



THE DRAGON'S DISCIPLE

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The Dragon's Disciple

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DEDICATION:

To our online friends, Kisa, Loren, Sanada, Tiffany, Armen and Anne's sister Deb for the encouragement and yaoi rpg fun that spawned this book.

And for Barbara's daughters, Jessica & Victoria, who aren't too embarrassed to have a freaky fangirl for a mom.

SAN FRANCISCO

1872

Kiyoshi sensed them long before they stepped into the sparse pool of yellow light from the streetlamp on the edge of Chinatown. The lamp flame flickered slightly, bathing them both in a wavering shadow. One tall and thin, the other a little shorter, trim but slightly broader in the chest and shoulders. Both had dark hair cut fashionably in the Western way. The taller was Chinese from the look of him, the shorter Japanese, like Kiyoshi himself.

He did not know their names, but he knew of them. Everyone in and around Chinatown knew of the Wong's most feared assassins, the Poisoned Dragon, and his protégé.

Theater patrons whispered about these two, and from his place on the stage as a kabuki actor, Kiyoshi listened. Stories of their cunning and power reached his keen ears, and he longed to see if it was mere hearsay. As the two men moved past him, he realized the tales were all true.

Such deadly control they radiated, so many degrees of passion passed between them as they spoke in hushed tones and brushed against each other while approaching the restaurant. Kiyoshi knew the establishment fronted a gambling den run in competition to the Wongs. Too often, this young rival clan had interfered in the older family's affairs and the two men had been sent to handle the situation.

Guards of the gambling den appeared from the darkness surrounding the restaurant.

The Poisoned Dragon and his younger partner whipped out razor-sharp knives from their suit jackets and slit the men's throats without hesitation. Kiyoshi shivered as the power of the two assassins swept over him. They were magnificent in their savage beauty, their dark eyes narrowed, flashing with danger, their well-toned bodies moving with the grace of skilled predators. They were glorious angels of death and Kiyoshi shuddered, reminded of the fierce master who had created him.

Blood dripping from their blades onto the pavement, the Dragon and his disciple entered the restaurant. A thunderous clatter arose from the top floor and broke the still night. Window glass shattered and a body hit the street with a dull thud. Another followed, and another. Innocent kitchen workers streamed from the back of the closed restaurant.

A bleeding man stumbled from the front of the building and ran in Kiyoshi's direction. Kiyoshi seized him with blinding speed and dragged him to the shadows, tearing into the gash already at the base of his neck. When he drank from a mortal, the rush of blood made Kiyoshi's head swim. Tonight as he fed, the sensation was intensified by the stark fear emanating from the man. Fear roused by the Poisoned Dragon. It made the man's blood utterly *intoxicating*.

The man went limp and Kiyoshi fell back against the wall, sliding down until he crouched. He wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of one slender hand and closed his eyes as the euphoria coursed through him. Another bone-chilling scream echoed across the empty street and Kiyoshi longingly watched the shadowed figures move in the broken windows of the gambling den. Oh, what might it be like to drink the blood of the Poisoned Dragon himself. . .

* * * * *

Dao Kan Shu leered at the girl cowering behind an overturned table

in a corner of the gambling den. "Come here, *mei-mei*," he said crooking one long bloodstained index finger at her. "I won't hurt you—much." He threw back his head and laughed, looking over to his student, Toshiro Itou. Shu raised one eyebrow in question. "Are we jealous, Toshiro?"

Toshiro frowned. "No." He looked at the girl; she couldn't be more than fifteen. "Let's just take her back to Yang. She can be of more use an informant than as a toy for you."

Shu replied with an expression of mock dismay. He came forward, stepping on a dead body strewn across his path. He reached out, stroking his bloody finger along Toshiro's creamy cheek. "Maybe you want her for yourself, hmm?" He grinned, a leering grin, and lowered his voice to husky whisper. "Oh, I think I'd like to watch you fuck her." He leaned in and skimmed his lips across the younger man's ear. "Maybe I'll fuck you while you do her."

Toshiro pulled back and gave Dao a cool look. "We'll take her to Yang," he said softly, reaching out to caress Dao's cheek and leaving his own bloody mark. "I'll entertain you privately when we're done with our work."

Shu laughed softly. "Business always before pleasure can grow tiresome." He took Toshiro's hand in his own, drawing the red-stained fingertips to his lips. "But I'm certain you'll make the wait worthwhile, yes?" He breathed across each tip, his lips almost grazing the skin.

"I always do," Toshiro answered. He gave Shu an aloof, almost bored look though his eyes glittered in response to the teasing half-kisses. "Don't I?"

"Oh, yes," Shu smirked. "Far better than that child would." He glanced over at the girl huddling in the corner. Her trembling hands clenched at her pink dress with its elaborate golden patterns. Shu clicked his tongue, but the wicked gleam in his eyes dissipated. "She appeals to your charity, I see," he sighed. "It is such a waste of beauty, though, especially for what Yang has in mind for her." He moved forward and cleaned the blood off his knife on the clothing of

a man lying dead across a table. Frowning slightly, he glanced over his shoulder to Toshiro. "Since when did you become his little delivery boy?"

"I didn't," Toshiro answered flatly. He wiped his own knife on the coat of another man slumped in a chair, then returned it to its carved ivory sheath secured inside his jacket. He went to the girl and grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet. She cried and shook, and tried to back away, but Toshiro held her firmly and whispered gently in her ear, "You will go, or he will kill you immediately. Do you want that?"

The girl looked at Shu's glowering face and shook her head. Tears streamed down her cheeks, leaving trails of tan skin showing through the white rice powder covering her face and neck. She lowered her gaze, and Toshiro led her forward. They followed Shu outside and to the carriage hidden a street away.

* * * *

Shu watched as Toshiro cleaned the ruined makeup and blood spatter from the girl's face with a handkerchief. At one time, his pupil's display of kindness would have thoroughly disgusted Shu. He would have viewed it as a sign of weakness, something to be corrected in his pupil.

Yet as his eyes followed Toshiro's gentle strokes of the silk cloth, the gesture seemed so natural for the younger man. It was so thoroughly like Toshiro to allow this frightened girl a shred of dignity when she went to face the head of the Wong's San Francisco organization. If necessary, Toshiro would undoubtedly plead to Yang to keep the girl from being auctioned at the secret *barracoon* held beneath the temple off Dupont Street. Such was his protégé—ruthless in triad affairs, yet sympathetic of the innocent.

When they reached Yang's office, it also didn't surprise him when Toshiro insisted on staying with the girl. They sat in the waiting area while Shu went into their superior's office to apprise him of the raid

they'd conducted on the gambling den.

However, the calm that had begun to settle over Shu in the carriage evaporated the instant Ren Yang opened his foul mouth after he'd given his report.

"I'm quite surprised you brought the girl at all. Don't tell me you're getting soft in your old age, Shu." Yang smirked, wiping his glasses on a crisp linen square. "First that business with you coming to the rescue of that the old woman last month, and now this. Oh, I am surprised." Yang replaced his glasses. "I told Jin Chao he was dreaming when he suggested that perhaps my stepson dominates over you in the bedroom, but now I have to wonder..."

"Shut your mouth, Yang, or I'll rip your tongue out and shove it up your ass."

Yang waved off the approaching bodyguard.

"Amusing, Dao Kan. Very amusing, but I have business to take care of. Cheung, show Mr. Shu out and bring the girl in. And Shu, do tell Toshiro that his mother sends her love."

* * * *

Shu slammed his fist into the wall outside Yang's office the moment he exited. "I will kill that bastard if it's the last thing I do. I'll rip out his heart and let him watch me eat it in that instant before he dies."

"Someday we'll have our chance," Toshiro said simply. He stood and waited for Shu to finish flinging his Chinese curses at the closed office door, then followed him down the narrow corridor. He paused at the top of the stairs and let Shu pass before following him down.

"Someday is neither good nor soon enough," Shu hissed. He reached the bottom of the staircase and crossed through the wide foyer towards the front doors. The hard soles of his English shoes clipped sharply on the marble floor. He glared at the large floor vases and red lacquer furniture Yang insisted the Wongs use throughout their headquarters. Like the expensive liquor in their parlors and the bookcases lined with antiques from China, they were symbols of

opulence offering an almost imperialist sense of self-importance. Yang, like this large mansion in the center of Chinatown, was full of shit.

Shu stormed outside, welcoming the cool evening air against the flushed skin on his face. His hands still trembled with anger as he pulled himself into the carriage waiting outside. Toshiro climbed in beside him, annoyingly calm in light of another infuriating meeting with the mob boss.

“We’re going to the *Gingbo*,” Shu snapped at the driver. He rubbed at his temple, all the pleasure of his night’s work gone. A game of Mah Jong, along with some other recreations, should restore his spirits.

“What a fucking night,” Shu sighed, irritated. Toshiro reached across their seat and rubbed at his neck. Shu leaned into the touch and sighed again.

Toshiro tugged at Shu’s shirt collar to expose a bit more of his skin. He placed a gentle kiss at the nape of Dao’s neck, then slid his tongue up along the tense muscles and traced the lobe of his ear. “We’re done working for tonight and the Wah Ching will be too busy infighting to see who will be their new leader for them to bother any Wong houses tonight,” he said to Shu. “We’ll have as much time to relax at the club as we want.”

* * * * *

However, Toshiro was anything but relaxed when they approached the entrance to the club and a disgustingly familiar voice assaulted his ears from the darkness.

“Hello, Dao Kan,” Jin Chao said as he stepped into the light of the oil lamps above the *Gingbo’s* lacquered front doors. “I hear congratulations are in order. Evidently you and your Jap lapdog did your jobs well tonight, and that makes the jobs of *leaders* like myself so much more enjoya—”

Like a spark flashing in the darkness, Toshiro shot forward,

slamming his long time rival into the front doors. The large brass rings jangled from the impact, muffling Chao's cry of surprise. Toshiro poised his knife at Chao's throat, ready to slice through the delicate tissue. He was prevented from killing him only by the way Chao's guards appeared and grabbed hold of his arms so he couldn't move to shove the knife forward.

"Don't *touch* him." Shu stepped into the circle of lamplight, his voice a deadly whisper. Dark shadows masked much of his face, but not his fierce glare as he eyed each of the guards. They shifted uneasily, and Shu narrowed his eyes. "If you don't get your hands off him, I will *take* them off—one severed finger at a time." They backed off quickly, more afraid for their own lives than for their leader's.

Toshiro didn't hesitate. The second the thugs released him, he whipped his blade out again and lunged once more at Chao. The other man reeled backwards, tripped over his own feet and fell on his rear. Toshiro stopped mid-step. Shu had his hand pressed against Toshiro's chest, barring him from moving any further.

"Again with these little games, Toshiro," Shu clicked his tongue in disapproval, but his eyes sparkled with pleasure. "You two *children* have been at this for years now," he ran his hand down Toshiro's chest, smoothing out the wrinkles in the coat. "You'd think you'd be weary of it already."

Toshiro spat at Chao, who shakily rose from the ground.

Shu laughed darkly, touching his protégé's cheek. "There, there, play nicely," he smiled and proceeded into the *Gingbo*, but not before giving Chao a cold glance. His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. "Watch how you address me in the future, Chao. A weak fool like you has no right to use my given name."

Chao shrank away from his piercing gaze. "Yes, Mr. Shu," he answered weakly as Dao and Toshiro walked past.

"Pathetic," Shu muttered.

"More than pathetic," Toshiro growled. He kicked the heavy door shut with his foot, right in Chao's face. He grabbed a bottle of liquor from the nearest table, despite the fact that the man who bought it

was about to pour drinks for himself and his companion. "Do you have something you want to say to me, old man?"

The man opened his mouth, then clamped it shut and lowered his head.

Toshiro followed Shu across the spacious, oaken floor, muttering under his breath the entire time. The bottom of the *Gingbo* was crowded with men playing Mah Jong and gambling. They smoked cigarettes and ate rice cakes served by laughing hostesses with jade earrings and cunning eyes.

* * * *

Shu climbed upstairs, away from the din. Behind him, Toshiro still seethed from the confrontation, and Shu smiled in amusement. Toshiro and Chao's rivalry went back nearly three tension-filled years, ever since the two crossed paths in Denver. Chao loathed Toshiro quite passionately, a hatred spurred by bitterness and jealousy. Though in all honesty, Chao's envy was justified; while Toshiro could bear to take or give *whatever* was asked of him, Chao's shortcomings were blatant and many. He had his uses, few that they were, but Toshiro was the fierce tiger Shu wanted at his side. He was the only person Shu had ever considered to take as an apprentice...and as something more.

Shu laughed softly as they reached the top of the landing and turned halfway to take Toshiro's wrist. He pulled him close. Their bodies brushed together through the layers of their formfitting European-styled suits. Shu slid his other hand around Toshiro's waist and down to his backside as he pushed him into the wall. Toshiro rested his head back on the paneling, groaning a little as Shu leaned in, released his wrist and fondled his cock through the front of his clothing.

Shu may have appeared distracted, but a part of him remained alert, always on edge. When the softly padded footsteps raced towards them from the darkened room across the hall, Shu pushed away from

the wall. He pulled Toshiro with him as the long curved blade of a Lungchuan broadsword smashed into the wall they'd leaned on. A string of curses in Mandarin spilled out of the attacker's mouth.

Shu's hand quickly moved up inside Toshiro's coat, pulling out the knife tucked in the special pocket. He whipped around just as the assassin darted forward for another strike.

The attack was fast and powerful, but sloppy. Shu sidestepped out of the weapon's range, and the other man couldn't change his momentum, leaving himself wide open. Shu plunged Toshiro's knife below the attacker's ribcage, piercing cloth and flesh with loud tearing sound as he ripped downwards. Blood spilled out on the floor and the man dropped to his knees with a cry.

Shu kicked the sword away. "Fool," he growled.

The assassin looked up through the nest of loose black hair wildly falling across his face. "Try dodging this," he choked out as he pulled a revolver from his waist belt.

Toshiro shoved Shu just as the trigger was pulled. He spun and delivered a vicious kick to the man's face and snapped the would-be assassin's head back with a sickening *crack*.

"*Shit*," Shu spat, staring at his arm. A dark crimson stain spread across his sleeve. If not for Toshiro, the bullet would have gone through his heart instead of grazing his arm.

Toshiro was at his side in an instant, whipping out his handkerchief and binding the wound. He glared at the girls and their clients who peeked out the nearby doors then turned his venomous gaze to Chao Jin who came running up with his guards.

Chao had barely stepped from the last stair when Toshiro delivered a backhanded slap that sent the taller man crashing into the upper banister. Chao cried out as he began to tumble over, but Toshiro seized him by the shirt, hauled him back to his feet and hit him again.

"You useless fuck! I think Yang will be interested to know how that piece of garbage got in here on Wong territory with you and your worthless people standing guard."

“He probably got here before we did!”

Toshiro shoved Chao back, but his rival gripped the railing. With a smirk, Toshiro stepped over the blood pooling around the dead man and returned to Shu’s side. “Clean this mess up,” he ordered Chao’s men who obeyed at once.

“You Japanese piece of shit,” Chao cursed under his breath. But he swallowed the rest of his complaints when Shu draped his arm over Toshiro’s shoulder and fixed him with a dangerous look.

“Tonight is just another example of your *shining* quality, Chao.” He cast a disdainful look at the two bodyguards as they picked up the corpse and lumbered down the stairs with it. “Keep your sharp tongue to yourself and be thankful your body isn’t being dragged out to the trash also. Toshiro does *his* job *well*.”

Chao nodded obediently

Shu watched him disappear down the staircase before continuing down the hall with Toshiro. All of the girls quickly went back to their clients and shut the doors to their rooms. No one interfered in things that weren’t their affair, not if they were smart. And the women at the *Gingbo* were clever, if nothing else. Shu selected an empty room at the end of the hall.

He pushed Toshiro away once they entered and dropped into the lounge seat that faced across from the wide bed occupying most of the room. “Another hired assassin...” Shu said in an irritated tone. “Whoever keeps paying them is throwing away their money.”

Someone knocked on the door and Toshiro opened it cautiously. “What is it?” he snapped at the girl who stood outside

“I’ve brought you and Mr. Shu’s things,” she said nervously. Her painted face was drawn with fear, but she held up a tray with a pipe, a pot of freshly brewed tea, a small glass vial and a wooden box filled with the finest opium in San Francisco imported directly for the Wongs.

“Fine.” He opened the door all the way for her, and she put the tray on the table next to Shu.

“Will there be anything else?” she asked, but her shaky tone made

it clear she hoped not.

"Go," Shu ordered. He wasn't in the mood to pleasure himself with this already frightened woman. She left in a barely restrained dash and Toshiro closed the door behind her. Shu sighed again and Toshiro moved to kneel in front of him.

"Can I take a look at that?" he gently touched the makeshift bandage on Dao's arm. As he undid the buttons on the shirt's front, Shu leaned back and sighed in reply.

Toshiro hissed at the sight of the gash on Dao's upper arm. It wasn't as bad as some of the injuries he had sustained in the past few years, but it was bad enough. Worse, the injury should have never happened in the first place. This was supposed to be a safe house—safe to anyone affiliated with their *tong*, at any rate. There was no way in hell that man would have gotten that sword inside—unless he'd had help.

Getting up, Toshiro took a clean sheet from the chest under the window and cut the cloth into smaller sections with his knife. He cleaned the wound with water from the pitcher atop the bureau and used the makeshift bandages to dress Dao's arm. He settled back on his heels and brushed the straight strands of black hair away from Dao Kan's eyes. "I think I might accept that invitation to dinner from my mother. It's the best way to get to Yang alone. He's not going to plead that he's too busy to hear what I have to say about this shit with Chao and this latest attack on you."

Shu frowned. "I've told you before, I don't want you going to that house," he said. "It upsets you. And that upsets *me*." He took Toshiro's hand and brought it to his lips. This time he did kiss each finger, trailing his lips and tongue from each tip to the bottom knuckle. Shu turned the hand over and caressed the crisscrossing scars that decorated the palm with fleeting kisses. He looked into Toshiro's eyes, before he reached out to stroke his chin.

"These attacks are meaningless, and hardly worth any concern," Shu whispered. "Don't accept the whore's invitation, and to hell with Yang."

“Let’s just forget about them,” Toshiro said. “Forget about them and Chao and all the other shit we need to deal with.” He tore himself away and went to prepare the opium pipe. From the box on the tray the girl had brought into the room, he took a daub of the soot-colored opiate paste on the tip of a long wire. He held the drug to the dancing flame in the oil lamp until it started to crystallize, and then he packed it into the thumb-sized bowl at the end of the pipe. Toshiro took the pipe to Shu and settled down beside the lounge, peeling off his jacket, shirt and boots.

“Do you remember that time in Denver? Do you remember how you shared it with me?”

“Of course I do,” Dao Kan said softly, the bamboo stem poised on his lips.

Dao slipped his arm around Toshiro’s bare waist, drawing him close. His palm pressed into the small of Toshiro’s back, he kissed the smooth, warm skin around the younger man’s navel. His tongue slid over the firm abdominal muscles, savoring the first thin glaze of perspiration that formed on the hot flesh.

Shu pulled Toshiro down to straddle his lap, groaning as the younger man pressed into his cock. His cry turned into a throaty laugh as Toshiro shifted his weight around to tease and inflame the desire already tugging at Shu’s groin.

Shu brought the pipe to his lips and inhaled. His hand slid up from Toshiro’s waist to the back of his neck, and he leaned forward. He covered Toshiro’s mouth with his own and exhaled. While Toshiro breathed the drug in, Shu worked his lips in a passionate, devouring kiss.

Toshiro murmured against his lips as he sucked the opium into himself. He shifted, but did not break the kiss. His hand slid between them and he caressed Shu’s bare skin, his long fingers dancing over a faint scar in the center of his chest. A scar he’d given Shu when they’d first met. Shu thought he’d teach a high handed young man a lesson in respect, but instead he learned that looks were deceiving. Though he could overpower Toshiro, the younger man gave as good as he

got, on all levels.

Shu pulled back, a smile playing on his lips. "Oh, I remember that as well." He put his hand over Toshiro's, tracing the path of the scar to where it trailed off just above his heart. Toshiro could play their games exquisitely, without complaint and with as much skill and passion as Shu could desire.

Toshiro spread his palm open over Shu's chest, feeling for the heartbeat. The touch was gentle—affectionate—and it stirred something inside of Shu he felt with no one else. *Love?* The idea made him laugh out loud and he roughly pulled Toshiro's hand away. What a ridiculous notion—love was a weakness only fools possessed. He had no use for such a meaningless, crippling thing, and neither should his protégé.

Yet Toshiro was more than just someone Shu pleased himself with. In spite of every belittling thought he harbored for the concept of love, the younger man was the only person Shu had ever called *lover*. He reached up to brush away the feathery locks of dark sepia hair that always fell into Toshiro's eyes, and he looked into those warm hazel depths.

Smiling, Shu interlocked his fingers with Toshiro's and stretched out across the davenport. Toshiro eased down beside him as Shu drew another deep breath on the pipe. He devoured Toshiro's lips in a fiery kiss, sharing not only the opium, but also his fierce passion.

A euphoric haze clouded Toshiro's mind and colored the world in an odd shimmering glow. Yet the heady effects of the drug never quite reached that small place inside him, that cold, lonely place that ached for some tangible, verbal affirmation of his importance to Dao Kan Shu.

He knew it should be enough that Dao shared his bed, trusted him to watch his back in the dangerous job they shared and yet he wanted...needed...more. He was never quite sure that one day he might not be in the position of that son of a laundry whore, Jin Chao, who had also once been Shu's favored one.

Toshiro reached for the opium pipe and took a direct breath in an



effort to silence the foolish part of him that wanted to rattle on about his uncertainty. He needed to cloud his mind further to numb himself to everything but the here and now.

Shu raised his eyebrows at him, obviously bemused.

"You have quite an appetite tonight, Toshiro," Shu laughed softly. "First for blood, now this..." He pulled the empty pipe out of Toshiro's hands and set it on the table. "What else are you hungry for?" Shu whispered as he brushed the tip of his forefinger on Toshiro's lower lip.

Toshiro captured Shu's wrist, drew his finger between his lips, then bit down below the bottom knuckle and pulled his head back, allowing his teeth to rake across the older man's skin. "You know what I'm hungry for," he said before recapturing Dao's finger between his lips, this time teasing the appendage with his mouth, swirling his tongue over and around the nail, mimicking the way he loved to tease the head of Dao's cock.

His own body responded and the blood surged downward, swelling his own cock, pushing it against the fabric of his trousers, the buttons of the fly. He closed his eyes, held Dao's wrist and continued to working his mouth over the large index finger, nipping, teasing, fairly fucking it with his eager, experienced mouth. He pressed close, arched his body, and rubbed his swollen, confined cock against the firm, slender hip of his lover.

While Toshiro rocked back and forth against him, Shu pushed deeper into his mouth. He toyed with Toshiro's tongue, laughing at each hungry nip of his teeth and teasing suck from his lips.

"Oh, yes," Shu purred. He pulled his finger out, licking the hot saliva trickling down to the base of his knuckles. Reaching between them, he gripped the hard bulge at the front of Toshiro's pants.

Shu shuddered, a pleased groan climbing up his throat as he worked his hand over Toshiro's hardness. He pried open the trouser buttons, tearing at the cloth as he pulled it apart with a hunger that bordered on desperation. Shu wrapped his fingers around Toshiro, squeezing the firm length in his hand before stroking at it with rough jerks.

Toshiro's groan was like a song, and Shu knew that it could be even sweeter. He stopped stroking and held Toshiro's cock fast while reaching to the back of the lounge with his free hand to take his knife

from his jacket.

The glint of the deadly blade brought a smile to Toshiro's lips. He rose from the settee, shed his pants and climbed back on, this time straddling Dao's hips. Hands on his thighs, Toshiro grinned. The dull edge of the dagger kissed his hot flesh just below his shoulder. He closed his eyes as Dao Kan dragged it down to scrape over one hard, sensitive nipple. He stifled a gasp when the tip of the blade pricked him like the sting of a bee just below the pink rise. It had been a long time since they played such dangerous games.

Toshiro opened his eyes and gazed down. A swollen drop of thick, crimson blood traced a lazy path down his sweat-slicked chest while lower and lower the flat edge of the blade slid with exacting slowness. He sucked in his breath again and struggled to contain a shudder of delight when Dao tugged at his pubic hair, turning the knife just enough to cut some of the coarse curls. He groaned when the cold steel stroked over his hot cock. He groaned louder when Dao slid back the skin and ran the flat edge across the throbbing head, collecting the fluid that seeped in anticipation.

"Does that feel nice?" Shu asked. His chest heaved with the mounting excitement in his body; he shivered.

"Yes," Toshiro gasped. "Gods, yes." He squirmed on top of Shu and pressed down as he parted his legs as far as they could go. Underneath him, Shu just started to rise, the cloth-covered bulge pushing against Toshiro's buttocks.

Shu laughed wickedly and brought the edge of the blade to his lips. All the varied tastes of Toshiro filled his mouth—the sharp savor of Toshiro's sweat, the saltiness of his semen, the metallic tanginess of his blood...a symphony of flavors driving his desire to unbearable extremes. He lifted the clip of Toshiro's hair to his nose and inhaled its scent as another shudder of excitement ran through him. He traced the dark, moist curls over his lips and down his chest to the top of his waistline.

Shu stabbed the knife into the cushioned side of the sofa and

clutched Toshiro's undulating hips. He pushed him back just enough to be able to reach the front of his pants. He unfastened the buttons with one hand as he reached over to the table and took the small vial from its place beside the box of opium. He dripped some of the oil on his abdomen and rubbed some between both hands to heat it before massaging the liquid across his throbbing cock in slow strokes.

Dao taunted him, and Toshiro grinned.. He resisted the temptation to stroke his own cock. Instead, he concentrated on the ache of desire tightening his balls and pulsing deep within his ass at the memory of what it felt like to be filled and taken by his mentor. But two could play the teasing game, and he could play it very well indeed.

His gaze locked onto Shu's. He reached out and touched his fingertip to the dagger blade long enough to draw blood, then dipped his finger into the oil on Shu's abdomen before lifting it back to touch his own chest. Toshiro used his bloody fingertip like a calligraphy brush and traced the Chinese character for power over his skin. It was the same mark Dao Kan had etched into his shoulder with the tip of his knife years ago.

His lover responded with a throaty laugh, his dark eyes gleaming in the lamplight. Without warning, Shu let go of his cock and grabbed Toshiro's at the base, squeezing harder and harder until Toshiro gritted his teeth. "Such sweet torture, isn't it?"

"And so is this." Toshiro grabbed Dao Kan's cock at the base, and turned his hand so that his blunt nails could scrape over the engorged vein on the underside when he dragged upward with a single, firm stroke. Shu shuddered.

Toshiro let go, then leaned forward, kissing Shu's shoulder and sliding his tongue along the older man's perspiring flesh. His breath quickened and his body grew hotter when Dao Kan seized his hips and positioned him. He bit Shu's neck, teasing with fluttery flicks of his wet tongue the place where Dao's ear joined his neck. "Tell me what you want from me. I want to here it."

Shu tangled his fingers in Toshiro's silky hair, jerked his head up and laughed. He pulled Toshiro's head back down and whispered. "Fuck me. Now."

Without a word, Toshiro impaled himself on Shu's hard, oil-slicked cock.

Forceful and demanding, the action caught Shu off guard. A deep groan rose in his throat as Toshiro slammed down over him. Shu's stiff, swollen head thrust through the tight opening in one fast movement. He thrust upwards, rising and heaving as the heat consumed him.

Crying out with delight, Toshiro bolted upright and arched his back. He contracted over Shu's hard cock, the engorged flesh bursting inside of him. Shu tightened his grip on Toshiro's trembling hips and slid one slick hand around to the small of Toshiro's back. He held his lover's bucking body in place as he thrust upwards, while the younger man came down over him.

Toshiro rode him, his hips swaying as he pressed down on Shu's cock. He leaned into Shu with all his body weight, and the other man tensed. Shu burned with passion and desire, and the pressure continued to rise at the base of his already rock hard erection. He grunted and pushed upwards, his fingernails digging into Toshiro's sweat-covered skin. The heat reached a fever pitch, and he shoved further and harder. He burst inside of Toshiro, both men groaning together as the hot fluid gushed out in a series of violent spurts.

Shu's breath came in short gasps, his pulse thundering in his ears. He emptied out quickly, but he pulled at Toshiro, wanting him to come down harder and harder still. Toshiro moaned and rocked back and forth, trying to satisfy the demands of his lover. Shu hissed and sat up just enough to grab the back of Toshiro's head. He pulled down and held Toshiro tightly to his heaving body, shuddering at the contact of hot flesh on flesh. His cock still firmly embedded deep inside of the younger man, Shu rolled over on the sweat-soaked cushions until his lover lay pinned beneath him. Toshiro's thighs tightened around Shu

and he reached up, tugging at Shu's hair. "Don't stop," he panted. He closed his eyes and pulled at Shu. "Please."

Please. The word sent a shiver of ecstasy through Shu's spine and he shoved into Toshiro, driving deeper and deeper until he came again in fevered bursts, throaty cries of pleasure rising in his chest.

Toshiro's swollen cock pushed against Shu's abdomen, and he squeezed his eyes shut. *Oh, gods...* He ached. As if sensing his plea, Shu reached between them and grabbed the throbbing length. He stroked it in a maddening rhythm until Toshiro spurted into his hand.

Toshiro opened his mouth with pleased groans and Shu leaned in. He tugged at Toshiro's lower lip, kissing and biting him with enough force to just bruise the delicate flesh. His tongue darted out and toyed with Toshiro's as he drank in the taste of the opium and his own perspiration. They shared each other's hot, moist breath in long kisses that left their lungs empty and burning for air.

Sated and sore, Toshiro exhaled a contented sigh and closed his eyes, savoring the faint pulsing still going on within him. He loved the weight of Dao on him, craved the sensation of complete fullness and the decadent feel of Dao's cock softening and sliding free when he shifted to reach for the opium pipe. Dao nudged Toshiro to sit up, then sat beside him.

Shu sucked the drugged smoke in greedily and held it in his lungs while offering the pipe to Toshiro, who shook his head and stood. He tore a piece of cloth from the sheet he'd used for bandaging and wiped himself clean. "You need to take it easy with that shit, and especially the laudanum," he said gently before reaching out to wipe Dao Kan's hand clean.

Toshiro wasn't ready for the backhanded slap, though he realized he should have expected it. "Mind your fucking business! Do you think you're my mother, or do you fancy yourself my *wife*?"

"Neither. I 'fancy' myself your friend, who doesn't want to see you turn out like those ruined bastards in the back rooms who do nothing but drug themselves and pass out for days on end." Shaking

his head, Toshiro went to get a cup of the lukewarm tea, then went over and lay back on the bed.

Laughing, Shu drew more from the pipe and came to the bed himself, his knife in hand. He seized Toshiro's left wrist and traced the point of the blade lightly around the base of the younger man's ring finger. Shu laughed again headily. "If you shared my taste for the pipe, it wouldn't hurt, now would it?"

He held up Toshiro's wrist, his glassy eyes watching tiny rivulets of blood drip down across the back of Toshiro's hand. When the red streaks reached Toshiro's wrist, Shu darted his tongue out and licked them away. He laughed again and gave Toshiro's cheek an indulgent pat with his free hand. "Such a magnificent wife you are."

Toshiro snatched his arm back and turned away. "Fuck you."

Shu's laugh was low and his words were beginning to slur together. "A lovely idea. I want that nice fat cock of yours in me for a change..." He slumped back, out cold in an instant.

Toshiro lay back and rubbed the side of his head, hoping the dull ache forming didn't turn to a full-blown headache. He looked at his left hand and the ring of blood that was drying there, sealing the thin cut. *I probably wouldn't mind being thought of as a 'wife' if only you cared that much.*

* * * *

"I only tell you this because I want to see you succeed in the business."

"Listen to Ren. He can help you. He only has your best interests in mind."

Toshiro glanced up from the glass of brandy in his hand, not bothering to hide the contempt he felt at the sight of his mother, Ume, perched on the lap of Ren Yang. She looked like some prized cat, ready to purr at the way Yang stroked his hand back and forth across her silk covered thigh.

"Shu is a liability to you, Toshiro. It's that simple," Yang said

before finishing his own drink and holding out the glass to Ume to be refilled.

Toshiro's generous mouth turned down. His mother acted more like a servant than the proud daughter of a samurai she'd been back home in Japan. "Dao Kan Shu is the best enforcer the Wong Family has ever had. The mere mention of his name makes men from here to Hong Kong and beyond piss their pants."

"But he's an embarrassment. The Elders feel that his savagery leads others to believe that we are *all* insane and that we *all* should be eliminated like mad dogs."

Toshiro smirked. "There isn't an assassin alive who can get to Dao Kan and injure him seriously enough to kill him. I've seen many try and die."

Yang removed his glasses and rubbed them on a crisp linen handkerchief. "Clearly it would take a very special man to get to Shu. One who knew him *intimately*, one who knew his vulnerabilities." Yang sipped the drink Ume gave him and began petting her leg again when she resumed her place on his lap. "Surely Shu has vulnerabilities, as any mortal man does."

"Look, Yang," Toshiro said roughly. "You may be my 'superior' as far as our business relationship goes, but don't even think to suggest that I betray Dao. I won't do it. I didn't back in Colorado, and I sure as fuck won't do it now."

Yang made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Did I ask you to betray Shu? Did I even hint that you betray Shu? No. I was simply stating an opinion that is shared by the Elders and myself. I was merely trying to be pleasant to my precious plum's devoted son."

Yang kissed Ume's bare neck, and Toshiro swore that his whore of a mother did in fact purr like a fucking pet cat.

"Fuck you, Yang," Toshiro, muttered as he stood and crossed the room. He froze dead in his tracks when Yang's voice broke the strained silence of the room.

"*Mei-mei*," Yang said to Ume, "Did I tell you that The Elders are going to promote Jin Chao to oversee the operation in Vancouver?"

He's been so dutiful to them, so conscious of upholding the best interests of the Wong Family that they feel he needs to be rewarded handsomely."

Toshiro glared over his shoulder at the older man. Jin Chao was a fucking joke and had been since the day the then eighteen-year-old Toshiro had met him in Denver. Chao had been jealous of Toshiro, bitter over the way Shu groomed him to be his successor. But Toshiro had bested that little prick how many times over the course of those two days and in the following few years? Each time it was Chao who went away bloody and crying like a fucking little girl. Chao didn't deserve to head anything,

"Is there something you need, Toshiro?" Yang asked condescendingly.

"Fuck you, Yang, and fuck your Elders, too."

"That's your mother's job, Toshiro."

Ume gave her lover a playful slap. "Ren."

Toshiro left, banging the door of the elaborate house hard enough to rattle the leaded glass of the door's the window.

* * * * *

The man screamed. Or at least he tried to.

Blood gurgled in the back of his throat and spewed out of his mouth each time he opened it. He brayed uselessly and clutched at his bleeding lips. With his tongue ripped out, nothing but garbled screams were possible.

Dao Kan Shu dropped the pink mass of tissue on the floor. "Imagine how much more difficult telling lies will be now as well," he said. He stepped forward, crushing the tongue underneath his foot. "When your *benefactors* suggested you try to mislead me, you should have reconsidered their offer very carefully."

He narrowed his dark eyes at the former Wong informant, writhing in his own blood on the basement floor. An oil lamp burned on the knife-lined rack to Shu's left, the only light source in the large

windowless room below the *Xiang* teahouse. The dull glow cast dark shadows across the man's contorted, agonized expression. His days as a mole for an opposing Chinese syndicate were over, his life forfeit. But death was too merciful a release for traitors, and Shu had no intention of killing him just yet.

Shu leaned down and grabbed the man by the top of his scalp. "A severed tongue is nothing compared to what else I have planned for you," he whispered into the man's ear. The wounded man whimpered pathetically, tears running down his bruised face.

Disgusted at the sight of such weakness, he stepped back and dropped the worthless fool to the blood-covered floor.

"Toshiro, you found this piece of *filth*," he hissed and glanced over his shoulder. "How would you see him punished?"

The younger man stepped away from the basement staircase and moved to Shu's side. "Take everything—his eyes, his ears, his hands." Toshiro toyed with a long knife and stared at the informant. "Leave him completely fucked."

Shu turned to his protégé and his face broke into a pleased smile. "Yes," he laughed softly. "That seems appropriate enough." Toshiro's words calmed the anger burning inside of him, and Shu gestured for one of the surrounding bodyguards to move forward.

"Take care of this...*thing*," he pointed offhandedly at the shuddering heap on the floor. "I'm not going to waste my efforts on him."

Shu turned and touched Toshiro's elbow. "We're finished here." The man's mutilated cries followed them up the staircase and Shu laughed once more. Afternoon sunlight greeted them as they stepped into the hallway. It streamed in through the open window at the end of the hallway, along with the faint drone of the *Xiang*'s patrons as they drank tea and conversed in the main room at the front of the establishment.

"Well done." He closed the thick wooden door behind them, shutting out the sounds of torture, and reached into his coat pocket. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped his bloodstained fingers on

the white cloth. Shu smiled at Toshiro. "As always."

Toshiro smiled back, but said nothing. His usually expressive eyes were distant, almost empty of feeling. Shu reached out and caressed his cheek.

"You're distracted. Why?" Without waiting for a response, he leaned forward and pressed his lips into Toshiro's. He drank their warm fullness and tenderly worked his mouth open until Toshiro's taste filled his mouth.

Toshiro tangled his fingers in the front of Shu's shirt and clung to him fiercely, held him close. Gods, he'd pull the man inside him if that would drive out Yang's voice from his head.

The Elders are going to promote Jin Chao to oversee the operation in Vancouver. He's been so dutiful to them, so conscious of upholding the best interests of the Wong Family that they feel he needs to be rewarded handsomely.

He was afraid to open his eyes when Shu pulled out of the kiss, afraid that he would know, that he would feel the tiny ambitious voice that nagged at Toshiro from deep within.

Toshiro forced his eyes open. "Yang," he muttered. "I went to see my mother today and that fuck Yang was there, and she was acting like his dutiful little whore. It makes me sick to see them together."

Shu's eyes narrowed with displeasure. "You shouldn't be wasting your time seeing her," he said. "As for Yang..."

His hand slid over Toshiro's shoulder and down to the small of his back. "Yang is another whore not worth your concern," Shu whispered into Toshiro's ear before kissing his cheek. "He dances for the Elders whenever they clap their withered hands—Yang is nothing but a weak-minded fool. We can take care of them both, you know. I've always felt we're too generous in letting them live this long."

"Well..." Toshiro's voice trailed off and he pulled back. "They're not important. What's important is that The Elders have put that useless fuck Chao in charge of the Vancouver operation." Toshiro's

eyes narrowed.. “That Chao is nothing but a waste of life! Vancouver should have gone to *me*—“ His breath caught and he quickly corrected himself. “It should have gone to *you*, to us.”

He turned and slammed his fist into the wall, cracking the plaster. He ran his hands through his hair and sank back against the wall. “I’m so fucking mad I can’t even think straight.”

Shu frowned. Using the same hand he’d caressed his lover’s cheek with, Shu slapped Toshiro sharply across the mouth. “You better start thinking straight, and quickly,” he snapped. “If anyone was wronged by Yang’s ‘decision’, it is *I*. Did you expect to be given Vancouver that simply?”

Shu slapped him again. “Power comes to me first, always, and I chose what to share with you.”

Toshiro welcomed the slaps despite the feel of the blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. The blows cleared his head of Yang’s voice. They brought him back to his senses, grounded him where he belonged. Where he’d been more than satisfied these past few years.

He raised his hand again, this time to gently cup Toshiro’s chin. “Let Chao have Vancouver,” he smiled softly. “San Francisco is a much better prize to claim.”

Toshiro nodded. “It is a better prize. You’ll take it and I’ll help you.” He leaned in, capturing Shu’s hungry mouth with his own.

And yet the faint echo of Yang’s voice taunted him. *Help him, boy? Why help that crazy bastard when you can have it all?*

Shu held either side of Toshiro’s face and pulled him closer into the kiss. His tongue darted out and found the bloody corner of the other’s lips. The taste excited him and he greedily lapped at the warm, tangy liquid.

Only when his lungs burned for air did Shu finally break away. He smiled softly and brushed his fingertips from Toshiro’s high, smoothly rounded cheekbones to the soft cleft on his chin. This youthful face concealed an underlying intensity, a beautiful mask of innocence hiding the passionate fire burning inside of Toshiro. And

Shu loved things of beauty.

“Of course you’ll help me,” he purred. “I don’t expect anything less from my Toshiro.” He slipped his hand around Toshiro’s waist and guided him down the hallway. They passed through a curtain of beaded jade and cut through the floor of the teahouse.

A number of the men seated around the room looked up from their tea or Mah Jong board and bowed their heads in respect. Shu afforded them only a passing glance as he and Toshiro crossed the room towards the entryway. Gold characters were painted on the twin pillars framing the door—poisoned dragon, the mark of the Wong family. His hand tightened around Toshiro’s waist and his smile widened. Soon, his own mark would decorate this corner of the city, outshining and outreaching anything the Wong’s had ever possessed. And Toshiro would be at his side always.

* * * *

Outside, the mid-afternoon street was crowded with people, mostly Chinese dressed in traditional clothing—loose fitting tunics, narrow trousers, soft cloth shoes, their long hair tied back in braided queues. Some paused to look at the two men as they exited the teahouse but most kept to their own business.

The house they shared was on the outskirts of the district and Shu called for a carriage. Once inside the enclosed cab, they both reached for one another, eager to indulge themselves in the other’s touch. Their hands wandered over their bodies, their lips pressed together in a series of long, hungry kisses. By the time they reached the house, a heated desire consumed them both.

Shu closed the front door behind them and ripped at Toshiro’s clothing to get at the hot flesh under them. “Fuck me...” Shu whispered hoarsely. “Now and hard.”

They didn’t understand. No one understood what he and Dao Kan shared. Toshiro didn’t even understand it himself at times but he didn’t need to. Not when his mentor, his friend, his lover pulled at his

clothes and spoke the words that said it all.

"Fuck me...Now and hard."

Toshiro knew he was special. He knew that no one else in the world had *ever* been given permission to be dominant over Dao Kan Shu—not even for one blessed moment—and that meant more to him than heading any crime syndicate.

He tore at Dao Kan's clothes even as his own were ripped free. He caught his jacket before it hit the floor though and took out the small vial of oil tucked into the jacket's breast pocket. He pushed the now naked Shu back towards the table in the foyer of their house.

Shu grinned and Toshiro leaned in to nip at the scar that still remained visible on Shu's chest, a scar he himself had given the older man during their first days together. Shu perched on the edge of the table, his well-toned legs spread wide.

Toshiro uncapped the vial, coated his hard cock then pushed oily fingers into Dao Kan's tight opening. He entered his mentor in one swift, hard thrust. Grabbing Dao's legs, he drove his hips in a steady pounding rhythm.

Each powerful thrust forced Toshiro's engorged flesh deeper, and Shu shifted underneath him, desperate for more contact. Toshiro swelled inside of him, and a throaty moan escaped Shu's lips. He pressed back into the table, surrendering himself completely to their passion.

"Harder," he panted. His arms wrapped around Toshiro's heaving torso and he dug his nails into his lover's smooth back. "Harder." He almost begged for it. Only Toshiro could wake this desire and make him long to be taken this way.

Shu arched forward as deep moans rumbled up his chest and passed his lips. He looked past Toshiro and caught his reflection in the mirror hanging on the opposite end of the foyer. He watched Toshiro move in the silvery glass, a study in both force and grace. His body rocked into Shu's with thundering strength, the muscles in his back shifting beneath the skin in flowing movements. On Toshiro's

right shoulder, the characters for *dragon* and *power* vividly stood out against the pale skin. A different sound escaped Shu. These were *his* marks, etched permanently into the flesh of his lover with a knife's blade. Striking, dangerous... beautiful.

Shu gasped as Toshiro came inside of him. He pressed his lips and teeth into his pupil's shoulder. He bit down to stifle the cry of pure ecstasy that rose in his throat when Toshiro's hot wetness gushed out in hard spurts. Shu held Toshiro tighter, pulled him closer. He wanted more.

Toshiro threw back his head, groaning in the mix of pleasure/pain that rode on the sensations of Shu's bite and his own hard coming. He paused to catch his breath, Shu's body still holding his semi-hard cock fast. He reached between them, his fingers still slick from the oil and began to stroke Dao Kan with a firm, practiced hand.

No, no one understood this. No one could possibly fathom the depth of what he and his *sensei* had developed and shared these past years. It was at times violent and cruel, but they didn't see it that way. It simply was what it was and though Shu was far more powerful than he, Toshiro didn't fear the older man.

He was like none of the others Shu'd had, far different from the girls at the *Gingbo* whom Dao 'decorated' with the press of his deadly knife.

Dao's strong hands clutched at his back, pressing into the marks so precisely carved on to his skin. He captured Shu's mouth in a hard kiss, then whispered against his lips. "I want to suck you dry."

Toshiro pulled his cock free and fell to his knees, his hands gripping Shu's waist, coaxing him to stand. He worked his fingers inside Shu's ass as he devoured his cock with lips and tongue.

Yang is a fucking lunatic if he thinks I'll destroy this...

A deep groan welled in Shu's throat as Toshiro's tongue worked over his hard length. He thrust his fingers into his already well-stretched opening. He leaned back, gasping and shivering with pleasure. He

pushed down into Toshiro's fingers at the same time shifting his hips forward in time with the rhythmic strokes on his cock.

Even as he fucked Toshiro's hot, moist mouth, Toshiro was fucking him and the ecstasy was incomparable. This burning passion could be lit by no other but Toshiro, a young man who touched places in his very soul no one else ever had or could.

And Toshiro was *his*.

The rush consumed him, the desire sent shivers down his spine. Pressure built up at the base of Shu's erection, and he shuddered from the rising heat.

Shu's heart raced, his lungs gasped for more air than he could take in. All the muscles in his body tensed as the pressure became unbearable. Toshiro's lips burned against his sensitive flesh, and he squeezed his eyes shut. His hot come burst out of his swollen head, filling Toshiro's hungry mouth.

Moaning with the release, he doubled forward. Shu ran his fingers through the soft ringlets of Toshiro's hair, damp with sweat. He emptied and Toshiro pulled away, gasping for breath.

Shu slid down to his knees and drew Toshiro's face to his. He kissed him with rare tenderness, gently licking at the traces of his wetness that spilled over Toshiro's lips. He traced the curve of Toshiro's cheek with soft kisses. "Yang is an ass," Shu whispered in his ear. "But you deserve more than to be stuck in that northern wasteland."

Clap.

Clap.

Clap.

"My, what a lovely and stirring performance. The great and terrible Dao Kan Shu getting fucked over like a woman." Yang smirked. "You moan more than Toshiro's mother."

Shu tensed, his hands tightened reflexively around Toshiro. Yang's reflection leered at him in the mirror, eyes glittering with mirth underneath wire-framed glasses.

"You little *fuck*," Shu spat. His nostrils flared and his pulse

quicken with the rising fury. "I'd get that sneer off your face while you still can."

"And if I don't, what will you do? *Moan* at me?" Laughing, Yang snapped his fingers. Bodyguards aiming the latest pistols appeared on either side of him.

Yang stepped into the foyer from the adjoining study. He moved forward and tossed a small silk pouch near Toshio. The gold coins inside clinked on the hardwood floor. "The Elders were quite pleased with the way you uncovered the Wah Ching informant. Good work, Toshio."

He crouched down and spoke quietly, yet loud enough for Shu to hear. "I underestimated you greatly. You have enormous potential in the business. As long as you continue to follow orders so very thoroughly."

Toshio grabbed Shu's hand, his fingers gripping so tightly that they began to stiffen and grow numb. Gods, how dare Yang do this! How dare Yang spoil this moment, this house with his presence! How dare that fucking Chinese bastard offer him everything he could ever want as long as he 'followed orders'?

He knew what that order was, and he couldn't do it.

He wouldn't!

He is your mother's husband. The Elders approve of them. If he chose you as his successor, they will accept it. San Francisco can be yours. Yours alone.

Shu barely felt Toshio's grip tighten on his hand. His entire body trembled with rage and he glared at Yang. His voice shook from the barely controlled anger. "How dare you?" he seethed. He swatted the pouch of money away in disgust and the coins scattered across the floor. Ignoring the pistols aimed straight at him, he rose to his feet and pulled Toshio away from Yang.

"Keep your poisonous tongue in your mouth, you filthy son of a whore," Shu hissed. He clutched at Toshio protectively, possessively.

Yang smirked again and his dark eyes glittered dangerously. "I could say the same to you, Shu. You are your own worst enemy, do you know that? Although it is touching the way you cling to your minion."

Yang's gaze swept along the bare back of the younger man. "I do have to commend you on your taste in lovers, though, Dao Kan. I never realized how attractive my stepson was."

His slid one hand along the firm curve of Toshiro's ass before exiting with a laugh.

Shu stared after Yang, too furious to even move.

"How dare he even *think* to *touch* you?" He pulled Toshiro against his heaving chest, his teeth bared in a savage snarl. "*No one* touches my things. Ever."

Yang enjoyed pushing him, and insisted on these games. But now he'd had the audacity to invade his house, to watch as he and Toshiro made love. Then to try and bait Toshiro with those filthy words... It *infuriated* him.

"I've reached the end of my patience with that fucking man," Shu hissed. He pushed Toshiro away and moved into the drawing room off the foyer. "We'll pleasure ourselves over his bleeding corpse."

Toshiro lost his footing when Shu's shove sent him backward to step on the discarded silk pouch. The silk slid on the polished wood floor, taking Toshiro with it. He fell with a dull thud, crying out at the jolt of numbing pain along his tailbone.

Dao Kan never even turned to see if he was all right.

No one touches my things. Ever

A thing. He was nothing but a thing to Dao Kan, even after all this time. Even after all they'd experienced, all they'd done, all the times he'd put his own life on the line for his mentor, his lover.

Toshiro pulled himself up, wincing at the lingering pain. He hobbled over to the door at the rear of the entry hall, unable to even look into the parlor. He trudged out to their small bathhouse and climbed into the deep cedar tub to soak without even washing first.

He sank down, covering his head, and stayed there until his lungs ached for lack of air. He sat up, letting the water stream down his face, telling himself that the sting in his eyes was only the bathwater and not tears.

* * * *

Inside the house, Shu watched Yang and his entourage of ass-kissing lapdogs from the large window in the parlor. He clenched the edge of the thick drapes with enough force to blanch his knuckles. After they got in the carriage and pulled away from the house, he left the drawing room and went upstairs. He stormed into the bedroom he shared with Toshiro and threw open the doors to their armoire. A string of curses in Chinese spilled from his lips.

Yang... His hands still trembled from anger as he pulled out a fresh change of clothes. That self-important *prick* caused him more aggravation than he was worth.

He threw the clothing on the bed, and pressed his shaking fingers to his throbbing temple. The stress and fury ate away at his ability to think clearly—he couldn't even focus enough to dress himself.

From the bedside table, he pulled out a syringe and a clear vial. His left forearm was already covered with small scars, but it was easy enough to find the vein. A small dose of the morphine eased his troubled thoughts and he sank on to the mattress, panting. He threw the syringe to the floor and rubbed his closed eyes. No one could take Toshiro away from him. No one.

When Shu woke, it was already late afternoon and the last rays of sunlight came through the westward facing windows.

Sunlight glinted off the blade of the knife in Toshiro's hand as he sat in the leather wing chair nestled between the windows. His legs were propped on a low table and the yukata he wore parted to reveal his well-muscled thighs.

"Have a nice nap?" he asked flatly, his attention never leaving the blade he so methodically oiled and polished.

"Yes, I did," Shu sat up slowly. The brief wave of nausea passed, a lingering aftereffect of the drug. He raised an eyebrow at Toshiro, but he felt calmer now, more prepared for what needed to be done.

For what he would *enjoy* doing.

* * * *

Shu rose from the bed and slipped into his pants. He gave Toshiro's attire a disapproving look. "Why aren't you dressed yet?" Shu frowned. "There will be plenty of time for you to play with your toys later. With Yang...and your mother." He buttoned his shirt and looked at himself in the tall mirror beside the armoire. "Your attachment to her is unnecessary." Shu shrugged into his vest.

"I suppose most attachments are unnecessary when you consider it," Toshiro said before driving the knife blade first into the window ledge. He stood and went to the armoire. As he dressed, he thought of Shu's former associate, Fey Lau, and the warnings he'd given. As Toshiro dressed he thought of all the warnings he'd been given by his mother as well. The warnings that seemed so fucking stupid back then when he'd been younger and lonely and searching for something, someone to bring excitement and purpose to his life.

Had it really been only three years? Gods, it seemed like a lifetime ago. Especially now.

He noticed Dao Kan's reflection in the mirror studying him, the dark eyes still glassy but wary. He caressed the older man's face, let his fingers drift down to glide across the crisp shirtfront and stroke the path of the faint scar that had resulted from their first encounter.

Toshiro closed his eyes, feeling the burn of the flesh beneath the characters scarred into his own skin.

"I'm tired," he whispered. "Tired of so many things."

"My sweet Toshiro," Shu's expressionless face broke into a small frown. "How can you be tired yet? There's so much more left to enjoy...so many more opportunities to be had."

He wrapped his fingers around Toshiro's hand and brought it to

his lips. "Don't confuse fear for weariness," his warm breath blew across Toshiro's fingertips as he kissed each one. "I thought I've taught you better than that."

Toshiro exhaled slowly. Gods, why was he doing this? Why was he making things more confusing than they already were? Toshiro opened his eyes and touched his fingers to Shu's lips. "Don't worry. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid of anyone and will do what I have to do when I have to do it."

Even if it kills me.

He pulled away and finished dressing. "Are we still going to see the Kabuki? Tomorrow is—"

"You know I don't care for your particular cultural pleasures," Shu snorted. "But if it amuses you, yes." He fastened a pair of silver cufflinks to his shirt and helped Toshiro button the front of his shirt.

"I suppose amused isn't the word," Toshiro pulled away and finished buttoning his own shirt. "I suppose there's a chance my mother will be there with that fuck Yang, no doubt."

Toshiro quickly turned and stepped as close to Shu as possible. He grabbed one of Dao Kan's hands in both of his. "Let's fuck the theater. Let's fuck it all. Let's leave San Francisco. You don't need the Wongs anymore. Any of the families would be lucky to have you on the payroll. We can go to Hong Kong."

"Fuck *yourself*," Shu hissed. "I'm better than someone's underling. How could you even *suggest* I waste more time working for any of these weak syndicates?"

He slammed the armoire doors shut hard enough to knock one off its hinges. "And then to return to Hong Kong?" Shu whipped around. "I haven't returned to my childhood home since claiming the last of my father's near worthless estate, and I've no intention of *ever* doing so." Shu stepped up to Toshiro and narrowed his eyes. "Don't be so *stupid*," he spat. "Or did you fuck out your common sense earlier?"

Toshiro pulled on his jacket and ran his hand through his hair. "Forget it. I don't know what I'm thinking. Fuck. I need a drink." He

went to the bureau across the room and pulled the stopper out of the cut glass brandy decanter and took a long swig straight from the bottle. He had to get that fucking Yang out of his head. It didn't matter that Chao was getting Vancouver. He—*Shu* and he would get San Francisco. One way or another.

"It was a simple misunderstanding, I'm sure," Shu said quietly as he stepped behind him. He took the bottle of liquor from Toshiro's hands and slammed it on the bureau top. "You had no intention of trying my patience... did you?"

Toshiro closed his eyes and rubbed them. His lower back still ached from the fall earlier. Gods, he was tired of this shit, so tired of Shu's fucking attitude towards him after all they'd been through, after all he'd done and let be done to him. He opened his eyes and turned away. "Let's go get something to eat. You want American or regular food tonight?"

"You didn't answer my question." Shu grabbed Toshiro's elbow and forced him around. "Did you mean what you said?"

"That hurts," Toshiro said, pulling Shu's hand off him. "I wasn't thinking, all right? What the fuck does it matter?"

He brushed past Shu and wrenched his knife from the window ledge, then tucked it in its customary place beneath his jacket. "I'm going down to *Xiang's*. Come along or don't. I don't give a shit anymore." With that he exited the room, banging the door shut behind him.

* * * * *

Shu stared at the door, too shocked and angry to even move. "*That son of a whore...*" he whispered. An odd sensation gripped him from within. Did he feel... *hurt*? With a fierce growl, he wrenched open the bureau drawer and took out his own knife. He glared at the dragon and tiger carved into the jade handle, evocatively intertwining with one another. The carving seemed so suggestive of the relationship he shared with his pupil—something dangerous, sensual... powerful.

He would not accept any sign of weakness from Toshiro. With an angry growl, he tucked the knife into his coat and stormed after him.

"How dare you think of walking away from me?" Shu took the steps down two at a time until he caught up with Toshiro on the landing. He pushed the younger man into the wall.

"*You follow me,*" Shu's voice trembled. "Not Yang, not your mother...*no one* else. *I'm* the one who makes the decisions." After all he'd tried to teach Toshiro, this is how he was repaid—with a student's petty temper tantrum. "You're not a *child*...stop behaving this way," Shu touched the side of Toshiro's face and frowned. "I thought you understood—*everything* I do is for you as much as it is for me."

Shu leaned forward and covered Toshiro's cheek with soft kisses. "You have to understand...or I'll *make* you."

It would be so easy to end this all. Toshiro's knife was so close, Shu completely distracted. Toshiro closed his eyes, turned his head so that his lips nearly brushed Shu's. "I understand," he whispered. "I understand more than you know. And I remember all that you taught me. *All* of it." For a moment, Toshiro was back in Colorado with Shu, sitting in the first bed they'd shared.

You called this 'your house', earlier. You said it with conviction, as though you already do own it...I like that. Why should you wait for something that's rightfully yours, only because a meaningless no-one stands in your way?

What does it matter if we're going away? Who wants to own anything in this shithole anyway?

It matters because it's yours, Toshiro. You can burn everything to the fucking ground if that's what you want to do with it afterwards. Don't let anyone deny you from taking what belongs to you. That's how things work in San Francisco. Once you take this to heart, I think you'll fit in there just perfectly.

Toshiro gripped Shu's strong shoulder, leaned in for a bruising kiss, biting his mentor's lip enough to draw blood. He kissed it away,

then pulled back to stare coldly into Shu's dark eyes.

"Now get out of my way."

Shu licked his lips. "That's my Toshiro," he whispered. He caressed Toshiro's cheek before turning away. "We'll dine together."

A meaningless no one.

That's all he was to Shu. He'd known it from the start, really, and now after all these years, Toshiro made himself face the painful truth. He wanted Shu to care, was certain that he did in his own twisted way. Shu was the one who wanted him around. Shu didn't send him off as his mother had when he was small. Shu didn't ignore him as his mother and her second husband did when he was older or banish him to a foreign country with a father he never knew existed. Shu had been there from the first day, with him, paying attention to him, teaching him so many things no one else ever could.

Like how to be a murderer and get paid handsomely for it.

He and Shu were a perfect team, a perfect team of cold, exact enforcers that gave the Wongs a total lock on the illegal trade and activities in San Francisco and beyond, but what had they gotten out of it, really? They'd gotten money, yes, fearful respect from the Chinese community, yes, but not what really mattered—the fucking recognition of Yang and the Elders.

But Jin Chao had it, that worthless little fucker.

Jin has what's mine, and now I want something better.

* * * *

Quan Li slammed into the side of the building. His head banged into the brick wall and his teeth clamped down over his tongue. He spat the blood to the ground. "Fuck you, Shu," he hissed in slurred Cantonese. "Fuck you *and* your little bastard," Li grumbled, glaring at Toshiro who stood at Shu's side, playing with the knife he'd just slashed across Li's forearm.

Quan Li possessed too many vices, and not enough resources to maintain them. He gambled and drank away the same amount of

money a family with five children survived on for a week. The Wongs were tired of footing their bookkeeper's soaring expenses and of his shit in general. Quite frankly, so was Shu.

"I've wasted enough of my time playing with you," Shu said darkly. The theater performance was due to start any moment, and as much as he enjoyed the killing, tonight it felt more like a nuisance. This bald, overweight, *sniveling* excuse for a man was not worth the effort.

Li laughed and pressed up against him. "Did you think you're the only asshole who wants to kill me?" he sneered. "I never go anywhere alone and the fun is just getting started, Shu."

Two men, Li's own bodyguards, entered the alley.

But Li's triumph was momentary as Toshiro vaulted forward and took out his two men before they could reach for their own weapons.

Li trembled at the ecstatic gleam in Shu's eyes, and trembled more when Toshiro came back, his handsome young face dark and deadly.

"I am not in the fucking mood for games tonight," he muttered. Li gasped as the knife was jammed into his side and jerked upwards until it reached his arm.

* * * *

The co-mingled scents of fear and blood drew Kiyoshi to the rear door of the theater. He peered out, saw a man murdered and licked his lips as he took in the two familiar killers. Oh, they were magnificent up close.

He inhaled slowly, closed his eyes and savored their scent. So full of power they were. So full of passion, all sorts of passion that heated their blood and pumped it through their veins in a heady rush that reached out to him. He shivered at the thought of touching at least one of them, tasting him. His mouth watered, his canines extending like the claws of a cat. He slipped out into the alley after the men left and quickly, drank what he could of the man the younger one had

stabbed, bringing him quickly to death's door.

Kiyoshi's sensitive ears picked up the sound of his mortal companions inside. *"Kiyoshi, you better get in here! The curtain's going up in five minutes!"*

Kiyoshi dragged himself away, wiped his mouth and went about his normal tasks of getting ready to perform with the Kabuki troupe.

Only tonight was different. Tonight was wonderful. Tonight he would feel those two watching him. The Poisoned Dragon and his protégé were here in the theater.

* * * *

Shu leaned back in the cloth seat as the lamps in the theater were turned down. Toshiro sat beside him in silence, eyes focused on the curtain. The younger man's hands rested on the railing to their balcony, crimson streaks trailing down across Toshiro's knuckles. Shu pulled out a handkerchief and reached out for Toshiro's wrist. He wiped the tacky blood off each finger and raised an eyebrow in amusement. "We enjoyed ourselves a little too much, I think," Shu smiled. "The viciousness I like. Your sloppiness, on the other hand..."

He patted Toshiro's cheek and tossed the soiled cloth on his lap. The curtain opened and the performance began. Shu sat back and sighed with irritation.

Toshiro reached down and grabbed the bloodstained handkerchief. "I don't care," he said miserably as his eyes scanned the main floor of the theater. There they were, front row center: his mother and Yang.

As if sensing the stare, Yang turned his head and looked up searching the darkened upper balconies and Toshiro recalled the audience he'd had with the Elders early this morning while Shu slept off another of his opium binges.

We like you, Toshiro, Old man Cho had said. *We don't usually accept outsiders into the ranks, but you've proven yourself time and*

again, and of course your mother holds a special place in all our hearts, more so since she married Ren. You have a great future here in San Francisco, but to be frank, you hinder yourself by the company you keep.

You're an intelligent young man. You can see how Shu, while quite effective in his job, is becoming more reckless and creating more problems than he needs to. He's attracting the notice of the white authorities, and we can't have that. We won't tolerate it. We'll put an end to it no matter what stands in our way. Ren suggests that we entrust the matter to your care, but some of us have reservations. We aren't exactly certain where your loyalties lie.

Toshiro's lower back still ached from that day in the foyer and as Shu's words rang in his head, *Why should you wait for something that's rightfully yours, only because a meaningless no one stands in your way*, he'd made the irrevocable decision.

I'll take care of the Shu problem for you.

* * * *

The performance seemed to drag on endlessly. Shu shifted in his seat and tapped his fingernails on the wooden armrest. He glanced at Toshiro and clicked his tongue. A large part of why he put up with this pointless shit was for *his* sake, no less.

"I hope you appreciate the things I do for you," Shu hissed under his breath. Toshiro remained silent and stared ahead, either having not heard him or not caring. It depended on whether or not Toshiro was trying to be *difficult* this evening.

"The things you do for me," Toshiro whispered. "Don't worry about Yang," he said louder "I'll take care of him. Just watch the rest of the show."

Shu's voice dripped with venom. "You've had your fun for the evening already. Yang is *mine* to deal with."

Shu's eyes, full of hate, glinted in the darkness. Yang had always crossed him, one way or another, over the years since Shu had

officially begun working for their syndicate. His weakness insulted him, his arrogance infuriated him. And after Yang's intrusion into his house yesterday...the trespass was unforgivable.

He wanted Yang's blood, and would have it.

Something onstage inspired the crowd to laugh. Shu glared at the woman beside Yang, who covered her mouth with a silk fan as she joined the laughter. The life of Yang's whore...Toshiro's mother...he wanted it as well.

His eyes still on the stage, Toshiro reached over and laid his hand on Shu's thigh. "Relax." He leaned over, his lips skimming the soft flesh of Dao Kan's ear. "Let's stay behind while the theater empties out. I hear Yang always lingers in the lobby greeting everyone and being the big important man."

"Hmph." Shu snorted.

He leaned away from the gentle touch of Toshiro's lips, frowning. "Stop it," he sighed, irritated. He swatted Toshiro's hand away from his lap. "Now's not the time for play. We have business matters of real importance to concentrate on."

And that always came first.

He gave Toshiro another irritated look and reached into his coat for his knife. When the crowd emptied out at last, Shu began to rise from his seat. "Let's settle this at last."

"Yes, let's."

Toshiro shoved his own knife deep into Dao Kan's belly, grabbing Shu's wrist so he couldn't strike out with his own knife. He quickly straddled Shu's lap and forced the arm with the knife against the railing, holding it with his body as he dragged his own weapon across through layers of muscle and flesh. He leaned into it, driving the knife in as deep as possible. He kept gazing into Shu's eyes before leaning in to kiss him. "I never wanted it to be this way, but you gave me no choice."

As the knife slashed through his flesh, Shu made a sound somewhere between a choke and a gasp. Reflexively, he tried to push away. But Toshiro shoved against him with more force and twisted

the blade upwards. “Tosh—” Shu started. The words gurgled in his throat as blood filled his mouth.

His free hand dropped to his belly, feeling the hot wetness that covered the front of his clothing. He stared at the blood—*his own blood*—as it covered his fingertips. His life spilled out of him, the blade seared as it tore through his insides. No one had ever cut him deeper...or made him *happier*.

“It’s...beautiful,” he whispered hoarsely. Shu exhaled a shuddering breath and a trickle of blood spilled from the corner of his mouth. His lips curled in a smile. Everything he’d taught Toshiro had been taken to heart—there was no sign of weakness, absolutely no fear or sadness evident in his student. Toshiro understood him, he always had. But it was only at this moment that it all became clear for Shu himself. He spasmed and coughed up blood. Droplets of the crimson liquid dotted his pupil’s face.

“My Toshiro...” he reached out with his trembling hand and touched Toshiro’s cheek.

His student...his *lover*...his *everything*...

Shu’s hand slid down Toshiro’s chest, pulling open the collar as far as he could with the last bit of strength his body had. One last mark needed to be left, one to express the realization that came only too late.

Yǒng yuǎn ai nǐ.

Shu struggled to trace the characters on Toshiro’s skin, his fingertips leaving crimson streaks on the pale, soft skin. They were for words he’d never spoken out loud. He’d never understood their meaning.

“I love you...forever...”

“No!” Toshiro cried. “Not now. You can’t say that *now*!” He let go of the knife, grabbed Shu’s face in his hands and looked into his lover’s dying eyes. “Not now,” Tears streamed down Toshiro’s cheeks. “Not now...” He covered Dao Kan’s mouth with his own, savoring the lips that only now spoke the love he’d craved so long. A piece of him died

inside when he felt the older man heave a sigh, and he drew it into himself. It was all he had left now.

Hands touched his shoulder. "Good work," Yang said. "You'll be rewarded handsomely. But you really shouldn't cry over such trash."

Toshiro pried himself away, pulled the knife free and brandished it. "Fuck you, Yang." He angrily wiped the wetness from his eyes with the back of one hand.



"Your mother already has." Yang held up his hands and his bodyguards appeared. "Now don't do anything rash, son. My carriage

is downstairs. Let your mother take you home and get cleaned up.”

Toshiro glared but left, taking one last long look at Dao Kan. He thought he saw him breathing, thought he detected movement of his hand.

* * * *

Kiyoshi lingered in the shadows, lured by the scents of blood and passion, anger and longing that came from the two he'd seen in the alley. Ah, so it was the younger one who'd survived. Kiyoshi shivered as the young man passed by so closely. Other mortals of no consequence followed, and once they'd gone, Kiyoshi stepped inside the balcony curtain. He touched a pale hand to his head as it swam from the blood lust sweeping through him.

Oh, this one's blood was intoxicating, and his heart was still beating, barely. The Poisoned Dragon wasn't ready to let go of life just yet. Kiyoshi advanced, bent and lapped at the blood oozing from the dying man's abdomen.

The Dragon suddenly jerked forward, crying out with pain and fury. He caught Kiyoshi off guard, grabbing his hair and jerking his head up. As the vampire gasped in surprise, savage instinct alone controlled the mortal, his jaws clamping down over Kiyoshi's exposed throat. He severed the flesh with his bite and blood gushed out of the wound. With another cry, he fell back on to the floor, spent.

Kiyoshi pressed a hand to his bleeding neck and then surrendered to his own instincts. He instinctively lunged for the man's throat to finish him off.

“Kiyoshi, don't make me come looking for you!”

No. Not Ryuhei. Not now. Kiyoshi gasped and watched the man on the floor. It was a fluke. It had to be. He was too injured to survive. He wouldn't move again.

Ryuhei's voice called out again, closer this time. “Come on, Kiyoshi! We have to get to the train depot, now!”
It was a fluke, he told himself again as he backed out and tore off the

bloody shirt he wore. He wiped his mouth, his hands. The wound on Kiyoshi's throat that was already healing. But the man wasn't healing.. He was dying. Soon, he would be dead.

He hadn't made this man what he was. He couldn't. He hadn't the power. He wasn't like the *oni* back in Japan who'd made him the human demon that he was. There had been chanting, a special ceremony of sorts. It didn't happen this way.

"Kiyoshi!"

"I'm coming, Ryu-san!" In an instant, Kiyoshi disappeared into the shadows.

And Dao Kan Shu stirred.

* * * * *

Yang bowed deeply to the most powerful of the elders. "Forgive me, Master Cho, for not immediately sending you his head. I sent Wu back to the theater, but evidently someone had removed the body. They must have taken it away with the body of the man Toshiro eliminated earlier, Quan Li."

Master Cho nodded. "You saw him killed, as did your men. I do not doubt you." Cho paused. "However, I have heard a rumor that your lovely wife's son has had a change of heart in the matter. Is this true? Does he pose a threat to us?"

"No, sir, he does not. You have my word on that."

"Please forgive my Toshiro," Yang's wife Ume said as she returned to the room with tea for the old man. She poured the tea and knelt at the Elder's feet to serve it to him. "Shu clouded his judgment for so long, but I assure you he is most loyal to the Wong family and in particular, to you."

Yang gritted his teeth as Cho reached out to stroke Ume's cheek.

"Leave us for a while, Ren. I wish to speak to your lovely wife about this matter in private."

Yang bowed. "Yes, Master Cho."

* * * * *

Shu moved through the dark alley, dragging one hand along the stone wall on the side of a building. Every faint sound echoed in his ears, colors once muted in the darkness of nightfall jumped out at him with sharp vividness...his senses burned and his mind raced to take it all in.

Toshiro tried to kill him.

He could still feel the burn of the steel tearing through his insides, the touch of Toshiro's lips in that last desperate kiss. The front of his clothing was torn and soaked with blood, but when he felt for the wound, his hand touched nothing but smooth, *whole* flesh. Even the wound at his neck had healed.

Shu collapsed against the wall, breathing in short, choked gasps. A different pain coursed through his body, tearing at him from the inside. He thirsted like never before—an aching, burning thirst that consumed him.

Whatever that *creature* in the theater had done to him may have saved his life. But it had also changed him. He could still taste its blood in his mouth, both cold and hot all at once. The thick liquid had seared his tongue, but its strange sweet taste *exhilarated*. When Shu had swallowed, the blood burned inside his belly. A strange mixture of agony and euphoria had overwhelmed him as the burning spread through his battered body, and it continued to do so even now.

“There you are.”

Startled at the loudness of what was only a whisper, Shu looked over his shoulder. A man of small stature like that of a young child hobbled after him in the dark alley. He was dressed in costume from the theater, and he dragged a body behind him. From what little remained of the mangled and chewed corpse, Shu recognized it as the man Toshiro had also killed, Quan Li.

“You left so quickly,” the man's eyes glinted. “Kiyoshi was right—

you are strong. But still weak enough for me to handle.” He smiled. His teeth were covered in blood. The ghoul laughed. “I’m glad—live flesh tastes so much better than the dead ones I usually take care of for the little *chiang-shih*.”



Shu stared at him as the freakish creature approached. "I would think so," Shu suddenly joined in the laughter. The ghoul frowned and bared his teeth. He lunged forward, but Shu caught him by the throat. With no other way to satisfy the thirst that consumed him, Shu snapped the ghoul's neck to the side and bit down into its cold skin.

But there was no blood in the creature to drain. Shu tossed the body aside, shaking with fury just as empty and pained as before. He stumbled on, desperate for human blood. Then he needed to find Toshiro...

The ghoul pulled himself up from the ground, rubbing at the tear in his shoulder. "Kiyoshi, you little fool!"

The man Kiyoshi had changed was already too powerful and too consumed with the thirst. He would become a monster...

The ghoul dragged the remains of his meal out of the alley and then raced to find someone who could stop him.

* * * *

The monk, Denghui, twisted the beads around his wrist. The wooden charms rubbed against his weathered skin, the pressure irritated his rheumatism as did the unseasonably cool night air. But he twisted the beads tighter and chanted softly under his breath.

He stepped over the bodies strewn across the cobblestones, closing his eyes against the carnage. It was as Gobei the flesh eater had predicted when he ran into the Tien Hau temple, begging for his aid...and worse.

"Mu-Gong, come to the aid of mankind," the monk chanted.

* * * *

Ume Yang made the carriage driver leave her off at the Tien Hau temple. She assured him that he would not be 'disciplined' by Ren for not taking her directly to her door following her 'visit' with the Elder Cho.

Ume stopped partly to purify herself of the old man's touch but mostly to pray for her only son. She had never seen Toshiro so distraught and the look in his eyes frightened her. And it wasn't simply because he'd gotten himself a bottle of laudanum in an effort to dull his pain. His eyes were different, so different. It seemed as though someone had taken a piece of his soul and thrown it away.

Ume passed the old women burning symbolic money to offer their ancestors in the afterlife and stepped into a quiet corner. She stood with her hands together, her eyes closed, and inhaled the thick incense that mingled with the sweet scent of ripe oranges set upon the small altar in front of her.

Please, Xi-Wangmu. I beg of you to help my Toshiro. I don't know how or why, but he loved that monster Shu, and for some strange reason Shu made him happy in some strange way. Please ease his pain. Please help him carry on and find the happiness he deserves. If not in this life, then in the next...

Xi-Wangmu heard the mother's prayer even as another overlapped and begged for her husband Mu-Gong's intervention.

How could it be that this 'monster' who was loved so deeply was a threat to all humanity?

Xi-Wangmu drifted to Mu-Gong's side and took hold of his hands before he could cast his power down to aid the monk. *Wait, husband. There is something more at work here. Something we do not understand.*

He wrenched his hand away. *Silence, woman! We are Gods! We understand all we need to understand.*

Xi-Wangmu grabbed him again, and her uncharacteristic obstinacy had him both angry and curious.

But do any of Us understand the workings of the mortal heart, husband? This monster the monk wants you to vanquish is so loved by another whose mother fears for her son's life at his loss.

Don't be foolish! You have listened to the prayers of women far too long. The monster must die. Mu-Gong raised his hand again and again his wife stopped him.

How can a man who inspires such love and loyalty be a monster through and through? Surely he can be redeemed at some point in time. Is it not better to subdue and give him that time than to kill him?

No.

Xi-Wangmu prostrated herself at her husband's feet. *I beg you to reconsider. I offer my immortality in return for his life.*

Immortality has been wrongly given to him. He must be destroyed.

A mother cries for her son's happiness. Ease her sorrow and her child's.

Mu-Gong raised his hand. *The son has committed almost as many wrongs.*

Xi-Wangmu raised her hand. *But in both there is love to temper these wrongs.*

Mu-Gong touched Xi-Wangmu's hand and each became one, and the one became the other.

And in all things there is balance.

* * * *

Shu heard the old man's approach long before the monk finally arrived. The sandaled feet shuffled across the street in steps slowed by age and the drone of his chanting poured endlessly out of a wrinkled, withered mouth.

"Prayers are useless, old fool." Shu tossed another body off the top of the stone steps leading up to the Wong's headquarters. The entire structure's design intentionally looked like some strange cross between Western architecture and the imperial palace in China. Here in the heart of the Chinese district, the Wongs were very much the rulers of their little empire.

An empire Shu would claim for himself. In this one night, he could slaughter every one of the Elders' puppets. More than half of the Wong enforcers in the city were already dead, soon to be followed by each of the Elders in turn. Yang he'd save for last, and take the most pleasure out of.

Then he'd find Toshiro, and share *everything* with him.

The corpse slid down the steps, and Shu laughed. It left a trail of blood that in the faint moonlight filtering through the dense clouds looked like ink. The monk paused halfway up the steps, and gave a small, respectful bow to the body. Shu laughed again and wiped the blood from the corners of his lips.

"It won't save you," he smiled. "The importance of a holy man is quite overstated."

"They're not for me," Denghui stopped chanting. He unwound the wooden beads from his wrist as he reached the top of the steps and faced Shu.

"Please, Mu-Gong," Denghui began chanting again.

Shu's arched an eyebrow in annoyance. "Fool." He lunged at the monk.

Denghui moved faster than his appearance gave him credit for. Though Shu's bloodstained hands found his throat, that move would cost him greatly. The monk's hands moved just as quickly to their target and never faltered. He wrapped the prayer beads around Shu's vulnerable wrist.

Shu laughed, his eyes flashing with mirth. He squeezed harder, and then screamed. The wooden charms *burned*. The smell of his own seared flesh filled his nostrils and he dropped to his knees. All the strength drained from his body and he screamed again.

"May Mu-Gong show you mercy, miserable creature," Denghui's old voice was made harsher from the chokehold. He shook his head sadly.

"*Fuck* your god!" Shu shrieked. This couldn't stop him! He clawed at the beads and the skin on his fingertips split open at the touch. He writhed on the ground, in more agony than he'd ever known as the world faded to black.

* * * * *

The monk stared down at the unconscious form, more demon than

man, even in his life as a mortal. Denghui closed his eyes and pressed his palms together in a prayer of thanks.

"But he's still alive." The ghoul crept up the stairs and stood beside his friend. Since the last stone in the temple had been laid, he had aided the kind monk's work. But this was the first time Denghui showed mercy to such an evil creature. He stared down at Shu's crumpled body with contempt.

"Mu-Gong gave me the strength only to bind him," Denghui said. "He is wise in his mercy."

Gobei frowned. "What do you want to do with him?"

"Bring him, please," the monk sighed, his old bones weary from the conflict. He turned away and slowly made his way down the steps, his joints aching with the effort. The ghoul pressed his pale lips together and grabbed Shu by the collar. He followed after Denghui, dragging the body behind him.

They reached the temple before daybreak. Gobei dragged Shu up to the tall red gate, but couldn't pass beyond the threshold onto holy ground. He dropped the body and backed away, shaking his head with disapproval. Shu was nothing like kind-hearted Kiyoshi. Letting this one live still seemed like a mistake. He said nothing more, though, hoping the gods would continue to protect the old man. As Gobei hobbled off into the shrinking shadows, Denghui bowed to him in gratitude.

Two other monks dressed in simple robes and with shaved heads stepped out of the temple. At Denghui's request, they each took hold of Shu and carried him into the temple.

* * * *

Voices pierced through the blackness, and Shu stirred. His hands were still bound, the burning just as fierce and constant as before. Growling with fury, he forced himself to sit up and blinked until his blurred vision regained some focus. He was on a dirt floor in a windowless room, large stones and a few construction materials were

scattered around. The voices and a solitary shaft of light came from behind.

He turned around and rose on unsteady legs. The light blinded him at first, but it steadily grew fainter.

"What are you doing?" he hissed.

The old monk answered. "Until Mu-Gong in his wisdom speaks on your behalf, you must remain here." The ray of light shrank further as another stone was set in place over the entrance. They were sealing him in this place.

Shu lurched forward. "*What?*" he shrieked. He slammed into the freshly erected wall, but his strength failed him. Shu screamed, his shoulder almost dislocated on the impact.

"You little *fuck!*" he choked out. He ripped at the beads on his wrist until the wooden charms became slick with his blood. When that proved futile, he gnawed at it with his teeth. The skin around his mouth peeled away from contact with the prayer beads, but his anger dulled the pain. The string finally snapped. Shu flung the charms to the side with a cry, scattering them into the shadows.

Another stone was set in place over the entrance and blotted out the last of the light just as he freed himself. Total darkness engulfed him. Shu slammed his fists into the stone, but something stronger than mortar held the wall in place. Though no longer bound to the beads, the very nature of this place quickly sapped the strength from his body.

"No!" Like a caged animal, saliva sprayed from his mouth.

He couldn't be trapped. Nothing could stop him.

Shu clawed at the wall with his bare hands. His fingernails tore on the stone and his raw skin slid uselessly over the surface. Curses and oaths spilled out of his mouth and his screams echoed in the closed chamber. When his cries became nothing but hoarse moans, he slid to the floor, exhausted.

"Toshiro..." The name echoed in the darkness in which Dao Kan Shu was very much alone.

* * * *

"You can tell me the truth, Toshiro," Ren Yang said swirling the wine around in the cut crystal glass in his hand. "It was you who killed those men, wasn't it?"

Toshiro poked at the steak on the plate before him with the blade of his dinner knife. Blood-tinged juices oozed out across the gleaming white porcelain plate and puddled beneath the mound of small red potatoes. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Yang smirked. "Jin was upstairs with the Elders. He said he's certain it was Shu who killed them, but we both know better, don't we?" He sipped his wine. "Shu taught you well, Toshiro. If anyone could have taken out that many skilled bodyguards in such a short span of time, it would have been you."

The glassware on the table rattled when Toshiro slammed his knife into the center of the steak and glared across the table at Yang. "It wasn't fucking me." He pushed his chair back and stood, his gaze still impaling his stepfather. "If it *had* been me, you'd have been the first to die."

Yang was still smirking after Toshiro stalked out of the room. He turned to Toshiro's mother, the smirk softening into a smile. "I never thought I'd say this, *mei-mei*, but your son is a worthy successor. His little temper tantrum following Shu's death paved his way straight to the top. He'll be an important man in the family when all is said and done."

* * * *

The nineteenth century drew to a close, and drifted into the twentieth. Toshiro succeeded Yang, but it was an empty victory. Though he kept his mind on the business at hand a goodly portion of the time, late at night when he was alone in the bed he'd shared with Dao Kan, that horrible day replayed itself in his mind over and over and over again.

* * * *

April 18, 1906

Blinking back the tears from his aging eyes, Toshiro pulled open his sleeping yukata and traced his index finger over the Chinese characters cut into the flesh of his abdomen, now scarred over. He'd given himself the grisly 'tattoo' to remind him always of what he'd had and what he'd lost—*yǒng yuǎn ai nǐ*.

"I love you forever..."

His vision a blur from the tears, Toshiro turned to the bedside table and took up a bottle of the laudanum he'd been using more frequently of late. He drank the entire bottle and let it pull him into a deathlike, dreamless sleep. "And I'll love you forever, Dao Kan..."

At 5:12 a.m., a shaking of the bed began to rouse Toshiro from his drugged slumber. Less than a minute later, he was thrown to the floor as the entire house shook as if in the grips of some monstrous demon. The armoire across from the bed toppled over, nearly crushing him. The door of the cabinet flew open when it hit the floor, the mirror shattering and pelting his bare skin. Plaster crumbled from the walls and ceiling as the shaking continued.

Toshiro pulled himself to his feet, made his way to the door and hurried to the stairs as quickly as his unsteady legs would carry him. He was halfway down when the outer wall collapsed, bringing the staircase with it. He flew, landing half outside the crumbling structure and as the initial shock wore off, he felt the stab of glass in his back. Fuck. The mirror. The big fucking mirror Dao Kan insisted on having in the foyer. He couldn't move; bricks and wood pinned him down. Another wall collapsed bombarding him with debris, knocking him unconscious.

* * * *

The rumble started deep within the earth's core moments before the

earthquake unleashed itself on the city of San Francisco. Buried beneath the temple, Shu felt its approach and braced himself. The floor buckled underneath him and the stone surrounding him trembled with the violent onslaught. In the span of only a few heartbeats, the Tien Hau lay in waste, and Shu walked free at last.

Early morning air filled his lungs, daybreak still lingered below the horizon. He pulled himself from the rubble, his muscles weak and trembling. Miserable and half-starved from the countless measure of years spent in that wretched hole, Shu staggered from the debris. He'd survived only on the strength of his fury and on his desire to find one man—Toshiro. The sounds of the wounded around him were a distant hum, barely audible above the sound of his own labored breathing.

Shu lurched towards the street. A wounded monk reached out to take a hold of him, spouting something with his dying breath. Shu looked down at the bloody hand that gripped his tattered clothing. The thirst burned within him, gnawing at his insides and consuming his mind. He grabbed the monk and savagely tore into his throat.

Blood, he craved it—*desired* it. He drained the monk quickly, and tossed the body to rubble-strewn ground. It gave him just enough strength to overcome his weakness and he quickly left the temple grounds.

Just as the earthquake cut a devastating path through the city, so did Shu. He moved through the ravaged streets, tearing into any survivor he encountered along the way with increasing ferocity. Each life he took gave him more strength, and he released his pent up rage with cruel intensity.

The path he took was engrained in his memory, and he followed it without realizing where it led. As he threw down another lifeless corpse, he paused in front of a destroyed house. Though little more than a pile of rubble, he recognized it immediately.

Toshiro. He'd found his way to their house.

Shu's senses suddenly focused, and the scent of familiar blood filled his nostrils. Toshiro's blood. He passed through what had once

been their threshold, and followed the scent to its source. He moved aside a large wooden rafter and knelt beside the body. Shu whispered the name that had never parted his lips in however long he'd been imprisoned.

"Toshiro."

Shockwaves of pain roused Toshiro from his stupor. He was dying. He felt the weakness and the coldness seeping into his numbing limbs. The sound of a far off familiar voice confirmed his thoughts. "I'm coming, Dao. Soon...soon..."

Toshiro groaned as the weight of the debris shifted, sending the pain through his broken body like an aftershock. He coughed, blood bubbling up, trickling from his lips.

Shu leaned down and pressed his lips gently to Toshiro's. He tenderly kissed the blood away and pulled back sharply, his face twisted as a kind of pain he'd never felt until now gripped his heart. He could taste it in his blood, feel it in the coolness of his skin—Toshiro's life slipping away with each passing moment.

"No..." Shu growled. This wasn't right. He glared at the rubble pressing against Toshiro's chest and fiercely shoved it away. The creature at the theater. How had he brought him back? What was the magic that healed him and made him live? He needed to know. He needed it now!

He lifted Toshiro's head and rested it on his lap. The soft curves of youth were gone, replaced instead with the handsome lines of age, and strands of gray now peppered the soft brown shoulder length hair. Shu caressed his cheek and ran his fingers through Toshiro's hair. Time may have altered this face, but it was still his. It was still the face of his treasured lover.

How many years had passed while he was away, locked in that cursed prison below the temple? More than twenty, perhaps thirty. More than three decades of their life together...*stolen*.

"Don't go," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm already here, Toshiro." He brushed away the dirt and dried blood from the man's face. His tone was sharp and yet his touch was gentle.

"It's true...what they say...in the Christian church..." He coughed, groaned and more blood trickled from his mouth. "Angels...angels come when you...die..." Toshiro tried to lift his hand, he couldn't but his fingers brushed Dao Kan. "Yang...Yang... made me do it..." He struggled to breathe. "Look...look," he whispered, trying to brush bricks from his abdomen.

"Don't be so stupid," Shu's voice caught in his throat. He cleared off the last of the debris from Toshiro, and frowned deeply. Thick pieces of shattered glass were embedded in Toshiro and a wooden beam pierced through his waist. But just above his abdomen, Shu could discern the characters carved into the smooth belly.

"Forever..." Shu whispered. The rest of his words were lost as his lungs locked inside his chest. He reached out and traced the marks with his fingers. Toshiro's own hand did this, sadness and pain behind each of his graceful strokes. It was beautiful. Shu drew the dying man into his arms, a choked cry escaping his lips. He held him close, rocking him against his chest, desperate to keep whatever bit of life remained within this body. "My Toshiro."

It hurt to draw in full breaths, so Toshiro didn't try. He wanted to smile, but didn't have the strength for he was using all he could muster to move his right arm, to reach out one last time for Dao and to tell him what was in his broken heart. "I—I'll...find... you...wait...for...me..."

Toshiro gasped, coughed, the blood spraying out of his mouth this time and then he went limp.

Droplets of blood landed on his face, and Shu tensed. "No," he commanded forcefully, desperate to control something beyond even his power. He'd taken so many lives without care or remorse, but now...he would have paid any price to save just this one.

But it was too late.

Shu's trembling fingertips brushed over Toshiro's eyes. Once so beautiful and passionate in youth, they now stared somewhere beyond him, empty and unseeing. Shu couldn't bear to look at them, and he gently closed them.

"I'll be waiting..." Shu whispered. He cradled Toshiro's lifeless body in his arms and kissed his already cool lips. He'd endured years buried beneath the surface in that temple prison in solitude, but it had not prepared him for the feeling of utter emptiness that came with this death.

My student, my lover...my everything.

Shu's eyes stung. He wiped at the wetness that trailed down his cheek, and stared at the glistening droplets on his fingertip. For the first time in his existence Dao Kan Shu understood grief, and cried for the life of another.

PART TWO: THE RECLAIMING

CHAPTER ONE

San Francisco Present Day

Ken Ohara studied the girl hovering just inside the main entrance of *The Poisoned Dragon*, the hot upscale Goth club on the outskirts of the city's Chinatown section. *CeCe, if she's the one you set me up with, I will strangle the life out of you this weekend.*

That girl couldn't be her, but it had to be. She was obviously waiting for someone, and his sister did say she was a cute little cheerleader type. Shit. She looked like the stereotypical blonde airhead, the kind that would struggle to do well enough to score double digits on an IQ test.

The girl glanced his way, then looked elsewhere, and he debated simply letting her think she'd been stood up. But if he did that, he'd never hear the end of it from his older sister, who acted more like an old lecturing grandmother than their *actual* grandmother.

The blonde did have a pretty face and hot body, though, and Ken knew if he was the least bit lucky, he might get laid for the time and money spent this evening.

He was about to get up and approach the girl when voices from the booth behind him caught his attention.

"That's *him*."

"Him? In the corner? In the leather with the sunglasses?"

"Yeah. That's the club's owner."

So the mysterious Dragon himself was in residence tonight? Interesting. Ken had been coming to the club weekly since it opened late last year and he'd never seen the great man in the flesh, though he'd heard all sorts of things about him.

Ken stood up and scanned the crowded interior. He took a few steps away from the table and peered over the heads of the black clad customers dancing to the latest Asian rock tunes.

Ah yes, there was the mystery man, in the back at a large corner booth. Damn, the guy was impressive even in the dim light. He wasn't overly large or flashy in any way, but there was just something about the way he sat there in his leather blazer and pants and a blood red shirt with the top three buttons open. His dark hair was medium in length, cut fashionably, and he had classic black Ray Bans, giving him a dangerous air, as did the cigarette in the hand resting upon the back of the booth's top.

Ken glanced back to the blonde by the door then got up and walked over to her. "Hi. Are you Mindy?"

She gave him a vapid stare. "Um, yeah. Do I know you?"

"I'm Ken. Ken Ohara. My sister and one of your friends set this up."

"Ohhhhhh." She stared at him for what seemed the longest time. "I'm sorry. When Jan told me Ken O'Hara, I thought you'd be all Irish looking."

"Well, it's Japanese and pronounced o HA ra not O 'HARE a."

She gave him a dazed look. "Right."

Oh, God, I should have just stood her up. "Look, if you don't want to do this, it's okay. I'm not usually big on blind dates anyway."

"Well, we are both here and all, " she said toying with the ends of her hair. "I guess you could buy me a drink or something."

Ken forced himself to smile. "Sure thing. I have a table over here."

Together, they walked past the bar, and from across the crowded club, Dao Kan Shu watched.

* * * *

As soon as the young man had entered the club that first night, Shu knew he searched for something...*someone*. It was in the way Ken stared into the crowd, carefully looking into each person's face. And tonight, through the pulsing throng of bodies filling the dance floor, he'd turned that searching gaze towards Shu.

In that brief moment, everything in the *Dragon* fell silent. The music, the conversations, the clink of glassware on metal tabletops—all the heated noises of the club dissolved into nothing. Without ever making a sound or even moving his lips, Shu called out across the distance...but as suddenly as it had arrived, the moment ended.

Shu brought the cigarette to his lips, inhaling deeply. Behind the dark glasses, his eyes narrowed at the blonde sitting with Ken. *But she's not the one you're searching for, Kenichi...*

He gestured and one of the club's girls quickly arrived at his booth. "Have two drinks taken to their table," Shu exhaled and his lips curled in a smile. Through the thin veil of smoke, he pointed to Ken and his companion as they took their seat.

With a nod, the woman wove her way through the crowd.

* * * *

A pretty waitress dressed in black leather bustier and matching micro-miniskirt, her skin powdered white, her lips blood red, her eyes rimmed with black liner, set two glasses of wine on the table. "Mr. Shu sends you his regards, and would like you give you each a drink on the house."

Ken looked to the back booth and gave the club owner a wave of thanks after the woman took their order. Shu responded by raising his glass in a small salute.

"So, like, do you come here all the time?" Mindy asked.

Ken tore his gaze from the mysterious Poisoned Dragon. "Once a week, sometimes more. It depends on school and if anyone else is

heading here.”



“I’m not used to this. It’s kind of weird. I mean, all the leather and Goth makeup. Gah. I feel like I’m at some Marilyn Manson concert.”

"I can take you home." *Please let me take you home...*

"I borrowed my mom's car, but I might as well stay for the free drink, right? I mean, it's not like I don't like you or anything. It's just—"

"You were expecting a blond-haired, freckle-faced Irish-American O'Hara, not a Japanese-American Ohara."

"Well, yeah." Mindy took a long sip of her wine when the waitress set it down. "I mean, I'm not prejudiced or anything. I was just surprised, that's all."

"It's okay, really," Ken said flatly, his attention straying to the back of the club booth where Shu now talked with two girls. They were the ones who'd been at the adjoining table earlier.

Ken tried not to be obvious about looking at his watch as Mindy sipped her drink oh-so-slowly. Fifteen minutes? It had been only fifteen *minutes*?

"Oh, my bad," Mindy chirped. "Here I am talking all about me and I haven't even asked what your major is."

"Art. I've scandalized my scientific minded family and refused to go pre-med like every other Ohara for the past half century."

"Oh. So you don't want to be a doctor?"

"No. I don't want to be a doctor like either of my parents, a pathologist like my sister or a psychiatrist like my grandfather. All I want to do is create art."

"Oh. Being a painter is nice, I guess."

And the minutes continued to drag by in a similar vein.

The long, endless minutes.

Ken had three drinks to Mindy's one. He ordinarily wouldn't, certainly if he was trying to make a good impression, but he really didn't give a shit since there was no way in hell he'd ever be seeing her again. She apparently was majoring in English Lit—how, he would never understand—and as she went off on a tangent about her professors, Ken found his attention wandering once again toward the rear of the club.

Poisoned Dragon still entertained those two girls. He wondered if

Shu would take them both to bed. It certainly wouldn't surprise him, not the way they were hanging on Shu, giggling and rubbing their faces like contented cats against his hands when he touched their cheeks.

Ken wished he were sitting closer or that the pounding Asian rock playing in the background were gone so that he could hear if maybe those two girls purred like cats too.

Suddenly Shu looked his way and, as he'd done before, lifted his glass in a small greeting salute. Ken did likewise and he wondered if Shu's eyes behind the dark glasses were as chilling as that odd half smile curving his lips.

"I said, I think I'm going to go now."

Ken jumped a bit when the grating sound of Mindy's voice pierced his left ear. The drink in his hand sloshed, and splashed her sweater. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were right there. Here let me—"

"Never mind."

She spun on her heel and headed towards the door. Ken took a few bills from his wallet, tossed them on the table, grabbed his jacket, then hurried after the girl.

* * * *

Shu laughed darkly. "Will you play her game, my child?" he whispered as his eyes followed Ken to the door.

"We can bring him to you," Lilith volunteered. She shifted closer to Shu and traced a finger down the front of his shirt, eager for some attention. Cassandra nodded and leaned close, twisting a ringlet of her scarlet hair around her finger.

Shu sat up and placed his drink on the table. The alcohol would not quench the thirst he felt rise inside him. He smirked at his overzealous pets. "I'm certain you would," he said. He swatted away their hands and stood up from his seat. "But he'll come on his own."

"Where are you going?" Cassandra took his drink and sipped from it at the spot where his lips touched the glass. Shu raised an

eyebrow at her tone and she looked away quickly, silenced by his stare.

“That’s better,” he said. How dare they question *him*?

“We’ll be waiting for you,” whispered Lilith. She took Cassandra by the hand and they slipped out of the booth. They retreated into the shadows of the club.

Shu dropped his cigarette into the abandoned drink on the table and smiled. Ken’s evening with *Mindy* ended in proverbial disaster, but all was not lost. At least for Shu, the evening was only beginning.

The Poisoned Dragon moved forward and disappeared into the crowd.

* * * *

“Hey, look, I’m really sorry.” Ken took a business card from his wallet and slipped it into the side pocket of her purse as she opened the door to her car. “My email is on the card, just let me know how it much it costs to clean or replace your shirt, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“I’m really sorry this didn’t work out, but you know how blind dates are.”

“Yeah. I know.”

She got in the car and slammed the door shut, then sped away, nearly running over his foot.

Stupid bitch. Ken looked at his watch. Damn. It was only nine-fifteen. He had no morning classes, only two afternoon classes tomorrow and there sure as hell wasn’t anything to do at his apartment. He thought he saw Jonny and Lok in the club, maybe he could hang with them a while. He might as well finish getting drunk. He lived within walking distance, so he didn’t have to worry about that. Yeah, getting drunk seemed like a real good idea.

He got himself another drink from the bar, then scanned the place for his friends. While doing so, he noticed that Mr. Shu and his little groupies were gone. Damn, too bad Mindy hadn’t left sooner.

He wouldn't have minded joining the party and seeing if he could get in on some of that action.

* * * *

The slam of the car door filled the empty parking lot. Only a few cars were scattered around the lot; most stalls were empty. "Because everyone's out having a good time," Mindy sighed and set the alarm as she headed for the apartment building's entrance.

Her heels clicked on the pavement and she looked down at her sweater. Even in the dull orange light of the overhead street lamps, the stain jumped out against the white cashmere.

She dug around in her purse for the keys to her place and muttered to herself. "Thanks for nothing, Jan."

"Thanks, indeed." A man breathed into her ear.

Startled, Mindy gasped and the keys clattered to the ground. "Where did you come from?"

"Maybe I was always here," the man whispered.

"Yeah, right," she said. "You're that guy from the club who bought us those drinks." She frowned a little. "What are you doing here?"

The lights around the building flickered and went out.

"Shit...crappy old building," she muttered. She bent down in the darkness to reach for the keys but her fingers touched nothing but cool concrete.

Shu tossed them in the air above her head. They jingled as he caught them. "The darkness suits me," he whispered.

"Yeah...right." Mindy stood up. "Um, do you mind?" She reached out, and his hand touched her wrist. Almost instantly, her unease faded, disappearing the way the sidewalks did when the fog rolled in from the bay.

"Not at all," he laughed, the soft sound easing her back from her thoughts. He dropped the keys into her hand.

Mindy joined in the laughter, though she wasn't quite sure why

she did. It was almost infectious. She stared at the keys in her palm, jingling them as she chewed her lower lip. "Do you...want to come up?" she asked, even though she didn't know why. She shrugged off her unease and smiled. "You can save me from tripping all over the stairs since you're so comfortable with the dark."

"*Save* you." He laughed. "Of course."

Shu stepped inside and closed the door behind them as she carefully made her way into the small kitchen off to the right.

Shu followed after her, his movements quick and soundless. In the next instant, he was beside her.

"I have candles somewhere here..."

He touched the side of her face and closed the cabinet she searched through.

"It's best you don't light them," he breathed into her ear and she whimpered. She turned around to kiss him, but he placed a finger over her mouth. The pain won't last long."

Confused, Mindy tried to move away. She stepped back into the counter and Shu smiled. The edge of his razor sharp fangs glinted in what little moonlight filtered through the kitchen window.

She opened her mouth to scream, but her cries never left her throat.

Shoving her backward into the cabinet, he tore into the side of her neck. She thrashed around beneath him, but her strength was no match for his.

As promised, it didn't last long. Mindy felt her energy sucked away and when Shu let go, she slid to the floor. Darkness was clouding her vision, and she felt so cold as she saw him take one of the small dishtowels folded on top of the counter and daub at his mouth.

Drops of blood still clung to his lips. "Thanks, Jan," he whispered, smiling.

* * * * *

Dawn crept over the horizon, but the sunlight never entered the

Poisoned Dragon. The building had few windows, all with heavily stained glass and thick curtains that perpetually draped over them.

Shu entered the now empty club through the side entrance, locking the door behind him. A couple of employees cleaned the floors and wiped the tables, their eyes fixed on their work. They'd all learned over time to never ask questions, no matter what the circumstances. They were here to obey, that was all.

As for the other man who sat near the back wall facing away from the entrance...

Shu narrowed his eyes and silently crossed the floor. The scent of absinthe and cigarette smoke was enough to give away the visitor's identity.

"Staying after hours, Danny?" Shu stopped in front of the booth. "You've already missed all the fun."

"We're here on business, Dao." Daniel Yang adjusted his glasses and gestured to the two bodyguards who sat with him. He turned in his seat. "We need to talk about this *establishment* of yours."

"Now's not a good time," Shu brushed him off. He started to walk away.

Yang slammed his drink on the table. "Don't fuck with me, Shu!" he shouted. "You're bringing the goddamn police on us with all the shit you're pulling here—and we don't need that, understand?"

"I'll do whatever I please," Shu hissed. In three steps he was leaning over Yang's seat, close enough for the man to smell and see the blood that stained the front of his shirt.

"Go home while you can, Yang," said Shu. He glared at the two bodyguards who rose from their seats and reached for their concealed handguns. "And take your two lapdogs with you."

"Jesus Christ," Yang muttered. Shu tasted the fear on his breath.

Yang raised a hand and the two hitmen froze. "And what do you want me to tell the syndicate, Shu?" he asked quietly. "You're good for business, but it's only a matter of time before your shit gets them really pissed off. Then what?"

"Time is meaningless, Yang," Shu pulled away with one last look

at the Chinese mob's spokesman. "Tell them *I don't give a fuck*."

Yang mumbled a string of curses but Shu said nothing more. He walked past the booth and through a dark doorway that led to a staircase.

There were other matters to attend to. Two women waited for him upstairs who believed this was all just a game. If they wanted to play, they needed to understand the rules.

* * * *

Cassandra gasped when Mr. Shu stepped out of the shadows and she tried to cover herself with her discarded skirt.

"Please don't let me interrupt," he said lazily as he draped his tall form across the leather chair opposite the matching sofa she and Lilith had been making out on.

She still couldn't believe she'd been making out with another girl and that earlier they'd—She stopped thinking when Lilith drew her into a kiss while tossing aside the skirt and working her thin fingers into Cassandra's panties.

She shivered and squirmed as the older girl worked her magic again, and even though she thought it was kind of gross because she was getting over her period and was spotting, she couldn't deny that the extra wetness made it so much easier for Lilith to turn her on.

She groaned when Lilith tugged her top off and trailed hot kisses down across her swollen breasts and lower still...

Cassandra looked with slit eyes at Shu, who sat with his hands steeped in front of him, elbows resting on the arms of the chair. He was breathing hard, she could see it in the rapid rise and fall of his chest that matched her own.

She cried out when Lilith ran her tongue along her wet slit and lapped at the combination of her natural wetness and the remnants of menstrual blood. She came fast and hard for her friend, and was still shaking when the other girl moved from between her legs and went to kneel before Shu.

“You see. I told you I’m a natural-born vampire.”

* * * *

Those words, spoken so casually from lips moist with Cassandra’s wetness and the faint traces of blood, meant nothing to Shu. He breathed heavily from the rush of their passion, but he was cold and empty of feeling.

You understand nothing of what you speak, “ he said. He leaned forward and his fingertips brushed against her flushed cheek. His touch trailed down along her throat and across her breasts, where her heart raced with excitement.

“I understand more than you think,” Lilith said, her lips curled in a coy smile. She pressed into his touch and shifted on her knees. While his touch excited her, her foolishness annoyed him.

“This isn’t about sex,” he whispered, and his hand suddenly went back to her neck.

Lilith shuddered at his cold touch and the way his grip tightened around her throat, but didn’t pull away. Her eyes were filled with desire as she stared up at Shu. For her, the threat wasn’t real—it was part of the ‘act’.

“It’s about danger,” she purred and licked her moist lips. “So did I prove myself?”

Shu narrowed his eyes. Passion and power were addictive things to the mortal heart, but they’re rarely ever truly understood. People could spend the entire span of their short lives seeking them and never know what it meant to taste them in their pure form. Even fewer *deserved* it.

Lilith had proved nothing, because she understood nothing. Too many gothic novels had romanticized her view of this dark world she wanted so desperately to be a part of.

“No,” Shu said at last. “You haven’t.” No one ever did.

“But I do have something else in mind for you.”

She stared up at him, enthralled. “Anything you want.”

He moved his hand from her throat and kissed the side of her neck once. "In exchange for your life, I'll let you taste my power." He bit down gently, but his sharp teeth punctured her skin easily.

Lilith gasped, her hand reached up to the back of his head. "Oh, God," she breathed. She ran her fingers through his hair, scared and excited all at once. She moved with the rhythm of his tongue as it stroked the side of her neck and whimpered once. He bit down harder, and her body went limp.

Cassandra screamed. Shu shoved the body to the floor and narrowed his eyes at her.

"Isn't this what you two *wanted*?" he asked, blood trailing down the corner of his lips. She shook her head and screamed again when he rose from the chair.

"Please don't kill me!" she shrieked. "I thought this was—oh, God—"

"A *game*?" he finished her thought. Cassandra clutched her clothes to her body.

"Y—yes!" Tears ran down her face. "Please—please—"

Lilith's life had tasted...empty. As did the woman from earlier in the evening, Mindy. He'd taken so many lives over the years, and the satisfaction they brought never endured. They satisfied his thirst for blood, but not his interest. Cassandra's sacrifice would be just as pointless.

"Get out," he said coldly. She bolted out of the apartment.

Shu stepped over the body and moved to the bedroom. He stepped out of his clothes and whispered a name that had lingered on his lips for the past several weeks.

"Kenichi..." He slipped under the sheets; the silk caressed his bare skin as he pressed into the mattress.

* * * * *

"Letmeout/Letmeout/Letmeout!"

"Fuck," Yang muttered upon hearing the sound from within the

Poisoned Dragon. The stupid girl finally pushed on the handle of the alleyway exit door and the moment her horrified face appeared, Yang flicked his cigarette to the ground. "Take care of that," he told his bodyguards. Yang turned to his mistress who came out of the club to stand at his side.

"He had me take two of them up to his rooms. I don't think the other will be leaving under her own power."

Yang's face became a mask of utter disgust. He knew this would happen. He told the Elders they shouldn't coddle that fucking circus freak, but they wouldn't listen.

Our ancestors owed him their success, Daniel. Shu was the most feared assassin the Wong Family has ever employed. When he was a mortal man his reputation stretched to Hong Kong and back. Without him the Tangs would have wiped us out a century ago. We owe him, Yang and you owe us.

Yang turned to the other two bodyguards. "Go take care of what he left, then meet me back at the *Gingbo*."

Yang's mistress turned to follow the men inside, but before she could, Yang grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. He devoured her mouth, his large strong hands gliding down her silk-covered back to work their way inside the side slits of her traditionally styled dress. She purred and rubbed against him when he cupped her bare ass and ground his hips into hers.

"My wife is in Vancouver visiting relatives. When you're done here, go back to the house and wait for me."

She smiled and demurely lowered her gaze and turned to go. Yang grabbed her arm and jerked her back to him. "And *mei-mei*, this time don't strut around naked where my son can see you. Lok spends too much time in his room jerking off as it is."

She grinned. "Then why don't you let him use one of the girls at the *Gingbo*?"

Yang gripped her chin, his fingers digging into her flesh. "Why don't I let him fuck you instead?"

"Would you like to watch? Or perhaps you can both fuck me at

the same time.”

Yang smirked. “Father-son bonding, now there’s an idea.”

She grinned when Yang slapped her ass and told her to get back to work.

* * * *

“Aw, fuck,” Ken mumbled as each pounding on his apartment door set off an explosion inside his skull. He looked over at the clock. It was only seven in the morning! What the fuck! He dragged himself to the door and undid the deadbolt, but left the chain attached. Two big guys were on the other side. One flashed a badge, the other a business card. His business card.

“I’m Detective Finch, this is Detective Miller. We’d like a word with you.”

Ken unhooked the chain and opened the door. “Look, if it’s about me pissing in old man Wong’s flower garden last night—”

“Is this your card, Mr. Ohara?”

“Yeah.”

“We need to ask you to come down to the station with us.”

“Why?”

“You’re acquainted with Melinda Latimer?”

“No, should I be?”

“You had a date with her last night. Your card was in her possession.”

Ken squinted and tried to focus his bleary eyes. He wished these guys would stop trading off lines because the inside of his head felt like a ping pong ball enough without having to keep looking from one to the other. “A date—Oh. You mean Mindy. I had a blind date last night, but it lasted maybe an hour.”

“We need you to come down to the station with us, Mr. Ohara.”

Ken gestured at himself. He was wearing only black boxers. “Can I put on some clothes?”

* * * *

It was just like on TV. He was taken to a crappy little room in a police station across town with the stereotypical old faded paint and battered table and two chairs and the bright overhead fluorescent light. Miller—or was it Finch?—gave him a cup of coffee and perched on the table near his chair.

“Tell us about your date with Miss Latimer.”

Ken had a sick feeling in his stomach and he knew the hangover was only part of the reason. “Shouldn’t I have a lawyer here?”

“Do you think you need a lawyer?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong except piss in old man Wong’s garden on my way home last night and yet I’m in a police station being questioned by you guys at seven in the morning over a girl I don’t even know, so I’d say yeah, I want a lawyer.”

Ken’s parents started bitching at him in Japanese the minute the cops said he was free to go, after they arrived with their lawyer and got things settled. He seriously debated turning himself back over to the cops for protective custody just to escape the lecture. The loud, endless lecture.

“Look, I can get myself home, you don’t need to drive me.”

He turned to walk away but his father clamped a strong hand on his shoulder. “We will drive you, Kenichi.”

Oh, shit. Ken braced himself for the latest chorus of *What a disappointment you are*, the lovely little duet he’d been hearing far too often since he went and enrolled in art college without their consent. Hell, you’d think they’d be happy that he’d gone and found a way to finance it himself without asking them for anything.

He didn’t even want to think of how they’d react if they knew exactly how he was financing most of his living expenses.

CHAPTER TWO

Ken stayed under the shower a long time, trying to wash away the haze of booze from his mind and also that inexplicably gross feeling of knowing he was the last person to see Mindy alive. Well, next to last person, obviously.

Apparently someone broke into her place while she was gone, was still there when she got home. They robbed her, slashed her throat, then shoved her in the shower and left the water running to wash away the blood.

Ken shivered and turned off the shower. He towed his still aching head with rough strokes. He was not feeling guilty. It was not his fault they had such a bad time on that fucking blind date that she ended up going home when she did. It wasn't his fault. It wasn't.

Ken tried to make breakfast, but decided to get a quick nap in before heading off to class. He had Gachelsing today and that man was such a pain in the ass, one needed to be well rested to deal with his nitpicky shit.

Christ, that freak probably hadn't ever sold his work, yet he tore apart everyone else's. *I should show him the mural I did at the Gingbo.. That would freak him out. Shit, it would freak my parents out even more.*

Ken grinned to himself as he put on clean jeans and a shirt. That wall mural at the Chinatown's oldest building probably wasn't something he could ever put on his resume, but it paid well and it was a damn fine piece of work.

His friend Lok, whose dad ran the place, said his old man's

business had doubled since the mural went up in the hidden back reception room of the old restaurant that fronted the brothel. Hell, Lok said he got a hard-on every time he passed it and knowing how shy Lok was, Ken considered that quite a compliment.

* * * *

Leigh Gachelsing started awake, a cry in his throat. He twisted around, struggling against the sweat-soaked bed sheets, his breath coming in panicked gasps. He couldn't breathe!

"Get off me!" he choked out. "Get off!"

He shoved the knotted sheets off his body and sat up, moaning. He pressed a hand to the side of his neck, feeling for the gaping, bleeding wound he was sure he had. He touched nothing but smooth, whole skin slick with sweat, not blood.

"God," he whispered shakily. He pressed his other hand against his chest. His heart hammered under his fingertips. He was still alive.

Gachelsing squeezed his eyes shut with relief. *It wasn't me...* He opened his eyes and saw a blonde girl at the foot of the bed. Her throat was torn open; blood ran down the front of her white sweater. "It was you."

She nodded and mouthed two words. *Poisoned Dragon.*

He blinked and the vision vanished. Another haunted dream he couldn't explain. He rubbed his eyes and cursed. These nightmares had followed him all his life...*when would they stop?*

"Shit." He looked over at the alarm clock. It was already half-past nine. He was going to be late.

After a vision like that, making it down to the college to give a fucking painting class should be the last of his priorities. But as he rolled shakily out of bed, he knew he had to be there. He could feel it...

* * * *

Gachelsing was unnaturally quiet today, and Ken kept glancing up from his sketchbook to see if his professor was still in the room. Usually the older man droned on and on and on about how no one appreciated true art in this age of graphics tablets and Poser people. He told them—often and loudly—that it was his moral obligation to see that they knew each and every nuance of how to properly draw from life, how to depict everything from the human body to simple lamp cords in excruciating detail so that it looked like the thing could be plucked from the page whole and solid.

Ken finished sketching his tangle of lamp cords with a half hour of class time to go and pulled another sketchbook from his backpack. This was the one that was strictly for himself, where he could flesh out ideas for future projects as they came to him. He smiled to himself as he remembered the cash Lok had offered him just for the preliminary sketches for the *Gingbo* mural.

He refused, saying that he couldn't part with them even though the original painting was complete. He said that he needed to keep them for future reference should he ever have to repair it. He didn't have the heart to tell Lok that his sketches, no matter how rough, were too important to him to know they'd be used as nothing more than porn for whacking off purposes.

Ken flipped to a blank page in the rear of the book and tapped the end of his pencil against his bottom lip a moment as he closed his eyes and pictured what he wanted to capture. His pencil flew over the paper, and he was so absorbed he totally missed the fact that the class has ended until Gachelsing's sonorous voice suddenly burst into his left ear.

* * * *

"Class is over, Ohara," Gachelsing said. He glanced down at the desk and caught sight of the sketches before Ken had a chance to cover them up.

"Oh, that's cute." Gachelsing turned the notebook around so he

could take a better look at the dirty drawings Ohara had drawn all over the two-page spread.

"I really like the detail work on her face," he tapped the page, his voice dripping with sarcasm. It looked like the woman in the sketch was right in the middle of an orgasm. God.

He spent hours trying to get these college kids to appreciate art, just so they could draw people fucking around. Great.

"What a waste," he muttered under his breath. At least most of the students made an effort. Ohara just showed up every day and zoned out or did whatever the hell he wanted—like this shit. Gachelsing rubbed his temple. The headache he'd had since waking up kept getting worse by the minute.

Why the hell did he bother coming today after all? He should have called in sick. The damn kids certainly wouldn't have cared.

"Fine, whatever," Ken growled through clenched teeth. He slammed the notebook shut and started to pack up his stuff.

Gachelsing reached into his pocket and pulled out a bottle of aspirin. He chewed on two of the bitter tablets and almost walked away. But he saw *her* again.

The murdered woman flashed in front of his eyes, and he froze in place from the shock.

"Wait!" He yanked the book out of Ken's hands and flipped to the page with the sketches. The woman in the drawings had a long gash on her neck—how didn't he see that before? And in her hands...was that her sweater?

"Shit..." he gasped. Blood splattered onto the page. His nose was bleeding.

Gachelsing looked from the drawing to Ken's confused face. "Who was she?" his voice shook. "Do you know her?"

He grabbed Ken by the shoulders. "*Did you kill her?*"

Ken stared, his mouth gaping open. He jerked himself away when Gachelsing grabbed his shoulders. "What *is* your problem? Why do you think I'd kill my mother, for fuck's sake?"

"M—mother?"

Gachelsing barely got the word out, and Ken reached for the sketchbook and tore out the blood-spattered page. He let it fall to the table top, then pulled out his wallet and showed Leigh the small photo of himself with his parents and sister taken last Christmas.

"My mother. I want to paint her portrait as a gift for her birthday."

Your mother..." Gachelsing pressed the back of his hand to the bottom of his nose. He blinked and stared at the sketch. The woman was completely different. Nothing he'd seen had been real. *Shit...what's happening to me?*

He rubbed at his aching temple again and walked to the end of the studio. He yanked a paper towel from the dispenser over the sink and wiped his bloodied hand. After a second, what Ken said finally registered.

"A portrait for your mom, that's...actually pretty nice," Gachelsing balled up the paper towel and threw it in the trash. He looked at Ken and frowned.

"Look, I'm sorry. I'm not feeling well today. I didn't mean what I said earlier." Jesus Christ, it still felt like someone was driving a nail into the side of his head. "Bring your painting by, I'd like to see it."

Ken put his things away after examining his sketchbook "I haven't started it yet." He walked toward the exit and stopped before leaving. "Hey, Professor. Are we taking part in that Halloween carnival at the Children's Services Center as a class project like we did last year with Miss Silivasi? It's already the first week of October and I'd like to get started, because I have a great idea for a mural to decorate the outside of the haunted house."

Gachelsing went to the desk at the front and picked up his things. "Yeah, actually, we will," he said. "If you've got some ideas, go ahead and get started." He looked over at Ken Ohara, and smiled a little. He'd had no idea Ken actually gave a rat's ass about art. It made coming in to class worthwhile, despite everything.

Poisoned Dragon.

The words sent a chill down his spine. Could Ken be involved with

what he'd seen in his dream? His head throbbed, and he felt a little dizzy. "Maybe I'm just going fucking insane," Leigh whispered to himself.

"Great." Ken paused. "Are you okay? Do you want me to call someone or get a nurse from the student health center or something? You look kind of pale and that nosebleed thing..."

"No, I'm okay. Get going, or you'll be late for your next class."

* * * *

Meg Silivasi sipped her coffee and watched Leigh Gachelsing through the leaves of a bushy rubber plant in the cafeteria of the San Francisco University of Art. He'd been teaching in the classroom next to hers, had lived in the same apartment building on the same floor as she did for the past three years and she knew less about him than she knew about the guy who came to tend the plant she was hiding behind.

Well, she wasn't exactly hiding. It wasn't as if there was anything she had to hide from. She wasn't stalking Gachelsing or anything. She was an artist—an award-winning, nationally recognized artist—and he was an interesting subject. A very interesting subject.

Tall, slim, with a straight nose and high cheekbones, he was a study in contrast and angles. Most of the time he looked like some young upcoming model for the latest mp3 player with his slightly spiky hair and long, thin hands. But then some days—like today—he resembled one of those wizened old men who sat out in Golden Gate Park on warm sunny days and watched the world pass them by as they had for seven decades or more.

Today Leigh Gachelsing looked like an exceptionally old, tired man, and Meg wanted very much to know what was wrong. The big brass clock outside the cafeteria chimed the hour, and Meg pried herself from her secluded corner to get to class. But before she left, she stopped by Leigh's table and gave him a business card from the little herbal shop in Chinatown she sometimes patronized.

Leigh looked at it a moment before tucking it away in his front pocket. "Thanks," he said quietly, like he had to force it out. Clearing his throat, he glanced up at her. This time he didn't look quite so snooty, but his eyebrows were scrunched together in a puzzled 'who-are-you-again' type of expression.

"Aren't you going to be late for class, Meg?"

So he did know her, at least. Meg opened her mouth to answer, but he looked back down at the table and started to pick at his mostly untouched lunch. "You didn't have to see how I was doing. I'm fine."

Glancing up, he gave her one of his haughty model looks again and Meg was tempted to tell him to never mind, but she didn't. Instead she gestured to the little tin of aspirin on the table beside him. "Stop at the *Chew Kee* on your way home. They have some stuff that really works on aches and pains."

* * * *

It was early evening when Ken ventured out. He spent most of the afternoon working on preliminary sketches for his haunted house mural, then went to the lumber yard and art supply store to make a list of needed supplies. He turned them in to the secretary in the office Gachelsing shared with the other departmental professors, along with a note for his teacher to call him on his cell phone if he had any questions or comments.

After that Ken headed back to Chinatown, stopping off at his favorite noodle shop for dinner. While he waited for the steaming soup to cool a bit, he turned his attention to the small TV near the cash register and watched the news. A picture of Mindy flashed on the screen, along with the news of her murder. "Fuck," he mumbled as the reporter gave a quick rundown of her murder, and added that a suspect had been questioned and released.

Fucking great. Yet another thing for his parents to hold over his head as an example of his failure as a son. It didn't matter that they didn't mention his name. It didn't matter that he was innocent and

had an airtight alibi with the record of the phone call he made to his sister or verification from the bouncer and his friends at the club that he'd been there when Mindy had gotten home and been murdered.

No, the only thing that mattered was that he'd brought disgrace to the Ohara family.

"Hey."

Ken looked away from the TV when Lok slipped into the seat at the counter beside him. "What are the odds of your father adopting me into your family? He likes me, right?"

Lok grinned and adjusted his dark-framed glasses. "That would be fucking cool." His smile fell quickly, though. "I don't think now's a good time to ask, though. He was pretty pissed off when I saw him."

Ken stirred around his noodles with his chopsticks. "What happened? Trouble at the *Gingbo*?"

"Nah. I think it's something else, and I think that guy who owns the *Dragon* has something to do with it. My father's been a bastard every time his name has been mentioned for months now."

Ken grinned. "What, Shu not paying enough protection money?"

Lok shook his head and leaned in close. "It's not that. He doesn't pay any. *They* take care of him."

"No way."

"They do," Lok said. "I don't know much, but I know the old men respect Shu. A lot. And you know what that means."

Ken nodded. "That's like Charlie's Golden Ticket."

"Fuck, yeah." Lok ordered a bowl of soup, then suggested they sit at the table in the back. "I heard something else," he said when his food was delivered. "I heard Shu is into some freaky kinky shit."

Ken slurped his noodles, then grinned. "Like what?"

"I heard my father's girlfriend tell him that Shu had these two girls in his apartment upstairs and he made them go down on each other."

Ken kicked his friend under the table. "That's only kinky to a virgin like you, you dumbass."

Lok's tanned cheeks flushed. "I'm serious, Ken. *Mei-mei* said she caught the girls in the bathroom before Shu came in last night. She said the one girl was doing the other right there and the girl getting sucked off was on the rag. Man, that other girl was lapping her up bloody. And after *mei* busted them, she heard them say how they just knew Shu would love to get in on that too." Lok toyed with his own soup noodles. "Do you think it's true? Do you think that goth vampire shit is for real and not just Shu's gimmick for the club?"

Ken reached across the table and smacked his friend's head. "Idiot. Vampires? For real? You need to get out more and stop watching the *Sci-Fi channel*."

Lok mumbled to himself and poked around his bowl with his chopsticks. "Yeah, well, I seen some weird shit growing up around here, especially with old folks. Real weird shit."

"You sound that gay guy who does those 'Haunted Chinatown' tours for the tourists." Ken smirked and finished his soup with a loud slurp.

"Of course it is kind of creepy down some of those alleys, I'll give you that much. There's been quite a few times I felt something was following me when I'd go home from the *Poisoned Dragon*. I swear I can feel someone watching me and almost hear breathing, but there's never anyone there." He shrugged and pushed his bowl aside, then finished his bottled water.

CHAPTER THREE

By the time he found a parking spot at the corner of California Street near the outskirts of Chinatown, it was early evening. Gachelsing stepped out of his car and hurried across the street. With his luck, the damn shop would be closed by the time he got there.

He walked through the market, looking for the *Chew Kee*, and almost missed it. The shop wasn't much of a shop at all. A small sign hung over the front door of a very old building he guessed used to be red from the chipped flecks of paint that still clung to the brick. A dull glow filtered through the murky glass on the door and the two narrow windows. At least the lights were still on inside and when Gachelsing tried the door, it opened with a soft jingle.

"Hello?" he called out into the shop. No one answered, but he moved inside and closed the door behind him.

The place was small and barrels of dried leaves and herbs covered most of the floor. Shelves lined with jars and tin canisters with characters scrawled on their peeling labels lined the walls. He picked up a gold-tinted jar and tried to make out the writing, but he'd never made time to keep up with the Chinese his grandmother had tried to teach him when he was a kid. Gachelsing could only remember a few words and even fewer characters. Nothing on the jar made any sense, and he returned it to the shelf with a frustrated sigh.

"Can I help you?"

A small, old woman walked over to him and took the jar he'd just been holding. She gave him a slightly annoyed look and returned it to

a different spot on the shelf. Obviously, he'd screwed up her meticulous little system here.

"Sorry," Gachelsing mumbled. "A friend of mine said this shop specialized in herbal remedies." Remedies that actually worked, not like that aromatherapy shit or other new age stuff. Not that he wouldn't be willing to give anything a try at this point. His head still throbbed and he felt like shit. He'd barely managed to make through the rest of his classes, and the pain wasn't letting up. At least the nosebleed had stopped by some miracle. A sharp twinge cut through his skull and he rubbed at his temple. "Shit. . ."

"Ahh," the old woman said in her heavily accented English. "You need this."

She moved away and scooped out some leaves from a barrel into an empty jar. She gave him another look, nodded to herself, and added a few more different leaves and powders into the jar.

"Thanks," Gachelsing said. He took a seat on one of the closed barrels and rubbed his face in his hands. The old woman moved around the shop, then went over to a jade mortar and pestle and began to grind the ingredients together. The pain started to worsen again and he closed his eyes tightly.

"What is this?"

Leigh looked up at the sound of the strange voice and stiffened slightly. Ken Ohara sat next to him at a table.

"We're having lunch," Leigh answered calmly.

He looked across the table at the shadowy figure who moved to sit across from them. His hands gripped the silverware tight enough to make his knuckles turn white. Leigh couldn't make out the face, but he knew who the person was. And he hated him.

Ken mumbled something and reached out to the shadows. The young man was shoved away and Gachelsing clenched his jaw.

Words, Chinese words, spilled out of his mouth faster than he could even realize what he was saying. He felt the fury rise in the man, and Gachelsing stepped away. Oh, God... He knew what was

coming.

An instant before the man's hand tightened around his throat and he felt the blade puncture his belly, Gachelsing tried to scream. His cries were choked away as his head was slammed into the wall with a powerful blow.

The knife slashed upwards and tore through his midsection. A burning, white-hot agony racked his body and he tried to push the madman away. Oh, God!

"Die!"

His chest exploded. The knife slammed into his heart over and over again with brutal force. Blood splattered out of him, covering and blurring the face of his attacker.

"No!" Gachelsing screamed aloud. "You fucking bastard!"

His eyes flew open. The old woman hovered over him, fanning him with a worried look on her face. He was back in the shop.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Where is he?" Leigh asked, confused. He sat up, looked around his eyes wide and frightened. "Where's Toshiro?" He froze. *Where the hell did that name come from?* "I mean Ken..." That *was* Ken, wasn't it? He'd looked younger, maybe...and the way he was dressed looked strange...

"You came alone," the old woman said and touched his forehead. "There's no one here but you and me." She gave him a funny look, like he was crazy...or possessed. "Who were you arguing with?"

Gachelsing shook his head. "I...I don't know," his voice shook. *But the son of a bitch killed me.*

"You need to take this and rest," the old woman lifted the jar and nodded gravely. "Come lie down in the back, I'll make the tea for you."

Her words sounded so clear to him; she wasn't speaking with an accent anymore. She was speaking in Cantonese, and so was he. He understood everything she said, and if he picked up one of the jars, he'd probably know exactly what was written on there, too.

He shivered and forced himself on to his feet. “No, I need to go.” Shit. He was still talking in Chinese. “I have to get out of here.”

“Take this.” She shoved the jar in his hand and backed away. “As a gift.”

Gachelsing didn’t have the strength or desire to argue. He mumbled a thank-you and left. He took three steps on the darkened street before he had to lean against the wall. His body shook violently and he wrapped his arms around his waist. His stomach lurched and he doubled over, gagging. “What’s happening to me?” he moaned.

* * * * *

“Welcome, Mr. Shu.” The hostess blinked in surprise and quickly bowed her head in a submissive gesture. “We weren’t expecting you at the *Gingbo* this evening.”

When she looked up again, a soft, almost sultry smile played on her lips. She smoothed out the front of her already wrinkle-free black silk dress and reached up to adjust the elaborate sticks pinning her long black hair in place.

Shu sensed the hostess’ fear. She kept it well under control, but it still carried on her fragrance. Just like the Chanel perfume...and the faint traces of Yang’s scent that still clung to her body.

Another of Yang’s whores. He gave the woman a cold look and brushed past her into the lounge.

The small room with its square tile-topped tables, red vinyl-covered seats and glass topped bar that ran the length of the back wall was just a front. Only one patron sat there, drinking an imported beer. Everyone else was behind the guarded door marked *No Admittance* on the restaurant’s left, where the real *Gingbo* waited for its customers.

“Mr. Shu, if you told me why you’re here, I’m sure I could help you better.”

“My business is just that—*mine*,” he said. “I don’t have to explain myself to anyone, let alone to a whore.” She bristled behind him.

They walked through the door. Two heavy-set bodyguards rose from their seats on either side of the doorway. Shu gave them a disgusted look and the hostess held up her hand to them. "It's all right, gentlemen," she said smoothly, and they sat back down.

Shu narrowed his eyes at them and continued down the short, gray hall. This whole business with Yang grew tiresome. Now his security guards were beginning to show the same lack of respect and good judgment their employer did. And there was only so much he could take before his patience wore thin.

They passed through another set of double doors and reached the true *Gingbo*. The brothel spread out over three floors of the tall building and was set up in the same style as the old massage houses in Hong Kong. Burgundy colored carpets covered the floor and shimmering beaded curtains partitioned the lounge area. Lovely girls in tight dresses or loose robes moved across the floors, enticing their customers with drinks or leading them off to the dark rooms upstairs.

"Shall I find you a seat, Mr. Shu?" she asked with a coy smile.

"Find Yang," he said. He eyed one of the young women fawning over a fat businessman on the mob's payroll and pulled out a cigarette. He wasn't interested in these *trinkets*. At least, not until he thirsted.

"Certainly," the hostess said. She couldn't keep the relief out of her voice this time. She walked over to the counter by the entrance and picked up a cell phone. "He's here..." she whispered.

Shu stepped down into the lounge area and waved off a young woman who tried to offer him a drink. He crossed the floor towards one of the darkened corners and stopped mid-step.

A large mural covered the sidewall, softly illuminated by a row of warm red lights. It promised the kinds of sexual pleasures the *Gingbo* could offer its clients, and it promised it well.

On the mural, several men lay tangled in the arms of enticing women. Two women stroked each other and rested their heads on the breasts of another who smiled sultrily. A man lay smoking an

opium pipe while a woman knelt between his legs, her pink tongue trailing along his inner thigh. A pair of male lovers leaned their hips into each other, semen covering their hands, their tongues.

Inside Shu, something stirred.

The mural was provocative...and very erotic. But a strange feeling beyond the sensual arousal tugged at him, and he stared at the painting in fascination. Either by a trick of the light or a subtle imperfection in the wall, a mark on one of the women's shoulders grasped his attention. He inhaled sharply.

Was that a character etched into her flesh? It was so subtle, even his keen eyes couldn't make it out clearly. And yet...

The hostess came beside him. "Mr. Yang will be here shortly to..."

"Who did this?" he asked softly, interrupting her.

"The mural?" The corners of her mouth turned up in a smile. "A friend of Mr. Yang's son did it. He finished it only recently. He's an art student, I think."

Shu raised an eyebrow at her. "Kenichi Ohara," he said.

Her smile faded a little and she blinked in surprise. "You know him?"

Shu laughed softly. "No..." he turned back to the painting. "...and yes."

Kenichi... "My artist," he whispered. Shu turned away and moved to the exit.

"But Mr. Yang is on his way," she called after him.

"Fuck Yang," he said. Kenichi Ohara occupied his thoughts now, and he wanted very much to find him.

* * * *

Shu stood outside the noodle shop, just beyond the light that streamed through the dirty window. What a strange coincidence—to find the very man he searched for only a little way from the *Gingbo*. Then again, were there such things as coincidences in this strange

world?

Kenichi sat at a table beyond the front counter. An empty bottle of water and soup bowl rested on the tabletop in front of him. He spoke with a rather unimpressive man seated across from him.

Shu snorted. That would be Yang's child, of course. How appropriately pathetic. But that little waste of life was of no concern to him.

"Kenichi," he called out softly.

Standing alone in the darkness, he smiled and moved to the shadows along the side of the building....to wait.

* * * *

Kenichi.

"What?" Ken asked, looking up from the check the waitress just gave him.

"What do you mean what?" Lok asked.

"What do you want? You just said my name. In fact, you called me Kenichi. What the fuck is up with that?"

"Are you on drugs?"

Ken punched Lok in the arm. "No, dumbass, but I think you are. You just said my name. My full name. Why?"

Lok held his hands up in a defensive gesture. "I didn't, honest." His cell phone rang. "What? Yeah, sure. I'll be right there. Fuck," he muttered. "It's my old man. I have to get to the *Gingbo*, he wants me to do something. Lunch tomorrow?"

"Yeah, sure," Ken said. He stood and dug in his pocket for money. He didn't have much on him. Shit, he was going to have to snag himself another little side job soon.

He checked his watch before stepping outside. It was pretty early even though it was dark. Maybe he should head to the *Poisoned Dragon* and see if he couldn't hustle someone at pool or even Mah Jong. He hadn't done that for a long while.

Ken stepped out into the dark side street and shivered a bit as a

breeze blew in from behind and tickled his neck.

Damn that Lok and his ghost stories.

* * * *

Shu smiled.

Ken had passed within an arm's reach of the shadows and never felt more than the touch of Shu's breath on the back of his neck.

But he had felt *something*...Any other evening, that alone would have been enough to intrigue Shu. But there were so many things about Ken that fascinated him already. And he wanted to learn more.

As Ken continued down the dark street, Shu followed a short distance behind. They wove through Chinatown's narrow, cluttered alleyways in a path Shu recognized all too well. They were heading towards the *Poisoned Dragon*.

* * * *

Ken rubbed his neck again. What the fuck was wrong with him tonight? Why did the streets seem so quiet, so deserted all of a sudden? Okay, so it was the middle of the week and kind of damp with wisps of fog filtering by, but it's not like he was on the set of some slasher flick.

He grinned to himself as he turned the corner. He certainly wasn't any cinematic virgin psycho fodder walking into a trap. Lok, maybe, but not him.

Ken changed his usual route to the *Dragon* and passed down a side street which was a lot less quiet than the last street had been. Yeah, leave it to the leather bar crowd to liven things up around here.

* * * *

Gachelsing rested his head on the steering wheel and squeezed his eyes shut. After leaving that strange shop, he'd managed to get back

to the damn car some time ago, but actually driving out of here was another thing.

Once he felt safe enough to be in control of the wheel, it was already dark. He turned the key in the ignition and almost started to pull away from the curb.

Ken Ohara passed by him on the sidewalk, and Gachelsing put his foot on the brake. Flashes of the last morbid vision he'd had streamed through his mind and he stared after Ken, his knuckles tightening around the steering wheel.

Another man walked by, and Gachelsing clenched his jaw. It looked like Ken was being followed. But as the kid crossed the street and headed down a busier one, the pursuer disappeared.

"Shit," Gachelsing cursed. A strange fear passed through him and he didn't know why.

Before he knew what he was doing, Gachelsing turned off the car and climbed out. He *had* to catch up to Ohara.

* * * *

Toshiro.... Toshiro....

The deep, accented whisper seemed to float through Ken's mind carried on the same damp breeze that brought the techno pop crap to his ears from the bar he'd just passed. Toshiro? Who the fuck was calling him Toshiro?

Footsteps. Quick footsteps on the pavement. Ken stopped, his body tensed, waiting. His friend Lok may be a dork, but the boy had some martial arts skills. Too bad he wasn't here right now.

Ken turned and relaxed a little once his painting instructor stepped into the light of the streetlamp.

"Oh, hey, Professor. What are you doing around here?"

Ken coughed to cover his laugh when a big gay biker peeked out of the doorway of the nearby club and gave Gachelsing's ass a nice long appraisal.

"I was just in the—*shit*," Gachelsing looked over his shoulder to

see what had Ken's attention. His face turned red when he caught sight of the tall leather-clad man winking at him.

"Oh, fuck," he rubbed the side of his forehead. Leigh sighed and turned back to Ken.

"I needed to pick up some stuff in the market," he said. He glanced around, obviously looking for something. "Are you down here with someone?"

Ken stared at his teacher.

Am I down here with someone? Oh, please tell me he is not trying to pick me up....

"I had dinner with my friend Lok at the noodle shop, but he had to go see his dad. I'm alone now." Shit, not good. Ken shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. "Um, Professor, I dropped off an estimate for the materials I need to for that haunted house mural. Last year the school picked up the cost, since the Children's Center is trying to raise money and all."

Gachelsing frowned. "What?" he said distractedly. "Oh, right, the mural..." He looked over his shoulder as if he expected someone to be there. "Uh, I'll be chipping in to cover some of the cost, too..." He looked past the bar at something in the shadows of the alley. He moved around Ken and took a few steps towards it. "Hello?"

A cat darted out and he jumped. "Shit." Gachelsing stepped back and frowned. "What are you doing here, Ohara?" Rubbing his temple, he closed his eyes for a second. "Who's Toshiro?"

Ken rubbed the back of his neck and stared. It took a few minutes for his brain to filter his teacher's words.

"It's none of your business what I'm doing here, *Professor*, and who the fuck *is* Toshiro? I don't know any Toshiro."

Ken's neck prickled again. Man, this guy was giving him the creeps big time. God, just what he needed, some stalker painting prof.

"You sure you've never heard that name before?" Gachelsing asked. He ran his hands through his blond-streaked brown hair, his face twisted with pain, confusion...fear.

Ken just shook his head more adamantly and stepped back. "No... For the record, I like girls, okay. Look, I gotta go."

* * * *

Dao Kan Shu shrank deeper into the shadows. *Toshiro*.. That name cut straight through him and touched the very core of his being...even after so many years. A cry formed in the back of his throat and he clutched at his chest just below the heart.

Underneath his fingers and through the light silk of his shirt, the scar ached. It burned. Shu stumbled backwards, knocking over a garbage can.

Gachelsing turned towards the noise. "Who's there?"

Confused and shaken, Shu moved deeper into the alley. He needed to get away...he couldn't follow any longer. But he already knew where Kenichi was headed. With a hand still pressed to his chest, he quickly left the alley and made his way to the club.

* * * *

Colorado, 1870

"I want to see San Francisco... with you." Toshiro whispered. *The early morning sunlight lit up his cream colored skin and highlighted the fullness of his lips, the soft curves of his young face. He leaned over the porcelain tub and lathered the sponge in the cool water.*

On his right shoulder, blood seeped through the thin cloth of his yukata.

"I'm going to show you everything," Shu reached out of the water and pulled back the material. His fingertips traced the Chinese character gracefully etched in the tender flesh. The dragon...his mark. He stroked the fresh wound and smiled at the beauty of it, and of the young man who bore it.

"Teach me, sensei..." Toshiro's lips brushed against his ear. Water dripped from the sponge and washed over the thin, raw cut on

Shu's chest. Toshiro's mark...

Shu cupped Toshiro's chin and turned his face towards him. Passion and hunger filled those deep, large brown eyes and they matched Shu's own intense gaze. Such an eager apprentice, so full of desire...

"My Toshiro," Shu laughed a moment before his gentle caress changed into a sharp slap.

More than a century had passed, and he could still feel the sting of the blow on the palm of his hand.

"My Toshiro..." he echoed.

Dao Kan Shu stared out the window of his loft, forgotten voices from the past and neglected memories awakening inside of him. Along with an ache he thought he'd never feel again.

His fingertips traced the scar on his chest, feeling the thin line that had never quite healed properly and never would. It would follow him through whatever length of time he walked this earth. As would the *thirst*...and the emptiness...

This wasn't Colorado, and *he* was long gone.

And Dao Kan Shu was very much alone.

A knock on the door interrupted Shu's thoughts. He stepped away from the window and glared across the open room. From the muted sounds of their footsteps and the rustle of clothing that carried through the door, he knew five people stood outside. He already expected them.

"It's open, Yang." Shu's voice carried without having to be raised.

The door opened, and Yang entered with his three personal bodyguards. The tall one, a man named Lau with wide features and red-blotched eyes he always tried to conceal behind dark glasses, dragged another man in front. Shu narrowed his eyes and lifted a decanter of brandy from the low table near the bookcase.

"Where the hell were you? I got to the *Gingbo* and you were gone," Yang hissed. "I waited a fucking hour."

Shu stared at him in silence, and Yang frowned to hide his

unease, but not well enough. Across the dark room, Shu flashed his teeth in an amused smile.

"We brought you fucking *lunch*," Yang growled. Grabbing the man from Lau's hands he shoved him forward.

A few feet from where Shu stood, the man fell on his face. He was bound and gagged, his face a bruised and bloodied mess. A tattoo in the shape of a dragon showed through a torn hole in the sleeve of his shirt. The man was one of the mafia's own—a hapless thug who'd fallen out of grace with the syndicate for some reason or another.

Disgusted, Shu glared at Yang. "You can keep your pathetic *offerings*. . . I have no use for that little piece of *shit*."

"We're not going to keep cleaning up your goddamn messes, Shu," Yang snapped. "So you'll take that 'piece of shit' and start getting used to it."

"I should slit your throat."

"You stay the fuck away from me," Yang gasped, whipping out a nickel-plated pistol from inside his coat.

Shu still stood a distance away, his dark eyes fixed unnervingly on Yang's neck. "You and your prickless little *associates* keep insulting me," Shu hissed. "And I don't like it."

He was across the room and tearing into one of Yang's bodyguards before anyone could move. He ripped open his throat with a quick bite to the neck, and then held the spasming man up by the back of his head. "I take what I want, Yang."

Yang took off his glasses and rubbed at them with the small piece of cloth he kept in his jacket pocket. "I see that," he said flatly. "But so do I. . . we understand each other more than you realize, Shu."

Shu snorted and tossed the man aside. Yang spoke smoothly despite the way his heart hammered in his chest. Shu could hear the organ's pounding rhythm from where he stood.

"We tolerate this *arrangement* because it suits us for the time being," Yang added. "That's the one thing we understand about each other."

Yang wanted power—the *cheap* kind that came with his little

drug and prostitution rings. He would never understand what it meant to command *real* power...or the emptiness that came with it.

Toshiro. The ghosts of the past weren't going to be quieted tonight.

"What do the Elders want?" Shu wiped the corner of his mouth and flicked the blood to the wooden floor.

Yang slipped his glasses back on with a satisfied smile. "There's been some recent trouble with one of the lower families."

That would explain the extra guards at the *Gingbo*. "Tell me something I don't know," Shu said.

"There's going to be wedding for one of their organizer's sons," said Yang. "You're invited."

He reached into his jacket to pull out some papers. "The details and location are here."

"I'll find it," Shu moved around Yang and flicked off the light switch. The loft fell back into darkness. "I don't need your information."

"Suit yourself," Yang shrugged, but his jaw clenched. "Gentlemen." The three remaining bodyguards followed after him as he headed through the front door. "Bon appetit," Yang called over his shoulder.

Shu turned back into the loft and laughed softly.

Downstairs, Yang stepped up to the parked Jaguar as Lau climbed into the driver's seat. "Fucking freak," Yang opened the car door and smacked his hand on the top of the roof. "I'm not going to keep putting up with this shit."

Two bodies fell out of the sky and slammed into the alley pavement with a sickening thud a few feet from the car.

Yang jumped. "*Fuck!*"

CHAPTER FOUR

“Jesus, I’m not here to pick you up,” Gachelsing snapped at Ohara. He didn’t intend to sound so harsh, but it just came out that way. There *was* someone out there, damn it. There had to be. Their presence made his skin crawl with a fear and hatred he couldn’t explain.

A door to one of the bars in the alley opened and the light lit up most of the dark corners nearby. Nothing there but old crates, garbage cans and bits of trash on the ground. Finally, the inexplicable fear was easing. Whoever, whatever it was, was gone.

But that didn’t erase his gut feeling. “Go home, Ohara,” he clenched his jaw. “You shouldn’t be here.”

Ken shoved his hands into his jeans pockets. “Look, Professor. I’m a big boy now and living on my own. I think I can decide when to go home and when to go have some fun, okay?”

“No, it’s not okay.” Leigh swallowed and tried to control the weird, irrational fear. Ken was right—whatever the kid wanted to do out here was his own business. But every part of Leigh’s gut instinct told him something was wrong. If he let Ken go on his way...would his student be the next murdered person he saw in his nightmares tonight? “Where are you going?”

“I’m heading over to the club, *The Poisoned Dragon*. Why don’t you let me buy you a drink? You look like you could use one.”

Gachelsing felt his stomach lurch.

Poisoned Dragon.

The blonde woman stood behind Ken's shoulder and stared at him. Her lips moved to form those two words, and fresh blood poured out of the gash on her throat.

He closed his eyes. Stay the hell away from that place, he told himself. Don't go near it.

The woman was gone when he opened his eyes again, but he couldn't force her out of his mind. He couldn't just ignore her and whatever message she kept trying to say. He couldn't save her, but maybe he could save Ohara. He looked at Ken and nodded. "Sure," he said quietly.

They walked in silence through the dark streets, a thin haze of fog drifting over them like the kiss of a cloud. Ken chuckled at the sight of a couple tourists dressed in shorts and T-shirts hurrying by, shivering, the husband muttering about, "Sunny California, my ass."

It wasn't long before the sign with the green neon dragon loomed up in the distance. "The club is really busy tonight," Ken said as they crossed the filled parking lot and headed towards the red lacquered front doors where a line waited. "Drink specials aren't 'til tomorrow. I wonder what's up."

Ken headed to the back of the line, but the bouncer at the door whistled and he looked over his shoulder. The man waved him and his guest inside, much to the dismay of the others waiting to get in. "I guess being a regular has its perks."

Gachelsing swallowed and pressed at the side of his forehead. The noise in the club didn't help this goddamned headache and he started to get that feeling again.

She'd been here.

He glanced at the bar as Ken weaved through the tables on the edge of the dance floor. *She sat there.*

"Shit." Gachelsing forced himself to focus on Ken. No tables were available, and all the booths were crowded.

Ken sighed and looked around. "Maybe if we wait a little while, something will open up?"

A heavily made-up waitress dressed in a leather bustier and

miniskirt and a silver choker appeared behind him and touched Ken on the shoulder. "You and your friend can have a seat over here." She curled her finger and gestured for them to follow.

The booth she took them too was all the way in the back, facing out over the crowd. "Guess you're pretty popular around here, Ohara," Gachelsing said quietly. This place—and whatever connection Ken had to it—unnerved him.

"If I am, no one told me," Ken said as he slid into the booth opposite Gachelsing. There was a single red rose on the table and Ken absentmindedly picked it up and toyed with it.

The waitress who showed them to the booth brought over a bottle of sake and two of the small traditional cups. "It's on the house," she said sweetly before she poured the rice wine and smiled, her false vampire fangs gleaming in the dim light of the wall lamp.

"Hey, why is this place so busy tonight?" Ken asked.

"Some girl was pulled out of the bay this afternoon, and the rumor is she had a drink token from here and fang bites on her neck." The waitress laughed. "They think this is a real vampire hangout straight out of an Anne Rice book. Mr. Shu said play it up if it brings in the profits."

Fang bites...vampires...

Gachelsing shivered and pressed his hands into the cold granite tabletop. "This isn't a joke," he snarled at the waitress. "A woman is dead and you people are playing dress-up like it's goddamn Halloween. *Jesus Christ...*"

The waitress' smile vanished and she gave Gachelsing a what-the-hell's-your-problem look. "Enjoy the drink," she said coldly and flashed her fake teeth at him one more time before walking away.

Gachelsing rubbed his eyes and cursed again. "Doesn't this place *disturb* you?" he asked Ken.

"Not really. None of that goth vampire shit is real. Nobody believes it, it's just..." Ken shrugged. "It's just a gimmick to raise profits like she said. People are fished out of the bay all the time every week, it's part of life in the big bad city." He slid the small cup across the table.

“You need to chill. Drink up.”

Some of the sake sloshed over the edge of the cup as Gachelsing grabbed it. His hands were shaking again and he gulped down the liquor in one swallow.

“You’re probably right,” he said. The sake warmed up his insides a bit, and he set down the cup. “I’m just having a seriously strange day...”

That didn’t even begin to cover it, but what could he tell Ken? *I saw a woman murdered in my dreams last night, and earlier this afternoon, relived a hideously gruesome death while I passed out on the floor of a Chinese herb shop.*

Yeah, right.

“So you’re a regular here.” Gachelsing looked around the club, frowning. There was too much leather and chains, too much fake blood. He would never come to a place like this, and Ohara didn’t look like he bought into this stuff either. At least not on the outside. “Why?” he asked. “Why do you keep coming here?”

Ken shrugged and poured another drink. “My friends come here. It’s something to do. It gives me ideas sometimes, like for the haunted house. I heard this place is built on the site of a house where a nasty murder was committed. Supposedly the dead guy haunts here.” He grinned and sipped from his cup. “The mural I have planned is *Ghosts of Old Chinatown*.”

A shiver went up and down Leigh’s spine. It was just an urban legend—a story, for Christ’s sake, but something about it gnawed at his insides. He closed his eyes, afraid for a moment he would see whoever was murdered here.

“That’s a pretty cool idea for the mural,” Gachelsing forced himself to say. “I can’t wait to see the sketches.”

He regretted saying that the minute the words came out of his mouth. Oh, God...what if he saw something else in Ohara’s sketches that wasn’t really there?

“I have some back at the apartment, you want to see?” Ken coughed. “I mean, I can bring them to school tomorrow or

something," Ken added quickly, looking down into his little sake cup.

A deep and frighteningly familiar voice appeared out of nowhere. "I'd much rather you *didn't* leave."

A tall man dressed in black leather pants and an open collared white shirt stood beside the table. The dim light glinted off the silver cross around his neck as he slipped into the leather seat beside Ken, his graceful fingers brushing along the tabletop.

"Stay and enjoy the rest of the night," the man said, casually picking up Ken's cup and sipping at the sake. "It's early yet." He took off his dark glasses and stared across the table.

The weight of that stare pressed into him and Leigh Gachelsing's heart pounded in his chest. He had no idea who this man was, and yet he *did*. Chinese, he guessed, from his look and the faint hint of an accent that decorated his words and in his late twenties, early thirties at the most.

And he scared Leigh shitless.

"What's wrong with your friend?" Shu raised an eyebrow at Leigh and smiled coldly. "He seems ill." His narrowed those dark eyes and pierced Leigh with powerful stare. "Or is there something stranger about him?"

Shu reached out without warning and stroked the side of Leigh's face.

Leigh gasped and pulled away from the cold fingers. The sharp nail on Shu's thumb left a thin, crimson scratch on his cheek. *What the hell?* His whole body started shaking again and the throbbing pain in his head flared up.

"We have to go," he sputtered. He couldn't explain why, but he had to get away from this man. He had to get Ken out of here.

"I have a better idea," Shu leaned back. The cool smile remained on his face, but his eyes flashed as he stared at the blood on his fingernail. "*You* can leave."

* * * *

Ken's eyes grew wide as the *Dragon's* owner reached out to touch Gachelsing and ended up cutting his cheek. It wasn't more than a scratch, but shit!

Gachelsing looked bad. He did need to get home or something. And yet...Ken wanted to hang out, he wanted to talk to Shu. The guy had been such a mystery since the club opened and he didn't know why, but he wanted to know more about him.

"Um, I think I should help the professor get home. He was sick in class today, but maybe I can make it back after?" Ken forced a bit of a smile. "I need to buy you a drink in return for this," he said, finishing the bit of sake in the cup.

Shu touched the front of Ken's shirt. He toyed with one of the buttons near the collar and pulled back before his fingertip touched the warm skin near the throat.

"Oh, no, those are unconditional gifts," Shu whispered through his softly smiling lips. "I was hoping to see you here tonight. So, why doesn't the *professor* take a cab?"

Oh, shit. Oh, holy shit.

He'd been thinking Gachelsing had been coming on to him in the alley but now this. Shu drinking from his cup, hoping to see him. Shu touching Gachelsing and him....

Why wasn't he feeling more grossed out?

"Get away from him."

Ken jerked around to see Gachelsing's hands balled into shaking fists on the tabletop.

Shu frowned. "What did you say to me?"

"We're leaving, so get your fucking hands off of him," Gachelsing's voice got louder.

"You're kidding me," Shu leaned his head back and laughed softly. The smile didn't reach his eyes and he stared at Gachelsing with growing resentment. "Kenichi is free to go where he pleases, who are you to interfere?" he hissed dangerously.

Ken sat and stared as the older men—what—*fought* over him?

Oh, this was too weird. Too fucking weird, and he wanted no part

of it.

“Look, I have to go.” He looked at Shu, hoping he’d get the hint and move out of the way. “I need to get home. I’ll walk you back to your car, professor, if you need me to. I really need to go.”

“This all seems so *familiar*—we’ve done this dance before, haven’t we?” Shu leaned forward and tilted his head to one side. “What’s your name, *Professor*?”

Gachelsing stepped back. “None of your fucking business,” he snapped. “Oh, shit...” He stood and backed into a couple moving to the dance floor. “Watch it, asshole,” the man spat at him.

Shu slid out of the booth, his eyes never leaving Gachelsing. “Perhaps you should sit down, *friend*,” he said coldly. “You don’t look well at all.”

A sick feeling hit Ken hard in the pit of the stomach. *Why? Why does this all seem so familiar? Why am I afraid for him?*

Without thinking, Ken bolted out of the booth and got between the two men. He grabbed Gachelsing’s arm. “You have to go. I’ll help you.”

Oh, God, this had to look so fucking stupid. People were staring. His friend Jonny was staring, and he’d tell Lok and... Shit.

“Come on, Professor, just go, okay?” He looked at Shu. “I’m sorry.”

* * * *

“No need to apologize,” Shu called out softly. “Make sure you take good care of your friend...” *Or I will.* He sat back down in the booth and licked at the blood on his thumbnail. It tasted bitter. He spat it out on the floor and poured himself another drink in Kenichi’s glass to wash out the flavor.

* * * *

Ken hustled Gachelsing towards the doors, but couldn’t help but stop

and take a long look back. Shu was still sitting in the booth staring at them—at *him*.

Ken knew he would return to the club and its owner as soon as he could.

“Fuck,” Gachelsing moaned. He reached out and grabbed a hold of Ken’s sleeve. “Can you drive? I don’t trust myself at the wheel.”

Shit. Gachelsing had a death grip on his arm and he looked like he was about to die. *Oh, fuck it.* Ken slipped his teacher’s arm around his shoulder and slid his arm around the older man’s waist to support him.

“Maybe I need to take you to a doctor. The Chinese Hospital isn’t far. Maybe they’ll see you, since it’s an emergency.”

“No!” Gachelsing pleaded. “Just take me to my apartment...please.”

“All right. Sure, Professor,” Ken said. They walked in silence back to where Gachelsing left his car. He handed Ken the keys and told him his address.

* * * *

He lived not far in the area south of Market Street, in a small apartment building much more modern than the aging Art Deco building Ken lived in. Gachelsing lived on the third floor and Ken walked him inside to help him get settled.

“You want me to get you an aspirin or something?”

Leigh nodded. “In the cabinet over the sink. In the bathroom.” He gestured to a door across the room. “In a small plastic bin. It’s a prescription.”

Ken went through the door and crossed the small bedroom to the bathroom. In a moment, he returned with a glass of water and small prescription bottle. “Here ya go.”

Thanks,” Leigh said quietly. He reached up and took at the round, white tablet from the bottle Ken offered. He held it in the palm of his hands, his lips pressed together in a grim line.

He never used these. He had the prescription refilled every month, but ended up dumping most of them down the toilet. It was a habit to buy them, not to use them.

I'm not crazy.

Maybe that was the problem all along. For years, he'd only pretended to take these medications, convincing himself he didn't really need them. That was what the voice used to tell him...*throw them away, Leigh. They can't help you. You're not sick. Certainly not crazy.* Maybe he'd done himself more harm than good, and now it was catching up to him.

I'm not crazy.

Gachelsing closed his eyes and swallowed the pill. He lay down across the couch, sinking into the thin and faded cushions.

"Don't go yet, Ken," he whispered. *I don't want to be alone.*

Shit. The poor guy sounded so pathetic Ken didn't have the heart to leave him. But he wanted to. Actually he *needed* to. He needed to get back to Chinatown and see if Shu was still at the *Poisoned Dragon*.

"Sure thing, Professor," Ken mumbled as he sat on the floor at the end of the sofa where Gachelsing's feet were. You'd think the art college could pay enough for the guy to buy at least one chair.

Ken reached for his backpack, intending to sketch something to pass the time. Shit. He left it in the booth at the club. Fuck.

"Professor?" he asked softly.

"Don't. Please don't go," Gachelsing mumbled.

Ken winced. Great. Now what was he going to do? With a sigh, he folded his arms across his bent knee and rested his head. He was hardly aware that he was soon drifting off to sleep.

"Fuck me...Now and hard."

He drove himself into the hot, willing body perched on the edge of the table before him. Hands, strong hands gripped his back, pulled him closer, the hips below thrusting forward, a muscled leg hooking the back of his. "Harder. Harder."

He plunged himself in swift and deep, his cock aching with the

desire that spiraled through him as it always did between them. The heat built, sweat coated them, the air of the small space filled with the sounds of their passion, the scent of their lust for one another. This was what he craved. This was what he needed. No one could take this from him. No one could make him throw it away.

Ken's eyes shot open as his body tensed. Shit. He jerked himself to his feet and stumbled across the room, looking for the bathroom. The little bedroom seemed endless, but the gleam of chrome caught his eye. He ran forward and yanked down the zipper of his jeans, nearly coming the instant he reached into his briefs to pull his throbbing cock free.

He raked his sweaty palm over himself and tensed as the sticky come poured free in a series of powerful spurts he hadn't felt before. It coated his fingers, the toilet seat, Christ, even the mottled green tile on the wall behind the tank.

Oh, fuck. What was *that*? What the fuck just happened? He hadn't a wet dream since he was a kid, why now? Why the fuck *here* of all places? Ken held his breath a minute, certain he heard movement from the living room. No way could Gachelsing find him like this. Ken stretched out and pushed the bathroom door shut with his foot. The latch engaged with a soft click and he lifted his leg further to push in the small locking button in the center of the gleaming brass knob.

He pulled a bunch of toilet paper from the roll, cleaning himself and the mess he'd made. He washed his hands, then slumped against the sink while drying them. The dream was so intense and so fucking real and...

It had been a *guy*.

He'd been fucking the hell out of another guy.

"Oh, shit." Ken dropped the towel on the edge of the sink and stared into the mirror for a minute. He didn't even look like himself, and he had to blink until his vision cleared. "I'm not gay," he told his reflection. "I am not fucking gay."

No, he wasn't. Absolutely, positively not. If he was, he'd have been attracted to another guy long before now.

But Shu attracts you...he definitely catches your attention.

"Shut the fuck up!" Ken shouted to the annoying voice inside his brain.

He clamped his mouth shut and held his breath, hoping to hell he hadn't woken his teacher. There was no sound and he opened the bathroom door and listened again. Nothing. Not a sound.

Breathing easier, Ken stepped out into the darkened bedroom. There was the outline of a desk with a laptop on it, and he went to it and flicked on the small lamp. He ripped a piece of paper from the back of the spiral notebook.

*I had to go. I hope you're okay. If you need anything—*No. He was not going to write *call me*.

Ken scratched it out and simply signed his name. He switched off the lamp and took the note to the living room. He placed it on the small end table near the bottle of pills, then left the apartment.

Once outside, he looked at his watch. It was almost three in the morning. Shit. The bus he needed wasn't running late, thanks to cutbacks. Oh, well, at least Lok had taught him enough of that Kung Fu shit to be able to sort of defend himself. Not that he had anything on him worth stealing except his cell phone.

Ken shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and headed back towards Chinatown. Too bad it was so late. *The Dragon* would be closed by the time he got back.

Then again, considering the fucking freaky dream he'd had, that was probably a good thing.

CHAPTER FIVE

The big stone lions flanking the gate at the official entrance to Chinatown were surreal in the foggy moonlight. Ken had no trouble imagining that they might very well come to life like something out of one of those cheesy Hong Kong horror flicks Lok liked so much. Of course the lions weren't even half as freaky as the clay dragons decorating the biggest pagoda on top of the gate.

Ken found himself glancing back and up as he passed through and began walking along the quiet, hilly street. The *deathly quiet* hilly street. Was it always this quiet or was he just freaking himself out? This was a world away from the Chinatown he passed through on his way to and from school each day. He was used to the crowded shops teeming with tourists and locals alike. It was odd not to hear the tangle of Chinese voices coming from the groceries and outdoor stands or the rhythmic *click* of Mah Jong tiles being shuffled by that group of retirees who hung out at the little bar with his neighbor old Mr. Wong.

There was no one out. No one on this street, or the one that branched off to his right. Ken pulled his leather jacket closed in front and hurried up the hilly street towards—Ken stopped. This wasn't the street to his apartment. He missed that turnoff—all the way back at the end of the block by the main gate. What the fuck was he thinking? He snorted. Obviously he wasn't thinking at all. Shit.

Ken took a quick glance around to regain his bearings. He was closer to the *Poisoned Dragon* than home. How fucking stupid was that?

* * * *

After the last employee left, Shu put the backpack on the table before him. Ken's leather bag rested near the edge of the low table, its contents laid out on the granite surface. A textbook on art history, a PDA, an assortment of different sized pencils with varying thickness of lead...

Shu traced his fingers over each item, gently feeling for the lingering traces of their owner's essence.

He needed to know more about this unusual student of the arts. From the moment Kenichi Ohara stepped into the *Poisoned Dragon*, he'd intrigued Shu. Countless other college students wandered into his club—the lax enforcement of the legal drinking age and gothic allure attracted them in droves. But they were all young, ignorant children who never realized they were likely being drawn for their own slaughter.

But Kenichi was...different. On the surface, he appeared to be so much like the others, but inside... Shu saw him and wondered if the young man would drown before his very eyes. Kenichi's soul felt trapped and it cried for release. Or did it cry out because it wanted to be bound—wrapped and smothered by a passion he'd only dream of?

And earlier this evening, the mural at the *Gingbo* had awakened memories Shu had long since forced from his mind.

"How is that possible?" Shu whispered. He rifled through Kenichi's possessions, searching for an explanation.

The last thing Shu drew from the bag was a hardbound sketchbook. This, more than anything else he'd touched, contained the essence of Kenichi. He slid his fingers along the spine in a gesture very much like a lover's caress. As he traced the edges of the cover, the corner of a page split the skin on his fingertip.

A crimson droplet swelled from the edge of the paper cut and Shu inhaled sharply, unaccustomed to being wounded so easily. The

blood dripped onto the sketchbook, and he laughed softly. Strange as the cut may be, it seemed oddly appropriate; the cost of tasting Kenichi's soul would be paid in blood.

Hastily made sketches and finely detailed drawings alike filled the pages of the sketchbook. Shu exhaled slowly, shivering as his fingers barely brushed against the surface of the sheet. Each stroke of the pencil had been made with so much...passion.

Though hidden in the pages, Shu could feel it.

Kenichi thirsted. Much in the same way he did.

Shu licked at the corner of his lips where the lingering traces of the last life he'd drank still clung. Perhaps they didn't thirst for the same thing, but the power of their desire was the same. Kenichi abandoned his family's wishes and pursued his own passion. He lived to create and was gifted at it. They were both so very much the same.

Time passed unnoticed. Shu dwelt on each drawing with painstaking thought, drawing in as much of Kenichi's essence as he could. The young man was almost naked before him; his very soul exposed to Shu with each mark his pencils had left on the sheet.

An ache rose just below Shu's abdomen. While one hand turned the pages of the sketchbook, the other slid down the front of his pants. The sensuality in Kenichi's artwork—in Kenichi's very soul—made him long to feel the young man's touch. Shu stroked himself as he hardened under the leather material, emulating the contact he so wanted to feel. The material tightened around his swelling length and his breath quickened.

As he almost came to a head, he reached the last few pages and froze. His hand fell away from the bulge at the front of his pants. He pushed the sketchbook across the tabletop, but his eyes remained frozen on the sketch on the page.

It was of a knife. Blood dripped from the subtly curving blade. A Chinese dragon and tiger entwined like fierce lovers decorated the ornate handle, winding around the metal in a serpent-like manner. The knife had an inscription on one side of the blade that read: *Kill one to warn a hundred*. The sketch only showed one side of the

blade, but Shu knew the inscription was there on the reverse, because it was the same knife that had left the scar across his chest.

It had once belonged to him before he'd given it to his protégé...to his beloved Toshiro.

"I'll find you..."

The knife had been lost in the earthquake a century earlier. There was no other like it in the world. How did Kenichi draw this?

The curtains billowed around an open window. The cool breeze carried with it the scent of the young man who stood outside the club entrance. Kenichi...

Shu quickly rose from his seat. He was desperate to see Kenichi, to know if it could even be possible... *Toshiro...*

He unlocked the front door and opened it wide. "I've been waiting for you," he whispered.

"You...have? Oh, yeah. I—I think I forgot my backpack here. *Did* I forget my backpack here?"

"Yes," Shu said softly. "Come in. Please."

Ken stepped inside. The club was totally dark save for the dim wall lights near the back booth. He jumped when he heard the lock catch on the front doors. He spun back around. Damn, Shu was staring at him. "I'll just get my stuff and get out of here. I'm sorry you stayed awake."

Shu smiled. It was a strange smile, friendly yet deadly, if such a thing was possible. "It's quite all right, Kenichi. I'm something of a night person, what with the club and all."

Ken forced a laugh. "I guess you would be. " He walked back toward the booth, his unease melting away like the morning fog in the noonday sun. His hands clenched into fists at his sides. "You went though my stuff? What the fuck did you do that for?"

"I wasn't positive it was yours. I had to check the contents for some identification."

Ken closed his eyes a moment. "Yeah. Of course you did. I'm sorry. It's been a weird night. I'm tired, I guess."

"You should rest," Shu said, reaching out. His fingertips only

hovered over Ken's shoulder, barely brushing against the supple leather of his jacket. He gently guided Ken to the booth. "Please sit."

* * * *

Shu pulled the sketchbook over as he slipped into the seat beside him. "I'd like to know more about your artwork...especially this one," Shu said softly as he pointed to the sketch of the knife.

"I don't know, it just...came to me," Ken hesitated. "Here at the club. So I took out my book and sketched it." He shrugged a little, as if it were no big deal. But his eyes betrayed his confusion.

"Have you seen this knife before?" Shu asked quietly. "In person, perhaps?"

"Sort of," Ken's voice trailed off and he called himself an idiot for almost blurting out that he had seen it—though he'd seen it first lying on the floor by the locked door at back near the restrooms that said *No Admittance*.

It had been so *real*/he'd even stooped to pick it up until Lok came out of the restroom and whacked him in the ass with the door. He'd seen it again for real shortly after that at an auction. "Um. I know it's late and you're closed, but could I get something to drink? I'm dying of thirst."

Shu simply stared at him, the dim light, tinted red from the lampshades, casting odd shadows on the angles of his face. He looked like a predator in the low light, biding its time waiting for the perfect straggling bit of prey to happen by. Dangerous, but...fascinating.

"I'll pay," Ken added as an afterthought, needing to break that weird dead silence that seemed to have followed him from outside.

"That's not necessary." A small smile formed on Shu's lips. He stood up from the table and drifted towards the bar. "All that I have is yours," he added with a soft whisper.

Shu moved behind the glass counter and ran his fingers over the rows of bottles lined against the wall. He instinctively reached for an

aged brandy and two glasses.

"How is your *friend*?" Shu returned to the table and poured out the drinks.

"He's okay, I guess. He had some medicine at home to take and he fell asleep—" Ken stopped short, the glass Shu gave him poised half way to his lips. "Kenichi," He said. "You called me Kenichi. How did you know—"

He looked down at the table when Shu's long fingers snaked out, pulling a receipt from the art supply store from the pile. "Oh. Yeah. Sorry," he mumbled, taking a long sip of the drink.

Holy shit, it burned going down. It hit his stomach and spread an inner warmth up and outward through him. Damn. This was some good stuff.

Shu stared at Ken, his eyes fixed on the young man's throat as he swallowed. Kenichi's skin flushed with the heat of the liquor and the color spread across his smooth cheeks.

A faint hiss escaped Shu. *He's so much like him. So much like my Toshio.* Until now, Shu had never truly noticed it. The young man's appearance, the very feel of his essence...

Shu returned the receipt to the tabletop, and lifted his own glass to his lips. "You're a very talented artist," he breathed softly, tapping the sketchbook. "These sketches are remarkable...as is your work in the *Gingbo*."

He raised his hand, almost touching the young man's cheek. He hesitated, afraid that if he touched the soft flesh, everything he hoped for would be proven a fantasy. He grabbed the brandy bottle instead, and refilled the empty glass in front of Ken.

"You've seen my mural? How did you know it was mine?"

Shu poured himself another drink and smiled. "I know everything that goes on in Chinatown, but it so happens that I know the *Gingbo*'s owner. His family and I go back quite a few years."

"Lok's dad is a bastard and a half," Ken took a long sip of the drink. "Oh, shit. Don't tell Mr. Yang I said that."

Shu laughed. "That's no secret." He finished his glass and set it on the table. "I've called him worse to his face."

Ken put down his empty glass and smiled a tipsy, crooked smile. "Yeah?"

"Yes," Shu returned the smile before replacing the stopper in the brandy. "But he's of little importance. I'd rather talk of other things."

Shu turned to Ken and his smile faltered. "You remind me so much of someone I used to know," he whispered.

I do?" Ken toyed with the empty glass, turning the stem in his fingers. "That's a coincidence, huh?" He cleared his throat. "Maybe I need to get going. I don't want to keep you up."

He dragged the leather backpack across the table and deposited it on the seat between them like a safety barrier then began putting his things inside.

As Ken reached for the sketchbook, Shu slipped it out from under his fingertips. He held it in both hands and traced the cover with the palm of his hand. This belonged to him now...it simply had to.

"You should stay," Shu breathed out softly. "You *will* stay." He reached down between them, his hand closing over Ken's while it stayed poised above the open book bag. "Come upstairs."

"Up...stairs..." Ken's voice trailed off as his vision clouded for a second. It was like that night he saw that knife in back. It was real but not and for a minute the dance floor looked like an old fashioned living room with velvet furniture and marble topped tables. He saw himself, but it wasn't him. And he saw Shu, Shu playfully pulling him, the other him.

Come upstairs, Toshiro, You need to see the rest of the house to see if it's worth buying. We need to make sure the bedroom is to our liking."

"Upstairs," Ken said again, finally conscious of the way Shu held his hand. *Held his hand!*

Ken pulled free and grabbed his sketchbook back. "I—I have to go now."

“Stay.”

Shu's voice was little more than a whisper, but the power behind it slammed against Ken's senses. Shu pressed his hand over the sketchbook and pinned it to the tabletop. He leaned forward, his lips only a breath away from brushing against Ken's. “Stay with me.”

Ken rubbed the side of his head as a weird stabbing pain came out of nowhere, like someone pressing their thumbs into his temples. “Well...” He stared at Shu; the man's eyes, though shrouded in the shadows, were vibrant, almost glowing like a cat's in the dim reddish glow of the wall lamp.

What's at home? Nothing. There's nothing for you there. Here you have a friend. You wanted to meet him. You wanted to get to know the mysterious Poisoned Dragon. “I guess I could stay for a little bit longer.”

“Yes...that's better,” Shu said, leaning away. “Come,” he took the leather bag from Ken's hands and left it on the tabletop. He stepped out of the booth and gestured for Ken to follow.

Ken got out of the booth and followed, not entirely sure why he was doing so. He paused and looked around as they approached that *No Admittance* door. They passed through it and ascended a twisted metal staircase. As they climbed to the top floor, Ken had the weirdest feeling that this place had been remodeled. That a wooden staircase had been here. A narrow one with fancy carved posts and railings.

When they reached the top floor, Shu led the way into his loft, flicking a light switch to the right of the door. A few candle-shaped wall mounted lamps flicked on in the corners of the room. It was still fairly dark but not so much as the club had been. The place was nice, nicer than his. It was on a par with his parents' million-dollar townhouse in Pacific Heights with bare wood floors, leather furniture, an oriental carpet beneath the long sofa and chairs near the white painted brick fireplace to the left.

“Nice place you got here. Ever think of doing something with the open wall space?”

Shu closed the door behind them and the lock clicked in place.

Shu came beside him. He leaned in close to his ear. "What would you paint for me?" Shu breathed. "Something...*passionate?*"

Ken shivered. "I don't know. I'm not sure what you like. You don't seem the type to want a landscape or still life." He swallowed hard as that freaky dream found its way back into his brain. He shoved his hands into his jean pockets and tried to ease the fabric from his growing erection.

He stepped away and went to stare at the wall opposite the fireplace. "It would be pretty cool to do something like I did at the Gingbo, but I don't imagine your girlfriend or any dates would be too amused." He stepped back a bit and turned slowly, looking at all the open wall space. "What would be really cool would be something like I'm doing for the one school project."

Ken turned and jumped to find Shu *right there*.

"And what would that something be?" Shu asked in that deep softly accented voice of his.

Damn, but he was scarier than Lok's dad with that stare of his, and that was saying a lot. Ken cleared his throat. "Um, I think I'd go with the theme Old San Francisco, you know, do a panorama of the city, close up street scenes showing the various people in the different sections, Nob Hill, Chinatown, the Barbary Coast."

Shu took Ken's hand in his own, holding it up between them. "I'm sure anything these hands create would be...*beautiful*."

He turned it over slightly, eyeing the vein as it throbbed along Ken's wrist.

"I want to know so much about you, Kenichi," Shu said softly. He encouraged Ken to follow him across the room with a gentle pull. Shu guided him to the bedroom, easing him down on the mattress.

"I've been watching you from the first moment you arrived at the *Dragon*," he whispered. "What draws you here? What are you looking for?"

It was like a dream. Ken felt as if he was a spectator watching Shu take his hand and lead him across the wide room and into another—the bedroom. The older man's voice was like the alcohol, dulling his

senses, slowing—no wiping away his reaction time so that all he could do was follow Shu's lead.

He sat on the soft bed, engulfed by the weird feeling of having done this, here, with Shu before. He was transfixed by the older man's gaze. Those eyes were so full of an inner fire he knew he'd never be able to capture properly on canvas. There was danger there, boredom and was that a hint of sadness?

Shu closed his eyes. "*Who* are you looking for?"

"You?" Ken heard himself whisper.

Shu opened his eyes and frowned. He brushed his fingers along Ken's cheek. "There can be no doubts," he hissed softly.

"I..." Ken swallowed, struggling to find something to say.

Shu pushed Ken back on to the mattress. He sank into the layers of black silk sheets. Shu leaned over him, still stroking at his face.

"Tell me again, Kenichi... *who*?" Shu whispered.

That odd sense of familiarity, of having been before here with Shu, filled Ken again as he was pushed back. He swallowed hard, though his mouth was becoming bone dry. He felt strange—happy and full of both a bizarre longing and fear. *He won't hurt you. He'll never hurt you.*

"I..." Ken closed his eyes and that freaky dream from before ran in shadows through his mind again. His blood raced through his veins, pooled in his cock, and jerked his balls with a burning ache. His fingers tangled in the silk sheets. His breathing became ragged.. A voice that was his own, yet wasn't, came from his lips.

"I've been looking for you, Dao Kan."

That voice...after so many long, empty years of waiting...

"Toshiro."

Shu cradled his lover's head in his hands. He ran his fingers through the gray-streaked hair and stared into a face where the handsome lines of age were creased with pain.

Toshiro struggled for breath. Shu could hear the blood pooling in his lungs, drowning him. "I'll find you again."

"I'll be waiting," Shu whispered.

And after so many long, empty years of waiting, he'd been found at last...

Shu's breath caught in his throat. His hands trembled and he grabbed Ken's chin, facing him forward. He traced the young man's lips with his thumb, brushed the tousled hair out of those aching familiar eyes.

"My Toshiro..." he said softly.

With a smile full of longing, Shu leaned in close. He took Kenichi's—*Toshiro's*—lips in his own. Gentle at first, the warmth of the touch flooded his senses. He pressed into him, hungrily, desperately, and with enough force to bruise the young man's full lower lip.

Ken was lost to the sensations coursing through him. He gripped Shu's shoulders, kissing him back with the same hunger he was shown. He arched up, bringing their groins in contact enough to send a jolt through his rock-hard cock.

The need, the want, the sense of having felt this way with this man before, consumed him.

But it also frightened him as he felt the oddest shift in perspective. No longer was he watching from without, he was living it from within himself again. And now the truth hit him like a dead weight. He was kissing another man. He was turned on like never before by another man. And he wanted this man to fuck him senseless now and forever.

He broke from the kiss, his breathing ragged, his face covered in beads of cold sweat. "I—I—I'm, I'm not gay. I'm not. I can't do this. Please. Let me go."

Let him go? After all this time? Impossible! Shu gripped Ken's chin and forced him back down on to the mattress. Fear clouded the young man's eyes where only moments ago a passionate fire had consumed them.

The smooth skin on Shu's brow creased with displeasure. "I've

waited several *lifetimes* for this moment...and you want to run away?" he breathed softly, his voice a dangerous whisper. "Don't be stupid."

Shu leaned close. Ken's breath blew against his cheek with each ragged gasp. It had the sharp odor of panic, and through it Shu felt that damned *uncertainty* again. He hissed and dug his thumbnail into Ken's chin.

"You're afraid..." Shu said. He leaned back, pulling his hand away from Kenichi's face. He licked at the droplet of blood caught under his nail and his frown vanished.

He laughed softly. "But this also...*excites* you. I can taste it in your blood." Shu ran his hand down Ken's chest, his fingers brushing down the hardness pushing at the front of Ken's pants. "I can feel it in your body. I won't *let* you go," he said. "Not again."

Oh, God, it did excite him. It excited him more than he could believe. Ken felt that inexplicable shift in perception again, but it was just for a second. And this time it *was* him thinking that he'd done this before, that he wanted to do this again and it was definitely his own voice echoing in his ears.

"I don't want to leave." He reached out, touching Shu's face, peered deeply into those hypnotic and dangerous eyes. He tangled his fingers tightly in the thick black hair, pulling Shu's face towards his own.

Shu leaned down into the kiss. He took hungry mouthfuls of Ken's lips, greedily satiating a desire that had ached inside him for so long. This was who he wanted—who he'd waited endlessly for in boredom and loneliness.

He touched the sides of his face with gentle caresses, and pulled slightly away. Shu's tongue slid across and past Ken's lips until he found the small cut by his chin. He lapped at it tenderly, the intoxicating taste of the young man's blood calling to him.

Shu kissed the wound and smiled at him. His hands moved down to the front of Ken's shirt, slowly unfastening the buttons until the

bare skin was revealed.

Ken groaned. Part of him still couldn't believe he was here doing this, but he wanted to, he needed to. Shu's touch was gentle but firm and so unlike the caresses of the girls he'd been with. He shivered when the cool air of the room touched the flushed skin of his newly bared chest. He raised himself up, tugged the shirt off then reached between them and fumbled with the button of his jeans. He tugged at the zipper, groaning again as lust swept through him fast and hard. "Touch me," he pleaded. "Touch me *everywhere*."

Shu bent his head and ran his tongue across Ken's small hard nipples, bringing another groan from Ken's lips. He writhed from Shu's expertise like someone out of one of Lok's porn movies, but he didn't care. "Touch me," he pleaded again, jerking at the constricting fabric of his jeans.

"I'll do more than *touch* you." Shu's tongue trailed up along Ken's throat and over his cheek. "Kenichi, I'll flood your senses...consume your very thoughts," he breathed into his ear. Shu's tongue flicked across the tender flesh of the earlobe, his hands brushed along Ken's arms and chest in fleeting strokes. "I'll devour you body and soul...because you're *mine*."

Shu reached down and wrapped his fingers around Ken's firm erection. He tugged at the shaft, and it swelled underneath his touch. Kenichi groaned, the thick vein pulsating in Shu's grip.

"OhShit! OhShit! OhShit!" Ken's words came in a gasping pant, his slim hips writhing under the firm, almost rough stroking of Shu's strong hand. Eyes clamped shut, he gritted his teeth, the desire building with an agonizing rhythm, then exploding through him harder than it had at Gachelsing's apartment.

Once again he came in hot spurts, his body shaking with the rolling spasm, his mind numb to all but the sensations ricocheting through him. Struggling to catch his breath, he opened his eyes and looked down, watching his come drip down Shu's hand like an opaque glaze allowed to drip down the rim of a piece of pottery.

Shu looked at him, then finally unwrapped his fingers from Ken's cock. He grinned a seductively wicked grin, then brought his hand to his mouth and licked off the thick fluid with erotic flicks of his tongue.

The realization began to seep into Ken's brain that this was weird, this was not what he was used to "I—I..."

"Sssshhh," Shu said, placing his damp fingers on Ken's lips.

Ken was powerless to protest when the older man kissed his cheek, licked and suckled his neck, his teeth grazing the skin, nipping here and there hard enough to leave behind a sweet ache. Ken turned his head and captured Shu's lips with his own. To his dismay, Shu broke the kiss, laughing when a half whimper escaped Ken's throat.

Ken watched as Shu stood up and stripped, revealing a lean but well muscled body. The whitish remains of long healed wounds stood out upon Shu's tan flesh and Ken's attention focused itself on the scars low on his abdomen. He felt a weird twinge in his chest; something tried to flash in his mind's eye, but he wouldn't let it though he didn't know why.

Shu moved to stand at the foot of the bed and yanked off Ken's shoes, jeans and briefs then stretched out alongside him. "So beautiful, just as I remember," he whispered, pulling Ken into a slow deep kiss. When he eased away, Shu reached out and ran his hand across Ken's chest, then back again the second time using the nail of his index finger to trace Chinese characters over Ken's skin.

"*Yǒng yuǎn ái nǐ*, my Toshiro."

* * * *

A few miles away, Leigh Gachelsing awoke with a scream.

CHAPTER SIX

1979

*D*octor Cole tried to hand Janice Gachelsing a prescription across the table. She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

"More pills? Anti-depressants?" She already had a medicine cabinet full of them over her bathroom sink, for both her and Leigh...ever since Jason died.

"They're not anti-depressants." Doctor Cole adjusted his black-framed glasses, looking so damned scientific with his goatee and pressed suit.

She smoothed out the wrinkles on the lap of her plaid skirt.
"Doctor Cole?"

"Please call me Howard."

"What are they then?"

"They're anti-psychotics." Her expression must given away some of the heartache she felt because he gave her a sympathetic look.

"You're son is very disturbed, Mrs. Gachelsing," the psychiatrist said. "He sees and hears things you and I know don't exist. He can't sleep at night."

She swallowed. "What's wrong with him?"

"Do you know what schizophrenia is?"

She nodded, but he went through all the details anyway. She kept nodding, not really listening anymore.

"Mrs. Gachelsing?" She blinked and nodded again. Dr. Cole repeated the last thing he'd said.

"The medication can take weeks, even months before it starts to take effect."

"What are you saying?" she asked quietly. She already knew.

"Mrs. Gachelsing—Janice—Leigh needs to be institutionalized. For his own well-being."

She turned to the glass window looking out into the next room. A handful of children played with building blocks or colored in their coloring books on the large round table in the center.

Leigh sat alone in a corner, staring back at her. His wide blue eyes stood out against the dark-circles traced under his lids after another night of terrorized screams. His hands twisted at the edge of his T-shirt, the iron-on Scooby-Doo pattern lost in the tight knots he kept twisting in his shaking hands. He looked smaller than six, the way he was pressed up so tightly against the walls.

"Centennial Peaks Hospital provides excellent inpatient care. I have some colleagues there who would be fascinated with his case study, I'm sure..." The rest of Dr. Howard Cole's words melted into an indiscernible drone.

Leigh just stared back at her, shaking.

* * * *

Leigh Gachelsing's screams ended in a small whimper. He lurched off the couch, clawing at his sweat-drenched clothing.

"Oh, God..."

He barely made it to the bathroom in time. Gachelsing flipped up the toilet seat and retched into the porcelain bowl. There was nothing in his stomach, and still he kept heaving until bile worked its way up. But it didn't get rid of the taste of semen in his mouth.

He gagged again. Someone had traced it on his lips. He'd licked at the sticky fluid, wanting it—wanting the man who'd done it.

Disgusted, Leigh pushed away from the toilet. He collapsed back

against the wall and slid down to the tiled floor. He rested his head on his shaking hands.

"It wasn't me." He shut his eyes. Just another dream. Only more real than any other he'd had, even though he never saw a face, or heard a voice.

"So much for the fucking meds," Leigh whispered.

A knock sounded at the front door.

Ken.

In the chaotic aftermath of the dream, he'd almost forgotten about the kid. Where had he gone? A sickening feeling washed over him and he shivered. Did Ken have something to do with the dream?

The pounding on the door got louder. Leigh forced himself up and he crossed the small apartment on shaky legs.

"What?" He threw open the door and leaned across the frame. His nerves were shot and his tone was harsher than he meant it to be.

Meg Silivasi's hand was still hovered over the space where the front door should be. She balanced a bag of groceries on her hip and pursed her lips at him.

Leigh ran a hand through his hair. "What?" he said weakly.

Meg shifted the bag to her other hip. "I was coming back from the store and I heard you cry out. I thought you might be hurt or something. I saw Kenny Ohara bringing you home earlier. Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?"

"No, no...I'm okay." Leigh looked away. He tugged self-consciously at his rumpled clothing. "Just a bad dream."

Meg tilted her head at him, her ebony hair brushing against the shoulder of her pullover sweater. She gave him another questioning look, and his insides knotted up even tighter.

She didn't know anything about him, and he'd never wanted her to. A very petty part of him envied her success—things always clicked for her. But he respected Meg, more than he let himself admit. And she always treated him like a colleague...and would as a friend if he'd let her. He didn't want that to change.

Don't drag her into this. Leigh almost closed the door in her face,

but couldn't bring himself to do it. Memories of the dream rushed back and he shivered. He didn't want to be here alone.

"It's almost four in the morning," he said. He was just desperate to make her stay without actually asking her to. "What are you doing up shopping?"

Meg's cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I couldn't sleep and I kept 'hearing' my grandmother tell me that milk and cookies would ease my troubled mind." She grinned. "My grandmother just liked fat grandchildren. I think it made her feel that they were well cared for." Impulsively she tilted the grocery bag so Leigh could see the package poking out on top. "Care to bite the heads off a few chocolate-filled elves with me?"

He ignored the cookies, his eyes widened in horrified surprise. Meg's grandmother died more than two years ago...

"You heard her?" he said quietly. Some of the shock edged into his voice. "Does she always talk to you? What else does she say?" The second those words spilled out of his mouth, he knew it was a mistake. Meg's expression changed, and his cheeks flushed with embarrassment. "I'm sorry," he mumbled. "I'm just tired." *Shit, shit, shit!*

Meg shifted the bag to her other hip and looked down at her sneaker clad feet. "Please don't give me that 'there goes the freaky Gypsy' look." She raised her head. "My grandmother raised me and we were really close. I know it sounds odd that I'd 'talk' to her even now, but sometimes I do, okay. And..." Meg frowned. "Sometimes I imagine I hear her repeat some of the things she'd always tell me." She took a step back. "Look, I better go. Just forget I was here. Forget me entirely, okay?"

"No, wait...please." Leigh reached out and touched her wrist before he had a chance to second-guess or stop himself.

"I don't think it's strange...or freaky." His voice kind of trailed off a little. "Believe me, I know more about weird looks from people than anyone else would. People don't give you a 'freaky Gypsy' look, they give you the 'stunning woman has taken my breath away' kind of

look.”

Oh, God...he sounded like a pathetic teenager with an even more pathetic pick-up line. His face flushed again.

“Forget that last corny bit instead,” he bit the insides of his mouth in embarrassment and let go of her wrist. But he moved out of the doorway, and gestured for her to come inside. “So you ‘imagine’ you hear your grandmother? Are you sure it’s imagination?”

* * * * *

Meg swallowed hard and stepped into the apartment as if in a trance. Stunning? Her? No way. Good Lord, her face was too round her mouth too big, her nose too long. Besides those flaws, she was the world’s oldest living virgin. *Thanks for that, Grandma.* And that little nugget of awkward information would certainly explain the jolt she’d felt when Leigh Gachelsing had touched her just now.

Meg took a seat on the old sofa, setting her bag on the small end table to her left. “It has to be imagination, right?” She laughed nervously. “Lots of people talk to their dearly departed. I’m not crazy, and I hope you don’t harbor any illusions about reporting me to the administration as being unfit to teach.”

“No, you’re not crazy,” Leigh said softly. He frowned a little, more self-conscious than ever. He didn’t want her to know what crazy actually was. “I wouldn’t go to those assholes in administration even if you were.”

He disappeared into the small adjoining kitchenette and poked around in the fridge. The milk he had was four days past the expiration date, but he sniffed it anyway. Not smart. He stuffed the carton back inside as his already upset stomach lurched a little.

He made some instant coffee for the both of them and joined her on the couch. “I’m sure it’s not what grandma used to serve, but I don’t have anything else,” he passed Meg one of the warm mugs, his fingers brushing against hers as she took the cup.

He looked at his hand. “You like yours with cream and sugar—

cubed sugar," he said quietly.

Meg stared and gave a nervous laugh. "Either you're psychic or you've been stalking me in the teacher's lounge." She took her grocery bag with one hand and set it on the floor, then removed the half-gallon of milk and box of sugar cubes. "It's Grandma's fault. She always had sugar cubes, *only* sugar cubes, and coffee just isn't the same without them. Three cubes gives the perfect sweetness, using a spoon throws it all off." She rolled her eyes. "I sound so dysfunctional."

She set her coffee cup on the end table, plopped in the sugar and added a bit of milk, stirring it with her index finger. She licked her finger clean, then sipped the coffee. Instant kind of reeked, but it wasn't that bad. Emboldened by this first chance to actually say more than two words to Leigh Gachelsing, she blurted out the question that had been on her mind for the past two years.

"Why do you dislike me so much? What have I ever done to you? Is it because I was given the faculty advisor position over you?"

"I—I don't dislike you," Leigh sputtered. "I don't even care about the advisor position."

He frowned into his cup, ashamed of his petty and very self-imposed rivalry with her. Meg was amazingly talented, and he couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy every time she was recognized for it. His work was just as good, at least *he* thought so. But the real reason... He was afraid. Afraid of being close with her.

"I'm not good with people," Gachelsing said quietly. He kept staring into the cup, avoiding those bright viridian eyes that were too sharp to deceive. "My students can't stand me...I live alone. It's nothing you've done—it's just *me*."

There was a reason he lived alone in this apartment. No one ever stayed, and he couldn't blame them. If he could walk out on himself, he would've done it a long time ago. Who the fuck wanted to keep waking up to his screams or listen to all the weird things that sometimes just came out of him?

Meg would just do the same, eventually. She'd leave, seeing him as either a freak or mental case—or both—and that would hurt more than anything. More than being alone.

He looked over at her, sitting quietly just within arm's reach and wished he could take her in his arms. "You're probably tired," Gachelsing whispered. "It's late and you don't have to stay. I'm okay."

"Maybe you should give people a chance sometimes. They might surprise you," she said softly before sipping the coffee. She stared into her cup a moment then glanced at her watch. "Actually it's pretty early. Almost time to get up for work—which I don't think you're going to do today." She reached out and ran her hand through his tousled, sun streaked hair. "You look like hell, Leigh, and have since yesterday. Are you sure there's nothing I can do?" She pulled her hand back and offered him an embarrassed smile. "I'm a good listener. Just ask Myra."

"Myra, from Art History?" Leigh put his cup on the floor. "She doesn't count. I've heard her in the lounge...she lets everyone know about her problems." But he smiled—the first real, genuine smile he'd ever shown anyone since he couldn't remember when.

She touched him.

It really wasn't more than a simple gesture of kindness. But it felt so wonderful to have that contact, as fleeting as it was. He wanted her to do it again, or better yet, to run his fingers through her hair and kiss those sweet lips that spoke nothing but kind words.

He looked away, feeling more fucking embarrassed than before. He cleared his throat.

"I did go down to the *Chew Kee* this afternoon," he said. Of course, he didn't mention his blackout or the vision of his own gory death. She would probably need something stronger than coffee and Keebler fudge cookies to handle it. "The old woman gave me some herbs I can try for my headache."

Thinking about earlier, he rubbed his temple. The pain was still there, only now it was a bearable dull throb. "Uh, you're Ken Ohara's advisor, right?" he asked. "Has been acting odd or anything lately?"

"Kenny? He hasn't been any odder than any other twenty-year-old male." Meg grinned and set her cup on the end table. "Now, his friend Lok Yang is another story entirely. When I filled in with Perkins' photography class when his wife went into labor, that kid kept giving me the eye like you would not believe, and he kept asking me if I thought they'd get to work with live models. Live nude models, like our kids in the Fine Arts department."

Meg shook with an imagined chill. "The kid is nice enough but kind of creepy, but then again, maybe that's because I keep thinking of his father." She sighed. "I know that's wrong especially after the stories my grandmother told of how her people were treated but I can't help it. The whole historic Tong Wars thing freaks me out. And I don't care what they say publicly about it being nothing but business associations, Mr. Yang looks like he stepped out of the Asian edition of the *Godfather*."

It was a good change of subject. At least it stopped Leigh from being more of an ass around Meg than he already had been.

"I don't know if maybe Ken's getting mixed up with those guys or something," he shook his head. "It's just a weird feeling I have." And that man in the club—*Shu?* Leigh shivered.

Everything about that place, from its owner to its very name—*The Poisoned Dragon*—sent chills through his body. He experienced a mixture of hatred, anger and fear he couldn't explain. God...he almost felt sick again.

"Meg, you know Chinatown pretty well, right?" He clasped his hands together so she wouldn't notice them shake. "You've been researching the area for your new art show." He unclasped his hands, angry at himself for feeling a jealous twinge. "Do you know anything about a club called the *Poisoned Dragon*?"

"Of course I've heard of it. It's all some of the kids talk about. Apparently it's the hot place to be, very atmospheric, very Goth, very cutting edge. I can't say that I'm not curious to see it all for myself. Do you think you'd like to go check it out sometime? With me?"

"Fuck, no! And you better not go there, either!"

Meg dropped her coffee cup. The warm brown liquid soaked through the leg of her jeans and pooled into a brackish puddle on the blue rug.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I..." Leigh's voice trailed off.

"It's okay," Meg mumbled as she went to the kitchenette. She wet the small terry towel that was folded upon the counter and daubed at the stain on her pants then went to sop up the mess on the rug. She picked up the fallen cup along with Leigh's untouched one and took them both to the sink. She picked up her grocery bag. "I better get going. Why don't you call in sick today, and I'll post a note on your classroom door that your class is cancelled. I have an advisory appointment with Kenny Ohara at ten this morning. I'll give you a call later, or stop by on my way home and let you know if he seems to be acting strangely."

Leigh nodded and stood, walking her to the door. "Meg?"

She turned. "Yes?"

"I'm sorry," he said simply. "I'm really sorry. It was a rough day and..."

"It's okay. You don't need to explain. It happens to the best of us." She managed a small smile, then kissed him on the cheek before hurrying the few feet down the hall to her own apartment.

Leigh watched her go inside, then he shut the door and rested his forehead on the edge of the frame. His fingers still pressed gently against his cheek, as if he could hold on to the warmth of her lips by doing that.

"Why did you bother stopping, Meg?" he asked out loud. No one ever gave a damn in these big cities, but she had. Each time tonight when they'd touched, either by accident or on purpose, he got a brief glimpse into her heart. It was one of those really rare times he didn't mind it so much, being the way that he was. She really did care, more than anyone else had in a long time.

"Because she doesn't know you yet," he sighed softly.

Leigh turned away from the door, suddenly feeling very alone in

his small and almost empty apartment. He gave the couch a wary look and went into the bedroom, tired and worn. Meg was right—a glance in the mirror over the dresser proved he did look like hell. Changing into a T-shirt, he tossed his clothes from the day before onto the floor and crawled into bed. He buried his head under a pillow and right before he dozed off, he realized he wasn't afraid to sleep.

* * * *

Ken Ohara never showed up for his appointment. Meg couldn't help but recall Leigh Gachelsing's concern that the boy was acting strangely. If there was anything Ken Ohara was adamant about, it was his art and his desire to make a career out of it. He'd been that way since high school, where Meg first met him when she taught at a summer program for gifted students. Ken worked hard to get into this university. He'd secured his own student loans, got himself an apartment and basically defied his upwardly mobile, conservative parents.

Meg began to worry when Ken hadn't returned her calls or answered the text messages she'd sent to his cell phone. And she decided that his friend Lok Yang might know something. She dismissed her last class after lunch early, then headed over to the photography lab, where he was scheduled to be spending the afternoon.

"Gee, I haven't seen him since we had dinner together at the noodle place over on Grant. Maybe he stopped at the club and got hammered. He did that the other night when he had the date with the girl that got murdered."

"Girl who got murdered? You mean the one who was pulled from the bay?"

"No, the other one. The one whose apartment got broken into before she got home."

"Oh," Meg said crossing her arms in front of her chest. Why did this kid have to leer so damn much? "All right. If you see Kenny later,

ask him to call me and we can reschedule his appointment.”

“I will.”

Meg headed back to her office and cleared up some paperwork she didn't feel like taking home, because she planned to spend the evening framing a painting for her upcoming art show at the prestigious Masuda Gallery.

Then finishing her sculpture, and undoubtedly daydreaming about Leigh Gachelsing, as she tended to do far too often. What was it about him that had caught her attention? He'd never been sociable here or at their apartment building. He rarely spoke to her unless it concerned university business and even then he was curt. And that jealousy she sensed and saw when it came to her art success, small though it was.

“Get your head out of the clouds, Madga, and get back to work. Boys ain't gonna get you nothin' but trouble like they got your mamma,” she whispered, voicing a memory of her grandmother.

* * * *

Ken Ohara struggled to pull himself from under the fog of sleep as he'd done a few times already. This time he succeeded, though it was like swimming up through a sea of gesso. He shifted upon the bed, the silk sheets stroking over his bare skin like—

Ken forced his eyes open. It hadn't been a dream. He really was here. Dao Kan Shu really was beside him, the older man's arm draped possessively over his chest. Oh, man. He ached in places he didn't know he had and he thought he should be a lot more freaked out than he was right now.

He was here with another man. An older man. One who'd damn near fucked him senseless.

And he wanted him to do it again.

The movement drew Shu out of his lazy doze. He wrapped his arm tighter around Ken's chest, as though reluctant to give up its warmth or the feel of the smooth skin.

"Where would you go, hmm?" he whispered into Ken's ear. "There's no other place for you to be, nowhere else you belong, and *no one* else you belong to."

Ken rubbed his eyes, but couldn't completely clear away the fuzziness. He figured it was because of the liquor he'd had down in the club then up here, but he didn't feel hung over. Of course, he hadn't sat up yet.

"I was supposed to do something today...be somewhere...school. I had classes and a meeting with my advisor..." He looked at his watch. Shit. The day was half gone.

"It's just one day," Shu whispered as he licked at Ken's ear.

"Yeah," Ken agreed before closing his eyes and squirming as Dao sucked the skin at the base of his neck. What was one day when he had this? Shu prodded him to turn on his side facing the window and Ken did, giving himself over again to the drugging desire that he never realized existed until last night.

Shu pulled the sheet down past Ken's shoulder and his fingers trailed along the soft groove along his spine. Ken murmured with pleasure and buried his face in the pillow. His body shifted to press into Shu's exploring touch.

Shu smiled. "Such flawless skin." It was free of any blemish, without even the hint of a sunburn from some reckless day spent on the beach. But it wasn't always this way. He brushed his lips over Ken's bare, cream-colored shoulder, tracing the same place he'd once left his mark on Toshiro.

"Like a blank canvas," he whispered in between soft kisses. "We're very much alike, Kenichi. We're both *artists*." He laughed, pressing his lips into the back of Ken's neck before pulling him back against his chest,

Shu looked across the top of Ken's head. Past the nightstand and the empty bottle of cognac that rested on it, the heavy curtains shifted lazily in a breeze. Sunlight spilled on to the floor in a lambent pattern and he smiled.

He almost felt strong enough to handle the sun today

Ken shivered, both from the tone of Shu's voice and from the feel of his hot mouth gliding across his shoulder and neck. A weird twinge shot through his left palm and then appeared to prickle the back of the shoulder Shu had just kissed. He turned and peered into Shu's dark eyes.

The man's gaze was unreal, so intense, frightening yet seductive. It was a gaze he doubted he'd be able to truly capture on paper or canvas. In a way it was like the Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile—a total mystery. Only instead of wondering if it meant happiness or some secret shared between artist and subject Shu's gaze surely was a portent of things unknown—dark things, dangerous things, erotic things...

Ken reached out to trace the planes of the older man's face with his fingertip, as if sketching the features in his notebook. It was so damned familiar. He tugged the sheet down even more, let his hands trace the toned, lightly scarred chest, dwelling upon the remnants of old injuries that crisscrossed his lower abdomen. Pain gripped the center of his chest, and Ken winced. That odd sensation of disconnectedness that swept over him last night hit him again and his head swam for one long moment, hard enough to blur his vision.

"I'm sorry, Dao Kan," he heard himself whisper. "So fucking sorry..."

He pushed against Shu until the older man was on his back, and once he was, Ken pulled himself to a kneeling position and began to stroke and kiss each faint line, paying particular attention to the ones on his flat belly.

A soft sigh passed over Shu's lips and he held the back of Ken's head. The scar on his belly ached as memories stirred within him. He could remember the sharp and unexpected kiss of steel as the blade plunged into his belly. Toshiro twisted the knife and punctured his lung, and even as the life spilled out him, Shu had smiled. A clean

strike made with deadly intent, and yet it had been sweetest of any of his lover's caresses.

"That's my favorite one," he whispered. "A token of love from my beloved that I will never forget."

Shu stared down at Ken, whose soft mouth continued to glide along the thin lines in tender strokes. He ran his fingers through Kenichi's hair once and pulled it back gently until the young man looked up at him. Ken and Toshiro shared the same face—the same soul. And yet, Kenichi was *not* entirely Toshiro.

Shu sat up and cupped Ken's chin. "Are you worthy of knowing this kind of love?" he wondered aloud. "Would you understand my gifts if I gave them to you, the way Toshiro did?" He drew Ken's lips to his and kissed him deeply.

"I—I want to understand. It's so confusing. I just don't know..." He pulled totally away, got out of bed and ran his hands through his hair as he went to the windows and pulled open the drapes.

Sunlight burst into the room. It pushed back shadows long accustomed to their places and spilled over the bed. Wherever the sunlight touched Shu's exposed body, his flesh stung as though layers of his skin were being stripped away.

Shu cried out, drawing the sheets around his raw flesh. He'd been caught unprepared, and he paid for it painfully. He dashed over to the large window and pushed past Ken.

"What are you doing?" Shu violently pulled the thick drapes shut.

Ken stepped back, clearly startled by the sudden fierceness. "I just needed some air," he tried to explain. "What's the big fucking deal?"

Shu ripped off the sheet from around his body and clenched in his trembling hands. "You little fool," he choked out. His skin still burned and his breath came in short gasps. "Don't touch anything unless I say so!" He lashed out, striking Ken across the mouth before he even realized he was doing so. But the sunlight had weakened him; otherwise the blow would have done more than just leave a small split in the center of Ken's lower lip.

Shu exhaled sharply and stepped forward. He grabbed the back of

Ken's head to stop him from moving back and licked at the droplet of blood that formed along the split. "You shouldn't do reckless things like that," he said. He took Ken's lips in his own and sucked at them, drawing more blood out of the thin cut before pushing away. "But if you do, expect nothing less."

Shu returned to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. He shuddered, no longer from pain but from the thirst that swelled inside of him. The taste of Kenichi's blood inflamed his desire, and he breathed heavily as he eyed the young man's throat. It took almost more self-control than he possessed to stop himself from lunging across the room and tearing into Ken's jugular to get to the sweet, hot liquid that coursed in his veins.

No one else's blood had excited or invigorated him as much. Just one more taste was all he craved, especially now because of the sunlight's weakening aftereffects. But would one more taste suffice?

"Get out."

"What?"

"Get. Out. *Now!*"

"Fine!" Ken grabbed his discarded clothing from the floor." And fuck you very much," he muttered as he slammed the bedroom door behind him. The sounds of him dressing quickly and then slamming the front door shut behind him carried into the bedroom.

Shu rose from the mattress, his heart still pounding in rhythm to the flow of Ken's blood. The taste of it drove him mad with desire for more—it ate away at his ability to resist the thirst. Once he indulged in that desire, there would be no stopping. Not until Shu was satiated and Kenichi lay at his feet, dead...or he rested in his arms, changed.

"Kenichi," Shu whispered. "Are you deserving of that honor?"

He walked to the door and pressed his hand against the lacquered surface. He sighed softly with longing.

I want to know if you are...and I will.

Shu stayed at the door until his breathing eased and his pulse slowed. Time in its meaninglessness drifted by without notice as the connection to Ken's life-force faded.

He moved across the bedroom and dressed, lost in thought. Pulling open an edge of the curtains, he tested the strength of the light with his fingertips. It barely tickled now. It was a gift from Ken's potent blood. With a smile, he drew them completely open and looked out over the street below and the city beyond.

There was so much to learn about that young man. Why wait until nightfall?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Ken dropped his backpack on the sofa the minute he entered his apartment and headed towards the shower, stripping along the way. He turned the water on full blast and lathered himself so roughly that he cracked the bar of soap. He stuck his head under the forceful spray of steaming water and stared at the ivory colored tile through the dripping strands of his brown hair. He couldn't believe what he'd done last night. Couldn't believe what he'd let be done to him.

There's no hiding from it, Kenny, his wounded pride announced. You kissed Shu, you touched him, you gave him at least three blowjobs and um, oh, yeah, you let him fuck you so much that your ass still hurts.

And guess what dude—you liked every homosexual moment of it!

Ken groaned as the memories washed over him like the water from the showerhead and he looked down at himself in disgust. Oh, God. Just remembering it gave him a fucking hard on. He pulled back and backed up until he hit the opposite side of the wall, the tile hard and cold against his back. He wasn't gay. He liked girls. He'd been to bed with girls, this was just...he didn't know what. Fuck, he'd been drunk. Damned drunk, and Shu probably put something in the booze to make him totally lose control that way.

Then why did it seem so familiar? Why did it feel like you were 'at home' the minute he pushed you down on that bed? Why did you love it—him—so much?

"I don't know," Ken whispered with a sigh. He stepped forward

into the water again and shut off the hot. Maybe the coldness would shock some sense into him.

* * * *

Leigh Gachelsing rolled over on to his back, pulling at the sheets around him. The alarm clock on the bedside table read five minutes past noon, a new record. Almost seven hours of sleep, and he'd woken up to the sound of Mrs. Terrasa's soap operas blaring on the TV next door instead of his own screams.

But things were still...wrong. He sat up, shivering in the cool breeze that drifted off the bay and through the open window to his left. He'd had no nightmares, no dreams at all in fact, and still an unnerving feeling ran through him. Like someone leaned in close and whispered in his ear, only the words were unintelligible hisses that brushed across his skin. He shivered again and resisted the urge to swat away at the side of his head, not so much because he doubted someone was there, but out of fear someone *would be there*.

"Jesus." Leigh rubbed his eyes. A picture of Meg suddenly popped in his head. She reached out to touch his hair, her green eyes sparkling as she flashed him a bright smile. He jumped up from the mattress, terrified. Terrified that something had happened to her, that she'd gone to that club after all, and that she was dead. But he'd opened his eyes and Meg was gone.

It was just a memory from last night. A harmless, pleasant memory of her sitting next to him on his sofa and not one of his gory visions. Leigh shuffled to the bathroom, relieved but shaken up nonetheless. He splashed some cold water on his face and leaned on the sink. He stared into the mirror, and gave himself a wary look. Now he was afraid of his own thoughts.

"Shit." Gachelsing opened the medicine cabinet and his hand hesitated between two of the bottles inside. But he clenched his jaw and pulled out the aspirin for the dull but persistent ache in his head. He didn't need his prescription, it hadn't done shit for him last night.

But just thinking about Meg now pushed away the bizarre shadowy things that nagged at him—it gave him some kind of strength he didn't have on his own and he blinked at his reflection in surprise as he realized it.

It was a nice feeling, even if it didn't last. He swallowed two of the aspirins and undressed. He stepped into the shower, letting the warm water run over his skin. The temperature of the water suddenly dropped, startlingly cold from one moment to the next. He reached for the knob to adjust it, but the water pouring down on him already was hot. These mixed sensations were coming from two bodies—his own and another. Someone else ran a cold shower, trying to wash himself clean, physically and emotionally.

Unnerved, Leigh shut off the water and wrapped himself in a towel. He still felt the cold water on his skin as the other person continued showering.

He needed to get the hell out of this apartment. Tossing off the towel, he went back to the bedroom and the creepy sensation faded a little, but not his desire to leave. He dressed, grabbing a pair of khaki pants and a gray sweater from the dresser. After pulling them on, he headed to the living room to find his car keys.

It wasn't too hard to spot them. They were on the chipped glass end table beside the sofa, tossed next to the cordless telephone he always seemed to lose even though his place was pretty bare. Aside from the table and the couch, there wasn't any other furniture.

Pretty pathetic for an artist living in one of the country's cultural meccas. Meg probably thought he was such a joke. With a sigh, he picked up the phone. He actually dialed two numbers before hanging up and tossing the receiver back on the table. She was probably in class, and he didn't know what he'd say anyway. But really, he was just scared.

"So pathetic," Leigh angrily muttered to himself. He grabbed the keys and started to leave. Another disorienting wave washed over him; it felt almost like that disembodied feeling in the shower. He looked at the keys.

Ken was the last one to touch them. The whispering started in his ear again, this time the words made sense. *Poisoned Dragon*—and it sounded like Ohara's voice. Meg's face came to mind again, and he wondered what the connection—if any—could mean. But at least he knew where to go. He left the apartment and headed straight for the university.



* * * *

“Damn,” Meg muttered when she checked the frame she’d varnished the previous day and found it slightly tacky. *You had to put an extra coat on it, didn’t you, you just had to.* She went to the supply room she shared with Leigh Gachelsing and took a small pedestal fan back to the studio. She hated doing this because invariably some little fleck of something managed to blow onto the finish and while most people wouldn’t notice it, *she’d* know it was there and it would drive her crazy.

In an effort to get her mind off the miniscule specks of dust, she went to the alcove where she had one of her sculptures for the show. Chewing her lower lip, she walked round and round the pedestal studying the sculpture. It was done in bronze from an original clay model. About twenty inches high and twenty-four in length, it depicted a mountain cave in the background with a fierce Chinese dragon slithering its way out, its frightening jaws open, fangs bared. It stared towards the foreground in which the bleeding breast of another dragon lay, an elaborate-handled dagger piercing its heart.

She hadn’t sculpted the dagger. She’d found it inside something she’d purchased at a charity auction and it had inspired the entire sculpture. Yet something was not right, though she still couldn’t put her finger on it. She took the scabbard of the dagger from its niche on the sculpture and turned it the other way. No that wasn’t quite right. She jiggled the handle of the dagger, loosening it from the space embedded in the bronze, and replaced it in its original sheath. Together, the pieces were like a sculpture itself, the ivory sheath and handle with their beautifully sculpted tiger and dragon motif. Meg set the sheathed dagger into the niche where the sheath alone had rested, and stood back to study that arrangement.

* * * * *

A few feet behind her, Leigh Gachelsing paused in midstep as he entered the studio.

All the windows and doors to the room were propped open to vent out the large area after painting class. But the mingled scent of thinner and linseed oil was permanently engrained in the wood panels lining the room to tickle the nose of anyone not used to it. The easels were propped up against the back wall, their heads only a couple of feet from scraping the top of the ten-foot ceiling. The worktables were cleaned off for the day and shoved against the side wall. Once the students finished classes by midday, only grads or professors worked in here and today, Meg had the place to herself.

She faced away from him, her head tilted just a little off to the side as she studied something in front of her. It had her complete attention—she was probably working on a piece for her art show. Leigh leaned in the doorway, careful not to make a sound that would distract or break her concentration.

Her hair was pulled back from her face and held into place with a brown hairclip that disappeared into the waves of rich ebony falling down past her shoulders. The shade complimented the light olive tone of her skin, loose strands brushed across her graceful neck, stirred by the soft breeze of the upright fan. She sighed and her shoulders shifted. She dropped her left hand to her hip, the other to her side. The trio of thin gold bracelets on her wrist jingled faintly and she took one step forward. Gachelsing followed the movement, studying the way the curves of her body flowed underneath her smock.

Leigh held his breath and wished he could capture this moment forever on a canvas. It would be the rare kind of portrait an artist could wait his entire lifetime to paint and never have the chance to. The subject was more beautiful than anything he'd seen and everything—the environment, the lighting the very moment itself was just *perfect*. The kind of portrait that happens, then transcends even the art itself. It was something almost...magical.

The same way just being in her presence suddenly was. He felt so at ease with her near right now, like everything that troubled him was far away and easy to handle. A sense of...he didn't know

what...kindness, maybe, reached out to touch him and it felt wonderful. Like when she'd touched him last night. He wished he could just stop time and take it in forever.

Meg scratched the back of her neck, then glanced around as if sensing his presence. She broke into a wide smile, her eyes dancing with happiness as if she'd been expecting him, wanting him to show up. "Hey! How are you, Leigh? Feeling better?"

The warm kindness she radiated flowed over him like watercolors on wet paper and it drew him from the door forward toward its source. He nodded and shoved his hands into his trouser pockets in an effort to keep from pulling her to him to capture that magical feeling of being at peace. "I'm a little better now. What are you working on?"

She rolled her eyes and made a face, her nose scrunching up in dismay. The girlishness of it amused him, but he kept a rein on his laughter when those inviting sea-green eyes of hers flashed with annoyance.

"It's this damn sculpture. It's making me crazy. Something's just not right, and I can't figure out what. I thought I had it the way I wanted it, but now I'm not sure." She gestured for him to come closer. "Here. You look. Maybe you can figure it out." She folded her arms across her middle, shifted her weight to one foot and cocked her head to the side again.

Leigh stepped up beside her, studying her for the longest time. She really was a thing of exquisite beauty, and he knew that he had to capture her on canvas soon. He was only half aware that she moved to adjust something on the piece.

"What do you think? This is how it was originally."

"Wel—" The word died halfway out of Leigh's mouth the instant his gaze fell upon a knife. A horrible, grotesque-handled knife. He took a step back, swallowed hard. His chest tightened—he could barely breathe. A tiger and dragon wound around the intricate ivory handle, intertwining with each other like they were about to devour each other. Small red stones representing the dragon's eyes leered at

him from their setting in the bone-white carving. The steel blade pointed into the heart of the sculpted dragon it was set against, and the polished surface reflected Leigh's expression as it turned from one of shock to horror.

He'd seen this blade before, felt the cold steel punch into his chest and tear through his heart the same way it pierced the sculpted dragon's. He took another step back, but couldn't look away from the knife. It held him in some kind of fixation and he choked back a cry of terror and pain. Was this real? Did that knife really exist, or was it another waking vision tormented him outside of his dreams?

I have *got* to get it to the gallery tomorrow afternoon at the latest, and..." Meg's voice drifted off when she glanced over her shoulder. She turned and placed her hands on her hips. "Leigh Gachelsing, exactly what is your problem with me and my work? What's with that look on your face? And don't you try to deny it. I know you have issues with me and I'd like to know why."

Whatever spell the knife had over him, Meg's voice broke it when she spoke his name. Leigh looked away from the sculpture, his shoulders slumped weakly and he pressed his fingertips into his throbbing temple. Oh, God, the problem wasn't with her—it was with that knife and the cruel presence that hovered over it, that *emanated* from it.

He shook his head. Any other day she could have called him on his stupid ego and she would've been right. "That has nothing to do with your work," he said. His voice sounded hoarse and hollow, even to his own ears. "Where did you find that knife?" He moved forward and gripped her shoulders. "You can't keep it—you *have* to get rid of it. Please." Shit. He was losing it on her, just like he did back in the apartment. But he couldn't let go of her. Meg was the only thing keeping part of him grounded.

Meg could only stare. Leigh was scared. She could see it, hell, she could feel it knotting her own stomach and making the latte she'd had a while ago churn as if it threatening to come back up. She could

only imagine what that fear felt like inside Leigh's skin. She reached up with her left hand and touched his shoulder, her grandmother's bracelets tinkling together softly like tiny bells.

"I got it at the Chinese Historical Society. They had a fundraising dinner and an antique auction last year. Kenny Ohara and I went because he was interested in a set of old San Francisco photographs that were being sold. The knife was inside the false bottom of a lacquer box I bid on. Kenny is the one who found the hidden compartment. I have no idea how. I never would have found the latch."

Meg stopped and gave Leigh a questioning look. "I'm babbling, aren't I? You can tell me to shut up if I am."

Leigh put his hand over Meg's, giving it a tight squeeze. "No, don't stop," he whispered. "Please."

He needed to keep hearing her voice, even if what she told him disturbed him. Ken Ohara was linked to the knife, and it didn't surprise him to learn it. Ken had a connection to the damned thing, and that's what made him worried. But Meg's voice drove back the fear that clawed at him, she made him feel safe and at peace with himself like nothing else ever had. It made his terror earlier feel like such an overreaction.

"Meg...I'm so sorry." Leigh touched the side of her face and closed his eyes. He didn't want to drag her into this, but God, he needed her. He needed her to make everything feel *right*. He leaned forward and touched her lips with his in a delicate kiss. Anything more and he was afraid he'd wake up to find her being with him now was just a dream.

But when he pulled back she was still there, and she was blushing. He felt like a total ass. She must have a boyfriend. How could she not? "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

She touched her fingertips to his lips. "I'm not complaining. Am I complaining?" Meg didn't wait for Leigh to reply. Instead, she leaned in and touched his lips with hers. It was a simple light kiss, not unlike

his own, but it felt good. Damn good. She broke it off and stepped away, but not before he noticed a pink blush spreading over her cheeks.

"You don't have to worry about the piece," she said softly. "I'm taking it to the gallery now. Mr. Masuda thinks he has a buyer for it, so it will be out of my hands in a day or two."

She retrieved the small, wheeled cart from the supply room, then took it to the pedestal. "Can you help me lift it off here and into my truck?"

Sure." The word came out so easily, but Leigh had to work up a hell of a lot of nerve to actually pick up the sculpture. He probably wouldn't have been able to do it if Meg hadn't returned his kiss. He was still a more than little surprised by it. He hadn't expected her to kiss him back, and not with so much...God, it couldn't be love. Maybe in chick flicks and soaps, it happened that way. But in real life, people didn't fall head over heels for each other just like that.

Leigh looked at the sculpture in his hands. Then again, in real life people weren't supposed to see or feel the kind of weird shit he did. He shook his head a little to clear it of the last lingering traces of the presence in the knife, and looked away quickly when he noticed his eyes drop down to the blade again.

"It's really a nice piece," he said lamely. "I didn't mean to get so..." He finished his words with a sigh. He bit his lower lip, but the need to explain himself at least a little was too strong. "This is going to sound really, really bizarre..." Leigh started. It was hard to choose the right words that wouldn't leave her thinking he was a total weirdo. "But there's something wrong with the knife. It kind of has a...a bad aura around it," he mumbled the last words so fast he doubted she even caught it.

Meg almost dropped her end, but she caught herself and managed not to tilt the sculpture and make it fall. "Oh, jeez. It's a good thing you were here, or I'd have been a very unhappy camper indeed." She gave Leigh an embarrassed grin and bent to retrieve the cloth cover from the shelf on the bottom of the cart and draped it

over the sculpture. "I don't think it's bizarre at all. It sounds kind of crazy, I guess, but when Kenny popped open that compartment, and whipped it out of the sheath, I screamed. " She lowered her gaze. "It sounds really crazy, but I had this weird flash like he was going to try and kill me. Kenny Ohara, of all people, can you believe it?"

Leigh's eyes went wide and that feeling from earlier hit Meg again. She reached over the sculpture and tried to touch him. "I told you it was crazy. Kenny Ohara is the sweetest kid I've ever taught. I've known him for a long time. He comes from a good family had a great upbringing. It was just this weird...I don't know." She pulled her hand back and gave the notion a dismissive wave. "Please forget it and please don't say anything to Ken."

"It's not crazy," Leigh shook his head. "I can't explain it, but I felt something like that, too."

He told Meg everything about what happened in the *Chew Kee*. Him passing out on the floor, reliving his own gruesome death, Ken being there as part of his vision—it all streamed out of him in a steady rush of words.

"You must think I'm fucking insane," he said, both miserable and relieved all at once.

"No, not at all." Meg came around the cart to stand directly in front of Leigh. She reached out and touched his face, tilting his head so she could look into his eyes. "I think you're gifted, very gifted. You have what my grandmother called *a doua vedere*. You can see what came before and what will come again."

Meg hugged Leigh. "It's all right. I know it is." She pulled away and stuck her hands into the pockets of her jeans. There's a lot of history in that section where the *Chew Kee* is. Kenny told me it was reputed to have been an opium den at the turn of the century. I imagine there was violence associated with the place. You might have picked up on it and been overwhelmed."

She pulled her hands free, took off the smock she'd worn to protect her shirt, then tossed it over the empty sculpture pedestal. "If you'll help me take this down to my truck and to the gallery maybe

we can get a cup of coffee or something and talk. I'll treat."

Leigh could have stayed in her embrace for the rest of the afternoon, for the rest of his life, maybe. *It's all right. I know it is.* And she really meant it. Those weren't words said out of pity or empty sympathy—sincerity poured out of her like a healing salve over his battered soul. And Meg had felt it too; whatever it was that lingered around the *Chew Kee* was real.

"I'd like that a lot," Leigh said quietly. In fact, he more than liked it he craved it—the chance to talk and just be himself around someone who wouldn't freak out or think badly of him. He crossed the room and closed the studio's doors, locking them for the day.

Meg greeted him with a warm smile when he caught up with her at her office door. She laughed and bobbed a little curtsy as he held the door open while she wheeled the cart inside and grabbed her purse. They exited into the corridor from there.

* * * *

Alone with Leigh in the elevator, Meg couldn't resist brushing a few fallen strands of sun-streaked hair out of his eyes. But the elevator pulled to a stop two floors down and she snatched her hand back realizing what an idiot she was being. First the kiss, then the hug and now this. He must think she was the campus bimbo on the make or something.

If he only knew the truth, he'd probably wet his pants laughing.

"Meg?"

Meg gasped and laughed at her cluelessness. The elevator had stopped, and Leigh was outside keeping the door open for her. "Thanks." She wheeled the cart to the faculty section of the parking lot and let Leigh help her load and secure the sculpture in the back of her SUV. She shut the tailgate and leaned against it. "You want to follow me in your car or ride down to the gallery with me?"

"I'll take mine," he said. "You may get held up by your hoard of adoring fans wanting an early preview." She frowned and he touched

her hand. "Hey, I'm sorry. It was a stupid joke. I admire your work, I really do. I have to admit that I'm jealous of how prolific you are, but I've always been something of a slacker in that area."

Meg rolled her eyes. "I'm only prolific because I don't have much of a life outside my job like some people I know who are always driving off here and there—" She stopped short and bit her lower lip. "It's not like I'm a stalker or anything. It's just that the window next to my drawing table overlooks the apartment building's carport..."

Meg looked down at her sneaker and cleared her throat. "We'd better get going. I think Mr. Masuda has an appointment late this afternoon." She looked up. "You know where the gallery is, right?"

"The block past the Palace Hotel?"

"That's the one." Meg laughed. "Your car is closer to the exit. You want to be all manly and lead the way?"

Leigh gave her a phony serious look and arched an eyebrow. "If you mean manly like this," he flexed his arm playfully in a mock bodybuilder pose, "then of course." He couldn't keep his face straight and he grinned back at her. He wasn't a big guy with broad shoulders or one of those gigantic biceps with legs who paraded around Venice Beach where he last lived, but he liked to run and he kept in good shape. And it showed even under his gray pullover.

* * * *

There I go again, acting like a total ass. Leigh rolled his eyes at himself, embarrassed, but Meg laughed and the cheerful sound was contagious. Chuckling, he reached into his pocket for his car keys.

He led the way to Masuda's gallery and parked in the special lot for artists and guests along the side of the Art-Deco building. Meg pulled up next to his '85 Corvette, and Leigh helped her carry the sculpture inside. Half the floor space in the showroom was already dedicated to Meg's work and while she made some arrangements with Masuda, Leigh looked over her pieces. Everything she sculpted,

from the miniature replicas of the twin lions greeting visitors at Chinatown's entrance to ornate tea sets based on designs from the turn of the century, was just amazing.

"Wow." Okay, so he wasn't a master of words. But her work left him speechless anyway.

"Is that 'wow' as in I can't believe they let this lame shit be displayed in an upscale gallery, or something else?" Leigh's eyes grew wide, and Meg laughed. "I know some of the things look like tourist trinkets but I don't know, I just wanted to do them my way." She shoved her hands into her pockets. "Do you want to go down to the Palace and get a drink or something? Are you hungry? You're so skinny—" She groaned and shook her head. "I sound like my grandmother."

He smiled a smile that was way too sexy. "It's okay." He offered her his arm like some hero out of an old movie.

Meg shifted her purse to her other shoulder and slipped her arm through Leigh's. "I didn't think men were so gallant these days—not that I'm complaining mind you," she said with an airy smile that rivaled the beauty of the afternoon sun that greeted them outside the gallery. She lightly rested both of her hands on Leigh's arm as they made their way down the street towards the opulent landmark hotel.

Once they entered the spacious lobby, Meg tugged on Leigh's sleeve and led him to an area off the main lobby where artifacts from the hotel's past were displayed. She coaxed Leigh towards the last of the large glass display cases where some photographs were displayed. "These were saved from the big quake in 1906. They go back to when the first Palace Hotel opened in 1875."

Meg looked, searching for a particular photo. "I hope they didn't take it out—oh there it is." She let go of Leigh's arm and crouched down, pointing to the bottommost shelf. "Look at the crowd in that one, can you see the guy on the far left near the lamppost? Doesn't he remind you of Kenny Ohara?"

"Oh, my God," Leigh gasped. "That could be him—the man from my vision." He gripped Meg's hand and pressed the other to the

display case.

"But he looks different," Leigh shook his head. "The clothing isn't right, I think it's too modern, maybe. His face is different too, a little more angular, his hair a little darker. In the vision, the man had looked *just* like Ken Ohara."

Leigh turned away. "I think I need to sit down," he said weakly.

"Dammit, I'm sorry," Meg said, squeezing Leigh's hand. She tugged on his arm with her free hand. "Let's go sit. The bar is just through this door."

Meg led the way to the spacious wood paneled bar area that was all but empty at this time of day. She showed Leigh to one of the round tables in the corner and pulled out a green brocade upholstered chair for him, then took the opposite one for herself.

A little chill went through her and she told herself it was coolness of the brown marble tabletop that caused it. "I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking, I—" She broke off when the waiter appeared. She ordered two glasses of wine and waited until the man left before speaking again. "Are you okay?" She took Leigh's left hand in both of hers and gently stroked her thumb across the back of his large strong hand. "That was stupid of me. It's like I forgot everything you just told me back at school about getting feelings from old things."

She sighed and lowered her head. "I'm such an idiot sometimes." The waiter returned and Meg handed him the money for the drinks, then took hold of Leigh's hand again. "My grandmother always said to respect and honor the spirits, to listen to them and take their advice seriously, but most important of all she said to fear them, because they were capable of things we couldn't imagine."

Leigh gratefully squeezed Meg's hand, glad for her company more than anything else. Her presence anchored him to reality and blocked that strange feeling or presence—whatever it was that threatened to pull him from consciousness a minute ago. The piercing ache in his head didn't stop, though. Leigh took a small sip from his glass, hoping it would help calm his nerves. He could barely taste the wine.

"I've been seeing these...spirits...for a long time," he said quietly.

“Ever since I was kid. Sometimes they talk, sometimes they’re just *there*.. Things have gotten worse over these past couple of years, and I don’t know why.”

Leigh thought he saw a young blonde walk up to the bar, blood running down her neck, and he shut his eyes. “Was your grandmother able to talk to these spirits?” he asked. “Please tell me it’s not just me. I don’t know what to do anymore.” He didn’t mean to sound so goddamn desperate, but he was.

Meg brought Leigh’s hand to her lips and placed a whisper of a kiss upon his clenched fingers. “I think it may mean your gifts are getting stronger. *Bunica*—my grandmother—sometimes talked to them, but she was always wary even if it was family. Mostly she blocked them out.”

She squeezed Leigh’s hand. “The quicker you learn to do that, the better off you’ll be.” She sighed. “I wish *Bunica* was still alive; she could show you how. I don’t know how, really, but I can just do it with certain living people. Sometimes when someone is very upset, I can feel it inside me and it can get overwhelming. I don’t know how I block it out, it just happens and little by little their pain starts to pull back. I wish I could be of real help. I feel so useless.”

“Don’t think that for a second,” Leigh reached up with his free hand and touched her cheek. “This is the first time I’ve ever found anyone who understood anything about what I go through. Just sitting here with you and being able to talk about this has done more good for me than you could ever know.”

Or maybe she did know. “We’ve worked together for almost three years—hell, we live in the same apartment building—and I never realized you felt these things too,” he said quietly. He looked down, ashamed. “I didn’t want to know...I was afraid to.”

Leigh looked into her eyes, deep green pools filled with kindness and more caring than he’d ever felt in another person. They were windows to a beautiful soul he wanted to lose himself to. Her inner strength shone, hinting at the extraordinary depth of her spirit and its calm power.

* * * *

Meg smiled and tried to ignore that part of her mind that reminded her how often he went out in the evenings and on the weekends and how he was gone for hours at a time. If that didn't say 'girlfriend', then what did—except maybe it was 'boyfriend', since this *was* San Francisco.

The musical ring of her cell phone broke Meg's train of thought. "Sorry," she mumbled, digging into her purse. "It's the gallery, I'd better answer. Excuse me." She took her phone and moved to the door that led to the area where the displays had been. Leigh was staring into his wine glass when she returned a few moments later. "I need to run over there real quick. One of Mr. Masuda's regular customers stopped by and may want me to do a commission for him." She broke into a broad smile. "You sit here and rest a bit and I'll hurry right back. Maybe we can get something to eat when I do?"

Leigh looked up. "Sure. I'd like that."

Meg grabbed her purse and headed for the exit. She glanced back after reaching the door to the lobby. Leigh was staring into his wine again, reminding her very much of their colleague who had that same air about him when he was having an extramarital affair with one of the administrative staff.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“She’ll be here in a moment, Mr. Shu,” Masuda put down the phone and cleared his throat. Across the showroom, Shu stood in front of Magda Silivasi’s newest sculpture, transfixed. He stared at the beautifully crafted dragon, his finger tracing the edge of the knife as it penetrated the creature’s heart.

Masuda walked up beside him, careful to keep the tension from edging into his voice. It took a little extra effort to do so, even after years of practice as an art dealer in the cutthroat San Francisco art world. You had to be sharp to get by in this industry, quick with your tongue and ready to appease. The same way he handled his clients, he handled Yang’s men and there was never any problem. They came for their money, he gave it to them, and they left. Except today. Today it wasn’t one of the underlings. Today it was one of the top men.

“Mr. Shu?” Masuda ran a hand over his fashionably tied back ponytail. He’d never seen Shu around this early; the club owner didn’t usually pay these types of low-level *house calls*. He cleared his throat again. “Would you like a seat?”

“No.”

“*Okay*,” Masuda exhaled a little more loudly than he probably should have and looked around.

* * * * *

The dealer was a nuisance Shu ignored easily. His attention was on

the sculpture...and on the knife. *Toshiro's knife*. First in Kenichi's sketchbook and now here. It was something he'd thought he'd never see again, and yet here it was. Just as he remembered. The edge of the blade slit open his fingertip, and a fat droplet of blood ran down the sharpened steel. Shu pulled his hand away, but he felt the sting not in his finger, but in his heart. His dark gaze lingered on the placard affixed to the pedestal holding the sculpture. *The Dragon's Tears*, indeed, he thought.

The gallery door opened and Meg stepped inside, a sense of sadness drifting with her like the delicate incense that drifted through the air around her.

The sadness dissipated, however, when Mr. Masuda looked at her. "Ah, and here is our artist. Come in, Meg. Mr. Shu is a very busy man."

"I'm sorry. My friend wasn't feeling well and I wanted to make sure he was all right before I left."

Shu turned slowly to face her. He stared at her through his sunglasses, barely listening to her ramble on to the gallery owner. So many questions had raced through his mind while staring at the sculpture and they'd been silenced with her entrance. A strange air hung about her, tickling at Shu's senses. It felt almost like she'd perceived something about him; her eyes had a look about them that suggested she saw more than what physically stood before them.

"Mr. Shu wants to buy your sculpture, Meg," Masuda broke the awkward silence. "What did you say it was called? *Dragon* what?"

"*The Dragon's Tears*," she answered, her gaze never leaving Shu.

"Is that so," Shu whispered. He felt his heart skip a beat inside his chest. The knife still echoed Toshiro's presence, he felt it in the piercing slice of its blade. It reminded him of tears shed long ago and a grief that wouldn't leave him, even now. *The Dragon's Tears*. How much did this woman know? Who *was* she?

"I'd be fascinated to learn how you decided on that name," Shu said. She eyed him a little warily, as if gauging him, and moved closer.

Shu suddenly leaned forward, his nose and lips brushed along the side of her face. He drank in her scent and pulled away when he recognized another's mixed with her own. She stepped back, startled. "What—?" she started.

"Who did you say your friend was?" he asked coldly.

"I *didn't*." Meg moved around the sculpture until it was between her and this Shu. "The name for it just popped into my head when I was sketching it out." She folded her arms across her waist. "I don't know that I want to sell this piece. It's one of my favorites." She stepped around the pedestal again. "I really need to get back to my friend—"

Shu grabbed her arm. "Don't play coy and try to drive the price up. I want it."

"Excuse us," Meg mumbled, pulling away. She gave Masuda a hard look and stepped away to the back of the gallery. The art dealer followed and repeated his earlier comment. "Yes, I want a sale, but I don't want to sell that piece to that man." She lowered her voice further and leaned in close to Masuda. "I swear he licked my cheek."

"This is San Francisco, you know how eccentric art lovers can be."

"I don't care. I'm not selling it. Not to him."

"You have to sell it to him. He works for—some very influential people I *need* to stay on the good side of."

Shu watched them from the corner of his eye, their hushed voices carrying across the room to his sensitive ears. He hissed under his breath and turned back to the sculpture. So the woman had no intention of parting with it. *Fine*. Shu reached out and touched the ivory handle of the knife with a gentle caress. *But neither could she have this*.

He took the knife from its setting and returned it to its sheath. Masuda and the woman continued their little exchange of words in the back of the gallery, and Shu cast them another dark glance before slipping out unnoticed.

* * * *

"You're being ridiculous, Meg," Masuda said with an exasperated sigh. "I don't see what the—hell?"

Shu was gone.

"Oh, shit," he muttered under his breath.

Meg watched Masuda stare through the tall glass windows that lined the front of the gallery then jog over to the door and poke his head outside. "Great. I am in such deep shit now," he said, giving her an angry look.

Arms folded in front of her, jaw clenched, Meg returned to the front of the gallery. "Look, I'm sorry if I seem unreasonable, but I..." Her words dissolved into a gasp. He'd taken the knife. "That bastard," she muttered. "He stole part of my sculpture!" Shaking with the fury of violation she yanked her purse from her shoulder and dug inside for her cell phone. "He is *not* going to steal from me."

Masuda rushed over and placed his hand on hers, preventing her from dialing. "What are you doing?"

"Calling the cops."

"No! You can't."

"That Shu character stole a piece of my work!"

"You didn't make the knife, did you? That piece isn't really your work."

Meg recoiled. "Don't you care about shoplifters? Won't your other artists be very interested to hear about this?"

Fear, dark and cold, poured from Masuda and hit Meg, raising a wave of nausea deep in her belly.

"Please don't call the police. *Please*." Masuda licked his lips, ran his hand nervously through his long hair. "You don't understand. You can't let the police get involved. Shu is...Shu works for some dangerous people. People I have to deal with. I have no choice. If you piss him off, you piss them off and if you piss them off, I'm a dead man."

"But you can't give in to intimidation—"

Masuda came over and knelt before her, bowing in the traditional

Japanese manner for mercy. "Please, Meg. I'm begging. Have you ever heard of Danny Yang?"

"Yes. His son goes to my school."

Masuda looked up. "Then you know. You know what they're capable of. All the rumors are true, Meg. Please let this go. I'll pay you for the sculpture myself. I'll not charge commission on anything of yours that sells ever. Just please don't get the police involved. Forget you ever met Shu."

Meg grimaced. The man's fear was very real and very strong. Though her sense of justice cried out to be met, she didn't have the heart to take the chance that Masuda's fears would be turned into reality. She put her cell phone away. "I won't call the police now, but I want you to promise to talk to him. The knife isn't valuable, but it's integral to that piece. I need it back."

Masuda nodded vigorously though Meg doubted he'd do as she asked. She sighed. "Can you help me take it out to my truck? There's no point in having it in the show now."

* * * * *

Leigh twisted the napkin around in his hand, wringing out the tissue paper until it snapped. He sighed and pushed it away next to the glass of wine he hadn't been able to finish. Without Meg here, those strange, mixed feelings were creeping back. He kept glancing over at the photograph-lined wall, his attention drawn there.

Listen to spirits... That's what Bunica said to do. Leigh shivered, his brow creased with uncertainty. He didn't *want* to listen to them, the idea terrified him.

"Jesus," he muttered. He didn't want to be afraid anymore. Drawing on some of that courage and strength Meg had given him, he rose from the table in the back of the room and crossed the floor. In the area that housed the displays a couple of tourists were, looking over the pictures, ooing and ahing over the antiquity of it all. Leigh swallowed and glanced nervously at his own reflection in the display

glass. It must be nice to just look at a picture and not feel the weight of the subject's soul behind it or hear the voice of their spirit. But he had to do this, for the sake of his own sanity. He needed to figure out what was going on and that meant taking grandma's advice. *Listen...*

Leigh found that strange photograph of the Ken Ohara look-alike. He stared at it, pressed his hand to the glass and tried to feel past throbbing ache in his head and the gray blur of emotions entrenched in all these things. Now that he was opening himself up to them, so many voices clamored in his head—it was hard to make any sense of it all.

Leigh leaned closer to the display, pushing out the tourists who gabbed away beside him. He looked to another photograph and another, trying to find something clearer to make out. He found one and inhaled sharply. There was no date on the photo, but from their dress, Leigh guessed it had been taken sometime in the 1880s, maybe.

A group of a dozen or Chinese men sat together in what looked like a parlor or entertaining room, with pipes and brandy glasses in hand. Most wore western-styled clothing with short hair and pocket watches tucked into their vest pockets; the older gentlemen still used their traditional tunics in dark silks. A man in his mid or late twenties sat in the back row, the long, graceful-looking fingers of his right hand pressed to the side of his face. His dark eyes staring out of the photograph with so much intensity Leigh felt it cut through his soul. Another man, younger and with softer features, sat right at his side. There was almost no space between them, inferring a sensual intimacy that made Leigh gasp.

He knew *both* those men. The younger one sat in his classes Monday through Wednesday each week, and the other...He shuddered as he met that intense stare. He'd met him last night in that nightclub. Leigh tried to swallow, but his mouth was dry.

"Things were so much more interesting in the old days."

The man's voice slithered in his ear out of nowhere, piercing the through the blur of emotions. Leigh gave a start, everything crashed

down around him. The man's presence overpowered anything else he tried to listen for and he pulled away.

"You..." he choked out. Shu smiled at him coldly and the pain in Leigh's head sharpened.

"Yes," Shu whispered. "What a coincidence."

That was far from the truth. He'd followed the trail of Silivasi's scent to the Palace Hotel, eager to find this man and learn why he kept showing up. There was something about him that had disturbed Shu from the start, and it unnerved him to know the man was connected to both the artist in the gallery and Kenichi. In this section of the long, wide corridor outside the bar, not enough sunlight filtered through windows to irritate his sensitive vision and the incandescent light was nothing but a slight nuisance. He took off his sunglasses and fixed the terrified man with a cold stare. Though he smiled, the gesture never reached his dark, penetrating eyes.

The tourists had gone. Leigh looked away from the stare, his heart racing with panic he couldn't explain. This couldn't possibly be the same man in the picture.

"Aren't we feeling well?" Shu reached out and touched Leigh's cheek. The man's thumb brushed over the cut he'd left on his cheek and the small wound burned in agony. It reopened without Shu's nail even having to slice into the skin, and Leigh pressed against the glass.

"What do you want with me?" he gasped. He clutched at the bleeding cut, his hand shaking. "Who the hell are you?"

"It would seem we have a lot of mutual *friends*," Shu hissed. "Kenichi Ohara, Meg Silivasi..."

Leigh's heart went cold. "Leave them alone," his voice trembled. The Chinese club owner was doing something to him, he could feel his presence shoving forcefully into his mind. Leigh braced himself, grasping desperately at whatever strength he had to resist what was starting to feel like some kind of *violation*.

Shu narrowed his eyes. "I have a better suggestion," he said quietly. "*You* stay the fuck out of my affairs...*Leigh*." He stepped closer, reaching out with his mind to push against his fragile

defenses. Names, scattered images and random thoughts spilled out of the art teacher as he struggled mentally against Shu.

“What?” Leigh gasped. He stumbled back to the wall between the two large glass cases, gritting his teeth as the pain his skull blurred his vision. “How did you...*oh, God...*” It was hard to stay focused, or even think clearly.

Shu laughed. “Pathetic fool.”

* * * *

Meg stood outside the hotel entrance a moment, letting the sun displace the trace of Masuda’s fear that chilled her inside. The relief was only fleeting, however, for the moment she entered the posh lobby another sting of fear—no stark terror—reached out to slice through her consciousness. Leigh. Oh, God. She ran to the bar. It was empty. Their table had been cleared. She rushed forward calling to the bartender. “Excuse me. I need to find my friend, we were sitting there, did you see him leave? He wasn’t feeling well—“

“I just came on duty. No one was here.” The bartender shrugged. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Meg turned away and placed her hand on her stomach in an effort to contain the churning acid. He was still here, and barely holding on to his composure. She let the feeling tug her across the dimly lit bar and through the opened double doors that lead to the back corridor. The unnaturally silent corridor that suddenly seemed as cold as the large mausoleum where her grandmother was interred.

Meg rubbed her upper arms to ease the goosebumps springing up then unrolled her shirtsleeves to cover her forearms. She saw Leigh crouched down between two of the large glass display cases, his back flat against the wall, his elbows resting on his bent legs, his head in his hands. She gasped. “Oh, my God.”

* * * *

“Meg?” Her voice pierced through the numbing fog crippling his mind. Leigh lifted his head and pulled his hands away. Faint bruises were already forming on his cheeks and temple where Shu’s fingers had dug into his skin. He couldn’t see her through the haze of pain blinding his vision, but he could feel her. The warmth of her spirit pushed away the icy terror gnawing away at his insides and pulling him towards darkness.

She knelt down in front of him. “Oh, Leigh! What happened?”

“Meg,” he reached out, his hands finding hers. He gripped them tightly and pulled her close.

He held her hands so tightly they ached, but she didn’t protest. His fear was so thick, seeping into her, and though it made her queasy, she didn’t try to block it out. His grip eased a bit, and she pulled one hand free and draped her arm around him, her fingers gently stroking the hair at the nape of his neck. “What happened? Please tell me—“

“Is there a problem?”

Meg looked over her shoulder to see the burly security man staring down at them. “No. My friend was feeling ill, that’s all, and he needed to rest a moment. I’m going to take him home.” She turned back to Leigh, stood and coaxed him up, wrapping her arm around his waist.

The security man took out a cell phone. “Do you want me to call emergency services?”

“No!” Leigh said, his fingers digging into Meg’s shoulder.

“No, thank you. We’ll be all right. We’re parked nearby.”

The guard said nothing, but followed them to the main entrance and watched as they walked to the end of the block.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Meg asked as they reached the parking lot.

“Not yet.”

“Okay.” Meg paused behind their vehicles. “You can’t drive

home, um, wait a sec.” She took out her cell phone and phoned the Masuda gallery. Masuda got a bit pissy when she asked him to take Leigh’s car home for her while she drove Leigh to their apartment building, but when she cleared her throat, he got the message and came right over.

“What’s going on?” Masuda huffed. “What happened?”

Leigh looked away and climbed into the truck without answering. He passed Meg the keys to his car, and Masuda turned to her for some kind of explanation. She gave him a look, and he clamped his mouth shut.

“Here. He lives in my building.” Meg tossed him the keys. “Thanks, Guy.” She slammed the driver’s door shut and pulled out of the parking space.

* * * *

“Answer the door, Ken. I *know* you’re home,” Lok jabbed his finger into the intercom button over and over. He knew it irritated the shit out of Ken, so he kept doing it. “Come on man, buzz me in!”

The lock to the door clicked open. “Finally,” Lok said. He pushed open the thick glass and nodded in thanks to the janitor who’d let him in. He dashed over to the elevator, his sneakers squeaking on the mosaic floor. He started jabbing his finger in the button to call it down, but the damn thing must be older than the yellowed tiles under his feet, because it was taking forever.

“Screw this,” he muttered. He kicked the bronze ashcan next to the elevator doors, hissing a little when he stubbed his toe, but went for the open-air staircase to his left. He dashed all three flights and reached Ken’s apartment, sweaty, out of breath, and not giving a damn.

He went straight for the handle without knocking. “Dude, where the hell were you today?” Lok kicked the door shut behind him and tossed his bag on the floor. “You missed class—Silivasi subbed for that Gachelsing asshole you’re always bitching about. You should’ve

told me you were going to bail out today.” Lok stepped down into the living room where Ken leaned back in the sofa with his sketchbook. Loud music blasted from the headphones jammed over his ears. No wonder the jerk hadn’t buzzed him in.

“Hey!” Lok leaned over the sofa and tugged the headphones off. “Earth to Ken, wake up!”

Ken jumped, and the sketchbook flew out of his hands and hit the edge of the coffee table, tipping his bottle of beer. “Shit!” He dived to grab the bottle before it spilled onto the book. “What the fuck! Don’t you know how to knock?”

Lok held up the blaring headphones. “Duh.”

Ken frowned and pulled them from his hand, then hit the remote on the stereo across the high-ceilinged room. “I was working on sketches for the Halloween mural.”

“Let me see.”

Ken snatched the sketchbook and held it against his chest. “No. It’s not ready.”

Lok plopped onto the sofa. “You temperamental artists are such a pain in the ass.”

“Deal with it.” Ken tucked the sketchbook into his backpack and sat in the old rocking chair opposite the sofa. “So what do you want?”

Lok rolled his eyes. “I told you Silivasi was looking for you. You had some appointment with her.”

“Oh, yeah.” Ken ran his fingers through his hair. “It’s no big deal. I’ll catch her tomorrow. You sick or something? You’re not getting all slobbery just saying her name.”

Lok stretched out and put his feet on the coffee table. “That’s cause I got me some last night.”

“Yeah. Right.”

Lok sat up. “I did, and you will not fucking believe with who.”

“Your left hand instead of your right?”

Lok tossed the cap from the beer bottle at him. “Fuck, no. My father gave me an early birthday present. He gave me his *mei-mei*.”

“You lying little shit.” Ken threw the cap back.

“Look and cry, Kenny boy.” Lok stood, reached into his rear pants pocket and pulled out a print of a digital photo that did indeed show his father’s mistress going down on Lok.

Smirking Ken tossed the picture at his friend. “You Photoshopped this, asshole.”

“Did not. Look real close.”

Ken went to stand next to the table lamp near the sofa and studied the print. It didn’t look pieced together in any way. “Shit. Aren’t you the lucky one.”

“Hell, yeah,” Lok nodded his head so eagerly it looked like it might fall right off his small shoulders. “But *she’s* the real lucky one, if you ask me.”

Ken didn’t, but Lok sat up straight, plunked his feet off the table and started telling him about it anyway. “You should’ve heard her, dude,” Lok’s eyes were going to pop straight his black-rimmed glasses. “She was moaning and calling out my name—and oh shit—she made every porno flick I’ve ever seen look as lame as *Disney* shit.”

“Jeez, Lok,” Ken made a disgusted face. “Keep your fucking sexcapades to yourself.”

“What the hell’s your problem?” Lok leaned forward and grabbed Ken’s unfinished beer. He took a long swallow and headed off the couch to grab another one from the fridge. “Jealous ‘cause you didn’t get laid last night, *papi?*”

Ken shifted on the maple rocking chair very conscious of the tenderness still lingering all over his body. Oh, he’d been laid all right, and it wasn’t a night he’d ever be forgetting, only partly because it had been spent with another man.

He closed his eyes as the memory of it came back to him in graphic, multicolored detail. He felt Shu’s lips on his hot skin, remembered the feel of him coming hard and fast deep in his ass. He could taste the salty sweat of him, feel those strong fingers tangled in and tugging at his hair. He felt the blood rush to his cock all over

again.

He jumped when Lok kicked his foot. "Stop spacing out and listen to me. Christ."

"What?"

"I said, do you want to make a couple bucks tonight? My dad wants us to make a pick up from old man Wen for him down at the wharf."

"How much do we get? A hundred, same as always?"

Lok held up his hand, his fingers spread wide.

Ken's jaw sagged open. "Five hundred? For both of us?"

"Apiece."

"Holy shit." Ken could only stare. He didn't really like helping Lok with these questionable 'runs' for his father, but damn, five hundred would pretty much cover his rent. Still that was a lot of money for a simple pickup at the wharf and dropoff back at the *Gingbo*. "You're sure on this? We're just doing the usual money pickup? We're not running dope?"

Lok took a long sip of his beer. "My mother would have my father's balls clear in Vancouver if I did that. You know they don't like me being that close to the dirty end of the business."

Ken stood up and reached for his leather jacket that was thrown over the back of the sofa. "I'm in, let's do it."

CHAPTER NINE

Not a single word was said on the ride back to the apartment. Leigh braced himself against the leather seat and clenched the armrest to try and stop from shaking. Each block they put between them and the hotel helped the pain stabbing through his head lessen. But that sickening fear and unease wouldn't go away so easily.

Meg helped him out of the car. Leigh found he needed to lean on her just to stay on his feet...just to keep breathing, in fact. The moment they reached his apartment, his chest constricted and the color drained from his face. He stopped dead in the doorway. "I can't do this," he closed his eyes and tightened his grip on her hand. "I can't be alone here."

"Do you want me to come in with you, or...do you want to come over to my place for awhile—until you feel better?"

He nodded and offered her a weak smile in return. Her smile was much more spontaneous and warm, and she instinctively reached out to take his hand and lead the way.

Leigh was quick to note how Meg's apartment was as cheery and welcoming as she was, and he could feel the sickening fear aroused by Shu begin to ease its grip on him at last. He took a seat on the soft, thickly cushioned, yellow-flowered sofa. "It's quite an eclectic collection of furniture you have here," he said glancing around at the traditional upholstered pieces mixed with obvious old world antiques and the modern stereo and chrome and glass bookshelves. Meg laughed. It was a lilting musical laugh, surely the laugh of an angel.

"You don't want to know what I started out with. Most of this

belonged to *Bunica*. It was much nicer than the discount store crap I had, plus it feels like home, you know? Like she's still around with it here."

Leigh smiled. Meg's warmth and obvious love for her grandmother pushed out the last of the cold caused by Shu. "May I ask why you call her by her name? My grandmother was Chinese and very old world. If I did that, she'd have tugged my ear off."

Meg gave him a curious look. "Oh. No, *Bunica* wasn't her name, it's Romanian for grandmother. Sorry."

Leigh gestured with his hand. "It's my fault for not thinking. I can be so stupid sometimes."

Meg laughed as she made her way to the kitchenette to put on a pot of coffee. "You're far from stupid, Leigh Gachelsing, especially considering that MFA from the Pratt Institute you have."

Leigh tilted his head. Was he detecting a hint of jealousy in there? He laughed. "Does my *curriculum vitae* bother you, Miss Silivasi?" he asked lightly.

She pouted. "I applied to Pratt for both undergrad and postgrad and was turned down both times." She reached into the old ceramic cookie jar on the counter, pulled out an elf cookie and bit off its head. "Now look what you've done. You made me bite the head off an elf."

"He probably deserved it," Leigh nodded gravely. "Look at the cocky smile those bastards have. He *definitely* deserved it."

She laughed again, just as light and sweet as before. That gentle sound warmed him from the inside out, and he'd do just about anything to keep hearing it. Warmth and love seemed to make up her apartment as much as the wooden floors and painted walls. It was almost tactile—something he could touch or wrap himself in. He leaned back into the cushions, the tension in his shoulders melted away. All his senses told him he was safe here. "It's not that big a deal anyway, getting into Pratt," he said.

"Yeah, right," Meg smirked at him with playful sarcasm. She took the metal pot off the stove and poured out two cups.

"No, really," Leigh looked down at his hands. "I just had decent grades."

Meg walked over to the sofa and handed him a steaming mug. "It's espresso, so it might be a little strong."

He smiled at her gratefully and took the mug. "It's perfect, thanks." She sat down next to him and he bit his lower lip. "This isn't any of my business, but...why aren't you seeing anyone?" he asked quietly.

There was no point in asking if she had anyone else in her life; he knew there was no one else living here. Hers was the only presence he felt, and maybe an echo from her grandmother. He turned to Meg and studied the soft curves of her face. He sensed a little loneliness inside of her he couldn't explain, and he wanted to know why or where it came from. "There's no reason someone as wonderful as you should be alone," he whispered.

"What makes you think I'm not seeing anyone? You're never around to see anyone coming over or taking me out." Meg dunked the rest of her cookie into the coffee and popped it into her mouth.

"Well, no, I mean—I'm not watching you or anything, I just—" His eyes went wide for a second. "Oh, I see..." he raised his eyebrows, fighting to keep the corners of his lips from turning up in a smile. "Ms. Silivasi, I think there's something you're not telling me."

Meg stared, not quite sure what to say. She pointed to her drawing table set in front of the wide window. "It overlooks the carport. I can't help but notice you coming and going when I'm sitting over there."

"Of course," Leigh answered simply. He sipped his coffee. She nervously went to the kitchenette and pulled some cookies from the jar. She placed them on a small plate and brought them back to the living room. He watched her break apart another fudge elf and eat it slower this time. "You never did answer my question."

She looked at him for the longest time, then lowered her head and stared down at the cookie in her hands. "I don't date. I never really did. My grandmother was pretty strict and I'm not the type men

seem to go after anyway..."

"You're right—what man would want a strong, talented, beautiful, caring woman?" Leigh frowned a little bit and touched her chin. "Only a complete fool would pass up someone so amazing."

He tilted her head up so he could look into her eyes. Small, embarrassed tears shone just behind her thick lashes. She blinked quickly to try and hide them, but he touched her cheek and brushed the drops away.

"I'm sorry for not doing this sooner," Leigh whispered. He leaned in and gave her a gentle, almost brushing kiss. Then he kissed her again, taking her soft, full lips completely with his own.

Meg was startled, but only for a moment. She melted into Leigh's gentle kiss, loving the way he slid his arms around her and pulled her closer, the way he slid his hand up into her hair at the back of her head and deepened the kiss, coaxing her lips apart, teasing the tip of her tongue with his. The blood roared through her veins, and she sensed a warm, vibrant glow of contentment flow out of Leigh and wash over her.

He broke the kiss slowly, pulling back, his fingers sliding through her hair to brush a few loose strands back from her face. "Tell me. Did I just offend you and make a total ass out of myself?"

Meg caressed the side of Leigh's face with a whispery brush of her fingers. "You might have but I'm not positive. Can you kiss me again so I can be sure?"

"You certainly must be sure," Leigh said with a grin.

Meg held the side of his face, drawing him close as he leaned in once more. His lips trembled a little as he met hers this time. Suddenly he was afraid of knowing so much happiness at once. These things never lasted, and each time it was getting worse to deal with it. It wasn't a question of falling in love, because he knew he already was...and he couldn't bear to lose her.

He held Meg closer and took slow, deliberate mouthfuls of her

lips. She murmured softly, taking as much of him as he offered. His hands slid up to the back of her neck and he ran his fingers through her soft hair as he eased out of the kiss.

"I think you're in the clear..." Meg breathed softly. "I'm definitely not offended." Her fingertips traced a delicate line to the corner of Leigh's mouth and brushed across his lower lip.

He blew soft kisses on her fingers as he reached up to take her hand. He squeezed it gently before placing it over his heart and holding it tightly against him. He closed his eyes, giving himself to the moment.

Meg did the same, welcoming the warm wonderful feeling of total peace and contentment flow from Leigh to her and back and again. This was magnificent and so surreal in a way. She'd never felt this. Never. Oh, she'd had dates here and there and she'd been kissed and even caressed by men simply wanting a quick toss in the hay, but she'd never felt this vibe from a man and certainly not directed to her and her alone.

She couldn't believe that she'd known Leigh Gachelsing so long, had worked and lived near him all this time and had never been bold enough to try and breach that icy wall he projected with such regularity. It had been foolish and even selfish of her not to fully tune his feelings in until now. She might have been able to help him, might have been able to ease the fear and pain.

"Leigh?" she asked in a tone hardly more than a whisper. "Are you involved with someone? Is that where you go?"

"No," he said quietly. He bit his lower lip and looked away. "There hasn't been anyone special in my life for a long time."

If ever. No one ever really got to know him, not really. The rare times he'd opened himself to anyone had been mistakes—no one could accept him the way he was. Every moment of the day he was alone, with only the strange things he saw or voices he heard to keep him company.

"I just need to drive away sometimes," Leigh whispered. *All* the time would've been more accurate. "There's a place in Monterey where there's nothing but the ocean and sky, just a long stretch of rocky beach where sometimes you hear the sea lions barking in the distance. There are no people or cars or anything. Just peace."

Leigh held her to him and rested his forehead on the top of her head. "Let's just go...right now," he breathed. "Come with me."

"All right," Meg said without hesitation. "We can take my truck. Are you up to driving, or should I?"

Leigh pulled back and grinned down at her. "You drive. I'll play the gigolo artist."

Laughing, Meg gave him a playful punch in the arm. She went to the kitchen and packed some fruit and bottles of iced tea into an insulated bag, which she handed to Leigh. He took the liberty of adding a few handfuls of the fudge elf cookies. On the way out, Meg grabbed the large canvas tote from beside her drawing table that was filled with extra blank sketchbooks pencils pens and pastels.

"Here, let me," Leigh took the heavy tote from her hands. He took a peak to see what made the bag so heavy, smiling when he saw the art supplies inside. A trip down there without even a sheet of paper or a pencil would to capture a spontaneous moment of inspiration would feel empty.

They passed his apartment on the way downstairs, and his stomach lurched. Meg noticed his hesitation and took his free hand in hers.

"It's okay," she said with an encouraging smile.

"It *is*," Leigh wrapped his fingers around hers and they went downstairs.

* * * *

Meg shook her head and laughed to herself when they turned off the highway and onto the access road to the beach. She parked the SUV and gazed out the windshield at the setting sun. She turned to Leigh

with an embarrassed grin. “It was real bright of me to drag the sketch supplies with the night coming on.”



He gave her a warm, understanding smile. “It just goes to show that art’s in your blood. Besides, we can always stop for a late dinner on the way back. There’ll be plenty of light in a restaurant to jot any quick ideas.”

Smiling Meg took the keys from the ignition and slipped them into her pocket. “Let’s watch the sun set.”

“Together,” Leigh added, brushing his fingertips along the side of her soft face.

“Together,” she agreed, feeling happier than she could ever remember.

* * * *



While they waited for the elevator, Lok checked his reflection in the small wall mounted mirror in the corridor outside Ken's apartment

and ran a comb through his thick black hair. He straightened his shirt collar and slipped on a pair of black metal-framed sunglasses. It never ceased to amaze Ken how dorky Lok turned into Big Bad Triad Boy the minute they set out to do one of his father's 'quick runs', and he made a mental note to suggest to his friend that he show this side of himself on a more regular basis if he wanted to attract babes.

His sister always said girls wanted a 'bad boy' who was a decent guy deep down. An image of Dao Kan Shu popped into Ken's head then, and he banished it as quickly as he could.

Lok had one of the Wong cars—a sleek, black Mercedes sport coupe. Two girls walking across the street stopped and watched them get in. With a grin, Ken pulled his own sunglasses from his leather jacket and slipped them on. He could play bad boy too, for a while.

Lok checked his watch after sliding the key into the ignition. "Let's cruise around a bit. *Mei* said my dad wants us to wait till after six before we do the pick up."

Ken settled back, one booted foot up on the Mercedes' leather dash and went along for the ride in style. With the windows down and loud Asian rock pounding around them, Ken closed his eyes only to be assailed by images of himself and Shu.

Vivid images. Filthy images.

Images that cut through him the way the sea lions cut through the waters off Ocean Beach, turning his blood to a steaming wave that ripped through his veins and pooled quickly in his cock and balls, hitting him with a maddening ache. The ache was so distracting, he rubbed himself in a vain attempt to ease it.

"What the *fuck* is up with this shit?"

Ken's eyes flew open and he snatched his hand away. "Sorry," he mumbled, his cheeks burning with embarrassment. He stared out the passenger side window.

"Man, if that is Jimmy Lau playing games, he's gonna regret it." Ken whipped his head around and saw Lok look repeatedly in the rear view mirror. Ken looked at the side mirror and saw another car just like theirs following them. He realized that he'd seen it behind

them when they left his building and that had been two hours ago.

The hair prickled at the back of Ken's neck. "Maybe we should head back to the *Gingbo*."

"Fuck no," Lok said, stepping on the gas to weave in and out of traffic. He looked in the rear view. "That's Jimmy. I just know it. Stupid prick. I'm going to kick his sorry ass back to his ancestors once we're done."

Lok headed towards the docks and toward the rear of a deserted warehouse undergoing demolition. A few twisted steel beams rose up out of piles of broken concrete, reaching toward the darkening sky like so many skeletal fingers. The air was damp and musty from the old wood and crumbled plaster of the fallen building. The screech of gulls and the distant blare of a freighter horn echoed in the distance.

And Ken Ohara's skin crawled.

Lok stopped the Mercedes at the warehouse's front gate. He mumbled to Ken that Wen was supposed to meet them there, but the small guardhouse was empty and only a couple of floodlights hanging from the chain link fence lit up the alleyway. He took off his glasses and shook his head.

"What's the fucking deal?" Lok muttered fiercely. He glared at the empty lot, his eyes flashing angrily. When he was like this, he looked a lot like his father. Both Yangs had the same attitude, the same dark expression that said 'don't piss me off'. Ken noted the similarities and reminded himself that his friend was his father's son, no matter how much of a dork he seemed sometimes.

"Let's check it out," Lok said. Tucking his own sunglasses away, Ken followed him out of the car and to the guardhouse. They looked inside. Wen was sprawled on the floor, bound and gagged with duct tape.

"What the hell?" Lok said. Ken darted around him and knelt beside the crumpled man.

"He's only unconscious," Ken said, feeling the weak pulse in Wen's neck. "I think he'll be okay if we get him to a d—"

Car doors slammed shut outside the guardhouse. Ken looked over

at Lok, then at the door. A group of three men sprinted forward from the car that had followed them.

“Shit!” Lok cried out in surprise when one grabbed him from behind. One of the attackers tried to pin him in a chokehold, but Lok grabbed the man by the wrist and pulled him into a side kick aimed straight for his jaw. The man crashed against the wall, blood gushing from his nose. Lok turned to take on another, but they lunged at him at once. One kicked Lok’s legs out from under him; two others slammed him into the doorframe. Two men grabbed him and pinned him against the wall.

“Son of a bitch—I think he broke my nose.” The bleeding attacker spat on the floor. “Stop struggling, dipshit—don’t make this harder than it has to be. Your ransom’s worthless if I have to kill you.”

Everything happened almost too fast for Ken to realize what was going on. While the kidnappers were still trying to get struggling Lok tied up, he noticed the handle of a knife sticking out of Wen’s jacket pocket. He instinctively grabbed the weapon, and suddenly everything changed around him. He wasn’t himself, and yet he was. Suddenly everything that happened next was like relieving another moment in time—A different time. It all felt familiar, like he’d done it a million times before, and he didn’t doubt that he had.

Ken sprang forward from his crouch near Wen like a tiger released from a caged prison. He cut the first man down with a ruthless strike to his throat, slashing open the jugular with amazing prowess. It wasn’t enough to satisfy his vengeance. While the man clutched at his torn throat, Ken swung around and stabbed him twice more—right in the groin. He shrieked and collapsed as Ken focused on another.

“Holy shit!” one man stepped away from Lok and headed for the door. Ken flung his knife and it stabbed the man clear through his skull. He fell to the floor, twitching.

“Jesus—Ken!” Lok stared at him in disbelief.

Ken panted, his lip curling into a wicked smile. He retrieved the

knife and turned to the last remaining kidnapper, the one with blood gushing from his nose. "You're next, asshole."

"Fuck this." The bleeding attacker reached into his pocket and pulled out a handgun. He fired two shots and Ken stumbled back into the wall.

The sudden pain pulled Ken out of his daze, and suddenly he was himself again. Leaving a trail of blood on the wall, he slid down to the floor, clutching at the wounds in his chest and belly.

Snapping out of his shock, Lok kicked the gun from the kidnapper's hand and knocked him unconscious. He dashed over to Ken. "Oh, my God—Ken!" he shouted.

"Wha—," Ken gasped. It hurt so fucking bad. "I—lok?" Everything went dark.

* * * *

Leigh and Meg sat on the beach in contented silence and watched the sun set together. The ocean breeze cooled as the last warm rays sank below the horizon line and Leigh held Meg close, enjoying everything about this moment. The feel of her gentle spirit was as beautiful as the vibrant gold and purple hues painting the sky, her inner strength as strong as the waves that crashing on the shoreline.

He kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you for being here with me," Leigh breathed softly. "I want this moment to last forever."

Meg leaned into his embrace and closed her eyes. "But we should go back."

"We don't have to," he said quietly.

Meg squeezed his hand. "Running away won't solve anything," she said. "And remember—you're not alone anymore. I'm here for you."

Leigh closed his eyes and touched the side of her face. "You don't know how wonderful those words sound," he whispered.

Meg smiled at him and kissed his forehead. She stood up and held out her hand. The left the darkened beach and headed down the freeway back towards San Francisco. Leigh pointed out a diner as

they passed through Monterey and they stopped for dinner.

* * * *

It was one of those ‘been there forever’ places that had its own steady clientele. It was the kind of place where the regulars paused their conversations long enough to check out who was coming onto their territory and pegging them as tourists or ‘one of us’.

The air brought to Meg’s mind an Everyman’s Surf & Turf, kind of place with the yummy scents of burgers and fries mixing with steamed crab, clam chowder and coffee and iced tea. A middle-aged waitress behind the counter smiled and pointed to a booth near the window. Meg gave Leigh’s arm a quick squeeze and excused herself to the ladies’ room.

She was nearly beside herself with nerves as she washed her hands in the cramped restroom of the diner. The past few hours had been like a dream come true, and she’d had quite a few romantic dreams featuring Leigh Gachelsing over the course of the past three years since she first met him, but now it was real. He was as attracted to her as she was to him and she was so pathetically inexperienced where men were concerned. She didn’t know what to do or how fast things should progress or if they should progress at all. She didn’t want to come off as a tramp (that would be a laugh, wouldn’t it?) but she didn’t want to be too reticent, or he’d think probably there was something wrong with her.

There was a knock on the door. “You almost done in there, Miss? I gotta go.”

Meg dried her hands and exited with a sheepish grin and a mumbled apology. She took a deep breath and walked down the short corridor back to the main area, stopping short when she saw Leigh gaping at the television behind the partition to her right.

She rushed to him and reached out across the table to grab his hand. Fear, dark and cold, was oozing out of him like some deadly primordial goo.

"Leigh, what is it?"

"It's Ken..." he pointed to the TV, his fingers tightening over hers.

"....the San Francisco University of Art student is en route to the hospital after suffering two gunshot wounds in a gang-related incident..." The reporter went on, and Leigh felt a sick sensation in the pit of his stomach.

Somehow Dao Kan Shu was involved, and he could sense it even this far from the city. The young man's life was in danger, and not just from the gunshot wounds..."We have to get to the hospital as fast as possible."

"But Kenny isn't in any gang. He's the sweetest kid I know," Meg said, blinking back tears. "He can't die..."

Leigh stood, grabbed her hand and headed out to her truck. "Let me drive."

"Are you sure?" He nodded and she handed him the keys.

Despite the tense situation, Leigh opened the door for her and Meg couldn't help but offer a half smile. He was so wonderful, almost too good to be true. She searched around for a new station on the radio, desperate for more information but there was none; at least, nothing more than they'd heard on the television.

"Maybe he got caught in the middle of some drive-by or something."

"Maybe. That has to be it," Leigh agreed, though his tone didn't back up the implied conviction of his words.

* * * *

In the distance, the last rays of sunlight skimmed over the bay and created thousands of shimmering ripples in the water's surface. Acres of rolling green hills spread out over the Lincoln Park Golf Course where a few golfers played out the last remaining moments of daylight. In one secluded corner, the lingering light streamed through the branches of the banyan trees as they moved overhead in the cool

breeze, dappling the leaf-strewn earth with golden patches. But the solitude of this area near the edge of the course was unnatural.

Over the years, golfers and caretakers alike had abandoned it out of fear for the strange presence that filled this corner. Here, the rustle of dried, uncollected leaves whispered in the wind like hollow voices for the dead buried deep within the soil.

Shu wandered through this forlorn area of Lincoln Park, his fingers outstretched to feel the last of the golden sunlight. The strength he'd taken from Kenichi faded; already it was enough to make the skin on his hands itch painfully with discomfort. The confrontation with that man back in the hotel taxed him more greatly than he would care to admit. But he welcomed the stinging pain—it washed away the disgust from his meeting with Gachelsing and it prepared him for a greater pain.

A century had passed since he'd set foot in this place with Toshiro's son Hayato, and things were quite different now. His fingertips touched the moss-covered trunks of unkempt trees instead of the stone markers that had once lined the ground in even, tight rows. Though long gone, he knew the way, his memories undimmed with the passage of time. In fact, they grew sharper, drawn out by forces that stirred around him

Long before the city of San Francisco constructed the golf course, this soil had belonged to a cemetery. Though unacknowledged, countless of bodies and ashes remained under the tediously manicured greens and Shu could almost detect the faint scent of incense in the air from when people visited the cemetery. It was engrained in the area, a remnant from a faded past. He paused between two trees and stared at a solitary red peony growing in the soil.

This was it. Here in this empty corner, he found the exact spot. Shu knelt on the ground and brushed away the leaves from around the flower. He ran his long fingers in the damp soil and his lips soundlessly mouthed the name of the man whose ashes lay underneath him. *Toshiro Itou.*

"You were supposed to be here at my side," Shu whispered. His last moments with Toshiro played out in his mind again; he could almost feel Toshiro go limp in his arms as he'd cradled his broken body close to his chest. But like the incense, the feeling was only a memory, engrained in his heart and no longer real. He clenched a handful of the soil in a tight angry fist.

"You would have been, if I could have done for you what that creature had done to me."

But Toshiro was gone. Or *was* he?

Kenichi Ohara satisfied him in a way he'd never expected to feel again. While they'd made love, he could feel his Toshiro within the art student. It had to be Toshiro. And yet he was drawn to this place, forced to face things from a painful past. There was a lingering doubt in his mind and heart that made him question Kenichi. Once he'd tried to find solace with another, but Hayato left him feeling emptier and more bitter than before. If Kenichi ended up being another empty pursuit—Shu squeezed the soil tighter until his hand ached as his heart did.

Shu let the dirt slip through his fingers. It trickled down to the earth the same way as the blood of the vampire who'd created him and left him to die.

"Kiyoshi..." Shu spat out his name with hatred.

* * * *

San Francisco, 1906

"Put the woman down."

The man jumped down from the ledge of a collapsed building, his lithe form landed with the grace and agility of cat. He moved forward with the same fluid movements, his softly rounded face forever frozen in a state of perpetual youth. His large eyes shimmered in the flickering light as the city burned around them, wide and fearful, but determined.

Shu pulled his teeth out of his latest victim's neck, and the woman

convulsed in his hands. "You..." his shocked expression quickly shifted to one of rage. He bared his bloodstained fangs at the vampire. "Oh, I've been looking for *you*."

Toshiro's blood still covered the front of his shirt and dried tears still streaked his cheeks, though hours had passed since then. Hours he'd spent hunting through the burning ruins of Chinatown for a trace of the creature who had pulled him from the brink of death in the theater thirty years ago. A surviving monk knew who he searched for—a vampire named Kiyoshi. The monk had choked out the name with his dying breath as Shu crushed his throat with his bare hands.

"I know," Kiyoshi whispered. "I followed the bodies. You don't have to kill so many to survive."

Shu snapped the woman's neck and flung her limp body to the uneven cobblestone street, damaged in the earthquake. "Really?" he looked at his hands. He could smell Toshiro's dried blood underneath that of all the others he'd slain to get Kiyoshi's attention. "What other useful bits of information could you have given me all those years ago?"

Kiyoshi took a step back. "I didn't mean for this to happen," Kiyoshi shook his head, his face knotted with dismay. "You weren't supposed to change."

"*How* did I change?" Shu's eyes flashed and his pulse pounded in his chest with growing fury.

"It was an accident," Kiyoshi rubbed his throat, absently feeling the scars left behind by Shu's bite.

His blood... Shu understood now—it was in the vampire's blood. Toshiro's life could have been spared with perhaps only a small drop. Shu's hands tightened into fists, his fingernails pierced his palms.

"I'm sorry," Kiyoshi whispered.

With a cry of fury and grief, Shu darted forward and grabbed Kiyoshi by the throat. He shoved the smaller man into the remains of a wall and punched his free hand straight into Kiyoshi's chest. He gripped the beating heart inside and ripped the organ out in his hand.

Shu let Kiyoshi's limp body slide to the ground and he stared at the bloody mass of tissue in his hands. He crushed it in his fist and watched as the blood leached out through his fingers and splattered onto the vampire's corpse at his feet.

* * * *

"Is he going to be all right, Jonny?" an older man held open the front door while another man dashed down the front steps.

"I don't know—the doctors say it's pretty bad," The young man shook his head, his round face pinched with worry as he shoved his cell phone into his jacket. "He was fucking shot point blank."

"Jesus," the old landlord said. He ran a hand through his thinning hair and jingled the keys. "Ken is such a good kid, how did he get mixed up with that crowd. Gangsters...drug dealers..." he shook his head.

Shu disappeared into the shadows, his hands clenched in fury. Moving with the speed and agility of his kind, he reached the hospital quickly on foot. The emergency room was crowded with police and news reporters gathering information on the shooting. Using his vampire's psychic control Shu slipped past them unnoticed and moved towards the intensive care unit. The smells of sickness, antiseptics and death filled the hospital, but the scent of Kenichi's blood pierced through it all...just as Toshiro's had the morning Shu had found his dying body. He clenched his jaw and followed the scent.

"Excuse me, sir," a nurse in blue scrubs blocked his path as he approached Ken's room. "Only immediate family members are allowed inside."

"I'm closer to him any blood relative could ever be," Shu whispered. "Now move aside." The woman opened her mouth to protest, but as she met his stare, words escaped her. She moved out of his way, unable to resist the suggestive power of his words or gaze.

Shu stepped inside and shut the door behind him before moving

to the bedside. The faint hum of the machines monitoring vital signs almost drowned out the sound of Ken's breathing. The young man was unconscious, his hold on life tenuous. In the dim fluorescent light, his skin appeared drained of color and cold to the touch when Shu caressed the side of his face.

"Kenichi, wake up," he called out softly. He leaned down and brushed his lips over Ken's forehead in a delicate kiss.

Not again! It couldn't happen to him again! He couldn't breath. He hurt all over he couldn't move! He felt so weak, so tired, so...alone...He didn't want to die again!

*Kenichi, wake up,
I'm trying! I want to!*

He couldn't miss this chance! He couldn't lose everything again!

Shu furrowed his brow and pushed away damp ringlets of hair away from Ken's closed eyelids. His fingertips danced across the cool, skin and down Ken's neck. The young man's pulse barely murmured in his veins, his breath came in small, shallow gasps.

Kenichi was dying.

"No," he whispered. "Not again." Toshiro's last moments replayed in Shu's mind. He touched Ken's clammy cheek with trembling fingers and inhaled sharply. Medical science could do nothing for Ken; death had already begun to claim this life. The doctors and nurses with all their medicines and technology were powerless. But this time, Shu wasn't.

He blew across Ken's lips. "Come to me," Shu said softly. He kissed him tenderly. "Taste my blood," he whispered, then drew his sharp thumbnail down the center of his tongue and bent to kiss Ken deeply.



Shu worked Ken's lips apart, the young man's faint breath filled his mouth and he pushed his tongue into the warm opening. Blood dripped from its tip and slid down Ken's throat. Ken stirred, weakly at first, but his pulse grew stronger with each drop of Shu's blood that made its way inside of him. His lips started to move, his tongue darted against Shu's and he swallowed hungrily.

He murmured and Shu pulled away. “Dao...” Ken’s eyelids fluttered and he tried to lift his hand. Shu touched a fingertip to Ken’s bloodstained lips.

“Shh...” he whispered. “Not too much. Not yet. Just accept this gift and return to me.”

“Don’t...go...” Ken’s words faded as he slipped out of consciousness once more. Shu pulled back the sheet and slit open the bandages on his waist and chest. The wounds were already showing signs of healing—his life was no longer in danger.

“But this can’t go unpunished, Kenichi,” Shu drew the blanket back over him and touched his cheek. “Those that did this to you will pay—*tonight*.”

Shu slipped out of the hospital room and walked down the hallway. The same nurse that had stopped him now detained two others, a man and a woman who both turned to meet his gaze; Gachelsing and Silivasi.

“Hey!” Gachelsing called out after him. The man started after him, but Shu disappeared into the crowded emergency room. They weren’t worth his bother now, not when Kenichi had to be avenged.

CHAPTER TEN

“Do you know him?” Meg asked when the nurse they’d been talking to scurried back to her duties.

“I know enough to hate him on sight.”

Meg let go of Leigh’s hand. The anger coming through him was almost too much to bear. “He’s the one from the gallery,” she said quietly. “He was the customer Guy Masuda called me over to meet. He stole the knife from my sculpture.”

Leigh’s azure eyes grew wide, but before he could say anything, Ken Ohara’s sister Cecilia came rushing over and threw herself into Meg’s arms. “Kenny is stable, but my parents are arguing with the other doctors and each other over who should do the surgery.” She pulled back and turned her tear-streaked face to Meg. “Please talk to them. You’ll make them listen to reason the way you did about Kenny and art school.”

Meg looked at Leigh, then back to CeCe Ohara. “But honey, I know art, I don’t know anything about medicine. Your parents are doctors—“

“But they’re being stupid! It doesn’t matter who operates or where, they need to do it now!” She tugged on Meg’s hand and gestured to the glass-fronted waiting room at the end of the corridor. “Please.”

They were halfway down the hall when Ken’s doctor was paged. “*Dr Saunders, Trauma One-STAT!*”

Meg winced from the force of CeCe Ohara’s grip. “That’s where

Kenny is!”

Mr. and Mrs. Ohara ran from the waiting room behind the doctor and CeCe followed. Meg and Leigh watched impotently as the medical staff headed towards the room where Ken lay fighting for his life.

“Christ,” Leigh rubbed his forehead and leaned against the cold wall. Did that son of a bitch do something to Ken? Back in the hotel, Shu had all but threatened both Ken and Meg. Leigh pushed away from the wall and looked down the long hallway towards the trauma ward.

Doctors and nurses brushed past him, the chaos of the environment started to get to him. Most people hated hospitals, but Leigh loathed them. There were so many terrible memories entrenched in the walls, voices of men and women who had suffered and died here...and now Ken might be among them.

Meg stood a bit away from him, and he frowned. Without meaning too, he'd pushed her away. He'd barely been able to control his anger when he saw Shu, and the intensity of his emotions must have overwhelmed her. He reached out to her and pulled her close.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to,” Leigh wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace. “Come on, we're not just going to stand here and wait.”

They went down the hallway, only a few minutes behind Ken's family. CeCe was pressed up to the large glass window facing the trauma ward where Ken lay, hooked up to more machines than Leigh could count.

* * * * *

“Don't go. Don't leave me again. Dao, please...” Ken could barely hear the sound of his own voice through the rush in his head. It was like when he went surfing and he got caught in a big wave, and the water roared over him, filling his ears.

But it wasn't water. It was the blood gushing through his veins...

The rushing died down or his hearing became clearer, he wasn't

sure what, but he could hear things; beeping and voices and footsteps and the clatter of metal. And he could feel. He felt everything. The heat of a lamp on his face, the scratchiness of the sheet and bandages. He even felt the stickiness of the adhesive tape on his skin. And the itching. Shit! The itching under the bandages was hellish—

He tore at the dressing, scratched at the wound.

"No. Don't do that, be still! Frank! Call Saunders STAT!"

"Fuck you," Ken muttered. He pulled at the bandages, feeling his body hair pulled out by the roots from his chest.

Someone grabbed his hands; he slapped them away.

"Get the restraints!"

Ken opened his eyes. It was so fucking bright! And everything was so clear. He blinked, swiped at his face, thinking some type of magnifying glass was near. He shoved away the nurse trying to hold him down and pulled the bandages the rest of the way off. It itched so fucking bad! He dug at the wounds, felt the source of the trouble. Metal, hard, searing him, he dug his fingers into the skin. It felt like his skin was closing around his fingers. He dug the thing out...bullets. Now he remembered.

"Sedate him!"

He sat up, or tried to. A male nurse grabbed him a doctor too. "Shit!" they pricked him with a needle. He felt himself falling...falling into a dark hole.

No! Not again. He heard the house crumbling, felt the staircase pitch. "Dao! Dao..."

* * * *

"What's happening?" CeCe asked, her voice rising in a panic. "Why is he ripping at his bandages like that?"

Leigh let go of Meg so she could comfort the young woman. "It's okay, the doctors know what they're doing," Meg said, giving CeCe a hug. Leigh stepped up to the window and looked past his own worried expression reflected on the glass.

The shock of seeing Ken reach into the wounds to dig out the bullets for himself still hadn't gone away. Leigh pressed his hand to the glass and swallowed, his mouth dry.

The doctors buzzed around Ken in a flurry. He was delirious almost, calling for someone whose name Leigh couldn't make out.. The nurse had to keep holding him down to stop Ken from trying to sit up. Only a small trickle of blood ran down the wound in his chest, and the one in his belly looked pink, like fresh skin had already grown over where the bullet had pierced him. Like it had already *healed*.

"That's impossible," Leigh whispered. He pressed his hand to the glass in alarm. A strange aura poured out of Ken, carrying along with a mixture of emotions and blurred memories that slammed against Leigh's soul. One thought only raced through his mind as he stared at the strange scene unfolding in front of his eyes.

That's not Ken.

He looked over at Meg, his eyes wide. Did she feel it, too?

Meg met Leigh's concerned stare and she rubbed her hand across Cecilia Ohara's back. "It's going to be all right. Your parents are talking to the doctor."

Meg looked back through the glass. Something was wrong with all this, and it wasn't just the confusion she'd sensed in Leigh that made her feel this way. She had the distinct feeling that Kenny had been missing someone terribly, someone he loved very much. His sadness and sense of being alone had been brief, but had hit her hard because she knew that very feeling intimately.

Inside the room, each member of the medical staff fell silent as they noticed Ken's wounds—or by now, the absence of them. They exclaimed to each other and smacked the side of the machines that monitored Ken's vital signs, like the equipment might be having the same trick played on it as it was on their eyes.

Leigh stared in unnerved disbelief, still trying to understand the

confusing aura surrounding Ken.

Ken suddenly looked directly at him, and Leigh felt the floor buckle underneath his feet. A misty edge crept into his vision and he felt the world shift around him. For a moment he was lying in the hospital bed with Ken, struggling against the restraining grip of the nurse and at the same time, he was himself—still staring through the glass. It was the same disembodied feeling he'd had in the shower earlier in the afternoon...

"Oh, my God," Leigh gasped and stumbled away from the window. The man he'd shared the experience with had been Ken—he was sure of it. Everything Ken felt now, so did he. The doctor jabbing his arm with a needle, the brawny male nurse's hands pressing into his shoulders. The same tug at his heart as a name formed on his lips.

"Dao," both Ken and Leigh whispered.

The door to the trauma room opened and Dr. Saunders stepped out, severing the bond between the two men. Still prepped for surgery, she tugged the cloth mask off her face and her skin paled with shock. She shook her head in amazement.

"Ken Ohara is...fine," Dr. Saunders sounded like she could barely believe the words she spoke.

"You're crazy!" CeCe Ohara shouted before running to her parents, who were coming out of the room with another doctor. They too looked shocked.

"He's going to be fine," Dr. Saunders muttered again, walking away towards the nurse's station. She pulled off the papery gown she wore over her scrubs and scratched her head as nurses crowded around and a reporter tried to push his way through to speak with her.

"He's *finé*?" Meg said as her eyes took in the things discarded as the doctors worked on Ken when he was brought in a short time ago. Blood-soaked dressings still littered the floor, as did Ken's clothing that had been cut off him. Blood dotted the shining tile floor like glistening drops of glossy red acrylic on a giant palette.

"How can he be fine..?." her voice faded as Ken's parents and the other doctor walked past. The Oharas were all crying, and Cecilia was fingering the small silver cross pendant she wore around her neck. Meg listened to the doctor and reached out to grab Leigh's hand as the physician's unbelievable words drifted to them.

"We'll move him to another room ASAP and keep him for observation overnight and to do some tests, of course." The doctor ran his hand through his close-cropped blond hair. "You're sure neither of you has ever come across anything like this in your practices..."

"I can assure you, we'd have remembered," Ken's father said dryly.

Nurses came and ushered Meg and Leigh out of the way while the male nurse and two aids came and transferred Ken to a gurney to transport him to another floor.

Meg grabbed Leigh's hand and held on tight. "What the hell just happened?" She looked back to the trauma room where the housekeeping staff began to clean the moment the unconscious Ken was wheeled out. "No one can be ready to go home after being shot and losing that much blood."

"I don't know," Leigh mumbled. He blinked, trying to clear the last cloudy traces of Ken's essence from his mind, and held on to Meg's hand. Her presence brought him right back to himself again, anchoring him to his own body, his own soul.

"Ken should have died," he said quietly as they walked away from the trauma ward and skirted past the chaos in the emergency room. "I feel awful saying that, but he was shot—twice—and at close range. No one human could have survived that..."

Leigh paused and looked over his shoulder as a shiver ran down his spine. "Shu," he said, his voice shaking a little as the anger welled up inside him again. Last night in the club, and then today in the bar, he'd felt a menacing power in the man he couldn't place.

"Did he do something to Ken?"

"Do something?" Meg asked as they moved out of the way of

another emergency case being wheeled in. They drifted back towards the waiting rooms. "Do you mean did he hurt Kenny, or—"

"Who in the *hell* is that and what is he doing to my son?"

Meg looked at Leigh when the deep voice of Ken's father boomed out from the smaller, more private consultation room. Meg shook her head as if to say don't intrude, but Leigh pulled her forward and peeked through the partially opened door. The Oharas and one of the doctors were rewinding and watching a feed from a security camera mounted in the hall that faced the room Ken had been treated in.

The man Shu was seen going in and though the angle wasn't clear, once he stepped into the treatment room it was easy enough to make out the way he tenderly caressed Ken like a lover, the way he leaned down and kissed him full on the mouth.

Leigh's shock was so great that its force hit Meg hard enough to rock her on her feet and she gasped, drawing the attention of Ken's mother who glared at them.

"What do you want?" she snapped.

Cecelia Ohara placed her hand on her mother's tense shoulder. "They're Ken-chan's teachers from the university."

Mrs. Ohara muttered something. Cecelia seemed embarrassed and came to the door.

"We didn't mean to intrude," Leigh said. "We just wanted to ask that you tell Ken we were here and that if we can do anything for him, he can call on Miss Silivasi anytime."

CeCe smiled. "I will. Thank you." She nodded, then closed the door.

Leigh stepped back, sick to his stomach. He tried to swallow, but his mouth was so damn dry. Without Meg there to support him, emotionally and physically, he probably would have thrown up.

The headache he'd been struggling with over the past two days flared up vengefully, like it had been gathering its strength during the brief reprieve. Wincing from the pain, his stomach lurching, Leigh backed into the wall across from the consultation room.

"Leigh?" Meg asked worriedly. She pressed her hand to the side

of his face.

“That *bastard*,” his voice cracked. “What kind of sick game is this?” Thoughts raced across his mind in a confused jumble. He caught glimpses of that dream from last night, could almost taste the come on his lips again. The knife from Meg’s sculpture, the murdered woman who kept whispering *Poisoned Dragon*, those disturbing moments of shared experiences with Ken—somehow, all these things were related.

Along with his own gory murder.

His chest tightened—he couldn’t breathe. The knife punched through him and pierced his heart, rupturing the organ. Blood gushed from his chest, he tried to scream...

“Leigh!”

His eyes flew open. He wasn’t even sure when he’d closed them or how he’d almost fallen back under that same horrible vision’s hold. Meg clutched one of his hands and held the side of his face, her fingers startlingly warm against his suddenly cold skin. Her soft, round lips trembled with worry.

“You’re scaring me,” she whispered.

“It’s not real,” Leigh said shakily. He touched the front of his shirt, feeling for his heart as it still beat safely in his chest.

“I didn’t tell you what happened in the hotel today,” he said after a moment. “I saw a photograph from the mid-nineteenth century. Shu was in it. And so was Ken.”

Meg’s eyes widened and Leigh felt his stomach lurch again. “You have to believe me,” he said urgently. “I didn’t just see it—I *felt* it. Before Shu showed up and...” he paused, unable to finish. What happened with Shu was too sickening to even try to put into words, and his hands started shaking with anger...with *hate*.

“Let’s go home,” Meg said quietly.

* * * * *

“I’m telling you, the kid was a fucking maniac!” the man shouted into

the phone. "He deserved to get shot, Ling." He held a handkerchief to soak the blood from his broken nose as he rested his other arm against the phone booth's hooded top.

"You weren't supposed to use guns, Brian," said the man on the other end of the line.

"Hey, I didn't have a choice!" A police siren sounded in the distance, and Brian cursed. "Look, I'm getting the hell out of Chinatown." He slammed the receiver into the cradle hard enough to make the coins in the depository jingle.

He crossed the street and hopped into the black Mercedes parked in front of a shop for souvenirs and other trinkets for tourists. As he started the engine, something flashed in the orange glow of the streetlights. From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of the knife's edge a moment before he felt its sharpness press into his throat. "Fuck!" he leaned into the seat, trying to back away from the deadly blade.

"Who the hell are you?"

The man's voice slithered out of the shadows in the backseat. "I'm the Poisoned Dragon."

"Oh, please," Brian tried to sound cocky, but the color drained from his face and his heart skipped a beat. The irregular pattern showed on the veins bulging in his forehead and neck. The Poisoned Dragon...there were rumors that said he was a feared assassin who worked for Yang and the Wongs. A man who killed without pity or remorse...and who couldn't be killed himself. Fucking rumors—all of it.

Brian reached for the gun concealed in his coat and the knife pressed against him. It burned, a trickle of blood spilled from the spot where the razor sharp edge rested.

"You're fond of that weapon, aren't you," the Poisoned Dragon whispered in his ear. "You fancy yourself quite a master with it, don't you? But you'd be dead before you could even draw it."

Brian made a sound somewhere between a grunt and a whimper. His eyes darted from his hand on the gun to the empty reflection in

the review mirror.

Dao Kan Shu leaned forward, his face pulled up alongside the man's. His freehand snaked around the car seat and touched the front of the man's shirt. "You were so close when you shot him...some of his blood splattered on your shirt."

Brian jumped. "Look...business is business, you know how it is. Yang's kid was only going to be held for ransom."

"I don't care what your plans with Yang's child were," Shu said.

"It wasn't even me," Brian blurted out. "I just work for the men who wanted it—the Wah Chings."

"Where are these men?" Shu asked.

"They're at a wedding dinner at *The Golden Lotus* on Washington."

Shu hissed under his breath. That was the very wedding reception Yang had asked him to 'visit'. Back in his loft, he'd had little interest in the job, but now it more than warranted his attention. And he would enjoy himself.

He pressed the edge of the knife against Brian's throat, and a trickle of blood mixed with the nervous sweat dripping down his skin. "Drive," Shu said into the man's ear.

Brian slammed his foot on the gas pedal and they sped off. Shu leaned forward in the backseat, his eyes fixed on the road, but achingly conscious of the smell of Kenichi's blood on the front of Brian's shirt.

The restaurant wasn't far and they reached it quickly. The car screeched to a halt in front of the restaurant and Brian sat back panting. "I don't have anything more to do with this—let me go."

Shu pulled the knife away and grabbed a handful of Brian's hair. "Not quite yet." He bared his teeth and Brian screamed as he tried to pull away.

Two men stepped out of the restaurant's doorway, their hands instinctively reaching for the guns tucked in their jackets. They were the sentries protecting the establishment's entrance, and they moved

with the self-assured movements of hired killers who enjoyed looking for trouble. One of them, a tall thin man with black dreadlocks, narrowed his eyes at the Mercedes but couldn't see past the deep tint on the windows. "What the hell's going on?" he said. "I thought Mr. Ching said we weren't expecting any more guests."

"He's not." The other man grunted and stepped forward, dropping the cigarette he'd been smoking. He spat on the pavement and adjusted his belt over his wide belly. The passenger door opened and Brian lurched out of the car.

"Dammit, asshole, Mr. Ching isn't happy with the shit you pulled tonight," the heavy-set bodyguard growled and pulled out a semi-automatic pistol from the harness strapped around his wide chest. "Get out of here before I blow your head off."

Brian's mouth flopped open a few times. "Help me—!" Brian croaked out. He stumbled forward into the light that spilled out of the restaurant's front door. Blood spurted through a gaping hole in the side of his neck and covered the front of his gray shirt.

"*What the fuck?*" the bodyguard stepped back in shock.

Brian suddenly jerked forward. A knife exploded through his chest, showering the two guards in a spray of blood. Shu stepped out from behind him, yanking the knife out through the man's back and tearing through his spinal column in the process with a sickening ripping sound. Brian collapsed to the pavement and Shu stepped on his twitching body as he moved forward.

Stunned, the two bodyguards backed away from him. The one with the dreadlocks got his wits about him first and raised his gun.

"Shit!" he cried. "Take out the fucker!"

Shu snorted and whipped the knife around in one hand. He hurled it straight at the hit man's right eye, brain tissue splattering out of the back of his head as the blade pierced through the skull. Shu raised his other arm, aiming Brian's gun at the remaining guard. Before the first body even hit the floor, Shu fired a bullet into his head.

"For my sweet Kenichi," he laughed.

He stepped over the dead bodies and paused to retrieve the knife. He held the bloody weapon up to the light, his chest rising and falling as his breath quickened. The sight and smell of the blood on the blade excited him...he'd almost forgotten how *good* it felt to take another's life in vengeance, to bathe in their blood, to taste it, to claim it.

The sounds of the men's cries and the gunshots had created a panic. Guests screamed and raced around him, while members of the mob jumped out of their seats and shoved tables out of their way. They reached into their pockets to pull out guns, but their movements were too slow. Shu cut them down with more precisely aimed shots to their heads. He ignored the guests that raced around him in a chaotic rush to the exit and tried to flee in a panic, his focus only on his prey—the syndicate leader himself.

Shu moved through the chaos in a straight line for the back of the restaurant where Ching sat, arrogantly calm. He wouldn't be chased away by one lone assassin. Something he would soon regret.

Anyone who crossed his path, Shu cut down with a quick slash of his knife, laughing, finding more pleasure with each kill. A large bodyguard tried to block his path, and Shu grabbed him. He snapped his neck and the man's head flopped forward. Taking him by the collar of his jacket, Shu lifted him off the floor with no effort, his strength enhanced by the lust for blood. He used the man's body as a shield when the other enforcers finally moved into action.

"Kill him!" Ching shouted running a hand over his clean-shaven head, the first sting of panic edging into his voice. Shu emptied his gun into the large overhanging chandelier, plunging the restaurant in darkness.

"Fuck!" The remaining guards fired blindly, cutting down some of their own men and innocent guests at the same time. The faint light that crept in through the tinted glass was enough for Shu to see by. He hurled the bullet-riddled body towards the last of the enforcers.

In three quick steps, Shu was at the table. He overturned it; glass and silver clattered onto the blood soaked floor. Shu laughed as

Ching tried to scramble away, slipping on the blood and muttering panicked curses. His voice was hoarse with fear.

Shu grabbed Ching by the throat and pinned him to the seat. With a flash of his razor-sharp teeth, he bit down into the jugular and tore at the man's flesh. Ching gurgled uselessly and struggled in vain to push him away. His strength was no match for Shu's and in a moment, he bled to death.

Satisfied, Shu snapped the tendons and ligaments in Ching's neck as he pulled away. He flung the body across the room and wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"All for you, Kenichi." He laughed and stepped through the carnage towards the exit.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

To Meg, the few hours spent at the beach seemed like nothing more than a pleasant dream after the incidents at the hospital. She was thrilled and relieved that Kenny Ohara was going to recover fully, but it was quite obvious that such a miracle came with a steep price.

A price that would surely be collected by the menacing Mr. Shu.

Meg looked over to Leigh as she pulled into the car port of their building in SoMa. “You still look shaken,” she said as she turned off the ignition. She paused and ran her hand through her hair. “This is going to sound like something *Bunica* would want to ground me for if she were here, but I want you to stay at my place tonight. Not in *that* way...I mean, you still look shaky from the hospital and I don’t think you should be alone just yet. You don’t have to, of course. I just thought...”

Leigh had been dreading the idea of going up to his apartment and spending what was left of the night alone. He stared down at his hands for a second and then turned to Meg, who sat in the driver’s seat beside him.

He told himself he didn’t want to burden her with this—with him. But he’d never felt this close to anyone before, and as he stared into her deep virid eyes so full of concern and kindness, he knew he *needed* her. And after everything she’d seen and he’d told her, she was still sitting here with him.

“I don’t want to be a bother...” his words trailed off and he sat there for a moment, debating what to tell her. In his heart, Leigh

knew that if he said *no*, he'd be lying to her and himself. And he didn't want to be alone anymore. "But I would like that," he said gratefully. "A lot."

"Great." Meg smiled and patted Leigh's hand before getting out of the truck.

* * * *

She went ahead to her own apartment while Leigh moved on to his place to pick up a few things.

She had to make a conscious effort to silence the nagging remembrance of her grandmother's voice that hounded her as she took a pillow and blanket from her room and piled them on a chair near the sofa.

Magda! How many times I got to tell you. Men is trouble, especially men who want to "date you" and not marry you first. You see where that got your mamma—alone and pregnant with you. I love you and I loved her even after she ran off with other no-good, but I don't want to see you hurt, too.

"I won't be, *Bunica*," Meg whispered. "I know what I'm doing."

* * * *

In his apartment, Leigh went to the bedroom and grabbed a change of clothes. He glanced at the bathroom door, still ajar from this afternoon. God, he needed a shower to help wash away the bad feelings that still clung to him like a layer of filth. But he hesitated to stay here much longer, the whole apartment felt...contaminated somehow. Without another moment's delay, he took his clothes and headed for Meg's.

The door was unlocked and he stepped inside, immediately sighing with contentment at the warmth that radiated from the place. Meg was throwing another thick blanket on the couch, making a bed for him.

“Would be all right if I...uh...took a shower?” he asked hesitantly.

Meg smiled. “Sure. She pointed to the bedroom door. “I imagine it’s pretty much the same set-up as at your place. Are you hungry? I know it’s getting late, but I have a frozen pizza in the fridge. It’s one of those pricey jobs with the assorted toppings and the fluffy cheese-stuffed crust.”

“We never did get a chance to finish our dinner, did we?” Leigh said with a different kind of sigh this time—a disappointed one. “I’m sorry about that. Maybe after things get straightened out, we could give it another try.” He wanted to add a bit about staying in Monterey for an entire weekend, just soaking in the beauty of the area...and each other. “For now, I’ll take you up on the pizza,” he flashed her a quick smile.. *And hopefully, you’ll take me up on the trip idea later. If I don’t make an ass of myself, that is.*

Meg’s apartment was set up almost exactly like his, only opposite. The kitchenette was on his left, the bathroom and bedroom down the short hall on his right. While Meg got started on their makeshift dinner, he showered and dressed.

When Leigh came out of the bathroom, Meg was busying herself with emptying the ice cube tray and pouring them glasses of soda. She sat on the stool closest to the window and looked at Leigh as he sat opposite.

Meg looked at the stove timer. “I think I’ll catch a quick shower, too. Would you take that out when the timer buzzes?”

“Sure.”

* * * * *

Meg washed quickly and slipped on an oversized denim shirt and a pair of loose shorts. She towed her hair dry and combed through it with her fingers as she went back to the kitchen. Leigh was putting the pizza on the hot pad on the end of the table.

She sat opposite him and watched him slice the pizza and lift it to their plates. She told herself it was silly to imagine him being here

often and sharing dinner with her and...no, she didn't need to think about sharing anything more.

Meg seemed a little quiet over dinner. Not that Leigh was much better for conversation. He didn't want to bring up what had happened in the hospital with Ken, not now. After showering and sharing this meal with her, most of his unease had vanished. An ill feeling still nagged at him in the back of his mind, but with Meg it was easy to block it out. Her apartment was like a sanctuary. In it—with her—he found comfort and a greater sense of peace than he could remember having...not since before his father died. He didn't want to ruin that.

But behind the warm smile Meg gave him so readily throughout the evening, he sensed a little sadness from her. He reached across the table and touched her hand. "Is something wrong?"

"No, not really. It's just been a weird day what with the sculpture and that man and Kenny." She smiled, her fingers curling around Leigh's. "I think I'd like to forget all that for right now. It's so peaceful here with you..." She lowered her gaze. "That sounds so highschool junior..."

"No, it sounds..." Leigh paused and reached out to brush some loose strands away from her face. Meg looked up and his fingers stayed on her cheek. "I think you can read my mind," he said softly.

Impulsively, he brought the back of her hand to his lips and kissed it. There was no other way to express how he felt at that moment. He gave her hand another squeeze and by God—he thought he saw her start to blush. A bit of her childhood flashed through his mind as he held her hand. He saw her grandmother, a loving but strict woman who'd done her best to protect the shy little girl hiding behind her long, multi-colored skirts. In some ways, Meg was still that little girl.

Leigh gently put her hand on the table. "I'm sorry," he apologized for both stealing that glimpse into her past and for the kiss. The last thing he wanted to do was give her the impression he wanted to take advantage of her. "I didn't mean anything by that," he softly.

He left the table and carried their plates and used napkins away to the small kitchen. He tossed them in the garbage and noticed a bottle of wine on the counter with a card from Masuda's gallery. Leigh took two glasses from the cabinet over the sink and returned to the table with the wine in hand. "We should toast your show," he said.

"Sure." Meg's smile faded a bit. Leigh's hand touched hers as he gave her the glass of wine.

"Tell me what's bothering you, please."

She shook her head. "It's not important." She stood and picked up the bottle of wine. "Let's sit in the living room." Meg sat on one end of the flowered sofa, leaning back against the pillow and blanket she'd brought out for Leigh. She kicked off her sneakers, then tucked her legs up.

She sipped the Bordeaux and grinned. "So, colleague of mystery, why don't you tell me about yourself?"

Leigh stared at the wine in his glass as he swirled it around, avoiding her eyes. "There's not much to say," he said after a moment.

After that glimpse into her past, he felt he owed it to her to explain something about himself, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. What could he say? That through out his childhood people—including himself—thought he was 'disturbed'? That even now he doubted his sanity and sometimes couldn't bring himself to sleep at night because of the nightmares?

Leigh knew in his heart that he should be able to share anything with her. She offered him nothing but kindness and understanding, but even she would have her limits. There was only so much she could take before his weirdness pushed her away and the thought of losing her terrified him.

He looked back at her. "I'm sorry," Leigh finished off the glass of wine. "Aside from my painting, I play a little guitar and write a little. . . . I'm a really boring guy." He gave her a half-smile. "Not at all like you."

Meg refilled his glass. She could feel the cold wall of detachment

beginning to surround him, and she decided to leave her curiosity by the wayside. Who the hell was she to pry, anyway? This was the first they'd ever spent time together outside of the university and she didn't want to ruin it.

"I've heard you play a few times when you have your window open. It was wonderful. There was so much emotion in the music, just as there is in your painting." He seemed more than a little embarrassed, so she let that subject drop as well and finished her drink.

"It's getting kind of late. I suppose we should get some sleep if we're going to make it to work on time." She got up and carried her empty glass to the sink. She sensed Leigh's approach before he slipped up beside her and placed his own glass in the sink.

"If you're uncomfortable with my being here, I'll go back to my place."

Meg looked into his blue eyes; a hint of fear was as visible in them. "It's all right, really. I'll be happy to take the couch if you like."

Leigh shook his head, and Meg lost herself in the beauty of the man. He had such wonderful planes to his face, the high cheekbones, the soft yet masculine brow, the naturally streaked hair that fell and spiked in the most perfect ways to accent his facial structure.

Meg reached over to click on the range top light. "I'll leave this on for you so you aren't disoriented in the dark if you wake during the night."

"Thanks." He gave her a small smile and started to say something else. He even leaned a little forward like he might almost kiss her again, and Meg's breath caught in her chest. But at the last second he turned away, his lips pressed tightly together.

"Goodnight," Leigh said.

He left the kitchenette and Meg stared after him. Closing her eyes, she tried to ignore the hurt twinge in her heart. She walked out and turned off all the other lights in the room as he settled on the couch.

"Goodnight," Meg whispered.

She made her way down the short hall, her bare feet padding

softly on the carpeted floor.

* * * *

Leigh sat on the edge of the couch and listened until he heard the faint click as she closed her bedroom door. He sighed and leaned back into the thick cushions, though he already knew he wouldn't be able to fall asleep.

"Meg," he said quietly. "I wish I could tell you everything." He wrapped himself in the thick blanket and rested his head on the pillow. Her delicate scent lingered on the fabric, and he inhaled deeply. "I wish I were holding you now."

* * * *

The nurse at the desk across from Ken's room rushed in the moment she saw him grabbing at the IV in his arm and ripping the monitor wires from his chest. "Mr. Ohara, please, stop! Lie back down. The doctors need you to stay here overnight!"

"I don't need to fucking be here, and I won't stay. I'm over eighteen. I can leave when I want."

Another nurse ran in and was soon followed by the resident on call.

"Mr. Ohara, listen to reason," the young physician said. "It's after one a.m. Wait until morning when your parents come for you."

Ken threw the wires off to the side. "Fuck, no. Where are my clothes?"

"They had to be cut away," a nurse said.

Ken spied a familiar black and blue duffle bag on a chair across the room. He sat up, fixed the nurses and doctor with a venomous stare. "Get out and close the door."

The staff hesitated and looked at one another.

Ken leapt from the bed, snatching the telephone from the nightstand as he did so. He held it as if to throw it at them.

“Get the fuck out now!”

Ken threw on his clothes, then rushed from the hospital as if he were a prisoner breaking out of Alcatraz. Once outside, he stopped to get his bearings then started walking back towards Chinatown.

* * * *

On the far end of the city, Shu also made his way through the darkened streets on foot.

He moved silently through the shadows, the only figure lurking in the empty, litter-strewn alleys running towards the edge of Chinatown. The moon and what few stars would have been visible through the light pollution were blotted out by thick clouds that threatened to release a heavy rain over the bayside. The fall night was cold, but his blood boiled in his veins, his heart still raced from the excitement of the kill and the lust for blood.

He'd enjoyed himself, not for the sake of doing Yang's work, but for seeking vengeance. The men who had almost taken Ken's life had paid the price for what they'd done with their own blood. Shu laughed and the sound echoed in the abandoned alleyway.

The *Poisoned Dragon* loomed into view as he stepped on to the main street. The club was still open and even at this hour, a few people milled about outside waiting to be admitted. Someone moved around the side of the building, and Shu inhaled sharply with surprise as he approached.

“Kenichi.”

The young man paused at the side entrance and turned around to face him. Shu was already at his side, breathing into Ken's ear.

“You've already recovered,” he whispered, his voice unable to mask his surprise...or his pleasure. He brushed his lips on side of Ken's neck in a fleeting kiss. “And I've already seen to those who've hurt you.”

The feel of his lips made Ken shiver. He turned, looked into Shu's

intense dark eyes and felt himself drifting into that odd state of being outside himself. A cool breeze swept over them and scent of blood assailed Ken's nose.

He gave a start as the drifting of his mind stopped and he returned to the here and now. He took a step back, his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his denim jacket. "What did you do to me?" His gaze swept down to take in the blood showing on the bit of Shu's shirt that was visible at the juncture of the lapels of his leather blazer. "What the fuck are you? What did you do tonight?"

Shu laughed and opened his jacket, fully exposing the crimson stains on the white silk of his shirt. He traced the front of the material, lifting the still tacky blood on his fingertips. He touched them to his tongue, smiling at the delicious coppery taste until Ken's expression changed to one of horror.

"What did I do tonight?" Shu's face darkened and he stepped towards the younger man.

"I've given you the gift of life," he said softly. "I've saved yours, and I've taken others—for *you*."

Ken backed into the side of the building. Shu put up his hand against the wall and leaned close over Ken. His frown deepened. "Are you balking at my gift?"

He stared into Kenichi's brown eyes, glad at least that the younger man did not avert his gaze. He pushed with his mind wanting to know what thoughts were whirring inside that attractive head. He couldn't, certainly not with the ease he had with that bastard Gachelsing, who fancied himself an artist.

Shu reached out and stroked Ken's cheek with his bloodstained hand, leaving a streak of red. He leaned in closer still, his lower body brushing Ken's.

What are you thinking, Kenichi?

The words rang in Ken's ears, though Shu's lips never moved from that half smirk of his. He touched his hand to the front of his T-shirt, feeling the scabbed-over skin where the bullet holes had been.

"Tell me it's a dream," he said quietly.

"But it's not," Shu breathed.

He closed his mouth over Ken's and devoured his lips. He kissed him almost angrily at first, pressing into the soft skin with bruising force because he loathed the uncertain words that spilled out from them. Inside his mouth, his teeth lengthened instinctually, the sharp fangs tense and eager to tear through the tender flesh. Shu bit down.

The sharp tips punctured Ken's lower lip, but Shu restrained the force of his bite. Shu pulled away a fraction of an inch and two droplets of blood beaded from the needletip-sized holes in the pink flesh. His tongue darted out, lapping at the droplets and healing the small wounds as quickly as he'd made them. The sweet metallic flavor filled his mouth, a sweet taste distinctly Ken's and at the same moment, distinctly Toshiro's.

He's in you somewhere. Shu grabbed the sides of Ken's head. He caressed the soft cheeks, cold to the touch from the evening air, and ran his fingers through Ken's hair. *My Toshiro...come to me.*

"Dreams vanish in the morning light." Shu slid one hand down to Ken's chest. His fingers pressed into the healed bullet wounds, his sharp nails digging into the cotton of Ken's T-shirt. "But I'll always be there when you wake," Shu whispered, his dark eyes piercing into Ken's.

My Toshiro...come to me.

Ken licked his dry lips. The faint taste of blood lingered upon his tongue. That feeling overcame him again, but this time he didn't try to clear it from his mind...he couldn't. He reached out, grabbed Shu's wrist and pressed the older man's hand more firmly against himself while leaning forward.

The world blurred out of focus and the security light on the fence across the alley seemed to flicker like a flame. The ground took on a wet sheen like after a rain and Ken thought he heard a steady cllop of horses' hooves against cobblestones.

He closed his eyes, felt his head spin. He rested his forehead

against Shu's chin. Cantonese words spilled effortlessly from his lips. "Let's go home."

Shu drank in that rich voice as it spoke in his native tongue. Its perfect timbre washed over his senses, the flowing words rich and beautifully pronounced in a voice he'd missed hearing for far too long. It was beautiful, and in the heat of passion, it was lovelier still. His body reacted and Shu gasped. Blood rushed through him and the pressure built up below his abdomen in an aching throb.

"Let's." Shu sighed softly and smiled. "You've had a trying day." He caressed Ken's cheek and tilted his head down so that his lips touched the other man's brow. He trailed them down the bridge of Ken's nose and tugged at the corners of his mouth with encouraging kisses.

"Come," he murmured against Ken's lips. Shu stepped back.

Ken still clutched at Shu's wrist as if hesitant to follow, but even more hesitant to let him go. Shu pulled him away from the wall, his other hand wrapping itself around the back of Ken's neck.

"I'll answer all your questions, Kenichi...if you're strong enough to take it."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Trance music still pumped through the *Poisoned Dragon*. A handful of men and women moved on the dance floor while a few more surrendered to their passions in the darkened booths around the large room. Shu moved straight through the club, taking in the sights and the feel of the environment. The heat of their bodies pressed against him; he tasted the electricity in the air as he wove through the dance floor with Ken beside him.

Everything felt different—from the sound of the music to the taste of the smell of the dried blood on his shirt. Things were sharper, more vibrant...and he felt more excited than he had in a long while. He felt *alive*...

A woman in a tight leather skirt with a silver choker around her neck bumped into him. Her eyes met his and she paused, captivated, her breath catching in her throat. In the flickering lights, her cheeks were flushed as the blood rushed through her veins, her heart pounding in time with the music. Shu laughed and touched her cheek as he walked on. She turned her head, too spellbound to follow and too captivated to look away. The scent of her blood, sweet and young, mingled with the scent of her sweat and lust. His eyes glanced down to her throat and he licked at his lips. Even his thirst was sharper, his taste for blood enhanced.

"Later," he laughed softly.

Shu reached out and placed a hand on the small of Ken's back, drawing him closer as they stepped into shadows along the edge of

the dance floor. And approached the rear of the club. They crossed through the side door and headed up the staircase leading to Shu's loft.

Ken followed without protest, almost leaning into Shu's hand as they entered the sprawling apartment. The drapes were still open and silver moonlight streamed in through the tall, single paned windows that covered the wall. Not bothering to turn on a light, Shu eased Ken on the leather couch and caressed his cheek.

"I have something else for you," Shu whispered. "Another *gift*." He pulled off his jacket and let it fall to the floor. In the silver moonlight that spilled in through the windows, the dark stains on his shirt stood out vibrantly. He ran a hand down the front of his shirt until his fingertips touched the handle of a knife tucked into his belt.

"It's a gift I've given you before." Shu pulled out the weapon and unsheathed it. He held the knife out so Ken could see his own reflection in the curved blade.

The younger man's eyes grew wide and Shu smiled. "You recognize it, don't you?"

"I found this in a box Miss Silivasi bought, but..." Ken reached up, touching his finger to Shu's. "It's *mine*..."

Ken tilted Shu's wrist and watched the moonlight reflect off the blade. A flash of light caught his eye, and it was as if a light had been switched on deep inside his mind. He saw himself but not himself with this knife, beside Shu, fighting a number of men... killing them...then smiling over it...

Ken closed his eyes to blot out the images. "I...I killed some men tonight...with a knife...it was like I'd done it before..."

"Because you have," Shu whispered. He took Ken's hand from his wrist and turned it over so the palm faced upwards. "Though not with these hands."

Ken opened his eyes as Shu leaned down and brushed his lips across the base of his fingers. "I can still smell the blood on them from tonight," Shu's breath blew across his skin. "Did you enjoy it?"

Shu looked up, his dark eyes glittering.

"No! How could I? I was trying to help Lok, I..." It came back to him all of it, the paralyzing fear at first then the glimpse of the knife and the realization that he could stop those men.

He *wanted* to stop those men.

He *enjoyed* the intoxicating rush of the attack, the feel of the knife slicing through unresisting flesh, the feel of the hot blood splashing him....

He felt a sickening fear well up in his stomach and yet his gaze drifted to the knife still in Shu's hand. "I don't understand, but I do..."

Ken rubbed the side of his head trying to slow down the whirring of his mind as it spun out of control. He was sensing things so many things like memories running wild. Only he didn't understand most of them. They were his memories, but they weren't ones he could relate to.

He clamped his eyes shut, dug his fingers into the glove soft leather of the sofa. "What's happening to me?"

"You've found your true self," Shu breathed softly. "My beloved, you're coming back to me."

"What?" Ken's voice was barely a whisper. He opened his eyes and simply stared.

"Kenichi, there's so much you have to learn," Shu smiled. "So much I need to teach you." He flipped the knife around and pressed the carved handle into the other man's hand.

"This is yours," he said. "Take it and don't be afraid."

The ivory handle was so hard, so cold, so familiar...

Ken brought his hand up, studied it. This was the knife he thought he saw down by the men's room that time. He hadn't connected it to the one in Miss Silivasi's box at the time but it was the same. The exact same and it was *his*. He knew it was his.

Without really thinking he moved his hand, slipping the sharp blade down the front of Shu's bloodstained shirt, slicing the buttons off one by one. Shu's skin was stained by the blood as well, but the

scars were still visible. So many familiar scars.

Ken opened his mouth, and Cantonese spilled out again as it had outside as it had in the hospital as it had in the bedroom here...

"I don't fear *anything*."

Shu hissed softly under his breath and closed his eyes. The beauty of the sensual voice and the power behind those words sent a jolt through his body. Shu reached down and touched the scars on his smooth belly. Though long healed, the old wounds ached painfully as though the knife had reopened them.

"Do you remember this now?" Shu's brow creased. He looked at Ken and reached out to touch his chin. "What did I tell you then?"

Ken closed his eyes. His head hurt like hell, as if something was trying to pound itself in—or break its way out? The room swam around him and he felt distanced but not, just like he had outside. He opened his eyes again and looked at Shu.

His heart pounded, his mouth was dry, his breathing quick, almost coming in gasps.

He unclenched the knife, reached out to touch Shu's belly. Tears stung his eyes as his fingers traced the scars. He smelt something—candles, oil lamps maybe? There was a faint trace of incense, and the metallic scent of blood in the air.

"Forever," he whispered.

"Forever," Shu echoed softly, brushing away the wetness that formed on Ken's eyelashes. "Yes...you do remember."

Shu placed his hand over Ken's, pressing his trembling fingers into the marks. He reached out and took Ken's left hand, tearing it away from the armrest. Shu's thin fingers clutched at him tightly, and Ken winced from the strength of the grip.

"I once left marks of my own on this flesh," Shu breathed. His thumb rubbed across Ken's palm and his nail scratched at the skin. Though not hard enough to draw blood, it left behind a faint red path in its wake.

"Train...no, not train." Ken shook his head, rubbed his temple, the pain evident. "I don't understand. I feel like I'm remembering a movie. An old movie, very old..."

Shu ran his thumb across Ken's chin. "It was no film, no simple dream, Kenichi. You lived before. You lived with me..."

Ken's eyes opened wide. "But...I don't understand."

Shu gripped his chin, his long thin fingers pressing into the soft flesh. "There's nothing to understand. My Toshiro—*you*—promised to come back to me and now you have."

Before Ken could say a word, Shu captured his mouth in a possessive kiss.

Ken wanted to stop this, and yet he didn't. His head swam, the pain began to fade and was replaced by a rush of blood throughout his body, a rush so intense that he shivered beneath the Shu's larger form.

The older man pulled back and grinned. "You're remembering it all, aren't you? Last night didn't even begin to touch on what we once had."

Resting a knee into the leather seat, he leaned into Ken. He took more hungry mouthfuls of the young man's lips while his hands slid from his chin and down his throat. Fingering the collar of the T-shirt, Shu tore at the cotton, his thumbnail sliced effortlessly through the material. He ran his hands over Ken's bare chest, feeling the small raised scabs that were the last remaining traces of his gunshot wounds.

Shu pulled out of the kiss and eased himself onto the couch until he straddled Ken's lap.

"You asked me earlier what I'd done to you to make this healing possible," he licked his lips and caressed Ken's chest. He felt the hammering of the other's heart, could almost *taste* the hot blood burning through Ken's veins. Shu remembered the woman downstairs and his breath caught in his throat as the thirst nearly overcame him.

"I can tell you, or I can show you."

* * * *

Shu sat up, gripped the front of Ken's shirt and pulled him along as he stood. Ken wasn't even aware he'd taken the knife until Shu's hand touched his.

"Oh, yes, bring your toy along."

Ken found himself grinning as he followed Shu through the darkened loft to the door.

The club had officially closed for the night by the time the two men made their way downstairs. A few waitresses cleared the tables and the flashing black lights had been turned off. But the woman's scent was still fresh, and he followed it to the bar. Shu picked up an empty glass from the counter and licked the rim. She had been one of the last to leave.

Ken came to his side and Shu offered him the glass. "She's still nearby," he smiled darkly. "Come."

* * * *

They stepped out through the club's side exit; his heart pounded and his mouth watered with anticipation. He hunted, and this time, he was with his Toshiro once again. The excitement swelled inside of Shu. He reached out and grabbed Ken's wrist, pulling him along as he sped through the alley towards their prey.

She was still on the same block as the *Poisoned Dragon*.. Her high-heeled boots echoed on the pavement as she made her way towards her car. By the time she noticed them behind her, it was too late.

Shu reached out and grabbed the back of her neck. He didn't bother to cover her mouth as she cried out. It was of little concern if anyone noticed.

"Yes..." he whispered into her ear. "Sing for us." But the sound of his voice and the feel of his breath on her cheek silenced her

screams. She leaned back into his grip, and he gently pulled back the soft, pale strands of her hair to fully expose her throat.

“Take off her choker, Kenichi,” Shu smiled.

Ken hesitated, fearing for a moment that Shu meant to rape the girl, but no, that wasn't something he'd do. A flash hit him of other girls, other times. . . . Dao had various favorite amusements. . . .

Ken pulled the knife from the pocket of his jacket and flicked the tip of it against the bottom of the satin ribbon that held the black glass cameo around the blonde's neck. The ribbon fell apart and his gaze was fixed upon the rapid rise and fall of her ample breasts, barely contained by her clingy black tank.

Shu, however, focused on the throbbing vein on the side of the woman's neck. He kissed her earlobe and touched the soft, pulsing skin. She whimpered and her chest heaved as her breath came in rapid gasps.

“What's your name, child?” Shu whispered.

“Angela,” she breathed.

“A lovely name,” he released her neck and grabbed her shoulders. His lips caressed her throat. The scent of her blood filled his nostrils, his body ached to taste her life—he craved it. “Now you'll sing for us a different way, Angela.”

Shu looked over at Ken as he placed a soft kiss on her jugular. “Cut her here.”

Ken froze. The knife was so heavy in his hand. He remembered earlier cutting those men who tried to hurt Lok, but this was different. This was. . . wrong. . .

And yet his arm rose as if someone else was lifting it, and the tip of the blade touched the girl's neck just enough to make a small cut. Blood, almost black in the dim glow of the light across the street, slid down her neck, erasing the white powder she'd used to make her skin paler than was natural.

“Yes...” Shu's breath caught in his throat. He shivered with pleasure

at the sight and scent of the thick liquid dripping from the cut. He laughed throatily and closed his eyes, his pulse rising in time with both Kenichi's and Angela's.

Shu touched the woman's chin and tilted her head back. He licked at the blood and moaned softly as the metallic flavor filled his mouth. She tensed under his grip and a small whimper passed over her darkly painted lips. Shu held her tighter, though she made no move to resist or flee.

He looked up at Kenichi. The lust rising in him, the desire to drink...for once it didn't feel *empty*. "Because of *this* you're here once again, my love," he laughed softly. His teeth extended and flashed in the dim light before he bit down into the woman's throat.

Ken stared, his eyes growing wide at the sight of Shu's teeth—Shu's—*fangs*—appearing and puncturing the woman's neck. He swallowed hard, his body tensing at the sound of the woman's soft moan mixing with the sucking sound and faint growl coming from Shu.

He wasn't seeing this. He couldn't be seeing this. Those teeth—fangs.

A vampire?

Chiang-shih, a voice inside corrected.. *It was true. The old men in the bowels of the Gingbo were telling the truth. There was a blood drinking creature roaming the streets after Dao's death—after I murdered him...*

The woman grew limp until only Shu's firm grip held her upright. Ken was only half aware that he lurched forward to grab the car keys from her hand before they hit the ground.

Don't stand there! Help him!

Ken looked around to make sure no one was watching, then went to her car and unlocked it. He stood back as Shu—Dao carried the woman and laid her across the seat. Dao smiled at him when he closed the car door and pulled him into a crushing embrace, a deep kiss. Ken stiffened at the first taste of the blood still lingering but then

the voice filled his head again. *Let go, let this world go...*

Shu pulled Ken closer, one hand pressing into the small of his back. The other stroked the back of his neck as he drew in the very breath from Ken's lungs. Their bare chests touched and Shu held him tighter, desiring this contact of flesh on flesh with the same fervor as he had the woman's blood. If it were possible, he would've pulled Ken inside of him to possess this feeling forever.

He leaned his head back and pressed Ken's lips into his neck. "Now you know everything," Shu whispered. "Now you understand."

The keys to the car jingled in Ken's hands and Shu's lips curled into a smile. "You always did concern yourself too much with cleaning up after our fun."

"Someone has to be practical," Ken whispered against Shu's neck. He nipped his flushed skin, then pulled back with a laugh. He tossed the keys onto the car, then bent to shove the woman's purse out of the way of the door. Cosmetics and things spilled out onto the floor, including a gleaming silver lighter.

He looked up at Shu, then flicked the lighter and stared at the flame a moment before touching it to the carpet on the car's interior. He shut the door and pressed in beside Shu as the flames erupted, engulfing the front seat of the compact.

"Such resourcefulness," Shu laughed and clapped his hands together. But as the flames danced inside the car, he stepped back, suddenly wary of them. Not much could harm him...but fire, yes.

"Come away," he whispered. He reached around Ken's waist and pulled him back from the car. They melted into the shadows along the darkened street. Most of the buildings in this had people living on the top floors in lofts much like Shu's. And very shortly, the fire was about to get everyone's attention.

"That's better," he smiled. They stopped at the entrance to the alley that led back to the *Dragon*, and Shu stroked Ken's cheek.

"We can see your handiwork from here," Shu laughed and dropped his hand down to the curve of Ken's backside. They turned

and watched as the flames engulfed the vehicle.

* * * *

“What the fuck?” Daniel Yang said, whipping his head around to the sound of shattering glass. “I should have fucking known,” he muttered under his breath as he caught a glimpse of a familiar silhouette going round the side of the club. Yang turned to his bodyguard, go check that make sure the cops who show up are *ours*.”

Almost as an afterthought, his head whipped around again to where he’d seen Shu disappear. Was that Kenny Ohara with him?

“God damn it!” Yang slammed his palm against the car door before throwing it open. Police sirens and the blaring horns of firetrucks could be heard in the distance. While Lau ran out to meet them, he went around to the side of the building after Shu.

“What’s going through your fucked-up mind, Shu?” He burst into the dark club and slammed the door shut behind him. “You don’t think it’s hard enough to keep the fucking police off our case that now you have to torch cars off a main street?”

“Go away, Yang,” Shu’s voice called across the empty room. “I don’t want my mood spoiled tonight by another one of your little temper tantrums.” The lights were off except for the blue lamps behind the bar. Shu leaned against the counter while another man pressed beside him. It *was* Ohara.

“Fuck you, Shu,” Yang snapped. He crossed the floor and narrowed his eyes at the vampire as he reached out to grab a hold of his open collar. Right now, he was too pissed off to be afraid of this bastard. “I told you—I’m getting fed up with this shit.”

Danny gave Ken a cold look. “What the hell is this? I thought you were shot.”

Ken’s eyes narrowed and his jaw tensed. In an instant a knife was poised a fraction above Yang’s wrist. “Take your hand off him, Yang, or I will take it off for you.”

Yang stared. When the fuck had Ohara learned to speak more than a few filthy words in Cantonese? “The fuck you say, *boy*.”

“I *do* say. Move the hand or lose it—and the arm as well.”

Yang blinked. Twice. Maybe Lok wasn’t the one with the suspected concussion at all. This kid’s brain was rattl—*Shit*. The little fucker *cut* him.

“If you don’t move the hand now, I’ll do what I should have done long ago.”

Yang let go of Shu and grabbed a handkerchief. He backed away, wrapping the cloth around his bleeding wrist. “What the fuck is going on here?”

Shu’s eyes glittered. “Watch out, Yang, he bites.” His laughter echoed in the room.

Ken started laughing too

“You little faggot,” Yang growled. “You should—”

Ken suddenly lunged at him. The blade whistled as the knife slashed through the air. Yang stumbled backwards, crying out in surprise and fear. He shut his eyes and fell back over a table. He expected the steel to tear through him in less than a second.

“Wait, Kenichi.”

Danny Yang opened his eyes and saw the edge of the knife a mere fraction of an inch from his right eye. Ken’s face was set in a snarl, but Shu had placed a restraining hand over his chest. The vampire leaned over Ken’s shoulder and narrowed his eyes at Danny.

“Don’t soil your blade with his blood,” Shu sneered. “It’s not worth the effort.”

Danny clenched his teeth. “Get that the crazy fuck away from me.” His voice shook with fear, and Shu laughed.

“Remember this, Yang,” Shu kissed the side of Ken’s neck and pulled him away. “You came very, very close to the end.”

“Fuck you!”

Ken spit in Yang’s face. “Get away from us, you worthless son of a whore.”

Yang reached into his jacket, and Shu fixed him with a paralyzing

look. "I'll rip out your throat before you can even pull the trigger."

Danny Yang lowered his hand.

"Get out," Shu said. "This is a private party and you aren't invited."

Yang pulled himself up and scurried to the door.

* * * *

Ken laughed with Shu and waited while the older man set the lock and alarm and returned to his side, reached out and stroked his cheek.

Ken closed his eyes and leaned into Shu's touch, opened to his deep kiss; he'd done this countless times before, in this very place.

But something was missing.

Ken pulled back, gazed up at Shu and offered him the knife handle first. "Make me yours," he whispered.

"Kenichi..." Shu closed his eyes and gasped. Those three softly spoken words touched a place in his soul. "Yes." He reached out and caressed the knife's handle before easing Ken's fingers to close over it once more. Shu wrapped his hand around Ken's as the younger man brought the flat edge of the knife to his chest.

"No, no...not with that one. That blade isn't meant to taste your blood," he breathed softly. "It's for mine. But for you...I have its mate."

Shu reached behind and pulled out the knife tucked into the back of his leather pants. He unsheathed the weapon, the polished handle glinting in the dim lights almost as sharply as the steel of the blade itself. It was identical to Ken's, only the intertwining dragon and tiger were carved from jade stone of the deepest green.

He touched the flat of the knife to Ken's cheek as he stepped around the younger man. He pulled at the edge of the torn shirt, exposing Ken's right shoulder to the cool air. Ken shivered, but from the soft murmur that passed over his lips, Shu knew the chill came from pleasure. He smiled and ran his fingers over the smooth, bare

flesh.

"My marks were here once," Shu whispered. He pressed his lips to the shoulder and traced a path in kisses and scrapes of his pointed teeth. The skin burned underneath his touch as if it also remembered the characters that long ago were carved into Toshiro's flesh. With one last tender kiss, Shu pulled back and pressed the cold edge of his knife into Ken's shoulder.

"This *will* sting, my love," he smiled.

Ken bit his lip, unwilling to let the sharp cry of pain escape when the cold blade touched his skin, pressed in to draw blood. He clamped his fingers around the hilt of the knife in his right hand while with his left he gripped the edge of the table Yang had run into to.

The sharp steel drew into his flesh. He closed his eyes and pictured the characters Dao was cutting. *Dragon* and *Power*. "Yes," he hissed. "Yesssss." The pain was maddening but Ken held it in, he fed upon it, swallowed it and let it settle low in his belly, until his body turned it into an energy that coursed through his blood, roused a passion he'd never before felt and turned his cock rock hard in a heartbeat.

"Beautiful," Dao said behind him. Ken shivered when the older man ran his fingertips across the cuts then leaned in to lick the dripping blood away with hungry flicks of his tongue. Dao grabbed him around the waist, hauled him back to feel his own hard cock pushing against his leather pants.

Ken groaned, let go of the table and reached back to stroke Dao's lean, leather-encased hip. He tilted his head back. "*Sensei*, teach me everything. Teach me what it is to be yours..."

"My Toshiro," Shu breathed. "My *Kenichi*." He swallowed his blood-filled saliva; his head spun with the intoxicating rush that came with the taste of Ken's life. He pressed his lips into the side of Ken's neck and spoke between kisses as he traced a path upwards.

"Possession... passion...power..." he lowered his voice and

closed his eyes. “*Loyalty...*” He caressed Ken’s cheek and slid his other hand down to the front of Ken’s jeans. He fondled the hard bulge, his fingers jerking open the fly. “Just as you showed me now with Daniel Yang.”

Ken had moved so quickly, so sure of himself and ready for the



kill. He'd moved like a predator—fierce, undaunted and strong. Shu shuddered with excitement once more, his aching cock pressed painfully against his confining pants. He pushed Ken forward into the table as he wrenched Ken's jeans down past his hips then off. Ken tightened his grip on the knife in one hand and pressed the other onto the tabletop as he leaned back into Shu's swollen length.

Shu groaned and turned Ken around onto his back. He pulled open the front of his own pants and leaned forward, their swollen cocks rubbing together. "Not all passion is gentle," Shu panted. "But a moment of pain makes the pleasure so much more worthwhile." He hovered over Ken, his tongue flicking in and out of his ear.

"But I've taught you that before. Now show me you understand," he kissed the corner of Ken's mouth and reached for the knife in Ken's hand. He caressed the cold steel blade and laughed softly.

Ken took back the knife, his dark eyes gleaming in the dim bluish light as his gaze skimmed the pale flesh of Dao's chest. A thin straight scar in the center of Shu's chest drew in attention and he traced the length of it first with his fingers, then leaned forward and did likewise with the tip of his hot, wet tongue.

Dao groaned, then laughed. "Surely you can do better, Kenichi. Or are you not the man I think you are?"

"Oh, I *am*," Ken breathed before bringing the knife between them and opening the old wound. The very first wound he'd made in another time and place.

Blood trickled out very slowly, soon stopping by the quick healing of the vampire's immortal skin. Ken tried to lift himself enough to lick the blood away, but Shu grabbed a handful of his hair so that his mouth was poised just short of the target.

"Not yet. That gift is one I must reserve for now." Shu jerked Ken further onto the small table and spread his legs wide. With no thought to delicacy, he shoved his fingers into Ken's tight ass. Ken grunted but did not cry out at the pain he surely felt.

"Good boy. Very good," Shu whispered, working his fingers in

and out of Ken for a moment. He pulled free, grabbed his own cock and jerked himself to the brink of coming. As the tension built and tightened his balls he let go, pulled back his hips then slammed himself into Ken's hot body, moaning as he shot inside Ken's tight hole.

Ken grunted, gritting his teeth, but then to Shu's delight, he sighed and pushed against him.

The knife clattered to the floor as Ken let go of it and gripped the table edges for leverage. He pushed himself forward again, the nagging ache in his ass soothed by Shu's sticky come that provided just enough lubrication to make the pain pleasurable

"Fuck me, Dao. Please," Ken pleaded, as a jolt ran through Shu's body, jerking his balls. "Such sweet words," he moaned. Ken spread his legs a little wider and Shu thrust forward

Deep groans formed in his throat as he shoved into Ken with his entire body weight. A combination of agony and delight, he winced at the burning friction and still he pressed further. Shu penetrated deeper, his entire body shuddering as he thrust inside of Ken. He filled Ken...possessed him, loved him. A blur of emotions and feelings coursed through him and culminated in the burning ache in his balls. He rocked back and forth, his abdomen pounding into Ken's swollen cock and the younger man cried out.

Ken's hot come burst from his swollen head and splattered on to Shu's waist. Shu pressed down harder, shoving himself as far in as he could while pushed his full weight on top of Ken's throbbing cock. He slid easily, the warm thick fluid on his belly easing his movements.

Ken bucked and heaved underneath, demanding more with his writhing hips and guttural moans that passed over his lips. Shu shuddered and leaned back away from the table as he emptied out in a last spurt.

Shu collapsed against him. "*That's* what it is to be mine," he panted. His chest rose and fell in a heaving motion as he struggled to catch his breath. He closed his eyes and groaned as he eased his thick, still throbbing length out of Kenichi's fully stretched opening.

Ken moaned as well, his face twisted as he pleaded desperately. “No...” he clutched at Shu’s back and tried to hold him in place. “Don’t.”

Shu laughed breathlessly, kissed Ken’s pouting lips and rubbed his hands over his shoulders and arms. He trailed his lips down Ken’s throat and over his sweat-glazed chest. He rested his ear and listened to Ken’s heart hammer within his chest.

“This life—mine once more,” he murmured and smiled.

Shu slid down to his knees and placed his hands on Ken’s hips, encouraging him to stand. Ken rose to his feet, shivering as the wetness oozed out of his opening and dripped down the inside of his leg.

Shu leaned forward and lapped at the sticky come. He slid his lips and tongue over the hot flesh, gently licking Ken clean.

A moment of gentleness to contrast the moments of pain. Ken gasped and reached down to cradle the back of Shu’s bobbing head. The gentle lapping turned him rock hard again, and Shu smiled. He traced his tongue along the throbbing length and kissed the base of his erection before standing up to devour Ken’s quivering lips.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Leigh stared at the ceiling, unable to sleep. A different kind of unrest than usual kept him awake. There were no bad dreams, no strange visions or gory apparitions. In his mind, he replayed dinner with Meg over and over again. He watched himself shut her out while they sat here on the couch, instead of opening up to her. He saw himself turn away from her in the kitchen, instead of showing her just how much he loved her.

Loved her.

Leigh rolled on to his side and rested his hand underneath his cheek. He loved Meg, and it wasn't something that had just happened. Deep down, he always had.

He'd never admitted it to himself before—it was easier to hide his feelings from everyone behind a petty mask of jealousy. The first day they'd been introduced to each other by the University's fine arts department head, Leigh had sensed her kind nature. It was in her smile, in the warmth of her touch when they shook hands. Later, he saw it in the way she helped her students, guiding them and encouraging them through whatever crisis threatened to hold them back. It didn't matter if it was something personal at home, or even a bad spell of creator's block—Meg always helped them through it.

It was the same here in their apartment building. When their neighbor, Mrs. Terrasa, fell ill, Meg was at her side the entire time before and after work. Her presence alone seemed to heal people emotionally and even physically. As he watched from afar, his feelings for her grew and he just buried them deeper. He wanted to know her

better, but was too afraid. Why take the chance when everyone else he'd ever tried to be with left him?

The bedroom door opened with a faint creak, and a few seconds later he heard Meg pad softly into the kitchen. Leigh sat up and held his breath. How much longer was he going to wait to tell her? Another day? Another year?

Shoving off the blanket, he went to the kitchen. Meg was taking out a carton of milk from the refrigerator, the tired look in her eyes showing she hadn't been able to sleep either.

"Meg."

She turned, a little surprised, maybe, and placed the carton on the counter. "Leigh, did I wake you?"

He shook his head and before she could speak, he went to her and touched the sides of her face, pulling her gently into a kiss.

Stunned at first by the swell of absolute love she felt flowing from Leigh, Meg relaxed and let instinct and her own heart guide her. Her lips parted and she pressed in close as he explored the soft recesses of mouth with an experienced yet delicate probing of his tongue. She slipped her arms around his neck, her unbound breasts half flattening against the solid muscle of his chest.

This was different that the kisses they'd shared today. This frightened her, it excited her, it made her feel more lightheaded than the wine had. She wasn't even sure when Leigh had moved his hands from her face but she was very conscious of the feel of those strong hands now gliding up and down her back, skimming the top of her rear encased only in thin nylon shorts.

She hadn't put on any panties after taking the quick shower before bed and she was very conscious now of how the heat swelled between her legs and of the wetness pooling. She was more conscious of how hard Leigh was becoming within the loose fleece sweatpants he wore.

Meg's heart pounded, partly from this wild desire filling her and partly from fear. Stark fear. She hadn't been this close, this alone with

a man ever. She didn't know what to do. What she should or shouldn't do.

But she knew what she wanted to do. And yet...

When the kiss broke, Meg was struggling to catch her breath and trying desperately to think clearly through the incredible pounding of her heart echoing in her head. Leigh's arms were still around her, clasped lightly at the base of her spine.

I want you, Meg.

He didn't say it aloud but he didn't have to. It was evident in the desire heating his azure eyes, in the way he held her, his erection pressing against her. She could barely find her voice. "Leigh, I—"

"Ssshhh," He whispered, brushing his lips against hers. "It's all right. I won't make you do anything you're not ready for. I promise."

He drew her into another kiss, then swept her up into his arms as though she were weightless. He carried her to the sofa and sat, positioning her so that she straddled his lap. Meg's mouth went dry and she licked her lips as best she could.

"Don't be afraid, Meg. Trust me, Please."

"I do," she whispered, losing herself in that look, lifting her hand from his shoulder to drift through his silky, sunstreaked hair.

She was afraid, yet wasn't. Leigh wasn't projecting the base sexual craving she'd felt from the few other men she'd dated. From Leigh it was pure loving emotion and it loosened her inhibitions enough to allow him free rein.

She whimpered when he drew his hands up beneath her T-shirt to brush over her tingling, hard nipples. Held her breath when he lifted the shirt and coaxed her out of it. She watched in rapt attention as he bent his head to suckle her until she squirmed. Her fingers dug into his shoulder when he sucked harder and teased her engorged nipple with expert flicks of his tongue.

Leigh lifted his head, capture her mouth with his once more and slowly slid his hands along her burning thighs and up into the loose legs of her gym shorts. Meg shivered when an unusual hot/cold wave washed over her and she felt the warm wetness between her legs. She

gasped when Leigh's thumb stroked her, working its way past the swollen outer lips to glide over the sensitive, pulsing nub nestled within.

He brushed teasing kisses over her lips, then along her jawline to the place where her nape joined her neck.

"Relax. It will be all right."

Leigh rubbed his free hand across her back, easing the tension from her spine and shoulders while he continued to stroke her sensitive flesh. He kissed the side of Meg's neck, breathing in the warm sweet scent of her hair. His lips brushed away the strands that stuck to her as a thin glaze of perspiration dotted her skin.

His entire body ached with desire and wanted so much to express the love he felt now that words failed him. Nothing he could think of to say would even come close to describing the happiness and fulfillment he felt just being here with her. He murmured against the soft skin of her shoulder as he pulled her closer and his fingers slid gently but firmly across her tender sex. Someone groaned, and he wasn't sure if the sound had come from Meg or from him. He ached in so many places, but he didn't want to rush her.

Leigh slid his hand out of her shorts and he wrapped both hands around her slim waist, easing her down on to the sofa. He kissed her lower lip and dragged his kisses down the front of her chest, in between her soft breasts and down to the waist of her shorts. Gently rolling the elastic down past her hips, his lips tracing along the crown of the thick, moist curls just peeking above the edge of the material.

He stopped from going any further and reached for one of her hands. "Only if you want me to," he said gently.

Meg reached for his hand, clutching it so hard his fingers ached. "I—I want to, but I—I can't. I—I don't use the pill or have anything. I—I haven't had a reason to..."

"Ssshhhh," Leigh whispered, kissing her trembling hand, stroking her fingers with his thumb, until she began to relax. "I told you I wouldn't force you into anything you didn't want." He shifted position

kissed her softly, brushed away the beads of perspiration from her forehead with feathery strokes of his fingertips. He reached between them, slipped his hand into the rolled waistband of her shorts and stroked her, then kissed her once again. "Just let me touch you. Let me taste you."

Meg bit her lower lip and nodded. Leigh smiled, savoring what he sensed with her—the mixture of fear of the unknown and excitement fueled by her own untapped desires. He kissed her cheek, her ear. "I love you, Meg. I have from the first."

He did love her. She felt it throughout her body as his emotion swept through him and eased over her like a lazy fog drifting across the bay. She closed her eyes, wrapped her fingers in the blanket crumpled beneath her and savored the exquisite torture of the way Leigh moved and peeled the shorts down her legs.

Through slitted eyes, she watched him slide to the floor before he shifted her legs a bit, then licked a languid path along her inner thigh.. She cried out at the first teasing flick of his tongue on her throbbing sex, moaned at the feel of his tongue stroking slowly up and down her wet slit.

Meg tensed, her back arching forward from the rush of blood through her body. Leigh slid his hands up along her slick, burning thighs and tightened around her hips. With each slow stroke of his tongue, her body buckled. He held her in place with a firm but yielding grip that let her squirm under his touch. Her wetness covered his lips and he slid up and down her hot, throbbing skin. He pressed into her and gently teased the tip of his tongue up in to the slit.

She gasped, leaning forward, her legs widening reflexively—welcomingly. Her hands tugged at his hair and scratched at his shoulders. Leigh moved his hands from her hips to cup her bottom, to pull her forward as he pushed just a little further into her, losing himself in the taste of her love and desire.

Tiny sighing moans rang in his ears as she spiraled toward her peak and she called out his name when she came in a millions

quaking spasms that filled him, body and soul.

Leigh pulled back, gasping for breath, his own body shaking. As he moved back onto the sofa, he gently took the sides of her face in his trembling hands. He drew her into a slow, deep kiss so she could taste her own delicious wetness for the first time from his lips.

His hands wandered over her body, cupping her breasts and stroking her bare hips. Almost timidly, Meg reached between them, her fingers just brushing his swollen length through the front of his sweatpants. He gasped and she pulled back.

"It's okay," Leigh said throatily. He touched her hand and drew it back towards him.

"I—I can't. . ."

"Sssshhh, Touching me is enough." Leigh closed Meg's fingers around his cock and started her hand on the steady rhythm. The fabric of the sweatpants added a delicious friction, and he sucked on one of her nipples as he rocked his body into her hand. He came fast and hard, the passion crashing through him like a wave on the rocks.

He shivered and groaned when Meg boldly slipped her hand into his pants and coated her fingers with his come. She touched a fingertip to his lips, then pulled her hand back to her face and licked his essences as if savoring a sticky pastry glaze. Leigh kissed her and tasted himself as it mixed with traces of her own sweet juice.

"Oh, Meg. I was a fool to shut you out for so long."

Meg smiled and touched her fingers to his lips to silence him. "Sssshhh. It will be all right. Trust me."

The electronic ring of the telephone broke the tranquility of the apartment. The machine picked up after the third ring and Meg's blood ran cold when CeCe Ohara's frantic voice poured out. "Professor Meg? Are you there? I don't mean to wake you—"

Leigh sat up and Meg scrambled backward to grab the phone from the end table. "CeCe, what's wrong? Is it Kenny?"

"He's *gone*!"

Meg gasped. "Gone? You mean he—"

"He got up and left the hospital! The nurses and doctor tried to

stop him but he just walked out and disappeared. He's not home or at our parents' and his friend Lok is still at the Chinese hospital. We can't find him. Do you know where he might be?"

Meg ran her hand through her hair. "I'm not sure where he could be. I'm drawing a blank."

* * * *

The scratching sounds of pencil on paper woke him.

Dao Kan Shu's eyes fluttered open and he shifted on the mattress, pressing his face into the pillow. While the daylight hours passed, he'd fallen into a deeper sleep than he'd realized. A more restful, satisfied sleep than he'd known in a countless number of years. Not since Toshiro died.

His hand reached out instinctively to the space at his side that had remained empty for just as long a time. But now he found the warmth of another body within arm's reach.

Ken sat at the edge of the bed, facing away from him. His legs folded underneath him, a loose fitting robe pulled over his body. Shu lifted his head and traced his fingers over the young man's back lightly enough that the gesture went unnoticed. For a brief moment, time and place shifted.

It wasn't Kenichi who sat there, but Toshiro.

Toshiro, patiently waiting for him to wake after a night at one of the opium dens. Or perhaps he was passing time until his lover rose for dinner. Toshiro and he were back in old San Francisco, together in their bedroom. The furnishings that surrounded them weren't of the contemporary Italian design in the loft, but classic Victorian-era style.

The scratching sounds started again. Shu's thoughts returned to the present, to the lover he now had at his side. But everything remained so appropriate, so perfect. The loft, the club—all of it had been constructed on the same land where they'd once shared their house.

Shu sat up and leaned over Kenichi's shoulder. The young artist faced away to catch as much of the faint light that made its way into the room through the small crack in the drapery. He hadn't opened the curtains or turned on a lamp, most likely not to disturb. Still unaware that Shu hovered behind him, he sketched away in his book. Each stroke of the pencil moved across the paper with beautiful strokes and carefully made lines. His hand moved with graceful motions as he drew a house.

Their house.

"Lovely," Shu whispered. Ken stirred, but didn't appear startled or surprised to hear him. Shu kissed the back of his neck and his lover leaned back.

Kenichi's hair was still wet from a bath or shower; his skin smelled of soap and water, lightly masking his own warm scent. Shu pulled the robe away from the younger man's shoulder, and gently kissed the fresh marks he'd made on the skin.

"Does it bother you if I watch?" Shu asked softly. Not that he had any intention of stopping. "This place is where our house once stood."

Our house.

Was that why at times it felt so damn familiar to him up here? Was that why he imagined he saw glimpses of old furniture and Persian carpets in the oddest places down in the club?

"I don't mind," he said quietly, shifting to turn around. He reached out and traced the side of Dao's face with his fingertips. His skin was so smooth, so cool to the touch. He couldn't believe that the man before him, who hardly looked more than a handful of years older than he, was more than a century old, and a vampire on top of it all.

"What was it like back then? What was he like? Toshiro?"

Shu took Ken's hand and brushed his lips over the fingertips. "Very much like you, Kenichi," he blew softly on the young man's skin. "Artistic. Strong in body and mind. Beautiful..."

His eyes followed the flowing lines of Ken's well-toned body in a

look more like a caress than a stare. Toshiro's flesh had been smooth and pale like moonlight on pale rose, the ideal of the old Asian aesthetic. Kenichi's lightly tanned skin fit modern standards of beauty, sun-kissed and rich in color and life. Different, and yet equally lovely.

"Toshiro was also loyal..." Shu let the last word fade from his lips and he released Ken's hand. He felt the long scar on his belly and sighed almost too faintly to be heard. "Ambitious. Powerful," he whispered. "Everything I could have wanted in a pupil—in a lover..."

Shu eased the robe completely past Ken's shoulders and gathered the material around the young man's waist. He wrapped his arms around him. "You should know Toshiro as well as I do," he murmured, pressing his lips to Ken's neck. "He's here, inside."

The fingers on Shu's right hand traced a painfully familiar series of characters on Ken's tight abdomen. He slipped into the Cantonese tongue, knowing the younger man would understand. "Toshiro loved me with this body." Shu touched Ken's wrist. "And almost killed me with this hand."

As the room darkened around them, he whispered of everything. Toshiro's last moments with him in the theater, the burning touch of steel as the knife sliced through his belly, the creature that appeared from the shadows and changed him into what he is now—he held nothing back.

It all seemed so familiar, yet distant to Ken. It was only as a long afterthought that he realized Dao was speaking Cantonese, that he understood it all and had spoken it himself. And it was also only now that he realized the part he played in the death of that woman outside the club the one Dao bled dry the one whose car he himself set fire to.

There were so many things he didn't understand about this, about himself...

"Perhaps it's too much to understand at once," Shu whispered, almost as if he'd heard Ken's unspoken thoughts. "Thoughts,

memories...all of it will come back to you over time.”

Shu held Ken close. He drew in the warmth of his lover's body, greedy to hold on to this life now that it was his again. For him, hours could go by in the moment it takes for a breath to pass over one's lips. In others, a day can endure an eternity.

“I suffered three decades locked under the Tien Hau temple,” he whispered. He closed his eyes and brushed his lips over Ken's neck, feeling the steady pulse. “Thirty years of solitude, hunger...loneliness. Bound by a monk with beads no better than the worthless trinkets they sell now in the market, yet I could do nothing. When I was freed, I found Toshiro on the brink of death...and once again could do nothing.”

But a century later, things were quite different. “Come with me,” Shu said as he moved to the edge of the mattress. “Walk the city with me and I'll show you how things have changed.”

* * * *

San Francisco came alive for Ken that night in ways that he never realized were possible. Walking along the streets with Dao, he felt transported back in time to the point of hearing horses hooves clop over the streets, of seeing the cramped buildings illuminated by the flicker flames of gas lamps and simple lanterns.

More than once he was certain he saw old Chinese men in their traditional garb, their hair braided back in long queues, shuffling along beside him. He heard the bawdy laughter of the whores of the Barbary Coast cajoling passersby into partaking of their pleasures.

In passing by the *Gingbo*, he saw it as it had once been and smelled the unmistakable odor of the opium pipes. He found himself wanting to go in and share it with Shu as they once had before drowning themselves in the intoxicating pleasures of the flesh.

Deep in the night, while most of the city slept, Ken sat on the damp ground in a secluded corner of Golden Gate Park, his head

resting contentedly upon the strong shoulder of Dao Kan Shu, and he felt more at home than he ever had.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Three Days.

It had been three days since Ken left the hospital against the doctor's orders, and no one had seen him nor heard from him. Even Lok Yang with his father's various connections through the area couldn't discover Ken's whereabouts.

Or if he had, he simply wasn't telling—though Meg doubted it. She sensed worry and confusion coming from him and not the usual sense of slimy coldness most liars roused in her. Of course her 'feelings' about people weren't always infallible. Case in point; her boss, Brennan Staub. But she had no desire to dwell on that awkward episode now. There were more important things to worry about.

"You know where he is, don't you?" Meg asked Leigh as they sat in her living room late that fourth afternoon. Neither of them had classes and they'd decided to catch up on their paperwork at home.

Leigh looked up from the guitar he'd been absentmindedly strumming. "I don't know for certain, but I have an idea."

Meg held her coffee cup in front of her and peered over the rim at Leigh. He'd been staying at her place the past few days and though they hadn't done anything more intimate than they had that first night, he'd been sharing her bed and making her feel more complete than she'd ever felt.

And though she sensed an inner peace within him, she also sensed a lingering fear and coldness which could only be attributed to his fears for Ken.

"That man, Shu, he has something to do with it, doesn't he? It looked like he was kissing Kenny on that video we caught a glimpse of."

Leigh plucked a few more delicate notes, then sighed and set the guitar on the coffee table. "Yes."

Before he could say anything more, the phone rang.

"It's Brennan, for you," she said quietly.

As he took the phone and moved to the kitchen, Meg sipped her coffee and tried to quell the twinge of guilt nagging at her like her grandmother. She was over twenty-one, and if she wanted a man to stay at her apartment, she could, and it didn't matter that their dean just found out about it because his call had been transferred from Leigh's phone to hers. Taking a breath to tramp down the weird feelings, Meg picked up her gradebook and tried not to eavesdrop on Leigh's half of the phone conversation.

"What's up?" Leigh opened the refrigerator, but wasn't hungry. On the other end of the line, Brennan Staub took a breath and Leigh could just see the Fine Art's program director scratch his salt-and-pepper beard with a know-it-all look on his face.

"Where have you two been?" he asked with a tone that suggested he already knew the answer. "You missed the staff meeting this afternoon."

"Catching up on paperwork," Leigh took out a bottled water and shut the door. *And trying like crazy to work up the nerve to track down Ken...* He didn't just have an idea—he knew exactly where he was. Just the idea of setting foot near the *Poisoned Dragon* or seeing Shu again was enough to make his stomach twist and he leaned on the counter until the wave of nausea passed. He couldn't even bring himself to imagine what was happening with Ken.

"Uh-huh," Brennan said in his lazy Southern California drawl. "I didn't know you'd moved your office into Meg's apartment..." He left the sentence hanging like Leigh was supposed to end it for him.

Leigh refused to offer more information. He wanted his private life

to stay just that—private. “What do you want?” he held the phone against his ear with his shoulder as he opened the bottle.

Brennan chuckled. “We need someone to go up to Sacramento and represent the department at the UC college fair this Wednesday. You missed out on the meeting, so that means you’re it.”

It was the kind of assignment everyone usually bitched about. The fair lasted a week, and no one wanted to waste their time there when there were so many art shows to prepare for in the fall. But Leigh jumped on it. Getting out of San Francisco—and taking Meg with him—sounded damned good to him.

“Fine.” He swallowed a mouthful of water before heading back to the living room. “I’ll do it.”

Brennan sounded noticeably surprised, but rattled off some more information without asking questions. Leigh mumbled a series of ‘Yeah’s’ and then hung up. Meg looked up from the gradebook folded on her lap.

“What did he want?” she asked.

“We’re going to Sacramento for the week,” Leigh put down the bottle next to his guitar on the coffee table and sat next to her on the couch. “It’s a university conference.”

Meg frowned at him. “But what about Ken?”

Leigh couldn’t meet her gaze and he stared past her out the window. “I’m sure he’s fine,” he lied. “This is a chance for us to be alone together.” *And to get you the hell away from this city.*

Meg frowned again. “I can’t go to Sacramento, not this week. I have the show at Masuda’s to get ready for and Brennan wouldn’t suggest that I go. He knows I hate those things.”

“Don’t we all,” Leigh muttered, setting his water down on the coffee table.

Meg didn’t like the strained silence that suddenly sprang between them like a protective case around a prized museum sculpture. “We should have gone to that meeting this afternoon.” She breathed a sigh and stared down at her grade book “I shouldn’t have let you talk me into staying home.”

Before Leigh had a chance to respond, the phone rang again. It was Mr. Lyle from the Children's Center. "Miss Silivasi. Forgive me for disturbing you so close to dinnertime, but I simply must complain about the work being done by Ken Ohara."

"Kenny? You've seen Kenny?"

"Yes, he's here working on the haunted house project, and—"

"Please keep him there. I'll be right down."

"Where is he?" Leigh asked quietly.

"At the children's center, working on the haunted house mural." Meg explained as she got up and dropped her papers on the tabletop. Leigh sighed under his breath with relief as she grabbed a sweater bundled on the love seat. When she turned around, he was already by the door, car keys in hand.

"I'll drive," he said. His face was taut with worry.

* * * *

Meg sensed the turmoil coming off him, and realized he'd lied to her about Ken a few moments ago. She frowned again, but held her tongue. Whatever he was keeping from her he would have to spill out sooner or later. Leigh held the door open for her and locked it behind them before they headed to the apartment building's parking lot.

Twice on the way to the Children's Center, she'd had to ask him to slow down. He wove through the heavy late-afternoon traffic and they reached the one-story building in record time, just before sunset. They pulled into a parking close the front entrance and rushed inside. Lyle was already waiting for them by the front security desk.

"Miss Silivasi, I can't begin to tell you how inappropriate the mural is," he pushed the wire-rimmed glasses up on his nose and shook his head. "I know it's Halloween, but this is a *children's* center, for God's sake."

"Where's Ken?" Meg stopped Lyle from continuing. But Leigh stepped around her without waiting for a response and headed down

the open air corridor on the left.

"He's this way," Leigh said.

Meg followed him downstairs through the large recreation room where the haunted house and Halloween party would be held then out the side door to the fenced play area. Ken was at the far side of the playground painting by the light of the halogen security lamp mounted on the wall of the center. The first large sheet of plywood was covered with a myriad of images of nineteenth century San Francisco, and it was breathtaking.

Meg felt as though she could keep walking forward and step into the painting and the world of the famed Barbary Coast. She could practically hear the clop of horse hooves on the ground, the rustle of the saloon girls' taffeta skirts. She could almost smell the smoke of the men's cigars and feel the heat of the flame the night watchman used to light the streetlamp. She turned her head to the section of wood Ken was starting on now. It was unmistakably old Chinatown, but...

At the end of the narrow dark alley strewn with blood and dead bodies, two men stood in a corner made by two brick walls of adjacent buildings. She couldn't see the face of the taller man, but he reminded her very much of the man Shu, and the other was unmistakably Ken.

Ken, a wicked gleam in his brown eyes, a twisted cruel smile upon his face. He was holding a cowering Chinese man by a long braid of hair and slicing open his throat.

"Oh, my..."

Leigh got within ten feet of the mural before his feet refused to carry him further. He felt nauseous, barely able to keep down the lunch he'd had with Meg at a trendy bistro in SoMA. Yet he couldn't look away from the painting; he stared at it with the same kind of sick fascination someone might have if they watched their doctor amputate a part of their body.

The two killers leered at him, taunting him with whispers from a

dark and bloody past. He shivered and after four days of peace, the pounding in his skull started once again. “Ken, how could you paint this?” he whispered, pressing a hand to his temple.

Ken Ohara glanced over his shoulder and stared at him.

“Oh, God,” Leigh whispered. The look in his student’s eyes, the coldness of his spirit. . . *This isn’t Ken*. “Ohara?”

“There, do you see what I mean?” Lyle moved up next to the mural and jerked his thumb at the painting. He turned to Ken and shook his head adamantly. “This is just unacceptable! I can’t let kids see this—it’s just *disturbing*, to say the least. Change it or take it down, now.”

Ken turned slowly, his dark eyes blazing with an almost demonic fire as he stepped from the painting and came towards them. Lyle took a step back as Ken directed his glare upon him. “Unacceptable? This is *art*. This is the finest fucking piece of art you’ve ever seen, you worthless son of a whore.” He took a few steps closer. “Now get out of my way.”

“What’s the matter with you?” Lyle backed away, his eyes widening. He gaped at Ken in shock before glancing helplessly at Meg and Leigh.

Leigh shook his head, the harshness of Ken’s words cut through the strange, sick hold the mural had over him. He moved forward and put himself between Ken and the Center’s coordinator.

“Ohara,” he clenched his jaw. “Stop this.”

Ken jerked his head to impale Leigh with his fierce gaze. He brandished the paintbrush in his hand like a weapon, the pointed blood red bristles half poised to poke out Leigh’s eye. “You don’t tell me what to fucking do. You had your chance, and look where it got you.”

Meg stood as if in a horrified trance, taking it all in. This was not the Kenny Ohara she’d known for the past few years. This was a stranger. She stepped forward, placing her hand on Ken’s wrist. “Kenny, let’s go somewhere and talk—“

Ken swung his arm, sending her flying backward onto her rear

and hitting the rubberized play surface with a dull thud. Leigh rushed to her side, helping her to her feet.

"I'm calling the police!" Lyle shouted.

"No! It was an accident. Wasn't it, Ken?" Meg asked, trying to step forward despite Leigh's hold on her.

"The fuck it was," Ken muttered. He threw down his brush, ran to the right and scaled the chain link fence. Dropping effortlessly to the street on the other side, he disappeared into the darkness.

"I'm still calling the police."

"No," Leigh said. "He had an accident the other day. He may have a concussion and not be thinking clearly. We'll handle it. I promise."

Lyle grumbled and strode past them, going to the mural Ken had been working on. He picked up the can of turpentine, uncapped it and held it as if he was going to throw it.

"No!" Meg screamed. "Please don't destroy it. I'll have it removed the first thing in the morning."

Lyle's thin chest heaved. "Fine." He put down the turpentine and recapped it, then stalked back towards Meg and Leigh. "Your services will no longer be required, Miss Silivasi, and neither will those of your students. We'll find other volunteers for the arts programs."

Lyle stormed off. Leigh stared after him and Meg slipped out from under his hands. She rubbed the elbow she'd landed on as she moved close to the mural.

"Why didn't you let him destroy it?" Leigh asked. He chanced a glance at it and quickly closed his eyes when the pounding in his head flared up.

"There could be some clues," Meg said. "For some reason, Ken is painting these images and the answers are here."

"Just look at this detail work," she said softly. "I mean, the subject matter *is* disturbing, but it's actually...beautiful. I've never seen Ken put so much soul into one of his paintings before."

"That's what scares me," Leigh whispered.

"We have to find out what's happening to him, Leigh." Meg turned back to him, her smooth forehead creased with worry. He moved to

her side and took her in his arms, more scared for her than he could say with words.

"He could've hurt you," Leigh closed his eyes. He pictured the mural in his mind, focusing on the vicious glint in the painted-Ken's eyes. They were the eyes of a killer. Leigh touched her elbow and winced at the small welt bumping up under her sweater. "He could've done more than just bruise you."

"You know that wasn't our Kenny," Meg shook her head. "It can't be."

What if it is? No. Leigh had sensed something else in Ken, another presence, maybe.

Shu.

Leigh tightened his embrace on Meg as he started to shake. That bastard had something to do with this. In the hotel, he'd showed Leigh he had the power to push past mental defenses with a presence full of malice. *What did he do to Ken? What if he goes after Meg?*

"Fuck Sacramento," Leigh said hoarsely. "I'm not leaving you here alone. And I'm not giving up on Ken, either."

* * * * *

Meg and Leigh moved the painted wood pieces to a more inconspicuous part of the playground around the side of the building, then packed up the paints and brushes and put them in Leigh's car. Meg paused and gazed back at the Children's Center while Leigh held the passenger door open for her. She'd been volunteering here since she first moved to San Francisco almost ten years ago. It would feel so strange not to be spending a few hours a week here and helping to discover and mold new talent, much as she had done by volunteering at that summer program at Ken's high school.

Leigh placed his hand gently on her back. "Are you going to be all right?"

She blinked back the stray tears trying to form and nodded. "I'll be fine."

They were halfway back to their building when Leigh pulled the car over to the curb. "That kid Ohara hangs with *has* to know something. I always get a vibe that he's holding out. I don't know what it is but I think we should talk to him."

"If anyone knows what's going on it would be him." Meg dug in her purse for her PDA and brought up Lok's address to refresh her memory. "Turn left at the next intersection," she said tucking the device away. "It's the big house on the right at the top of the hill."

* * * *

"And what have we here?" Leigh said as he cut the ignition and noticed the approach of two stocky men from the shadows surrounding the large turn of the century house. "Why do I feel like we just rode into Dodge at High Noon?"

"I kind of guess we have," Meg said, touching his hand, then exiting the car. They'd only taken three steps toward the house when the men intercepted them.

"You got business here?" the stockier one with a leather blazer asked.

"We're from the University. We need to speak with Lok Yang. Miss Silivasi is a student advisor."

"Prove it," the other man said, unbuttoning his own blazer in movie mobster fashion.

Leigh shook his head and pulled out his wallet to flash his university ID. Meg did the same.

"Satisfied now? Or do we need to have our retinas scanned or something?"

"You got some big balls, art man. If you wanna keep 'em, shut your mouth and get moving."

"Excuse me?" Leigh ground his teeth, his temper flaring. The man in the blazer moved forward with a big show of cracking his large knobby knuckles. Meg reached up and put a hand on Leigh's shoulder.

"Thanks," she said quickly and started up the last steps to the house. Leigh ground his teeth and moved between the two hulking thugs.

"Guess the stories about Lok's dad are true," he glanced over his shoulder. The two thugs were still shooting them nasty glares. "Those two aren't gardeners, that's for damn sure."

A few more men inside, either standing or seated on the French furnishings, spread around the living room. The conversation in the room died and everyone looked at the two art professors, suspiciously at first, and then with contempt.

"Miss Silivasi?" Leigh and Meg turned around. Lok paused at the bottom of the staircase in the foyer, his hand clutching at the banister. "What are you two doing here?"

"We need to talk to you about Kenny, Lok," Meg folded her arms in front of her and frowned. She gave him a worried look. "It's important."

"I haven't seen him since the other night. I told you that."

"Well, we have seen him and he's acting strangely," Leigh said flatly. "He tried to hurt Miss Silivasi tonight."

"No way! Ken wouldn't hurt anyone..."

Leigh and Meg exchanged a quick glance at the sudden fading of Lok's voice. It didn't take a mindreader to tell the kid lied, but with their abilities to sense the feelings behind his words, it was all the more obvious.

"Lok, something is happening to Ken—he's not acting like himself, and you know that," Leigh moved behind Meg and rested a hand on the banister. "We need your help before he seriously hurts someone...or worse."

Lok sat down on one of the steps and rested his elbows on his knees. "He already has," he said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Meg unfolded her arms and swallowed loud enough for Leigh to hear it.

Lok explained what happened by the warehouse, how the would be kidnappers were cut down with ruthless precision and no remorse

on Ken's part. The way he described it, an image of the mural sprang to Leigh's mind. He reeled back and gasped for air, like someone had punched him in the gut.

"Lok, go to your room." Daniel Yang stepped into the foyer and narrowed his eyes at his son.

"But, Dad."

"Go."

As Lok retreated up the stairs, Yang turned his cold stare to the two art professors. "Is there something you want with my son?"

Meg looked from the retreating Lok to his father. "Mr. Yang, We're worried about Kenny Ohara. He checked himself out of the hospital, and hasn't been to his apartment or school or contacted his family in days, and that simply isn't like him."

"And this concerns me because?"

"If it was my son's best friend acting so strangely, I think I'd be concerned," Meg said.

"Well, it isn't you, now is it, *Professor?*"

One of the bodyguard types hovered in the doorway leading to the living room.

Leigh shook his head to clear it. "Look, we don't want any trouble."

"Then stay the fuck away from Lok," Yang's tone darkened.

"There's something going on here you don't understand..." Leigh didn't know where to even start, but he didn't have to.

"I know more than you fucking realize," Yang grunted. He nodded, and the thug moved from the doorway into the room. "Get out of my house."

Leigh clenched his jaw, but wasn't going to let himself be intimidated. For all his show of being a tough guy, Yang wasn't just a little upset at the two concerned art instructors—he was scared about something else. The man's features were set in a don't-piss-me-off expression and a cocky smile tugged at his lips, as Leigh was sure it always did. But fear lurked in Yang's eyes behind their sharp glare. When Yang lifted his hand to adjust his glasses, Leigh noticed the

bandages wrapped around the man's wrist.

"Mr. Yang, how did you get that?" Leigh whispered as he stared at the bandages.

"None of your fucking business." The edge in Yang's voice was unmistakable.

"If you don't want to help us, then let us talk to Lok," Leigh persisted.

"I'm not letting you put my son in danger with whatever crusade you're on to save Ohara," Yang stalked past them. "And if you're smart, you'll keep to your own fucking business for your sakes."

"But, Mr. Yang—" Meg froze in her tracks when the bodyguard blocked her path.

"I'll show you both out," he said.

Meg looked at Leigh, whose look of momentary defeat mirrored what she was feeling. When they reached the privacy of Leigh's car, Meg turned to him. "What do you think is going on?"

"For starters, I think Ken is the one responsible for Mr. Yang's injury."

Meg gasped. "No. I can't believe that. Shoving me away in a moment of anger is one thing, but to hurt his best friend's father? Especially a man like Daniel Yang—"

"I saw it, Meg. It was just a flash, but I saw a glimpse of Ken with a knife and looking at Yang."

"Oh, my."

One of Yang's men from outside rapped on the back of Leigh's car and motioned for him to get going. Cursing under his breath, Leigh turned the key in the ignition and sped away towards SoMA.

* * * *

Lok waited on the landing at the top of the stairs, his back pressed against the far wall so he would remain unseen. He heard Miss Silivasi and Gachelsing actually try to argue with his father—they were two of the few people who'd ever dared. They tried to convince

the senior Yang to help, but the two art professors were thrown out of the house a moment later.

"What about Kenny?" Lok whispered out loud. Miss Silivasi and Gachelsing were right—his best friend wasn't acting like himself, and he owed it to him to do what he could. He bit his lower lip and went downstairs.

Bits of conversation came from the men gathered in the living room.

"You can't do this, Danny. The old men won't like it."

Lok recognized the raspy voice. Franklin Cho smoked two packs of cigarettes a day and the head of his father's 'security' team sounded like he could die from lung cancer any time now.

"The Elders," Yang corrected, "don't need to know what I'm doing."

The deep voice of Jimmy Lau's father boomed from just inside the doorway leading to the foyer and Lok stopped from getting closer. "Well, it's about time you did something about that motherfucking freak. Shu is a liability. Period."

"You want the Elders on your ass, Lau?" Cho rasped. A chair screeched on the hardwood floor, and Lok knew either Lau or Cho was getting up to get in one or the other's face.

"The Elders believe in tradition, loyalty...respect," Yang's smooth voice stopped whatever conflict might've occurred. "Hayato Itou said to respect Shu, and the Family does. To them, it means power to have a *chiang-shih* working for them."

Lok peered around the doorway. His father stood by the fireplace, his back turned to the rest of the room, a glass of absinthe in hand. "But he's getting out of control." Yang emptied the glass and threw it into the fire. "He's always *been* out of control. The Elders be damned—I want him dead. And if that Ohara kid is helping him, I want him dead too." He downed his drink. "I need to get going. I have an appointment at the *Gingbo*"

Lok stepped away in horror. *No fucking way...they can't kill Ken.* He backed into a wooden pedestal, nearly knocking it over. More

chairs screeched in the living room and he darted upstairs before he could be seen. He burst into his room and flipped through his class notebooks. Miss Silivasi's number was in here somewhere—he'd stolen it from Ken's PDA last week when they went to check out the haunted house site in the Children's Center.

Just thinking about his friend made him flip through the book faster. *Miss Silivasi has to help him before it's too late...*

* * * *

As soon as they got back to Meg's apartment, Leigh picked up the phone and called Brennan Staub. "Brennan, I can't go to Sacramento."

"Oh, I beg to differ."

"Look, it's personal. I need a few days off."

"No."

"I'm entitled to ten sick days."

"Give me a medical excuse."

"Come on, Brennan, don't be a hardass on this. You can get someone else. Get one of the newer professors."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. Meg will be taking time off, too. You have plans to spend the week screwing her brains out?"

"You bastard."

"Gachelsing, you'll go to Sacramento, or you'll be out of a job."

"You can't fire me for no reason."

"Let's see—insubordination, refusal of duties, a less than stellar departmental evaluation last semester—need I go on?"

It hit Leigh clear as day. The bastard wanted Meg, but she'd brushed him off. Repeatedly. He slammed the phone down. "Shit."

Meg returned from the bathroom and sat on the sofa next to him. "What's wrong, what happened with Brennan?"

"He said if I don't go to Sacramento, he'll have me dismissed."

"No! He can't do that."

Leigh leaned in and kissed her forehead. "He can and will,

because he's a bastard." With a sigh, Leigh sat back and ran his hands through his hair. "Maybe I can go over his head."

Meg touched his shoulder. "If you have to go to the conference, then go. I'll be all right. Kenny won't hurt me. He has no reason to. If he comes back to school, he'll be fine, I know it."

Leigh didn't share her confidence. He placed a hand over hers and rubbed his thumb across her delicate fingers. "I don't want to take a chance on that," he said. "I'd rather lose my job than risk losing you."

Meg touched the side of his face. "When you asked me to trust you the other night, I did," she said. "Now I'm asking you to trust me. Kenny's going to be fine and so will I."

Leigh opened his mouth to protest, but she put her fingers over his lips. Her touch communicated so much love and strength. Her spirit washed over him and his doubts shrank away. He nodded and she pulled her hand away.

"I love you, Meg," Leigh said softly. He touched her chin and tilted her face up, then drew her into a gentle kiss.

The phone rang. They ignored it, letting Meg's machine pick up until Lok Yang's voice came across in an excited whisper.

"Miss Silivasi, I can't really talk, but I'm worried about Ken. I can't say why exactly, but if you go to the Historical Society and check into the records they have on Hayato Itou, you might find something." *Click.*

Meg nearly bowled Leigh over reaching for the phone, but it was too late. Only a dial tone greeted her. She hung up the phone receiver and turned to Leigh. "Hayato Itou. That doesn't sound Chinese at all. It seems more Japanese, doesn't it?"

"Ohara's family is Japanese."

"Yes." Meg's eyes grew wide as she realized why the name seemed so familiar. "The knife. The one I used in my sculpture. The box I bought at auction where Kenny found it was from the estate of Hayato Itou. His things were donated to the Historical Society's collection in the fifties or so."

Leigh gave her a questioning look. "But why would the Chinese Historical Society have Japanese memorabilia in their collection?"

"I still have the auction brochure."

Meg hurried to the bedroom and returned with a deep red lacquered box, as well as a small brochure. She set the box on the coffee table then flipped open the brochure. "Cinnabar and black with an inlaid top of cherry blossom branches and birds, this fine example of nineteenth century Japanese lacquer ware was part of the estate of Itou Hayato, a prominent member of the Chinese business community, son of Mr. Itou Toshiro and Lu Yin, granddaughter of Lu Zhaoxu, who financed the importation of the historic altar of the Kong Chow Temple. "

Meg bit her lower lip. "I know that name, and it's not because of the temple connection." She closed the catalogue and began scanning it from the front. "I remember looking at the catalogue with Kenny as we waited for the auction to start and he pointed it out to me."

She flipped a couple more pages then stopped and folded the thin catalogue in half to show Leigh. "Here it is—Lot thirty-five is comprised of a number of vintage newspapers printed in both English and Cantonese, similar to the ones in the collection here at the Historical Society. " Meg gave Leigh the catalogue, then went to get her purse from the small table near the door and returned to the sofa with a pocket magnifier. She handed it to Leigh and pointed to the photograph, showing a representation of the newspaper being auctioned. "Look at the piece of the paper in the back."

Leigh sucked in his breath as the tiny words fairly leapt off the page at him. *Lu Zhaoxu and a number of his business associates were murdered last night in a small restaurant off Stockton. Lu is thought to have been assassinated by*

The article was cut off, but Leigh's eyes grew wide as an image flashed through his mind. "Shu. He was killed by Shu."

"But that's impossible. That had to happen over century ago."

Leigh closed his eyes, rubbing his temple as a nagging ache began to take hold. "I know it's crazy, but those photos at the hotel, it

looked like Ken and Shu were in them.”

“Ken Ohara is twenty years old. I know that for a fact.”

“I know. I know.”

Meg looked at her watch. “The Historical Society is closed to visitors, but maybe I can catch Steve Kwan. I know he works late on Wednesdays. He sets up the lecture series and he owes me one for doing some free painting restoration work.”

Leigh set aside the auction catalogue and stared at the antique box on the table before him. *Itou Hayato son of Mr. Itou Toshiro and Lu Yin*. Toshiro. He knew that name. From the vision he'd had that day in the herbal shop. The one who looked like Ken. That was Toshiro. He was sure of it.

His thoughts broke off when Meg hung up the phone and said. “Let's go.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Shu leaned over the metal railing bordering the large space and stared down into the club. Below him the floor filled as the evening crowd packed in. Rumors of the vampire who lurked in the outskirts of Chinatown lured this crowd in droves, rumors encouraged by the growing number of missing or murdered people found around the *Poisoned Dragon*. A throbbing mass of young men and women with black clothing and silver jewelry, their faces painted a ghostly shade of pale. It was all part of their fantasy world, so much like the one the girl Lilith had believed in. As had the last girl strewn on the railing a step away from Shu, now nothing more than a corpse cooling to the temperature of the room.

Shu glanced back at the crowd below. The heat of their bodies and thundering of their hearts rose up to the rafters, and he imagined the taste of their blood on his tongue. They were a shadowy sea of endless victims to be preyed upon and Shu laughed at the frailty of their mortal lives. But entering the club now was the only one he cared about, the one face he searched for.

Kenichi.

The young man looked up at the silent call and shielded his eyes from the flashing black lights hanging from the rafters. Shu smiled, and Ken made his way along the edge of the crowd. He climbed up the narrow metal stairs to the catwalk hidden behind the curtains bordering the stage where a live band played a dark, hypnotic song. Ken crossed the scaffolding, stepping over the body of the dead woman.

Shu reached out and uncurled his fingers in a beckoning gesture. "Taste this." He held his hand out, blood coating his fingertips.

"Stop it," Ken snapped and Shu raised an eyebrow at his tone, his lips curling into a smile. Such defiance...

"It is an acquired taste," he laughed and licked his fingers clean. The vampire's voice faded into a sigh and he flicked the last droplets of blood over the edge of the railing. "Where were you today?" he asked after a moment. "You left early this morning." He leaned close and traced his lips over Ken's shoulder, inhaling the scents that lingered on the fabric.

"You were painting..." But a familiar scent mixed with the sharp odor of turpentine and linseed oil...the scent of a woman. "And you were with someone."

"No," Ken muttered, staring down into the crowd. "I was working on my mural for the haunted house and the bastard who runs it pitched a bitch, saying it was too graphic, then Gachelsing and Silivasi show up to bitch at me about it too." He pushed his hair out of his face with an angry swipe of his hand. "I'm going to get a shower and work on the wall in the bedroom."

He stepped away, pausing when he came to the girl's body this time. He looked back at Shu, who was staring at him. Ken opened his mouth as if to say something, but instead lowered his head and stepped over the girl again.

"But Silivasi's scent is on you," Shu's whisper carried across the distance between them. "Why?"

He moved quickly, his footsteps never made a sound on the metal railing. Suddenly, Shu was at Ken's side, breathing in his ear. He touched Ken's shoulder, his fingers sliding down across the tense muscles in his neck and back. That Silivasi woman had a strange air about her back in the gallery, and she seemed close to Kenichi. Shu refused to feel threatened over a woman who most surely was insignificant, and yet his hands tightened around Ken's broad shoulders. "Tell me why her scent is so heavily on you," Shu demanded.

Ken opened his mouth a few times, searching for the words to say. "She got in my way," he said softly. "I had to deal with her...she was getting in my face."

"Fools," Shu's lips curled in a smile. "They don't appreciate the beauty of your work as I do."

"Don't worry about it. I told them to leave me alone." Ken reached up and touched Shu's hand. "I really need a shower."

Without a word, Shu stepped away and watched as Kenichi went back down and disappeared through the door that led back to the loft apartment. Some people just would not listen and insisted on being dealt with in other ways. Gachelsing and Silivasi clearly fell into that category.

Shu looked over the catwalk railing and signaled to one of Yang's lackeys, filling in for Yang's whore, who usually tended to whatever needs he had. The man quickly appeared at the head of the stairs. "Clean this mess," Shu said indicating this evening's 'dinner companion'.

Yang's lackey made a gagging noise in the back of his throat, his skin tone as gray as the sports coat he wore.

Shu snorted. "What's wrong, you don't have the stomach for this job?"

The man skirted past Shu, careful not to make eye contact or to reply. He knelt down by the body, touched it, made a croaking noise and then pulled away as if not knowing what the hell to do. He muttered curses about that stupid bitch *mei* not being here, and Shu silently debated killing the useless fool. But doing so hardly seemed worth the time or effort. Shu turned to leave, preferring instead to watch Ken work on the painting.

"She fucks up everything, that bitch," the lackey muttered. "We could have enough money to not have to deal with this shit, but no..."

Shu paused at the end of the railing, his sharp ears catching the barely audible words. *Mei's* taste in men ranged only from powerful to more powerful. This sniveling lackey who could barely stomach

handling the body of a dead woman was nowhere in the range of her appetites.

"What would you have to do with Yang's mistress?" he asked.

The man jumped away as Shu approached. He backed into the railing. "Nothing, I mean, I—" he stuttered.

Shu grabbed his face with one hand, his nails digging into the man's skin. He could smell it now—*mei-mei's* scent underneath the thick layer of cheap cologne the man wore.

"You two have been sleeping together," Shu frowned. "What else have you been doing?"

"I—I—don't know what you mean," the man broke into a cold sweat.

"Perhaps this will encourage you to *know what I mean*." Shu pressed him backwards over the railing. The man's arms pinwheeled and he shrieked though the sound was drowned out by the music of the band.

"Oh, shit! Don't drop me!" he pleaded as he dangled more than twenty-five feet over the unknowing club patrons below. "*Mei* promised the job would give a quick payback. Everyone knows you hate Yang, why the fuck would you care if we set up the kidnapping job for his kid?"

Shu raised an eyebrow. "*Mei* arranged the kidnapping?"

"She set up the job for the kid. We were supposed to get a cut from the ransom."

"And live happily ever after," Shu said coldly. The man made his best attempt at a nod.

"Where is she?"

"With—with Yang, I think," he stammered. His eyes widened. "Oh, shit..."

He begged for his life, his body shook with fear and his words came out in choked gasps. Shu pulled him back on to the railing and his pleas turned into grateful moans. As he tried to pull away from Shu, the vampire snapped his neck and tossed the body next to the woman's.

“Now to find dear *mei mei*.” He gave the dead man one last glance. A stop at the *Gingbo* was in order.

* * * *

Ken leaned forward, resting his forehead upon the black ceramic tiles of the shower wall, and let the steaming water course over his naked back. It stung the newly healed cuts over his right shoulder blade, but it wasn't an unpleasant kind of pain. If anything it was arousing. Just the way the past couple days had been arousing in all senses of the word.

The homophobic fears he'd had after that first time being with Shu suddenly didn't matter. In fact, it felt right that he and Shu should be a couple. And he knew the dreams had something to do with it.

The dreams he'd had since Shu came to him in the hospital and healed him had been unbelievable. They weren't like typical dreams at all. It was as if he entered some kind of psychological movie theater the minute he closed his eyes. At first he was seeing himself and Shu in another time, a place, yet here in San Francisco. It was what inspired his mural at the children's center. He was living the local history he'd only read about in school.

But it wasn't the sanitized general history of textbooks at all. What he saw in his dreams was often dark and violent, and he was right at the center of it all. It made what he knew of Lok's father's 'business' seem like a Saturday morning kid's show. The streets of his dream Chinatown were filled with extortion and opium dens, prostitution houses and the taking over of rivals' territory and the protection of their own.

Their own—his and Shu's. Oh, he knew there were others 'at the top', issuing the official orders and taking the largest share of whatever spoils were won, but in reality, on the dark and gritty streets of old San Francisco, he and Shu were a force to be reckoned with and feared. But it wasn't really him who was at Shu's side at all. It was Toshio.

And yet he *was* Toshiro.

Sort of.

Ken stepped back under the direct flow of the showerhead. For hours over the last few days he'd been listening to Dao Kan reminisce about the past and more times than he could count, Ken found himself adding things to the conversation, filling in spots left untouched, even correcting names of people and dates of events.

And he didn't know how or why he was able to do it. But he was sure—almost sure—he wanted it to stop.

Toshiro was so many things he didn't want to be. He was ambitious to the point of committing murder to get what he wanted. He was able to do all sorts of dirty work without a second thought. He—

Ken closed his eyes and tilted his face up to the water. No. He didn't want to think of it anymore.

But Toshiro wasn't a total monster, a tiny voice said somewhere deep in his mind. He understood goodness and compassion and love. He loved Dao Kan Shu so deeply that it touched a place buried deep within the heart of a fierce dragon, and that is nothing to be ashamed of.

* * * *

"The *Gingbo* is closed."

The usual two guards wearing their usual colorless suits and dour expressions blocked Shu's path. The one who'd spoken scratched at one of his tightly cropped sideburns and stared at Shu over his dark glasses. "Unless you have an invitation from Yang, tonight's a private party and you're not welcome."

"Yang needs to keep a better watch over his dogs," Shu hissed. "You're always forgetting your place." He moved forward faster than they could react and shoved them straight through the double doors they'd tried to block. The wood splintered with a loud crack and they crashed into the opposite wall. Before crumpling to the floor among

the debris. Shu stepped over the mess and entered the brothel.

Empty of bar patrons and the whores who serviced them, the lower floor of the *Gingbo* lay mostly in darkness. Just as the two guards had said, the place was closed for exclusive business tonight only. Shu stepped down into the main floor and snaked through the crimson furniture made an even deeper shade of the color by the dim red backlighting along the wall by Ken's mural.

Shu briefly stared at the artwork, a sharp reminder of why he was here. His Kenichi—his talented artist—almost had his life taken from him, *stolen* from him by the filthy whore who helped run this place no less. Shu's temper flared, his hands clenched into tight fists. Muffled sounds drifted from upstairs, and he picked out *Mei's* voice. Hissing under his breath, he stalked up the staircase.

Voices poured out from an open room on the right of the landing along with soft orange candlelight.

"What the hell?"

"It's nothing, Danny, just lay back and relax," *Mei-Mei* cooed. "Po and Ling are right downstairs."

Shu stepped into the room. His footsteps fell silently on the thick red carpeting that covered the floor from wall to wall. On the giant four-post bed, *Mei* straddled Yang's waist, her hands slowly rubbing over his naked chest, and purred.

"You've been under too much stress lately." She leaned down and her long black hair slid past her bare shoulders and spilled onto the pillow. *Mei* touched Yang's cheek as she pressed her mouth to his, kissing him with lips as adept at pleasuring as they were in deceiving.

She pulled away and smiled. "Feel better?" Her hips shifted down and Yang wrapped his arms around her waist.

"You're through working at the *Dragon, Mei*," Yang murmured, his eyes locked on hers.

"This whore is through working in a lot of places, I'm afraid." Shu leaned over the bedside and grabbed the woman by her hair. He ripped her from Yang's grasp and dragged her to the edge of the bed. *Mei* shrieked and Yang jerked up, frantically reaching for his glasses

on the nightstand.

"What the *fuck*?" he cried out, practically spitting with rage. "Shu, you son of a bitch, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"You'll have to find a less treacherous plaything, Yang," Shu held the woman in place, his hands twisting in her hair as she tried to jerk away. "Show him your tongue, *mei-mei*."

He forced her mouth open with his free hand. "Why, it's not appropriately forked yet." Shu reached in, stabbed his thumbnail into the edge of her tongue and tore down. She screamed, blood spewing from her split tongue and down her heaving breasts.

"Fuck! *Fuck!*" Yang scrambled out of the bed and pulled his handgun out of his pile of clothes. He aimed, his arm impressively steady, given how badly his body shook.

If Shu had been in better spirits, he would have laughed. "Save your bullets," he hissed. "The whore has something she wants to share, don't you, *mei-mei*?"

Shu whispered into her ear, but his voice carried across to Yang as well. "Who else have you been working for and *on*? How was it that those men knew exactly where and when to find Lok Yang four nights ago by the docks?"

Her voice gurgled in her throat. "It was a mistake," she managed to choke out, blood splattering from her lips. She looked over at Yang. "Please, Danny, I was stupid! I wasn't thinking! Don't let him kill me."

"Yes, the forked tongue suits you nicely," Shu held her up and away from him. "Wouldn't you agree, Daniel?"

Yang's answer came in three rapid pulls of the trigger, each bullet finding its target on *Mei's* chest just shy of her heart. She twitched in Shu's grasp, a little bit of life still left in her body.

"Not good enough," Shu grabbed her shoulder with his free hand. "This *bitch* can't die quickly enough." He snapped upwards with the hand knotted into her hair while he pushed down into her shoulder with a fierce twist. Flesh and tendons stretched in her neck before tearing apart with a loud rip. Her body fell to the mattress and he

lifted her head away, sinew and shredded skin dangling from the edge of her neck while the blood gushed out of the hole in her body.

Yang lowered his gun, his eyes wide, his body racked with tremors.

“There,” Shu tossed the head to his feet. *“Feel better?”*

“You monstrous bastard.”

Shu smirked and wiped the whore’s traitorous blood on the sheets. “I’m disappointed in you, Daniel. Your ancestor Ren had much better taste in women who truly understood loyalty.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Leigh and Meg reached the Historical Center after nightfall. They parked a block away at Portsmouth Square and walked down Clay Street towards the old YWCA building now housing the Center. The evening air was crisp enough to make them walk at a brisk pace and only a handful of local residents were on the street. A cable car rang out somewhere in the distance as Meg and Leigh came up to the brick structure.

The front doors were locked, but Meg rang the buzzer hidden along the edge of the doorframe. A minute or two later, the door opened and a man in a USC sweatshirt peered out.

"Meg?" Steve Kwan tucked a pencil behind his ear and shifted a heavy stack of papers in his arms to be able to push open the door more. "What's up?"

Meg introduced Leigh to the graduate student, and Kwan smiled brightly. "Well, come in." He kicked the door shut after the two art teachers. "Things are quiet around here at night, which makes for great research opportunities. I guess you want more information for your art show?"

Meg glanced at Leigh. "Sort of," she said. "I bought some antiques from an auction a while ago. The Historical Center put them on the block. They belonged to the estate of an Itou Hayato."

Kwan nodded. "We auction off a few things every now and then to help with the fundraising." He started down the hall, and they followed.

“Would you still have any more items from his estate?”

Kwan gave her a look over his shoulder. “Yes—but they’re important pieces, not for sale,” he said, a little defensively. Like most museum curators, Kwan gave off the air of someone very protective of his collection.

“We just want to see them,” Leigh assured him.

“That’s fine,” Kwan led them to an area of the Center blocked off from visitors. “Can I ask why, though? I mean, no one’s showed interest in any of that stuff since I’ve been working here.”

“Just research,” Leigh said quickly.

“What kind?” Kwan persisted. It seemed to Leigh that for every answer, Steve Kwan had a question. Kwan tried to open the door leading to the storage area and fumbled his stack of papers. They spilled on to the floor and he sighed.

But at least that brought an end to his questions. Leigh bent down to help him gather the scattered sheets and noticed they were fliers for an upcoming lecture series.

This year, Dr. Samsaras will thrill us with local legends handed down concerning the mythic Creatures of the Night who allegedly prowled the alleys of Chinatown during the early decades of the 20th century.

Known as the Poisoned Dragon and Chiang-Shih, these legendary ‘boogeymen’ struck fear into the hearts of disobedient children and teenagers throughout the entire San Francisco area....

Leigh stared at the flyer in his hand. “Who is this Dr. Samsaras?”

Kwan shuffled the stack of flyers together. “Between you me and the jade phoenix on the wall, he’s a bit of a crackpot, but he brings in the donations. Last year we were able to carpet the entire lecture hall and have the garden expanded with the profits we made on his Halloween walking tour.”

He stood and held the stack of papers close to his chest. “You remember him, don’t you, Meg? You said he reminded you of an older David Bowie.”

Meg shook her head. “I don’t think I was on the tour.”

“Oh, that’s right. It was that student of yours, the one you let help while you did the restoration on that painting. I remember someone in an a sweatshirt from your school tagging along behind Samsaras and kept thinking it was you, for some reason.” Kwan laughed. “Some of those Japanese boys are too pretty for their own good, eh?”

Leigh handed over the flyer. “What are the *chiang-shih?*” he asked quietly.

“Like these say,” Kwan tucked the extra sheet in his pile, “they’re just made-up monsters. Something like the vampires of European folklore. It’s funny about the Poisoned Dragon reference, though. I think some of the stories say the Dragon killed a few notable members of the Chinese community.”

Leigh swallowed. *Poisoned Dragon*. Those two words haunted him at every turn.

“But I’m no expert with that sort of thing,” Kwan continued. He hit the light switch and a fluorescent lamp flickered on overhead. Meg moved past him and started thumbing through the catalogue book on the table by the door that would help them find their way through the maze of shelves that filled the room.

“You should come check out the lectures, if you’re really interested in local legends like that,” Kwan turned back to Leigh and nodded. “The series is slated to start at the end of the month.”

“I’d like to see this Samsaras sooner, if possible. Is there a number I can reach him at?” This wasn’t something that could wait, not if there was even the remotest chance Ken’s life...*Meg’s life*...was in danger.

“There is, but it’s not in the city,” Kwan answered. “He moved up to Sacramento not long ago . Get this—he’s a ‘paranormal investigator’. Here...” he tugged out a flyer and took out the pencil he’d tucked behind his ear. He scribbled out a telephone number and handed it to Leigh.

“That’s how you can reach him,” he shrugged. “He’s a joke, really, but the man is a great storyteller.”

“Thanks...” Leigh folded the piece of paper in hands.

Sacramento, the same damn place Brennan was sending him off to. This had to be more than coincidence.

"Well, I've got to get some paperwork done," Kwan shifted the stack of flyers and headed out. "Let me know if you need anything." He ducked his head back in the doorway for a second.

"Don't mess up my cataloguing system," he warned. "I know exactly where I left everything."

"Don't worry, Steve, we won't goof anything up."

Meg waited until the curator was down the corridor before moving to stand near Leigh again. "Now why would Kenny Ohara be following around the ghost hunter guy last year?"

Leigh twisted the sheet of paper in his hands, barely aware he was doing it. "Something in Ken was drawn to the stories," he said. "If those are even 'stories' at all..."

Meg frowned and squeezed his shoulder. "There are a lot of strange things in this world, but *chiang-shih?* *Vampires?* Why would Ken be drawn to that?"

Without trying to call the picture to his mind, he saw a flash of the murdered young woman, a deep gash on her neck, the words *Poisoned Dragon* on her lips. He shivered despite the warmth of Meg's touch.

"You said so yourself—Ken found that knife even though it was so well hidden," Leigh said. "Something is calling for him."

"But how? Why—" She broke off her grip tightening on Leigh's shoulder. "It's that Shu? You don't think...he can't really be... Can he?"

"If I can see and feel the things I see and feel for no reason, why can't he be?" Leigh stepped to the catalogue to see where Hayato Itou's things were located a moment before Steven Kwan rushed in and told them they had to leave.

"I'm sorry, I just got a call. I need to pick up our director and take him to the airport. He needs some files he's supposed to present to a symposium in LA. I have to lock up and take them ASAP."

"Sure," Meg said.

They left, and Meg looked apprehensively at the door as Steve locked it after them. She sighed and turned to Leigh.

"What do we do now? Do you want to go to that club?"

Leigh blanched. "No!" He ran his hands through his hair. "Let's just try to grab a late supper and go home. If we sleep on it, we can come up with something."

"But Ken might be in trouble. In danger."

Leigh studied her for a long moment. "He might be, but I don't think so. I feel it will be all right. We'll think of something in the morning."

There was no *fucking* way he would ever set foot in that club again, and as long as he could help it, neither would Meg. Nothing he told Meg was a lie—Ken had been fine when they found him in the children's center. *More* than fine, except for the fact he'd acted unlike the Ken they knew. Rude, arrogant...violent...it was almost a completely different man. But whatever was happening to him, for tonight, at least, Ken should be all right...

They stopped for a quick dinner in Union Square before driving back to the apartment. The light on the answering machine flashed as they entered the door.

"Maybe it's Ken," Meg dashed over and hit the play button.

"*Hi, Leigh. I'm guessing you're still at Meg's place...*" Brennan Staub's voice sounded over the speaker, his sarcasm as plain and biting as ever. Leigh closed the door with a sigh and Meg folded her arms over her chest while the rest of the message played.

"*The University needs you down in Sacramento tomorrow, and there's no other way about it...*" Brennan went on and Leigh leaned back against the door.

"Bastard," Leigh grumbled before punching the delete button on the machine. "I'll have to leave before dawn to get there by the time he says I need to. Shit. Everyone knows those stupid introductory sessions never actually start before eight."

Coming closer, Meg cast a sympathetic look his way and reached out to smooth her palm over the toned planes of Leigh's chest,

accentuated by the snug fit of his steel gray T-shirt. "It's only a couple days. You'll be back by Monday, and maybe by then Kenny will have gotten whatever rebelliousness it is out of his system and he'll be back at school the same as always."

"Yeah. Maybe." Leigh draped his arms over the tops of Meg's shoulders and toyed with the ends of the ponytail secured at the nape of her neck. "I'm going to run back to my place to pack a bag and get a shower so I don't have to worry about it in the morning. You could come with me, maybe wash my back. . . .I'll wash yours."

Meg giggled and shivered when Leigh let his hands drift down the front of her body. "As tempting as that is, Professor Gachelsing, I think I'd better get a call in to Kenny's family to let them know he's...I guess he's all right. There's no need to worry them more than they are. The fact that he was working on his project is a good sign, right?"

"Of course it is," Leigh said none too convincingly.

He pulled Meg into a slow kiss, then pried himself away and went down to his apartment.

* * * * *

Meg called the Ohara home, but got only their answering machine. She left a brief message telling them that she'd seen Ken for just a moment and that he seemed as physically fit as he'd been before the shooting incident and that she'd be in touch the minute she had any other news to give them.

She hung up the phone, feeling more than a little guilty, though she knew it was silly. She hadn't lied to them. She had seen Kenny. He had been fine physically. Could she really comment on his mental state? She was no psychologist and it made perfect sense that he might be having some 'attitude problem' after being shot and almost dying.

She didn't even want to try and sort out the hows and whys of his miraculous recovery. She'd been trying to do that for days and all it

had given her was more headache than answers.

Taking a deep breath to calm her mind, Meg let her gaze fall upon her purse, which she'd dropped onto the sofa when they'd entered the apartment. She sat, pulled the purse onto her lap, then pulled out the small plastic bag. When she ran down to the market this morning to pick up some tea and milk, she'd impulsively stopped at the nearby drugstore and bought over-the-counter-contraceptives.

She glanced nervously at the door, afraid that Leigh would walk in and see her, though she knew it was foolish. She was a grown woman and probably should have been on the pill for years now, if she wasn't so damn backward when it came to sex.

Surely she wasn't a total aberration for not having ever really had a sex life. She'd been busy with school and grad school and teaching and pursuing her art career. She simply hadn't had the time to get involved with anyone that deeply. And that disastrous whatever-it-had-been with Brennan Staub when he'd still been teaching did not count.

Making up her mind to follow her heart, Meg got up and took the bag containing the contraceptive sponge to the bedroom. She got a quick shower, inserted the sponge according to the instructions, then threw on her old terry robe. She was about to take it off and lay naked in the bed when she remembered something on the top shelf of the closet. She smiled to herself as she took it out and opened it, withdrawing the red lace negligee and matching thong she'd been talked into buying at a female colleague's home shopping party last summer.

Everyone else bought something—some bought many things, and she'd felt odd not participating. Meg smiled again as she slipped the garment on and unpinned her hair, letting it bob about her shoulders. She'd be a liar three times over if tried to deny that an image of Leigh Gachelsing in all his snooty, cover-model-looking glory hadn't popped into her mind when she bought the negligee.

* * * *

Dao Kan Shu stood atop the roof of the apartment building behind Silivasi's. He smirked as he watched her shadowy form through the sheer peach curtains. It would appear that meddling little shit Gachelsing was going to 'get lucky' this evening.

There'd been a time when Shu would have only been far too happy to beat him to it, but now such wicked pleasures held no attraction for him, they hadn't for decades.

"Enjoy yourselves while you can, Professors," Shu whispered before stepping to the edge of the roof and leaping down, the back of his leather jacket fanning out around him like stereotypical bat wings.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

San Francisco, 1906

In the aftermath of the earthquake and the fires that ravaged the city, Chinatown itself was completely devastated. Two days after the chaos, a man picked his way through what remained of a house on the outskirts of the Chinese district. His coat was slung over his shoulder, the sleeves of his shirt rolled up to protect them from being too dirtied.

Shu watched him from behind, hidden among the deep shadows formed by the remnants of the staircase and a piece of the roof that leaned over it. The blood of his victims and the vampire who'd changed him still clung to his clothing, as did Toshiro's. He'd returned to the house to find the body gone, while this man went through the rubble and took possessions that were not his to claim. Shu watched in anger, waiting for the sun to sink safely below the horizon before he lashed out and killed whoever this scrounger was.

The man kicked aside a piece of debris—an edge of the frame that belonged to the large mirror that had hung in the foyer. Shu narrowed his eyes and hissed under his breath. Then the man turned away with a sigh, his profile highlighted by the dusk's waning sunlight.

Shu's eyes widened; his breath caught in his throat. He moved out of the shadows and the young man jumped, startled by his appearance.

"Toshiro," Shu gasped. He was at his side in less than a moment, tracing a finger along the other's cheek. He tilted the man's face to him, studying it carefully. The features were a little more rounded, his hair a shade darker. "His scent is in your blood," Shu breathed.

"He was my father," the man answered softly.

Toshiro's child. "What's your name?" Shu whispered.

"Hayato." The young man swallowed, but his eyes glittered in the dim light. "You're him, aren't you? Dao Kan Shu."

Shu didn't answer, keeping his face expressionless. He brought his hands to both sides of Hayato's face, his thumbs gently brushed the smooth skin. This moment was so reminiscent of his first encounter with Toshiro. He saw Toshiro's smiling face, the soft curves of cheeks...the untapped desire in his eyes.

"He murdered you," Hayato's pulse quickened, his breath caught in his throat. "Before I was even born."

"He did," Shu ran his fingers through Hayato's hair, shorter and darker than Toshiro's had been. No rebellious strands got in the young man's eyes, the way they had with Toshiro. "And in many ways, I'm dead still," Shu said. "How is it you know me?"

"Everyone knows the Poisoned Dragon," Hayato whispered. "And my father knew you best of all."

"Yes," Shu frowned. He drew Hayato's face to his; the young man didn't resist. Shu took his lips in slow kiss, working his mouth open. He took Hayato's warmth, his taste, his smell. Hayato stiffened at first and then returned the kiss with a fierce hunger.

Shu pulled away, his eyes closed. *He was so much like Toshiro...*

"I want everything my father had," Hayato said breathlessly. He clutched at the front of Shu's tattered, dust-covered clothing. "Everything."

* * * *

Shu moved through the empty city streets, lost in thought. Silivasi and Gachelsing persisted in interfering with Kenichi. Shu's concern lay in

how much influence those two had over the young man, and how far they'd be willing to go to exercise it. He would do whatever was necessary to keep them away. After finding the professors' apartment building, he'd intended to return directly to the club. But his footsteps guided him elsewhere. He came to a stop in front of large turn-of-the-century house. He put a hand on the iron gate blocking the entrance off from the rest of the street and stared at the structure.

It stood out sharply against the black, moonless sky with its crisp white paint job, as vividly now as it had in another lifetime. From the curved balconies on the second story to the earth and stone cellar that spread out below the structure hidden from the public's eyes, Shu knew everything about the house. Years ago, he'd shared it with another. Hayato Itou, Toshiro's child...one of the bitterest disappointments Shu had ever suffered.

For a while, Hayato served as a substitute for the man he wanted. Shu took him each night, driving into him in attempt to fill the emptiness, telling himself Hayato could be everything he'd once had in Toshiro, all he'd desired.

Sexual satisfaction Hayato provided in full measure, but the young man never touched that one hidden place inside of Shu's soul, never filled the void as Toshiro could. Yes, Hayato possessed so many of the qualities Shu valued: ambition, intelligence, a desire to do whatever was necessary to achieve his desires. But he lacked artistry, and compassion, and in the end, one fact remained.

Hayato was not Toshiro.

When he'd finally realized this, it was like experiencing Toshiro's death all over again. The disappointment and grief—made sharper by how close Hayato had come to being like his beloved—that filled him once more.

But now there was Kenichi.

From the moment he'd first seen the young man, he'd felt himself drawn to the artist. The past few days they'd spent together, Kenichi spoke like Toshiro, moved like him, loved like him. As they lay in bed, Ken's head resting on his outstretched arm, Shu could close his

eyes everything was exactly the way it had been in 1872.

Shu pushed away from the gate, his face twisted with pain. While he concerned himself over whatever threat Silivasi and Gachelsing might pose to his hold on Ken, he also feared his own influence over the young man. How much of Kenichi's feelings were genuine, and how much had Shu himself placed there with the longing in his own heart? If such were the situation, Kenichi would be a far crueler disappointment than Hayato.

Shu returned to the *Poisoned Dragon*. He entered through the side of the building to avoid those remaining inside the club, dancing and drinking away the last few hours of the night. Upstairs, Kenichi sat in the bedroom with a sketchbook open on his lap and a pencil in hand. More than a dozen sheets of paper lay crumpled around him on the mattress.

Ken's pencil flew over a fresh sheet, his focus completely on the drawing he laid out in frenzied strokes. Suddenly, he dropped the pencil and ripped out the page with a sigh. He balled it up in an angrily clenched fist and tossed it on to the bed with the others.

"Shit," he sighed and rubbed his eyes.

Shu moved to the bedside and unfolded one of the trashed sketches. In it, he stood behind Ken, his arms wrapped possessively around the younger man's bare chest and waist. Ken leaned back into the embrace, his head tilted backwards as Shu kissed his neck; a trickle of blood ran down from the spot.

Each line of the sketch captured their dark passion with such intimacy. Shu exhaled slowly. "This is beautiful," he breathed. He looked through the other crumpled attempts, all similar portraits of himself and Kenichi, each as arousing as the first. "Why are you destroying them?"

"They're not right. They're not...me." Ken looked up his dark eyes weary and haunted. He started to say something but then his gaze fell on Shu's bloody clothing. He swallowed hard, his complexion paling a bit. "What did you do? I know you *have* to, but..." his voice trailed off and he rubbed his eyes again.

Shaking his head, he laughed bitterly. "I don't have a problem accepting that you're a fucking vampire, but I can't accept the fact that I might be this Toshiro reincarnated. Is that fucking hypocritical or what?"

He stood up and grabbed one of Shu's silk shirts from the closet. "I need a drink. I'm going downstairs for awhile." He left the top three buttons open, then tucked the hem into his black jeans. "Maybe if I stand close to the DJ's speakers, the music will blast the fucking stupid thoughts out of my head."

Ken had taken a few steps to the door when Shu seized him by the arm and jerked him around. The vampire leaned in close, his forehead touching Ken's, those dark eyes of his glowing with an unnatural sheen. "Think those 'fucking stupid thoughts', Kenichi. Think them over carefully before it's too late."

"Too late for what?" Ken asked throatily. "Are you trying to tell me I should be afraid of you...because I'm not." He said it without a note of defiance or aggression—it was just the truth. He wasn't afraid of Shu; it never even crossed his mind that the vampire would bleed him dry like any other victim.

Shu's chest rose and fell as his breathing quickened, and his expression darkened. He reached up and brushed Ken's face with his index finger, leaving a small smudge of dried blood on his cheek. "Maybe you should be."

"Fuck you," Ken said, but he didn't pull away from the touch.

Shu said nothing. He leaned closer and pressed his lips against the smudge he left on Ken's cheek in a soft kiss. He dragged his tongue over the blood until the skin was clean and then he stepped away. "Get your drink," Shu said, his voice flat and empty of any emotion. "I need a bath."

* * * * *

Ken wove his way through the milling crowd and stepped up to the bar. He ordered a glass of wine, which was presented without

question. The staff knew Shu favored him and that was all that mattered. Standing there Ken stared in the direction of the small stage where the DJ was stationed. He tried to peer up through the haze of stage lights to see if that girl's body was gone. It probably was. Apparently Yang's people very were good at cleaning up after Shu's 'dinner'.

With a sigh, Ken moved off and tried to find a dark corner to sit in. He had to settle for a spot at Shu's back booth, which no one ever trespassed on.

Ken was staring down into his wine when he heard his name being called. He looked up to see his friend Jonny Martello coming toward him from across the dance floor. Ken couldn't help but smile as Jonny stopped more than once to bump and grind with a couple of pretty girls who caught his eye.

"Dude. Where's your cell? Lok's been trying to get hold of you all night. Damn, he's called me at least a dozen times. I had to turn the fucking phone off. The vibrating in my pocket was about to make me come, it rang so often."

"What does he want?"

"I don't know only that he need to talk to you." Jonny sipped his beer. "Dude, Lok said you got shot. He said you almost died. It was on the news that you were critical."

Ken shrugged and stared down at his drink. "The doctors didn't know shit. It looked worse than it was." Ken looked up when his name was called again. It was Lok.

"Jonny, get lost," Lok said, sliding into the booth next to Ken.

"Fuck off."

"You fuck off. Now."

Both Ken and Jonny stared at Lok, then each other.

"Yeah, well, fuck you, too," Jonny grumbled as he took off back to the dance floor.

"You have to get out of here," Lok told Ken the minute they were alone. "You have to stay far away from this place. You have to stay away from Shu."

"Do I now?" Ken sipped his wine and watched the dancing crowd.

Lok gripped his arm. "Kenny, please. Listen to me. Shu is..." Lok looked around nervously and lowered his voice. "Shu is...dangerous. I can't tell you why and it's not just because of what he does for my father. He's...really dangerous."

"I know."

"Trust me, you don't."

Ken finished off his drink and held the empty glass up for a passing waitress to refill. "I know about Shu. *All* about Shu."

Lok gaped and swallowed hard. "You have to get away."

"I should but I don't know if I can."

Lok's brown eyes grew wider still, and he leaned close. "Is he—is he holding you prisoner?"

"What's that one CD you used to like? *My Own Prison*? That's me I'm in my own little prison." Ken laughed and downed the wine the waitress brought in two swallows. "Move your ass." Lok stayed put, but Ken fixed him with a cold stare. "Move, Lok. Now."

Swallowing again, Lok stood and let Ken pass. He followed him to the private door back near the restrooms. "Kenny. Listen to me—"

Ken entered the narrow corridor leading to the loft, shutting and locking the door behind him.

* * * *

The drapes were drawn in the bedroom to let in the dim light from street lamps below. Shu sat in the bath, his head rested on the porcelain edge. He watched the curtains' shadows move across the wall past the open bathroom door, the material stirred by the cold breeze drifting through the open windows. Downstairs, Kenichi sat in one of the booths, Shu's own, perhaps, drinking and trying to purge 'fucking stupid thoughts' from his mind. Shu stood up in the deep, step-down bath; water streamed down his body, rinsing away the last of the blood from tonight's kills. "Two of which were done for you, Kenichi," he whispered in the darkness.

Shu dried himself and let the towel fall to the floor as he entered the bedroom. He shuffled through the crumpled papers on the bed sheets, admiring the beauty and passion each drawing possessed once more. The cool air blew over his bare skin, a sharp contrast to the warmth of Ken's flesh when they lay together. Sighing under his breath, he crossed the room and opened the walk-in closet. A large chest rested along the back wall and he undid the latches, stiff with rust after decades of remaining unopened.

His fingers drew back a thin piece of silk covering, and he traced over the delicate wooden structure inside the chest. Despite the almost pitch blackness of the spacious closet, Shu could clearly make out the intricately carved pagodas, slopping bridges and walkways—every detail in the miniature bonsai garden had been made with care and skill.

Shu carefully removed the model and carried it to the bedroom. He placed it on the table across from the bed as the door to the loft opened. Ken entered the bedroom a moment later, and Shu silently gestured for him to come closer.

"I know what troubles you," he said softly, slipping into Cantonese as he often had with Ken over these past few days. "I want you to see something and you'll understand as well." He pulled the cloth covering away from the bonsai garden as Ken stood beside him.

"You created this," Shu leaned close and purred in his ear. "Perhaps you're having trouble accepting you *might* be his reincarnation, when you should accept that you *are* Toshiro reborn."

"Damn," Ken whispered before crouching down beside the table to study the sculptured scene. Tiny trees and shrubs dotted the elaborate landscape that was built atop a shallow porcelain planter. Time and lack of sunlight and water had turned the greenery from its original state to a drab, washed-out brown, the motion of Shu moving it from where it had rested caused the plants to flake making them look like dead autumn trees.

Ken reached out, wanting to touch the delicate wooden buildings, bridges and fences, but he stopped short, afraid that to do so would

cause them to crumble. He looked up, tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. "I could never do this. These took hours, maybe years to carve. The doors look like they actually slide open and closed. Look at that crane. You can see feathers, look at the fish in his mouth, there's a fin..."

Wiping his eyes with an angry swipe of his hand, Ken stood and stalked over to the open window. "I'm not him," he said into the night air. "I can't be him no matter how bad you want me to."

Those words cut into Shu like the sharp edge of a knife. He felt the sting in his old scars, and he pressed a hand to his belly, feeling the long thin line of scar tissue that started in his abdomen and curved upwards to the bottom of his ribcage. The very concerns that haunted his return to the club this evening now spoken from Ken's lips. Shu's brow creased as he frowned. He carefully drew the silk covering back over the miniature garden.

"Kenichi..." Shu breathed as he moved behind Ken. "You can't deny your true self." He caressed the back of the younger man's neck, moving his fingers through the soft strains of flowing hair. "Time can change names, but not souls."

Ken closed his eyes, leaning into Shu's touch. He pulled away and stood with his back against the window, the cool air upon his skin making him shiver. "I don't think I can take this." He leaned his head to rest upon the window frame. "I'm so fucking confused."

"You're strong, Kenichi," Shu unfastened the buttons on Ken's shirt. "You can handle this and much more." He eased the silk garment off his shoulder and only just brushed his fingertips over the exposed skin. Ken made a noise somewhere between a whimper and sigh as his fingers reached around to touch the still not-quite-healed marks on Ken's back above the shoulder blade. Like the scars on his belly, these also burned beneath his fingertips with an unnatural heat.

Shu sighed softly as he withdrew his hand. "In time, the confusion will pass."

Ken tugged the shirt back up over his shoulder then pulled away. "Yeah, sure. I'm gonna go in the other room and watch TV. Don't

wait up.”

“*What?*”

Shu’s eyes narrowed at Ken’s flippant response, his hand pulled back with a sharp movement. “How dare you?” he spat. Before Ken could respond or move, Shu reached out and grabbed his collar.

He nearly lifted Ken off his feet with the force of his tug as he dragged him to the bed and shoved him on to the mattress. Ken pushed at Shu’s hands, but the effort was wasted. Shu’s strength greatly outmatched the young mortal’s, and he pinned Ken down as easily as someone could a very small child.

“Don’t *fuck* with me, Kenichi,” Shu said, his voice colder than even the night air surrounding them. He ripped open Ken’s silk shirt, still pinning him down to the bed at his shoulder, and traced, with his index finger, one of the healed bullet wounds on the young man’s abdomen. “I’ve given you so many precious gifts because I believe you *deserved* them...but I can also take them away.”

Kenichi *was* strong, perhaps too strong for his own good. Shu’s dear artist clung with far too much stubbornness to the narrow scoped life of Kenichi Ohara. He was more than that...better, even. When would he realize this? Shu leaned close, his lips skimming Ken’s ear.

“Does *fear* help you understand?” he asked. “Because I can show you terrors you’ve never dreamed of in the worst of your nightmares, if that’s what it takes.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It was dark when the alarm buzzed, pulling Meg from a deep, contented sleep. She turned and reached for Leigh, who'd turned off the alarm and was already sitting up.

He looked over, smiled and kissed her forehead. "Go back to sleep."

"No," she said stifling a yawn. "I'll make you some breakfast." She stood and grabbed her robe from the chair beside the bed, then padded barefoot to the door, shivering at the delightfully decadent feel of the wetness between her legs. She smiled to herself as she made her way to the living room. Last night had been everything she'd hoped her 'first time' would be, and she was glad she hadn't given in to temptation before Leigh.

Her happy thoughts broke off the moment her gaze fell upon the framed photo of herself and her grandmother on the wall above the sofa. *Bunica's* ever-present smile suddenly looked like the disproving expression she got whenever speaking of Meg's mother, who'd gotten herself pregnant at the age of seventeen. Meg closed her eyes looked again and breathed sigh of relief to see *Bunica's* smile back in place.

Stop being silly. You're a grown woman capable of making up your own mind, and you aren't going to have an unwanted pregnancy. It's time to live your life in the twenty-first century like everyone else and forget about those old customs and being an obedient 'good girl' once and for all.

While Leigh dressed, Meg prepared a quick omelet and some

toast while the Mr. Coffee handled the morning's caffeine dose. The warm, inviting scent of the freshly brewed coffee filled the small kitchen, and she took two mugs from the drainer next to the sink. As she set everything out on the table, Leigh came out of the bedroom and dropped his travel bag by the front door.

"Breakfast is ready," Meg smiled at him while he tucked in the bottom edge of his shirt and moved next to her. He slid his hands around her waist and pulled her into an embrace.

"I wish I could stay," he sighed and rubbed her back through the cloth of her robe.

Meg leaned back and smoothed out the front of his shirt. "So do I," she smiled. "But this won't be the last time we wake up together." Meg smiled brightly and tried not to let tears form in her eyes. She didn't succeed.

"Oh, oh," Leigh said. "This is either very good or very bad."

Meg laughed and blinked the tears away. "It's very good." She draped her arms over Leigh's shoulders and toyed with the ends of his hair. "This all seems so sudden between us, but it seems so right too, you know? I can't explain it but I don't want to—I don't need to." She bit her lip a moment trying not to picture her grandmother's sternest expression that kept trying to fill her mind. "I love you."

Leigh brought both hands to the sides of her face and he gently wiped away the fat teardrop that rolled down her cheek. "Meg..." he whispered. When she looked up, his eyes shimmered and tears beaded on his lashes. "This is the most *right* thing I've ever felt."

He brought her close and touched his lips to hers, holding her closer as their kiss deepened. They pressed into each other, wishing time itself would slow. With each tug of their lips or soft murmur they made, they tried to make the moment last a little longer. The alarm on Leigh's wristwatch went off, its steady beeping a reminder that no matter how much they wished otherwise, the minutes kept passing.

Leigh pulled back and touched Meg's cheek. "I love you," he said softly. "More than I can even start to tell you."

She smiled at him, wiping away the last of the wetness in her eyes

and grabbed his hand. "Well, come on, don't let your breakfast get cold." Meg started towards their apartment's dining area—she already thought of it as *their* apartment.

"You're not having any?"

Meg shook her head. "Not right now. I thought I'd call Kenny Ohara a bit later and see if he wanted to eat with me before class—"

"No," Leigh said. "Stay away from him while I'm gone. He could have hurt you Meg. Badly."

"I think he was just upset about the mural. He's very intense when it comes to his art—"

Leigh gave her hand a squeeze and his expression became serious. "Meg, please listen to me—don't go after Ken until I get back. Don't set foot anywhere near that nightclub."

"All I was going to do was call him on his cell phone and meet him at school or at the coffee shop across the street—"

"Meg. *Please*."

She felt the tension and fear begin to build within Leigh and couldn't send him off like that, and risk him getting into an accident.

"I promise. I will not call Ken this morning."

Leigh studied her a moment, then nodded and gave her a quick hug before following her to the table.

"It's good," he said as he picked at the eggs and sipped the coffee. He smiled at her and she nodded. A little of his anxiety lingered, but it was nowhere near as powerful as what she had felt a moment ago.

"I can pack something for you for the road," she offered, but he shook his head.

"I'll be fine," he said before polishing off the omelet. He looked out the window where the sky was already turning a shade of pink behind the outline of the cities buildings and skyscrapers. "In fact, I should probably get going."

Meg followed him to the front door, her hand clasped in his. She didn't want him to go, but knew he had to.

"I'll try to come home early, if I can," he said. He unlocked the

door, car keys in hand, then turned around and gave her one more kiss. "Remember what I said."

"I will," Meg said, hoping that Kenny would come to school and be his old self. "Don't drive like a maniac on my account. I'll be here when you get back on Sunday I'm not going anywhere."

Leigh kissed her quickly and turned to go.

"Wait!" Meg ran to the kitchen, reached into the cookie jar and ran back to the door, presenting Leigh with an elf cookie. "If you get lonely for me, bite his head off or something."

Leigh took his suit jacket from atop his travel bag and shrugged into it, then took the cookie with a chuckle. "I'll be thinking only of you when I bite into him, I promise."

Leigh tucked it into his coat pocket and started to leave. Halfway through the door, he stopped himself, turned around and pulled Meg into a tight hug. "I'll see you Sunday and not a minute later," he kissed the top of her head and left the apartment.

She watched until he disappeared down the hall, then rushed to the window over her drawing table. He looked up at her and she blew him a kiss. He smiled brightly, took the elf cookie and kissed it before getting into his car and driving away.

She gazed out in the direction of Chinatown before closing the window, hoping that Kenny would come to school and that he'd open up about what was happening.

* * * *

Meg walked backward as she directed the men carrying the large plywood pieces that comprised Ken's mural out of the freight elevator. "Just set them up in Professor Gachelsing's studio, down the hall on the left. The doors are opened."

She ducked into her office to get her purse and took the men a tip. "Don't worry about closing the doors, I'll get them before I go. Thanks." Meg stood and studied the paintings, more awed than ever at how lifelike it was, how much of Ken's soul was in each precise

brushstroke and highlight.

Meg's cell phone rang and she seized it from her purse, only to frown when she saw it wasn't Ken returning her calls. It was her boss Brennan Staub, telling her he'd gotten a complaint from the Children's Center about her and Ken. Wonderful. "I'll come up to your office. I can explain everything. Bye."

Meg felt a headache coming on when she left the director's office. Why was he such a pain in the ass all of a sudden? She rooted through her purse on the elevator, but didn't find any pain reliever and decided to check Leigh's studio. She gave a start at the unexpected sight of someone standing in front of the mural. "Lok?"

The young man turned, the dark eyes haunted, even fearful. "Ken did this, didn't he?"

"Yes. It was supposed to be for the Halloween project at the Children's Center. What's wrong? Have you talked to him?" Meg went forward grabbed the young man's jacket sleeve. "Is Kenny all right? Tell me, Lok, please."

Lok cast a nervous glance back to the section of the mural that showed the man who looked like Ken killing the older Chinese man. "I talked to him for a minute." He paused, nervously licked his lips and shifted his backpack from one shoulder to the other. "I'm worried about him, Miss Silivasi. He's different. I can't explain it. But..." Lok made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Forget it. You shouldn't get involved in this. My father is already pissed at you for coming to our house."

Lok walked past Meg but she grabbed his backpack to stop him. "Lok, please. I'm worried about Kenny. Really worried. If I could just talk to him, I'm sure I could reason with him. You know where he is, don't you? You know where he's been staying?"

Lok shivered. "You can't go there. You don't want to go there."

"Where is he, Lok? Is it that club? The *Poisoned Dragon*?"

Lok stared down at his feet. "Please don't tell him I told you." He looked up. "Please don't go there. The owner...he, he sort of works for my father...Stay away from him. Please."

Meg bit her lower lip as Leigh's similar pleas echoed in her mind. "Tell Kenny to come see me or call me."

"I'll try. Look, I gotta go."

* * * *

Ken propped his foot up on the glass coffee table and made a halfhearted attempt at adding shading to his latest sketch. He cast a weary glance to the big window across the room and then shifted his gaze towards the bedroom door where Shu'd been all day, dead to the world. Ken smirked and wondered how the whole 'undead' thing ever got started. The smirk fell quickly away, however when he considered how much easier things would be if Dao was some stereotypical vampire who was more a corpse-like monster than a real flesh and blood man.

Ken took the sketchbook from his knee and slipped it back into his backpack, on the leather sofa next to him. He'd wanted to go to school today, but hadn't. It wasn't because he didn't want to learn new techniques or perfect the ones he'd learned already, it was because he felt out of place.

Even down in the club, he felt like he didn't belong anymore. He couldn't relate to his peers, who seemed so young and stupid and shallow.

That was one of the main reasons he stayed close to the loft. Dao didn't treat him like a kid the way most adults he knew did. Well, except for Miss Silivasi, of course. She'd always treated him as a fellow artist first and a student second, even when he first met her back when he was in high school.

Breathing a miserable sigh, Ken lay back on the sofa and covered his face with his forearm. It was bad enough he never felt he fit in with his family and their interests, and now when he finally thought he'd found his place in the world, he wasn't fitting in there either. He didn't fit anywhere. Well, except maybe here with Shu, but then that was a crock of shit too, wasn't it? He only fit because Shu thought he

was the sainted Toshiro.

But you are, that too-familiar voice said inside his head. It was the same voice that sometimes came out of his mouth speaking Cantonese, even Japanese to Shu, especially when they were alone, locked in a heated embrace.

"But maybe I don't want to be Toshiro," Ken whispered aloud. "I just want to be me, to be accepted for being *me*."

* * * *

The heavy drapes shifted in the breeze, faint rays of light played across the floor in a dance warning that the sun was still high enough in the sky to be more than a nuisance. Today Shu didn't have the strength to endure those harmful rays. He watched the shadows move across the floor, a shaft of light occasionally touched the table across from the bed whenever an unusually strong draft would shove against the heavy drapery. The silk cloth hanging over the table's edge shimmered in the brief flashes of light and the details in the miniature bonsai garden brought out in startling relief.

Shu lay width-wise across the mattress on his back, the black sheets bundled around his waist. His head was turned towards the table, his eyes fixed on the delicate miniature, his arms stretched out across the empty spaces on either side of him. The bed stretched out around him, large and very empty. His last words from the night before came back to him.

"Get out."

He'd sent Kenichi away, too furious to trust himself near the young mortal. Ken wanted to believe in a fantasy world denying his bond—his *oneness*—with Toshiro, rejecting everything Dao Kan Shu had done for him in the process. It was a cruel insult, one that infuriated Shu, and by the same token, one that hurt more than he cared to admit.

Kenichi had spent the early morning hours out in the main room of the loft, and from the sound of pencil scratching on paper Shu

could discern through the closed door, he remained there still. Another strong breeze puffed up the curtains, lighting up the edge of the mattress along with the entire table's surface.

The bonsai garden mocked him now, its beauty and craftsmanship an almost contemptuous statement to Shu's foolishness for even considering Kenichi and Toshiro to be one and the same. He sat up sharply and rolled on to his hands and knees, a growl in the back of his throat. He picked up the sketches he'd stacked on the bedside table and leafed through them, his expression darkening with an emotion closer to melancholy than the anger. The artwork had the same inner passion, the same skill and loveliness the garden showed. This was nothing like Hayato. This time it *had* to be Toshiro come back as promised.

"Kenichi, you mustn't disappoint me," Shu whispered.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Using the I-80, Sacramento was only about an hour-and-a-half or two-hour drive from San Francisco. By no means a very long trip, but sitting alone in his car with only the drivel of talk radio to keep him company, Leigh sure as hell felt otherwise. He imagined himself back in the apartment with Meg—they probably would've still been in bed at this hour, sleeping in a little while longer....or maybe doing something else...

He smiled to himself, remembering everything he and Meg had shared last night. It couldn't have been more perfect, and having her love to look forward to when he got back made his attendance at the conference a little easier to get through. He rested his left elbow on the edge of the car door, and wondered what she was doing now.

An image of Ken back in the Children's Center flashed in Leigh's mind and he turned both hands to the steering wheel.

"You promised, Meg," he said out loud, his words lost in the wind that blew through the open top convertible.

Shit. He ran a hand through his tousled hair and shook his head. He trusted her—she wouldn't go anywhere near the club because she must have felt the fear gripping his heart at the very mention of the idea. But it reminded him of another purpose for being in Sacramento.

Leigh touched his pocket, where, next to Meg's cookie, he felt the faintly rumpled sheet of paper with Dr. Samsaras' telephone number. Steve Kwan may have called the man a quack, but something inside of

Leigh told him the doctor knew something about this *Poisoned Dragon*. Samsaras could very well have the answer to helping Ken. It was a chance Leigh was more than willing to take for his student...and for Meg.

He took the next exit off the highway and a bit later the tree-dappled campus of Sacramento City College came into view. Nestled within the city, Leigh found a parking spot near the administrator's building and reached the auditorium in time to sign in as his universities representative, more than thirty minutes early for the first speaker at eight.

"Damn," he sighed. "I *could* have stayed in bed a while longer." Leigh took a seat in the back of the auditorium away from the other representatives gathering in the first few rows and rested his head on his hand. By the time the first speaker went up to open a large discourse on how the current Fine Art curriculum in schools statewide needed more funding—a fact *everyone* knew in spades already—Leigh kept glancing down at his watch in impatience. Halfway through the morning, he got up from his seat and stepped out into the lobby area, despite the disapproving look he got from the faculty coordinator seated by the exit doors.

Cell phone in hand, he called Meg at the apartment and only got the answering machine. *She's in class, dumbass*. He hung up and looked out through the glass front of the theater building. Steel-gray clouds heavy with rain rolled in from over the distant mountainside making the day feel darker and colder than it was. His stomach twisted a little with unease.

Screw the damn conference. He clenched his jaw. He pulled out the piece of paper from his pocket and dialed Samsaras' number.

* * * *

Malcom Samsaras squinted over the top of his glass at the man who entered the casual restaurant just off the campus of the city college. This Professor Gachelsing certainly didn't look the way Mal had

pictured him. In fact, he looked more like one of those pretty boys who hung out on Castro Street back in San Francisco. Oh, he'd had his fill of those wretches and then some. And that name. Gachelsing. Honestly, could the man have made up anything more absurd if he tried? Despite his alleged profession as an art instructor, he must surely be some oddball hoping to score the whereabouts of the 'real vampires' who professed to roam the night.

Mal watched as Gachelsing wove through the tightly arranged tables, blinking as his eyes tried to adjust to the darkness of the restaurant. He pushed aside a section of the bead curtain that draped from the ceiling, dividing the back of the dining area from the front section next to the amber-stained windows facing the road. The art teacher impertinently came up to where Samsaras sat and pulled up a seat.

"*Dr. Samsaras?*"

Samsaras raised an eyebrow and lowered his glass to its weaved coaster on the table. Noticing the doubtful emphasis on his title, he tapped his finger on the side of the cup. The large silver ring on his index finger clanked on the glass with a sound as sharp as his disapproval. *Ass.*

"Yes," Samsaras finally answered. "You know, *Mr. Gachelsing...*"—he made damned certain to emphasize the *lack* of title there—"I have a number of clients to see today, and I don't have much time to waste. So..." He gestured across the table with a bored sigh.

Gachelsing blinked at him and opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but quickly thought better of it. "Right, sorry," he said and reached into his jacket pocket.

Samsaras rolled his eyes and drummed his fingers on the table, but suddenly became aware of a strange feeling coming off the art teacher. While Gachelsing fished out a piece of paper and unfolded it on the table, Samsaras narrowed his eyes at him and clicked his tongue. Unbelievable... this little prick had the *real* power?

Gachelsing pushed the flyer for the Chinese Historical Center's

annual lecture series forward. Samsaras looked down at it and fingered his ring while the other man spoke.

“What do you know about the Poisoned Dragon?” Gachelsing asked.

“What?” Mal snapped. He looked down to where the younger man pointed. “Oh. The Dragon. Well, he *is* famous—or should I say, infamous—in San Francisco especially amongst the Chinese. In legend he is what one might call the bogeyman, the creature who slinks about in darkness to devour the unwary.”

Mal paused and sipped his coffee. “Of course, the Dragon was very real and so much more dangerous than any shadowy bogeyman.” He quirked his eyebrow when he saw the art teacher pale.

“The *Poisoned Dragon* was real?”

“Quite. He was an assassin, you know, back in the days of the Tong Wars when the Chinese were battling for their respective mafia-like ‘turf’ in San Francisco and elsewhere.”

“That would be—what—sometime in the late 1800s?” Gachelsing asked in a whisper.

“More or less,” Samsaras said. “But you didn’t come all this way to ask me history questions.”

The art teacher twisted one of the table’s cloth napkins in his hand, his eyes focused on the flyer. His skin blanched to another, paler shade of gray. Samsaras leaned forward.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost, Gachelsing.”

“He’s no ghost,” Gachelsing shook his head and Samsaras raised both eyebrows this time. “You might not believe it if I told you.”

“Try me.”

Gachelsing stared a moment. “Did this Dragon have a name?”

Samsaras frowned. “Oh, let me think,” he said tapping his ring on the side of the cup. “Chao, or Lau or Sho, something like that, I believe.”

The art teacher swallowed and Mal’s interest was more than piqued. “Could it have been Shu, by any chance?”

"It's possible, but I don't see—"

"He's alive. The Poisoned Dragon is alive."

Mal set down his cup and made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Preposterous."

"But you do the ghostly legend tours and lecture. You *believe* in the supernatural don't you?"

"Why, of course I believe in things beyond our normal realm of perception being possible, but really, the Dragon alive? Are you sure you haven't seen his specter, perhaps?"

"I can tell the damn difference between a ghost and someone who's alive," Gachelsing snapped.

"Interesting," Samsaras stroked his chin and sat back in his chair. He kept his voice even and cool. "How does a professor of Fine Arts know that?"

Gachelsing looked down at the napkin knotted in his hands and dropped it to the table like he'd caught himself doing something he'd told himself not to. "I just do," he said. "Leave it at that."

Samsaras laughed under his breath. "This getting more fascinating by the moment." He reached into his wallet and dropped a few dollars on the table as he got up. "Why don't you come to my office? I think I might have something you'd be interested in."

They left the restaurant in Gachelsing's car...a Corvette, no less, Samsaras noted dryly. He gave the art teacher directions and they reached his office a few left turns and stop lights later.

"This is it?" Gachelsing asked. He gave the brick faced building with the large neon sign spelling out XXX in a flickering display of hot pink letters and barred windows a disbelieving look.

"No," Samsaras frowned. "It's upstairs."

The art teacher gave him another look, but didn't say anything.

"Why don't you go back to San Francisco, then?" Samsaras grouched before stepping out of the car. A moment later the ignition cut off, the alarm beeped on and Gachelsing joined him as he climbed up the narrow steel staircase on the side of the building to his office's entrance.

* * * * *

And the flyer had called Samsaras a noted parapsychologist, Leigh thought as he looked around the dingy little ‘office’ that made the art supply room he shared with Meg look like the penthouse suite in one of those Financial District highrises.

The room smelled like unnatural flowers, which Leigh judged came from the plastic freshener propped upon one of the many metal bookshelves that lined the faded blue walls. The shelves were filled not only with books but various things that would look right at home in some schlocky film gypsy caravan—*Sorry, Meg.*

Necklaces and pendants made from everything from pewter to bone to shell and ivory were suspended from thick dowels set into a hunk of two by four, there were crystal balls of varying sizes and a couple forked wooden sticks—what were they called—divining rods?

There were jars and small boxes of ceramic and wood, along with some grimy fabric pouches containing who knew what. And there were books. Lots of books, some paperback, but mostly old ones bound in cloth and leather. Most looked like garage sale rejects with cracked spines and faded covers, and they all lent the room a musty aging air which the artificial ‘freshener’ seemed to accentuate instead of mask. Of course the string of dried garlic cloves he noticed draped over the side of another shelving unit didn’t help on the aromatic score.

“Sit,” Samsaras said as if addressing a dog. Leigh looked at him a long moment, then took a seat opposite the desk. The chair shifted on its uneven legs the moment he sat down. Now why wasn’t he surprised?

Something that did surprise Leigh, however, was the lacquer box Samsaras took from one of the filing drawers of his big metal desk. It looked a lot like the box Meg had gotten from that auction the one with the secret compartment where Ohara had found the dagger.

Leigh watched as Samsaras unlocked the box and withdrew a leather-bound book that was fastened with a twisted leather thong sewn into the center spine. A slimy sort of chill crept along Leigh's spine and he shifted, causing the uneven chair to bob. Samsaras shot him an indignant look.

"This," Samsaras said as he slowly unwound the thong. "Came from the estate of a Mr. Itou—"

"Hayato Itou?"

Samsaras set the book down with a scowl. "If you know the answers, then you don't need me." He gestured to the door. "Good day."

Leigh sighed and ran his hand through his hair. "Sorry."

"As I was *trying* to say, this journal belonged to Hayato Itou, who was half Japanese, half Chinese and the last head of one of the most feared Tongs Chinatown had ever seen."

I bet Daniel Yang will love hearing that bit of news.

"What?" Samsaras snapped.

"I didn't say anything. Go on, please," Leigh said quietly.

Samsaras glared at him, then continued.

"As I was saying, this journal covers the years 1904 to 1906, in fact, the last entry is dated a day after legendary earthquake. Hayato doesn't say much about his father Toshiro, as apparently they'd been estranged his entire life, but he does say how his father was the protégé of the Tong's most feared assassin commonly referred to as the Poisoned Dragon."

Leigh felt the chill again. "So Toshiro was a killer as well?"

Samsaras' gray eyes narrowed. "That's what I said, isn't it?"

"Sorry." Leigh held out his hand. "Could I see it? Please?"

"Do you read Japanese?"

"No."

"Then it won't do you any good, will it?"

Leigh pulled back his hand. "I suppose not." He tried not to let the smug expression of the parapsychologist piss him off. "What's a *chaing-shih*?"

"A Chinese vampire. An especially vicious vampire who tears his victims apart, then feasts upon their blood. They're very rare, you know, mainly because once buried they can't escape their grave unlike the European variety, which dissipate into mists and whatnot."

"So if this *chiang-shih* bit someone and they were buried right away, they wouldn't become a vampire, too?"

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"Sorry." Leigh cleared his throat. "So if one of these vampires wasn't buried and was free to roam around, they would be..."

"They would be not unlike the legendary Poisoned Dragon—a consummate and vicious killer." Samsaras set the journal down on his desk and leaned forward. "Now why do you think you've seen the Dragon? Why do you think he is, in fact, the Poisoned Dragon?"

Leigh swallowed and tried not to remember the feel of the man's gaze, so cold and deadly even behind the sunglasses he'd worn. "I can't really explain it, but this guy is... he's frightening."

Samsaras said nothing, only stared for the longest time. Finally he got up and came around the front of the desk. "I don't normally avail people of my services free of charge, but of course I'm all for protecting humankind from the evils of the supernatural world, so I could try a summoning spell."

"A spell? To summon what, exactly?"

"Since we have Hayato's journal, I can try to contact his spirit and ask if it is in fact the Poisoned Dragon you've encountered. That way you'll know if you're dealing with an ordinary man or someone—something more deadly."

Leigh glanced around the room before meeting Samsaras' stern gaze. "Can you do that?" he asked quietly.

Samsaras snorted, but the edges of his thin mouth curved up in a smile. "Watch for yourself."

Leigh shifted in his seat, suddenly growing uncomfortable under the man's condescending glare. "Maybe this was a mistake."

"What are you afraid of, Gachelsing?" From the shelf behind the desk, Samsaras took a heavy brass urn with what looked like ravens

engraved on it. He dropped it next to the old journal on the desk and it landed on the metal with a heavy clank.

"I'm not—" Leigh closed his mouth and swallowed. A sense of unease washed over him. He eyed Hayato's journal and reached out for it. He couldn't read Japanese, but if a part of Hayato was in there, he would be able to feel it. If the echo was strong enough, there might be a chance he'd experience something like what had happened in the *Chew Kee*. Frankly, the idea terrified him, but he still wanted to see for himself.

Just as his fingers were about to brush the cracked leather spine, Samsaras pulled the book away.

"Your doubts are going to make it difficult to conjure the spirit," he said darkly. "Leave, and don't bother coming back until you know what you want."

"No—I'm sorry," Leigh shook his head. "I want to do this, really." Whatever he might be, Samsaras' stuff looked like it was used. The brass urn was polished enough for Leigh to see his reflection staring back at him in the domed surface with no sign of tarnish or dust. *Maybe Samsaras uses it to shave out of.* Leigh rubbed his face in his hands and sighed. This was the closest thing to a lead, and he better not screw it up.

"Well, I can't do it *now*," Samsaras huffed. "I need to *prepare*." He closed his eyes and pressed his forefingers to the side of his temple.

Unbelievable. Leigh stared at him. "So when is a good time?" He had to work hard to keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"At sunset."

"Of course," Leigh said, a little more biting than he'd intended to. Actually, he was a little surprised the man hadn't said midnight. He might have actually said so, but Samsaras opened one eye and fixed it on him in a cold glare.

Leigh pressed his lips together and then pushed away from the table, not bothering to apologize. The parapsychologist coughed and closed both eyes again. As Leigh closed the office door behind him,

Samsaras started to hum in a steady drone.

“What the hell am I doing?” Leigh muttered as he clomped down the metal staircase. Fat raindrops started coming down followed the low rumble of distant thunder. He dashed over to his car a second before the downpour started, and then he drove off down the suddenly somber and gray street.

Really, Leigh doubted this guy could summon shit. After having seen ghosts and visions his entire life, nothing in Samsaras’ place felt even remotely attached to another presence or spirit. He could usually sense those with better accuracy than he would have liked; sometimes just by touching a tabletop or brushing against a doorway a flash from another person or life would go through his mind. Here, there was nothing at all. Just whatever he saw with his eyes or heard or with his ears.

Leigh didn’t bother returning to the conference. Brennan might bitch about it when he returned, but one missed day wasn’t going to mean much. He wandered around the Crocker Art Museum and then tried to have an early dinner, but the closer it got to nightfall, the more anxious he started to feel.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Meg picked at her microwave dinner and stared at the phone on the table near the sofa. Kenny's sister had called her a bit ago, frantic. He still hadn't contacted her or their parents, and the police wouldn't take a missing person report because he was of sound mind and legally an adult. Their attitude was if Kenny wanted to disappear, who were they to stop him?

Meg hadn't told CeCe about the possibility of Kenny staying with that Shu at his apartment above the club, because she hadn't wanted the Oharas to go rushing over to try and drag Kenny home. She'd known Kenny for a few years now, and the one thing she knew was how obstinate he could be, especially when it came to his family trying to fit him into their traditional mold.

She'd tried calling Leigh, but he hadn't returned her call and she knew what he'd say anyway. He'd tell her to mind her own business until he got back.

But she couldn't.

She was the only one who had a chance of talking to Kenny and getting him to listen to reason. If he wanted to have a relationship with an older man, that was certainly his business, but he couldn't just turn his back on his friends and especially not on his education. He'd put too much of his soul into his art and she wasn't going to watch him throw it away out of youthful pride or hormone overload.

Meg got up, covered her dinner in plastic wrap, stuck it in the refrigerator, then went to look through her closet and tried to think

what one wore to a hip Goth nightclub.

* * * *

Dusk fell over San Francisco in hazy shades of gray and lilac. Above the *Poisoned Dragon*, the first pounding sounds of this evening's selection of rave music vibrated faintly through the floor of the loft. By nightfall, the club would already be packed with over two hundred men and women, and more than half that number waiting outside to be admitted.

Shu opened the door to the bedroom as he buttoned the front of his shirt. He crossed the empty loft and paused in front of the sofa. On the television, the evening news was beginning its broadcast and the anchorwoman started a lead-in on two more bodies pulled from the bay earlier this morning. The girl from the nightclub, and Yang's lackey. Shu shut the television off and turned back to the couch, touching the leather seat.

Kenichi's warmth was gone, but his presence remained behind. His scent permeated the material; his backpack and art books lay tossed near the armrest. Ken couldn't have left more than an hour or so ago.

With a frown, Shu picked up Ken's sketchbook and leafed through it. Sketches filled both sides of each sheet, and a smile formed on Shu's lips as he saw himself drawn on several pages. The deeper he got into the book, the more sketches he found scratched out and the tattered edges of pages that had been torn from their place. But on the last page, he saw a portrait brought to life with the finest precision and craftsmanship any of Ken's works had displayed to date.

It was the sketch of a woman. Shu immediately recognized her—Ken had captured his professor with stunning perfection. The soft shades forming her full lips and softly rounded eyes were laid on the paper with gentle care. The delicate lines of her cheekbones and cupped chin had been made with the same gentleness a lover would

have used in a caress, only they were traced with a pencil instead of his fingertips. Her ebony hair, each strand crafted in painstaking detail, seemed to move in a gentle breeze, or perhaps it was the breath of that same lover that stirred her tresses.

“Magda Silivasi,” he spat out the name, baring his teeth in disgust and rage.

Shu hissed under his breath, his hands tightened on the book until he felt the hard cover bow with the pressure of his grip. The utter beauty of this piece—the tenderness of emotion infusing its very creation—*infuriated* him. Did Kenichi fancy her? Did he harbor adolescent sexual fantasies for her? Did he want the simpering light touch of a woman’s caress and a supple, wet body engulfing him at night?

Shu threw the book onto the sofa, his harsh breathing sounding like a feral growl.

He stormed out of the loft, slamming the door behind him. A moment later he appeared downstairs in the club, and took his seat in the booth in the back. His angry eyes scoured the growing throng on the dance floor and the crowd by the bar, searching for Kenichi.

* * * *

Meg pulled the thin, cropped sweater tighter around her shoulders. If she’d known she’d be standing in a line outside so long, she would have worn something more substantial than the sweater over her red tank top and slim black skirt. She might also have left the stiletto heels at home. It was bad enough she’d be wearing them to her gallery show soon. Her poor feet would never forgive her. A shrill whistle caught her attention and Meg looked up to see the stern bouncer at the door signal for her to approach.

“You’re in, sweet thing. Go.”

“You need to see my ID?” She reached for the zipper of her purse, but he waved her inside.

Meg gave an apologetic glance back to those who’d been ahead of

her, then scurried through the heavy wooden door, more than a little taken aback by the fierce Chinese Dragon plaque set in the center. Good Lord, this place was loud and already crowded. Looking over the provocatively clad waitresses weaving their way back and forth from the bar, it was easy to see what attracted the young university men here and of course, they in turn attracted the young women.

Now if only she could catch a glimpse of Kenny in the dim, pulsing light. She shivered, still chilled from the damp night air, and made her way to the busy bar for a glass of wine to ease the coldness in her bones.

* * * *

Across the crowded club, Shu leaned back against the leather seat. *She* was here, in the *Dragon*. The very object of his fury, the very reason his hands clenched at the leather backing of the booth and the rim on his glass of brandy.

"That *bitch*," he seethed. The cup shattered in his palm, the amber liquid spilled onto the table along with chunks of glass and a few drops of blood. A waitress, his usual girl, came up to him with a concerned frown.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Shu?" she asked, wiping away the mess from the table top onto her empty drink tray.

He gave her a cold look and then returned his glare towards Silivasi, who now faced away from him and was ordering a drink. "Not for much longer," he whispered.

"Have that woman in the red top and black by the bar join me," Shu turned back to his girl and took a napkin from her tray. He wiped away the few drops of blood on the palm of his hand, his wounds already healed. "Her name is Meg Silivasi."

* * * *

"A gentleman in the back, asking for me?"

The waitress nodded.

"Oh, I don't think—" But it was probably Kenny. "All right," Meg said, lifting her wineglass from the bar. She followed the waitress glancing casually here and there at the dancing crowd. It was too bad Leigh disliked this place; she'd like to bring him here some night. Well maybe they could find a similar place...else...where.

It wasn't Kenny. It was that man. Shu.

"I'm sorry. I probably should get back to the bar. I'm waiting for someone, actually, and I thought—"

"Sit." Shu hissed the word through his teeth, staring at her with unblinking eyes as he traced his lower lip with the edge of his fingernail. It wasn't a request, or an invitation. It was a command.

He stared her up and down, his eyes tracing the curves of her body through her tight clothing. She wore the same determined expression on her face she'd used back in the gallery when she refused to sell him her sculpture. He laughed, a dark sound that rumbled in his chest and passed over his lips. The woman couldn't afford to be quite so flippant now, could she?

"Don't bother waiting for him." Shu kept the rage from rising in his voice, but not even his best form of self-control restrained the loathing coloring each word. "Kenichi won't be seeing you tonight...or ever."

The wineglass began to tremble in Meg's hand.

I have to go. I need to leave. I can't stay near him.

And yet she found herself sitting down despite the frightened thoughts swirling around in her head.

"What—what did you do to Kenny?"

"Nothing," Shu whispered. "But by the same token, I'd like to know what it is *you've* done with him." All of the doubts circulating in Ken's mind, his uncertainty over who he was and who he belonged with—*she* was the root of it all. He reached out across the table and put his hand over the rim of her glass to stop it from shaking in her nervous grasp. "You've *infected* him somehow," Shu said. "Tainted

his mind so he isn't able to think or see clearly...and I want it to stop. Kenichi is *mine*."

Meg had to force the words out. "He isn't a possession. He's hardly more than a boy. I—I don't think he's ready for what you have in mind, Mr. Shu."

Come here!

The deep voice reverberated through Meg's head like an echo in a cavern. She found herself sliding across the smooth leather and around the curve of the high backed booth until she was next to Shu.

He narrowed his eyes at her and frowned. "You're quite mistaken."

Shu touched her face, stroking two of his fingers down her cheek and across her lips, smudging the deep, almost blood-red lipstick. Meg leaned just a fraction into his touch. She struggled to resist, but was already too enthralled to put up much of a fight.

Leaning forward, Shu skimmed his lips over her earlobe. "He's less of a *boy* than you know," he breathed.

His fingers dropped from her lips. He traced down the front of her top, feeling the curve of her breast before working his way under the hem of her tight shirt. "Unless you've already tried to find out how much of a man he is," he hissed. "*Whore*."

Meg's heart thudded wildly and her mouth became dry as chalk. Suddenly she was five years old and hiding under the table in her grandmother's kitchen as her mother was screamed at by *Bunica*. *Whore! You're nothing but a whore, Elena! Get out of my house. Leave the girl to me! I won't let her be a worthless whore like her mother! No man will touch her as long as I live!*

Meg shook her head, or rather, she tried to. "N—no. I'm not. I'm not." Tears welled up in her eyes as she remembered last night with Leigh. Oh, God, she'd acted like a whore, though. The things she did. The things she let him do...

"Is this how you seduced him?" Shu laughed, but the mirth didn't reach his eyes. The sound died in his throat and a low growl came

out instead. "With tears and feigned innocence?"

Shu's hand slid up against the bare skin on her waist, feeling along the edge of her bra and the soft, tender flesh beneath it.

"If you're not a whore, then pull away."

Beads of perspiration dotted Meg's forehead as she gritted her teeth and gathered up all the strength she possessed to jerk free from this awful man's touch. But she couldn't. She barely moved an inch. What was happening? What was he doing? Was her wine drugged?

Leering, he leaned in to lick the beads of sweat from her brow. "I thought as much," Shu said, as her best effort at escape actually brought her a fraction of an inch closer. He grabbed her chin with his free hand and forced her to look into his face, their eyes locking in a stare.

"Was it really your intention to come here tonight, in my own house, and take Kenichi away from me?" he leaned forward and brushed his lips over hers, tasting her unease—her fear. "Did you know who you were trying to *fuck* with?"

Inside her shirt, Shu's hand rubbed over her swelling breast and slid upwards. He raked the nail of his index finger over the strap of her bra, tearing through the cloth. He punctured her skin, dragging the nail downwards in a curved line from her heart to the center of her chest. She jerked from the pain, and he slipped his hand out.

"I won't let you have Kenichi, but you'll be *my* entertainment for the evening." Shu laughed and brought his finger to his mouth. He flicked his tongue over the thick blood that trailed down to the base of his knuckles.

He cut her! He cut her and he was licking her blood and enjoying it. Oh, no. No, no, no, no. It couldn't be. Could he? Was he? It wasn't possible, was it? He was no mindless undead creature, but surely... surely he was *Noseferatu*...

A strangled something almost escaped from Meg's lips as Shu leaned in again, kissing her delicately. His hand dropped below the table to rest on her knee, then glide up her thigh. With a mere touch of his fingers, her legs parted, and he chuckled.

His lips brushed her lips and cheek and he whispered in her ear, "Make all the noise you want, woman. Sing for me."

Shu pushed back her tight skirt, exposing the bare skin on her leg. He stared into her eyes, two shimmering green orbs wide with disbelief...and desire. He laughed throatily and she opened her mouth to protest but only a small whimper came out.

His fingers toyed at the front of her panties. She shifted in her seat and made more of those weak little noises as his touch slipped under the thin material to find her warm and inviting. She throbbed at his touch, her sex swollen and responsive to his exploring finger as he pushed inside of her.

Shu kissed her lips as they parted to cry out and he swallowed the sound. "A blushing whore," he murmured against her mouth. "But you didn't blush last night, did you?" His mouth slid down her lips and along her throat, his tongue flicking over her salty skin.

"I watched you undress for your lover," he said as he continued to stroke at her moist flesh between her legs, enjoying the conflicting scents of desire and fear that rolled off her glistening body. "You should have stayed at his side instead of coming after Kenichi."

Gachelsing...another fucking nuisance who wouldn't mind his own affairs. "I'll deal with him using the same loving attention I'm giving you now," he whispered. He would make the bastard *suffer*.

CHAPTER TWENTY~ONE

“Offering oneself to the spirit world as a tool for communication is a very risky business, Professor,” Malcolm Samsaras said as he welcomed Leigh into his office after dusk. “It isn’t something that I normally do, certainly not without compensation. However, in this instance, I’ve decided to help you.”

The parapsychologist showed Leigh to the small table he’d set up in the center of the room. Simple metal folding chairs were on opposite sides of the round plastic table, which was covered by a green vinyl cloth. He indicated the seat Leigh was to take, then sat down himself. He ran one thin hand over the worn leather cover of Hayato Itou’s journal.

“I meditated extensively after you left this afternoon and decided that the best course of action is to allow Mr. Itou—Itou-san, if you will, to communicate directly through me via automatic writing.”

He indicated the pile of vellum and traditional fountain pen. “I believe that using instruments Hayato would have used will greatly aid us in this endeavor.” He got up and lit the selection of black and red candles arrayed on his metal desk behind the table. “Professor if you would be so kind as to turn off the overhead light. The switch is behind you.”

Leigh flicked off the switch on the wall next to the doorway. The office plunged into darkness—he had no idea how much the grungy, yellowish bulb had managed to light up the room from under the dust covered shade. The candles glowed from their place on the desk

behind Samsaras, and Leigh followed their flickering lights to make his way to the table. His toe hit the edge of a shelf or a piece of furniture that jutted out from its haphazard placement on the floor.

"Shit," Leigh muttered under his breath and something on whatever the hell it was he hit made a rattling sound like metal on metal.

"Watch it," Samsaras warned. "Don't try to break anything."

Leigh gritted his teeth and limped a little on his way to the table. He was already uncomfortable enough with everything; the pain in his foot and Samsaras' tone didn't help matters. Black shadows and shafts of orange light moved across the tabletop as a draft from one of the steadily vibrating overhead ducts stirred the flames.

"Can we please get started?" Leigh placed his palms on the vinyl covering, trying to ignore the knotting in his stomach.

"Are you in a rush?" the parapsychologist frowned. The angular lines on his thin face made sharper by the crown of candlelight behind his head.

Yes...I want to get the hell out of here. Leigh blinked, not sure where that panicked thought came from. But a quiet "No" came out instead.

Samsaras stared at him for a time. "Once the connection has been made, you will be free to ask the spirit questions. Try to make them simple ones that can be answered in a few words, or by yes or no. Do you understand?"

Leigh nodded.

Samsaras cleared his throat, then closed his eyes and began to make a low, droning sound that was akin to a hum. He slowly wove from side to side, his long, thin hands held out over the paper and pen. It seemed to take forever and Leigh made a conscious effort not to keep checking his watch. At last the droning sound stopped and the parapsychologist gasped. He trembled and shakily took up the pen, switching it to his left hand.

He spoke in a low tone that was shaky as if he was just learning to speak or speaking after a long time of having lost his voice. The

words were English but forced, accented. "You have disturbed my eternal rest, but I am not angered. I understand your fears. I know them too well."

Samsaras' lips moved, but the voice coming out belonged to someone else.

Leigh's hands pressed into the table and tightened around the cloth covering. He sucked in his breath through his teeth. "Shit..." *This is real.*

The journal vibrated and then jumped in place. Though it only rose an inch or two in the air, it crashed back to the table with a deep, ominous thud. The book cover flew open and pages ruffled like invisible fingers leafed through them. A presence filled the room, thick and heavy like dense smoke from a raging fire, only invisible to the naked eye. Leigh felt its smothering weight press against his chest and he instinctively gulped for air.

"Hayato?" Leigh's voice wavered.

Samsaras' lips moved again and a garble of words spilled out of his mouth, none in English. It sounded like a mixture of Japanese and Chinese. Leigh couldn't make it out clearly. But it had to be Hayato—the languages alone confirmed it. He leaned forward.

"How do you know my fears?" Leigh asked. He closed his eyes, remembering both those old photographs that had Shu in them, as well as two men who both looked so much like Ken Ohara.

"What is he? What is Shu?"

Samsaras made a groaning noise. The pen scratched rapidly over the paper, filling it with writing Leigh couldn't make out in the dim, flickering candle glow. They weren't English words, he could make out that much. He wanted to ask other things but he was afraid to speak.

Then Samsaras stopped writing and fixed him with a stern, dark gaze. Only it wasn't *Samsaras* looking through those eyes—it was someone else. The parapsychologist made a sort of croaking sound as if trying to speak.

"Murder. Father. Avenge. Too late. Too late."

With pen strokes shakier than before, Samsaras wrote more before flinging the pen aside. He slumped forward and began breathing heavily, almost gasping for air as if he'd been submerged under water too long.

"Wait!" Leigh jumped from his seat. The presence he'd felt slipped out of the room, disappearing back to wherever it had been summoned from. He grabbed Samsaras by the shoulders as if doing so would keep the spirit from leaving.

Murder... Shu had murdered Toshiro. Oh, God...this meant everything *was* true. The man he'd seen in those old photographs and the man met in the club and hotel—they were one and the same. Was that bastard trying to do the same thing with Ken now?

Leigh's mouth went dry. Samsaras had said a *chiang-shih* like Shu would be a monster. *Meg...*

"What does he want?" Leigh asked, shaking the man. "How do I stop him?"

"What? What are you talking about? Get your hands off me!" Samsaras pulled back, stood, and stumbled into the table on unsteady legs. It collapsed under his weigh. Leigh helped him up, dragged him back to his feet rather.

"Tell me! Tell me how to stop a *chiang shih*!"

Samsaras pulled free again, he lurched across the floor, flicked on the overhead lights, squinting when they blazed to life. "You need a Buddhist spell, blessed prayer beads...I don't know...my head is pounding. Go away!"

"I can't!" Leigh shouted. "Not until I know what's going on—Samsaras, I need answers!"

The parapsychologist shook his head and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. "Don't look at me," he said shakily, for once his tone free of any of its sarcasm or biting edge. "I've done enough for you already!"

Leigh grabbed the collar of his shirt to stop Samsaras from turning away. Every time he came in contact with Shu, Leigh's insides twisted, his body shaking with fear and hatred. In his dreams he saw

people murdered, he had waking visions of his own death. The man—no, that *monster* had some kind of fucking hold over him and he didn't know why.

How many innocent lives were at stake? Leigh immediately thought of Meg and Ken, but they weren't the ones in danger. That young blonde girl in the sweater—each time he'd seen her, blood pouring from the gash in her neck, he hadn't understood what she was trying to say. But the two words that formed on her silent lips now made sense. *Poisoned Dragon*... Shu killed her, and she'd been saying so from the start.

"People's lives depend on this!" Leigh slammed Samsaras into the wall, rattling the bookcase.

"So what?" Samsaras made a feeble attempt to push him away. He looked around wildly and pressed a hand to the side of his head. "I need to calm down—I need to think."

Leigh stared at him in shock. "I thought—I thought you did this regularly," he stammered in disbelief. "How can you be so shaken up by this?"

"You wanted to know how to stop him—I already told you!" Samsaras growled. "Go!"

Leigh let him go and backed away. He was starting to feel a little dizzy himself, like there suddenly wasn't enough air in the room. A cold shiver of fear trickled down his spine like an invisible fingernail racked across his back. He whipped around and faced the door. "Meg..."

A blurry image of her standing by the door reaching out for him flashed before his eyes. The vision left as quickly as it came, swallowed by whatever strange void hung over Samsaras' office. Leigh ran to the door and threw it open.

"Meg!"

A thick curtain of rain still poured from the black sky overhead. He stumbled out onto the staircase and gripped the slippery railing. He stared out into the void, his heart in his throat. Something was wrong.

CHAPTER TWENTY~TWO

“What’s wrong?” Shu pressed his lips against Meg Silivasi’s cheek and murmured against her flushed skin. “This is more than you bargained for, isn’t it?” His fingers were still buried deep inside her. She was hot and wet and pulsing around his cool flesh.

The crowd moved to the music pounding around them, the air thick and heavy with the scents of their warm bodies. Flashing lights glinted off their skin, slick with sweat, and off the rims of their drink glasses. But seated in his booth in the back of the *Poisoned Dragon*, half-hidden in shadow and far from the dance floor, the woman and vampire were lost in another world. The music, the lights, the sounds of laughter and conversation—everything became a blur in the background.

Silivasi’s chest heaved, her heart crashed against her ribcage. Her blood rushed through her veins, the fluid’s coppery scent rising to the surface of her exposed flesh with her perspiration. Shu felt the excitement rising in her just as the *thirst* rose in him.

She was a lovely woman.

Shu touched her face with one hand and reached up to wipe his fingers clean of her wetness along the front of her top. Kenichi had captured this face with so much life-like detail; looking at her now she was exactly as he had drawn her. The smooth curves of her cheeks, the fullness of her lips... Kenichi must have stared at this face for a very long time to be able to render it so well. Shu hissed bitterly, thinking of all the torn and crumpled sketches of himself Ken had

discarded. Meanwhile, this woman's had come out so beautifully, and with seemingly no effort.



He grabbed the back of her head, his fingers tangled tightly in her

hair. With his other hand, he pressed the material of her top against her skin and the blood from the cut soaked into the already red cloth like a dark stain.

“Moan for me,” Shu demanded. He nipped her neck, the sharp edge of his teeth raking across her sweat-covered skin. His fangs extended in anticipation, his pulse rose in time with hers. “I want to take every pleasure I can from your worthless life.”

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Shu broke away and gazed coolly at Kenichi. His nonchalance faded, turning quickly to irritation at the look in his young lover’s eyes. Was the boy jealous? Did he really care so much for this mortal bitch? His dark gaze remained riveted on Ken as the younger man slid into the booth across from them. He reached for Silivasi’s hand. She gripped his fingers, her eyes glistening with teary fright. “K—ken—ny,” she choked out.

Ken swung his attention back to Shu. “Let her go. Now.”

Shu laughed then leaned in to kiss Silivasi, dragged his tongue from her lips across her flushed cheek and along the side of her neck. He broke off, looked up and stroked her throbbing pulse point with his index finger. “And if I don’t?”

“I’ll hate you. Forever.”

The last of Shu’s smile disappeared. *Forever*... such a powerful word. Almost as powerful as *hate*. Hearing it come from Kenichi’s lips struck him like a blow to the face.

“You know exactly what to say to wound me,” Shu whispered. “But you don’t mean it.”

His breath quickened and his nostrils flared. He stared down at the tabletop, glaring at the way Kenichi held Silivasi’s hand, their fingers interlocked. The gesture was far too reminiscent of the way two lovers would hold one another while making love.

Shu’s body trembled. He felt his control ebbing away, Kenichi slipping from his reach. He grabbed Silivasi’s wrist and yanked her hand out from the younger man’s grip.

“She’s poisoned your mind,” he said. “Promises of the flesh,

sweet words of flattery about your art—whatever she's used to seduce you with, it's a *lie*." He waited for a reply there was none.

"I do this for you, Kenichi," Shu's voice shook. Pulling Meg close to his side, he tilted her head to one side, exposing the pulse on her neck and licked her flesh along the throbbing vein. *I'll bleed you dry, whore. Dry.*

Shu bared his teeth and then sank his fangs into Meg.

The shock froze Ken at first, but adrenalin propelled him across the tabletop to shove Shu backward. There was blood, but not as much as he feared. He shoved aside Shu's empty drink glass and snatched the napkins to press to the small wound. Miss Silivasi collapsed against him. She clutched at his shoulders as dry sobs wracked her trembling body.

Glaring at Shu, Ken slid around to the other side of the booth pulling his teacher with him. "You monstrous fucking bastard," he muttered with barely contained fury before leading her to the rear entrance.

Shu panted and leaned back against the seat. Still reeling from the sudden severing of his contact with Silivasi, he struggled to get a grip on his jarred senses. He tried to sit up and fell back, the room spun around him as his heart raced inside his chest. Ken reached the exit and disappeared through the door while his weak teacher clung to him for support.

"*Bitch...*" Shu forced himself up. He hadn't bitten down hard enough; Ken's hard words hindered the strength of his bite. Her blood still lingered in his mouth, but its taste was bitter and it nauseated him. He spat furiously on the table, clutching his waist. The scars on his belly burned.

"No!" He spat again and pushed away from the booth. But Ken was already gone. Shu slammed his hand into the table, the granite surface cracked. A few clubbers looked his way, curious, while most continued with their conversations, or drinking their drinks, living their lives...

The sound of his own heartbeat thundering in his ears blocked

out everything else as Shu stumbled to the back wall. He should pursue them, snap both their necks or rip their throats out so he could watch them bleed to death before him. But he couldn't; his steps stopped at the side door leading to his loft.

Kenichi had saved that woman—shoved him aside for her.

Shu shoved open the door and raced up the steps. In his fury, he twisted the handle on the doorknob hard enough to splinter the wood. He knocked the door partially off one of its hinges as he threw it open.

The sketchbook was still on the sofa where he'd thrown it. The art-filled pages mocked him, insulted him.

"Kenichi," he gasped. Grabbing the book, he moved to the large windows. He ripped open the thick curtain, pulling down the rod the cloth hung from so the metal hit the floor with a loud clatter. On the street below, Ken was helping *that woman* into her car.

Shu punched his fist through the glass and threw the sketchbook down to the street below with a growl. Without waiting to hear the sound of the book hitting the pavement among the shattering shards of glass, he stormed to the bedroom and ripped off the silk covering from the bonsai miniature.

"You little fuck!" he spat. "How dare you hurt me?" He raised his hand and slammed it down over the model.

A hair's width from the delicate structure, he froze.

The air stirred by the force of his swing scattered some of the tiny brown leaves, and they rustled across the wood sculpture with a dry sound almost like a sigh. Shu stared at the model in all its perfection and beauty, and saw another one very similar to it only in a different time and place.

The other model was almost as elaborate as this one, though not as much so. But it had been crafted with all the same love and attention, and by the same graceful hands. Toshiro had loved that bonsai garden. Shu had seen it. And in a jealous rage, destroyed it.

"Your craftsmanship is excellent, Toshiro." But the more he looked at the beautifully crafted sculpture, the more he loathed it.

"But it shouldn't be lovelier than mine."

Shu smashed his fist into the model with brutal violence. He pounded until all that remained was rubble, blood dripping from his hand. Toshiro watched, tears forming in his eyes.

"Are you going to cry?" Shu tenderly brushed his fingertips under Toshiro's lashes and drew out the warm wetness. "Sensei is a harsh teacher, isn't he?" he whispered. "It's best you learn now not to place so much value in such meaningless pursuits."

Now Shu himself valued those *meaningless pursuits*.

His fist opened and he caressed the top of a delicately carved pagoda. He couldn't destroy this, not now, not ever. "My Toshiro..." he whispered.

Yong yuan ai ni.

"I'll love you forever." Shu closed his eyes, his heart aching with so many different emotions from rage, pain... regret.

"Kenichi, you've disappointed me."

* * * *

The shattering glass caught Ken's attention as he fastened Miss Silivasi's seatbelt. He shut the car door as he saw something sail out the loft window. His sketchbook. He looked at his teacher, her face buried in her hands, her body still shaking with fear. Some stupid sketches shouldn't matter to him but they did. He dashed through the two rows of cars and leapt over a row of low hedges at the edge of the parking lot to grab the book from the street.

He dashed back to the car and got in to drive Miss Silivasi home. He didn't know what to say. He didn't know what to do as he took her inside the apartment building.. He fished in her purse for her keys and fumbled with them until he found the ones to unlock the inner lobby door and again upstairs at her apartment. He helped her sit on the sofa. "I'm going to go get Professor Gachelsing—"

She grabbed his arm. "No. No, no. No, no, no." She let go and clamped her eyes shut. "I'll be all right. I need a bath, that's all. But

don't leave. Please stay here and make sure he doesn't come to get me. Please?"

"But—" Ken stopped short. His instinct was to say Shu wouldn't hurt her, but obviously that was a lie. He might have killed her. Ken closed his eyes and swallowed hard. "All right."

Miss Silivasi got up on what seemed to be rubbery knees and made her way out of the living room. Once he heard the closing of the bedroom door, Ken hung his head. *Why the fuck did Dao do that? What was wrong with him? How could he? Why don't I absolutely hate him?*

Shit. He couldn't stay here. He felt so guilty. He had to get Gachelsing. She'd be okay while he went down the hall.

Ken punched the door buzzer for the third time and looked nervously back toward Miss Silivasi's door, praying that he was right about Shu not trying to finish what he'd started earlier. "Shit. Come on, Gachelsing, you have to be home."

"Ohara. What are you doing here?"

Ken spun around. Shit. What happened to Gachelsing? He looked like he just saw a ghost. Or—"Did Shu come after you, too?"

The last traces of color drained from the art teacher's face.

"What happened—where is she?" He grabbed Ken by the shoulders, his eyes wide with panic.

"She—she's in her apartment," Ken said.

"Oh, God... Meg!"

* * * *

Leigh darted down the hall, keys in hand. He struggled with the lock—his hands shook so badly. Bursting inside the apartment, he called out for Meg.

No, no, no.

So many terrible visions flashed through his mind. Leigh pictured her wounded, mangled, or worse. His heart froze in his chest. She was here in the apartment, he felt her presence... *But why wasn't she*

answering?

He found her in the bathroom, sitting in the tub. Overcome with relief, the strength in his legs gave out and he collapsed to his knees on to the cold tiles.

"Meg!" Leigh could barely manage to choke out her name. He clutched the edge of the porcelain. "Are you oka—" The words died in his throat when he saw the still-bleeding cut on her chest.

"Oh, God..."

Meg looked at him, her eyes rimmed red from crying, mascara pooling beneath her lower lids. She launched herself at him, grabbed him around the neck and held on for dear life. "I was so scared but I couldn't move. I couldn't. And he, he bit me. He said I was a whore. He *touched* me...I couldn't stop him..." Her words dissolved into wracking sobs.

"I never should have left you here in San Francisco," Leigh said hoarsely. Tears blurred his vision and he embraced her tightly. As he held her, a rush of feelings and images washed over him and he gasped. Everything Meg had experienced, he relived in horrified detail. Her terror and her suffering—as well as that strange mixture of lust and hate she'd actually felt for Shu.

Leigh's stomach lurched and bile rose to his mouth. He pulled away from Meg before he could stop himself and leaned against the tiled wall. That monster had tormented her—*hurt* her—but he couldn't help the feeling of disgust in the pit of his stomach.

"Why did you go?" he asked shakily as he leaned forward, his arms wrapped around his waist. "I told you—I *begged* you not to."

"I—I was worried," Meg mumbled as she stood and grabbed her thick terry robe from the small stand behind the tub. "Lok Yang came to school, he was so troubled about Kenny—Kenny. Where is he?"

Leigh rushed out to the living room, but Ohara was nowhere to be found. Meg came up beside him and touched his arm. "Find him, please."

"The hell I will." He turned and hugged her to his chest. Fear coursed through his body strong enough to replace the anger he felt

toward Ohara...and the burning hatred he felt towards Shu.

"I don't want to lose you, Meg." Leigh held the back of Meg's head and neck. A lump rose in his throat as his fingers brushed over the two small but inflamed puncture wounds just above where her neck met her shoulders. "That *bastard*," he hissed. *Shu could have killed her.*

Leigh hugged Meg closer, burying his face in her damp hair. The idea of confronting a real killer terrified him, but losing Meg—that thought frightened him more. "This is going to stop," he said. "I don't know why Ohara protects him, but I swear to God—I'm going to stop Shu. "

Meg pulled back, shook her head violently. "You can't. He's not what you think. He's...*Noseferatu—a vampire.*"

Leigh's eyes widened. He shouldn't be surprised, not after what Kwan at the historical society told them and especially after what happened with Samsaras. But a fucking *vampire*? He touched Meg's neck again, smoothed her damp hair back from her forehead and hugged her once more.

"I met that man your friend Kwan told us about. Samsaras the parapsychologist. He did a séance or something and called up the spirit of Hayato Itou. Hayato spoke through him, saying Shu killed his father, Toshiro." Leigh pulled back enough to look into Meg's haunted eyes. "Those antique photos at the hotel we saw that day. You know how it looked like Ken?" She nodded. "I think Ken looks like Toshiro. Shu probably wants to kill him again."

Meg gasped, tried to pull away, but Leigh held her tight. "We have to save Kenny."

I have to save Toshiro.

Leigh blinked, and Meg was gone. He stared in shock at his suddenly empty arms. "What—?"

His clothing was different. Instead of the outfit soaked with the water from Meg's bath, he now wore a dark brown suit with long sleeves and a long button down coat. He reached up, fingering the high collar and tight necktie that choked him just a little.

Then he coughed. Blood pooled inside his mouth and splattered over his lips. The thick liquid dribbled down his chin and on to his chest, where more blood gushed from a gaping whole where his heart should be. Crying out, Leigh tried to take a step back, but he was no longer standing.

Shit! He looked around, wildly. He sat in a dining room, people dressed in Victorian-styled clothing surrounding him. The wound in his chest didn't stop bleeding.

This is exactly what had happened in the *Chew Kee* that night in Chinatown. No...it was different. The images were sharper, the sounds clearer, events had changed...

"He's my friend..." Leigh jumped in his seat. Ken—no—Toshiro sat in the chair on his left. The kid looked just like Ken, only younger and with his hair cut a little longer, more old-fashioned. Toshiro held a knife with an ivory handle, his fingers toying with the edge of the blade. *The knife from Meg's sculpture.*

"Who?" Leigh swallowed.

"He's my friend." Shu appeared out of nowhere and draped his arm over Toshiro's shoulders. He laughed, and Leigh pushed away from the table.

"Leigh?" Meg cried out. "Can you hear me?"

The room vanished, along with his strange clothes and bleeding wound. Leigh blinked again and found himself back in the apartment, Meg still in his arms, her face twisted with worry.

What the hell just happened?

"I'm okay," he whispered shakily. "And Ken will be okay, too...at least for a few more days." Leigh squeezed her shoulders. "You should rest."

"You need it more than me," Meg said softly. She reached up and took hold of his hands. "What happened? You looked like you were in a trance."

Leigh shook his head. "I'm not sure. Maybe it was just some weird daydream, but I do think Ken is okay for now." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. "In the morning we'll figure out what to

do. Samsaras said something about blessed prayer beads. Maybe we need to go to a church and see what we can get.”

Ken sat outside and waited until his parents left their house at exactly 9:05 for their weekly late dinner at their favorite restaurant on Hyde Street. Once their car turned at the end of the block, he went around to the back of the house and let himself in through the kitchen. He grabbed a flashlight, then went up the back stairs and up into the attic.

“Shit,” he muttered as she shone the flashlight around. His parents must have cleaned, because the old box he was looking for wasn’t where he’d left it. After rooting around a few more minutes, Ken was about to give up when he remembered that little nook near where the main chimney rose up against the outside wall.

There it was.

Kneeling down next to the box, he undid the layers of twine securing the lid. He lifted out the small diorama he’d made back before high school, when he’d taken those first art classes from Miss Silivasi.

“Shit,” he muttered again. The flashlight’s beam skimmed over the small scene mounted onto a square of plywood. The diorama had been done with sticks and dried moss of various size and color. Overall, the craftsmanship was pretty primitive, but it reminded him very much of the bonsai sculpture Shu had shown him. The one Shu said Toshiro had made a century ago.

Ken’s throat became dry as he remembered how pissed off he’d been after making this diorama in school. The scene hadn’t been equal to the image in his mind, the image he realized earlier this evening was so much like the sculpture Shu had. He knew as surely as he knew his own name that there had been another bonsai sculpture, one that Toshiro had so loved. And he also knew that Shu had destroyed it.

Destroyed it, as the vampire had wanted to destroy Miss Silivasi.

CHAPTER TWENTY~THREE

“It’s fucking daylight. There’s nothing to be afraid of.”

Lau shoved the clip into the handgun’s chamber and it locked in place with a sharp click. He glared at the four men around him—Cho, Frank, Ing, and that kickboxer from Taipei with the wide shoulders and shaved head. Lau could never remember the man’s name, but he was a bull and his size came in handy on hits.

“I don’t want to end up like the fuckers at the *Golden Lotus*,” Ing took a puff from his inhaler, the cold, damp morning air fucking with his asthma. The scrawny kid didn’t look like much, but he never missed a shot with the silver-plated 9mm semi-automatic he held in his other hand. Ing never missed the fucking bull’s-eye.

“The freak is *napping*,” Lau said, tucking his sunglasses into his coat pocket.

For the last five years, Andrew Lau worked as Yang’s right hand man and head enforcer. And for three of those fucking years, he’s been waiting for this moment. Dao Kan Shu was a rabid animal, no matter what the Elders said about having something with power like that working for them. Lau hated everything about the vampire—end of story.

“Yang wants the fucker dead, and that’s what we’re going to do.” Every time he spoke, a cloud of vapor blew out of his mouth when the warm air from his body met with the cold early morning air. “By the time they start serving breakfast at the *Wah Mei*, we’ll be finished here.”

Cho shook his head, but checked the clips on his guns anyway. The older man didn't like the idea, but tough shit. Lau kicked open the door and the five men entered the *Poisoned Dragon*.

They moved through the club, checking the shadows and tearing down the drapes as they moved across the floor. Lau picked up a chair and threw it against the black tinted windows by the front. The glass shattered loudly and an alarm went off.

"Be quiet, asshole!" Cho snapped, his raspy voice even rougher with stress. He moved behind the bar and turned the alarm off. Being Yang's spy, that *Mei* bitch had known everything about the place, passing the information to Yang and Lau. Everyone involved with the hit now knew every inch of the club. *No surprises*.

Shu wasn't down here, but Lau had expected that. "He's upstairs," he growled at Cho. "And he already knows we're here."

Lau kicked down the door leading up to the loft's staircase. Sunlight already spilled into the hallway from up the spiral staircase from the broken door at the top.

"What the fuck?" Lau muttered to himself. *So much for no surprises*. He climbed up, the others behind him.

Inside the loft, some of the curtains had been torn from the windows. The tall glass was shattered. Sunlight—supposedly deadly in high doses to the man in here—filled the large room. Shu sat on one of the high-backed leather chairs near the window with one hand reached out over the armrest, his fingertips touching the light. Thin wisps of smoke rose from the creature's skin as it started to smolder.

That was strange even for Shu, but Lau just shrugged. Whatever. "I've got a message from Mr. Yang," he called out with a smirk on his face.

"You've come to kill me." Shu looked away from his hand and stared across the room at Lau.

"Well, he said it a little more eloquently," Lau moved into the loft, the others right behind him. "But that's the gist of it. Your time is fucking *up*, Shu." He stayed directly in the light and moved along the wall. He wanted to enjoy killing the bastard, but he wasn't stupid.

“Look for the Ohara kid,” Lau gestured towards the bedroom. Frank and the Taipei-heavyweight went to check it out.

“When he left, he forgot things,” Shu pulled his hand out of the dangerous light’s path and reached onto his lap. Ing fired two shots the second he saw Shu’s hand move. That’s the kid for you—quick on the draw.

But Shu moved faster.

The bullets hit the edge of the curved blade and ricocheted. The first one hit the far wall; the second one bounced off the knife and tore through Lau’s kneecap. With a cry, he hit the wood floor with a wet thump, his blood splattering around him. *The fucker had used the knife as a shield.*

Ing got two shots off, and then fell facedown next to Lau. The ivory handle of the knife, quickly turning red with dripping blood, propped up Ing’s forehead. A good two inches of the red-stained steel blade jabbed out through the back of the man’s cranium.

“Fuck!” Lau growled. He scrambled up to his hands and good knee before a strong hand grabbed the top of his head. He was pulled away from the sunlight’s direct path and thrown into the wall. The back of his head cracked the plaster and he slumped to the floor, dazed and in pain.

Cho screamed and fired his gun. Lau blinked and through his blurred vision he saw Shu tear through the man’s neck with another knife. The severed head rolled to a stop in front of him and Lau pushed away, his back against the wall.

“Shit!” Frank came charging out of the bedroom firing. The Taipei bull shouted swearwords in Mandarin. Shu crouched down by Ing’s body and yanked out the knife before letting the corpse smack down to the wood. As he stood up, a bullet tore through his shoulder. The boxer came up around and grabbed him in a chokehold.

Actually, he was trying to snap Shu’s neck. The bull’s neck bulged. Lau could see the veins in the hitman’s forearms bulging from the stress. Twisting as much as he could, he yanked Shu off the floor. On a regular job, the technique would have worked. Shit—it would have

popped the head off of anyone normal. The Taipei boxer was a strong motherfucker, but not the brightest piece of work.

Maybe he just hadn't noticed the two knives in Shu's hands, or maybe he thought the force of the chokehold would make him drop them. Either way—not the smartest move.

"Keep shooting!" Lau shouted. Where was his own gun? Fuck! He'd dropped it after getting shot, and it was there across the room next to Ing's body.

Frank hesitated. "What about Hsinyi?" That's right—Hsinyi was the boxer's name. Frank didn't want to risk hitting him while shooting at Shu. He didn't realize the boxer was already dead.

Shu flipped both knives around in midair and crossed them over his chest. He rammed the blades into the skin just below the kickboxer's giant shoulders and twisted. Hsinyi screamed, but the sounding of snapping cartilage came through loud and clear. Shu ripped up and outwards, and Hsinyi's arms flopped off right at the joint.

The man shrieked, blood gushed out all over the place. He waved his stumps around in shock—but he wasn't in enough shock not to realize what was happening. Shu dropped to the floor without a sound and whipped around. He swung around with both knives, and crossing his arms again, he slashed through Hsinyi's waist. The top half of the torso fell to one side while his lower half twisted in place from the force of the cut, then collapsed in the opposite direction. Both halves of the man still twitched as they hit the floor.

"Shoot!" Lau screamed.

Frank fainted.

"Fuck," Lau leaned back against the wall.

Shu held up one of the knives, the edge of the curved blade still glinted in the sunlight though most of it was drenched in blood. He moved across the room, right in front of the open window. He barely flinched at the touch of the light and he grabbed Frank's limp body. He tore into the man's throat.

Lau looked away; he couldn't stomach watching Shu feed. He saw

the gun on the floor beside Ing's body and he lunged for it. His legs gave out and he slid on the wood. As he picked up the weapon, Shu appeared at his side and grabbed the back of his coat, lifting him off his feet. The vampire stood in the morning sunlight, and Lau twisted around to see him. Maybe the light wasn't enough to kill the fucker, but it made the bullet hole in his shoulder bleed and it obviously hurt him.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Lau growled.

Shu glared, his eyes dark and piercing. "Yang sends pieces of *shit* like you after me," he spat. "But I'm not going die yet."

"Keep standing there, asshole, and prove me wrong."

The sunlight did burn, with the kind of agony that felt like layers of his skin were slowly being shredded with the edge of a razor. Shu bore it—compared to the pain of his disappointment, it was nothing. Still, he carried Lau away from the window and slammed him back against the wall. Until he knew for certain that Kenichi was not his beloved after all, he would not die.

And even then, it wouldn't be at Lau's hands.

"Does it upset you that of the many lovers Yang has had, you were never one of them?" Shu whispered.

"Crazy shit is coming out of your mouth, fucker," Lau warned, his voice cracking. "Shut it."

"I think it did," Shu said coldly.

"Fuck you!" the man snarled. "I'm not playing your goddamn mind games. If you're going to kill me, then do it."

Shu narrowed his eyes in a cold stare. "Not yet," he whispered. "I have a message I want to deliver to Yang personally. You're going to take me to his house."

"Fuck you." Lau was beginning to sound like a stuck record. "I'm not taking you anywhere."

Shu's frown deepened into a snarl and he bared his teeth. Loyalty...that fucking Yang commanded it so easily. "I won't just kill you," he spat, saliva mixed with the blood of the man he'd just fed on

splattered on Lau's face. "I'll make you *suffer*. Are you willing to do that for him?"

The man was one of Yang's prized dogs, a loyal and obedient enforcer, and quite protective of his master. Though Shu tightened his hand around Lau's neck, the hitman insisted on choking out, "Yes."

Loyalty. Under a lesser test last night, Kenichi had failed. The disappointment was bitter, indeed.

Lau put up a decent enough struggle, but Shu carried him out of the loft by his throat. He dragged him through the club, cringed at the light filtering through the broken windows and torn curtains. The sun grew stronger and even after feeding, Shu's own strength wouldn't last for much longer. He grabbed a drape from the floor and threw it over himself before using Lau's body to push open the side door.

The Mercedes was parked outside in the alley. Shu broke the window and tossed Lau into the passenger chair. He didn't expect the prick to drive, but Lau would come with him.

No one expected Shu in broad daylight. So the two bodyguards who approached to check out the car as it pulled up to the turn-of-the-century home were ill-prepared to handle the situation...to say the least. Dragging Lau's broken body behind him and wrapped in the thick drape, Shu cut down both hulking guards with two precise strikes from his knife. They never even managed to scream.

"Yang!" Shu threw open the doors and shouted into the house. He slipped into Cantonese, forgetting everything else in his rage and pain, both physical and otherwise. "Show yourself, you little fuck!"

Lau protested with muffled cries, his voice hoarse from the chokehold. Yang appeared from the study on the left of the foyer. "Shu?" he stared in shock.

Shu threw Lau across the room. The man hit the floor and skidded to a stop in front of the mob leader. "Keep your fucking trash away from me," Shu spat. "This one is whole..." he stepped over to Yang and shoved Lau out of the way with his foot, "but the rest are in *pieces*. If you wanted me dead, you should come after me yourself."

Shu grabbed Yang's throat.

"Dad!" Lok Yang came down the staircase. He charged into the room and lunged at Shu. "Get away from him!"

"This doesn't concern you, child," Shu smacked his attack away. Lok crashed backwards and Yang bucked in Shu's grip.

"Don't you touch my son!" he gasped.

"Don't give me a reason to." Shu bared his teeth. But Lok provided the reason himself.

"I'm calling for help." He darted for the phone on the end table by the sofa.

Call for help. Shu shoved Yang into the wall and knocked him unconscious. He stepped behind Lok.

"Foolish boy," Shu grabbed Lok's wrist and twisted it until he released the phone. He slipped back into English, quickly regaining a hold of his senses. "How *did* Silivasi know Kenichi was in the *Dragon*?" Lowering his voice, he added, "You called her."

Lok's eyes widened, their look of fear and then defiance was proof enough.

Kenichi hadn't contacted his teacher. There was still a chance...

"Where is he?"

"I don't know," Lok shook his head and Shu released him. He wasn't going to waste time on a child.

"I'll find him."

* * * * *

Meg and Leigh were waiting outside when the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library opened their doors at nine a.m. They headed directly for the General Collections and Humanities Center to look through the large collection of occult and paranormal books they'd looked up online the previous night.

Three hours and many, many shelves later they still hadn't come up with anything about Chinese vampires and blessed beads. With a defeated sigh, Meg folded her arms over the stack of books in front of

her and rested her head. “Are you positive that man said you needed blessed beads to defeat Shu? Are you sure he didn’t mean a set of rosary beads containing a small crucifix?”

“No, no,” Leigh shook his head. “Samsaras never said anything about rosaries—just blessed beads.” He rested his elbow on the table and absently rubbed his eyes. “The last time I did this much research it was for grad school,” he mumbled.

Leigh picked up another book on mysticism in ancient China, skimmed through the index in the back and tossed it aside with a grunt. “Damn it, this is going nowhere,” he sighed. “We could try visiting a temple and talking with the monks...even if they do think our story is full of shit.”

“There a lot of different temples,” Meg tapped her stack of books. “How do you know which one?”

“I don’t,” Leigh shook his head. He frowned and stared across the table at Meg. “Wait—Samsaras claims to be an expert on these paranormal creatures, but he specifically said the beads would defeat *Shu*.” Just mentioning the name made him look away from her and shift uncomfortably in his seat, paling a little.

“Anyway,” he said softly. “He was talking with Hayato Itou’s spirit. Maybe the answer to figuring the bead thing out is there—maybe he had ties to a temple or something.”

Meg’s head shot up. “Wait. Damn, I have it, it’s right there, but I can’t remember where I saw it.” She closed her eyes and tried to think. She faltered a moment as Shu’s face appeared before her mind’s eyes, his eyes so full of hate, his mouth open, his teeth—his fangs—red with her blood.

She opened her eyes, her fingers touching the spot beneath the high neck of her sweater where the bruise and punctures remained. “I know. The catalogue of the auction where I got the box with the secret compartment, it mentioned Hayato’s wife and how her grandfather contributed to bring statuary or something to a temple here. Let’s go home and look.”

As they left, Meg cast an apologetic look to the library assistant

who looked from them to the table overflowing with books that needed reshelfed.

They were shocked to see Ken Ohara sitting outside their building when they returned.

"Kenny!" Meg rushed to the young man's side. Ohara's face looked different—his eyes were red and he looked haunted, shocked...hurt.

"What happened?" Leigh asked, coming up behind Meg.

"It's *him*," Ken swallowed. "He went after Lok..."

Meg gasped and hugged him.

"I'm sorry, Miss Silivasi." He pulled away and ran his hands through his hair. "I didn't want you to get hurt—I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"Listen to me, Ken," Leigh swallowed. "You're in danger, more than any of us are. Shu thinks you're a man named Toshiro Itou—a man he murdered in cold blood more than a century ago. And he wants to do the same to you."

Leigh shivered, anger and hatred filling his heart. "He's not your *friend*, no matter what bullshit he's been feeding you—Shu wants to kill you. Do you understand?"

Ken slowly nodded, but he didn't understand. He didn't understand any of it. He didn't understand how Dao Kan Shu could be a fucking real vampire here in the twenty-first century.

He didn't understand how Miss Silivasi could go to the club looking for him and almost die.

He didn't understand how he killed those men who'd tried to kidnap Lok.

And most of all, he didn't understand the dreams he had last night or the weird feelings and flashes the past days that seemed so familiar, that made him think maybe he *was* Toshiro Itou, who Dao claimed to love but obviously wanted to kill.

"What do we do?" he asked quietly.

"Thank God," Leigh closed his eyes. "You're listening to reason."

He touched Meg's shoulder and helped her up before offering his hand to Ohara.

"Come with us," he said. "We know how to stop him. Permanently." Leigh gave a Ken a warning look. "He has to die, Ken."

Ken swallowed hard, but didn't respond as Miss Silivasi followed Gachelsing inside. Ken joined them, his teacher's words echoing in his ears, his stomach churning and threatening to toss up the tea he'd had for breakfast.

What the fuck is wrong with me? Why do I care what happens to Shu? He's a fucking monster right out of a horror movie. I've seen him kill, drain people dry and not feel a bit of guilt. He tried to kill Miss Silivasi, he went after Lok...

Ken leaned against the back of the small elevator and tried to ignore the burning itch of his right shoulder, the place where Shu cut him—where he asked—damn near begged Shu to cut him. *Make me yours...* again

"Kenny, are you coming?"

Ken broke from his reverie and entered after his teachers.

He sat and picked at the salad Miss Silivasi made for their lunch and tried not to hear the echo of Lok's frantic voice. He must have listened to the voice mail a thousand times while walking here and waiting for his teachers to return.

"He's a monster, Ken, a real fucking Chiang Shih! He killed my dad's guy, tore 'em apart, he fucked up Lau bad and tossed my dad across the room like he was nothing. I thought he was gonna kill me but he didn't, he said he didn't have time. He said he wanted you..."

Shu *was* a monster, he'd seen it himself. He'd watched the vampire—practically helped him cover up for that girl he drained outside the club that night. Ken's stomach twisted and he pushed away his untouched plate, mumbled "I'm all right," in answer to Gachelsing's question, then went to look out the window by Miss Silivasi's drawing desk.

Dao Kan Shu was a monster, but in a short time he'd made Ken feel more wanted than anyone ever had. Ken felt like he'd finally

found a place to fit in and belonged the way he never had with his family. And though Shu was indeed a vicious killer, the man also had such gentle moments.

Sure, Dao Kan was kind of rough sometimes in bed, but that was more out of passion than cruelty. Ken never felt he'd been molested or raped. He'd welcomed the forcefulness, gave it back as good as he got and craved more.

He couldn't stop remembering the hours they'd spent just talking or walking through the dark streets, listening as Dao told him how things used to be when he and Toshiro were in their prime. And he'd felt it. Even though the memories seemed so distant and fog shrouded, they were there in his heart.

Dao said Toshiro tried to kill him, that he'd been forced into it by another Yang and Toshiro's own mother.

Ken closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. It was all so fucking confusing. He turned and watched his teachers.

"Here's the catalogue," Miss Silivasi pulled a seat up to the table next to Gachelsing. She opened the large pamphlet the auction house had released, listing their entire collection. Ken remembered flipping through it with her as they waited for the auction to start last year.

That seemed like a whole other lifetime ago now.

"Look," she tapped one of the pages and turned it around on the table so Gachelsing could read the wording underneath the picture. "Here's the information on Hayato's grandfather."

"The Kong Chow," Gachelsing read. He looked up at Meg and closed the pamphlet. "That has to be the temple."

"It's not," Ken corrected. He turned back to the window. "It's the Tien Hau." In the reflection on the glass, he saw both teachers exchange a glance.

"How would you know that, Ohara?" Gachelsing asked softly. He tried not to sound freaked, but the edge to his voice was still there. "We haven't even explained to you why we're looking for the temple."

Ken shrugged. "I just *know* it's Tien Hau, okay? It's the oldest temple and Toshiro's mother used to go there. It was between her

house and...I don't know... someplace she used to go a lot."

Ken closed his eyes. He felt like such a traitor just being here. He knew what Buddhist prayer beads would do to Shu. They'd weaken him, hurt him, make him an easy target to kill. They'd be able to bury him alive like the old monk did over a century ago. He turned around, his hands shoved deep into his jean pockets. "Maybe I should go. I shouldn't be here."

Gachelsing and Miss Silivasi gave each other another look, this time more worried than anything.

"You can't go," Miss Silivasi said. "It's not safe, Kenny."

Gachelsing frowned and nodded. "She's right," he added quietly. "You have to stay with us for your own safety. And besides that..." He got up from the table and started gathering their mostly untouched plates.

"You have to help us," he looked over at Ken. "You're the only one who can get close enough to him."

The words hit Ken with such force that he reared back, bumped into the drawing desk and bent the bendable lamp out of position. Unbidden, other similar words rang out from within his mind. "*Clearly, it would take a very special man to get to Shu. One who knew him intimately, one who knew his vulnerabilities.*"

"Kenny, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I don't know. I don't want to be here. I'll be all right by myself."

He tried to move around the table and dart for the exit, but Gachelsing's words stopped him in mid-step. "Damn it, Ohara—look at this!" Ken turned around

Gachelsing held on to Miss Silivasi's left hand and brushed a few strands out of her eyes. "Show him, Meg," he furrowed his brow and clenched his jaw. "Show him so he'll get it through his thick head."

Miss Silivasi bit her lower lip and nodded. She undid the first two buttons to her blouse and held open one side. A nasty, jagged cut traced up from somewhere under her clothing to right over her heart. The wound had scabbed over, but Ken knew it was fresh. He

felt a sickening lump in his stomach and looked away.

"Don't you dare look away," Gachelsing growled at him.

"Leigh, it's okay," Miss Silivasi started, but Gachelsing moved forward and grabbed Ken's shoulder.

"He tried to cut her heart out, Ohara, don't you see that? He's messing with your *mind*! I know it because he's done it to me, he's done it Meg." His voice cracked.

"Stop protecting that monster," Gachelsing shook his head. "How many others have to get hurt—or worse—because you don't want to start believing the truth?"

Ken opened his mouth, but no words would come out. They were too busy rattling around in his head. *But he wasn't like that with me. He saved my life... he loved me...* "I'm sorry. I'm sorry he did that but he wouldn't if you'd have minded your own business and stayed away!"

"What?" Gachelsing's face twisted. "You're actually making excuses for that bastard? You're blaming me and *Meg* for what happened? Wake up, Ohara!" He pushed Ken into the wall that divided the kitchenette from the rest of the apartment. Picture frames mounted in the wall rattled from the impact, and Ken's teeth clanked together.

Meg cried out, "Leigh, stop it!"

"Shu doesn't love you!" Gachelsing shouted. "He never has!" Gachelsing made a choking sound and the color drained from his face. "What am I saying?" he asked shakily. "Christ..." He looked at his hands as if he was noticing only now that he'd practically shoved Ken through the wood. He stepped back and let Ken go.

Ken rubbed the back of his head, made his way to the dining table and collapsed into the nearest seat, a look that was half anger, half despair upon his face.

Meg cast Ken a sympathetic look, then went to Leigh's side. She rubbed her hand across his back, felt the cold sweat through the fabric of his button-down shirt. "What happened?" she asked softly.

"I—I'm okay." He leaned into her and closed his eyes. "Is Ken all

right? I don't know where that came from, I swear to God, I didn't mean to grab him like that or say those things."

Meg pressed her lips together. "He's fine," she said. Leigh sighed and his body shuddered under her touch.

"It's happening again," he whispered shakily. "Weird thoughts, memories that aren't mine—I don't know where I'm getting these ideas or why I'm saying them—but I don't want it." Fear and uncertainty rolled off him in waves. "We're going to the temple," Leigh swallowed. "We have to stop this and Ken needs to help us."

CHAPTER TWENTY~FOUR

Ken felt like a programmed robot as he followed his teachers out and into Miss Silivasi's truck. She drove to Chinatown and parked near where Kearney Street ran into Jackson then they walked the rest of the way to Waverly Place where the Tien Hau temple was located, atop a Mah Jong parlor, of all places. Ken looked up at the three steep sets of stairs that led to the temple's main section.

He didn't want to go there. He couldn't. He didn't care to know what they'd find out. Instead, he wished he could find Dao and warn him to get as far away as possible and never come back. But when Miss Silivasi touched his arm, he trailed behind her like an obedient puppy.

The temple was so strange and new, yet very much familiar the higher up the steps he climbed. When they reached the top it came as no surprise to be greeted by a veritable sea of red and gold paper lanterns. The smells of incense and burnt paper tickled his nose and through the smoky air he could see red electric lights as well as floating wick candles. Ken couldn't help but think that the old regular candles were nicer.

When he looked across the narrow space, he froze. A familiar black haired woman was placing an offering of oranges near the altar. He blinked and she vanished, replaced by an older woman with white-streaked brown hair.

"Ohara?" Gachelsing's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. During the entire ride over, the older man had stayed quiet, making

sure not to even look at Ken. This was the first thing he'd spoken since they left Miss Silivasi's apartment. Even now, he still looked a little pale and unnerved.

"Yeah," Ken answered quietly. "I'm fine."

A monk dressed in loose fitting, brightly colored robes stepped out to greet them. "Welcome to the Tien Hau," the old man bowed his head respectfully, but he didn't cover up the puzzled tone of his voice. "I understand you have some unusual questions?"

Gachelsing hesitated. He gave Ken a quick glance before he nodded to the monk. "Do you know what the *chiang shih* are?"

The monk's tan skin pale color of ashes and the lines in his face deepened. "That's a very unusual question, indeed. This is a temple, Mr. Gachelsing, not a place for scary legends and monsters."

"This one isn't just a story."

The monk's mouth pressed into a straight line. He looked at Gachelsing's face and the haunted expression reflected there. It must have been proof enough. The old man nodded slowly.

"I know," he whispered, turning. He walked down the hall filled with lamps and incense. "You've come to ask about the beads."

The monk led them deep into the temple, away from the spots reserved for visitors and tourists. They stepped into a dark room where only two small red lanterns were lit near the back wall. The old man pulled out a dusty lacquer box from the cabinet near the lamps and opened it.

"After the earthquake in 1906, these were pulled from the rubble by a monk who survived the tragedy...and the slaughter that followed." He pulled out a string of prayer beads, the sheen on the wood long since worn away by age.

Ken barely heard the monk, for as soon as he said earthquake, Ken felt the ground tremble and he fell back to the wall. Oddly, the lanterns hanging did not shake and no one else seemed to have felt it.

Miss Silivasi came over to him. "Kenny, what is it?"

Ken shook his head. He couldn't speak, he could hardly breathe. He felt like his chest was being crushed.

The sensations were gone as quickly as they came and he was crouched against the wall, gasping for air.

"It's the power of this place," the monk said softly. "Sometimes it affects those with deep memories."

"What does that mean?" Gachelsing gave Ken a questioning look.

The monk didn't answer. Instead, he wrapped the beads around his hand and chanted softly. After a few minutes, he carefully unwound the charms and handed them to Gachelsing.

"It's not found in any of our written records, but each monk here knows the story," the old man's voice sounded a little weaker, a little more weathered. "These beads have been endowed with the strength to bind the *chiang shih*, to weaken him. They've been given the power by Mu-Gong himself."

"Thank you," Gachelsing said. He held the beads and reached out for Miss Silivasi's wrist, wrapping them around her. "Until we're ready, I want you to wear them," he said. "They should keep you safe."

Meg touched them, as if to take them off. "But it's Kenny who—"

Leigh touched her wrist, pressed his fingers to her lips to silence her. "I *need* you to be safe."

Ken stood and took a calming breath, then ran his fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. "It's okay, Miss Silivasi. I'll be all right." He paused and lowered his gaze from the fierce stare of Gachelsing. "I'm going to wait outside."

Ken turned to leave, and Leigh almost stopped him. As he started to call out, Meg shook her head and gave him a concerned look.

"He'll be okay," she said softly.

Leigh swallowed whatever words he planned to say. He still couldn't explain what had come over him in Meg's apartment, why he'd been so desperate to stop Ken. The relationship the young man had with Shu unnerved him, and after what the monk said about memories, a small bit of doubt edged into his mind. *Could Ken be Toshiro?*

No. Shu manipulated and used Ohara, and planned to kill him.

Period.

Leigh squeezed Meg's hand. "We're going to stop this. I promise."

Leigh swore the moment they reached the ground level and did not see Ken waiting. "I knew it! He was playing us, Meg!"

She squeezed his arm. "Let's not jump to conclusions. Maybe he's waiting by the truck." Leigh cast her a doubtful look, but said nothing as he led the way to Kearney Street.

Oh, Kenny, Meg thought when he wasn't there either.

"I knew it. Shit!"

"Maybe he went home, to his apartment," Meg offered. "Let's look there. It's not all that far away. He had to have gone there."

Leigh's jaw tightened shut. That same, relentless, sharp stabbing pain started in his temple and he leaned one hand on the hood of the car. "He's not going to his house," he said gruffly. "He's going back."

Back to that bastard—Shu.

Leigh pressed a hand to his throbbing temple. *Why doesn't Ohara understand?* Maybe he can't help it. Shu can mess with a person's mind, make them say or go along with something they wouldn't normally want to. Like he had with Meg. The thought made Leigh's stomach lurch yet again.

* * * *

Meg insisted they try Ohara's apartment first. She really believed he would be there, and maybe Leigh wanted to believe it too. Even with the beads and his determination to put an end to this, fear lurked inside him. When he thought about setting foot inside the club, he felt the sharp stab in his chest and he caught himself clutching at the non-existent wound.

"Drive faster," he said. Meg nodded grimly and her truck sped down towards Ohara's apartment. They rang the buzzer at the front entrance for several minutes before the building manager came out to speak with them.

"I haven't seen him for days," the man rubbed his wrinkled

forehead and frowned, deepening the lines around his mouth. "Not since the day I heard about the shooting." He shook his head and asked if Ohara was all right. "He's really a nice kid, I can't imagine him getting mixed up with the wrong crowd like that."

Leigh clenched his jaw. "You have no idea who he's mixed up with."

Anger shoved at his fear, burying deep within the recesses of his heart. He pressed his fingers against the side of his forehead, the throbbing ache worsened by the moment. They'd given Ken the benefit of the doubt, hoping in vain that the kid would be here, safe. He turned away from the manager and started for Meg's parked truck.

Meg muttered a quiet "Thank you" to the manager, then followed behind Leigh. She got behind the wheel of the SUV and placed the key in the ignition, but didn't start the engine. She turned to face Leigh, her face lined with a mix of concern and fear.

"What exactly are we going to do? We're no match for this Shu. I didn't even realize he was manipulating me until it was too late. I was powerless, Leigh. Absolutely powerless to do anything but sit there and let him..."

She bit her lower lips as tears brimmed in her eyes. "The things he said, the things he did...I feel so dirty even now..." She turned away and stared out the side window. "You must hate me."

"No," Leigh mumbled. He stared down at his hands as they tightened over the clasps to the seatbelt. "You had no control over that."

Shu had manipulated her—he'd tried to kill her, for Christ's sake. Each time he saw the gash on her chest and bite marks on her neck, it was a painful reminder of how close he'd come to losing her. When he touched Meg, he relieved horror and revulsion she'd experienced during those moments...and her attraction as well.

Leigh's shoulders tensed and he bit his lower lip until the metallic taste of blood tickled his tongue. This is why he'd agreed to check out the apartment first. If Ohara had been here, then Meg could've stayed

with the kid. Leigh would face Shu alone, but reassured that Meg was safe. He didn't just fear losing her life—he feared losing her, period.

"If we go after him, how much power is he going to have over you?" he asked softly.

"None," Meg said emphatically. However the nagging doubt she wanted to quell would not be silenced. "At least I don't think so..." She gripped the steering wheel until her fingers ached. "I don't know what he did. It was like the movies. He looked at me and I felt myself slip away. Or maybe the wine I had *was* drugged too. I don't know." She laid her head down on her hands. "I just don't know."

CHAPTER TWENTY~FIVE

Ken rushed along the hilly streets towards the *Dragon*. He tried not to hear Gachelsing's words and he did his best to blot out the sight of the cut on Miss Silivasi. *He tried to cut out her heart.*

Dao couldn't have. He wouldn't have...but he would. It was what he did. He killed. He was a vampire and he wasn't one of those angsty book or movie ones. He was a real vampire who did what he had to do to survive and even enjoyed it...

Stop being so weak. Toshiro understood that to truly live, blood must be shed. Accept it, and don't deny the truth. The real world is a cruel place, Kenichi, and always has been. It isn't pretty fictional Sunnydale and I am not the forlorn Angel too conscience-stricken to be what he is. I appreciate the gift that spineless Kiyoshi inadvertently gave me...and I use it with pleasure.

Confused, his mind spinning in a thousand different directions, Ken didn't pause to acknowledge the prickling sensation on the nape of his neck as he let himself in the rear door of the club. It wasn't until he reached the opened private door that led up to the loft that he paused. This door was always locked. Always. He hesitated, then started up the twisting staircase, his eyes growing wider when the smell hit him.

Blood.

Death.

It was both alien and all too familiar to him.

Surely Miss Silivasi and Gachelsing couldn't have gotten here so

fast and killed Dao. Even though he would still be sleeping, he'd be able to defend himself if necessary.

But those beads. They'd weaken him, the monk said.

Swallowing hard, Ken steeled his nerves and kept going up. The loft door was broken from its hinges and—

"Oh, shit..."

He knew these guys—rather, what was left of these guys. They worked for Lok's dad. Ken's stomach heaved and he doubled over as the few bites of food he'd had came rushing up. He spit the bitter bile from his mouth, turning away. Shu had done this. He was the monster Gachelsing said he was.

Ken stepped out to the landing, leaned back against the wall and took several deep breaths. It was true. Shu had been fucking with his mind. He'd done it to Miss Silivasi, something Ken witnessed with his own eyes. She hadn't wanted to sit there, hadn't wanted Dao Kan to touch her that way, but she couldn't stop herself.

"Kenichi."

Ken stiffened and looked over the stair railing. Shu stood at the bottom of the staircase. He clutched one of the torn drapes from the club downstairs over his body. From underneath the makeshift cowl his eyes glittered, their unnatural glow made even more startling by the intensity of his stare. The words he spoke were no louder than a whisper. But in the shadow filled stairway where the smell of death hung in the cold air like a suffocating blanket, they pierced Ken's senses with a great force.

"You've returned." Shu soundlessly climbed up the staircase, his movement both slow and fast at once. He never seemed to rush, but was at the top of the landing in less than a moment. The vampire moved across to where Ken leaned against the wall. Blood covered the front of his clothes, visible through a part in the makeshift robe.

More bile rose to Ken's mouth; he choked on the acidic fluid and forced himself to swallow. He couldn't get Gachelsing's voice out of his head. *Shu is a monster... He wants to kill you, Ohara.*

A moment of silence passed. From under the dark cloth

protecting him from the sunlight, Shu seemed to study Ken, gauge him. Then he leaned close, his expression impossible to read. "I smell...*fear*," he whispered. His face twisted and his eyes darkened.

Oh, shit.

"Are you *afraid*?" Shu spat. He smashed his fist into the wall only a few inches from Ken's head. The blow cracked the wall and his body trembled with anger under the robe. "Are you so weak?"

"What you did...those men..." Ken's voice faded and he found himself believing very much what Gachelsing had warned him of. The look in Shu's eyes was pure evil. Evil and hatred focused directly on him. And yet...

"You need to go. Get away from here. Gachelsing is coming. He has something to kill you. Beads. A monk gave them to him. Go. Just go as far as you can. Go live your life. Do what you do. Just go. Hurry."

"Don't try to *dismiss* me," Shu hissed. Behind the fury in his words, there was a hint of something else. A different look flashed through those intense, unblinking eyes.

"Did you tell him?" he asked bitterly. This time the edged tone of his voice was unmistakable. "How else would the fool learn about the prayer beads and what they would do? Did you make sure to show them where to have the *fucking* things blessed?"

Ken shook his head, his breathing quickened. A sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead. "No, no, I...I didn't meant to. Someone else told them about the beads..." His knees giving out, Ken sunk to the floor. When he opened his mouth to speak, words failed him.

"No one else knows—but you and I." Shu stepped back. "Now you tell me lies."

The *chiang shih* dropped the protective cloth and flinched at the touch of the sunlight on his skin. But he tolerated any pain the rays caused and reached behind him to pull out a knife from the back of his pants. Dried blood caked the ivory handle, now covered in a reddish-brown coat. The blade managed to shine even with through the bloodstains. Shu threw the knife with a vicious growl. It jabbed

into the wooden floor beside Ken, the impact echoing in the stairway.

“Do I make good sport, Kenichi?” Shu choked out. “Why don’t you try using the knife on me again instead of letting others do your own work for you?”

Ken hung his head when Dao pulled the knife but when the vampire spoke Ken looked up his expression very different than before. There was a fierceness in his eyes now. He grabbed the knife and slowly rose to a standing position.

“I didn’t fucking tell him about the beads. Miss Silivasi said it was the Kong Chow temple and I fucking corrected them because I remembered being there. I remembered taking someone there. A woman. I felt she was my mother, even though I know she couldn’t be.”

“It’s easy to pick up a knife against me, isn’t it?” Shu demanded as though he hadn’t heard Ken, his voice a hoarse whisper. His gaze flickered from the sharp blade to Ken’s face. “Why not—you’ve done it before.”

Reaching behind him once more, Shu drew out the jade-handled mate to the knife in Ken’s fist. “And that was your mother you saw in the temple. With all of that combined, how can you still doubt who you are?”

Shu moved forward to within striking distance of Ken. He bared his teeth, and his eyes flashed. “Answer me, damn you!”

Ken’s arm hung limply at his side, the knife clutched in his hand more out of an ingrained habit than the will to use it. “I can’t answer because I don’t understand it. I’m *me*. I’m Ken Ohara, the misfit in a third generation Japanese-American family full of successful doctors all the way back to when they stepped off the fucking boat from Tokyo.”

With a sigh, he lowered his head and the tone of his voice took on the weariness he felt. “I wish I could make more sense of it.” He reached up and touched his shoulder, where Shu had cut the character for dragon. “Part of me wants to be Toshiro, because I finally feel like I belong when we’re alone, but...” His words trailed

off and he looked up, his dark eyes glittering with combined fear and loathing. "Toshiro accepted the violent part of you, but I don't know if I can. I know you have to because of what you are, but what you did to Miss Silivasi, hurting Lok... I hate you for that."

Those last words just hung in the hallway like the stagnant air and the stench of blood and death. *I hate you.*

Shu's hand darted out faster than he could restrain himself. He grabbed Ken roughly by the jacket's collar and slammed him back into the wall. "You know *nothing!*" he shrieked. "I was *merciful* with those *fucks!* They've done nothing but meddle where they're not concerned!"

He swung his arm up and stabbed his knife into the wall just beside Ken's neck. The bullet wound on Shu's right shoulder split open, the blood spilling down his arm barely noticed. Ordinarily the injury would have repaired itself a few moments after he'd received it, but the stress on his body from the exposure to sunlight took its toll. Rage gave him his strength now and he gripped Ken's chin with one hand.

"You—" Shu choked. "I expected so much more from you."

Downstairs a door slammed open. The sound of their footsteps and voices carried through the open door leading to the club. "Ken!" Silivasi and Gachelsing—both of them here, in the *Poisoned Dragon*.

Shu hissed under his breath. "You believe you hate me now," he pulled out the knife from the wall. "Wait until you see the true limits of my mercy."

Ken grabbed his arm. "No! Don't hurt them. Please!"

With a growl, Shu threw him back and he hit the wall, his head banging back with enough force to cloud his vision. By the time he could see and think straight, Shu was gone.

Ken ran down the stairs almost tumbling headfirst. He dropped Toshiro's knife but picked it up and sped the rest of the way to the club. He reached the main room just as Miss Silivasi and Gachelsing entered.

"Get out! Hurry!"

"Kenny!" Miss Silivasi started to run forward to meet him, but Gachelsing held her back.

"Wait." The art professor stared at the knife in Ken's hand and took a protective step in front of Meg. "Where is he?"

Ken glanced wildly around the large room. Some of the windows were broken and a few curtains pulled away from others. The dull orange sunlight that made its way inside the club created dark shadows in the corners and by the booths. "I don't know." He turned back to the two teachers. "Just go!"

"Dammit, stop protecting him, Ohara!" Gachelsing took three steps forward and raised his arm. He held up a blood-covered gun in his shaking hand. The professor must have found it here in the club left behind by one of Mr. Yang's men. Not good. . .

Ken shook his head. "Please, just listen to me!"

"Save your words, Kenichi."

Gachelsing whipped around. Behind him, Shu stood just behind and to the side of Meg. "You can use them to plead for your own self once I've finished."

He held a knife to her heaving chest. The tip of the sharp, already bloodstained blade traced a thin arc just above her heart. Terror registered clearly on Meg's face, but she remained frozen to the spot, though Shu never physically restrained her.

Ken watched in horror as Gachelsing aimed the gun at Shu. "Don't, Professor. You can't hurt him and he'll kill her."

Shu laughed. "Such a quick learner you are, Kenichi. A trait I've always liked about you."

He looked back at Gachelsing and sneered. "The way his hand trembles he can't take a decent shot, even if the weapon were of use against me."

"Bullshit," Gachelsing snarled. "You're bleeding from your shoulder, asshole." Droplets of sweat dotted his forehead and he quickly wiped it away with the back of his freehand. He raised his other hand to steady the gun and kept it aimed directly at Shu. "Get the fuck away from her," he shouted. "Now!"

Shu glanced down at the bleeding wound on his arm and a choked whimper came out of the woman. "Don't bother," Shu said through clenched teeth. He reached up to grab her neck, but the moment his flesh touched hers, he gasped sharply. A burning pain ran down his forearm, as though millions of micro-thin needles invisible to the naked eye punctured his skin.

"*Bitch*," he cursed angrily. He shook his hand out and glared at Gachelsing, his narrowed eyes flashed with anger.

"Go ahead and shoot," he said coldly. "You'll have the satisfaction of killing your own woman."

"You bastard!" Gachelsing screamed. "Leave her out of this!"

"That's the entire *fucking* problem," Shu's expression remained calm, but the fury growing inside him came out in his voice. "Neither of you could leave well enough alone. You insist on taking away what's *mine*."

A choked cry of anger and hate rose in Gachelsing's throat. "Kenny Ohara isn't fucking yours!"

"He was until this bitch stole him from me!" Shu shoved Meg aside and flipped the knife around in his hand.

"Meg!" Gachelsing gasped. With a guttural cry, he pulled the trigger, the gun aimed straight for Shu's heart.

Click.

Gachelsing stared at the gun, his eyes widened. Every time he pulled the trigger, he got the same dull, empty click in the chamber. "Oh, shit..." He looked up to see Shu directly in front of him.

"Next time, make sure it's got an ammunition clip." Shu reached out and smacked the gun from the teacher's hands. It clattered uselessly to the floor and he grabbed Gachelsing by the collar, pulling him into the blade of the knife. The steel rammed through his shoulder and as he screamed, Shu dropped him to the floor. "Be thankful I didn't gut you the way I gutted that meddling fuck Lau when he tried to poison Toshio's mind against me."

Ken scrambled to Meg's side. She'd hit one of the heavy tables when Shu shoved her and her right arm was already swelling and

bruising. She grimaced as she tried to use it to help pull herself up from the floor. "He has to be stopped, Kenny."

Shu turned to smirk. "Such a noble little demon slayer you are, Magda. Your *Bunica* would be proud, I'm sure."

"Fuck you, Shu."

The vampire laughed. "Now you sound like Toshiro's bitch of a mother Ume."

While Gachelsing struggled to get back on his feet, Shu leaned over and ripped the knife out of his shoulder. "I showed *that* woman far too much mercy, for Toshiro's sake. This time I won't make that same mistake." He flicked the blood off the blade and stepped towards them, his hate-filled glare directed at Meg.

Behind him, Gachelsing rolled onto his knees, gasping from the pain. "*Lau...!*" he choked out. "Ken, is that who you were talking about back in the Children's Center when you told me *I'd had my chance before?*"

"What?" Shu stopped and glared down at the art professor. Gachelsing returned the stare with one just as full of loathing.

"A man named Lau tried to get Toshiro away from you and you...oh God..." He pressed a hand to his forehead and hunched over as he made a gagging sound like he was about to throw up.

"I can see it all in my mind...I can *feel* it," he gagged on the words and whimpered. He clutched at his chest. "You *bastard*—you *murdered* him—you stabbed him through the heart!"

Shu stopped and looked down at Gachelsing. "So that's it," he hissed. "I knew I sensed something familiar from you." Shu glanced over his shoulder at Ken. Behind the rage and hate flashing in his eyes, there was a look of doubt... a shadow of loneliness...or sadness.

The vampire turned back to Gachelsing and heaved him off the floor again. "You're not going near him again," Shu's voice trembled. "I'll tear out your throat before you say another poisonous word to Kenichi."

Shu opened his mouth to carry out the threat, but before he

could, glass shattered twice in the distance from above and from within the storage rooms behind the bar. A burning smell filled the air, became stronger as flames took hold in the loft and storeroom. Shu growled. "Yang."

Meg took advantage of Shu's distraction to charge forward. She took the prayer beads and threw them over his left wrist, then the right when he dropped his knife. With a growl, Shu swung his arms, catching Meg in the ribs. She flew backward, hit the floor hard and skidded past Gachelsing.

"Miss Silivasi!" Ken rushed forward. Shu reared up in his path. "No! Get out of here. Now!"

"Meg!" Gachelsing scrambled over the glass strewn floor and collapsed beside her with a cry. When Shu dropped him, he'd landed wrong and twisted his ankle. The sharp pain made him inhale sharply and he coughed on the smoke coming from the door behind the bar. Meg was unconscious. He pulled her limp body into his arms. "Answer me, Meg!" He held her close. "I'm sorry for what I said to you," he coughed again and stroked her cheek. "I didn't mean to say those things in the car—please Meg—wake up!"

Shu crumpled to his knees, shrieking in agony. He clawed at the wooden charms loosely wrapped around his wrists, yet they were impossible to remove. He looked up at Ken, his face twisted with fury and pain. Streaks of blood trickled down from his ears and nostrils—the beads were taxing his body beyond its supernatural limits.

"Take them off!" he shrieked. The skin on his fingertips peeled away with each attempt Shu made to claw at the beads. In less than a moment, both his wrists had become raw and stripped almost clear of flesh. "Fucking take them off!" He collapsed backward onto the floor.

Ken felt a twinge of pain in his heart. The look of suffering on Dao's face—

"Ohara, don't listen to him—do it!" Gachelsing screamed. He

clutched at Meg, cradling her to his chest. “Do it now! Kill him!”

Flames licked up from the behind the bar and raced across the decorative wooden ceiling beams. Metal and glass crashed to the floor in back, and the temperature of the building soared.

Ken moved forward, his grip tightened around the knife in his hand. Shu was a monster, he deserved no less than death, and yet he hesitated, the knife in his hand poised over the prone vampire’s heart. He raised his arm up, concentrated on the left side of Shu’s chest and—

He couldn’t do it. He couldn’t stab Dao.

“Ohara—*Ken!* Hurry!” Leigh coughed and covered Meg’s mouth and nose with the bottom of his shirt.

Ken looked at Gachelsing, who desperately tried to rouse Meg. Ken raised his arm a little higher. Shu’s dark eyes flew open, piercing him with their intensity, their...sadness?

“Toshiro,” Shu moaned. He reached out to the younger man, his palms open and receptive. Blood dripped from his sore and open wrists, splattering on to the cracked floor. But the gesture was pointless—Shu could reach out all he wanted and his fingers would never find the one he sought again.

Toshiro was gone...forever. Shu’s eyes stung, not just from the dark smoke filling the room or the relentless burning of the beads. Bitter tears spilled over his lashes and he wept.

Kenichi was not Toshiro. And he never would be.

The vampire exhaled a long sigh, the air from his lungs mixing with the blood he’d spilled to assault Ken’s nostrils with a sickening sweet scent. “So this too was a mistake,” Shu said softly. “You weren’t what I thought you were. Just like Hayato...”

He clawed open his shirt with his bleeding hands then glared at Ken.

“Do it! Kill me,” he pleaded. “Don’t just stand there! Do it the way Toshiro would have done it! Strike swiftly and without remorse. Kill me and be done with it. Let me find him in the afterlife...if he’s there

at all...*kill me...*"

Shu reached up, his bound, bleeding hand seizing Ken's free hand, dragging him down. He reached next for Ken's other hand and poised the knife over his heart. "Kill me. Make me proud of you as I was of him."

Ken's hands trembled. "I can't," he whispered. "I can't." He flicked the knife, but only to sever the string of the magical beads. They clattered to the floor, rolling away into dark recesses. Ken dropped the knife before running to his teachers. He helped Gachelsing to his feet, then scooped up Meg and got them both out the front door. He handed the unconscious Miss Silivasi to Gachelsing, who stumbled back against the side of Meg's truck parked near the club entrance.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I just couldn't. Not again." Ken took a deep breath and turned back to the entrance, reflected flames danced off the glass in the door.

"Ken! Don't!"

CHAPTER TWENTY~SIX

Ken dashed back into the burning club, ignoring Gachelsing's pleas to stay outside. Once inside, Ken's eyes stung and watered from the increased smoke, but he could still see, and breathing wasn't that bad. Maybe because of having had Shu's vampire blood not long ago. It healed him at the hospital; maybe it was protecting him now. One of the decorative beams fell off to his left and he screamed. "Dao!"

"Kenichi..."

Coughing, Ken dashed toward the sound. Through teary eyes he saw Shu on his knees gasping and trying to push himself up from the floor. Instinctively, Ken grabbed Toshiro's knife before reaching out to haul Shu to his feet. He gripped the vampire around the waist and pulled him to the rear fire exit.

As they crossed the threshold, Shu put his hand up against in the doorway. Halfway through the exit, he paused and pulled away from Ken's grip.

"Why did you come back?" Shu coughed and droplets of blood dotted his lip. He stared at the floor as if he couldn't bear to look into Ken's face and shook his head, not wanting an answer.

"Go," he said hoarsely. "Let me die."

Ken coughed, grabbed Shu's arm. "No. You can't die. You can't because—I *remembered*."

Shu looked at the hand on his arm but didn't pull away from the touch. "Remembered?" he asked softly. He reached up and traced a sore fingertip over Ken's knuckles, wincing at the pain from his raw

and open skin.

"Remembered what?" he whispered. "Another broken fragment of a memory? A sensation of familiarity you can't explain?" He wrapped his hand around Ken's wrist and used what little was left of his strength to pry it off his arm.

"It's not real," Shu released him and slid down along the doorway to his knees. "It never has been. Leave me in fucking peace—I don't want your pity."

"I remembered that you didn't help me up. I fell on the silk pouch from Yang's fucking payoff for finding the traitor. I fell and hit the foyer floor hard. My back hurt, but you walked away. You never looked to see if I was all right. You never helped me up and I knew then you didn't care... I listened to Yang and to the Elders and to my mother and did what they wanted me to do. It was at a *kabuki* performance..."

Ken looked back when windows broke from the heat. Reaching down, he grabbed Shu's arm again. "I was wrong. You did care, you stupid fuck, and you waited until I stabbed you to tell me."

Shu exhaled as though someone had forced the last of his breath out through his lungs. "I never helped you up."

Countless times Toshiro had cared for his wounds, treating them with a tenderness Shu himself had often mocked. Until the very moment Toshiro's knife plunged in his belly, he'd taken the younger man for granted instead of treating him like the treasured lover he was. Those bitter memories were ones he'd never force on Kenichi—only Toshiro would know them.

Ken's grip tightened on Shu's arm, his young face highlighted with the dancing shadows as the flames consuming the club drew closer. His words were harsh and his tone angry, though it was the same kind of reaction Toshiro would have made. Shu stared at his own reflection in Ken's rich auburn eyes. They flashed with something other than anger, or bitterness—it was the same thing tugging at Shu's heart.

Dao Kan Shu pressed his hand over Ken's and whispered the three

words he'd never once said in life. "I love you."

The words reached deep and squeezed Ken's heart. He took off his jacket and threw it over Shu to protect him from the sun, then pulled him to his feet. "Let's get you out of here."

They darted out into the alley. Firetrucks blared their horns in the near distance along with police car sirens. Shu shrank under the cover of the jacket, biting back cries of pain whenever a ray of light from the afternoon sun managed to touch to his skin. He'd never felt this weak. The beads hadn't pained him this much the last time. It was all he could do to keep walking; without Kenichi supporting most of his weight, he wouldn't be able to do even that.

"I can't make it on foot," he tugged at Ken's arm, drawing him back up the alley. "You'll have to drive—Lau's car is this way."

Ken pulled Shu towards the black Mercedes. Wisps of acrid smoke rose up from beneath the jacket pulled over the vampire's head. Oh, God. Was his skin burning?

"Keys. Pocket," Shu muttered. Ken reached into Shu's pocket. Oh God, he seemed to be burning up from the inside out! Ken dropped the keys. He bent to get them, but Shu almost toppled over. "Fuck!" He grabbed Shu, let his weight rest against him as he pulled open the door and eased Dao in. He ran around and hopped into the driver's seat, fumbling again with the keys. At last he turned the ignition and sped away.

Shu cried out in agony as they headed into the sun. Ken looked over. "This is the shortest way! Don't die! Please!"

Shu writhed in the seat, hunched under the jacket. Strangled groans of pain came out his throat, and he clutched at his belly. He felt the hot liquid seep through the silk a moment before the scent of his own blood reached him. The old scars seeped blood underneath his touch, the flesh beginning to tear apart as though the wounds were being made fresh again.

Between his cries of pain, choked laughter passed over his dried and split lips. "Before you died in my arms...after the earthquake..."

I told you not to die,” Shu closed his eyes, his breath coming in rapid, wheezing gasps. “You defied me then.” He smiled faintly, though the protective jacket hid his face. “I think it’s my turn now.”

“No!” Ken sped through the stoplight ahead almost crashing in the intersection with oncoming traffic. He cut through an empty lot, swerved to miss vehicle and pedestrians alike in his rush to get back to his apartment.

* * * *

Flames leapt out of the windows on the second floor, thick clouds of black smoke billowed over from the *Poisoned Dragon*. Two fire trucks roared onto the scene, they’re sirens blaring as they pulled in front the blazing club. Rescue workers swarmed the place, pulling out hoses and dashing into the building to look for survivors. Across the street from the burning building and lost in the chaos, Leigh clutched at Meg’s hand.

“Meg!” He coughed, his throat raw from the smoke and his lungs burning for air. He kept repeating her name, like that alone would be enough to pull her back. Her pulse fluttered weakly under his fingertips. “Meg!”

Where he should have sensed her warm presence flowing from her spirit, he felt instead a cold, numbing emptiness. She was right in his arms, and yet Leigh couldn’t sense her.

“Sir! *Sir!*” He looked away from her face to the fireman standing in front of him, trying to get an oxygen mask to him. “The paramedics are on their way! Is there anyone else in the building?”

Leigh blinked, his eyes well-past being able to water to ease the harsh dryness. Ohara dragged them out from the club, helped them get to the other side of the street. He’d carried Meg to safety, and then turned back.

Ken—don’t go! Leigh had shouted hoarsely. *Don’t go back inside!* But Ken ignored him. Just like he’d always done in class. Leigh called after him until nothing but raspy, unintelligible croaks came out.

Smoke escaped from the broken doors to the entrance, and Ken vanished in the swirling black clouds.

Leigh now looked over the fireman's shoulder at the burning building behind them. Other rescue workers were dousing the building with white, foaming sprays of water, trying to get the blaze under control. The fire had spread so quickly...how much time had passed since Ken had gone back?

"Is there anyone else in the building? The burly, mustached fireman persisted and Leigh accepted the oxygen mask.

"Maybe. I don't know." He barely recognized the sound of his own cracked and charred voice.

A crowd of spectators had gathered just a little further down the street, each person craned their necks over each other to better appreciate the blaze. Turning away from Leigh, the fireman headed towards the onlookers, shouting for them to leave the area. A team of paramedics came up to Leigh. They must have arrived sometime while the fireman spoke.

"Sir, we need to get her out of here and you need treatment." The paramedic eased Meg from his lap and checked her pulse.

"How long has she been unconscious?" The paramedic turned to face him. Her nametag read 'Mendoza'. Afterwards, Leigh wouldn't be able to remember her face or the sound of her voice, but the name stood out clearly in his mind.

"A—a few minutes." He dropped the oxygen mask and struggled to remember clearly. It couldn't have been more than a few moments ago, but hours seemed to have passed since Shu threw her across the room. Leigh's heart leapt in his chest and he clenched his jaw, anger temporarily piercing through the numbness clouding his mind.

"Has she spoken to you?"

"No." Worry quickly replaced anger. He tightened his hand around Meg's. But the woman paramedic turned back to her partner, and they started to lift Meg onto a gurney. Her hand slipped out of Leigh's grip.

"Where are you taking her?" he struggled to rise.

"We have to get her to the hospital—it looks like she has head trauma."

Another paramedic arrived out of nowhere to look at the knife wound on his shoulder, and Leigh pushed away from him. "I'm going with her."

"Unless you're a direct family member, you can't ride in the ambulance."

They were taking her away.

Like hell they were.

"You can't take her anywhere without me!" He moved forward on his twisted ankle, barely feeling the twinge of his strained tendons.

"Stay calm—you have to be treated for your shoulder wound—"

"Damn it, I'm not letting her go!" he growled.

"Only direct family members can ride in the ambulance, so unless you're—"

Leigh grabbed the edge of the gurney. "I'm her fiancé!" he cried.

The two paramedics exchanged glances, and then Mendoza nodded. "Fine—come on."

They loaded Meg into the ambulance and Leigh climbed in after them. He took a seat across from Meg and reached for her hand. Mendoza shouted for the driver to get moving as her partner put an oxygen mask over Meg.

"Here," Mendoza pressed a thick gauze pad against Leigh's bleeding shoulder. "Keep pressure on it."

Leigh nodded silently, barely hearing her. He stared at Meg, her face deathly pale and unresponsive to his words or touch. He shouldn't have taken her there. He shouldn't have let her get involved with this. Or with him. The night she'd showed up at the apartment, he should have turned her away.

He squeezed her hand again. *Please, Meg. Not because of me. Not for me.*

"Wake up," he whispered. "Don't leave me here alone."

* * * *

“You can’t leave me like this. Not now,” Ken muttered as he stopped the car behind his apartment building. Shu was unconscious, the front of his black shirt, darker and wet with blood. Ken got out, ran around to the passenger door and pulled it open. He fumbled in his jean pocket for his door keys and slipped the edge of the key ring around his thumb before reaching down and pulling Shu from the car.

The moan the vampire made as he collapsed against Ken was painful to both the younger man’s soul and ears, but Ken was relieved that Dao could make any sound at all. “We’re almost there. Please hang on.” Ken was on the verge of tears by the time they reached his door and he struggled to keep Shu upright and undo the lock.

“We’re here.” Ken kicked the door closed behind him and helped Dao to the sofa letting him crumple down onto it. He rushed to the bathroom and returned with a wet cloth and towels. He ripped open Shu’s shirt, whimpering when he saw how the old scars had turned into open cuts. They were scabbing over, but still...

Shit. Shit. Shit. *Shit! Think, dumbass. Think!* Ken closed his eyes a moment and took a deep breath as he tried to pull any bit of medical knowledge gleaned from a lifetime of living with doctors he could from the recesses of his mind. He used the cloth and towels to gently swab as much of the blood away from Shu’s abdomen and hands as he could. He ran back to the bedroom and pulled an extra bed sheet from the dresser, then cut it into strips with the knife he brought from the club.

Toshiro’s knife. *His* knife. Dao couldn’t die. Not now, not since he was really remembering. Ken swiped the tears from his eyes and tried to blot the mental images of being trapped after the earthquake. It wasn’t fair. It just wasn’t fucking fair.

Ken took the bloodied towels and cloth and tossed them in the kitchen trash, then returned to kneel beside him. He smoothed back the tangled strands of hair from Dao’s impassive face and leaned in to kiss his lips. “I remember it. All of it,” he whispered.

Shu moaned and tried to lift one bandaged hand. Ken took Dao's hand in both his and held it close to his heart. "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to help you. I..." his words trailed off as his gaze fell upon the knife resting upon the arm of the sofa. Dao's blood saved him in the hospital...

Releasing the vampire's hand, Ken took the knife ran the razor sharp tip along his forearm deep enough to draw blood from a thin, visible vein. He watched the blood well up and begin to drip, then pressed his arm to Dao's mouth. "Please, work. Please work."

Ken's words faded into the white oblivion Shu slowly sank into. Even the sharp agony wracking his body had gone. Shu sighed, the last of his breath easing out of his lungs. *But Kenichi does remember...*

He tried to mouth the last words on his lips, though the feeble effort was wasted. He had no strength, his life ebbed away and his broken body no longer responded. Though what meaning did *Yong yuan ai ni* hold now that 'forever' lay beyond reach.

"Please work...Please work..." Kenichi chanted softly, his voice hollow and distant like a whisper carried on a breeze. Something soft and warm touched Shu's partially opened mouth. A thick droplet of liquid fell on his lips and slid onto his dry, parched tongue. The liquid's warmth and metallic flavor burned the inside of his mouth, but not unpleasantly.

Blood. Sweet and salty both at once, full of strength and power. The taste of life. Shu's eyelids fluttered open.

Kenichi leaned close to him. Blood trailed from the thin cut on the soft underside of his forearm, a few inches up from his wrist. Ken pressed the wound to Shu's mouth and the crimson fluid beaded on his lips. Shu lapped at the blood weakly at first, then hungrily as the taste triggered a deep, ingrained response. His tongue traced the edge of the cut and he closed his eyes. The taste of Ken's life, young and strong, filled his mouth. The sound of Ken's pulse thundered in his ears. He closed his eyes and his heart rate rose in to match the other's, gaining strength by the moment.

Stimulated by the blood, Shu's teeth extended. Aware of nothing else but its sweet flavor in his mouth, he pierced the skin around the cut. Kenichi moaned, a faint sound Shu barely noticed over the throbbing of Ken's pulse. He drew out more of the life-giving liquid from the puncture wounds, swallowing the blood as quickly as it touched his tongue. When Ken moaned again, the cry sounded to Shu like an erotic call from his lover encouraging him to satisfying himself, to take what he wanted—what he needed.

"Wait," Ken murmured faintly. "You're taking too much..." He tried to slip out from Shu's grip. His pulse fluttered irregularly.

As Kenichi's arm pulled away, Shu whimpered. He sat up, his lips pressed firmly against the warm skin. This wasn't something he would give up. His body moved of its own desire, its own needs. He grabbed Ken's elbow, keeping him close.

All he knew was the thirst for blood.

CHAPTER TWENTY~SEVEN

“Hurry up, Stan! She’s crashing!”

“What’s wrong? What’s happening?”

“Sir! Sit down! I can’t help her if you’re in the way!”

“You need help back there, Mendoza?”

“I need you to fucking floor it, Stan! Sir! Sit down and let me work!”

Meg watched the weird film play out from her vantage point high in the balcony...no not balcony...Where was she? And why was Leigh so frantic? And who was the woman in uniform and was that her on the stretcher? Why were they stabbing that big needle in her chest? What was happening?

“Magda, Magda, Magda. I told you to stay away from the men. You wouldn’t listen. Just like your mamma.”

Meg turned. “Bunica? But you’re dead. How can I see you?”

“I think you know, child...”

Meg shivered and looked back down on the weird scene. It became clearer. She was in an ambulance, that woman was a paramedic they were trying to save her life...

Meg sobbed and tried to grab her grandmother’s arm but her hands couldn’t feel anything, couldn’t grip the wispy fabric of Bunica’s blouse. “I don’t want to die! I don’t want to leave Leigh! I love him, and he loves me! I don’t want to die...”

“I have no power to help you, Magda. It’s better you should come with me now...”

“No! I won’t leave Leigh! I can’t!” Meg clamped her eyes shut and prayed as hard as she could.

“We’re losing her!”

* * * *

The paramedic’s shouts bled into the background along with the screeching wail of the ambulance’s siren. Leigh clung to Meg’s hand as Mendoza worked frantically to save her life. They turned a sharp corner and screeched to a stop. Pieces of medical equipment rattled in their secured places on the wall of the cabin and Leigh squeezed Meg’s hand harder. She felt so cold.

The rhythmic beeping from one of the monitors suddenly flattened into a steady wail.

“Shit!” Mendoza cried out. “We have to get her out of here, Stan!”

The backdoors swung open and the other paramedic helped Mendoza rush the stretcher out of the cabin. Three members of the hospital staff were already waiting by the entrance to the emergency room and they quickly rolled the gurney inside. Leigh stumbled out of the ambulance, only a second behind.

He paused for a moment at the entrance, struck by a sick sense of *dèjà vu*. The same hospital, the same nameless doctors and nurses who nonetheless felt so familiar...a week ago he’d rushed into this hospital with Meg after Ken had been shot. Now they were here again and she was the one on the verge of death. Why the hell hadn’t he done something then?

“She’s going into cardiac arrest!” the attending shouted as he raced through the hallway with Meg’s gurney. They wheeled her in the same direction they’d taken Ken. Leigh went after them, pushing past the nurse that tried to stop him.

“Let her go.”

“No!” Leigh shouted. He whipped around to tell the fucking nurse to back off, but she was gone. An old woman stared at him with piercing black eyes undimmed by age, her narrow shoulders

wrapped in a deep burgundy shawl with gold embroidery. Leigh recognized her face from the photographs on Meg's bookshelves back in the apartment, and he recognized the otherworldly aura emanating from the spirit's presence.

Leigh stepped back. He faced Meg's grandmother and swallowed. "I'm not letting her go."

"You good-for-nothing. She don't need no man causing her troubles, making her no whore like her mother."

"I won't do that, I love her," he snarled.

The old woman turned up her nose. "Love, *che*."

"Go to her, hurry. She doesn't have much time."

Leigh spun around to see another ghost. This one wasn't familiar and yet she was. She had Meg's beautiful eyes, that same determined tilt to her chin. You . . ."

"Her mother," she said with a faint smile. "Hurry, be there for her. Get as close as they'll let you. Let your heart keep her where she belongs."

"Elena, no!"

The spirit of Meg's mother glared at *Bunica*. "Magda is a good girl and this man loves her. You *will not* take that away from her."

Down the hall, the doctor shouted and Leigh turned towards them. They made a sharp left at the end and Meg disappeared from view. His heart skipped a beat in his chest. He had to be at her side, no matter what. He loved her . . . no one could take that away from them.

Glancing over his shoulder, he gave Meg's mother one last appreciative look. Lena nodded and smiled softly. Leigh sensed her sadness, her loss—she'd missed being with Meg throughout so much of her daughter's life, but she loved her. The powerful emotion shone in her eyes, along with the unshed tears dotting her lashes.

"Go," she said, and when Leigh blinked, both apparitions vanished.

"Thank you," he whispered. Moving as fast as he could on his swollen ankle and grinding his teeth against the pain, he started after

the doctors.

He got as far as the double doors leading to the emergency ward. A large nurse's aide on the way out of the bustling room stopped him from going further, but didn't send him away. After one glimpse at Leigh's face, contorted with pain and worry, the aid helped him to an empty stretcher waiting at the entrance.

"I'm here, Meg," Leigh said, his eyes fixed on the activity happening on the other side of the glass doors. Doctors and nurses moved around her bedside, a blur of men and women in blue scrubs. He closed his eyes and reached out with his mind, determined to find that warm, caring presence he loved. "Come back to me."

* * * *

"P—please, stop..." Ken took deep breaths, trying to stop the lightheadedness from overtaking him. He swayed, felt so weak. He could hardly stay kneeling. He fell forward, his head banging into the vampire's shoulder. He was hardly aware that the words that tumbled slowly from his lips were in Cantonese. "Please don't kill me, Dao Kan..."

Ken's forehead pressed into the bullet wound on Shu's shoulder. Though already partially healed, the deep cut stung sharply at the touch. The reemergence of pain, slight though it was, snapped Shu from the thrall of the blood thirst. Kenichi's final plea reached him, and he gasped.

Shu pulled away, releasing Ken's arm. The younger man shuddered against him, his face buried against Shu's bare chest. The younger man's breath brushed against the sweat-covered skin, weak and irregular. It served as a reminder of the frailty of Ken's mortal life. Shu pressed his hand to the back of Ken's neck before collapsing down on to the sofa.

"Kenichi," he breathed heavily. "Fool."

"You've always been more a fool than you could admit," Ken mumbled with a feeble laugh. He took several deep breaths, waiting

for the lightheadedness to ebb. He pulled himself up, stumbled to the kitchen and grabbed the carton of orange juice from the fridge. He guzzled it, then bent over a moment before making his way back to the living room, holding on to furniture as he went. He plopped down beside the sofa again and rested his head on Shu's chest. "Don't leave me," he whispered in Cantonese before the weakness swept him into unconsciousness.

"Never again." Shu brushed back strands of hair from Ken's closed eyes, his fingertips traced the top of the brow. "Never again, my Kenichi," he repeated softly in his native tongue.

Shu sat up slowly, easing the younger man's head to his lap and touching the scabbed cuts on his belly. The wounds had been so carefully tended to—just as Toshiro always had done. When had he ever returned those tender gestures? Rarely...if ever. It took a memory of such neglect to fully awaken Toshiro.

You never helped me up, and I knew then you didn't care...

Now Kenichi rested, half-leaning on his lap, half collapsed on the floor beside the couch.

As the blood worked its way through his body, enough of Shu's strength returned for him to rise from the sofa and take Ken up in his arms. He carried the younger man to the bedroom and eased him onto the unmade sheets before drawing the window blinds shut against the afternoon light. Returning to the bedside, he undressed Ken. He tossed the clothing, bloodstained and reeking of smoke, over the edge of the mattress and ran his hands over Ken's uncovered body, searching for injuries.

Finding none, he drew a blanket over the unconscious young man. Ken shifted in his sleep, rolling onto his side. Shu sat at the edge of the mattress and rubbed his hand down along the sheet covering Ken's back. He climbed into the small bed and wrapped his arm around Ken's waist. Drawing his treasured lover into his arms, Shu cradled the other to his chest and leaned back against the headboard. He closed his eyes, feeling the steady rhythm of Kenichi's pulse and breath against his body, and waited for the younger man to wake.

* * * *

Leigh shivered. The hospital was cold, but a different chill had settled deep in his bones. He watched the scene in the ER unfold before him, helpless to do anything *but* watch. Through the window in the double doors, the chief doctor barked orders through the paper mask covering his mouth and nurses rushed to fill them. They hovered around Meg and then stepped back. Another doctor, a woman, dashed over and looked over Meg's chart before exchanging words with the chief.

Leigh moved out of his chair, sensing the tension in the room change. Most of the medical staff surrounding Meg moved throughout the room and one of the nurses curtained off her bed, covering her from view. The nurse turned to the woman doctor who'd stayed behind and pointed her to the ER entrance where Leigh waited, his breath caught in his throat.

He moved away from the doors as she stepped out to speak with him. "I'm Dr. Saunders," she started to say as she tugged off her mask.

"I remember," Leigh cut in. "You were Ken Ohara's doctor."

He didn't have to add more information to jog her memory. Saunders blanched a little, her lips pressed into a thin line. "That was a miracle," she said. "I still can't explain it and I won't even try. I've never seen anything like that before, and I don't think I ever will again...unfortunately." She licked her lips and frowned, like the next words she planned on saying were hard to get out.

"I understand you're Miss Silivasi's fiancé," Saunders said.

"Yes...what's wrong?" Leigh asked shakily.

"Meg isn't responding," she answered. "She was pulled out of cardiac arrest, but she's not waking up from her coma...There's not a lot of hope she ever will."

Leigh stared at Saunders. He heard the words fine, he just didn't understand them. "No," he said, shaking his head. "That's a

mistake.”

“I’m sorry,” Saunders shook her head. She noticed the blood on Leigh’s clothes and frowned. “You were in the fire too?”

“I was with her—” his voice cracked. Why had he taken her there? Why didn’t he have the courage to face that goddamn monster alone?

“You need to have those wounds treated right away,” Saunders latched on to the idea like she felt better having a problem she could solve. She started to guide him away from the double doors. “Let’s go—”

“I’m not leaving Meg!” Leigh pushed away. “I need to see her.”

Saunders frowned again, but didn’t protest. Instead, she led him through and he shoved past the curtain covering Meg’s bed. He leaned on the bed and took her hand, still so painfully cold to the touch.

“Please,” he prayed softly. “Meg, wake up.”

Meg was hiding under the kitchen table as her mother and grandmother shouted at each other as they did every time mama came from the city to visit. But wait. This time it was different. They were arguing about her.

“She needs to stay with me. Lena!”

“No! She’s too young! She has a life to live!”

“A life like you running with those bad men?”

“Mama, stop! Magda is not me, she’s a smart girl and she had one man who loves her. She doesn’t have to search for the right one. She has him! Stop holding her back!”

“He made her his whore!”

“He loves her!”

Meg gasped when suddenly her mother was beside her coaxing her from the table and she realized she wasn’t a little girl anymore. She was grown up.

“Go back, Meg. Go back to your Leigh.”

“Leigh?”

“Magda. Listen to me,” Bunica said. “Come with me. It’s a good place, a beautiful bright place, look.”

Meg turned to where her grandmother pointed. It was so bright and warm and welcoming, She stepped forward. Her mother grabbed her by the shoulders.

“No, baby. Not now. You don’t have to. Go back. Go back...”
She gave Meg a shove and Meg felt herself falling...

“Come back, Meg,” Leigh chanted softly. “Come back, Meg.”

Leaning close over the bed, he held her hand over his heart, his fingers interlocked with hers. He kissed her cold cheek and breathed in her ear. “I love you, Meg. Come back to me.”

Leigh suddenly gasped. Something rushed past him and he thought he heard Meg’s voice cry out. “I’ve got you,” he called gently. Her presence filled him, surrounded him.

Meg’s eyes fluttered open and he choked back a sob he hadn’t noticed rise in his throat. “Welcome back,” he whispered before leaning in to kiss her.

Meg gripped Leigh’s hand. “What happened? The fire...”

“Shu hit you, he knocked you across the room. Ohara helped get you out.”

“Where is he? Is Kenny all right?”

Leigh hesitated. “I don’t know. He went back inside.”

Meg’s eyes filled with tears. “No—”

The doctor returned and shooed Leigh outside. A detective was waiting. He flashed his badge, then questioned Leigh, who said that he and Meg went to look for their missing student. The club had been unlocked when they arrived and looked as if it had been broken into. Ken had been with the club owner and the fire started. He doubted the detective would believe anything having to do with vampires, magical beads or psychic episodes. The detective told Leigh they might need to question him further and Meg when she was up to it.

Leigh simply nodded, then went back to wait outside the trauma room. They took Meg for some tests and scans, and he promised her

he'd be waiting for her when she was done. He hated to leave her out of his sight even for a moment, but felt he had no choice. He let the doctors tend to his shoulder and ankle, then went to the waiting room until Meg was through and placed in her own room.

He smiled when they let him go to her and he felt her spirit much stronger than before. He pulled a chair up to the bed and held onto her hand with both of his.

"Did you find anything out about Kenny?"

Leigh shook his head. "A detective came. He said they found two bodies upstairs in the apartment Shu had above the club."

Tears trickled down Meg's cheek. "Oh, no..."

Leigh brushed the tears away with feathery touches. "He wanted to go back inside, Meg. Whatever hold Shu had on him, we couldn't touch."

"But he was only twenty."

"I know. It might not have been him they found. We'll have to wait and see."

Meg nodded and squeezed his hand. "I love you, Leigh."

"And I love you, Meg, more than you can ever know."

CHAPTER TWENTY~EIGHT

Ken floated in a murky, warm haze as a tumble of images both past and present drifted past his mind's eye like an epic stage drama and he realized after a time that so many of the past images had filled his dreams at various times over the course of his life. *Present life*, a tiny voice within him said.

The flow of images slowed and he watched himself—Toshiro in the foyer of the house he'd shared with Shu. A man who reminded him of Lok's father and two bodyguards were there. Yang tossed a silk pouch of gold coins at Toshiro's feet for a job well done. He turned his derisiveness on Shu, pissing him off to a near murderous level. Yang left with a triumphant smirk and Shu shoved past Toshiro, causing him to fall with a jolting thud to the hard floor. Only this time it was different.

This time, Shu did turn back. He scooped Toshiro up and carried him out to their bathhouse and lowered him with great care into the warm water...

The images faded by degrees as Ken's consciousness rose. Music played, one of his favorite Japanese bands—Buck Tick. It was a slow, sultry song, the 'fuck song', Lok liked to call it. Ken smiled to himself and became aware of being immersed in warm water. A soapy cloth was being rubbed gently over his shoulders, daubed with infinite care over the spot where Shu had replicated Toshiro's unique 'tattoo'.

"I knew you were waking," Shu murmured in Cantonese when Ken's eyelids fluttered open.

Ken murmured when the vampire's lips touched his and he

offered a lazy smile when they parted. "What are you doing?"

Shu answered only with another tender kiss. He reached into the warm water and poured a handful over Ken's shoulder. Across from the tub, a candle burned near the sink, filling the bathroom with its muted glow. The orange light cast flickering shadows over the soapy surface of the water and Shu lathered the cloth once more before stroking it gently over Ken's chest.

Ken settled back against the tub with a contented sigh, loving the gentle touch more than he'd ever imagined possible. Dao's fingers cupped his chin and tilted his face upwards.

"You're still so pale," Dao whispered, his brow furrowed.

"I'm fine," Ken murmured.

Dao pulled away and dried his hands on a towel. He sat beside the tub on the tiled floor dressed in one of Ken's bathrobes. From a small plate on his lap, he took a piece of star fruit and brought it to Ken's lips. "You're still very weak," he said. "You're going to need something more than this."

"It's fine," Ken licked at Dao's fingertips and ate the fruit.

"No, it's not," Dao whispered. He reached up and caressed Ken's cheek. "You would have let me kill you."

"But you were dying. I had to do something."

"As Toshiro would have done."

Ken nodded and touched Dao's hand. New skin covered what had been gaping wounds. "It was worth it. You're better now."

"I'm going to have to go out. I need more, but I won't take it from you."

Ken frowned and grabbed Shu's wrist. "Promise me you won't hurt Miss Silivasi or Gachelsing."

Shu's mouth twisted, but the look of disgust melted away as he breathed a sigh. "I won't do anything to them, but only because it would upset you."

"Lok too, and his father."

Shu growled. "Yang tried to have me killed. He torched the club, I know it."

“Please.”

“You have my word.”

Ken leaned back in the tub, satisfied. “Thank you,” he said softly.

Shu left the plate of fruit within Ken’s reach and got up. “It pleases you so much to show them mercy.” He paused at the open door, loosening the tie to his robe. “But they’ll come looking for us.”

He looked over his shoulder towards the candle. His dark eyes flickered in the orange light before they gained that same haunted, almost sad, appearance they had before.

“They won’t find me, Kenichi,” Shu whispered as he hesitated in the doorway. “I will not stay here.”

Time seemed to stop and it was as if someone had slathered a great mass of black paint across his world, blotting out every last trace of living color. He scrambled out of the tub and nearly slipped stepping off the small mat and onto the tiled floor. He fell forward. Dao reached out to steady him and Ken gripped the vampire’s shoulders. “I won’t let you go.” Tears slid down his cheeks. “Take me with you. Please.”

Shu brushed his lips over Ken’s lashes, drinking away the salty wetness. “As Toshiro would want,” he breathed.

Ken shivered and clutched at him tighter. “Please,” he begged. Shu pressed a forefinger to Ken’s lips and gently, but firmly, pushed the younger man away.

“Kenichi,” Shu said. He shrugged out of the robe and draped it over Ken’s shoulders. “You don’t know what you’re asking for.”

As he reached down to fasten the robe’s tie, his eyes fell on Ken’s waist. Below the surface of the smooth, water-streaked skin, faint red lines began to appear. Shu watched in fascination as they formed a series of characters on the flesh. Inhaling sharply, Dao Kan traced each stroke as he slowly mouthed the words.

“*Yong yuan ai ni*,” he whispered. He looked up into the same eyes he’d missed for so long.

Ken’s lips trembled. “Don’t leave me. Not now.”

Shu slipped his hand around Ken’s waist and pulled him close.

Closing his eyes, he covered Ken's face in delicate, fleeting kisses.
“*My* Kenichi.”

ÉPILOGUE

A few weeks later

Half of San Francisco seemed to have turned out for Meg's show at the Masuda Gallery. Weaving his way through the crowd and listening to the words of praise for Meg's work filled him near to bursting with pride. Meg deserved this, and he hoped that this would set her on her way to being able to devote all her time to her art. She didn't need to be stuck teaching when she could create work that so captivated her audience.

Not seeing Meg within the gallery, Leigh asked Masuda if he knew where she went.

"Outside to get some air, I think."

For a moment, Leigh's heart caught in his throat. What if Shu had called to her to lure her out? No, that was crazy. Shu was dead. He had to be. The bodies found were his and Ken's. Even through they were too badly burned to identify, they'd both been judged to be male between twenty and thirty and since they'd be the only ones positively known to be there...

His heart hammering, his palms seating Leigh hurried outside and began to walk around the block. He found Meg standing near her SUV, the red and gold shawl she wore over her long black dress pulled tightly around her shoulders. He came up beside her and placed his suit jacket around her shoulders, then pulled her close. "What are you doing?" he asked, following her gaze. She'd been

looking at the covered sculpture in the back of the truck, the one she'd decided against showing at the last minute. It was the *Dragon's Tears* sculpture that Shu had stolen the knife from weeks earlier. She'd found a suitable replacement, but had never been quite happy with the result.

Meg sighed and turned to face him. Tears glistened in the corners of her lovely eyes and her rich voice quavered. "I'm just thinking about Kenny. He was so talented. He dreamed of having his own show some day. He could have done it before he graduated—he was that good. You know he was. Now all he'll have is that mural we took from the children's center and the plaque his parents presented to the department."

Leigh cupped Meg's face in his hands and brushed her tears away with the pads of his thumbs. "It's not your fault he went back in. It was that Shu. He probably compelled him to do. He was determined to kill Ken the way he killed Toshiro."

Meg laid her head on Leigh's shoulder and sniffled. "I don't know. I think Kenny really cared about him, and I know it's crazy, but when I was with them that night, even though Shu had that weird hold on me, I felt what he felt when Kenny came to the table. He did love him enough to be afraid of losing him. I was a threat to that that's why he did what he did."

Leigh pulled back and tilted her chin up. "He did what he did because he was a fucking monster, Meg."

Before she could protest, a man approached them.

"Professor Gachelsing?"

Of all the people Leigh never expected to see again, the parapsychologist Samsaras was it. "Dr. Samsaras. This is a surprise." He turned to Meg. "Doctor, this is my fiancée, Magda Silivasi. Meg, this is Dr. Samsaras, I told you about him."

Meg offered Samsaras a half smile and extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor. What brings you here?"

"I have the lecture and walking tour for the Historical Society tomorrow and I was taking a walk myself to go over a few things."

Leigh was quick to note the way Samsaras continued to hold onto Meg's hand and how he stared at the part of her grandmother's shawl visible beneath his jacket.

"Miss Silivasi, are you of Romany descent, by any chance?"

"Yes," Meg said, pulling her hand away and taking a step closer to Leigh. He put his arm around her shoulder.

Samsaras nodded, and Leigh was certain he saw the oddest red light glint in the man's eyes when a car drove by, and caught him in the headlights.

"That's most interesting. I've been studying Romany legends recently along with more of the Asian ones. Are you by any chance familiar with the Valley of the Moon? It's not far from here, in the wine country."

"It's where I grew up, actually," Meg said, pulling her hand away.

"Well now, that is quite interesting." Samsaras turned to Leigh. "Do you have Asian ancestry at all, Professor? I thought you mentioned you did."

Leigh didn't remember mentioning any such thing, but he'd been pretty frazzled that night. "My maternal grandmother was Chinese. Why do you ask?"

Samsaras grinned and that odd gleam came into his eyes again. "Just idle curiosity." He reached into his jacket and pulled out two tickets. He handed them to Meg, his fingers lingering on hers.

"Knock the shit off, *doctor*, she's spoken for," Leigh grumbled, covering Meg's hand protectively with his.

"Forgive me, Professor. I merely wanted to invite you both to my lecture. I've kept you long enough. Please excuse me."

Leigh's stare was colder than the chilly October air that blew from the bay as he watched Samsaras cross the street walk briskly down the block. He took the tickets from Meg and dropped them in the gutter. "Freaky bastard."

Meg laughed and he looked at her questioningly. "What's so funny?"

"He's the freaky bastard and we're what? An empathic gypsy girl

and a reluctant psychic?"

Leigh grinned and wrapped his arms around her. "We're *artistes*, and you need to get back to your adoring public, but first..." He pulled her into a slow deep kiss.

And from the shadows at the end of the next block a car passed reflecting red in the eyes of the one silently watching the young lovers.

Now all I have to do is find the chaing shih.

THE END

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Award winning author Barbara Sheridan has written several paranormal and historical romance novels.

Dragon's Disciple is Anne Cain's first collaborative effort. She's written several short fantasy/horror stories, and is a freelance graphic artist.

Both authors admit to being rabid fangirls of Japanese anime, manga, films and certain hot, fantasy inspiring J-rockers.