



THE DRAGON'S DISCIPLE

SILK & POISON

BARBARA SHERIDAN AND ANNE CAIN

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By
Barbara Sheridan & Anne Cain

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PART ONE

NIGHT OF THE POISONED DRAGON

CHAPTER 1

San Francisco

1870

The *Chew Kee* was a small shop for exotic teas, herbal medicines and oddities imported directly from Hong Kong. A number of signs and posters scrawled with Chinese characters advertised the shop's merchandise through smoke stained windows. Meanwhile, the characters for "poisoned dragon" painted onto a corner of the dark glass of the front doors in crimson ink served as a warning for the Chinese that this building belonged to the Wong family, as much of San Francisco's Chinatown already did. Any unwelcome visitors would be dealt with *appropriately*.

The thought of what was generally considered "appropriate" made Dao Kan Shu smile as he pushed open the door and stepped inside. After all the recent trouble

from a number of impetuous rival tongs, the men he worked for were finally beginning to fully appreciate the artistry involved in punishing those who crossed them.

“Mr. Yang is looking for you,” the shop owner called out as he stroked his long gray beard with a bony hand and eyed Shu over a cup of black tea. Dao Kan walked in silence to the back of the shop, not giving the older man a second glance. Shu smirked, knowing full well the reason why Yang wanted to see him.

He passed through the door and entered the *other Chew Kee*: the sprawling opium parlor where only the most favored members of the city’s underworld were allowed. Occasionally, some of the more recognized allies or clients of the Wongs could be found entertaining themselves here with one of the family heads, including several local politicians. Tonight however, only a handful of other “hatchet men” lounged around, looking for amusement within this establishment’s wood paneled walls. Shu took his usual place towards the back of the parlor and dropped into the padded seat as he waited for a serving girl to bring him a pipe.

The girl who approached was new, all bright eyed and eager to serve. Fresh off the boat no doubt either lured by promises of a rich husband or even sold off by her family as an unnecessary female mouth to feed.

“Good evening and welcome. I am at your service.”

She licked her painted lips. "For anything."

She handed over the opium pipe then knelt beside the chair...

"*Anything?*" Shu's sharp gaze followed the curves of her body as he exhaled, a cloud of wispy smoke filling the distance between them. "What a dangerous thing to say..." He laughed softly, his assessing gaze coming to rest on her smooth, painted face. It looked warm and inviting, the sort that promised to deliver on the pleasures inferred by her words. She bore such an enticing look in her lovely eyes, those rich brown depths speckled with hints of green and gold. The soft, yet clearly sensual expression only proved what he'd already expected---that she lacked *all knowledge* of just whom she was attempting to service.

"You must be new around here, *mei mei*," an amused smile played across Shu's lips. "I don't remember seeing this pretty face before." He leaned forward and cupped her chin between his thumb and forefinger, turning her head slightly to the left and then to the right. It *was* a pleasant face, but it could always be lovelier. Yes, with tears of pain running down her cheeks and her eyes wide with terror, she *would* be lovelier.

"I will serve you in *any* way you need, sir. That is why I was put here," the girl said softly. "I'm new to San Francisco but not new to the world we live in." Sitting back against the chair, Shu took another drag on the

pipe. The smile faded from his lips and he exhaled slowly. "Show me the skin on your back."

She turned and undid the buttons of her silk dress, letting the fabric slide down to reveal the small characters tattooed upon her shoulder the characters for *poisoned dragon* revealed to all who her masters were.

"I see," Shu said softly. "You certainly are not new to the ways our world." He leaned forward once again and gently took hold of the edge of her dress. Careful to only touch the material, he pulled it further down to uncover more of the flesh on her back. Though far from being ideally pale like a winter snow, her skin was unblemished by harsh sunlight. And the flesh itself was smooth, as yet unmarred by any beatings or cruel treatment that he could see. "Look at me."

The girl turned.

"You've always been a good child, haven't you *mei mei*, and you'll do *anything* I require." He paused. "Tell me, would you *die* for me?"

"If I was ordered to by Mr. Yang."

In the fraction of a second she met his gaze, Shu saw a spark in her eyes that all her submissive postures could not hide. There was a passion in them that needed to be dealt with, a lesson that must be taught. Shu smiled... For his amusement, she would do...perfectly.

He set the pipe down on the lacquer table beside the

chair and reached out, his fingers lightly brushing against her face. "Your mouth speaks wisely..." Dao Kan purred. "But your eyes say otherwise."

Before she could move, Shu slid his hand to the back of her head and pulled her towards him. His lips claimed hers as he dragged her onto the chair with him. With his other hand, he reached out to find the edge of her dress and pulled the material away. Her unmarked shoulder lay revealed, a small gasp escaping her in light of her sudden nakedness. Then swiftly Shu drew out the knife always concealed beneath his western styled jacket, and he held her tightly against him. He reached around and cut slowly into her flesh.

The girl knotted her fingers in his jacket and held on for dear life but she did not scream or utter more than a whimper. Her body reacted underneath the knife's edge with only the slightest of trembles, and Shu pressed his lips harder against hers. He held her by the back of her head, pleased with her self-control and the opportunity it gave him to find the satisfaction he craved.

He turned slightly, pulling her mouth close to his ear as he slid his lips across her face. He could smell the salt of tears still hidden by her eyelashes, though he still could not taste them. His lips brushed against her ear as she clutched at his clothing.

"Don't be so timid, child," he whispered. "I want to

hear you *sing* for me.”

Shu pressed the blade into her more forcefully, stopping just shy of reaching her lung. He raked it across the length of her smooth, pristine skin. The girl could not contain her screams this time. “Yes, sing for me...”

Shu pulled away to appreciate the expression of agony and terror that contorted her once smiling face. “Yes, *mei mei*, I knew you could be beautiful.” He continued to work the blade across her back and leaned in towards her to kiss her cheek lightly. Shu smiled to himself confident that his handiwork would be recognized, and everyone would know who this woman now belonged to.

A girl’s scream assaulted Ren Yang’s ears seconds after his guards and he entered the *Chew Kee*.

“It would seem that Shu has arrived ahead of us.” Yang despised the man and his taste in amusements, but he appreciated a job well executed, whatever the methods. So far Shu had never failed to give him the results he needed.

The men spending their off-hours in the opium den curtailed their amusements once Yang entered. Yang frowned upon seeing who Shu had chosen as his latest ‘playmate’. With a nod from Yang, two of the other men rush forward and removed the bleeding woman while one of his guards brought over a chair.

He sat back, crossed one leg over the other, removed his glasses and wiped them with a square of pure white silk. "I had plans for that one this evening, Dao Kan."

"My apologies," Shu answered with a plainly false smile. "I'm sure you'll find another one better suited for you, however." He reached forward and grabbed his opium pipe, his smile dropping quickly when he saw the guards were still holding the girl while she tried to find her footing. "I would appreciate it if those men stop touching *my* new property, Mr. Yang." He stared over his shoulder at them, eyes narrowed into slits.

"*Your* property, Shu?" Yang laughed. "While we may value some of your talents remember that you work for us. That girl--before you spoiled her beauty--bore the mark of the Wong family. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that as head of this branch that makes her mine."

Nothing vexed Shu more than to see his things in the hands of others, and the anger clouded his judgment. But while Yang's words sickened him, Shu knew they were nonetheless true.

He forced an apologetic smile. "I meant only that I would like her to be my new work of *art*. Surely, you can share?" Shu joked before taking up the opium pipe once more.

Yang replied with a look of disdain. "We need you to go to Colorado."

Shu raised an eyebrow and exhaled. "Oh?"

Yang looked to one of his guards, the tall one on his right who wore a bowlers hat and an always expressionless face that may have well been fashioned of dried clay, Lau. He nodded, and the bodyguard came forward, pulling out an envelope from inside his suit jacket. He offered the small packet to Shu.

"You'll notice there are two train tickets inside," Yang gestured in the direction of the envelope with another curt nod. "We need you to stop at a place called Pagoda Springs first and pay a visit on one Li Zhang. He has been remiss in his payments to us. Very remiss." Yang sipped from the glass of absinthe another serving girl brought forward. "*Talk* to him. Let him know how benevolent the elders are and how graciously we give him this second chance. Of course let him know there will not be a third."

While Yang continued to speak, Shu opened the envelope and examined the contents. The amount of money inside was more than adequate for getting around such a backwater place as Colorado, and he was pleased to see that the train tickets were first class. Anything less and he'd have been insulted.

"Li Zhang will not be a problem." Shu smirked and tucked the envelope away into his pocket. *Talking* with someone meant he only had to leave him enough fingers to wire the money to San Francisco, affording him plenty of

creative options as to how to go about dealing with the fool. "No one can represent our elders' benevolence as *efficiently* as I can."

"I'm sure." Yang finished the shimmering green liquor and placed the empty glass on the table between them.

"Tell me something," Shu tapped his fingers on the armrest of his chair. "There's a rumor circulating another debtor exists overseas who believes himself outside the Wong's reach."

"That rumor is a lie," Yang said coldly. "I'm expecting a wire from Tokyo tonight that should contain all that's due the Elders."

"So there was a debtor."

Yang visibly tensed. "That's not your affair, Shu."

The smile dropped once more from Dao Kan's face and he raised an eyebrow at Yang. "It doesn't come as a surprise that men like Li Zhang and this Japanese fool whoever he may be have lost some...consideration...for proper business practices. I have heard *rumors* about certain things in Denver. It would seem the Wongs are thought of as fools by some..."

In an instant, Yang produced a concealed knife and hurled it. The sharp tip embedded itself in the high back of the chair a fraction from Shu's temple. "No one makes fools of the Family and its elders, Shu. *No one.*" Yang stared

as Lao retrieved his knife, wiped it then handed it back. “You’re being paid to enforce our policies, not comment on a situation you know nothing about.”

“Yet you are also sending me to Denver?” Shu said smugly, patting his suit jacket where the envelope with money and tickets rested.

“Ling Po’s people are causing a disturbance at our house there. I want it stopped.” With that Yang got up and left.

“Always a pleasure, Mr. Yang,” Shu called. He watched Yang and his guards disappear. He may have spoken too boldly tonight, but his skills were valued by the elders, and there was nothing Yang could do that Shu feared. Yang knew that as well and that made it all the sweeter.

Shu turned in his chair and scanned the row of girls waiting against the wall until they were needed. Each turned away or looked quickly to the floor when his fierce gaze met theirs.

Shu smiled wickedly and got up. He grabbed one girl by the hair and yanked her forward. The train didn’t leave for three hours, he had more than enough time to *play*.

CHAPTER 2

The train clattered quickly along the tracks through Colorado. Two porters in the rear of the train's dining car chattered quietly either unaware or unconcerned that the remaining passenger might overhear them.

"Tell me Charlie, when did this become the damn Yellow Express?"

Charlie looked up from his newspaper. "You talkin' about all them China folks stopped at Pagoda Springs lately?" he asks.

"Yup." Jake put his cup down and gestured behind him with his thumb. "There's another one of them now, having a late supper I wager."

Charlie snorted. "Well, what else would've be doin' here, Jake? In the dining car?"

"Laugh all you like, dummy. I just think it ain't right that lately there's been more of them riding the damn train than there were setting down the tracks."

Jake gulped down the last of his coffee. "So long as they pay for a good ticket what's it to ya? I'll see ya when we get to Pagoda Springs."

Charlie grumbled. "Yeah I better make my rounds too."

Boredom, rather than hunger had driven Shu to the dining car. While the other passengers slept during these early hours of the morning, he wouldn't consider doing so himself. There was always a certain sense of anticipation that came with these little *trysts* he made on behalf of his employers, one that kept him focused and alert. However, his patience with the length of this train ride was wearing thin, but as parts of the porters' conversation reached him across the distance separating their tables, one of the men garnered his attention.

He watched them leave, each heading in opposite directions, before rising from his own seat.

There *were* ways for one to keep occupied on these tiresome journeys after all.

Aside from the rhythmic sounds of the train clanking on the tracks, everything was quiet as Shu crossed through the passenger cars on his way to the rear of the train . Most everyone was sleeping so the cars were dark with no one moving about except him. He stepped out on to the platform at the end of the car. There was just enough light from the

small lantern over the door for him to start making his way over the rail that connects to the next car.

The man called Charlie gave a start when Shu opened the door to the baggage car and extinguished the lantern..

“Hey! Passengers ain’t allowed to the front of the train, buddy.” When Shu said nothing the man scowled. “You even understand what I’m saying, Chinaman?”

“I’d say we’re about 20 minutes from Pagoda Springs, correct?”

“Uh, yeah,” Charlie answered. He gestured to the other car behind. “Now move it on back to the--”

Shu lunged forward, dragged the man out, slammed him down and back against the little platform railing, one hand against the man’s throat. “Tell me, Charlie, who else has ridden on the ‘Yellow Express’ to Pagoda Springs, hmm?” I pull back his head to hear his response.

“I -I don’t remember---!”

Shu drew a jade handled knife and held it poised at the man’s eye. “It is in your best interest to remember.”

“A kid named Itou showed up last week, the week before I don’t know!”

“Where do they stay?”

“Itou’s father has a house up town, I think,” he chokes out. Dao Kan Shu frowned. He’d hoped to learn more information than just this.

“You don’t know much at all, do you?”

“Don’t k-kill me!” Charlie whimpered as Shu lowered the knife slowly closer to his eye.

Shu could see the faint traces of sunlight starting to show on the horizon. The train was due to reach its destination of Pagoda Springs at Dawn. “Today is your good fortune,” he said with a sneer before pulling the knife away. “I don’t have time to kill you, myself...so the train will have to.”

Before the man could scream for help Shu tossed him off the little platform and beneath the deadly wheels of the train.

Shu’s dark gaze raked over the little train depot as he exited the rain. What a shithole of a town. Hopefully he’d have his business with the man Zhang done with by the time the next train to Denver rolled through and he could get on to more important business.

When Shu entered the small gambling house on the outskirts of the booming mining town, the man posted at the front door immediately understood who he represented and stood aside with the proper display of respect.

Despite the day’s early hour there were still revelers from the night before drinking and gambling when Shu entered casting warning looks to all who dared meet his gaze. The owner, Zhang sat at a table in the center of the main room, his balding head bent over the game, unaware

that the room was quickly emptying around him.

Shu took the seat across from him, the one left open by Zhang's more perceptive opponent. Shu gave the Mah Jong board a cursory glance and laughed at the way Zhang placed his tiles. "You play like an ass. No wonder you've lost so much money you need to take the club's profits.."

Zhang looked up, his saggy face screwed up with resentment. "What did you say? Who..." His watery eyes bulged and his words trailed off as he realized that the man before him was not one of the locals. Beads of sweat broke out upon his forehead as he began to understand.

"I-I--," he stammered and looked about wildly. The room was empty save for the proprietor's enforcer who blocked the only exit.

Shu gestured to the man at the door and smiled. "He understands it's in his best interest to never displease our employers."

"I have the money!" Zhang shouted nervously. "I can wire it to the Wongs tomorrow! "

Zhang tried to stand. Shu knocked the table out of and lunged forward, slashing at the side of Zhang's head before he could react. Zhang fell to the floor. Shu dragged him up by the long braided queue that hung down his back

"The Wongs asked for timely payments from your profits. They know how much business you do. Quite a lot from the miners and those working on the new rail line just

south of here, “ Shu said calmly. “But you chose to keep a hefty sum back for your own gambling entertainment and that will not be tolerated. When you were given the capital to start this little enterprise you were told that eighty percent of the profits were to be wired to San Francisco. I assume you did not hear this properly at the time of your arrangement with Mr. Yang.” Shu lashed out again, sliced off the man’s ear. “Can you hear better now?”

Zhang clutched at the bleeding gap on the side of his head, and stared in horror at his bloody ear on the floor beside him. He cried out in pain and anger, and tried to push away from the assassin. Shu tugged on the man’s hair, dragged him over to a table. He forced Zhang to his knees, then slammed the man’s hand onto the tabletop. “I want you to fully *grasp* the extent of my employer’s generous nature.”

With a single stroke of his knife Shu sliced off Zhang’s first three fingers, leaving only the thumb and forefinger behind then let the man go. Zhang Li screamed and crumpled to the floor, cradling the hand as blood gushed from the three ragged stumps. Shu crouched down beside him.

“The Wongs are giving you this rare opportunity for a second chance,” I narrow my eyes, though the smile never leaves my face. “Do you want your children to die? Your woman? Screaming and crying? Because that is the extent of *my* generosity...”

Through tears of pain and anger, Zhang shrieked. “You sick bastard! Don’t you dare touch them!”

Shu reached into Zhang’s mouth and pulled out his thick tongue as far as the muscle would stretch before slicing off the end. “Wire the fucking money by tonight, understand?”

Zhang nodded.

“Good,” Shu said calmly. He rose and stepped away, cleaning the knife’s blade with a handkerchief.

Two of Zhang’s workers rushed from the back room and dragged their bleeding master away.

Shu glanced at his gold pocket watch then took a seat at one of the tables and started to arrange the tiles on the Mah Jong board. “Let’s have a game then,” he called out to guard by the front door.

In the parlor of the spacious house on the outskirts of Pagoda Springs, Toshiro Itou cursed at the front door his father just exited. He’d been here for two weeks, two weeks of pure and total hell and he was fucking tired of it. This place may have been a “boom town” as his father called it but as far as Toshiro was concerned it was a backwater piece of shit that couldn’t hope to compare to Tokyo or even what little he’d seen of San Francisco in a million years.

The most excitement he’d had since being shipped here at the urging of his mother’s new bastard of a husband

was the fight he'd gotten into the other day with some local piece of shit who didn't like his comments on two whores standing in front of the saloon. So what if one of the white women who looked like whores happened to be the local shit's mother?

"I should have stabbed his occidental ass," Toshiro muttered, plopping his booted feet up on the table his father's maid just polished. Toshiro's scowl deepened as he thought of the fucking sheriff who'd confiscated his knife and of his spineless father who refused to demand it back.

It will only give you more opportunity to get into trouble.

With a smirk Toshiro stood and swaggered out of the house and into town. If his gutless father was afraid of trouble then he'd be cowering in his new American boots before long. And what did he care anyway? He hadn't shown one bit of interest that he even had a son. Of course that should have come as no surprise considering how his mother had been pushing him away his entire twenty years on this earth. No one paid attention to him no one cared, so why should he?

Passing by the dilapidated jailhouse Shu noticed a young man duck inside in what looked like an attempt to be furtive. He appeared to be Japanese, and Shu's curiosity was piqued enough to follow. He stepped silently inside watching

the boy try to pick the lock on a metal cabinet in the back of the room. He was well-dressed and clearly not as skilled as he'd like to be, judging from the manner in which he was banging at the metal. Shu laughed, startling the boy.

The boy scowled. "Get lost. I'm trying to retrieve my property."

Amused by the little cur's attitude Shu approached. "It's clear you have no idea what you're doing.. It's a simple pin tumbler, as such it's child's play to pick open."

The boy scowled again.

"What are you trying to retrieve?" Shu asked with an amused smile.

"What business is it of yours? My father practically owns this town I can do what I want when I want."

Shu leaned against the side of the cabinet and folded his arms across his chest. "If what you say is true, then you wouldn't be here, trying to break into a locker in order to take back something you claim is yours. In fact, if your father is as powerful as you imply, I doubt the law would even have confiscated your property to begin with."

The boy replied with yet another loud curse in Japanese and Shu was rather surprised that he found it all so amusing. Of course what else did he have to do until it was time to go to Denver?

“Either you’re lying about your father’s status, or your lying about your ability to do as you please.” She extended his hand for him to hand over the tool he attempted to work the lock with. “May I?” I asked, though his tone make it clear it wasn’t a request. The boy did not do as ordered. Interesting.

“My father is an insufferable bastard who thinks he can ‘keep me in line’, by taking my weapons away.” He tried again to get the lock to pop but when it didn’t he scowled and handed the pick over to Shu.

“Who are you anyway? You know Zhang who runs the opium den?”

“Zhang is an associate of mine, yes. I’m Dao Kan Shu, and I’ve come to *assist* him with a small business matter.”

The lock came open after only a few seconds of minimal effort and Shu pulled open the cabinet drawer. Inside was an assortment of rather interesting items, including revolvers, weapons, some personal effects. He arched an eyebrow at the boy. “Now which of these playthings might be yours?”

With a smirk, the boy reached in and removed a knife along with a pearl handled revolver. “These would be it.” He tucked the knife into his boot and the gun in the back of his belt and shut the drawer then headed toward the back door. Shu was pleasantly surprised to find the boy waiting when

he exited.

“My name’s Toshiro. Toshiro Itou.”

“Are you certain those weapons are yours, Toshiro?”

Shu asked with another rare smile though he already knew the answer by the awkward places the boy chose to place the weapons.

“They’re mine now and that’s all that matters to me.”

With a triumphant smirk he turned and walked slowly down the alley beside the jail and the next building.

“They won’t be of much use to you, unless you’re willing to use them,” Shu said in a low menacing tone as he stepped beside the boy. “Of course that’s assuming that you do know how to use a revolver or a knife.”

The young man had an easy temperament to manipulate. His pride and self conceit were readily apparent, though it was his desire for control and his ambition that captured Shu’s interest. Those last two are qualities he found most appealing. “I wonder what other things you’d like to learn,” Shu whispered before stepping past the boy.

Shu smiled when he heard the boy’s pace quicken to catch up.

“I like to learn all sorts of things, of course it depends on the skill of the teacher if I choose to pursue the course of study”

Shu glanced over, not letting his pleasure show. “The teacher’s skill is not in question,” He gave the boy a

longer more appraising stare and was again pleased that the younger man did not look away as most people did. . “You’ll undoubtedly wish to complete the entire course. Although, failure of any kind is *unacceptable*...”

“Unacceptable? What do you do, kill your ‘students’ who don’t quite measure up?”

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 3

He was serious. Toshiro could see it in his eyes. They were cold and soulless like those of a shark and Toshiro had no doubt that this Shu was even more of an evil bastard than Iwakura, his stepfather back home. Iwakura was ambitious and willing to do anything to anyone to get what he wanted. That was power and Toshiro wanted that same power for himself.

He looked Shu straight in the eye. "I don't fail."

"Wonderful," Shu said with a smile as they stepped from the alley to the main street. "Tell me, Toshiro, is there someplace in this forlorn hell-hole of a town that provides somewhat decent drinks?"

"There's Zhang's place, I guess. Besides that the only place I know is the saloon. The liquor is decent enough I suppose if you don't mind being surrounded by the cowboys." He indicated the *Shady Lady* with a jerk of his thumb and led the way, wondering what kind of lessons this Chinese had to teach.

Like much of everything else in Pagoda Springs, the saloon hardly served as Dao Kan's ideal choice. Nothing in this place had impressed him so far, save for the glimmer of

ambition in Toshiro's eyes. Shu followed the boy into the lackluster building, his face twisted into an expression of contempt towards the far from charming clientele and the even less endearing saloon itself.

All the men were the grime-covered, animal-hide wearing, slack-jawed morons Toshiro referred to as 'cowboys'. A few paintings depicting far more extravagant European parlors hung on the drab wooden walls, and a dozen or so round tables filled the dusty floor. With two brass spittoons resting at either end, the bar itself faced straight across from the entrance. Shu and Toshiro were reflected in the narrow mirror lining the wall behind it as they entered the *Lady*. Though determined to make this stay in Pagoda Springs as short as possible, Shu would not pass on any opportunity to enjoy himself on this particular job.

He claimed a seat near the back and far to the right of the door, away from anyone's immediate notice upon entering the establishment. "Order whatever you feel is appropriate," he told Toshiro as he tossed a more than generous amount of money on the table. "I will have cognac...if something of that quality is to be found *here*."

Toshiro smirked a little as he took the paper bills. "This *has* to be your first visit to Colorado," he said before calling for the bartender's attention. While the boy ordered, Shu lit a cigarette and watched him closely. The hunger in Toshiro was obvious; with the proper encouragement, it

could drive him to do great things. Why was he wasting time here, in this empty, *insignificant* town? Surely Toshiro's father realized he had a fine son to raise in whatever line of business he pursued, and yet the man barely had an influence on the child. How very interesting.

Toshiro returned to the table, two glasses of simple brandy in hand along with the bottle of liquor. Shu smiled as he accepted the drink. "Does your father involve himself with Zhang's business?" he asked casually. The question served as much to test the boy's willingness to provide information, as it inadvertently did of his loyalty to his father.

"I don't know," Toshiro looked down into his drink. "My father doesn't really talk much to me...about those things."

"Interesting," Shu said softly. The hastily added latter part of Toshiro's words made Shu doubt much was ever spoken between father and son at all. He reached into his coat and withdrew a silver embossed cigarette case. Opening it, he held it out across the table to Toshiro.

Toshiro looked up from his glass and frowned a little. After a moments hesitation, he took one of the cigarettes between his thumb and fore finger. "I only came to this little piece of hell on Earth a couple weeks ago.. I never even knew my father was alive until last year." He paused. "I think I liked him better when he was dead to me."

Shu studied his face carefully for any signs of

deception, but it's clear Toshiro spoke the truth. The older man laughed softly.

"I never cared much for that 'filial piety' nonsense myself," he sipped at his drink, grimacing at the poor quality of the brandy. "Life is too short to waste revering old men and their foolish, outdated sensibilities. It's far more practical to serve one's own best interest." Placing his glass down, Dao Kan looked across the table at Toshiro with a neutral expression. "Why don't you see to it that your father becomes more to your...*liking*?"

Toshiro froze, the glass of amber colored liquor halfway to his mouth. He peered over the top at Shu. "And you can tell me how to manage that one?" Toshiro set the brandy down. "I'm all ears, my friend."

"You say you preferred the man when he was dead to you, correct?" Shu narrowed his eyes. "That's something that can easily be arranged, and not in the figurative sense."

Oh, killing someone outside of his purpose in Denver would certainly infuriate Yang and garner the disapproval of even the Wong elders. But any slap on the wrist Shu received would be worth the trouble. Especially for such a unique boy as Toshiro Itou. "Is that something you would like?" Shu asked coldly as he brought his glass to his lips.

Toshiro took a slow sip of his drink, then cleared his throat. "The idea is interesting of course but I don't know if he's had time to change his will. I wouldn't want to miss

out on being the beneficiary of all that wealth. I imagine his demise can wait a bit.”

Shu made the slightest of frowns. “Are you...*afraid*?”

“I’m not afraid,” Toshiro looked up sharply, his eyes flashing. “I’m looking to the future. If he’s dead now I might find myself on the poor end of the stick that’s all. No sense being inconvenienced for something that can wait.”

“Indeed.” Shu smiled. “Then taking someone’s life--let alone your father’s---poses no concern to you?”

Toshiro shrugged and poured another drink before taking a long swig. The alcohol warmed his insides, loosening his tongue a bit. “Every case is different isn’t it, but on the whole I’d have to say that no it doesn’t bother me.”

“No,” Shu corrected sharply. “Every case is exactly the same.” He flicked the ashes from his cigarette off the edge of the table and stared into Toshiro’s eyes. “The methods may change and the circumstances leading up to the act may differ, but the purpose *never* alters.” He paused a moment his piercing gaze never leaving the boy’s. “To consciously take someone’s life is to exercise the ultimate form of control---of power,” his voice dropped to a throaty whisper, sending a chill down Toshiro’s spine. “Every time you kill, you are a *god*.”

Inside his chest, Toshiro’s heart skipped a beat. He wanted that kind of power. Iwakura had it. His boss in the

new Meiji government, Ookubo, definitely had it. They never dirtied their own hands with blood, but still...Toshiro had seen what that power could do. And he wanted it for his own.

Shu's soft voice interrupted his thoughts. "Show me your hands."

Toshiro held them out for his inspection. The calluses at the base of his fingers weren't as pronounced as Iwakura's or his father's, from their years of samurai training, but he'd handled swords and knives before. He could shoot a gun too.

He could kill if he had to—if he wanted to.

"They're still clean," Shu said with a disapproving frown. He reached out and traced a fingertip along the slightly more rough skin above Toshiro's palm. "Still very, very clean. And soft."

"Have these hands *ever* been spattered blood?" he asked.

Toshiro frowned at his words and pulled away. "No they haven't but if I was born a few years earlier I'm sure they would have been. I would have fought for the restoration back home."

"When you were born is irrelevant." Shu brushed him off with a smile. "If you're referring to that little squabble of a revolution that occurred in Japan, that's also irrelevant to me." He dropped the cigarette in the still half-full glass of

brandy before him and rose from the table. "I think it's time for your first lesson."

Toshiro gulped down one more drink then followed Shu, wondering just what things this new *sensei* had to teach.

The sun already drifted low in the sky when they left the Shady Lady. Some shops and businesses had closed for the evening, several more were drawing down their blinds as they made their way down the street. A number of other people moved about as well, their shadows long and bluish-black on the dirt road. Toshiro watched Shu study each of the passersby with an almost predator-like interest.

They walked the length of the town in silence. Shu obviously searched for something, and Toshiro could only guess what it might be. The older man stopped in front of a building that sort of angled away from the main road, its step-up porch shaded under a sagging roof. White women in low-cut dresses and layers of make-up filled the porch or sat on the steps. They had the same kind of look Shu had---like they were looking for something, or someone. They were the town's whores.

"Perfect." Shu smiled at Toshiro's skeptical expression. "Pick one."

If Shu meant it for what Toshiro thought, he didn't want any of these. He was just about to say so too, but something about Shu gave Toshiro the feeling the older man

wouldn't take no for an answer. So he studied the whores and tried not to make a face. They all looked old beyond their years not unlike the women in the Yoshiwara back home.

But there was one in the back who looked a bit younger, a bit less sure. She didn't spout a "come take me" at him or Shu, like the others did. She was a little fat with dark hair piled high on her head and big green eyes that looked more than a bit frightened that one of these 'foreign devils' might want to bed her.

"I'll have that one," Toshiro picked her out with a crook of his thumb.

"Yes, she'll do nicely," Shu said, clearly pleased with his choice. He gestured to the woman. "Come now, don't be shy. If such a thing is even possible." Shu laughed lightly and clapped his hands together. The whore obeyed, despite the fear written on her wide face, and went down to them without saying a word.

Glancing at Toshiro from the corner of his eye, Shu addressed her simply. "My companion has a slight problem he needs your help with. You see, he's still a virgin," he laughed again as her eyes opened even wider. "Can you be gentle?"

"I can be anything you want," she said quietly, her plump cheeks blushing.

A blushing whore who would have thunk it? "Hn," Toshiro held back an irritated sigh.

He wasn't too happy with Shu's virgin comment, but he let it pass. Iwakura might be a slimy bastard, but he had shown Toshiro quite a night on the town for his genpuku, his coming of age ceremony. He looked at Shu and then toward the whorehouse. "Well sensei, what do you have in mind?"

"Sensei...I like how that sounds," Shu flashed him another smile. "But we won't be staying here." He turned back to the whore. "Take us somewhere quiet, where we won't be disturbed. I'm sure you know plenty of places like that, don't you?"

"I know a couple places," the whore said. "Follow me gents."

"You know since there's two of you, you both still have to pay," she told Shu as she lead them through the back street. She stopped at the little grain store room building behind the old general store. There was only a minimum of sunlight left in the sky, almost none of it reached this abandoned-looking place. The area stood empty of people and none of the buildings that enclosed it had windows facing into the alley. Shu gave her another pleased look.

"I only want to watch," he smirked. "But I assure you, you'll be fairly compensated."

The whore led them into the unlocked store room and plopped down on top of a stack of feed sacks. She patted the stack next to her and found her smile at last. "Come on honey," she said to Toshiro. "Don't be shy."

“Yes, don’t be shy,” Shu echoed. He moved next to Toshiro and leaned against him, covering Toshiro’s right hand with his body.

“Kill her”, Shu whispered into his ear.

Kill her

Shu pressed a knife into Toshiro’s palm. Toshiro looked around him at the woman.

Kill her

Shu stepped away and Toshiro held his hand behind his back to hide the knife as he approached. He sat beside her, and she giggled before leaning in to kiss his lips. Toshiro kissed her back. Her mouth tasted like cheap whiskey and she smelled of cheap perfume that prickled his nose. Her arms draped around his neck.

Kill her

Toshiro slid one arm around her thick waist and held her still as she depend the kiss, her whiskey flavored tongue toying with his.

Kill her

His heart pounding in his chest, she snaked a hand between them. Her fingers stroked at him through his fine wool trousers He was already so hard in her hand, but not because of the woman’s touch. It was more the thrill of what Shu expected him to do. What he couldn’t do. What he shouldn’t do.

But wanted to do it.

Kill her

Toshiro gripped her tighter, pulled her closer. Then he plunged the knife high into her back in the proximity of her heart. She jumped, trying to pull away, and he twisted the knife.

The swiftness and determination of his strike almost startled Shu. In one instant, his concern over Toshiro's ability to kill vanished, replaced instead with growing... *excitement*..

"Yes," Shu hissed softly, coming up beside them. He grabbed the whore's wide neck with one hand and braced her buckling body against Toshiro with the other. Her windpipe crushed under Shu's grasp, she brayed uselessly in choked gasps. A gurgle rose in her throat as blood moved up her trachea with each desperate gasp for air. Toshiro had only just missed her heart with his first strike.

"Yes," Shu's lips curled into a smile. "Again." He leaned in close to the woman to better hear the sweet, muffled sounds of her pain, his stare focused on Toshiro's face. "Again...and *harder*."

Toshiro returned the fierce gaze, unwilling---unable--to look at the woman. Her hot blood trickled down his hand as she struggled in vain.

Again...and harder

His eyes glued to Shu's grinning face--his *pleased expression*---Toshiro swallowed hard and did as he was told,

taking the knife out plunging it in again...and again.. and *once again*. Each stab coated his hand with more of her hot, sticky blood.

The whore's body at last grew limp and Shu stepped back. "So soon," he murmured disappointedly. He pulled the body away from Toshiro and let it slide to the floor. Shu started at dead woman for a moment before turning to Toshiro. "How was it?" he smiled wickedly.

Her blood now felt cold on Toshiro's hand. Cold and sticky. He dropped the knife. No---he grabbed it again and plunged the blade into the sack of grain and watched it split open. The small pellets spilled out like so much sandy blood in shades of reddish brown.

Toshiro glanced down at the woman then looked at Shu, pondering his *sensei's* question. "It was like nothing I can describe."

Shu leaned in close to his ear. "But did you *like* it?" The deep voice slithered in his ear, his breath hot and steamy against the skin. Toshiro turned, their faces a fraction of an inch apart.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Excellent," Shu's breathed. He pressed his fingertips against the front of Toshiro's silk shirt, feeling the heart race through the fine material.

"Welcome to a new world, Toshiro." Shu's hand slid up to brush against the side of Toshiro's cheek.

Shu was so close, so attractive despite the hardness in his eyes. “Always do as your *sensei* tells you and I promise even *better* things are to come.”

Toshiro leaned forward as drawn to the words as he was to the lips that spoke them, wanting to feel Shu’s mouth on his own. The caressing touch of Shu’s hand suddenly changed into a sharp slap. Toshiro gasped, more startled than hurt.

With a grin, Shu took out a handkerchief from inside his jacket and used it to grab the blood-coated handle of the knife. “Nicely done...if not sloppy.” He reached out with his free hand to touch the dark red stains on the front of Toshiro’s clothing. “Only a virgin soils their sheets with blood.” Shu laughed. . “That’s something we’ll work on for the next time.”

“Leave the body,” Shu said coldly. He stripped off his coat and tossed it to Toshiro. “Cover up and let’s go to your house so you can clean up.”

“I’ll go myself,” Toshiro said quietly, lowering his gaze. Shu struck him again, this time harder and Toshiro reeled back, his face hot and stinging.

“Don’t get *cheeky* with me,” Shu’s eyes flashed, at once both seductive and dangerous. “You’ll do as *I* say, *when* I say.”

Shu shoved Toshiro down, grabbing his face and making him look into those cold frightening eyes. He could

kill without caring. He could kill Toshiro easier than the younger man had killed the woman.

“Do you understand?” Shu whispered.

Toshiro tried to nod. He couldn't. He only just managed to force the word out. “Yes.”

“That's my *good pupil*,” Shu brushed his fingers across Toshiro's cheek once more in a gentle caress, then motioned for him to rise. “You've passed your first lesson. Exceptionally.”

CHAPTER 4

Toshiro looked down at the tray of food the maid set down on the table in front of him. On the silver-gilded plate, a piece of beefsteak soaked in its own pinkish juice. He pressed the meat with his fork and the juice turned a shade darker, more bloody. He sliced into it and stared at the hint of red in the center that continued to ooze more blood.

Like that woman had oozed blood over his hand...

Toshiro closed his eyes and remembered the moment, the rush of power, of excitement, of....*lust* that shot through him.

He opened his eyes and looked down at the steak, eating it slowly as he relived every moment of being with Shu...his *Sensei*

Now Toshiro knew how Iwakura, his stepfather, felt. The man hadn't dirtied his hands in a long time but he had once, and Toshiro used to hear him tell mother of it years ago.. He could see the excitement in Iwakura's eyes and the way the power of taking what he wanted had flowed

through him. Now Toshiro understood why his mother was so attracted to him. Now he knew why he couldn't get the image of Dao Kan Shu from his head.

I should have joined him for dinner, like he'd asked, Toshiro pushed the lingering remains of his meal around his plate. After leaving the storage shed, Shu parted ways with him and left for the hotel, saying he needed to clean up as well before their evening meal. *Their* evening meal. Instead, Toshiro stayed in the house after he'd bathed and tried in vain to get all the blood stains out of his clothes with the used bath water. Wrapped in robe, he went downstairs only to find the house empty except for the maid, his father was somewhere in town.

Toshiro closed his eyes and pushed the plate away from him. Shu had wanted to be with him for dinner.

He left the table and got dressed, his knife tucked into the waistband of his pants beneath his opened jacket. He went down the stairs two at a time and turned into his father's library to take a couple gulps of brandy from the liquor cabinet. Toshiro dashed out of the house through the back way and headed back to town. He wanted to find his *sensei*. He wanted to feel his power again.

Shu waited in the hotel's dining room until the tea he slowly sipped at turned cold. Toshiro never walked through the large double doors. Shu cursed loudly in Cantonese,

several patrons turned in his direction as he stalked out of the parlor and retreated to his room. Shutting the door behind him, he leaned against it, panting heavily. Haphazardly tossed on the bed a few feet in front of him, his soiled clothes from earlier greeted him. The moonlight filtering through the sheer curtain highlighted the crimson bloodstains and Shu hissed. Disappointment tasted bitter on his tongue.

He lurched to the bed and flung the clothes off the sheets with a growl. But Toshiro's eyes had had that glimmer of ambition, of hunger. Shu could practically *feel* the desire vibrating on the young man's skin, his strength and thirst for power so like Shu's own. Breathing heavily, Shu sat on the edge of the bed and unfastened the collar of his shirt. He'd also felt Toshiro's arousal, because it too had mirrored his own.

Shu leaned back on to the sheets, pressing his back into mattress as he stared at the ceiling. His hand slid down his bare throat and over his chest as his breathing quickened. What would Toshiro's touch feel like? Shu sucked in his breath as his hand moved further down, mimicking the caress he wished to know. His erection pushed up to meet his strokes, straining against his clothing. With a sharp cry, he sat up, gasping.

Wherever Toshiro was now, Shu would find him. He would find his pupil.

Shu stormed out of his room, slamming the door shut

behind him. His open coat flapping in the wind, he left the hotel at a sharp clip. Toshiro walked along the edges of town where buildings were scattered few and far between. He stayed as far as he possible from that storehouse, wondering if anyone had found her. He wondered if anyone cared.

If even he cared.

Toshiro turned along an alley that ran parallel to the town's main street. Something moved in the shadows in the corner of his eye and he tensed, his hand on his knife's handle. In a heartbeat's time he knew he could kill again, easily. But a man stepped out from the darkness, his words slammed into Toshiro.

"Well, well. If it isn't my *pupil*."

Standing in a shaft of moonlight, Shu looked like some demon god.

"Hello," Toshiro said quietly. He'd wanted to run into him but now that he had.... Shu's eyes flashed with a dark fire.

An exciting fire.

A frightening fire.

"I see you got cleaned up well enough," Shu looked him up and down "I thought you would still be at your house, crying like a frightened child."

"I don't cry," Toshiro snapped. "I *didn't* cry." Anger heated his blood and he stood up straighter. "I'm not a baby

who needs to run home to his father. I'm a grown man."

Shu narrowed his eyes, but his lips curled up in a smile in a faint hint of a smile. "You have a sharp tongue, Toshiro."

Shu suddenly stepped closer and shoved him against the building. "A 'grown man', are you?" he taunted. "Have they even dropped yet?" He reached down and roughly groped the front of Toshiro's pants, their eyes locked in fierce stare.

Toshiro swallowed a cry as Shu's firm hand squeezed his balls, his heart racing as the pain faded into...something else. "They dropped a long time ago," Toshiro said roughly. "Just like yours."

"Are you comparing yourself to *me*?" Shu snorted and all the while his dark eyes glittered. He finally loosened his grip, but Toshiro stayed achingly tight as the older man's touch moved up his chest and wrapped around his throat.

Shu could snap his neck in an instant. They both knew it. But that just made the game more interesting. "In terms of maturity, Shu-sensei," Toshiro said. "You are my superior in other ways of course."

"My, my, you are a clever one with words, aren't you?" Shu laughed softly. "But I can feel your pulse quicken beneath my fingertips..." His voice dropped to low whisper. "Is this...*exciting* you?"

"You're an exciting, interesting man, Shu-san."

You've experienced so many things that I haven't."

Toshiro paused, but never took his gaze from Shu's hard cold eyes. "I have much to learn from you."

"And there's much I'm going to teach you," Shu breathed. He leaned in close, his lips almost brushing Toshiro's. "I want to *taste* your excitement..." The tip of his tongue darted out along Toshiro's lower lip. "Come with me," Shu suddenly pulled away.

Frozen to the spot, Toshiro watched him turn and head out from the alley.

Shit. I can't believe he did that!

Trying not to acknowledge the jolt between his legs, Toshiro hurried to catch up. He fell in step behind Shu as they crossed the main street. Only a handful of people were around---a few miners and cowboys entering the saloon for a late drink, a couple out for a walk. But the peaceful setting seemed a startling contrast to the wild way Toshiro's heart pounded and thoughts raced through his mind. He followed Shu up the steps to the hotel, through the lobby and up the L-shaped staircase.

Shu opened a door and waited for Toshiro to enter before closing it shut behind them. The room was dark, the wood paneling still holding the warmth from the summer's afternoon sun. Shu struck a match and lit a small lamp on the cabinet near the door, filling the space with a soft light. The bed's sheets were rumpled, clothes tossed in a bloody heap next to it.

"Sit." Shu pointed to the small davenport across from the left side of the bed. Toshiro dropped down into the stiff cushions as his *sensei* opened the cabinet and served out two glasses of brandy. Shu joined him a moment later, handing him one of the drinks. Their eyes locked again for a moment, neither spoke.

"You do want to feel it again, don't you?" Shu broke the silence. "The exciting flush...the power?"

Toshiro gulped down the liquor, liking the way it burned his throat and erased a little cold chill that slid down his back. Shu's tone sounded angry, no, dissatisfied. Toshiro looked up at him, knowing that by not meeting with Shu earlier, he'd created doubts. "I won't disappoint you," Toshiro said forcefully.

"I don't expect you will," Shu replied slowly.

He put his glass on the table beside the sofa and reached for an attaché case that lay under it. Obscured by shadows, Toshiro hadn't noticed the sleek black leather box until now. From inside of it, Shu removed a long, thin pipe

with a bamboo stem. An opium pipe.

“I saw what happened while that whore was on you,” Shu prepared with the dexterity of someone all too familiar the process. His fingers moved gracefully and almost too quick for Toshiro to even follow---the next minute, the scent of the tangy smoke prickled Toshiro’s nose. Shu inhaled deeply. “And I know it wasn’t because of her touch.”

Toshiro lowered his head, the heat rose in his face. It had excited him in ways he hadn’t expected. In the same ways Shu excited him. Toshiro imagined this, too, must be what Iwakura does to his mother. He looked up. “That isn’t a bad thing is it?”

“No,” Shu exhaled. He offered the pipe to Toshiro. “It’s not. In fact, I was rather...*envious*.”

“Envious?” Toshiro took the opium pipe from him. He’d only done this once before, back in Tokyo with a friend. He’d gotten sick before his mother caught the two boys and beat them for touching the shit. But now Toshiro took a small drag from the pipe and tried not to cough before handing it back.

“You flatter me, sensei.”

“I don’t intend to flatter.” Shu snatched the pipe away from his outstretched hand. He tossed it impatiently on to the table and turned back to Toshiro.

“It *disappoints* me when I don’t participate in those things,” he said coldly. “I want to feel the excitement as well.

"He reached over and caressed the side of Toshiro's face.
"How will you repair this disappointment?"

"Repair, the disappointment...?" Toshiro repeated the words dully. They weren't making any sense, but it couldn't be because of the way Shu touched him that way..."I'll do what you tell me to, Shu-san."

"I wouldn't accept a 'no' for answer," Shu whispered. He moved so damn fast grabbing Toshiro roughly by the front of his shirt. He tossed the young man across the davenport, and Toshiro could only remember his mother and stepfather again. He saw them in the diningroom once, fucking when they thought no one was home, Iwakura was being rough, but not brutal. She liked it.

The way Toshiro was liking it now...

"I want you to *harden* again," Shu said hoarsely. "I want to feel everything you felt"

He grabbed at Toshiro again, lifting him half off the furniture and forcing him over to lie face down. Shu pressed down between Toshiro's shoulder blades with one hand and gripped the waist of Toshiro's pants with the other. In one violent yank, he pulled the clothing down and Toshiro's knife clattered to the floor.

Shu leaned over him, his breath hot in Toshiro's ear. "I take it you've never been *had* either, have you Toshiro?" he said. "Tonight you'll also learn what it feels like to be

raped.”

Okay, so there was one thing Toshiro *wouldn't* do for his sensei--at least not that way.

“Are you trying to scare me?” Toshiro spat, getting his right arm out from under himself.

Dao Kan laughed in his ear and Toshiro jerked his arm back. His closed fist caught Shu in the forehead. The blow knocked the man back and Toshiro quickly got out from under him. A second later, he had his knife in hand again and launched straight at Shu.

But Shu pivoted to his side and grabbed Toshiro's outstretched arm, using the young man's own momentum to redirect the force of his attack. He slammed Toshiro onto the floor, knocking the end table aside in the process.

“So my student does have *teeth* after all,” Shu sneered, panting heavily.

Toshiro cursed at him in Japanese and at himself for not being bigger, or strong enough to stab him. *Let him think he's won. He'll be vulnerable soon enough.* “I'll get you for this, Shu. You'll be sorry.”

“Are you actually threatening me, Toshiro?” Shu's eyes glittered with amusement. “Hmm.” Shu released him and sat back on his heels. “Would you do it?” His smile grows wider. “*Could* you do it?” He laughed.

Toshiro got to his knees and spun around, landing a strong punch to Shu's head. The man fell back and Toshiro

straddled him, panting and bruised, but triumphantly holding his knife to Shu's throat.

"Yes I can." Toshiro drew blood, just a trickle. He traced his finger along the cut with his free hand and licked it in front of him. "I'm not your toy Shu."

"But you play so well," Shu laughed lightly, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth. His eyes flashed with something that looked like respect...and desire. "Yes," Shu whispered urgently. His hands slid up along Toshiro's hips, holding him in place. "*This* is what I want to feel...it's what *you* want as well. This is what it means to have power."

Naked from the waist down, Toshiro couldn't deny the shift in control excited him. He moved back and forth, just enough to rub against the older man. He dropped the knife an inch so he could bend down to lick at the small wound..."I do want to feel your power Shu..."

Again, Shu moved quicker than Toshiro could anticipate. Shu grasped his wrist and found the pressure point that made Toshiro release the weapon at last. With his other hand, he grabbed the back of the young man's head and pulled him to the side, forcing him to roll over until Shu topped him once more.

"Ask nicely," he panted. He leaned over and ran his tongue across Toshiro's lips, "Beg for it."

Afraid before but now intrigued, Toshiro kept his eyes on Shu's. Toshiro knew he was going to be rough, but

part of him wanted it. A big part of him wanted it “I want you to,” Toshiro muttered. “I want you to use me.....please.”

CHAPTER 5

A shiver of obvious pleasure moved through Shu. “That’s a good boy,” he purred, caressing Toshiro’s cheek. “I see it in your eyes-- the desire---the *hunger*.” Breathing heavily, Shu felt down the front of Toshiro’s shirt, his dark, wild stare still focused on Toshiro’s. He reached lower, his fingers exploring the gently rippled muscles at the waist and the smooth, flat abdomen.

Heart pounding in his chest, Toshiro tensed underneath him and bit back a low moan. Shu’s hand wandered lower still, closing around Toshiro’s erection. The length swelled beneath his fingers, hardening and throbbing with each stroke.

A low, guttural sound escaped from Shu’s throat. Sitting back on his heels, he ripped at the latches on the front of his trousers and released his own hard cock. He forced Toshiro’s legs open with his knee and pushed into him. Toshiro arched up out of reflex, but Shu covered his body, grinding him against the floor.

GODS! IT HURTS!

Toshiro bit his lip to hold back the cry. He was *not*

going to let Shu know how much it hurt.

And Shu kept ramming into him, grunting and moving faster. It seemed like forever but then he came in hot gush. The gooey wetness eased the pain, and Shu still kept thrusting. Again, Toshiro bit his lip, but for a whole different reason. He moved under Shu, trying to make more contact.

Suddenly, Shu stopped and Toshiro heard himself whimper. "Don't stop Shu, not now. Please."

Toshiro's words sent another shudder through Shu's body. He clutched the sides of Toshiro's head. "Be mindful of what you ask for," he said hoarsely, before driving into Toshiro again. Their hot flesh burned against each others, their bodies buckled and heaved with each thrust.

Shu threw his head back and pounded into Toshiro even harder. Stroking himself hard and fast, Toshiro spurted into his hand as Shu hit his peak again and exploded inside of him. He sat up, gasping for breath, and leaned forward to lick at the trickle of blood on Shu's exposed neck.

"Taste it," Shu gasped. "I want you to *fucking taste* it." Grabbing the back of his head, Shu pressed Toshiro against his throat.

The blood was hot and metallic tasting but Toshiro lapped it up. He swore he could taste the man's power.

Shu reached between them and swatted Toshiro's hand away. Instead, he grabbed Toshiro's swollen flesh and clenched it tightly, pulling and jerking in a relentless rhythm

that matched his own thrusts.

Toshiro couldn't believe Shu was still going, but didn't complain. The pain was lingering but now was cushioned by a fiery pleasure. Sweaty, sticky and hotter than he'd ever been before, Toshiro wanted more. He clutched Shu's shirt, trying to meet his thrusts, and groaned as the older man slammed into him again and again.

Shu pushed away without warning, yanking Toshiro's hands away from his sweat-soaked shirt and slid out with a low grunt. Toshiro leaned back, panting. With even less of a warning, Shu slapped him sharply. "Don't demand pleasures from me, Toshiro," he laughed. "It's not the student's place to do so. Never forget that."

No. Toshiro wouldn't forget. He wouldn't forget anything about today. Shu moved off him completely, and Toshiro felt empty, alone---frustrated.

Beside him, Shu made a choked sort of gasp and shoved the fallen table aside. His attaché case had spilled open, the contents scattered on the floor and broken. He cursed in Chinese and Toshiro forced himself to focus on the words, though all he wanted was to have Shu back where he was on top of him.

"Where in bloody hell am I going to find more fuckiing opium in this godforsaken shithole of a town?" Shu's voice had a panicked edge.

Toshiro didn't care. But maybe if he found a way to

fix his problem, Shu would fix his...

He sat up and shivered as Shu's wetness oozed out of him. He grabbed his underwear and wiped himself, wincing as the soreness made itself known.

"Zhang should have a supply," Toshiro volunteered quietly. He stood, his knees shaking, body aching. He stepped into his pants, trying not to feel the excitement build again when Shu turned and stared with those hard eyes.

"I've been to his parlor and I know what he has---I don't want his cheap, impure mixtures," Shu glared. "I'd rather smoke shit."

"He's lying to you then," Toshiro buttoned his trousers and returned Shu's look with a cool one of his own. "Zhang sells out to someone in Denver; I've seen the crates in my father's shipping yard by the train station."

Shu raised an eyebrow. "How do you know what his business in Denver is?"

"He's not sending out Buddha statues---that's for sure," Toshiro snorted.

"Indeed," Shu said. He undressed in silence, stripping out of his vest and shirt. His naked body was muscular, but not overly so, more lithe and defined than anything. His skin was a shade darker than Toshiro's and various small scars stood out here and there on his chest and back. Toshiro smiled to himself knowing that Shu would have a scar from him now, and maybe the man would let him give others....

While Toshiro watched, Shu used the clothing to clean himself and then turned to the bureau on the far wall. "I'll pay him another visit," he took out a fresh dress shirt and slipped it on. "And you shall accompany me."

"Of course," Toshiro said. Once pleased, then maybe Shu would take him to all the places the young man wanted to go. Toshiro sat back on the davenport, sucking in his breath when it hurt. But watching Shu so powerful and so close took the ache away.

"Good," Shu muttered. "Good."

He left the collar of his shirt open and didn't bother putting on a vest or a coat---the summer night seemed hot enough already. He glanced at Toshiro and smirked. "If you can sit so easily," he quipped, "then obviously, I was too gentle." Shu wiped away the trickle of blood that ran from the cut on his lip and smiled. "But, yes...you are impressing me."

Shu moved to the sofa, bent down and picked up a long knife from the scattered contents of his case. Flipping the weapon around in his hand, he extended the ivory handle to Toshiro. "I think you'll find this a more efficient *tool* than that butter knife you took from the jailhouse earlier. It belongs with the one I always carry."

Toshiro accepted the knife, admiring the intricately carved handle where a dragon and tiger seemed to intertwine. He touched his thumb to the blade and was

rewarded instantly with a drop of blood. Yes, this will be a *most* interesting future with himself and Dao Kan Shu.

He stood and bowed at the waist. "Thank you, sensei."

"Yes," Shu's voice dropped to a murmur. He watched the droplet of blood on Toshiro's finger and absently stroked at the cut on his throat. This time spent with his new pupil replayed itself in his mind---the initial feeling of disappointment followed by redeeming moments of erotic pain and pleasures. It was more pleasure than he'd ever anticipated and his imagination stirred wildly.

He'd felt the cold touch of steel a number of times, but never at the hand of someone who enjoyed it on the same *artistic* level he did. Toshiro shared his strength and ambition. It only needed nurturing, expanding. And though he'd never been penetrated by another man he wondered what would it feel like to take the boy inside of him.

Toshiro moved forward and brushed his fingers over the cut on Shu's throat. "I can tend to that for you."

Shu grasped his wrist sharply. An uninvited touch was something he would not tolerate---the two blows to his face notwithstanding. Shu *allowed* him to make that contact then, and he would continue to decide what Toshiro might do in the future.

Nonetheless, a jolt ran through his body at Toshiro's touch. Physical contact with another person, with nothing

but bare flesh on flesh, always seemed *distasteful* to Shu, but with Toshiro it was suddenly different...

Shu pulled Toshiro's hand close and ran his tongue along the trail of blood on the boy's thumb. The fluid's salty, tangy bitterness sent yet another small shiver down his spine. "Let's go," Shu said quietly.

Toshiro bit back a groan and followed Shu out of the house. He walked behind his *sensei*, and once in the dark, he brought his thumb to his lips and licked it. Toshiro tasted him as well as the coppery blood.

CHAPTER 6

For the second time that day, Dao Kan entered Zhang's gambling house. In the aftermath of the assassin's first visit, the parlor was unusually subdued for the kind of establishment. Only two tables had a game of Mah Jong going while a small group of three men sat near the back rolling dice. All conversation stopped when they took notice of Shu, but no one stood or tried to leave despite the terror obvious on their faces. Shu smiled. He stepped down three short, wooden steps into the dark room and held back the dusty red curtain that separated the lounge from the front entryway so Toshiro could pass alongside him.

Shu touched inclined his head so his lips brushed along Toshiro's ear as the young man paused on the last step. "Look at their faces," Dao Kan's breath stirred the soft, feathered strands of hair along the earlobe. "That's *respect*."

"It looks more like fear," Toshiro almost smiled.

"Same thing," Shu laughed softly.

Someone in the back rooms must have alerted the house's proprietor because a moment later the middle-aged man appeared through the narrow door just beyond the group of dice players. He smoothed out the front of his *Cheongsam*, long fingers pressing out any wrinkles in the tunic's black embroidered material. "Zhang isn't here," he said roughly. "I told that dog he's outlived his usefulness." He fingered a string of prayer beads wrapped around a thin wrist, the only gesture betraying his nervousness.

Shu looked at Zhang's former underling with contempt. "A wise, if not belated, decision," he said dryly. "Fortunately for you, the Wongs have no interest in holding you accountable for Zhang's mistakes." The gambling house manager conceded with a bow of his head and said nothing.

"But *I* want his opium," Shu said.

"We have another parlor room this way," the proprietor looked up with a relieved expression as though catering to Shu's request would make amends for anything. He gestured to the darkened doorway he had just emerged from. "With new rice mats on clean cots and exceptional pipes imported from Canton. We even have fresh opium cakes."

Shu narrowed his eyes. "I want *Zhang's supply*."

The proprietor's dismay added a few more lines to his already gaunt face. "It's already gone," he admitted.

“Zhang has contacts in Denver---he sold the opium to a man called Ling Po.”

Shu hissed under his breath---Ling Po, the very man Yang had sent him to deal with in the first place. The proprietor saw his displeasure and took a quick step back. “I never deal with Ling Po’s men,” the man frowned and shook his head fiercely. “Only with the Wong’s.”

“Ling Po is for me to deal with,” Shu glared at the proprietor and then turned to Toshiro. “For *us* to deal with.”

The proprietor followed Shu’s gaze and frowned at Toshiro. “But, Mr. Shu...his father owns much of this town...”

Shu turned back to the man and gave him a look that clearly spoke of his indifference.

The proprietor frowned deeper making his face look even more gaunt. “Itou is Japanese. This isn’t their affair.”

Shu leveled the man with an icy stare and continued to do so even as he spoke. “Toshiro, wait for me outside.”

Toshiro ignored the muffled cry of pain and heavy thud that filtered toward him as he exited the room.

Outside, the night air had grown cool and Toshiro shivered under his coat. He stood just outside the entrance while Shu finished up inside. Looking up at the star-filled sky he touched the top of the knife handle tucked into his belt with his right thumb, making the cut on his finger there

sore and raw. Pretty much like the rest of him felt...and not just physically.

After a few minutes, Dao Kan brushed past him with a wooden box in hand, the black lacquer shining in the moonlight. Toshiro watched him walk down the road and almost disappear into the darkness.

Shu stopped and spoke over his shoulder "Have I lost my pupil?"

Toshiro bit his lip and went up to him. "I don't know."

Shu slapped him, not hard---but enough so his cheek stung. "I don't like insecurities," Dao Kan said. "And I certainly don't like losing an apt learner."

"Maybe I don't like the idea of going to Denver," Toshiro said sharply. He expected another slap, but instead Shu's face darkened.

"You'd rather stay here?"

"Maybe." Toshiro looked away, his heart thumping in his chest. He wasn't scared...even knowing that Shu could kill him. He wasn't afraid of anybody or anything--and he did want that power Shu'd promised. He wanted it badly---the way he wanted Shu himself. But part of him hesitated anyway... "Like the man said back there...this is Chinese business. And my father--" he started.

"You think your father wants you here?" Shu asked coldly.

A slap would've hurt a hell of a lot less.

"Did he even know you were alive before you showed up at his door?"

"No," Toshiro answered quietly. He felt a prickle of anger on the back of his neck. Why was he hesitating? Why should he give a shit what his father thought?

Shu continued in a low voice. "You told me your mother sent you to this country, *alone*, to live with a man who's only claim to you was that he *fucked* her and left her pregnant. You are nothing to either of them...and they should be *less* than nothing to you."

Toshiro closed his eyes. He couldn't bear to look at Shu or worse---to let the older man see the tears he felt wanting to form. Dao Kan was right---absolutely right. Neither of his parents wanted him, not even his mother. She never had. Toshiro was shoved away while she was always too busy with her friends or Iwakura to bother.

Confident that no tears would come, he opened his eyes. "You're right. I wasn't thinking." He touched the tips of my fingers to his arm. "I'll make it up to you."

"In Denver tomorrow," Shu stepped away to the side so Toshiro's fingers brushed across his shirtsleeve. His lips curled up in a small smile and his eyes glittered.

Toshiro moved quickly to stay at his side. "Are you

going back to the hotel?” Shu raised an eyebrow at him in reply, still smiling.

CHAPTER 7

Toshiro led them up the dirt road where rows of houses had been established on the opposite, ‘upscale’ edge of Pagoda Springs. His house stood out from the rest with its pristine white arched windows and brick and wood siding. Several Ash trees would have served to shade the stone walkway leading to the front of the house during the day, but at night they created a dapple of shifting moonlight on the ground. Even in the larger cities on the coast, the house would have stood out among the finest.

Appropriate for a student who stood above so many others.

Toshiro unlocked the door and closed it behind them after they entered. Shu crossed the foyer to the staircase, silently appraising the French furniture in the parlor beyond and the elegant detailing such as the mahogany moldings where the walls met the steepled ceiling. He started up the steps and Toshiro followed. “Which one of the bedrooms is

yours?" he asked.

"It's the second door down," Toshiro said when they reached the upper landing. He took out his key and unlocked the door. While Shu entered, Toshiro lit one of the lamps on the marble topped bureau to shed a little light on things.

"That's a nice soft feather mattress on the bed--just in case you're curious," he shrugged as if it didn't matter to him either way if Shu planned to use it or not.

"Is it?" Shu stepped over to the foot of the bed. "What if soft, comforting things don't interest me?" he asked softly as he stared at Toshiro.

Wondering if Shu had noticed the bulge that was already starting to form in the front of his pants, Toshiro leaned back against the door and turned the lock. "I already know the kind of things that interest you, Shu-san."

Shu's smile held a hint of danger but his posture relaxed until he seemed open. Inviting. "Are you so confident?"

"Yes." Toshiro dashed forward, whipping out the knife from its place in his belt. He knew what Shu liked and he had no problems giving it to him. Heart pounding and cock aching, he arced the blade through the air and flicked it across Shu's chest. A thin line of crimson appeared along the cut material and then spread out as the blood seeped into the silk. Toshiro pushed Shu back on to the bed and straddled his hips. Gods...Shu's cock was as hard as his.

“Too bold,” Shu’s voice was husky, thick with lust. He hit Toshiro in the stomach, grabbed Toshiro’s waist and wrenched him roughly to the side. The move knocked the wind out of the younger man as he slammed into the mattress and . Shu shoved him face down. “You’re in no position to be dominant with me, Toshiro.”

“Or so you think,” Toshiro jabbed his elbow back into Shu’s stomach with the last word. Shu grunted as bone connected with soft tissue and Toshiro flipped over. He held the knife to Shu’s throat again. “I’m not some little woman you can push around.”

“Of course you’re not some shrew without a dick *or* a backbone,” Shu said with contempt. “I wouldn’t waste my time with you otherwise.” He reached up and found the pressure point on Toshiro’s wrist to make him release the knife. Toshiro cursed but dropped it.

“You’ve gotten quite fond of this weapon in such a short amount of time, That pleases me. I’m pleased to note,” Shu laughed t. Then his expression grew serious. “You know, I have every intention of taking you back to San Francisco as well.”

“What makes you think I’ll go? I can get to San Francisco on my own,” Toshiro grunted and tried to move out from under him. He had to bite back a moan when Shu pressed down on him, erection on erection.

“After you’ve already told me you’d come with me to

Denver?" Dao Kan laughed softly. He eased off the pressure point on Toshiro's wrist and brought the young man's hand to his chest. Shu traced Toshiro's fingertips over the long cut, shuddering at the touch on his raw flesh and murmuring soft sounds of pleasure.

"An *unschooled* amateur alone would be ravaged by that city in less than a week's time." Shu leaned inbreathed. "Don't think so much of yourself...yet. But once you've been properly educated, you'll be more powerful than you ever imagined possible."

Toshiro's breath quickened to a near pant. "Yes, sensei."

Shu reached for his own knife, still safely tucked into the waist of his pants. The handle matched Toshiro's exactly, only made out of jade instead of ivory. Shu caressed the side of the young man's face with the flat edge of the blade. "You'll have my attention as long as you continue to please me...and you'll belong to no one else..."

A soft whimper escaped Toshiro. Shu finally let go of his wrist and he reached between them to rub at himself. He'd never been so hard...it hurt. Groaning, he stroked himself and tugged at his pants with trembling fingers. Shu pressed down with his hips again so Toshiro could feel his hardness too while he touched his own.

"The Wongs mark their property," Shu said. "As do I." He sat back and rolled Toshiro onto his side. The young

man's left shoulder lifted off the mattress and Shu slit open his shirt with the knife. He kissed Toshio's bare skin, ran his lips along the side of the boy's neck.

"This *will* hurt," Shu whispered while his tongue flicked in and out of Toshio's ear. "But try and enjoy yourself because I will."

Not knowing what to expect and not really caring, Toshio grabbed his cock and squeezed. A moment later he registered the sting of the blade on his shoulder. Shu carved into his skin.

Toshio tensed as the steel touched his skin and pressed in just a enough to break the surface. Blood oozed along his shoulder and he gripped himself harder, willing himself to relax. This was part of a very interesting education he would never get anywhere else. The burn in his shoulder continued and seemed to travel down inside of him. Pain made his balls twitch and get harder, and he closed his eyes and stroked harder still. He felt a sticky droplet ooze from the tip of his rigid cock.

Shu drew the knife across his flesh with graceful strokes a calligraphy master would envy. But instead of ink, he painted with the crimson shades of blood. The character for 'dragon' appeared on the ivory skin with painstaking care on Shu's part, and not once did Toshio cry out.

"No tears, or a whimper of pain. Such a good boy you are," Shu he murmured. He caressed the side of Toshio's



face with his free hand and gasped at the heat coming off the flesh. With a moan, Shu leaned away and stabbed the knife into the mattress. His breath came in hard gasps quicker, his chest heaving uncontrollably as he tore open his shirt.

“Don’t ever disappoint me,” Shu panted. He grabbed Toshiro’s hand and pulled it to his groin.

Toshiro rubbed his hand over the hard length with a slow, firm stroke. “I... don’t want... to disappoint you...*sensei*.” The word comes out more like a moan than anything.

“Harder,” Shu groaned. He pressed a bloodstained hand down over Toshiro’s. “And I want you to say my name.” He cupped Toshiro’s chin, forcing the young man to look into his eyes. “Say it.”

Toshiro squeezed Shu, rubbing him harder through the fabric of his pants. Toshiro’s balls ached as he remembered what Shu did--what *they* did before. He was still sore all over but didn’t care...

“Shu...Shu Dao Kan...Shu Sensei...”

Toshiro’s gaze was glued to the cut on Shu’s chest. *Toshiro’s* mark. He wanted to touch it again, He wanted to lick it and taste *sensei’s* hot blood.

He wanted Shu to do the same to the burning cuts on his shoulder...

“Do you want to taste it?” Shu asked as if reading his thoughts. He grabbed Toshiro’s wrist and shoved the boy’s

hand away from his cock with a grunt while he unfastened the front of his pants. "So do I."

He traced his finger along the cut on his chest. With a smile, he smeared the blood on Toshiro's mouth and leaned in. Shu pressed his lips to Toshiro's and tasted himself on the young man. The taste was coppery, salty and he licked it from those full, tender lips, eager for more.

Toshiro had to touch him again. Shu was so hard and hot, his cock throbbing under Toshiro's exploring fingers. Toshiro's lips skimmed down to lap at the trace of the cut on Shu's neck, his licks turned into kisses...

Shu suddenly gasped. "Don't *touch* me unless I fucking *tell* you to!" he choked out. "How many *fucking* times do I have to tell you!" He pushed Toshiro away from his neck and struck him across the face.

FUCK! That HURT! That bastard Shu was going to leave him bruises and scars! But as pissed as Shu claimed to be, he still *liked* it. Toshiro watched Shu wrench his thick and very swollen cock from his trousers. Then Shu tried to unfasten Toshiro's ties, but gave up after his hands wouldn't stop trembling.

"Take them off," the man panted and leaned both hands on the bed's headboard.

Toshiro got off the bed, wincing as he straightened and his shoulder burned. Blood trickled down his back like tiny liquid fingers. He kicked off his shoes and slowly undid

his pants, then kicked them aside towards the remains of his ruined shirt

Though Shu wasn't looking, Toshiro gave him a show anyway. He reached his hand around to dip his fingers in the blood from his shoulder and slowly brought them forward. He traced a jagged red line down his chest all the way to the base of his erection.

But Shu looked across the bed and caught Toshiro's reflection in the full length mirror on the bureau doors. The corners of his lips pulled into a smile. He moved off the mattress, wrapping his arms around Toshiro's waist. "Don't tease," Shu whispered. "Not unless you want that mark permanent."

Shu pulled Toshiro back on to the bed. They rolled over until once more Toshiro lay panting underneath him and Shu hovered on top. "Please," Toshiro breathed. *Fuck me*, he added silently and spread his legs open.

Instead, Shu reached for the lacquer box Toshiro had all but forgotten about. The older man opened it and withdrew a small stoppered vial and a glass syringe which he placed on the nightstand beside the bed. Before tossing the box over the bed, Shu pulled out another vial of clear, amber-colored liquid. He dripped some of the oil on his fingers and then rubbed it over his fully erect cock.

Shu leaned down and brushed his lips over the boy's cheek. "My Toshiro," he breathed. He thrust himself deep

inside of Toshiro, pounding into him until come and drawn out moans of satisfaction erupted from them both.

Toshiro moaned as Dao Kan's cock slipped out him. Their heavy breathing drowned out the soft chirping of the summer crickets outside in the grass below the window. The older man collapsed on the mattress beside him, panting. The bed sheets were knotted and twisted around their waists, soaked in sweat, blood, and their thick come. <

Shu propped himself up on an elbow and yanked on the sheets until they lay naked. "Such an able pupil," he whispered and brushed his fingers along Toshiro's exposed length. After all they'd just experienced, the boy's cock still reacted to the teasing touch and hardened.

"Such an able teacher," Toshiro murmured.

"Such a clever reply---bold, but not overly." Dao Kan laughed and leaned over so their lips grazed in a half-kiss. "Does your body ache?" The tip of Dao's tongue darted out along the corners of Toshiro's mouth.

"Nothing I can't take," Toshiro parted his lips and lifted his head just enough to welcome a full kiss.

"And you deserve to be rewarded," Dao Kan murmured, deepening the kiss until their lungs burned for air. He pulled away and reached over to take the vial and needle from the night table. "Care to try something *else*, tonight?"

Shu smiled and unscrewed the vial's top. He dipped

the tip of the syringe into the clear liquid and drew the morphine into the needle.

“It is not the student’s place to demand, but the teacher’s right to grant privileges?” Toshiro’s eyes fixed on the drug as it pooled into the needle, his voice even.

Dao Kan raised an eyebrow and smiled wider. “Precisely,” he laughed. “And this *is* an extraordinary privilege I’m offering you, Toshiro. Don’t squander my generosity.”

“I would never do that, Shu-sensei.”

The older man sat up and touched the soft underside of Toshiro’s forearm, his thumb feeling along for the veins where the joint bent. The tender flesh was unmarred, free of scar or blemish, and Shu made a pleased noise in the back of his throat. For someone so clever, Toshiro was so bloody *innocent*.

“Here,” Shu offered him the needle with a soft laugh.<

Toshiro sat up, his eyes fixed on the needle. He knew what was inside there, though he’d never tried it. He licked his lips and then looked up to meet Shu’s gaze, which was as fierce and intense as ever. The best way to get this assassin to do what Toshiro wanted was to encourage Shu to indulge his own desires first. Shu could do so very many things for him, the least of which was sex. With a man like Dao Kan at his beck and call, Toshiro could be more powerful than his

father.

He closed his fingers over Shu's outstretch hand.
 "Show me how Shu-san. Please."

Shu quivered momentarily under the touch and glanced down at Toshiro's fingers. "Hmph." But he took Toshiro's forearm and pulled it to him. The vein was easy enough to see through the soft, pale skin and he pressed the tip of the needle against it.

He paused before actually pushing the top of the syringe. "How fortunate I am to have come across such an eager student," he whispered. He shoved down on the top of the needle, and the morphine gushed out.

Toshiro gritted his teeth at the prick of the needle and bit the inside of his lip as Shu injected the drug. The morphine burned, the searing flame traveled up along his arm. *Shit!* Toshiro's free hand clenched at the sheets beneath him and gasped. *He's poisoning me! How fucking stupid could I have be—*

A slow groan eased out of him as the morphine hit his system.

He sucked in his breath and held it as he became aware of something...Oh Gods!

It was like being thoroughly drunk.

It was like being a child in a candy store with a purse of money.

It was like that perfect, perfect moment when Toshiro

released and Dao Kan came inside of him.

“Ooohhh Shu-san...” he moaned. Suddenly weak, he pitched forward and Shu pressed a hand to his forehead to catch him.

“Perhaps I should have had you lie back first,” Shu said lightly. He pulled out the needle and eased Toshiro back on to the mattress. Toshiro’s vision blurred a little, and he watched in a daze as Shu pushed out the traces of morphine left inside the needle before returning to the vial for a second dose.

Dao Kan injected himself and his body trembled. He laughed, a high pitched, almost giddy sound Toshiro could just barely make out above the sound of his own pulse thundering in his ears. Shu made a shuddering sort of gasp and just managed to drop the needle and empty vial on the nightstand before crumpling onto the mattress.

“How does *this* suit you?” he asked with another burst of hollow laughter.

Toshiro started laughing with Shu and curled on to his left side to press his forehead against Shu’s shoulder. He could feel his heart racing, hear the blood rush through his body. This was un-fucking-real. “I like this. I like this just fine.”

Toshiro grinned like a maniac as he watched the euphoria light up Dao Kan’s dark and dangerous eyes.

It’s not the student’s place to make demands

Fuck that.

Toshiro arm shot out, fingers tangling in Shu's tousled hair. He dragged him to close and kissed Shu hard, his tongue very *demanding* indeed.

Dao touched the sides of Toshiro's face gingerly, his fingers shaking the intake of morphine. He leaned into the kiss at first and wrapped his hands around Toshiro's head. But he suddenly pushed the boy away his pupils already dilating from the drug, but still his eyes flashed.

"How dare you. "If he meant to chastise, the effect was lost with the giddy burst of laughter that followed them. "*I take what I want,*" he said with a wide grin and brushed the tangles of hair from Toshiro's moist brow. He leaned in and returned the kiss with one just as passionate.

"Then take what you want, *sensei* because if you don't I just might take what I want," Toshiro murmured against his lips.

Shu stiffened. "Are you *mocking* me?" he asked in a cold whisper. "How DARE you speak to your teacher that way." Shu grabbed Toshiro's hair and jerked his head back roughly. With two sharp slaps, he struck the boy across the mouth with the back of his hand.

Toshiro's vision blurred, this time from the force of the blows. The morphine blocked any pain, but a warm trickle of blood ran down the corner of his mouth. *Bastard. Fucking smug bastard. Who does he think he is? Toshiro was*

descended from a long line of samurai and Shu was probably nothing but a fucking rice picker's son. He pulled away from Shu and wiped the blood from his mouth with his thumb.

"Don't be cross with *sensei*," Dao Kan caressed Ken's cheek, his touch suddenly gentle. "I know best."

"Fuck you," Toshiro said.

"Maybe one day," Shu smirked. "One day."

He cupped Toshiro's chin and kissed the bleeding corners of the boy's mouth with soft, tender motions. And damn if Toshiro didn't like them.

Slowly, the morphine lulled them both to sleep.

CHAPTER 8

Fog rolled in from the bay and blanketed the streets of San Francisco in the thick mist. The night was cold and dark, Shu's footsteps echoed in the empty alleyway. Blood still dripped from the knife in his hand; he felt its sticky warm wetness on run through his fingertips. He stared down at the ivory handled blade and frowned as he tried to recall who had been assassinated.

"Of course," he caressed the bloody carvings on the handle with his index finger. This knife wasn't his...Shu sucked in his breath.

"Toshiro." He looked around, but the fog buried everything under an impenetrable gray wall. His heart rate rose in a panic. The boy was nowhere. "Toshiro!"

Dao jerked awake. The dream vanished but the ill feeling inside of him persisted. He sat up on the sweat drenched bed sheets and pressed a hand to his belly until the wave of nausea passed and his body stopped trembling. An

over indulgence on morphine...that would seem sufficient to explain his anxiety and the sickness.

But it wouldn't account for the relief he felt seeing Toshiro still in bed, beside him.

The young man still slept, his back to Dao. The fresh carving on Toshiro's shoulder was already healing nicely, and Dao Kan touched the markings. *His* markings. He pulled away his hand away with a hiss and rolled out of bed. Opiates did have that nasty tendency to alter a man's perception of the reality of things...affection was not to be confused with *possession*.

Shu crossed the floor and searched through the pockets of his coat which he'd haphazardly tossed over the desk chair. He removed a cigarette from the silver case and then dropped his coat once more before moving to the window. Toshiro shivered without Shu's heat to warm his naked body. He slowly woke up, blinking lazily as he got used to the morning light. Rubbing some of the grogginess away from his eyes, he rolled on to his back and winced as the sensitive skin on his shoulder stung.

"Shu-san?" Toshiro said, sitting up and testing the traces of soreness he felt in various places. Shit but Shu fucked so rough...not that those aches were entirely unpleasant...

Dao Kan didn't look away from the window. "We'll have breakfast here," the older man answered. "I want fresh

clothing.”

And when did I become your servant? Toshiro wondered as he stared at Shu’s broad back. He took a slow deep breath and bit back his resentment. It was probably his own fault. He was taking it the wrong way. After all Dao Kan hadn’t ordered him to do his bidding he simply said what he wanted.

He got out of bed and grabbed his sleeping yukata that had fallen from the bedpost to the floor. He rang for the maid and when she came to the door he told her to have his father’s new Chinese cook prepare a decent breakfast. “A Chinese breakfast. Make sure he uses the good tea.”. Toshiro shoved his and Shu’s soiled garments at the maid to be cleaned then before closing the door in her face he said. “And have your husband fill the tub in the bathroom.”

When Toshiro turned around Shu was watching him with amusement. “What?”

“You’re quite used to getting your way aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Shu laughed and stubbed out the end of his cigarette on the marble top of the mirrored dresser beside the window. “Then that makes two of us,” he drawled as he crossed the room. The maid knocked once on the door then brought in the breakfast tray. To her credit she didn’t drop the food at the sight of Toshiro bent over the high footboard of the bed, Shu’s cock buried deep in his ass. She simply tilted her head

down, set the tray on the nearest flat surface then scurried out, banging the door quickly behind her.

Shu laughed, his amusement putting a halt to his amorous adventures.

“Don’t stop,” Toshiro pleaded. His ass was sore, his recently virginal flesh stretched beyond it’s usual limits but he craved the passion Shu showered upon him. He’d never felt more alive, never knew that the first pain could take such a pleasurable turn. He pushed back. “Please finish,” he begged. His body slick with sweat, his balls tight with need, his cock oozing milky droplets in anticipation.

With a laugh, Shu pulled out of him and Toshiro whimpered.

“Don’t touch yourself,” Shu ordered slapping his ass before going to sample the meal on the tray.

Toshiro cursed under his breath then smiled to himself. He straightened and went to retrieve the tray. He moved a small wooden table close to the bed then set the tray atop it. He climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged, his erection jutting out between his bent legs. He poured a cup of the imported green tea then held it out to Shu. “It’s really quite good. My father had it imported from Shanghai.”

“Did he now?” Shu asked with a smirk as he took the cup before perching on the bottom of the bed.

“He did,” Toshiro said simply, stopping Shu from taking a plate. “You’re a guest. Let me.”

Shu leaned back against the footboard and watched with amusement as Toshiro carefully placed the rice and fruit and broiled fish on the fine porcelain plate.

“Chopsticks or a fork?”

“A fork I think.”

Toshiro handed over the plate and then the fork and linen napkin before settling back and fixed himself a light plate of fresh fruit. Shu ate his rice with leisure watching as Toshiro picked up a ripe piece of melon. The pink juice dribbled from his lips as he bit into it and Dao marked the progression of the sticky drops as they fell from those full lips more sensual than any woman’s down to the taut chest that would only become more defined and muscled with maturity.

The next piece of melon his protégé ate was even juicer and this time the juice drops fell in a trickle, down the chest, across the flat of the boy’s belly and down further to be stopped by the thatch of thick black curls nestled between his leg.

“Are you trying to *seduce* me, Toshiro?”

“Hmmm? I don’t understand.”

Shu sipped his tea. “Ah yes, I forgot you’re just an innocent babe in the woods.”

“What?”

Dao Kan dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand. The boy was entertaining, he’d give him that.

He continued eating as Toshiro took a bowl of rice and the chopsticks. Odd how entrancing it was to see the younger man's inborn grace and fluidity of movement.

Shu's eyebrow quirked when a few bits of rice fell and landed on Toshiro's semi-erect cock. He set the bowl aside and took up a napkin to clean himself but Shu grabbed his wrist. "Please, do let me." Setting aside his dish and taking the chopsticks from Toshiro, he raked the pointed ebony tips over the younger man's chest, following the lingering trail of pink melon juice. He flicked the grains of rice away then ran the sticks back and forth along the length of Toshiro's cock watching and is reached its full hardness once more.

"Don't move," Dao Kan said in a dusky whisper as he took one of the sticks and eased the point into the moist slit of Toshiro's cock. He turned the stick in a gentle circle with his fingertips while using his free hand to tug at his own growing erection.

Toshiro whimpered and clutched at the bedsheet. "Perhaps I should let the Wongs make a male whore of you," Shu said twirling the stick again. "Oh I can see the men lining up to sample you."

"Fuck you," Toshiro whispered.

Shu laughed and slipped the stick free. "Please do," he said, leaning back and spreading his legs. "Ride me. Hard. And if you do it very well I might just jerk you off."

"And I might just let you."

Toshiro was on his way to the bathroom to wash with Shu when the voice of his father Kashitaro Itou assailed them from the top of the staircase.

“Who are you and what the fuck are you doing with my son?”

Shu stared coolly at the elder Itou. “Fucking is precisely what I was doing. Now if you’ll excuse me, my bath is getting cold.”

Toshiro smirked and began to follow his new sensei in to the washroom, but his father seized his arm and jerked him around to face him. “Don’t give me your mother’s venomous stare. Answer the question now. Who was that man?”

Toshiro pulled free. “He’s my friend. I met him in town.”

“At that opium parlor? And you let him into my house. You let him into your bed?” The senior Itou’s handsome face was a mask of disgust. “I can certainly see Iwakura’s influence in your upbringing.”

Toshiro said nothing he simply gave his father what he referred to as his mother Ume’s venomous stare. Even after his father grabbed a handful of his yukata and jerked him forward.

“Did you know that your mother must have been Iwakura’s second choice? He tried to get me in his futon but

I tossed him aside like a bowl of maggoty rice. How sad for you to have been raised by my two bitter cast-offs.”

Toshiro didn't move a muscle to escape his father's grip. His father couldn't intimidate him. Especially not now.

“Iwakura is an imperial prince,” Toshiro said at last. “I'm sure my mother is glad to have experienced trash like you to finally be able to appreciate the finest.”

The elder Itou released his son with enough of a backward shove to send the young man crashing to the hardwood floor.

Toshiro picked himself up and cast a glance to the closed bathroom door. “Haven't you heard? Iwakura is an important advisor and his uncle is about to lead a mission as Japan's ambassador to the West. He'll be among the finest Japanese and foreign dignitaries while you rot here in some backwater mining town.”

Toshiro's father cross his arms over his chest. “I do so hate to rain on your parade as the Americans say, but I have already met a great number of European and American dignitaries and if you knew anything at all about me you'd know that this ‘backwater’ town is simply a quiet respite from my myriad ventures which I set in motion long before I escaped the pestilence that now oversees Japan.” He paused and smirked at his son. “So how many members of the new Meiji government did your mother have to fuck to get

Iwakura his position?"

Toshiro sucked in his breath, containing his anger by balling his hands into fists at his sides. "You're disgusting. My stepfather said neither side would have you. Now I know why."

His father sneered. "Boy, you have more to learn than three lifetimes could ever teach you. Iwakura isn't capable of keeping his own dick in a position of importance. And if you truly are my son then you have enough inbred intelligence to recognize the truth when you see it."

"Bastard," Toshiro muttered when his father turned his back and walked towards the stairs. "I don't give a shit about my stepfather and his fucking family. But a prince among princes is better than a rich man among barbarians any day."

Itou looked back, his dark eyes glittering in triumph. "Well then, we'll see how well you get along without the comforts this rich man's money can afford you in this land of barbarians. You have until sundown to get out of my house. And take that Chinese dog with you."

"So I'm a Chinese dog am I?" Dao Kan asked as soon as Toshiro entered the bathroom.

"He's a useless bastard."

"And his son is a coward for not killing him to shut him up."

Toshiro swallowed and approached the large

porcelain tub nestled within a wooden base. "I'm not a coward. The law here is on his side. Why should I risk hanging for the likes of him?"

Shu exhaled a weary sigh. "My Toshiro, always the practical one." He shook his head and leaned it back against the edge of the tub.

Toshiro knelt beside the tub his lower body protesting, his tender shoulder burning as he stretched to retrieve the fluffy sea sponge. "Would you like me to wash your back?"

Shu opened his eyes. "That might be enjoyable" He leaned forward and was silent for a moment. "Some would say the purpose of life is to survive, but I disagree," he said softly. "It's in the pursuit of power...and possession."

"Possession," Toshiro repeated as he stroked the sponge down Shu's back.

"Yes. Those are the only two things that matter," Dao continued. "Love, compassion, even happiness---those ideals are meaningless. Only the weak long for them." He leaned back against the porcelain rim and turned to face his new student. "What do you want, Toshiro?"

"Power," he said quietly, lathering the sponge again and smoothing it carefully over Shu's chest. He scooped up some of the water with his hand and let it trickle down across the angry red line where he'd cut the assassin yesterday. "I want power." *Power to possess you, power to get what I*

want, from whom I want, when I want...

“A wise answer. And you’ll have it, I promise you. My business here is finished, I’ll be leaving this shithole town later today. There’s a train late this afternoon that will reach Denver by early evening.”

Shu tilted his head back so Toshiro could wash the cut at his throat. “I’ll let you accompany me since you no longer have a place here.”

CHAPTER 2

After bathing and dressing, Toshiro went back to his room to gather a few belongings. He stuffed them into a leather traveling case as Shu watched from his place near the doorway. Slowly sipping at a glass of brandy, he leaned against the chestnut dresser and fingered the loose items strewn on the polished top. He impatiently tapped the cover to a gold pocket watch, anxious to leave already.

“Finer clothing waits for you in San Francisco,” Dao sighed and placed his empty glass next to the watch.

“I’m leaving my father’s shit,” Toshiro called over his shoulder. “But I’m taking what’s mine.”

Dao Kan smirked to himself. “So be it.” They were both so very much alike, more so with each passing moment. Shu hadn’t left Hong Kong without taking everything owed to him by his father. Toshiro wouldn’t do anything less.

While the young man finished pulling out a few suits from the bureau across from the bed, Shu opened

the top dresser drawer. He sifted through the layers of silk undergarments, noting the fine material as a sign of Toshiro's opulent heritage. His fingers touched something firm amid the soft material, and he pulled out a bound book. Flipping through it, each page featured a Japanese-styled painting of women in a range of poses, from the suggestive to the erotic. Amused, Shu traced a finger over the flowing black ink drawing of a nude woman.

"You mustn't leave this behind," he looked up, raising an eyebrow at Toshiro, and tossed the book onto the bed where it landed a few inches from the open valise.

Laughing, Toshiro picked up the collection of arousing images and stuffed it into the case along with his other things. "Yeah, who knows I may feel the need to jerk myself off."

Shu laughed. "So you do that often do you?"

"No more than any other man." Toshiro tried to appear aloof about it, but Shu noticed the faint blush creep up on the young man's cheeks. "The maid back home would always throw them out whenever she found them. At least here the maid didn't know shit, or she didn't care." He looked over his shoulder at Shu and smirked. "Or maybe she'd use them to get off for her husband."

Toshiro turned back to his packing, with that smooth subtle grace once again evident in even the simplest of his movements. Shu smiled and closed the drawer shut

before moving to stand behind him. "I'm more interested in knowing how often *you* 've gotten off on those images. In fact, I want to watch you do it," he whispered in Toshiro's ear.

The young man sucked in his breath, but continued packing. "Maybe I can do that for you. If I have time."

"But you are a coy creature," Shu ran his hand along the small of Toshiro's back. "You *will* show me. Later."

They went downstairs by mid-afternoon. Toshiro's father was nowhere on the premises to see his son off, and Shu was not surprised by his own sense of relief. Granted, an appearance from the senior Itou would've given Toshiro an opportunity to make up for the cowardly way he'd handled himself earlier...but that would've given Itou the same chance to convince the young man to stay. The maid and her husband were standing by the front door, two feeble sentinels to ensure to escort the outcast child from the house. As he and Toshiro crossed the foyer, Shu found himself reaching out to put a hand on Toshiro's back. It was a possessive gesture---one that coupled with the fierce glares he gave the hired servants warned the man and woman to stay back.

"You don't really have to go," the maid blurted out at the last moment. "Your father, he's just---"

"Fuck you and him," Toshiro muttered..

He slammed the door shut behind them and Shu

narrowed his eyes at the house. "Good," he said softly. "Don't waste more of your attention on this hovel or the bastard who fathered you. Nothing they've given you can match what's to come with *me*...." Shu placed his hand on Toshiro's back once more as they walked into town.

A huge crowd had assembled in the square, a thronging mass of people who filled the main road and blocked the way to the train station. Shu hissed under his breath and stopped.

"What's wrong?" Toshiro asked.

"I don't feel like shoving my way through this mess," Shu sighed with irritation. There were too many people, the risk of too many strangers' bodies touching his too great...he frowned in distaste. And hidden among the crowd, Toshiro's father could be waiting to cause trouble as well. "A back way to the station would be best."

They crossed paths with a group of women and snippets of their conversation caught his attention. "One of Lucy's girls---murdered!" one of the women shook her head and mopped at her brow from under her white bonnet. "Who would do such a thing? There's never been any trouble like that here before."

Toshiro froze beside Shu, his face blanched of color.

"And the way she died---," another woman added

grimly, her lined face taut with the horror of it all. "The men who found her told the sheriff she was stabbed more times than he or the undertaker could count."

"Lord Almighty," the younger woman gasped above the collective sounds of shock that rose from the others.

"That poor girl."

"Who could do something so cruel?"

Shu reached out to grab one of the suitcases Toshiro nearly dropped. "What are you doing?" he snapped in Japanese. He narrowed his eyes at the boy, but his insides tightened. *No no no...* Why did he worry for his hold on his pupil? He raised his hand to strike the young man across the face, but held back, unwilling to draw unnecessary attention.

Toshiro swallowed and fumbled with his grip on the other case. "N-nothing," he said quietly. Shu caught him glancing at the group of women behind them.

"Stop it," Shu hissed. "Are you showing me fear? *Remorse?*" He spoke each word like they were foul curses, and all the while a sense of panic welled up inside of him that he would lose his pupil here to these loud-mouthed wenches.

"No, I..." Toshiro's words trailed off.

"Well, that's what she gets for bein' a whore." The women started gossiping once more and Shu stared at them in a fury. Should they speak one more poisonous word he

would slay them even in the midst of this crowd.

“A waste of life anyway,” another woman sighed.

Shu grabbed the back of Toshiro’s neck and pulled him close. “They’re right,” he whispered, his words shaking under his breath. “Your concern over this is foolish.”

Toshiro blinked and looked down at his shoes. “I—I’m not concerned,” he said quietly. “You’re right, *sensei*.”

“Yes, I am,” Shu closed his eyes with relief. “Always. That woman was less than nothing.”

Toshiro nodded.

“And it brought you pleasure?” Shu insisted.

“Yes,” Toshiro looked up at him. “It did.”

“Good,” Shu released him and headed for the alley behind the post office where they could circumvent the crowd and reach the train station.

Taking advantage of the Itou name’s social weight in Pagoda Springs, Toshiro had the manager of the railroad depot arrange for his father’s private car to be added to the train bound for Denver.

The Itou car was an opulent thing outfitted with polished mahogany panels, rich velvet and glove soft leather upholstery and hand woven Turkish carpets. It boasted separate dining, sleeping and general compartments as well as it’s own small kitchen area.

Toshiro directed the baggage handler to leave their bags in the general compartment. Once the man was

gone Toshiro used the knife Shu had given him to spring the lock on the liquor cabinet concealed within the wood paneling next to the wide sofa-like seat at the rear of the compartment.

Shu watched the younger man appreciatively. So much about the boy simply *fascinated* him in a way that no other ever had. "Why were you sent here to Pagoda Springs?" he asked when Toshiro approached with a brandy decanter and two glasses.

Toshiro poured himself a drink then leaned back against the paneled wall. "Supposedly to meet my father who wasn't as dead as everyone thought." He sipped his brandy. "That's the official story anyway. I think my mother wanted to get rid of me." He smirked. "Or keep me out of trouble. I had some rough friends back in Tokyo."

"Rough friends?" Shu laughed softly. "And just how *rough* were these friends of yours?" Placing the half-full glass of brandy on the ledge behind the sofa, Shu touched Toshiro's cheek. "I don't think you understand the meaning of the word--Not yet. But you're learning."

"My mother thought they were rough," Toshiro said softly. He had too. Hell, he thought he was rough until he'd met Shu

Shu touched Toshiro's cheek in the same spot where he'd hit him and left a bruise earlier. The wound stung and Toshiro spoke without thinking. "My friends weren't

anything like you.”

Shu’s expression when from content to dangerous. “Don’t insult me with the comparison. Of course I’m nothing like whatever breast-suckling brats you wasted your time with back there.” Shu knocked the glass from Toshiro’s hand then leaned in close.

“Apologize,” he said with quiet authority.

“Sorry,” Toshiro muttered.

“Why are you shrinking away, Toshiro? Hmm? I thought you enjoyed things rough.”

Grabbing him by the collar, Shu yanked him close enough to whisper in his ear. “Don’t cower like a child who’s been scolded. You’re much better than that.”

A knock sounded on the compartment door and Shu pushed Toshiro away.

“Mr. Itou?” A porter called out from behind the frosted glass. “Dinner is about to be served in the dining compartment, but would you like me to serve it here for you?”

Shu looked back to Toshiro and raised an eyebrow. “I’ll leave this to Mr. Itou’s discretion,” he said.

Toshiro slid the door open a bit, giving the porter a hard look. “We’ll eat in the dining compartment but make sure you get somebody in here to clean up the glass I dropped while we’re gone.”

The old porter folded his arms across his chest and

gave both Toshiro and Shu a dismissive glance. "Excuse me, sir, but this is supposed to be Kashitaro Itou's private car. We don't take kindly to runts breaking into and causing trouble on this train. Who the hell are you?"

Toshiro reached through the door and grabbed the porter by the throat. "Toshiro Itou is who the hell I am and if you like your sorry assed job you'll shut your mouth or lose it as soon as I tell my father how you spoke to me."

He shoved the older man hard enough to make him stumble backward, then stepped into the narrow corridor before pausing to look back at Shu.

"A good effort, Toshiro." Shu leaned in the doorway and glanced down at the porter. The man clutched his throat tried to catch his breath. "But if your grip had been a little stronger, you could have crushed his windpipe. Better luck next time." He stepped past the crumpled man and started toward the dining compartment. Pausing at the connecting door, he turned and gave Toshiro a withering glance. "Speaking of next time---maybe we can try not to hide behind Tou-san's name, hmm?"

"It slipped out," Toshiro mumbled. Before stepping through the connecting he looked back. From the way the man's hands trembled and the sweat dripped down the sides of his face, the porter was clearly afraid.

Shu's hot breath blew against Toshiro's neck as he leaned in close, flicking his tongue across the lobe

of Toshiro's ear. He whispered, "He's afraid of you, Toshiro....Feels good doesn't it?"

Toshiro smiled to himself. It *did* feel good.

Shu recognized the glint in Toshiro's eye and the corners of his lips curled into a smile "Yes, enjoy your handiwork. But know that's nothing compared to what you're capable of." He studied Toshiro's eyes waiting for some wavering. To his satisfaction there was nothing but a cool resolve. No remorse for what he'd just done to the porter, or to that whore in Pagoda Springs. There was no fear of reprisal or consequence. Shu reached out and stroked the boy's cheek. "Oh yes, I think I'm beginning to see the real Toshiro."

"Now tell me," Shu asked once they reached the dining compartment and took a seat under the window. "What kind of tutoring did you receive in Tokyo?"

Toshiro sat opposite and gazed out at the farmland and trees breezing past. "Most of it was useless, except maybe the English. That was from my hired tutors." He paused when the old waiter came and quickly poured them some wine. When the man left he sipped the Bordeaux then continued. "I learned other things, too. More useful things. Like how to throw a knife, how to cheat at dice and cards, how to pick pockets." He raised his glass and smiled at Shu. "And I'm looking forward to learning much, much more from the most skilled tutor yet."

Shu nodded and touched his glass to Toshiro's. You'll have plenty of opportunity to shine for me, Toshiro. There's no rush for the moment. "He sipped his wine, pausing when the waiter returned with some fruit appetizers. "Do you play Mah Jong?"

"I'm not the best but I'm good enough to play for money."

"Excellent." Shu took another sip of wine and smiled at him over the rim of the glass. "Cards and dice require no skill---any fool can play those silly games. I wouldn't have expected you to be so limited. When we arrive in Denver, we'll have to pay a visit to the Ningbo," he said. "I played there a few months back. In fact, I handled a little problem there for the Wongs." The memory of dealing with another simpleton like Zhang brought a satisfied smile to his lips. "I'm sure we'll receive a very warm welcome."

The waiter arrived with their dinner-- annoyingly American fare of steak and potatoes, and Shu look at it disdainfully. "We'll also pay a visit to a decent restaurant when we get there," he sighed at Toshiro.

Toshiro nodded and poked at my steak with the fork. He rather liked it but supposed he shouldn't. "Iwakura---my stepfather--was big on Westernization. He and my mother used to make me eat this shit all the time. I sort of got used to it. It's not so bad when it's like this inside." He cut the steak open and sliced a little piece from the rarest part. He rather

enjoyed the taste of the bloody juice. It reminded him of when he cut Shu and how it tasted to lick the blood away.

Suddenly heat rushed through him. His balls ached and he started to get hard. He rubbed his hand across the napkin over his lap for a second before taking a sip of the wine.

“Having to get used to this...” Shu wrinkled his nose as he sliced into the piece of meat. “...how unfortunate. Do you always do what your mother tells you?” He looked up and notice

Toshiro’s expression change, the young man’s eyes focusing on something beyond the food on his plate. Toshiro had dropped a hand to his lap, his body language suggesting he stroked at something underneath the table.

Shu’s breath caught in his throat. It’s not the food Toshiro was enjoying---it was the act of cutting he derived pleasure from. “It excites you, doesn’t it?” he asked softly. “It does the same for me.”

“A lot of things excite me. And I hardly ever listened to my mother,” Toshiro replied before reaching inside his jacket to take out the knife Dao Kan gave him. He locked his gaze onto Shu’s as he cut into the reddest part of the meat with the dragon handled dagger. He sliced off a little piece, stabbed it with the end of the knife then licked the bloody juice before eating it from the knife’s tip.

Shu exhaled sharply and reach out, tracing a

fingertip along Toshiro's lips as he swallowed. Shu opened his mouth and touched the bloodied finger to his tongue. "It tastes...sweet."

"I can think of things that taste better," Toshiro said casually after he swallowed the food. He picked up the knife and ran his tongue along the flat of the blade on both sides then wiped it on the napkin in his lap, rubbing it over the tightening bulge there more than necessary.

He sipped the brandy. "I think we have an audience," he nodded to the left where the old waiter was staring but trying not to be obvious.

Shu glanced in the same direction and narrowed his eyes at the nosey old fools. "He's not important," he brushed them off, turning back to Toshiro. The young man's hand still moved underneath the tabletop, his shoulders tense as he touched himself over and over again. Shu tightened his grip on the glass of brandy he held, his heart rate quickening.

"I know one thing in particular that would taste better," Shu teased. "But can you handle it?"

"If you want me to. I will. I'll do anything you want. Haven't I shown you that?"

"Yes you have, but don't mince words. You want it as well."

Toshiro laughed laugh softly and settled back. He plucked a red rose from the little glass vase on the table and rubbed it across his lips. "I want you to be pleased with me.

I want to be useful to you.”

“I am pleased.” Shu reached across the table to take the flower from his hand. He brought it to his lips, feeling the warmth of Toshiro’s skin still on the velvety petals. “Though I’ve only begun to explore your potential,” he inhaled the rose’s soft scent. “Things will be more fun in Denver.”

They left their meals half eaten and returned to the traveling compartment. As soon as they entered, Shu reached out, jerking Toshiro to him. He still had the rose and traced it across the younger man’s lips before kissing him softly. The taste of wine was on the young man’s breath and Shu pulled back to hover his lips over Toshiro’s. He licked at the corners of Toshiro’s mouth, tasting the faint traces of blood which lingered there.

“Tell me...back in the dining car...you were hard weren’t you?”

“I still am.”

Touching the flower to Toshiro’s cheek with one hand, Shu reached between them to slide his hand down the front of the boy’s clothing. Heat radiated from Toshiro’s body and Shu’s breath quickened as his fingers wandered further down “It feels good, doesn’t it?” he whispered into Toshiro’s ear. “You really do understand.”

“I understand...a lot of things...” Toshiro groaned. “But I have more to learn.. Teach me. Teach me

everything.”

Shu pulled his hand away. With Toshiro’s wrist gripped tightly in my hand, Shu shoved him up against the door, the back of his head banging into the wood. He dropped the rose and slid his free hand up along Toshiro’s body.

“You’re so greedy for knowledge, and I do want so very much to teach you...But, do you know what you’re asking of me?” he whispered, leaning in until their foreheads touched. “I already expect loyalty from you, but this goes so much further than that.”

He flicked his tongue across Toshiro’s full lower lip. “I want everything from you...your dedication, your service, your very life...” He drew back, cupped Toshiro’s chin. “Can you give me that, Toshiro?”

“Yes...oh yes.”

“Such a sweet promise,” he said, reaching up to hold Toshiro’s face in both his hands. “You’ll take everything I have to give you...and you’ll like it.” He teased Toshiro with another fleeting kiss. “What gifts will you give me in return?”

“Anything. Anything you want.”

CHAPTER 10

“I want all you can give and more,” Shu said seriously. “And I’ll have it.” He stroked at Toshiro through the fine fabric of his trousers, his own body swelling in response to the hardness his fingers skimmed. He wanted to take the young man here and now, but there was time enough for that. The waiting and the wanting would make the final conquering all the sweeter.

Shu pulled away, sat in one of the thickly padded chairs between the windows and propped his feet up on the edge of the sofa they’d used earlier. He gestured to the cushioned seat. “Sit.”

He anticipated Toshiro would drop into the spot next to his outstretched legs but the boy didn’t. Instead, he chose to sit on the opposite end and stretch his own limbs across the length of the seat. Shu chuckled and steepled his fingers. “You’ve been well educated. How much Chinese do you know?”

“Enough to get by,” Toshiro said, meeting his gaze coolly. “Both Cantonese and Mandarin if you’re curious.”

“Then speak to me.”

“*Ha wo deh bang*,” Toshiro said without a trace of hesitation.

Shu arched his eyebrow in surprise. Perhaps he’d expected a quote from some classical Chinese literature one of Toshiro’s tutors had forced the boy to read through. But no, his Toshiro was only too eager to respond with *Suck my cock*...the comment was cheeky and offensive, and yet...Shu laughed. “I should’ve known,” he pressed a hand to his side where it already ached from the laughter. “You’ve mastered the essentials of our tongue, haven’t you, Toshiro?”

Toshiro grinned. “I told you I know enough to get by.” He got up, got a new bottle of brandy then poured Shu a drink. When presenting it he leaned down to whisper. “So, will you?”

In an instant Shu grabbed Toshiro around the throat with his free hand. He squeezed, then as suddenly as he attacked he let go then patted Toshiro’s flushed cheek. “Perhaps one day if you’re very, very lucky.” He laughed. It was remarkable really, how often Toshiro made him laugh. More extraordinary yet, the laughter was genuine, spontaneous, and deeper than any Shu had known before.

Shu’s lips curled into a smile when the train pulled

into the depot in Denver. While the car slowly rolled to a final stop, he stood and parted the velvety-green curtain over the window. Through the darkened glass, the city spread out just past the station. Brick and wood buildings, some as tall as three stories, rose up from the main avenue behind the depot. Carriages and horses lined the dusty street, the common rooms of saloons and hotels visibly crowded from the silhouettes filling their windows. Certainly this was of no comparison to the rapidly growing metropolitan San Francisco was, but after their time spent in Pagoda Springs, Denver was a haven of civilization.

“Where shall we begin?” Shu held open the curtain, turning to face Toshiro. The young man’s eyes never strayed from his, not even to gaze through the window.

“Anywhere you like,” Toshiro said. “I want to see it all, I want to do it all. I want to follow you in everything.”

“A very good answer,” Shu purred. He drew the curtain shut, and Toshiro came to his side as they crossed to the end of the compartment.

“I want to be like you,” Toshiro continued. “I want people to quake at the mention of my name. I just want to give you time with no distractions so you can teach me.” \

“You’re ambitious too, I see,” Shu said coldly and lead them out on to the platform. Ambition was one of the qualities he found appealing about Toshiro from the start. However, the young man still needed to understand his place a little more

clearly.

“But it’s my discretion when or when *not* to teach you,” He stopped, turned and looked down at the boy. “I indulged your little word play earlier but you service me...not the other way around.”

“Fine,” Toshiro answered tersely.

They went down the wooden steps leading off the platform and crossed through a wrought iron gate at the station’s entrance. A man stood to the side, leaning against the gate. He stood in the deepest shadows just outside the ring of light from a gas lamp. Shu watched from the corner of his eye as the man’s hand snaked into his jacket, the lamplight catching on the razor sharp edge of the knife he pulled out. He inched forward, drawing the attention of Toshiro who in turn reached for his own weapon.

Recognizing this would-be assassin, Shu held up a hand to stop Toshiro from attacking. “What are doing, Chao?” Shu asked.

“Mr. Shu?” Chao stepped back, right into the circle of light. His oval eyes widened in shock, his rounded cheeks draining of color. Chao’s thin lips moved without the benefit of any clearly pronounced words to make his meaning known. Shu frowned and Chao flinched.

“Life out here has made you soft,” Dao Kan hissed. “And stupid, as well.”

Shu glanced over to Toshiro who'd tucked his knife away but remained poised, ready to strike. Shu silently debated letting Toshiro use the skills he'd boasted of back on the train. That would certainly be a fitting end for the living disappointment that was Jin Chao.

"Mr. Shu, forgive me," Chao finally found his voice. "I didn't expect to see you here of all places. You're too good for a worthless city like Denver."

"Indeed," Shu said, his gaze following that of Chao's which shifted to Toshiro then back. There was no comparison. Though Chao had a year or two on Toshiro, he lacked all of the grace and power that seemed innate to the other.

"Why are you hanging around with this pathetic, shit-eating Jap?" Chao suddenly blurted out in Cantonese.

Toshiro sprang forward, catching Chao in the gut with a punch. He landed his own punch to Toshiro's head before doubling over. Toshiro connected with a knee to Chao's groin. Only Shu's voice--Shu's laugh---as Chao collapsed stopped Toshiro from lashing out with his knife.

"Now, now, Toshiro," Shu chuckled. "Play nicely."

The edge of Toshiro's knife hovered a breath's distance from Chao's throat, and Shu smiled. The speed of Toshiro's attack, the decisiveness of the boy's strikes impressed him greatly. "Well done," Shu whispered into his protégé's ear. "Save some of that energy for later."

Chao struggled to his feet, his face flushed with pain and humiliation. "You little fucker, don't you walk away from me," he growled at Toshiro.

Shu narrowed his eyes. "Don't make me cross, Chao," he said. "Or I'll slit your throat myself."

Chao wiped at the corner of his bleeding mouth. "I'm sorry, Mr. Shu," he said quietly. "I don't want to make you angry---I want to make you happy."

"Really?" Shu's eyebrow arched up, as did the corners of his lips. He glanced at Toshiro. "Now I have two eager disciples....how amusing."

Toshiro replied with a glare as he took a silk handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wiped the knife blade so Chao could see it. "Correction. You have one student and one useless fuck who belongs working in a laundry."

Chao's lean body trembled with the anger flashing in his dark eyes. "I don't work in a laundry. I'm not useless."

"Then make yourself even less so and take us to the *Ningbo*," Shu said. "Find a carriage; I have no intention of walking the distance."

"Of course, Mr. Shu," he says quietly. He gave Toshiro another venomous glare. "I'm not as neglectful as others are."

Toshiro spit on the ground as Chao walks away.

"Methinks thou doth protest too much," he muttered

in English, repeating one useful phrase he'd learned from the worthless British tutor he last had.

"You've resorted to quoting Shakespeare," Shu said lightly "You must be upset."

His laughter faded and he brushed away some dust from Toshiro's jacket. "I don't see why, though. You're pleasing me very much." He let his fingers trail along Toshiro's cheek. "You had every intention of killing him. There wasn't a bit of hesitation in your steps."

Toshiro leaned into Shu's touch, hoping to hell that bastard Chao saw it because Shu was *his*. "He pissed me off. I don't like it when people like him piss me off."

"That's my beautiful Toshiro," Shu fingered that lovely bruise above the younger man's jaw, visible even in the pale light of the moon. "Take what's yours and get rid of anything---or anyone---that stands in your way."

He flicked his wrist and slapped Toshiro lightly over the bruise. "But Chao Jin serves his purpose well enough. Unless I tell you to, don't kill him."

"Fine," Toshiro muttered as they approached the carriage. Chao smirked at him, and Toshiro mouthed *Fuck You* at the little bastard.

After telling the driver to head west down towards the Chinese district, Chao climbed into the carriage. He sat across from Shu and that little fucker, who was trying to act so fucking smug.

Student. What did Shu mean by having a student? Though the mark on Jin's back healed a long time ago, it twinged as if Shu's knife was piercing his flesh once more.

"Are you deaf now?" The sharpness in Shu's voice snapped Jin from this thoughts.. "I asked you if the *Ningbo* serves meals."

"For you, Mr. Shu, of course," Chao said, before turning a cold stare to that Japanese dog who didn't deserve Shu's attention the way he did.

Smirking, Toshiro ran his fingertips along Shu's thigh.

Without warning Shu backhanded him. "What are you doing? I didn't ask you to touch me."

Toshiro's shoulder—the one Shu cut—connected with hard wood and metal of the open carriage side. The flare of pain blurred his vision a moment but soon he saw Chao laughing. Toshiro could see the glee in his eyes, see it in the gleam of his teeth.

"Some student. Nothing but a fucking Jap lapdog" he muttered.

Toshiro's knife was out and flung before it registered in his brain that he'd thrown it and Jin Chao's scream told me it hit a target. Right between his legs.

Almost.

It landed between where Chao's thigh met his cock...

“Now you know, the fucking Jap lapdog can bite as well as he can bark,” Shu quipped in answer to Chao’s cry of pain. “Don’t pull it out or you might bleed to death.”

Chao whimpers rather pathetically and nodded through the pain. Shu sat back and raised an eyebrow at Toshiro before turning back to Chao.

“Do you have a cigarette?” he asked casually. Disbelief coloring his face, Chao fumbled in his pockets and offers one with his bloodied fingers. He tried to light it, but his hands were shaking too badly to strike the match.

Sighing, Shu lit it himself and reached into the small valise beside him for a knife. He stared at Chao through a wispy cloud of smoke as he exhaled. It occurred to Shu that now would be a most excellent time for a lesson.

“Toshiro, give me your hand.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt your ‘friend’. He should have dodged it.”

Shu simply stared. It was *that* stare. Taking a slow breath Toshiro held out his left hand

“Oh, I’m quite sure you meant it,” he said giving Toshiro a cold look. “But you’re also correct . He should have dodged it. “ He breathed a weary sigh and shook his head “Slowness is one of Jin’s his many faults.”

“I’m sorry---” Chao choked out..

Shu sneered then taking Toshiro’s outstretched hand by the wrist, he held it palm up in front of him. “Watch,” he

told Chao.

He pressed the tip of the knife blade just into the skin along the base of Toshiro's fingers, and sliced downwards in a thin arc along the palm.

The first pass of the blade draws a crimson line down his hand, the second and third slash through and across it and all the while, Toshiro did not cry out. He barely even flinched as his skin was sliced open, and blood dripped in between his fingers.

"Are you watching closely, Chao?" Shu asked before moving the knife off Toshiro's hand to press the red-stained edge of the blade to his throat.

"And if I ask for your life, Toshiro, what would you say?" he whispered.

The first cut has been the worst, the second was oddly thrilling and the third...watching Shu's face, the subtle way it changed as the blade went across made the pain fade...

Shu was excited by the blood letting by it and Toshiro was excited by him. "My life is yours to take."

"Everything of yours is mine." Shu whispered in return. He moved the knife away and licked Toshiro's blood from the blade. A smile played on his lips as he brought Toshiro's bleeding hand to his mouth. "My sweet Toshiro." He breathed over the cuts and kissed his palm tenderly.

Toshiro murmured with delight then looked over at

Chao in triumph.

“This is why Toshiro is by my side---and you’re not, Chao. Do you understand?”

Chao choked out a hoarse “Yes” as the carriage pulled to a stop at their destination.

While Chao slowly limped out to open the carriage door for them, Shu reached into his coat pocket and withdrew a crisp handkerchief. He wrapped it around Toshiro’s hand, pausing to stroke the cloth over the cuts. “This is why you’re better,” he said with a smile before climbing out of the carriage.

Toshiro’s own smile grew wider and he took pleasure in letting the Ningbo’s front door shut in Chao Jin’s face as they entered.

One inside Toshiro looked around. He wasn’t sure what he expected--maybe something akin to a Japanese teahouse-- but he didn’t think it was this. This place was dark and shadowy, the lamps few and far between. He could make out a lot of red lacquer tables,. low chairs and couches and curtained off sections. It was a place full of mystery, of danger, of unspoken delights to be savored and discovered—very much like the man at his side.

Toshiro did, however, recognize the smell of opium though. His friend Ando-kun back home introduced him to that.

Muffled voices drew Toshiro’s attention. “Wong!

Wong enforcer!” and in a moment an old man hurried out and bowed deeply to Shu.

“No trouble. No trouble. We paid it all on time this time. You can check.”

The old man’s words spilled out in a panic and Shu sneered. “I would imagine so, for your sakes.”

He scanned the dark room. It was crowded with a number of patrons, though everyone had by now stopped whatever they were doing to amuse themselves. Mah Jong games had come to a standstill, drinks rested on the tables untouched and all eyes were upon them—upon *him*. There was so much tension---so much *fear*---in the air, he could almost taste it. It was quite delicious.

“I’m here for pleasure, yeh yeh,” Shu said to the old man after a time. “Show us to a seat.”

With a nod and relieved sigh the old man led them deeper into the parlor until the reached a partially closed off corner of the room. He scurried off to bring some tea and Shu sat back on the long lounge seat positioned against the wall. He pushed one of the thick cushions out of the way for Toshiro. “You seem a little overwhelmed. Is this your first time in a decent opium den?”

Chao finally hobbled over and Shu gestured for him to set down the valise and take a seat on the chair across the way..

Toshiro sneered at Chao. “The place back home was

inadequate compared to this,” he said in answer to Shu’s question. He certainly wasn’t about to confess that it was his first time doing more than passing by an opium den with that little laundry fuck Chao here.

A girl brought tea and Toshiro gestured to Chao. “Maybe she can take him to get bandaged before he faints and ruins the evening.”

“How considerate of you, but, no.” Shu glanced at Chao. His face had drained of color and his hands were balled into trembling fists as he struggled to hang on to his composure. “I want him to learn a lesson.”

“I want to learn, Mr. Shu,” said Chao shakily.

Laughing softly, Shu leaned over and put out my cigarette on the table top. “You don’t have the strength my student has, but your determination amuses me.” He brushed his hand across Toshiro’s cheek. “You can take everything I have to give you. You’ve learned your lessons quite well.” He paused and gave Toshiro’s face a teasing slap. “Now, serve us all some tea.”

Toshiro stared boldly into Shu’s eyes then lowered his gaze a fraction and poured the tea, serving Shu first, then the asshole Chao and then himself last.

Toshiro sipped his tea then looked at the makeshift bandage on his left hand and at the way the blood had seeped through the layers of cloth. Fuck. It was starting to throb but he refused to let Shu and especially that fuck Chao see his

discomfort.

The old man who greeted them appeared placing an opium pipe on the table. He prepared it for Shu and offered it with a humble nod of his head.

Shu brought the pipe to my lips and inhaled deeply. He leaned in, his hand sliding around the back of Toshiro's head to pull him into a kiss..

Shu exhaled into him, pleased to have Toshiro eagerly inhale the opium smoke. He took his time breaking the contact. "How does it fare now?" Shu asked with a smile.

Toshiro gave him a crooked grin. "Much better than before."

Chao dropped his tea cup and it shatters on the floor. Shu glanced over at him and he looked away either out of fear or shame. It didn't matter which he felt , Both were equally pathetic.

Shu turned back to Toshiro and caressed his cheek. "Then maybe you can handle your own pipe." He took another deep breath and exhaled the thick smoke into the air over their heads. "Would you like that?"

"You know what I'd really like, but if you want me to have my own, I won't refuse," Toshiro said with a smile. "You lead. I follow. That's the way it is."

"Yes," Shu nodded. Such sweet words, such total obedience..."I expect nothing less..." He inhaled another

breath from the pipe and pulled Toshiro to him to let him taste the opium again. "Take all you want," he said offering Toshiro the mouth of the pipe.

Toshiro drew directly from the opium pipe making the quick decision to risk Shu's anger. He grabbed the lapels of Shu's jacket, and tugged him forward, devouring his mouth, and passing the opium.

Deepening the kiss Toshiro slid his fingers up through Shu's silky hair, his body responding, aching to be taken again by the older man.

Shu caressed his face as they kissed and Toshiro could hear Jin Chao whimper behind them and was sure it wasn't just his injury that was making him squirm.

Shu's fingers stopped gliding across his cheek and he slapped Toshiro lightly, affectionately. They both laughed, their eyes glassy from the drug.

Chao stood next to the table, gaping at them.

"What is he to you, Mr. Shu?" he asked in a softly trembling voice. "A toy? A lover? What?"

A lover? Until Toshiro, no one had ever managed to keep his interest long enough to be more than a one night partner---let alone managed to *survive*.

"He's a possession," Shu said matter-of-factly. "He's my possession."

CHAPTER 11

“Leave us,” Shu snapped at Cho who stood there gawking as if he couldn’t believe his own eyes and ears. “Get that wound taken care of. And don’t forget to have that knife cleaned and return it at once.”

Chao stared a moment, an odd little sound gurgling in the back of his throat. Then slowly turned and began to hobble away.

Toshiro laughed quietly. He could almost feel the hate coming off Chao. Well fuck him all over the place. With his rival gone, Toshiro settled back on the plump cushions beside Shu. . “I could get to like this.”

Shu laughed and prepared the opium pipe again. “How does your hand feel now?” he asked lazily, reaching out to touch the bandage wrapped around Toshiro’s palm. “I take it that back in the carriage those were the knife throwing

skills you'd mentioned earlier. Impressive."

Toshiro wrapped his fingers around Shu's. "It hardly hurts at all now." He reached for the pipe with his free hand once Shu had taken the first taste. "I can do better. With the knife." He inhaled from the mouthpiece again then passed it back. "I just wanted to shut him up. He was pissing me off."

Toshiro watched Shu in the dim light as he brought the pipe to his mouth. The red paper lantern hanging above cast a warm glow on the man's upturned face, highlighting those high cheekbones with a soft rose color. His sculpted lips slowly sucked at the bamboo stem, drawing out the billowy smoke with gentle, provocative movements. Toshiro watched and shifted to give his swelling cock a little more room in his trousers. He wondered what those lips would feel like, wrapped around his length, the tip of his cock's head thrusting into the hot depths of Shu's mouth. Chao would spill into his pants at the sight.

"Why do you let him work for you? He's weak," Toshiro asked with contempt

Shu chuckled, his eyes glassy from the drug. "He had potential once. Before his weaknesses took the better of him." He set the pipe aside then grabbed the closest teacup. "But he's obedient, and he does what he's told. There's value in that." He paused to sip the tea then asked, "Are we jealous?"

Toshiro smirked. "Hardly. Curious is probably a better word for it." He leaned over to pour more hot tea into Shu's cup then a little into his own. Settling back on the cushions he took a sip. "I think he's jealous. He has a crush on you."

"Really?" Sarcasm dripped from Shu's words. "You would know all about that, wouldn't you?" He took another drink of the steaming liquid. "Would it satiate your *curiosity* to know I've never fucked him?" Smiling, he brushed his free hand down the front of Toshiro's shirt and over the burgeoning erection between Toshiro's legs. "Or maybe I have..."

Toshiro offered Shu a drunken grin. "I don't have a crush. I'm devoted. And you *didn't* fuck him that's why he hates me. He wants you badly, but we both know he wouldn't appreciate your special 'gifts'."

"And you do...?" Dao Kan placed the cup on the table and took up Toshiro's chin instead. Toshiro offered only a smile in reply and Shu devoured him with those delicate, almost femininely shaped lips. He moaned and Dao Kan's tongue slipped into his mouth, every bit as moist and hot as Toshiro had imagined.

Chao looked back before stepping through the door to the kitchen area. Shu was feeling that little shit up. What was he going to do suck him off right there? Cursing under his

breath he hobbled into the kitchen. One of the girls working there had come with him from San Francisco and she tended the wound on his upper thigh while another cleaned the knife Shu had given that little Jap bastard.

He rested a while, drinking deeply from the bottle of cheap liquor, all but ignoring the gentle yet flirtatious way the kitchen girls fawned over him as he stared at the ivory handled knife. It was the mate to Shu's own knife. It should have been given to *him*. It would have if he hadn't been sent here to help with things. Fuck.

Chao swatted at the girl patting the bandage on his thigh into place. "Leave me alone." He got up and limped across the kitchen. He couldn't walk too well but he didn't have to. All he needed to do was be able to throw this fucking knife right between that Jap's eyes. With the weapon in hand, he started making his way back to them...until a revolver was shoved into his back.

"Keep walking."

Chao recognized that voice. It was Ling Po, an enforcer for the local tong out of Vancouver who'd been making trouble for the Wongs. "Shu fucked up one of my men in Pagoda Springs and I think I need to return the favor."

"Then I'm not the one you should be pointing a gun at," Chao said thickly. "His little fuck-toy is right over there...and so is Mr. Shu himself."

Ling Po stepped around Chao followed by his hatchet men, one of whom grabbed Chao roughly by the arm as they headed straight for table at the back of the Ningbo.

Toshiro murmured happily as Shu nuzzled his neck, biting until it hurt. He gasped, the pain disappearing in a shudder of erotic pleasure as Shu's hand fondled his tightening balls. Suddenly the niggling feeling of being watched tugged at him and he opened his eyes to see Chao approaching—being led by a group of men. He nudged Shu.

“Dao Kan. There's trouble.”

Shu jerked away, those dark eyes flashing now with predatory anticipation rather than sexual arousal. Toshiro reached inside his jacket. Fuck, the knife. Chao was holding it. He slid his hand over the sofa cushion and let it slip down to the valise on the floor just before the men reached them. Chao was shoved into the table and doubled over while a man held a revolver to his head.

“So you're Shu,” the man said. He cocked the trigger and spit on the lacquer top. “I'm Ling Po and my employer has a message for you: he doesn't take kindly to Wong shits who fuck with his men and neither do I.” With a nod of his head, his men moved to circle them.

Shu's eyes glittered, his smile widening dangerously. “I was hoping for some entertainment this evening.”

Ling Po snarled and nodded again. The lackey nearest

to the lounge seat pulled out a knife and held the sharp blade to Toshiro's throat. The man probably thought he'd be an easy target because of his bandaged left hand, but the dumb shit didn't notice Toshiro's right one reach into the valise.

Toshiro felt a rush of blood and he whipped up the knife, slicing through the lackey's wrist. He threw his knife at the man nearest him, then picked up the one that fell to the floor and cut the man's throat. The first two of Ling Po's would be assassins were down before they even had time to scream.

Ling Po stepped away in shock. He raised his revolver and aimed it at Toshiro. His focus centered on this Japanese demon, not even aware that Shu was beside him until a strong hand tightened around his throat. Ling Po was slammed onto the low the table, the back of his head cracking on the hard surface.

"What's wrong, Ling?" Shu laughed, twisting the revolver from the man's hand. "Did his appearance deceive you?"

Two of his thugs lunged at Shu from behind and Chao tried to choke out some kind of warning. Dao Kan aimed over his shoulder with the revolver, firing twice. The two men collapsed, blood and brain tissue oozing out of the holes between their eyes.

"He's quite beautiful, in his own right," Shu continued, unperturbed by the attack. He leaned over to

whisper in Ling Po's ear. "Watch him as he cuts down your men...my Toshiro is a study of grace and power, and he doesn't even realize it yet." Ling Po screamed as Shu twisted his wrist some more and snapped the tendons. "It's that mixture of innocence and ferocity I find so fascinating..." Shu looked up, his eyes following the lines of Toshiro's form. "...so alluring."

Toshiro wiped the sticky blood off his knife on the nearest dead man's clothes. As he moved to retrieve the other knife he'd thrown at the other attacker, he glared at Chao. "You're fucking useless aren't you? Don't use your injury as an excuse," he said, holding up his hand. The bandage was stained red with blood.

Fuck you!" Chao choked out. He pushed away from the table, Toshiro's knife still in hand. He flipped the ivory-handled blade around and poised it for a throw. Behind him, another one of Po's thugs charged.

Toshiro dove forward and shoved Chao out of the way. He stabbed the fucker in the heart, and twisted the knife before pulling it out. "You're not the only one who knows how to play with one of these things," Toshiro hissed at Chao.

He was in mid-turn to help Shu, when someone grabbed him from behind. Toshiro caught a flash of a goateed face contorted with rage before he was lifted off the ground and a thick hand tightened around his throat. Fuck.

The last of the Po's enforcers... Gasping for breath, Toshiro flailed around. Chao stood in front of them, just smirking. The knife slipped from his fingers and clattered to the floor. "Oops," the little bastard whispered.

CHAPTER 12

Throat burning, lungs aching, Toshiro gasped.
“Can’t---breathe!”

He clawed at the strong hand tightening around his throat. The grip crushed down around him harder, squeezing the very life from him. He tried to cry out again and nothing came up except a pained wheeze. White fog started to edge into the corners of his vision, as his eyes lost their focus.

Desperate, he kicked out one last time and made contact with a table. Glass shattered. The hand squeezed again.

“Don’t you *dare* touch him.”

Frigid and deadly as a cold winter wind, the dangerous voice cut straight through the murkiness clouding Toshiro’s mind and senses. He blinked away the involuntary tears of pain, and found a reservoir of strength needed to stay conscious. He didn’t want to die now, not here. Not like this!

“Dao---!” he croaked.

Across the way, Shu had Ling pinned to the table, but his eyes...they burned with such murderous fury as he stared at the attacker behind Toshiro’s shoulder. He stepped towards them, and Ling Po sat up, foaming at the mouth in his anger.

“Kill that little fuck, Shang!” Ling shouted and his lackey obeyed.

A serrated blade pressed against the side of Toshiro’s face, grating and scratching at his skin near the temple. The sharp tip hovered only a fraction of an inch from his eye.

Shang’s thick voice rumbled in his chest, his breath carried a scent of rotting fish. “I’ll take out these pretty eyes with pleasure Li---” he started, but the rest died in his throat.

Shu moved fast, suddenly bolting across the short distance in a shadowy blur of black silk. Before Shang could stab the blade into Toshiro’s face, Dao Kan was at his side and grabbing his wrist. Hissing viciously, he twisted downwards and the forearm snapped at the joint. Shang screamed and reeled backwards.

Toshiro and the serrated knife hit the floor at the same time. Greedily sucking in the air, he hunched over and rubbed his aching throat. Another piercing shriek came, and he looked up. Dao had continued rotating the man’s arm backwards, and even while the man screamed, Toshiro heard

a moist crunching sound. Shang's shoulder popped free of its socket and he slammed down on his knees.

Clutching at his mangled arm, Shang stared up at Shu and opened his mouth to scream once more. Dao spat in his face and shoved the revolver's barrel into the man's open maw. "*No one touches my things,*" he hissed.

Blood and tissue splattered across the carpet and furniture as Shu emptied out the last four shots. He left the revolver wedged in what remained of Shang's face, and the man's lifeless body collapsed to the floor in a gory heap.

Toshiro caught Shu's gaze and choked out, "Thank you." He coughed, his breath ending in a ragged pant. The sound of a scuffle distracted them. Over at the table, Ling tried to break away and Chao shoved into him. Toshiro forced himself to stand and glared at that useless fuck Chao who 'accidentally' dropped his knife.

Ling Po kneed the bastard right in the belly. Chao had the wind knocked out of him, and he collapsed against a table. A red stain spread out on the bandage wrapped near his groin, and he struggled to stay up, his face twisting with pain. Shu brushed past him and gave him a look that made Chao visibly wither.

With a fluid motion, Shu kicked up a fallen knife caught it in mid-air and pushed Ling back on to the table.

Chao was struggling to his feet when Toshiro slowly approached. "I hope he turns that knife on you next. Or

better yet I hope he lets *me* do it.” Toshiro spit on Chao then turned his attention back to Dao.

Ling struggled and Shu drove the blade of the knife through the man’s shoulder, pinning him to the table. He grabbed Ling’s throat, smiling in satisfaction when the action cut off his cries of pain.

“Come here, Toshiro,” Shu called lightly.

Toshiro smirked. “Pay attention Jin, it’s me he wants by his side.”

Toshiro scooped up the knife---his knife---the one Chao had so conveniently dropped earlier. As he approached the table, that asshole stumbled away from Toshiro’s path, clutching at his reopened wound. Chao glared, but his entire body quivered while his skin paled. Managing a satisfied smirk at the sight of the other’s fear, Toshiro stopped at Shu’s side.

“Hmm.” Frowning, Dao Kan cupped Toshiro’s chin with his thumb and forefinger. He tilted Toshiro’s head up slightly and brushed his fingertips over the exposed throat. Toshiro winced but made no sound as the older man traced over the tender bruises along his neck, made by each of Shang’s fingers. Shu made a displeased noise from the back of his throat and he released Toshiro’s chin. Their gaze met once more, and Dao caressed Toshiro’s cheek in a soft, soothing way. Toshiro felt himself smile until Shu turned back to the man on the table.

“Thankfully for you, Ling Po, those blemishes are not permanent,” Dao Kan exhaled sharply through his teeth. “No one may leave a mark on him except *I*.”

“You crazy fuck!” Ling choked out. His eyes darted wildly from Shu to Toshiro, more froth rising to his panicked lips. “When my boss finds out about this, your little whore is going to be fucked with the barrel of a gun and you’re going to watch!”

Toshiro’s hand tightened around the handle of his blade. He stepped away from Shu and got closer to the table, staring down at Po. “Those are big words from a little man who’s in the position to be fucked himself.”

Though it hurt like hell, he grabbed Po’s leg with his left hand and pulled. Shu laughed, his eyes glittering. He murmured words of approval in Cantonese and pinioned Po’s other leg against the table edge. Toshiro held up the knife. Soaked in splattered blood, the sharpened edge did not catch the lantern light.

“Your late friend has the gun occupied so let’s see how you like getting fucked with this.”

Toshiro slid the knife up from knee to thigh slicing the fabric of Po’s pants and leaving a thin, perfectly red incision along the skin. A flick of his wrist split the center seam of the man’s pants and etched a scratch at the base of his balls.

Ling Po’s eyes widened with terror and he tried to

move. Shu and Toshiro both pressed their weight on the struggling man.

“Pleasepleasepleaseplease,” The words gush out of Ling in a desperate slur.

Toshiro grinned at Dao Kan. “Oh, he wants it...”

“Don’t disappoint him,” Shu whispered.

Taking the point of the knife, Toshiro pressed the sharp tip against Po’s opening. With painstakingly slow movements, he twirled the knife handle in his hand.

Ignoring Po’s screams, Shu put a hand over Toshiro’s and encouraged him to twist harder. Drive deeper. He looked back at Ling and his expression darkened.

“Enough. Just hold it steady.” Shu moved his hand away from Toshiro’s and pulled the other knife out of Po’s shoulder. He dragged the blade across the man’s throat in a slow, purposeful cut. When he pulled away, only a trickle of blood ran from the wound. Just the man’s larynx---his voicebox had been torn open.

“I want you to deliver a *message* to your employer, Ling Po.”

Shu forcefully shoved him onto his side. Ling thrashed around and tried to scream again as Toshiro’s blade shredded at his insides. But Shu stabbed into his lower back and twisted..

“This is what happens when I decide to fuck with your boss’ men,” Dao Kan yanked him back around, raising

his knife once more. "And this is what happens when you try to threaten *me*."

The sharp tip plunged into Po's eye socket, and Shu carved out the soft tissue with one, fast arc of blade.

He stepped back, while Ling Po clutched at the gaping wound with the one arm that still has some mobility and made gasping sounds where screams should've been. Shu cleaned the blade on the front of the man's shirt and glanced at Toshiro.

"I want all their eyes taken out," he looked around at the rest of Ling Po's assassins. "At least from the ones who still have faces."

Toshiro breathed heavily. Both disgusted by and admiring of Dao Kan's ferociousness, he forced himself to swallow despite the dryness in his mouth. He wiped his own weapon on Ling's clothing as well, then picked up another discarded knife from one of the attackers that had landed under the table during the melee. He tossed it to Chao, who barely caught it without cutting his clumsy hands.

"You heard Mr. Shu. Cut out their eyes. And then deliver them and Ling back to their employer. I suggest you dump them in their territory then get the hell out of there."

Chao stared, clearly pissed. But he glanced back to Shu who simply watched and sipped some tea. If he'd hoped for Dao Kan to interject, he was mistaken.

Toshiro grinned as Chao obeyed his command

without protest. He dropped to his knees in front of one bloodied corpse, wincing from the pain of his own wound. Toshiro's grin grew wider. He could get used to this.

"That was a well-deserved wound and I'm glad he suffers for his carelessness," Shu said coldly as he indicated Chao's blood-soaked bandages with his tea cup. He turned his gaze to Toshiro, as intense as ever. "You, on the other hand, deserve something quite different."

Toshiro wove his way between the overturned furniture and bodies of those would-be assailants, Shu's eyes following his every movement. Toshiro came to him and accepted the glass of tea Shu offered. "The pupil enjoyed all this as much as the teacher, I believe," Dao Kan whispered.

"No one pleases me as much as you have." He said it in a tone that slithered over Toshiro and snaked its way inside the depth of his being.

Making certain to drink from the exact spot Dao had, Toshiro sipped the tea. He stepped in closer so his body brush against Shu's, not wanting that stupid fuck Chao to hear.

"And no one has appreciated me as much as you have."

"No one *ever* will," Shu said softly, reaching up take the cup from Toshiro's hand.

Toshiro stood at Dao's right side and watched Chao finish up and place the eyeballs into a square of cloth. As

the other man dragged the barely conscious Ling outside, he turned back to his sensei.

“Is there someplace else we might go?”

Dao’s throaty voice rang with lust. “Come.”

CHAPTER 13

The rest of the *Ningbo* had been all but abandoned. Most of the patrons were gone, the scattered few who remained either too shocked out of their senses to leave, or too frightened. Shu glanced around the parlor and found the proprietor cowering in a far corner, half-hidden behind a beaded jade curtain.

Shu skewered the old man with a look. “We’ll be adjourning to one of the rooms upstairs. Have someone bring us another pipe. After that, I don’t wish to be disturbed for the rest of the evening.”

“Y-yes, of course,” the proprietor averted his gaze and pulled back the curtain to reveal a narrow wooden staircase. “By all means...”

Dao Kan dropped a hand to Toshiro’s shoulder and drew him close

“Lead the way,” he breathed into the boy’s ear. “And see the fear your craftsmanship leaves in your wake.” As they moved towards the staircase, no one in the room dared say a word, or even breathe too loudly. Shu smiled with pride and pushed the old man out of the way, the curtain cascading closed behind with soft chimes.

At the top of the landing, a hallway spread out before them. The doors to each of the many rooms hung open on tarnished brass hinges, the beds and sofas inside tousled but empty. All the whores and their customers no doubt frightened away by the commotion. But the last one at the end of the hall had been untouched all evening. The sheets were still made and the candles unlit.

Shu kicked the door closed behind them and reached out to touch Toshiro’s neck. The bruises stood out against his ivory skin even in the moonlight.

“They marred your beauty,” he said softly before leaning in to kiss the purplish marks.

Toshiro breathed a contented sigh at the feel of Dao’s lips on the tender skin. Reaching out, he gripped the older man’s arm.. “But you repaid them wonderfully,” Toshiro answered, caressing Dao’s cheek with his left hand. The blood that had seeped from the wounds on his palm to his fingers left a red smear on the other’s face. Toshiro leaned in to lick it away, then gazed into Dao’s eyes. “You saved my life and avenged me. I can’t repay you enough.”

"I don't take *payments* from you," Dao whispered, pushing him back towards the bed. "I take *pleasure* from you." He pressed Toshiro down onto the mattress and stretched out beside him. Shu lifted Toshiro's blood-covered hands to his lips, kissing each palm with delicateness.

Toshiro ran his fingers through his mentor's dark hair and gazed over this man. He'd never known anyone like him, someone so dangerous yet alluring, nor would he ever. A soft knock sounded on the door, and Dao's slow kisses stopped. "I'll get it," Toshiro said, pulling his knife out just in case. It was only the old man from downstairs with a new pipe and a quaking girl behind him who carried a bucket of water and an armful of towels.

Taking the opium pipe to the bedside table, Toshiro let the girl set the bucket inside the doorway. "You may want to bring another and set it outside the door. There's a lot of blood to clean off." She gasped and scurried out, making him laugh.

"Silly girl," Shu laughed as well. He sat up against the pillows, his dark eyes dancing with mirth.

Closing the door and latching it, Toshiro carried the bucket and cloths near the bed. He dipped the knife in the bucket, dried it, and then set aside on the table as well.

His gaze was on Dao as he peeled off the bloodstained clothing and began to wash his naked body. "I don't want their filth on me. I don't want you to have to have to touch

it.”

“Mmm.” Shu reached over the edge of the bed and lifted one of the red chrysanthemums from the clay bowl on the nightstand. “But crimson is a color that suits you so well,” he purred. Come to me, Toshiro.”

Toshiro dropped the cloth into the bucket and sat on the edge of the bed, the air in the room cool against his damp skin. Shu grabbed his elbow, pulling him close. He traced the flower petals across Toshiro’s lips before kissing them softly.

“Whatever you want from me, Dao Kan,” Toshiro closed his eyes and murmured. “Anything...it’s yours.”

“Such a sweet promise,” Shu whispered. “And it’s one you mean to keep, I know.”

Toshiro opened his eyes. “Oh, yes.”

Dao Kan shivered with pleasure. He released Toshiro and yet he could still feel the young man. He was there, under his flesh, touching Shu in places that drove him mad with desire and something more. “You were beautiful tonight,” he breathed. “And what I have for you now aren’t lessons, but *gifts*...” Shu touched the flower to his own lips, licking at the moisture left there from Toshiro’s breath, and then slid it down his body. He traced a path to the tip of the hardness pushing against the front of his trousers.

“Taste your reward,” Shu whispered.

“Oh Gods, yes,” Toshiro moaned and leaned forward.

He rubbed his cheek against the chrysanthemum, then nudged it aside to press against the bulge in Dao's pants.

"Yes," he whimpered again between licks of the buttoned fly. Shu laughed, his pulse quickening, his balls sore.

As he popped open the buttons, Toshiro tugged the edges of the fabric apart. He leaned in and licked what hard flesh lay exposed. His hand darted out, tugging Shu free from the constricting material, then wrapping around the shaft. Toshiro squeezed. Fluid seeped from the swollen head and Toshiro licked it away with short, hard flicks. He met Shu's stare one last time before devouring him with lips and tongue.

Dao gasped. His hands slid up and down over his own heaving chest, clutching at his body while Toshiro consumed his exposed organ. The heat from the young man's tongue burned against his throbbing cock, the pressure building at his groin. Dao clenched his teeth with frustration. Toshiro's mouth worked at such a fucking slow pace---he wanted to strike the boy across those teasing lips, shove himself down his lovely throat and teach him how things were properly done.

But soon enough Toshiro's licks and sucking motions became harder, more demanding. His teeth raked across the pulsing vein on the underside of Shu's cock, his hand squeezing the base of the erection until the sensation

bordered on pain. Dao Kan's back arched as he groaned loudly, curling over Toshiro's bobbing head. He cradled the back of the boy's neck and thrust his hips forward on the mattress. Semen burst out of him and he cried out with the blissful release.

Muffled moans followed as Toshiro struggled to swallow it all. He pulled away gasping, come trailing down his lips and chin. Shu grabbed the sides of his face and drew him close, lapping at the thick, opaque fluid. "My Toshiro," he gasped between mouthfuls of his own bitter, salty taste now mingled with the protégé's tangy perspiration.

"Please make me come," Toshiro panted. He jerked himself with his bandaged hand, but his face betrayed some of the pain he must feel from the wound.

"No," Shu caressed his cheeks, his shoulders. "Not yet. There's one more reward to come." He lifted Toshiro's hand away from the stiff cock and peeled off the stained bandages. "Redress that."

There were some clean sheets on a low chest along the wall and Toshiro went to cut a strip off one to rebind his hand. Then he wet and rung out a new cloth, holding it out with his uninjured hand. "Would you like me to wash you, Dao Kan?" he offered, his hand trembling, his cock still fully erect.

"I think I would." Shu undressed and tossed the blood splattered and sweat-soaked clothing over the edge

of the bed. "Back in Pagoda Springs, you only tasted what it felt to have power," he paused to light the opium pipe. He inhaled then blew out the wispy smoke, closing his eyes as the effects of the drug washed over him "Tonight you drank it in, *bathed* in it. And with Ling Po you were brilliant."

"If I was brilliant it's only because I've had the best teacher."

"Yes, you do."

With soft, swift strokes Toshiro wiped him clean. Then he dropped the cloth back into the bucket and lay beside him on the bed. Toshiro brushed his hands over Dao's chest, sliding them up to caress his face. He leaned in to lick his ear and whisper.

"Share it with me like before. *Please*."

Taking a deep breath, Dao devoured his lips, allowing Toshiro to draw the opium in like before. When the drug passed between them, Shu reached across the bed to take the knife from the nightstand. He leaned over and brushed his lips over Toshiro's bruised neck.

"No one else can touch you," Dao whispered, brushing a few stray strands of hair out of Toshiro's eyes. He traced the side of the boy's face with his fingertips. "Ever."

"No one but you."

Dao coaxed him onto his side and took one last breath from the pipe before handing it to Toshiro. "Now, the last gift for my pupil in honor of his fine performance

tonight.”

With a soft kiss to the mark on his shoulder, Shu pressed the edge of the blade into the smooth skin below it. He traced the character for “power” in a thin red line of blood, carving into the skin with three practiced strokes. Not once did Toshiro flinch or make to pull away. A sigh escaped him instead.

“I would kill anyone else who tried to do that...”

“I’d expect you to,” Shu said softly. “Because I don’t share my things.”

Finished, he stabbed the blade into the headboard of the bed. Tracing his fingertip along the fresh cut, he was satisfied with the gracefulness of the curves, the perfection in each stroke of the character.

“It’s beautiful,” Dao Kan closed his eyes and felt the ache between his legs build once more. His fingers slid off Toshiro’s back and onto his hard cock. He stroked his length once and hissed as he swelled quickly. Before sleeping, he would take his pleasure with Toshiro again.

Dao Kan lay back across the mattress. “Touch me,” he whispered.

The bed shifted and Toshiro placed the opium pipe in his hand. “Yes, sensei” he murmured. Toshiro’s un-bandaged hand stroked across Dao’s chest. He pinched and tugged on the small hard nipples while his other hand eased down across his flat belly. His fingers teased and pulled at the nest

of curling hair below his taut abdomen.

Shu was so hard, and Toshiro couldn't help but groan. His body ached inside to be filled by his hot come again and he cupped Dao's balls, giving them a squeeze before gripping the base of the cock with his bandaged hand. It stung and burned, but he stroked him anyway, letting the knot in the bandage scrape against the underside of his shaft up and down along the throbbing thick vein.

Shu threw the pipe aside and his breath coming out in a low moan. He moved underneath Toshiro, rocking into the mattress and pressing against his hand with each jerk and tug.

A guttural sound welled up from the back of his throat. He grabbed Toshiro's shoulders and wrenched him to the side. Surrendering to the forceful push, Toshiro flopped onto the mattress, panting as heavily as Shu was. He looked down, seeing his own cock rigid with a bead of thick fluid already seeping from the head.

Shu shoved his legs apart and Toshiro gasped. With a grunt, Dao Kan rammed into his tight opening and he cried out. But it wasn't from pain, the opium has dulled that, it was from the jolt of white hot desire that shot through him, tensing his muscles, and making his body clamp down on Shu's cock so swiftly that the older man came almost in an instant. The thick, hot fluid surged through him, hitting sensitive tissue and making Toshiro shudder.

He nipped at the nape of Toshiro's neck. "Oh but we're far from done. I'm going to fuck you into the bed," Dao Kan panted. Reaching under him, he pulled Toshiro up as he thrust down over and over again.

"Do it!" Toshiro croaked out. He grip Dao's shoulders, his fingers digging into sweat slick skin. Bending his legs, Toshiro opened himself to Shu as much as he could. Each hard thrust brought a moan from him, and Toshiro was only barely conscious of the way his shoulder scraped against the sheets. He hardly cared that the healing cut broke open and that the new one was rubbed raw from the friction and pressure of Shu's body on his.

Dao Kan's taut belly rubbed against Toshiro's aching cock, the burning pressure too much to bear. The madness escalated and he bolted up as his cock spasmed. Grabbing Shu as hard as he could, he bit into the man's shoulder, tasting coppery blood. Toshiro sucked at his skin with each spasm of his tight muscles around Dao Kan's cock.

When he could catch his breath again, he licked the bite and kissed it softly, letting his tongue trace a path to his ear. "Wonderful...It... was... *wonderful*. I want to fuck you like that so you can feel it too...."

Shu slipped out of his passage. "Fuck *me*?" his voice shook. Sweat dripped off his chin unto Toshiro's brow, where it mingled with Toshiro's own. He leaned down, his tongue sliding across Toshiro's flushed skin, drinking in their mixed

perspiration..

Shu caressed his cheek, and moved down to lap at the corners of his open mouth. The taste of his own blood o

Toshiro's lips thrilled him.

Thoughts of the boy filling him---of bursting inside of him--raced through Dao Kan's mind. He'd never been *penetrated* but the idea taking in Toshiro's engorged cock made his body tremble with anticipation. "What would you feel like inside of me?" he found himself wondering softly.

Shu pulled away and grab both sides of Toshiro's face in his hands.

"Such a young, seductive creature..." his thumbs rubbed across the boy's cheeks and he stared into those warm brown eyes, dull from the effects of the opium.

"And such a bold suggestion," he laughed softly. Shu struck him across the face with a sharp slap and sat back, laughing.

His hands slid down Toshiro's heaving chest and past his waist. Reaching the base of his erection, Shu stroke the young man roughly until the cock swelled against his fingers once more.

"*Why* should I let you?" Shu whispered throatily.

Toshiro reached out, his fingertips just brushing Shu's hot sweat covered skin. "Because the thought intrigues you. Because it amuses you that I'd dare to want such a thing. Not only want it, but know that I'll have it. Maybe not today but

some day, some day..."

He sat up and grabbed hold of Dao's shoulders. "I want to be like no one you've ever known. I want what no one has ever had from you..."

"You already are." Shu's voice was so faint a whisper, it was little more than a passing breath on his lips. Over years, he'd taken and broken so many lives, and no one had ever managed to capture his interest so completely, to fascinate him so deeply. Toshiro stirred things inside of him that Dao Kan couldn't even begin to explain. It drove him mad and it thrilled him.

He lifted Toshiro's hands off and examined them. The right palm had covered the bleeding bite wound on his shoulder, and Shu kissed the bloody stain softly, relishing in the taste of his own fluid---the taste of their passion. "But what you want from me is very, very *dangerous*."

The look in Shu's eyes was both frightening and attracting

Toshiro's heart hammered in his chest, and his breathing was still as quick as before. Dao held his hand still and Toshiro entwined his fingers with Shu's. "Dangerous but exciting," Toshiro said. He licked his lips, wanting very much to knock Shu over and have him completely with mouth, hands, cock. "What good is being alive if there's no excitement in it?"

"Not much at all." Dao Kan laughed softly and lifted

Toshiro's hand to his lips once again. Tenderly, he kissed each of finger and his tongue slid over the knuckles in a soft stroke. "I've always thought so, and perhaps that explains some of my fascination with you, Toshiro. We're so very much alike, you and I."

With Toshiro's hand still in his, Shu pushed the boy back down on the mattress. "But I think you're being too *ambitious*."

And yet, he reached down with his free hand and touched the sticky wetness Toshiro's release had left on his belly. Shu licked at each moist fingertip, enjoying Toshiro's taste before leaning down to blow along the young man's engorged flesh. His tongue darted out, teasing the slit on the head of Toshiro's cock.

Toshiro smiled and laughed to himself. How many times had he heard growing up how "fucking politically ambitious" his father was and how often did Iwakura mumble about his mother having too much "social ambition". So he was ambitious. He liked being ambitious. Especially about this. *I will have Dao Kan Shu under me one day. Oh yes I will...*

His thoughts soon dissolved with each teasing suck Dao made on his cock. Toshiro arched up into the hot recesses of Shu's mouth, his fingers gripping the rumpled sheets. He sucked in his breath and exhaled Dao's name in a moaning sigh.

“Shuuuuu.”

Just as he started to come, Shu pulled away, laughing throatily.

“I still decide what to take *and* what to receive,” Shu whispered, lying down beside Toshiro. He drew a sheet over their sweating bodies before the evening air could chill their exposed flesh.

“Of course.” It was disappointing, but no less satisfying. Toshiro watched him as he caught his breath, and then wiped the wetness away with the sheet Shu pulled over them.

Toshiro reached for the bottle of rice wine the old man brought with the pipe and took a long drink, then handed it to Shu. He curled up next to him, his eyelids growing so heavy.

It was almost an afterthought that Chao came to mind. “Do you think Chao made it out alive?” Toshiro asked with a yawn. Shu dropped the empty bottle over the edge of the bed and it shattered on the wooden floor.

“He survived, I’m sure,” he said lazily. “He lacks your *creativity*, but he can handle himself against these local upstarts. Tomorrow, we’ll have the pleasure of crushing those who remain.” Closing his eyes, he leaned back into the pillows and pulled Toshiro close.

PART TWO

TOKYO PLUM

CHAPTER 14

Tokyo

Ume Itou Iwakura smiled at her reflection in the floor to ceiling mirror set between the breakfast room windows of the western styled mansion in the heart of Japan's new capital, Tokyo. Her late father certainly wouldn't have been pleased with all the "modernization" Japan had undergone since the overthrow of the Tokugawa Shogun four years ago, but Ume didn't mind at all, not when the zeal to make up for three centuries of isolation from the western world brought such pretty things into her life.

While the corsets with their stiff stays still took quite a bit of getting used to, Ume did like the way they accented her female figure in ways the old kimono never could. She turned sideways and smiled again. Her bust was fuller than many of her countrywomen and she was glad she'd given in to instinct and let her only son nurse as often as he'd wanted as a baby instead of listening to her grandmother who

insisted that making him wait would build his character.

Ume's smile faltered as her gaze fell upon the small photographic portrait of her Toshiro. She missed him terribly, more than she thought she would when she sent him off to America at the insistence of her new husband, Hiroshi. It was silly to be worried. It wasn't as if she'd cast him out into a barren wasteland alone. He was grown now. Officially a man in their culture and he was going to live with his father, the man she thought dead until last year.

Truth be told, she'd sent Toshiro to him out of spite. The boy was a handful and a half, terrorizing tutors and servants alike and driving her and husband to distraction at every turn. It served Ookura right to have to deal with the brazen young man after they way he so unceremoniously divorced her to take off to the old capitol to live out his political ambitions. He should have stayed here where he belonged and run her father's fencing school the way he agreed to when father adopted him as heir after the marriage.

But no, Ookura Itou was too good to be a simple sword school instructor. He had lofty dreams. Dreams that got him marked for assassination by his new "comrades in arms". Those dreams ended up with him being grievously injured and forced him to flee Japan entirely.

Ume's thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of a maid. "Iwakura-sama wishes to see you in his office at

once.”

Ume grinned as she strode across the polished oak floor of the foyer and ascended the wide curving staircase. Knowing Hiroshi he probably wanted a mid morning “treat” to whet his ravenous sexual appetite. Since it was an appetite she shared and readily indulged, she certainly wasn’t about to complain.

Ume’s sprightly steps faltered when she saw the trunks and large leather traveling cases piled before Hiroshi’s office door. They were her cases only hers. “Are we going on a trip?” She asked brightly when she entered.

“*We* are not.” He answered flatly. He took a large envelope from his top desk drawer and slid it across the desk to her.

She opened it. Inside was a steamship ticket. “San Francisco? Why am I going to America?” her deep brown eyes opened wide. “You’re sending me to bring back Toshiro?”

“Hardly.” Hiroshi got up and poured himself a brandy from the cut crystal decanter on the hand carved cabinet behind his desk. “It appears that a business deal I was planning fell through at the last moment. My investors are not willing to grant me a loan extension so I have to turn over the collateral I promised.”

“Oh. So you wish me to deliver this collateral for you?”

"You *are* the collateral. You'll be staying with the tong elders in San Francisco until I can settle things. I imagine they'll have you work to help pay off the debt somehow."

"You're joking."

Hiroshi simply stared.

Ume laughed and threw the ticket back at him. "You can't do this, you have no right."

"I'm your husband. You belong to me I can do anything I want with you."

"I won't go! I'll divorce you! You can't do this!"

Hiroshi casually sipped his drink. "Fine I'll wire America and tell them to take Toshiro instead. He should be easy enough for them to get to. He's in Colorado isn't he?"

"The hell you will! I'm going to wire Ookura this instant and tell him you're insane. He'll protect our son with his life and unless you've forgotten he was one of the top swordsmen in all of Japan."

Hiroshi smirked. "Ookura may still have his katana but it's not match for the guns the Chinese will send along with their men. "Matsumoto. Take my lovely wife for a walk and see that she doesn't return."

Ume jumped when her husband's bodyguard came up behind her and pulled her arm behind her back, twisting it until her knees began to give way. "All right! I'll go to America!"

Ren Yang stared at the pocket watch resting in his palm. At a quarter past two in the afternoon, the damn ship was late. He cursed under his breath and stalked the pier, the enforcer flanking his side followed until he glared at them over his shoulder. "Can you give me some fucking space?" he snapped, irritated.

Lau made a non-committal noise and shrugged. But as soon as Yang started pacing along the pier again, he went right back to following his boss, only a step and a half behind.

Yang swore again. Three hours waiting on a dock along the Barbary Coast—during one of the hottest spells the city of San Francisco had endured in his recent memory--had pretty much fucked with his mood.

He clicked his tongue impatiently and tightened his fist around the gold watch. He suddenly hated the damn trinket, a supposed gift from the Elders for his loyal services. It was certainly crafted fine enough and the roman numerals adorning its face looked so undoubtedly western. A strange gift considering how close the seven old men stayed to their homeland's culture. Yang ran a hand through his thick black hair which was cut short and left loose to fall just above his shoulders in the European style. All the Elders had their long, gray queues trailing down their crooked backs and they'd die before abandoning the Chinese status quo. He'd gotten a

few disapproving glares for following the western aesthetic, but Cho, that old bastard, he'd just smiled and clapped his hands looking very pleased with himself.

"The Wongs' empire crosses both sides of the ocean," Cho cackled. "The younger generation should embrace the western ways like a serpent crushing its prey." Cho presented Yang with the watch a few days later, that same calculating grin on his wrinkled lips. *Crush your prey* was inscribed in Chinese on the reverse of the watch case.

Only he wasn't referring to the Americans or others living outside of Chinatown, not that the old man wasn't capable of something so ambitious. Cho meant the other triads pushing against Wong territory...and failure wasn't an option. That was the whole reason he was here on this godforsaken dock and waiting for a special delivery from their Japanese associates overseas. Whenever that fucking ship decided to pull into port, a ruthless assassin was supposed to be on board, ready and eager to start slitting throats for the Wongs.

Yang jammed the watch into his vest pocket and rolled up his shirtsleeves in a vain attempt to beat the suffocating heat pressing over the city. He had no idea who the assassin was or how Cho got a hold of him. His job now was to bring the new recruit to Chinatown, test the man's skills on a current "nuisance", and then deliver him to the Elders.

“Mr. Yang,” Lau coughed behind him.

Yang screwed his face up in annoyance and pushed his glasses back up his nose. “What’s the fucking problem now?”

Lau raised a narrow eyebrow and made a visible effort to keep an amused smile from his mustached lips. “It’s the *Wah Mei*.”

Yang looked to where his bodyguard pointed on the horizon. The steamer ship was pulling into the bay at long last.

“Finally,” Yang growled and leaned on one of the posts lining the edge of the pier. “Let’s hope the fucker we’re waiting for is worth this waste of time.”

“Time to go.”

Ume frowned at her “escort” but managed a smile to herself when she noted the way he stayed a full arm’s length away from her once she picked up her fan along with her small traveling case and exited the stateroom. He’d tried to take the position of “bodyguard” a bit to literally they’re first night out of Tokyo but he’d gotten that foolish notion right out of his head once he met with the business end of her fan.

She tightened her grip a little more around the pretty fan that hid its true purpose behind a gleaming façade of fine

black lacquer, red trim and stiffened gilded paper. The fan was in fact a *tessen*, an iron war fan and a traditional weapon of the Japanese samurai. Toshiro's father had given it to her before their brief marriage and both he and her own father had schooled her in the use of it.

She could deflect a dagger and sword attack and even kill an assailant should the need arise. For her rape-minded "escort", however, one sharp jab to the genitals had been enough to change the course of this thoughts for the rest of their journey.

Ume shielded her eyes from the midday glare with one dainty gloved hand as she stepped out onto the sunny deck of the steamship and maneuvered through the crowd to the gangway. Once her eyes adjusted to the light level she noticed two well dressed Chinese men waiting dockside, looking haughty and impatient.

Ume's escort, Fong, lightly touched her arm then pulled back when she spun and skewered him with a look. "Hurry. Mr. Yang doesn't like to be kept waiting. Please."

At the bottom of the gangway, Lau folded his arms over his chest and looked up at the steamship. "Who's that?" he scrunched up his nose at the woman loitering on the deck.

Yang adjusted his glasses and scowled. The sunlight reflected off the ocean water and made it difficult to see

who stood at the top of the gangway, but he could tell it was a woman. The hulking man with a bowler hat behind her must be Fong. He'd heard the asshole never went anywhere without that ridiculous hat.

"I don't know," Yang dismissed the woman with a wave of his hand. "Maybe she's the man's mistress or something. Why the fuck should I care?"

He moved to the foot of the gangway and Lau came up beside him. The bodyguard shouted up. "Where the hell is Chao's man, Fong?" He had an intimidating voice that boomed throughout the pier. Though he rarely used it, when he did people tended to look sharp and do whatever they were doing faster. Yang smirked as the many Chinese working in the dock hurried along their business and the few westerners looked around in alarm.

"Thank you, Lau, I think that---what the fuck?" Yang's smile dropped as the woman and Fong descended the wooden plank, alone. He didn't even bother sparing her a glance and immediately turned on the idiot beside her.

"Where is Kui's man, asshole?" Yang seethed. "I didn't wait hours on this fucking dock for him to take his sweet-ass time!"

"There's no man, boss. I was told to bring *her*. She's what we got in payment from that Iwakura."

Ren took a long moment to replay the words over in his mind. Slowly, and hoping he was having what would

amount to a bad dream—he turned his head to look at the woman. She was an utter bitch; that much was evident from the cold dark eyes that glared at him from beneath the veil of the small ribbon decked bonnet atop her shining black hair.

“What kind of joke is this, Fong? Tell whoever put you up to it that I’m not laughing!”

“It is not a joke but a nightmare,” the woman muttered in halting Cantonese.

Yang clamped his mouth shut and turned to glare at the woman. “Who the fuck do you think you are?” he said quietly, dangerously. “Unless I ask you to talk, you keep your mouth shut.”

Oh, she was a bitch alright. Instead of taking his words as a reminder of her place, her black, almond-shaped eyes narrowed and her full, softly painted lips pressed into a thin line. But she didn’t turn away from his glare. It was a blatant sign of disrespect. He should slap her, he should make her cower on her knees until she learned to fear him and the men he represented. But the only thing he did with absolute certainty was to tell himself he wasn’t attracted to the fire burning within those deep ebony eyes.

“Let’s see if you have the stomach to match the look, mei mei,” Ren said coldly. He tried to follow the curves of her body, but they were hidden under the layers of her exquisite French dress. “And the ass to match your balls.”

He turned away and gestured for Lau, Fong and the

woman to follow him to the waiting carriage. "Our first stop is to take the bitch to Ling's for some decent clothing."

Ume's grasp of Chinese wasn't the strongest but she understood enough especially when the words were accompanied by such unsavory looks as the man Yang was giving her. Decent clothing indeed. This gown alone cost more than this damned carriage of his.

She glanced from the carriage window to Yang who shot her yet another of those 'how dare you gaze upon me' looks. Ume tightened her grip upon her tessen and met his glare head on. He almost reminded her of her first husband with that regal air of self importance cloaking him like an emperor's court robes.

"What is wrong with my clothing, Yang-san?"

"Nothing if you're one of those rich white bitches from Nob Hill, but you aren't. You're just another piece of Wong property now."

CHAPTER 15

“What?”

Without thinking, Ume was across the small space and gripping the lapels of Yang’s jacket. “What do you mean I’m a piece of property? I don’t belong to you people! My stupid husband said I was to stay until he repaid his loan that’s all.”

Yang shoved her away so roughly that the back of her head banged on the carriage wall. “Don’t ever do that—don’t even think to be so disrespectful again.” He shot a harsh look to Lau who hadn’t reacted quickly enough to guard him. “Tell the driver to stop at the barracoon.”

Ume swallowed hard and clutched her fan tightly with both hands. She wasn’t certain what the word meant but it couldn’t be good. Especially not with the way Yang and his men were glaring at her. Oh, why did she still have the impulsive streak that had already caused her more trouble than she cared to admit to?

The carriage stopped near a and when Yang got out, jerked her out behind him, and then dragged her forward. He plowed through the temple and into a far corner at the very back of the building and waited while his man Lau held aside the wall hanging that covered a small door.

The door led to a flight of stairs that Jeet down below ground level. The way was lit by small lanterns and in the distance voices could be heard. Voices of men laughing and shouting out amounts of money while the cries and the occasional wail of women echoed back.

Ume gasped once they reached the bottom and she took it all in. This was a trading center. A trading center for girls and young women. Some of them were younger than her own son. All were stripped naked and all bore at least one tell-tale sign of having been beaten, most likely with a stick, judging from the long thin black and blue marks.

Yang dragged her off to the side where one girl sat on a low stool. She was doubled over and shaking. Lau reached out, yanked her up by the hair and kicked apart her ankles. Yang grabbed Ume's shoulder and made her bend to see the mark seared into the flesh of the girl's inner thigh. "This is what happens to whores who displease me, mei. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Ume whispered.

"Good. See that you don't forget."

Ume was barely aware of anything as Yang propelled

her back up to the temple and out to the carriage. She felt her stomach churn as the carriage wound along the streets. She wouldn't end up like those girls. She would rather die than be branded or beaten or sold to the highest bidder. If catering to Yang and his superiors would keep her alive and unmarred then she'd do whatever it took to make that happen.

And she hoped to hell she could keep her impulsive spirit in check.

The carriage pulled to a stop before a small shop off one of Chinatown's main streets and Ume followed Yang inside. The incense in the shop was thick and smelled of mingled spice and flowers that reminded Ume of a funeral. She placed her gloved hand over her mouth very much wanting to throw up and she wasn't sure if it was because of the incense or the scene she'd witnessed with that girl.

She glanced over. Yang was staring and she took a deep breath and raised her head. "I'm fine," she muttered.

"I wasn't asking and I don't care."

Bastard. Ume followed along behind him pausing when an old woman scurried out from behind a beaded curtain. She wore a shapeless black tunic over loose pants and Ume grimaced at the thought that they'd dress her like that. They'd probably make her a servant like this woman. Wonderful.

“Our fair plum from Tokyo will be conducting some business at the Gingbo and elsewhere. See that she has something suitable to wear.”

The old woman nodded vigorously and bowed and ushered Ume through the beaded curtain and into a small room with bolts of brightly colored and patterned silks and a few thickly padded chairs. Yang followed.

The woman jabbered and gestured wanting Ume to undress. She looked at Yang who'd seated himself comfortably in one of the chairs and was accepting a cup of tea from another older woman who came in from a small door across the way.

Ume cleared her throat. Yang looked at her. “Yang-san, if I am to undress to try things on, would you please wait elsewhere?”

Yang smirked. “You don't have anything I haven't seen a thousand times over. Get on with it or I'll take you back to Sun.”

Though she tried to suppress it, Ume shivered at the memory of that man Sun and the joy he showed burning the Wong brand into that girl's flesh. She closed her eyes and took another deep breath as the old woman jabbered for her to hurry.

Yang settled back and crossed one leg over the other as the haughty Japanese beauty began to strip. He wondered if it was fear or an attempt at seduction that made her peel

those kid gloves so slowly from her thin hands, gently pull back the sheer veil on her bonnet before untying it and setting it down on the chair atop her fan and gloves. Next she kicked off her low heeled kidskin shoes then began to undo the long row of buttons on the top half of her dress. He smiled at her tiny shiver when she peeled the top off and laid it carefully on the back of the chair holding her other things. Next came the skirt and a few petticoats and was down to voluminous lace trimmed underdrawers a corset and thin strapped chemise beneath that.

She glanced back at him then lifted one leg then the other to roll down her silk stockings. The old woman unhooked the stiff corset in the back and the fair Ume was now a fraction away from revealing all her lovely charms.

Yang set the teacup down and ordered the women out. Ume turned and bit her lower lip. He grinned as he stood and approached her. "I told you, you don't have anything I haven't seen before, though I have to admit, I am somewhat impressed ." He reached out to smooth his hand over the soft fabric of her chemise and the round breast within. He pinched her nipple, rolled it between thumb and forefinger, his grin growing wider when her body responded, hardening the flesh.

"Let's see if they're really as nice as they seem," he drawled in English as he tugged at the ribbon holding her chemise closed. Ume's body stiffened when he tugged the

ribbon free and then tore the chemise from her. He focused his attention upon those lovely full breasts which moved so wonderfully with each quick deep breath she made. "I'm quite impressed," he said softly, cupping both soft globes in his hands, rubbed his thumbs back and forth across the her nipples until they peaked.

"Do you really dislike me so, my plum?" he asked, working at the tie that held her drawers closed. "I think you like me more than you can bring yourself to admit. Let's see if I'm right."

Ume bit her tongue when Yang's hand slid into her drawers and snaked between her legs. She wanted to keep her thighs closed tightly but again the image of that girl being burned for "disobedience" put a halt to her resolved.

"Relax, mei mei, I'm not going to hurt you. That's the domain of my man Shu, who happens to be out of town." He leaned in and kissed her neck, his lips teasing the lobe of her ear. "If you're a very good girl I'll see that you never have to deal with him and his tastes. Now open those pretty legs for me"

Closing her eyes, Ume shifted her stance.

"Look at me, *mei*. I know there's passion in those eyes, if there wasn't you wouldn't be as wet as you are."

Ume opened her eyes, ashamed at the way her traitorous body was responding to this seduction of his. He stroked one long finger up and down the length of her slit,

drawing out the wetness pooling at her entrance. She ground her teeth together when he slipped a finger inside, then another and a third and stroked her with a slow precision that made her wetter still.

“Relax and enjoy it my plum, you know you want to,” he drawled, shifting his hand so his thumb could brush across that sensitive spot within the fold of skin as his fingers continued to stroke her from within. He kissed her neck, his teeth nipping, lips sucking firmly. “Let yourself go, *mei* let me see the passion in those pretty eyes of yours.”

She wouldn’t, she couldn’t—help it...Her breathing quickened as the sweet tension built inside her. He was good, very good. As good as Toshiro’s father had been. Ume was only half aware of the way her hips moved in time to Yang’s touch and how she reached up to grip his strong shoulders.

“That’s it, mei enjoy it for me...”

Ume whimpered when Yang bent his head to kiss her breast. She gasped when he drew one aching nipple between his lips and suckled it fiercely, until the pleasure spiraled down to her sex. Her hips moved more and she shifted her stance trying to increase the friction against his thumb. A tiny spasm shot through her when Yang scraped his teeth over her nipple as he let it go.

Yang laughed and stopped the movement of his fingers. With his free hand he caressed her flushed cheek.

“Oh *mei mei*, you appear to be quite the unexpected

treasure.” He tore the drawers from her and wiped his fingers clean then began to unloosen his tie. “Now be a good girl and touch yourself while I get ready to give you what you really want.”

A deep, throaty growl vibrated in Ren’s lungs as he slowly unfastened his shirt. His eyes followed her every movement, every shifting muscle underneath her flawless, porcelain-like skin. A thin veil of perspiration glazed her bare body, accentuating the smooth, full curves. Still short of breath, she slid her hand between her full, swollen breasts and down her past her navel. Her delicate fingers teased the edge of the dark hair before the reaching down, entangling themselves in the moist curls.

“Is this how you like it,” she breathed heavily, her eyes half-closed and hidden by thick, black lashes.

Ren felt the front of his already constricting western-styled pants tighten. “Oh, yes,” he laughed deeply.

He shrugged out of the silk shirt, his chest heaving in anticipation. He swallowed, the tangy taste of Ume’s perspiration still on his tongue. He wanted to find out so badly what the rest of her tasted like, what the feel of him sliding inside was like. Ume wasn’t like the typical girl or woman the Wongs appropriated from negligent associates who failed to pay up----too frightened or subjugated, or even inexperienced, to be of much interest to anyone.

He tugged at the buttons on his pants with painful,



self-imposed slowness. Anything to prolong the sensual, dance-like performance a little longer. He slipped out of his trousers and stepped out of his low-laced boots, a smile curling on his lips.

Of course, Ume had a wild streak he should know better than to let slip by, but with each swaying move of her lovely figure....She suddenly moaned as her fingers pushed inside of her, and Ren made a surprising whimper-like sound in the back of his own throat. He cast common sense to the four winds and to hell with it.

He moved forward and grabbed Ume, his hands sliding over the steamy, wet skin on her tense shoulders. He took her lips in a demanding, powerful kiss, his tongue wasting no time in exploring the hot recesses of her mouth. He didn't know who's moan he swallowed in that kiss---hers or his---only that one of them made a sound that begged for more. Moving his hands along her body in strong, hungry strokes, he squeezed her tight rear and heaved her up and against the wall.

"How wet are you?" he panted, shoving one hand between them to spread her legs open. Both Ume's hands gripped at the back of his neck and a cry caught in her throat.

"Why don't you find out?" her coy words dissolved into another half-moan as he worked his fingers into her slit.

Ren made a satisfied noise---they were beyond fucking words and at the cusp of just fucking. Pressing his lips into her neck, he wrapped both hands around her rear again and his firm, rock hard erection pushed into her.

Part of Ume hated herself but her throbbing body overrode her pride in short order. She wrapped her arms around Yang's neck, hooked her legs around his waist and surrendered to the pounding rhythm he set up. The scrape of her bare back on the wall was both uncomfortable and pleasurable and she tried to push down against each of his hard upward thrusts adding friction to her throbbing sex.

"Oh Gods," she moaned as the tingling tightness built within her and soared to its peak. She shrieked when Yang snaked one hand between them and rubbed the swollen nub and sent her over the edge. She dug her fingers into his shoulders as her body spasmed around him. He shoved her harder against the wall thrust into her quicker, then stiffened and came with a low moan. Ume gasped and clenched her eyes, savoring the feel of his pulsing cock, the way his fluid mixed with hers and tricked out between them.

She opened her eyes when Yang tightened his grip on her rear took a step back. He moved and sank down into the closest chair, still buried inside her. He nudged her hips. "Clean me, *mei, mei*," he said between quick breaths. "...with your mouth."

With a wicked grin Ume slid from his lap, rather

liking the feel of the wetness trickling over the tops of her thighs. She sank to her knees between his outstretched legs and took his wet cock into her mouth then pulled back slowly sucking away as much of the sticky wetness as she could.

After all, there were worse things that could happen to her than being some gang leader's mistress.

CHAPTER 16

Birds chirped outside and the branches of the swaying banyan tree scratched at the glass window. Yang dozed, pressing the back of his forearm across his eyes to ward off the morning light. Stretched slowly across the cotton sheets, his muscles flexed with pleasurable soreness and he yawned with lazy contentment. When was the last time he'd had such a fulfilling slumber, he couldn't remember. Or such comfortable dreams.

The woman beside him stirred, draping her warm body over his. Ren removed his arm and stared down at the reason for this rare, peaceful moment. Her soft hair spread out across his chest like a fan made of black silk while her two pink breasts heaved gently along his ribcage with each of her slow breaths. Ume Itou, the Tokyo Plum...she was so

full of pride and of passion. Even now Ren's body reacted to the mere memories of the night before, his organ swelling against her thigh, then slowly receding.

He touched her cheek gently. What kind of spell had she cast over him? There were hundreds of lovely girls in Chinatown all disposed to service him at a moment's notice, but something about Ume's nature had him captivated. Oh but she was a sensual creature, designed by nature or practice with the skills to seduce the most cold-hearted of men and inflame the most hot-blooded with desire. Her spirit too possessed a rare power, something he doubted her would ever be able to squelch. Like the stars that fell from the heavens, Ume was a delight to behold, but never to be contained.

"You're beautiful," he whispered with wonder. Amazing, this fair plum had changed him into a poet.

Ume's eyes fluttered open. "Ren-san, did you say something?" she said, her voice dusky with sleep. She tilted her face up and he cupped her chin. "Nothing," he looked away from those alluring eyes with the flickering light of passion burning within them. "I had a silly dream. That's all."

"There's no such thing," she breathed across his . "Bad dream yes, and certainly good ones. But silly? No."

Yang ran his fingers through her hair. "Then maybe it was a good one."

"I'm glad." Ume kissed him above the heart.

A knock sounded at the door, soft but insistent. Ren sat up, regretting last night's decision after leaving the dress shop on taking a hotel room. In his house, no one---not even Lau---disturbed him in his bedroom.

"Come in," he called out with a sigh. In afterthought, he was glad for the interruption.

Perhaps he was starting to enjoy Ume's company too much, something that could be dangerous for them both.

A maid pushed open the door, her eyes glued to the floor and her narrow shoulders hunched under the black dress. "I'm so sorry, sir," she spoke quickly. "But this letter was sent for you, to be delivered immediately."

He accepted the rolled up piece of rice paper from her quivering hands when she approached the bed. Waving her off, Ren broke the cord that held the note shut and a laquered hair ornament plopped on to his lap, heavier in weight than the polished wood should have been.

Unrolling the note, he read the characters painted there twice before climbing out of bed. *Show us what Iwakura's payment is worth.*

Another detail that had failed to make itself known in the lazy morning light: Ume belonged to know one, except the Wongs. She was only property, and it was time to test her mettle.

"Get dressed," Ren turned away and picked up his

clothes from the where they were strewn across the lounge chair across from the bed.

“What’s wrong?” Ume sat up, not bother to cover her nakedness as she leaned against one of the bedposts.

“You have a job to do, my dear.”

Yes, dreams could be silly.



The following day Ume sat before the mirrored vanity in the hotel suite and took yet another calming breath. She had been so wrong. There were worse things than being a gang leader’s whore and she had to do one of them soon.

She studied the specially made Kogai in front of her. She’d owned many of the ornamental hairsticks in her day but hers had been purely ornamental. She pulled at the ends of the lacquered stick and studied the think sharp blade that was normal another piece of wood sanded smooth to pass through the hair. This kogai was meant for more than decoration and with the layer of poison coating the blade it was doubly deadly.

She took a deep breath and slid the pointed end through the knot of hair at the nape of her neck taking great care not to let the blade prick her.

I can do this. I MUST do this. It’s my life or his, it’s as simple as that. This is no reflection on me or my character. This is Hiroshi’s fault. Without his stupidity I wouldn’t be

forced into this position. It's his fault I have to work for the Wongs. I don't want to die or be tortured to pay his debt and I won't be a common whore for any man who has the money, So I'll do what they want until they decide the debt is repaid.

A knock sounded on the outer door and Ume took another breath before rising to answer it. Her father and first husband Ookura gave her the knowledge to do what she must.

"It's time," Yang said firmly.

Ume followed him into the main room of the suite and introduced Mr. Jee Jiang who controlled a profitable area the Wongs wanted.

"Please allow our fair Plum of Tokyo to entertain you while I deliver your proposal to my superiors."

Old Jee smiled, his narrow eyes leering at Ume, lingering on the expanse of thigh visible through the side slit of her red Chinese dress as she sat beside him, one leg crossed over the other. "Take your time, Yang."

Jee put his hand on Ume's leg, his gnarled fingers quickly sliding up, seeking. She forced a smile and uncrossed her legs, allowing him to feel the lack of undergarments. Yang watched a moment, his expression impassive then exited.

Closing the door shut behind him, Ren found himself pressing up to the wooden surface. With his ear against the

lacquer, he strained to catch all the different sounds coming from the other side. Jee's voice, as old and withered as his cock must be, carried through the door.

"I'm not as young as I used to be, beautiful one, you need to help me."

Ren heard Ume respond, though too faint to be understood. Whatever she spoke, it pleased the old fucker because he cackled and scraped his chair over the hardwood floor as he adjusted himself. Ren could almost envision the wrinkled, balding man yanking at his pants to pry out his half-useless dick, and Ume forcing herself to part her legs open to receive it.

Confirming his worst imaginings, Jee suddenly croaked out, "Been a long time since I had one as hot and tight as you."

"Fuck," Ren whispered the curse, shutting his eyes. He didn't want that old bastard touching her, *using* her. The idea just disgusted him....and...He leaned back against the door and ripped off his glasses to wipe at them with a linen cloth he pulled from his coat pocket. The worst thing to do was fall for one of the Wongs' women---especially one of these rare tiger women Cho selected to serve as assassins. The involvement would lead to trouble, to say the fucking least.

He noticed the rhythmic thumps coming from beyond door. Jee was pleasuring himself fucking well, the ancient

wrinkled bastard. But why the hell wasn't Ume doing her job? Did she lose her stomach?

"Fuck!" This time Ren growled the word and reached for the pistol tucked in the back of his pants underneath his coat. The Elders expected Jee dead, and failure was never an option with them. If Ume Itou Iwakura couldn't or wouldn't perform, death would be a release compared to what they would have done to her.

"I hope you enjoy it Mr. Jee," Ume's voice interrupted his thoughts. A moment later, the chair scuffed across the floor again, followed by a wet cry from Jee. Ren released the gun's handle and sighed with relief when he heard the heavy thud of a lifeless body hitting the floor.

He opened the door and stepped up behind Ume as she stood over the old man's corpse, blood dripped from the steel blade of the kogai in her fist. A satisfied smile curved Ren's lips and he slipped one arm around her waist. He pulled her to him and used the linen cloth still in his hand to wipe her cheek. "The first one is always the hardest, mei mei, but I am very, very pleased with your work."

Ren smiled into the mirror hanging across from Ume and kissed her neck as he eased the bloodied weapon from her hand. He wiped it clean, then took the other half from her and tucked it into his jacket pocket.

"Now let's go look at our new territory shall we?"

Ren glanced at Ume as they walked arm in arm through the downtown market district of San Francisco. "Don't tell me you were bored back there? Not that I'd blame you, really. Jee wasn't only a stupid businessman, but an *old* bastard. I'm sure you've had to 'entertain' better, more *spry*, clients for your husband."

She glared at him and he smirked. "I mean, *ex*-husband. How many would that be so far? Two? Three? Let me guess---none of them could keep up with you."

Ume dug her fingers into Yang's forearm The bastard. What a fool she'd been yesterday...and last night. How stupid to allow her body to override her commonsense even though she was nothing more than a pawn for Yang and his people. "I have had two husbands. The first I was forced to marry because my father needed an heir to inherit his dojo." But oh how I loved Suzuki Ookura....

And the second....well, you've dealt with Hiroshi Iwakura you know what a conniving, lying bastard he is. That was clearly a mistake on my part." She glared at Yang again. "One I won't make again."

He returned her glare and forced her fingers from his arm. "This kitten certainly does have claws," he said coldly. "Maybe it was Iwakura that made the mistake."

How dare this insufferable Chinese bastard speak to her this way?!?

Ume gripped her *tessen* so tightly knuckles ached.

She so want to crack his skull with the iron fan. And Ookura showed her how to do that very thing should I ever find myself in dire straits.

. Ume sighed as she wondered how he'd taken to Toshiro. Their son is so much like him in so many ways yet so different. She realized now of all the ways she failed the boy by being too busy trying to gain them some social standing in the new Meiji era. She really only wanted to give her son the advantages he deserved, but she saw now that she'd spent too much time getting things for herself first...

. "What's wrong, *mei*? Regrets about the past?"

Ume flashed Yang an angry look. He merely grinned.

"Come now, we've already been through this. *I'm* not the one you should be pissed at, so save the spite for Iwakura. Though I'm sure you have some other things planned for him, should you ever see him again."

They came to a stop in front of a jewelry shop. "Maybe you've never been treated right, mei. You know, working for me is going to have its benefits."

As "pleasant" as the benefits she'd gotten thus far had been they really weren't what she wanted and that was her freedom.

Inside the shop Yang picked out a pair of jade earrings and held them up to her face. "I understand you have quite a fondness for the finer things in life."

Ume brushed past Yang and pointed to the tray in the next case the old man behind the counter brought it out and she picked up a pair of emerald earrings. "I'd like these if you don't mind."

"I do mind, actually. You have to *earn* them first." Yang leaned in and kiss her.

Bastard. And the way he kissed her so openly as if she were his!

Ume picked up the emerald earrings and admired then against her ears in the small mirror the old clerk set on the counter. "Oh I'll earn quite a lot Yang-san. have no fear." She looked at his reflection studying me in the glass. "There isn't anything I can't do when I put my mind to it."

Yang's reflection smirked at hers. "That's what worries me--the things you can accomplish when you set your mind to it."

Nonetheless, he reached into my coat pocket and pull out the money necessary to buy the earrings.

"Would you like them wrapped, sir?" the shop owner asks.

"No, I believe the fine lady shall be wearing them." He took the earrings from Ume's hands. "Allow me." First I put in the right one through the tiny hole in her ear and stopped to smile coyly at her. "They're quite becoming on you." But instead of putting in the left, he pressed the sharp tip into her ear lobe and draw a drop of blood. "Let's try not

to be so self-assured though, alright? Don't forget who owns you now. You're Wong property."

She refused to give the Chinese bastard the satisfaction of crying out when he jabbed her ear and she knew it was insanity but she couldn't; stop herself from speaking. "I will work for you, but *No one owns me* Yang." She turned to face him, leaned in as if to nuzzle his neck then bit the very bottom of his ear lobe enough to leave a mark.

"I try to play nice, and *this* is what I get?" He grabbed her elbow and shove her towards the door. "You're going to learn your place."

He pulled her briskly along the streets until they reached Sun Bao's parlor. "Sun!" Yang barked "I want this bitch branded immediately!"

CHAPTER 17

Ume cried out when he shoved her onto the couch that girl had been tied to.

“You belong to the Wongs, Ume. “And you’re going to learn that one way or another.”

“No no. *Please...*”

“*SILENCE!*”

Ume trembled and clutched her fan until her hands cramped as the man returns with a white hot iron. Tears filled her eyes when she saw the characters for *Poisoned Dragon* that would be burned into her skin.

Yang yanked up her dress and spread her thighs. She felt the heat of the iron so close to her delicate skin. “I’m sorry. I’m *Sorry!*”

Ren smirked. “Why should I believe your

remorse?"

She breathed heavily from the moment of panic. "Really...that won't be necessary. I wasn't thinking clearly. It's all be such an ordeal for me."

"An ordeal. Yes I can see that," Yang said softly, his hands stroking her warm flesh.

The tension eased from Ume's body underneath his hands, the muscles in her thighs loosening to his touch. "That's better, my plum." Ren moved his hand from her leg to cup her chin. Some defiance still smoldered in her eyes behind the sultry expression, but it was nothing like the display he'd seen earlier. Neither did she turn into a babbling idiot, spilling tears and snot all over the fucking floor.

All of this impressed Ren, and it also relieved him. "Put down the branding iron, Sun."

The older man obeyed and the hot metal sizzled as hit the water in the cooling bucket. "She's a strong one, Mr. Yang," he affirmed. "She'll be useful."

"As long as she remembers her place." Ren sat down beside her on the couch and drew the opening of her dress shut. "She'll be very useful."

"Now leave us," he said. Sun gathered his branding materials and slunk off to the back room. Ren turned back to Ume, who despite her calm demeanor, was pissed. The anger radiated off her sultry body.

"Sun had some doubts about you," he stroked his

chin and adjusted his glasses. "He worried you might have been a---how can I say this? Ah---a slow learner. But even the strongest-willed students catch on pretty quick with the right...motivation.

"In the future, you'll keep that poisonous tongue in check and be respectful to your superiors." Ren reached over to the low table across from them and poured a glass of cabernet from the decanter. He swirled the deep burgundy liquid in the glass before taking a sip.

"You have to be, my plum," he said in low voice, thick from the rich liquor and concern he wouldn't admit to himself of having. "I'm a forgiving man. The Elders..."

He let his words trail off and offered her the glass. "Don't fuck with the Elders, Ume. Not unless they *ask* you too."

"Thank you," she mumbled, before taking a long sip. After drinking, she handed the glass back and Ren finished it off, his eyes never leaving hers.

"I'm sorry," Ume apologized demurely. Part of her act, yes, but it would be convincing enough for Cho and the others. It would have to be, for her sake.

"You'll have plenty of opportunities to make it up to me," Ren touched her cheek and moved forward in his seat to breathe on her flushed skin. "You're an enchanting woman, mei mei."

He captured her lips with his and surrender to the

passionate kiss.

“Mmm...” He pulled away and smiled at her. “My Plum is just as sweet as she is deadly.”

Yang smoothed back the few strands of her hair that had fallen out of place. He convinced himself Ume’s lovely hair arrangement had been ruined from the exertion of killing the old man and not from fucking him. He suppressed the shudder he felt for her sake.

As he leaned down to kiss the side of her neck, he murmured, “It’s just a job, mei mei. Nothing more.”

Ume’s breath quickened; he felt her warm exhalation brush his earlobe “And this is just for pleasure,” Ren sighed, reminding himself as much as he did her. “Nothing more.”

“Pleasure, yes,” Ume muttered, wrapping her arms around his waist. Ren closed his eyes. Yes, it was easy to surrender to this woman and her captivating charms. She radiated sensuality in every graceful gesture, every sway of her hips beneath her clothing. His hands slid down her back, prying open the latches to her form-fitting dress.

“What is your given name Yang-san?” Ume whispered into his ear, moving to press against him.

“Ren,” he answered. Someone coughed in the doorway and he turned around. Sun stood in there with a concerned look on his face.

“Not now,” Ren growled at him.

“But there’s a---”

“Get out! Whatever you have to say can wait.”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Yang,” Sun lowered his head and glanced warily at the woman.

“Well, spit it out,” Ren huffed impatiently. “You can speak freely in front of our fair Plum.”

Sun nodded, though obviously uncomfortable doing so. He shifted his weight from foot to foot and coughed. “The Elders want to see you, Mr. Yang,” he said. He smoothed the front of his long coat. “They wish to discuss your *Fair Plum*.”

Damn it all. Ren stepped away from Ume and adjusted his glasses to stare at the older man. “Are they meeting tonight?”

“They’re already here.”

Ren silently cursed, but he flashed a bright smile to both Sun and Ume. “Wonderful. I’m sure they’ll find Ume Itou as enchanting as I do.”

Sun lead the way upstairs to a large open meeting area overlooking the heart of Chinatown. The room sprawled over the entire second floor and yet was bare of any furniture other than the five widebacked chairs arranged in semicircle in the center. Gold lanterns were the only decorations on the red-painted walls...surprisingly sparse, given the Elders’ opulent tastes. Five men sat in the chairs, stroking their gray beards and tapping their fingers impatiently on the armrests. Their bodyguards stood throughout the room watching in

silence.

Ren stepped forward and noticed the Chinese characters for Poisoned Dragon painted on the paper lanterns and frowned. They reminded him of the last time he'd presented a new assassin to the old men, the man most people had taken to calling the Poisoned Dragon himself. But Ume Itou was nothing like Shu---an efficient killer obsessed with cutting into the opium den girls he pleasures himself with in an attempt to make them 'beautiful'.

"Elders, forgive my lateness. I was--"

"We know what you were doing." Master Cho narrowed his watery eyes and pursed his old, cracked lips into an angry pucker. "Why did you bring this whore here?" he pointed at Ume.

"This is no whore," Ren gestured for her to come to his side. She drew beside him and he touched her shoulder. "She is the gift our associates in Japan have sent us: Ume Iwa-excuse me Itou."

"Is that so?" Cho hissed. "Tell us woman, can you kill as well as you can fuck?"

Ume gritted her teeth until her jaws ached and tightened her grip on the iron an in her hand. She would love to show the old bastard what her father and first husband taught her but she held onto her anger as best she could. She'd almost gotten herself tortured once today for her impetuoussness.

She bowed respectfully then said softly, "Perhaps you should ask Jee Jiang--oh--forgive me--he won't be able to answer you or anyone ever again."

The old men lean together and murmur amongst themselves in Chinese. It was difficult to make out what they were saying, but from their tone, they sounded more pleased than annoyed.

Yang gripped her shoulder and she was certain he was placing himself behind her as if she were a shield. "And she's going to handle the affair with Leung as well, Elders," Yang said.

"Is that so?" Cho sits back in the chair and one of the bodyguards handed the old man a cup and he smiled over the steam that rose from the rim. "You are quite a lovely woman, Ume, is it? Come, join me for me tea."

Yang gripped her shoulder a moment then let go.

She was afraid that old Cho might throw the hot tea in her face but she slowly stepped forward. She bowed then sat in the Japanese custom by kneeling before his chair. She looked up at the leering old bastard, forced a smile then lowered her gaze like a proper Japanese woman was taught to do. "It is an honor Master Cho."

The old man sucked in a wheezy breath through his yellowed teeth. "Such fine manners," he stroked his beard and looked her over as she gave a short, humble bow at the waist. "Such lovely features as well."

Cho's snapped his gaze to Yang, his wrinkled face drawing back into a smile. "What a treasure she seems to be," he said. "Beautiful *and* deadly."

"As I said," Yang nodded once in a submissive gesture. "She's no common pleasure girl---she's an amazing woman."

"We have yet to see about that," Cho was quick to disagree though the oily smile never strayed from his weathered lips. "Perhaps she can offer a personal demonstration?" A dry yet clearly lascivious cackle forced its way out of his lungs.

"Though perhaps now is not the time for such frivolity," another of the Elders interjected. He shook his wide head, the jowls under his chin jiggled with the motion. "Isn't there another matter to tend to?"

"Yes, thank you Soo Ling," Cho narrowed his eyes, but kept any displeased comments to himself. "But I believe our new treasure can service us in that respect." He smiled coldly. "Yes, I think it will be an excellent way to test her supposedly *amazing* qualities."

He leaned forward, his long-nailed fingers digging into the armrest as he breathed in Ume's face. His breath smelled of tobacco and stale tea. "We have an...*associate* who runs an important operation not far beyond the Coast. He hasn't cooperated with our clan's rules---understand that *we*," he gestured to the pairs of men seated on either side,

“own this city.”

Yang interrupted with a cough. “You’re talking about Leung,” he said quietly. “That might be too trying a task for *mei mei*. She only started her services today...”

“For an *amazing woman* the job should be simple,” Cho dismissed his inferior with a wave of his knobby hand. “Isn’t that right, my dear?”

“I am but a humble servant of you and your illustrious Elders. I will do whatever it is you require of me.” She bowed her head. The old man chuckled amongst themselves.

“Elders,” Yang said with a quick bow. “Perhaps I should take our lovely woman and begin preparing her for her job.”

Cho glared at Yang his old eyes flashing dangerously. “Or perhaps not, Yang. I would love to know if she has any other *talents*.” He tilted Ume’s chin up and offered her a leering yellowed grin. “What do you say, my dear?”

“I would be honored to visit with the Revered Elders but may I make one small request?”

Cho exchanged an amused look with his cronies. “What would that be?”

“I ask that you wait until I’ve finished my assignment. I would be honored to serve you and the others as a reward for a job done well.”

Cho leaned back in his seat, his wrinkled smile

stretching from ear to ear. “You *are* one to treasure, aren’t you my lovely?” he laughed again and then gestured with the crook of his finger for one of the bodyguards behind him to serve out more tea.

“We’ll honor your request,” Cho took a small sip from his cup. He looked down at Ume through the thin veil of steam and flicked his tongue over his cracked lips. “*I’ll* honor your request.”

He turned his leering gaze to Yang. “Prepare her.”

Yang bowed low once more. “Of course, Elders.”

CHAPTER 18

Yang was quiet, too quiet on the carriage ride back to his office. When he told his man Lau not to join them in the inner office, Ume became more concerned than curious.. She took a seat in one of the imported chairs near Yang's desk and watched as he tossed back one drink then another. He stood his back still to her and stared down at the row of liquor bottles on the lacquered cabinet before him.

When the silence became too much and began to grip her stomach with icy tendrils Ume finally asked. "Who is this Leung and why does he scare you?"

Ren stared at her over the rim of his glass. "He should scare you too, Ume," he said quietly. "And he will, once you know better."

Ume clutched the fan resting on her lap. Having to

deal with old man Jee had been difficult enough what was she going to have to do to “take care of” this Leung who could strike fear into the heart of a man like Ren Yang?

Yang glanced down at her lap and tried to smirk, but his face was so drawn it looked more like a grimace. “Oh *mei mei*,” he turned away from her and ran a finger across the labels on the row of liquor bottles before him. “Your skill with that weapon isn’t going to be enough for this.”

He picked out a gin and filled his glass, then stepped over to her. “For your sake, I hope you have another trick up your lovely sleeve,” he said. “If you don’t...”

Ren paused and shrugged. “You’re *ed*, and not the way you like to be.”

“Dr. Leung Quanyou works independently from anyone else now, but he used to manufacture opium for several powerful organizations throughout Canton. As a rule, the Six Companies ignore him and the tongs don’t touch him. There have been attempts on his life in the past, but obviously, everyone’s failed. He’s a very hard son of a bitch to nail...and its even harder to identify the bodies of those who failed the assassinations.”

Ren took the seat opposite Ume and stared at her another minute or so while that same heavy silence from before pressed down around them. He rubbed his chin with his free hand and licked his lips, taking his sweet time before continuing. “He’s only protected by two bodyguards, but

still..." he paused again and looked away.

"The Elders believe Dr. Leung can cause trouble now that he's arrived in San Francisco and they want him 'handled'," Ren lifted the glass in a toast to her. At least he didn't bother trying to smirk again. "You have the...*honors*."

A knock sounded on the door and Ren lowered his glass. "Come in," he said flatly. Lau entered the office, shaking drops of rainwater from his coat. He wore a fierce scowl on his usually impassive face, adding to the already tense air.

"Elder Cho wants it taken care of by *tonight*," the bodyguard glanced from Yang to Ume and pressed his lips together. "Which means we should leave now."

Yang reached over to Ume and handed her the glass of gin, never looking away from her eyes. "Have Ching call a carriage and escort her to the bay."

Lau's posture visibly relaxed. "You're not going then?"

"No."

"Good," Lau said. "This isn't a job for someone like you, Mr. Yang. That's why we have people like her for these situations." The bodyguard gave Ume a look that bordered on sympathetic, but was nonetheless callous. "That's just business."

Yang gave a short laugh. "And it's always only been

about business.”

The office door closed behind them. Ren listened to Ume and Lau’s footsteps grow fainter as they walked down the hall and staircase. It was better than listening to the voice inside his mind that kept repeating, *It’s never been anything more than business.*

Cursing loudly, he took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes to rid himself of the image of Ume’s lovely face. Those tender, rose-colored lips that begged to be kissed, the rich sepia depths of her eyes that refused to show fear even now...Ume had been an extraordinary woman. Already he thought of her in the past tense.

Ren rose out of his chair and went to the water-streaked window. Two stories below, a horse and carriage already waited for its passenger. Lau stepped out into the rain and opened an umbrella. Ren caught a glimpse of Ume before the umbrella blocked her from sight. Blurred by the misty drizzle falling from an ash-gray sky, the red flower print on her black *cheongsam* looked too much like splatters of blood.

The cab door opened and Lau helped her inside. The bodyguard stepped back as the driver flicked his whip and the horse pulled away from the muddy curb with a reluctant lurch. Ren pressed a hand to the cold window pane and watched grimly. He would’ve liked the bodyguard to go with her, but Lau’s job was to stay at his side.

Ren pressed a hand to the cold window pane. *It's only business*, he repeated to himself.

CHAPTER 12

It was like a dream—no—a nightmare. A horrible dank nightmare that seized Ume and would not let her flee. She'd followed the man Lau like a puppet down to the waiting carriage. It wasn't until the carriage pulled away and she looked out the small rear window to see Ren Yang peering down.

When the building faded from sight Ume turned to the man, Chin who was in the carriage with her. "I don't understand. I know what I'm supposed to do but how? I can't just charge at this Leung...I don't know what to do."

Chin took out a pack of cigarettes from a hidden pocket somewhere in the black flowing material of his tunic. He lit one and puffed on it nervously while outside the rain kept a steady patter on the cab's wooden roof. "If anyone knew exactly what to do, Leung would've been dead a long time ago," he flicked off the ashes on to the carriage floor and stared at Ume.

"He prays at a different temple each day, sometimes

burnings hours worth of incense at a time,” Chin shook his head and tossed his queue over his shoulder so it trailed down his back. “In Canton, he used to claim to be a holy man---even saying that two goddesses protected him.”

Chin put out the cigarette and reached back into his pocket to take out a small drawstring sack. Inside the red velvet, what sounded like several coins jingled softly. “Mr. Yang doesn’t believe in those tales, but I worked in the gambling houses near the ports and have seen Leung. He only has two bodyguards, a pair of sisters who never leave his side. They’re only a few years older than some of the girls Po Xing keeps in the *Gingbo*, but they’ll be your biggest challenge.”

The carriage pulled to a stop and Chin rubbed the fog off the glass window to look outside. Through the misty sheets of rain, a pair of one-story high red pillars rose up along a brown door that had two gold-embossed tigers etched into it. Round windows sat in laquered frames on either side of the pillars, the glass tinted enough so the soft glow from the lamps inside showed through, but still concealed the interior.

“This is his tea house,” Chin said.

It might have looked an inviting place to have dinner. Except for the two rows of somber faced enforcers who stood in a line along the restaurant’s front walls, just under the tiled awning to avoid the rain. The mist and rain blurred their

faces and dark clothing so they looked like the shadows of spirits who waited to an unsuspecting mortal. Occasionally, something bright flashed and Ume knew it was the sharp edge of a knife or hatchet reflecting the lamplight.

Chin cleared his throat and the sudden noise made Ume tense. The Wongs' man tossed the sack of coins on to her lap, his black eyes wide and fearful. "Those men won't touch you. They're only there to make sure no one other than a Chinese enters the tea house and that none of the tongs try to rush inside in large numbers. I could give you ten handguns and all the knives you could carry, and they wouldn't stop you from going inside. Leung is that confident in his goddesses."

The carriage driver tapped the cab wall sharply, telling them to hurry up inside. Chin leaned over to Ume and whispered quickly. "The gold I just gave you is the best I can do. Pay Leung tribute and maybe you'll catch his fancy. Whatever story you tell him, try to stay as close to the truth as possible or they'll know you're lying."

He opened the carriage door for Ume, but refused to look out to the street or restaurant. "Go."

Though they were shrouded in darkness, their faces further obscured by the wide brimmed hat they wore, Ume could feel the sharp eyes of the armed *highbinders* watching her every step to the front door. And though her heart thudded madly in her chest she held her head as high as the

proud samurai's daughter that she was. No matter what this night would bring she would keep her wits about her and die as nobly as the warriors whose ancestral blood flowed through her veins.

One of the hired killers stepped over to open the door for her and gave him the barest nod of thanks before entering.

Ume could feel the curiosity and interest ripple through the teahouse once she was inside. Their glances were fleeting, their voices hushed but she knew they were talking about her, no doubt wondering why this Japanese woman wearing Chinese clothing was coming into there midst unescorted no less.

She sensed the fierce gazes of Leung's "goddesses" even before she saw them in a far corner of the room. They stood on either side of their master who sat at a small round table idly sipping tea and conversing with another old man.

Leung glanced at her and Ume offered him a faint smile and a faint nod of her head before snapping open her fan and making her way to an occupied table across the room. She made sure to sit with her back to Leung and his party and waited patiently until an older woman came to see what she required.

"Tea please and some rice crackers if you have it. She took the pouch of gold. "The gentleman in the back., the one who has his daughters with him, please give this to him

and tell him to enjoy his dinner.”

Only to keep with some pretense of good manners, the hostess gave Ume a small nod in lieu of a bow. She disappeared outside of Ume’s line of site and never returned.

Soft footsteps drew closer, along with the rustle of many layers of silks. A shadow fell over the table and a bone white hand dropped the velvet pouch in front of Ume. The cloth dropped to the table soundlessly, the gold coins no longer inside.

“Don’t waste Master Leung’s time.” The woman’s voice was cold and breathy enough to rival the bitter winter winds of Hokkaido. Ume glanced over, taking in her painted face and elaborate, gold-embroidered dress. This was one of the ‘goddesses’. The woman pulled her hand back under the wide silk sleeves and narrowed her eyes in a suspicious glare.

“He has no use for an old woman like you.”

Ume finished sipping her tea then casually looked up. ”But your Dr. Leung is a man of experience is he not? As such I’m sure he appreciates an experienced woman.”

The girl struck out by Ume caught her wrist, thankful for the martial training her father and Ookura instilled in her. She squeezed the girl’s wrist at the pressure points and a long thin needle clattered to the lacquered table top.

“You see, child, experience has it’s merits.”

Ume continued to hold the girl and clutch her wrist until she heard the rustle of more silk and then the slow clapping of heavy hands behind her.

“Now, Now, Feng-Po, play nicely with our guest.”

The girl’s tone lost its waspish edge. “Yes, Dr. Leung,” Feng-Po said softly with demure nod of her head. She yanked her wrist out of Ume’s grip and gave the older woman a quick nasty, spiteful glance.

Fingers grazed the top of Ume’s right shoulder and traced along to her left, pausing briefly at her neck to feel the soft hair at its nape. Leung came around and sat across from her, his dark eyes glittering.

“I must see this lovely face,” his words rolled together in the Mandarin tongue, his voice rich and deep. A few lines around his eyes crinkled up when he smiled, giving his handsome face a youthful and kind appearance Ume was sure didn’t reflect his heart.

“I will call you...” he paused for dramatic flair. “...Chuang-Mu.”

Ume laughed lightly and sipped her tea again. She looked at the old man through her thick lowered lashes. “Why Dr. Leung what makes you think I might be a goddess of sexual delights?”

He reached across the table and tilted her chin up with the handle of his wooden fan. “I can see it in your eyes my beauty.” He lowered the fan. “Tell me my lovely. What

brings a Japanese woman who knows the Chinese Gods into this old Mandarin's abode?"

"The tea," Ume just allowed the edges of her lips to bend up in the hint of a smile.

Fen Po, who had remained standing, covered her mouth with her wide sleeve. She gave a tinkle of laughter. "Such a coy thing," the girl's eyes flashed dangerously. "Others come for a much different reason. Usually to *try* and take the Master's life."

Leung placed his cup back on the table and steepled his fingers before him. "*Fen Po*," his tone sharpened and the girl flinched. She nodded humbly and moved to stand behind Leung. He smiled again at Ume.

"My goddesses are so protective of me," Leung reached out with the edge of his fan to run it over the top of Ume's hand. "But only a *very* foolish or desperate woman would come here with the intention to harm me." He stroked the edges of the long, thin mustache that draped along the corners of his mouth with his thumb and index finger.

"You look like neither, Chuang-Mu," his smile grew, but his eyes narrowed. "Tell me why a Japanese woman is in a Chinese tea house wearing a cheongsam?"

Ume dipped her index finger into her tea then sucked the tea from her fingertip, looking at Leung again through the fringe of her lashes. *Keep your story as close to the truth as possible...*"My husband is a member of the Meiji

government back in Tokyo. He had some unofficial business dealings with the Chinese and thought it prudent that I act as his courier so as not to rouse suspicion from those who oppose the new regimen. My son from my first marriage is here in America, staying with his father so it would arouse no suspicion for me to journey here to visit him.”

Ume ran her fingertip along the rim of the cup on the table before her and willed her voice to remain steady a bit longer. “As for my dress. It was a gift and so pretty I wanted to wear it immediately.” She sipped the last of the tea.

Leung smiled and reached out to caress her hand with his wrinkled fingers. “A beautiful woman should always wear beautiful things.” He stood and came around the table to stand beside Ume. He touched the jade earrings then let his fingers trail down the side of her neck to trace a line around the silken collar of her dress. “Such a lovely small neck. That deserves some ornamentation as well I think.”

Perhaps the next time I come to America.”

“Perhaps this evening.”

“That would be lovely.”

Another woman arrived at Leung’s other side dressed in flowing pink silks and a sky blue scarves. She looked a year or two older than Fen Po, though the rice powder masked any lines age might have made. She inclined her head in her master’s direction. Earrings made of strands of gold that dripped down to her shoulders jingled delicately.

"I've been lonely waiting for you to return to our table, Dr. Leung." She looked over at Ume and smiled warmly. "And jealous that I haven't been introduced to your lovely company."

"Sate your curiosity, Chang-O, and meet Chuang-Mu," Leung laughed. "Your sister seems suspicious of her."

"You've made Fen Po blush with shame," the new woman gasped. Ume glanced at Fen Po and caught the younger's venomous glare. There was no way she was blushing. "She wants only to keep you safe, Dr. Leung."

"Hmm," he tilted his head to one side in bemusement. "She's very considerate."

Chang-o laughed. "As your guardians, we both are." She turned to Ume with that same smile she'd used earlier, her voice sweet and guileless. Unfortunately, the warmth didn't reach her cool, vibrant jade-colored eyes.

"Please join us in the parlor beyond the dining room," she said.

"The tea is just as fine there," Fen Po added under her breath just for Ume's benefit.

Leung clapped his hands together, pleased with the arrangement. "This agrees with me. Come."

CHAPTER 20

Fen Po followed immediately after him, her footsteps on the polished wooden floor soundless save for the rustle of her clothing. Chang-O waited for Ume to rise and with another polite smile, walked just behind her.

Past the spacious dining hall, she crossed through two iron archways bordered with bamboo stalks. Silk screens with painted images of the Chinese countryside and mountain ranges divided the corridor, and Leung slipped around one with an ebony frame. He opened a pair of dark-stained doors with an elegant patina and stepped into a room with silk-screen covered windows. Gold lamps hung in each of the four corners, while a red lacquer bed large enough to easily accommodate four people occupied most of the floor space.

Leung sat back against the stack of red and black cushions, and Fen Po perched herself on the edge within arm's reach of him. Ume waited near the entrance as Chang-O closed the doors behind them.

"Now let's see..." the woman came around Ume and

caressed her cheek. "We must make sure you're concealing nothing..." She pulled out one of the hair pins holding up Ume's hair, and the black locks tumbled free.

"Very nice," Chang-O murmured as she ran her fingers through the rich ebony length of hair. Her hand wandered past the tips of the strands and down the front of Ume's dress, doing more than just searching for concealed weapons. Chang-O cupped each of Ume's breasts and then slowly reached down to stroke her hips and buttocks.

"Very nice indeed," she purred. Chang-O tilted her head forward and took Ume's lips in a kiss that was at first gentle, but quickly heated up. She broke away after a moment and wiped the corners of her mouth with her sleeve.

"No poison," Chang-O nodded approvingly, her jade-colored eyes glittering. "If you would kindly give me your weapon," she indicated the fan still clenched tightly in Ume's hand with a slow glance, "Then you are free to join Master Leung in bed."

Ume handed the fan over and gave the other women a quick bow. Oh dear kami what was she going to do without her tessens or even that poisoned kogai Ren took from her after she'd dealt with old man Jee?

"Are you nervous, my dear?" Leung asked with a chuckle.

Ume forced a smile. "But of course. You are an important man and I would hate to disappoint you in any

way.” She approached the wide bed noting the way his eyes followed the movement of silk across her body. She wore nothing beneath the *cheongsam* and the friction of the silk puckered her nipples making them visible. She marshaled her courage and went to Leung accepting her fate and praying she could find a way to do the job despite her inevitable outcome.

“She must’ve arrived there a while ago,” Lau spoke over the top of his newspaper. He sat across from Ren Yang, in the same chair Ume had occupied only an hour or so ago. Folding the paper shut, he uncrossed his legs and rose from the leather seat.

“We won’t receive any word until tomorrow.”

“What’s your point, Lau?” Yang snapped. He hadn’t moved from near the window since she left, his gaze drifting from the street below only long enough to refill his drink every once in a while. The bottle of Absinthe rested half-empty on the windowsill and he fingered the label absent-mindedly. So many men across San Francisco spent their lives in a drunken haze, but tonight Yang couldn’t seem to escape into that numb comfort.

His bodyguard’s disapproving look was reflected on the window pane. “My point is you should go home, Mr. Yang,” Lau said. “I don’t understand why you seem so troubled about this. I already made the arrangements for her

body to be picked up tomorrow morning and taken to the cemetery.”

Ren made a non-committal noise. The Chinese cemetery in San Francisco---one of those abandoned plots of land for Chinese who are too poor or have no family to send their bodies back to China for a decent burial. Ume Itou might be Japanese, but surely her spirit would linger in that lonely place as well, unable to find peace or solace.

“It’s that easy to take care of, isn’t it?” Ren asked softly.

“As it would be for any other whore working for us, Mr. Yang,” Lau answered.

Ren placed his glass on the windowsill. The taste of the liquor no longer agreed with him. He walked past Lau and grabbed his coat from the rack by the door. They left the building in silence.

Neither of them spoke during the carriage ride to Yang’s house. The rain and dreary mist left the streets empty of people and they soon pulled to a stop in front of one of the Victorian-styled homes on the outskirts of Chinatown. All of the windows were dark and the place itself suddenly reminded Yang of the cemetery Lau had spoken of---cold...*empty*.

Lau jumped out and unlocked the iron gate leading to the front door. While he looked around to make sure no rival tong members waited in hiding for his boss, Yang clenched

his jaw.

“Chin,” he knocked on the carriage’s cab and the driver leaned around.

“Yes, Mr. Yang?”

“Take me to Leung’s parlor.”

“But, Mr. Yang!”

“Now.” The threat in his voice ended all of Chin’s protests.

With a flick of the whip, the carriage pulled away from the house as fast as the horses would go. Lau shouted after them, but once they turned a corner, the bodyguard’s voice disappeared in the mist.

“Yes, come to me, lovely,” Dr. Leung crooked his finger and beckoned Ume closer. She perched at the edge of the bed near him and he stroked the edges of his mustache as his smile widened.

“What natural beauty does that clothing hide, Chuang-Mu?”

Ume gave no reaction when Chang-O came up from behind her and started undoing the buttons along the top of her *cheongsam* then down the side until the fabric fell away leaving her naked to the waist. The old man’s eyes swooped to her breasts and Ume reached up to rub her palms across her breasts. He made a low sound deep in his throat when

she pinched her nipples and leaned her head back.

Cool fingers raked across the bare skin on Ume's back, and made herself exhale a soft moan when Chang-O's lips skimmed her shoulder and her hands glided around to cup Ume's. Dr. Leung made clear his approval and the woman, Fen Po reacted.

"*Feh*," she snorted. "Any of the whores in Chinatown can be of amusement this way---"

Leung gave the girl such a look it silenced her before she could fully end her sentence. "Get out from my presence," he said coldly.

"Dr. Leung!" Fen Po's eyes widened in shock. "I would prefer to stay at your side."

"The way you disrespect me, you deserve to be at my feet," he glared. "Go."

Ume pulled away from the remaining female bodyguard. "Perhaps I should go. I don't mean to cause trouble."

"You are not my child," Leung said, undoing the buttons of his tunic. "Fen Po has been getting too lofty an opinion of herself. She is becoming possessive of me in ways that are not hers to do."

"Forget my arrogant sister. She thinks she has some ownership over master Leung," Chang-O whispered behind Ume. "Forget except what's before you as I hope Master Leung will forget Feng Po."

Ume let the woman coax her back until she was resting against Chang-O's now bare from. She closed her eyes a moment while Dr. Leung tugged at her dress from below to strip her bare. She tried not to acknowledge the way her flesh crawled when the old man's bony fingers played their way up her calves and parted her knees.

Opening her eyes when Chang-O moved behind her, Ume took note of how the other woman retained two long sharp golden sticks in her hair. As long as those sticks remained in place she might be able to attempt the task she was sent to do.

Ume shuddered when Leung's fingers brushed against her slit, and Ren Yang's handsome face flashed within her mind. She tried to convince herself that it was him touching her.

"Perhaps you are not as ready to entertain me as I thought," Leung said.

"I don't understand...."

"Leung pulled away and sat up. "Perhaps you Japanese are different? My goddesses are always wet with wanting me."

"I—"

"I can prepare her Master Leung," Chang-O offered quickly.

"Yes, do."

Chang-O got up from the bed, pushed Ume back then

crawled between her legs to tease with her lips and tongue. Though she hated it Ume gave the appearance that she was enjoying it and the more she did so the more Leung and his woman seemed distracted.

When Leung moved and began pleasuring the woman on her knees from behind with his own mouth Ume began to writhe and grip Chang-O's shoulders then ran her fingers up through the woman's thick hair.

"Take me master, please!" Chang-O pleaded, before devouring Ume once more.

Ume's heart pounded as the old man mounted the girl from behind then closed his eyes and began thrusting furiously.

This was her chance.

Ume raked her fingers through Chang-O's hair and the golden sticks dropped to the heaving mattress. While the girl cried out as old man drove into her, Ume grabbed a handful of her loose hair and yanked up.

Chang-O gasped, her last groan of pleasure catching in her throat. Ume's free hand tightened around one of the sticks beside her. The light from the overhead lanterns flashed off the gold as Ume sliced through the air with it and drove it straight into the other woman's ear. The cartilage around the canal snapped as the metal pierced straight through and sank into soft tissue. Ume slammed the flat of her hand over the end of the stick, wedging it deep into Chang-O's brain.

The goddess's eyes rolled up into her head and she twitched violently, saliva running down the corners of her gasping mouth.

"Oh yesss," Leung moaned, still grinding into the woman and never realizing that she was in the midst of her death throes.

Ume's face wrinkled in disgust and she pushed Chiang-O's body off. Leung looked up in alarm. "What are you doing?" he panted. His eyes darted from Ume's angry face to his goddess' still form. "What are you doing?!?" For once that cool voice of his had a trace of panic.

"My job," she answered.

Leung scrambled backwards, his eyes wide with horror, his dick exposed and limp. He glanced down at Chang-O as a pale greyish-pink fluid oozed around the stick embedded in her ear. The great opium maker whimpered pathetically, all of his dignity from earlier gone.

Ume snatched the other gold stick and moved forward in a graceful motion. Her heart still pounded in her chest but she moved on instinct now. The same instinct carried down through her father's proud line of warriors for generations.

When Leung opened wide to scream for help, Ume rammed the stick up through the roof of his mouth. But she didn't have the same element of surprise she'd had with Chang-O. Before she could puncture up into his brain, he

shoved her away and flopped off the bed. As he crawled on all fours like a beaten dog, Ume grabbed for her tessens among the bundle of Chang-O's robes tossed on the floor. Forcing herself to keep a good grip on the fan with fingers slick with blood and brain tissue, she lunged after Leung and slammed the metal edge into the back of his neck.

The delicate bones at the head of his spine shattered and he collapsed on his elbows, crippled from the waist down. Ume grabbed the back of his head and shoved it down to the floor. The gold stick drove upwards and severed through his brain. In a few seconds, he lay as cold and limp and as the woman on the bed.

Ume stood up, shaking but alive. She grabbed one of the bed sheets and wrapped it around herself, not giving a second thought to the blood stains on the cloth. She had to get out of here, there should be a back way...

The door burst open and Fen Po shrieked in the doorway. "Leung!" She turned on Ume, her eyes wide with murderous fury. "You *snake*!" she cried. "I'll kill you!"

Ume let the sheet fall and kicked it away. She couldn't be encumbered, not now. She'd held her fan and balanced her weight on the balls of her feet and let instinct and training again guide her.

Ume's strength wore thin as she blocked Fen Po's attacks from striking vital areas. As it was she was slashed across her breast, hip and arm. The gashes weren't deep but

they were painful.

She moved back with her *tessen* poised at the ready, stepping over Leung's dead body to put some ground between herself and the furious girl. Ume pressed her free hand against the long cut just above her heart to help staunch the bleeding.

Fen Po glared, her cherry-red lips pulled back in a hateful snarl. "You're nothing but a whore and a charlatan!" she spat. "Leung and Chang-O's weakness was to be seduced by your petty little deception! *Goddess of sexual delights* my ass!"

The girl sprang forward, and Ume just barely dodged another ferocious attack. One blow after another, Fen Po lashed out over and over again, her deadly needles lashing out in a flurry of pink and gold silks. If not for her life being in mortal danger, Ume would've thought the girl's graceful strikes beautiful, almost dance-like.

Ume gasped as a sharp tip sliced across her forearm. In just that one brief moment, Fen Po had leapt to take advantage of her distraction. The girl kicked out and made contact with Ume's hand, the *tessen* went flying from her grip. Weaponless, Ume immediately shifted into a hand-to-hand form of fighting, grabbing Fen Po's foot and trying to throw the girl off balance with her own momentum.

Fen Po smirked and whipped out with her right hand as if to punch. Ume saw the blow coming and moved to

block---just as the girl must have realized she would. The flowing silk of Fen Po's sleeve wound around Ume's wrist and the girl yanked down, pulling Ume forward. Those lovely scarves draped around Fen Po's dress became deadly weapons as they wrapped around Ume's neck and tightened around her throat.

CHAPTER 21

“Like I said---nothing but a harlot and a joke,” Fen Po sneered. “If it hadn’t been for your pretty face and this lovely body, you never would’ve been a match for us.” She pulled back on the silk and Ume went down on her knees, gasping.

Fen Po moved behind her and grabbed a handful of her hair. Ume felt a cold prick on the side of her neck as the assassin yanked her head back and held one of those needles to her throat. “No more games, *Chuang-Mu*,” she spat in Ume’s face. “Now, you die.”

From the rear, Ren Yang approached the tea house on foot and was let inside by a Wong informant. “Has anyone been-removed-this evening?”

“No.”

Ren nodded not bothering to acknowledge the relief that washed over him. He let the informant lead him

through a back corridor where Leung's private quarters were located.

Perhaps his Plum was still toying with Leung . Yes that had to be it. He refused to dwell on the very real possibility that she might within the bowels of the building subjected to torture. Or already dead.

The informant stopped dead in his tracks and pushed Yang back into a shadowy doorframe. "Listen," he whispered hoarsely and pressed an ink stained finger to his lips. "There's something going on..."

Yang held his breath. Some shouts and the sound of metal clashing against metal drifted down from the far end of the corridor. From the entrance Yang and the informant just used, two men burst into the hall, their queues trailing along behind them as they ran towards the commotion. Yang and the informant pressed tightly into the doorway as the two men dashed past.

"Someone must've broken in," one shouted to the other.

"But why is it taking so long for the assassin to be dealt with?" the other asked, his voice fading as they moved down the corridor. "No one's ever lasted this long in a fight with the two goddesses..."

Ren clenched his jaw and closed his eyes with relief. Ume was alive. There couldn't be anyone else fighting

Leung's personal bodyguards.

Fuck.

"She's as good as dead, Mr. Yang," the informant whimpered. "Just leave now while you can."

"Take me to Leung's room," Ren ignored his advice. "There has to be a secret entrance---show me the way."

"I-I don't know any," the informant stammered. "I just worked for his book keeper, I know nothing!"

"Show me," Ren grabbed him by the collar and pushed him up against the door. "Or *I'll* kill you personally, you little shit." He dropped the informant who moved down the hall, this time with no further protests.

At the end of the corridor, they veered left---away from where the two guards had turned. Large wallscrolls decorated the walls down the entire length of this new hallway, and the informant stopped at one with the characters for grace and beauty painted down the bamboo roll. He pulled the painting back and pushed in the wall, revealing a narrow doorway just large enough for one man to walk through.

Yang stepped in and drew out his revolver. The informant wasted no time closing the door behind him and Yang moved forward in the darkness. Up ahead, the sounds of fighting suddenly stopped and he rushed forward, expecting the worst.

Ren raced forward and rammed his shoulder through

the wall. He crashed into the room, knocking over the dresser that had been positioned to block the secret passageway. The lamps on the bureau top crashed to the floor, wood splintered in all directions. Ren rolled forward and lost his grip on the revolver, the frame to his glasses have twisted in the process.

So much for the fucking element of surprise. Only five years had had passed since he became the Wong's overseer of their San Francisco operation and he'd already lost the edge he once had as an enforcer. Lau would've been quick to point that out.

Ren snapped his attention back to the matter at hand. Ume and a woman---one of Leung's assassins, the one called Fen Po---struggled not more than a few feet away from him. The woman had Ume down on the floor, a noose of silk scarves tightened around her neck. Fen Po turned away from her attempts to strangle Ume, her eyes wide with anger and shock. "Let her go!" Yang shouted.

She screamed something at him in Mandarin, her pretty face twisted in an ugly look of hatred. Fen Po jerked back her arm, revealing a sharp needle in her fist. The deadly tip was aimed straight for Ume's temple.

"No!" Yang lunged forward and crashed into Fen Po. They tumbled away from Ume and Ren smashed into the far wall. Momentarily dazed, he shook the feeling off and tried to sit up. A stabbing pain cut through his midsection and he

cried out. The end of the woman's needle jutted up from just below and to the right of his waist, the sharp tip had found its way to a pressure point inside his body. Every movement he tried to make caused his vision to disappear in a pain-induced flash of whiteness.

Beside him, Fen Po pulled herself up in a mess of rumpled robes and disheveled hair. Blood dripped from her broken nose, smearing the rice powder on her face with crimson streaks. She saw where she'd managed to gouge him and she laughed maniacally.

"Bitch!" Yang gasped as he forced himself to sit up against the wall. If he didn't start moving fast----the girl beat him to his thoughts.

Fen Po flung another one of those damned needles through the air and it stabbed him through the left shoulder. His entire arm went numb.

"Was she your whore?" Fen Po snarled.

Yang clutched at the wound in his shoulder. "Were you *his*?" he indicated Leung's corpse with a nod of his head and managed a sneer just to irk the already furious assassin some more.

"Your bitch killed him!" she roared in her rage. Her hand darted under a torn sleeve to pull out yet another needle.

"How many of those shits do you have under there?!?" Yang shook his head, trying to stay alert despite

the pain.

Fen Po rushed forward and plunged the tip just above his heart. He bit back a cry and she screamed at him, spittle flying from her lips.

“Enough to kill you with!” She twisted the needle, searching for another painful pressure point instead of puncturing his lung. The tip found its target and he couldn’t control the painful spasm that followed.

“You forgot on thing,” he forced. The assassin’s face contorted with more anger.

“What?!?”

“Her.”

Fen Po whipped her head around right into the barrel of Yang’s revolver. Ume pulled the trigger and half the girl’s head exploded, showering Ren’s face in a splatter of blood and bits of pinkish tissue. Fen Po’s body dropped to the floor and Ume lowered the smoking revolver.

“Bitch,” Yang glared at the corpse as he yanked out the needle above his heart.

Ume dropped to her knees next to him and pulled out the remaining needles. She said nothing, her face set in a proud and determined expression. But Ren could see the faint tremors in her shoulders, the softest hints of trembles. Finally able to raise his arm, he cupped her chin and pulled her close. Her lips felt so warm and alive on his....

“Ume,” he breathed, closing his eyes in relief. “I

think I could love you.”

There wasn't time for Ume to process Ren's words because all hell broke loose in the corridor as Lau arrived with a contingent of Wong assassins to rescue their boss. And Ume was certain that if Ren hadn't pulled her along with him that the others would have left her behind to be a “diversion” aiding their escape.

As it was, Ren insisted that she be taken with him to the Wong family's hideaway in the hills where he'd stay until things calmed down with regards to Leung's people seeking revenge. Ren's man Lau was perturbed by the decision but didn't try to dissuade his boss though he insisted on posting himself and a small group of men at a smaller building on the outskirts of the property fronting the only access road.

When Lau had gone Ren set the latch on the front door of the small house.

“So what happens now--to me?” Ume asked, standing in the rear of the hallway with Ren's overcoat covering her naked body.

“I won't let Leung's people come after you if that's what you're afraid of.”

Ume wrapped her arms around her middle, her iron fan clutched in her left hand. “But what happens with me and Hiroshi's debt? Surely What I did tonight repays it. Your Elders will let me go won't they? They have to.”

Ren approached. “That is not the tone to take, *mei*,

especially not with them.”

He brushed some of the loose hair away from her eyes. His hand dropping down to caress the side of her face and neck. “I would expect you’ve had enough dealings with their type to know better,” he said. “They don’t *have* to do anything. And I doubt they’re going to want to let you slip through their fingers. I--”

Ren paused and thought better of whatever he’d wanted to say. But his hand continued moving along her skin in a gentle stroke, slowly pulling away the coat draped over her shoulders. He pressed his lips together as he took in the gash Fen Po had left across her breast and creased his brow.

“Its not as bad as it looks,” Ume sucked in her breath as his finger just grazed the top of the angry red line. The cut had stopped bleeding at least, but it throbbed painfully.

“You were careless,” he said quietly. “This could’ve killed you.”

Ume swatted his hand away with the tessen. “Careless? I was careless? You and your precious Elders sent me in there knowing full well that I’m not one of your trained hatchet men and you have the nerve to call me, careless?” She pointed at him with her fan. “I may have been careless but I did the job your people couldn’t didn’t I?”

She paused and when Ren did not reply she turned her back. “I’m going out to the bathhouse. The water should be heated by now.”

Ren's hand darted around her waist and he held her back. "You have too much spirit for a woman in your position," Ren murmured as his lips brushed against the back of her neck. "I want you to know...it wasn't my choice to send you on the Leung job. Your pride says otherwise, but admit it---you were just lucky tonight."

Those words might've sounded sarcastic, except his tone had a softness to it Ume rarely heard. As he spoke, he guided her through the cottage towards the bathhouse and paused at the backdoor, pulling her close. "The night air's cold," he said softly, the warmth of his body radiating through his clothes. "It won't do for you to survive tonight just to fall ill tomorrow morning."

He opened the door and they stepped out onto the narrow stone path that lead to the bathhouse. A cool breeze rustled through the grove of banyan trees surrounding the house. Ren paused on the path, pulled her close. ~~but~~ Ume pressed into him, his arms wrapping around her. She barely felt anything other than Ren's heat and the growing hardness just below his abdomen. ~~This sounds like they're hugging not walking to the bathhouse. They can stop a minute for him to kiss her~~ ^ ^ _

Inside the bathhouse, steam rose from the surface of the water. Ren closed the door behind them and then took a washcloth from the toiletry-lined shelf over the tub while Ume shrugged out of his jacket. He dipped the strip of

cotton into the water and rung out the excess before slowly drawing the damp cloth over her face and down across her neck. He wet the cloth again taking extra care to gently swab her wounds.

“The doctor gave you salve for that didn’t he?”

“Yes.”

Ren nodded then swept her into another embrace and kiss before pulling away to shed his own clothing. He stepped into the tub, helped Ume in then sat with his legs outstretched, pulling her down to straddle his lap. With feathery touches he brushed stray strands of hair away from Ume’s lovely face, noting how drawn she appeared.

“Luck or not tonight, you’re one hell of a woman, mei-mei, and your husband—both your husbands were fucking fools to let you get away.”

“They sent me away,” she said with a weary sigh before draping her arms lightly over his well toned shoulders.

“Then they’re even bigger fools.” He kissed her once again this time with infinite care, his lips softly parting her, his tongue darting out just enough to tease against hers. Only when she responded did he pull her closer, murmuring into her mouth as her sex slid across his growing erection.

He pulled back and peered into her lovely dark eyes. “Did Leong touch you? Did you have to fuck him to catch him off guard?”

“No. He had the one woman use her mouth on me then he took her from behind. I stabbed her with her own hair pin then managed to get him when he realized what was happening.”

“Good,” Ren said, brushing his fingertips across her full lips. “You’re far too precious to have been subjected to that useless old bastard.”

He dipped his hand beneath the water and stroked the petals of Ume’s sex, pleased when she responded and pressed into his touch. She lifted her hips giving him room to position himself at her entrance. She kissed him hard as she slid over his rigid length until he buried to the hilt in her hot moist folds.

Yes, his Tokyo Plum was far too precious to be nothing more than a sacrificial lamb and he’d defy the fucking Elders if it would keep her safe and by his side.

CHAPTER 22

Three days later

“Again.”

The hemp ropes whistled as they sliced through the air a split second before they sliced through the skin on Yang’s back. He clamped down on his sore inner cheek, the insides of his mouth already raw from the many cries he’d bit back earlier.

Across the room, Lau strained at the ropes binding him to a chair. Though not from any effort to run to Yang’s aid. If not for the cords being there to hold him up, Lau would probably have slumped to the floor in a bloody, exhausted heap. Then again maybe not. Lau looked up at Yang, his face the embodiment of calm despite the cuts on his lips and welts on his cheeks.

“Enough.”

Cho shuffled around from behind with the torturer at his side. The burly enforcer wound the whips around a fist Yang would swear was the size of a normal man's head. But Cho stepped in the way of his view of the giant, his withered hands clawing more than stroking at his long gray beard.

"While Leung's house wreaks on the Wongs, its only fair you suffer in turn," Cho said. The old man didn't really sound displeased, the sight of Yang's blood must have cheered him some.

"They never would have associated Ume Itou with us if you hadn't needlessly invited yourself to the fray. Now we must make deals with some our less-liked allies to handle this."

Now Cho looked upset.

He was sliding a thin bladed knife from the voluminous sleeve of his brocade tunic when a commotion beyond the door to the storage room caught his attention.. The door slammed open and on the threshold stood the Japanese who*re, her hair disheveled, her lip swollen and bleeding her eyes gaze sweeping past him to linger on Yang with a mixture of grief and guilt.

She swung her dark eyes back his way. "Master Cho I beg of you---"

Her words were cut short when the door guard seized her by the throat from behind.

"Forgive me Master Cho, the bitch nearly gelded me

with that fu*cking fan.” With his free hand the man tore the fan from Ume’s grasp and threw it to the ground.

“Let her go, Ming. I want to see what brings her here and what gives her the balls of a man to attack the likes of you.”

Ume stumbled forward falling to her knees when Ming shoved her away. She coughed, struggling to catch her breath then looked up. “Please master Cho. I beg of you to spare Ren and his man Lau. They would never defy you or bring trouble to the Wongs. It’s my fault. Ren did it for me. I’m to blame.”

“The bitch doesn’t know what she’s talking about,” Ren straightened up, the deep lashes on his back protesting against the movement with a throbbing pain. Cho glanced back at him, and he didn’t dare give Ume a direct look in front of the cruel Elder. “Fucking men, and maybe women, for amusement is the extent of her capacity.”

Cho regarded Yang with a suspicious look. “And you risked your life and the Wong’s dignity for that?”

“Sometimes a man’s desire overtakes his common sense,” Yang licked at his parched and cracked lips. “We do stupid things to please our sex.”

“And you Lau?” Cho raised his eyebrows at the bodyguard, but his lips were already pulling back to reveal a grin of yellow-stained teeth.

Lau shifted in his in obvious discomfort. “She’s a

very desirable woman.” Yang clenched his jaw. Could Lau have sounded any less fucking convincing?

But it worked. Cho snapped his fingers, the sound surprisingly sharp for fingers that looked so withered and useless. The enforcer with the hemp rope happily started unwinding the whip, but the old man glared. “Not you!” he spat. The other guard understood his meaning and pushed Ume forward.

“Mei mei,” Cho used those crooked fingers to rub away some of the dried blood from her chin. “Are you groveling on your knees for Yang? What happened to that spark of pride I saw in you?”

“I’m only my knees because he shoved me,” Ume said casting a glare back at Cho’s guard.

Cho’s laugh echoed through the dank chamber and he took hold of Ume’s hand to help her to her feet. He jerked her to his side, one wrinkled arm encircling her small waist accentuated by the western gown. He grinned at Yang, allowing his hand to glide up to caress the swell of her silk encased breast. He leaned in inhaled her flowery scent and teased the lobe of her ear with his tobacco stained tongue. “Who do you serve my dear little plum?” He squeezed her breast when she hesitated.

“The Wong Elders.”

“Exactly,” Cho said fixing his snakelike gaze back on Yang. He let his free hand brush over the bodice of Ume’s

dress then down across her torso. He pressed his palm into her skirts and rubbing against the mound of her sex.

Cho had talked of Ume's pride, but Yang felt a huge lump of his own rise up in his throat. He swallowed it down with more difficulty than he had mouthfuls of his blood as he watched that decrepit, wrinkled, *vile* old man caress Ume's womanhood. For a while, Cho seemed content to watch for any reaction Yang might show. But as his touch pushed deeper into the silk, actually sliding up in between her legs, Cho became too aroused to care.

Such was Yang's good fortune at least. He could feel the heat of his anger spread across his cheeks, the perspiration bead on the sides of his temple and bridge of his nose. His hands, bound at the wrist behind him, curled into fists tight enough to make his forearms go numb. Lau tried to give him a warning look, but Yang focused past him to Cho and that fucking hand of his...

"This won't do," Cho snickered at Ume. "Lift up those cumbersome skirts." The man who brought Ume into the room gathered up the material and bustle, revealing Ume's long and slender legs.

"Are you wet, my dear?" the old man cooed. "Perhaps under this you are..." He reached over the lace top of her bloomers, his hand writhing under the white cloth.

Ren watched as Ume bit her lower lip and closed her eyes. He wanted to close his own eyes but couldn't. All he

could do was stare at Cho and watch the old man leer and touch.

“Hmmm not terribly wet but very hot inside. And tight I think. Yesss, hot and tight just the way I like my women.”

Cho looked at him and Ren bit back the rage. But when Cho withdrew his hand and licked his thin fingers one by one, he felt as though he could snap the ropes binding him and kill that old bastard.

“Perhaps I was hasty Ren. I can certainly understand wanting to preserve such a deliciously sweet woman.” He tilted Ume’s face towards his and kissed her.

“Especially when killing her would only be a means to punish you for your stupidity,” Cho sneered. “Now that would be a waste of unforgivable measure.”

Yang dropped his head, immediately hating himself for making the submissive gesture. He knew better than to defy Cho and risk his life...or worse. That guard complained about nearly being castrated by Ume’s blow, but Cho really would have a man’s testicles cut off if pissed enough. Yang usually took any kind of disciplinary action in stride and showed the proper obsecience, but damn it---where Ume was concerned, the desire of his heart was to tell that old fuck crawl under whatever dusty hole he’d slothed out of and die once and for all.

“Yes, Master Cho,” he mumbled reluctantly.

"Will you be subjecting me to another show of poor judgment, Ren?"

"Of course not, Master Cho," Yang swallowed another mouthful of bloody saliva and pride.

"Good," Cho fawned over Ume once more, touching her cheeks, neck, the loose strands of perfectly black hair spilling across her shoulders. "Let them go and treat their wounds."

The guards both sighed their disappointment in unison, then one moved to unleash Lau, the other Yang.

Ume's relief for Ren's safety was short-lived, however, when Old man Cho "suggested" that she leave with him and join him at his house for some refreshments. Having no choice she went and forced herself to give into his whim of stripping both her and himself and serving him tea in the nude.

Swallowing back the bile repeatedly she sat on his lap on the wide paneled bed that was like a small room enclosure unto itself. She put up with Cho's touches and slobbering kisses and even managed to return his attentions to his satisfaction.

As soon as he tired of her company she headed straight for the Tien Hau temple to thank whatever multitude of Chinese gods who'd rendered the old man impotent thus saving her from actual intercourse with the lecherous Elder.

Needing to clear her thoughts before returning to

Ren's house Ume took a long walk outside of Chinatown. She wound up near the Bay and stood staring out at the water longing for home and wondering how her son was faring with his father. They were so very much alike Toshiro and Ookura, both physically beautiful, with strong forceful spirits and more arrogance than should be allowed, but where as Ookura's was tempered by a life of samurai self-discipline she'd failed Toshiro by allowing him far too much freedom.

Her thoughts wandering far and wide Ume was only marginally aware of the sound of approaching men speaking in a mix of Chinese and English until one of the voices stuck her as oddly familiar.

She glanced back and nearly toppled off the outcropping of rock she was standing on. It couldn't be. It simply couldn't. But it was. She'd know that handsome face anywhere, know those dark eyes that could penetrate a person's soul like the sharpest katana ever forged. "Ookura? What are you doing in San Francisco? Where's Toshiro?"

"He's in Colorado, but why are *you* in San Francisco? And here in particular?" he asked gesturing with his hand.

"I've been wondering that myself these past days," Ume muttered.

He stepped forward, reached out to tilt her chin up as he'd done so often when they were younger and back in Japan. "I think we need to talk," he said softly in that voice

that still had the power to reach down and touch her deep inside after all these years, after all the anger he'd shown her when he divorced her.

Ume pulled away. "I don't think I should."

"I think you need to," he said simply.

Much to the chagrin of the white and Chinese businessmen he'd been speaking with, Kashitaro Itou ended their meeting and took his former wife back to his suite at the opulent Palace Hotel. "I came to discuss a business venture with certain new contacts," he told Ume as he poured them each a glass of fine French Burgundy before sitting on the velvet divan opposite her. He took a leisurely sip and watched as his former wife did nothing more than stare down into her glass.

The years had certainly been kind to her changing her from a lovely girl in a maturely beautiful woman. A clearly troubled woman. And that is what had him puzzled. Ume did not trouble lightly. Oh she would rail and rant on things that did not suit her pleasure but he'd never seen her like this so subdued, the haughty fire totally missing from her wide eyes.

He set his glass down on the side table then took hers and did the same. She looked up her expression one of tiredness and defeat. The Ume Itou he knew never admitted defeat to anything or anyone and he couldn't fathom why she was now.

He took hold of her left hand in both of his. "Tell me what happened. Why are you here?"

He'd always been so easy to talk to, had always known exactly the right things to say the right things to do to get her to open and respond to him. And this time was no exception. Ume found the words spilled out almost of their own accord about Hiroshi Iwakura about being sent here as "payment" for a deal gone wrong, about having to act as an assassin about, Ren rescuing her from Leung's place, and that horrid old man Cho "playing" with her.

"Gods, Ume, you've been through hell. No wonder you look the way I felt after surviving the revolution back home."

Ume shifted and reached over him to get her wine. She drained it in two swallows then gazed down into the empty glass, swirling around the remaining drop of red liquid. "My life certainly hasn't turned out the way I thought it would..."

"You aren't alone on that score." Itou drained his own glass then set it back on the table. He settled back one arm stretched along the back of the divan behind Ume. He lifted his hand enough to toy with the stray strands of hair at the nape of her neck, above her high collar where some faint bruises were showing. "I've been thinking about you lately." She looked up and he offered her an embarrassed smile. "Yes, they've been kind thoughts."

He continued toying with her hair. "I often find myself wondering how things would have turned out if I hadn't gone to Kyoto or if I'd returned when you called me back."

"Don't you mean when I incurred your wrath by lying to get you to come home?"

Itou moved his arm, brushed his fingers across her creamy cheek. "Well the details don't really matter now do they?"

She shrugged. "I suppose not."

He cupped her cheek, ran the pad of this thumb across her lower lip. "I did care about you, Ume never doubt that. If I'd know about our son I probably wouldn't have left."

Ume pulled away. She got up and went to peer out the window. "You would have gone sooner if you had. You never were the type to be tied down not with your political ambitions."

"You're probably right. But I wish you would have told me about him nonetheless."

"I was a fool. I've been foolish about so many things."

Ume turned and gave a start to find Ookura so close behind her. "How is he? Is he happy? He was angry with me when he left." Surprisingly she didn't feel the urge to protest or pull away when he slipped his strong hands around her waist and pulled her close.

“Toshiro is a grown man, you don’t need to worry about him.”

“But I do. I wasn’t the best mother, in fact I was awful. It’s only the past two years that he’s lived with me steadily. I—“ She was silenced by the feathery caress of Ookura’s fingertips across her lips.

“You don’t need to worry about Toshiro. You need to worry about yourself and you need to let me help you if I can.”

“I don’t think—“

Her words were cut short again when he dipped his head and captured her mouth in a slow gentle kiss.

#

Outside the Palace hotel, a Chinese boy of about six years of age bolted down the cobble-stone street. He rounded a corner and skidded to a stop, the soft leather soles of his shoes slipping on the smooth surface.

“They’re still inside,” he panted. He whipped his head around to indicate the hotel so fast, his queue swung around to his front. “They haven’t come down.”

Yang stared at the building in silence. The boy looked from him to Lau and then back again, waiting. Lau sighed and dropped a gold coin into his hand. “Thank you!” the boy chirped, and then vanished.

“I think I should pay them a visit,” Yang said quietly.

Lau sighed loudly. "You've thought of better things, Mr. Yang."

"Fuck you, Lau."

As it happened Ren didn't need to pay his fair plum a visit because as he was turning the corner to approach the hotel as she exited with another Japanese. A tall man, an arrogant bastard from the look of him. The doorman hailed a carriage but only Ume entered it. And though he couldn't be certain was sure that the man kissed Ume before helping her alight.

"Where do you think she's going?" Lau asked.

"If you shut your mouth and get your ass moving we'll see."

Lau groaned but followed his boss. Ren grumbled his own discontent, biting back the pain in his bruised body, but he never slowed his pace until he was certain Ume's destination was his house. He leaned back heavily against the wall of the nearest building to catch his breath.

"What do you think she's up to Mr. Yang?"

Ren grunted.

"Do you want my opinion?" Lau leaned against the bricks with one hand, the other moving across the handle of his revolver tucked into his belt.

"Not really."

Usually that sufficed enough to silence his bodyguard's protests, but Lau volunteered his idea anyway.

"The woman is more trouble than she's worth," he said gravely. "She's more cunning than most, she's certainly deadly, and trouble surrounds her. Ume Itou is a threat you'd do better cast off."

"Now that's too brash," Ren squinted at the slightly taller man, but Lau refused to break the stare of his superior. "What the hell's your problem, Fah? Did you wake up one day a few weeks ago and decide to do everything in your power to piss me off?"

Lau's composure waned. He looked away, his lips pursing as he wisely held back anything else would've said, both hands working to smooth the front of his suit. "No," he said quietly.

Yang shoved roughly past him. "Mind only what you're told to, Lau. I won't take this sh*t from you." Friend or not.

Strange how love more than lust could take away a man's sense of reason. His desires could be sated by any fine girl at one of the Wong's houses, but he longed for Ume and loathed this new, cocky suitor. Lau could take his well meant advice and shove it up his tight ass. Yang stormed across the street, nodding to the two men keeping watch over his house. He crossed the threshold and slammed the door shut behind him. Drawn by the noise, the housekeeper came in to the foyer through the kitchen.

"Where is she?" Yang demanded.

"I'm right here, Ren," Ume said from the top of the short flight of stairs. "What happened now? I just got home a moment---"

Before she could finish speaking Yang charged up the stairs and seized her by the shoulders. "Who is he *mei*? Did Cho send you to fuck him?"

Ume tried to pull away but couldn't. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"The man the Japanese bastard I saw you with at the hotel. Who is he?"

Ume gave him a shove in his injured ribs and he let her go. "That is my husband—my former husband. my son's father Ookura—I mean Kashitaro Itou."

Her ex-husband.

Ren stalked past her and ripped off his glasses. He angrily rubbed at the lenses with a silk kerchief, his thoughts racing in time with his pulse. "Perfect. So it's someone you've already fucked. I'm not surprised, really."

When he was angry he sometimes shouted. When that anger was coupled with nervousness, he lashed out with his tongue. "Is there any oriental man you haven't parted your legs for?" He forced himself to smoothly replaced his glasses on to the bridge of his nose in a sharp contrasting the roughness of his manners from only a moment ago.

"Well, Cho doesn't count," he said coldly. "Even with the stick you must have to tie to his organ to get it to

penetrate you, I'm sure he can't get far."

Ume slapped him hard enough to leave an imprint of her hand then shoved her past him. She took a wrap, her small drawstring handbag and her fan then shoved past him again on her way out of the house.

He stared after her in silence. Once the door slammed shut, he brought his hand to his cheek and rubbed the still-hot skin. "Damn you," he cursed himself. "Damn you for giving a shi*t."

Lau had stayed within view of the house, but couldn't bring himself to follow Yang inside. Not with that woman in there. From his vantage point across the street in a small curio shop, he watched as Ume suddenly stormed out the front door. The horse that had pulled her carriage to this address hadn't even had time to cool off before she climbed back in and the driver flicked the reins to move on.

He stepped outside, pulling on his bowler hat, and found he had no problems following Ume to wherever *her* destination might be.

Ume was pacing in the hotel lobby when Ookura came down in answer to the summons from the front desk.. "What's happened? You look awful."

She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't. The

only thing that would come out was a flood of tears. She let him lead her back to his suite and give her a glass of brandy while he retired to the bedroom to get a cool damp cloth. He sat beside her on the divan and bathes her flushed cheeks, then smoothed the stray damp strands of hair back from her face.

“Feeling any better?”

“Not really.”

Ookura took hold of her hand. “What happened?” he asked in that deep velvety voice of his as he gently stroked his thumb across the back of her hand.

“It’s not important,” Ume said, pulling her hand free. “I just needed to get away from Yang. He was... I just needed to get away.” She set the brandy glass aside and stood. “I’m sorry for bothering you. I don’t know what I was thinking. I’m sorry.”

Ookura stopped her before she reached the door to the suite. “You don’t have to go, Ume. Please stay. Have dinner with me.”

“I’d rather not. I must look awful. My dress is wrinkled—“

“I’ll have them send something up. We don’t need to go out.”

After a time Ume nodded and managed to offer her former husband a small smile. “Thank you. I haven’t eaten all day.”

Ookura rang the bell near the entryway and a few short moments later someone answered. Ume returned to the divan and listened as he ordered a bottle of merlot along with bread and cheese.

“Please, Ume,” he said as he closed the door. “Relax, allow yourself to be comfortable while we wait. I have a dressing gown and *yukata* you’re more than free to change into.”

How seductive his voice was, making even the slightest suggestion so easy to follow. Ume retreated into his bedroom and undressed, letting her clothes fall to the floor unheeded. Inside the bureau, she found an assortment of suits and shirts, along with Japanese silk *yukatas* and a burgundy dressing gown. She slipped into this one, the soft velour draping around her shoulders and along her hips. When she turned to tie the robe closed, she found Itou standing in the doorway, his eyes taking in her naked beauty with the same gentleness of the material at her sides.

He stepped into the room and came before her, his hands slipping into the open robe to touch her hips. She sucked in her breath, surprised by the warmth of his fingers through the thin fabric of her undergarments.

“Ume...” he leaned in to kiss her, and before she knew what she was doing, her lips were reaching out for his. Another knock at the door suddenly interrupted them.

“Dinner, I suppose,” Ookura smiled and touched her

chin. He left, and she followed, tying the robe closed as she went.

Ookura had opened the door and a man dressed in the hotel's uniform walked in with their meal. The man paused in mid-step so suddenly, the bottle of wine nearly toppled off the tray. He stared at Ume with open shock, maybe anger. It was so hard to tell what his expressions meant.

Lau.

"Good evening, madam," he said quietly. "I trust you're enjoying your stay at the Palace."

"Hotels are enjoyable but I'd prefer to be home. I find I'm missing Japan more than I expected."

She watched Lau set the tray down and felt more than a little triumph when Ookura handed him a few coins and gestured to the door.

Lau tightened his fist around the coins. He stiffened, leaving Ume with the impression he was actually having some difficulty getting his legs to work. "Would you like me to open the wine bottle before I go?" he asked through clenched teeth.

Ume stared at Yang's bodyguard, now turned simple spy, in amazement. Didn't he have enough information to slink back to his master with? And why wouldn't he stop staring? Ume felt her cheeks flush with her indignation, but she forced herself to remain composed---almost indifferent.

"I believe opening a bottle of wine is within my

ability, thank you,” Ookura snapped at Lau over his shoulder as he popped the cork. “You’re services here are no longer required.”

Lau’s gaze wouldn’t break hers. He just stared, seemingly oblivious to her former husband’s words.

“Did you hear me?” Ookura turned, his tone sharp.

“Yes,” Lau whispered. “*Sir.*”

His eyes shifted, breaking their contact with Ume’s at last. He moved to the door quickly, and closed it behind him with a soft click.

“I take it that was your ‘Mr. Yang,’” Ookura said lightly as he poured the wine and handed it to her.

“No,” Ume said softly. “That was his bodyguard, Lau.” She breathed a tired sigh and set the glass down without sipping. “I suppose he came to check up and see what I was doing. I imagine he’ll hurry back and regale Ren with tales of me naked and clinging to you like...a common wh*re.” The last words came out almost in a whisper.

She looked up when Ookura sat beside her and smoothed his hand over her hair. “Why do you care what some low life Chinese thinks about you?”

He leaned in and kissed her forehead then slipped his arm around her and pulled her close and rested his cheek against the top of her head. “Surely those bastards can’t mean to keep you under their collective thumb no matter what Iwakura promised them. Why don’t you simply leave?

Go home to your aunts?"

Ume pulled away. "I'm afraid that if I do they'll go after Toshiro and try to use him or even simply hurt him." She clutched her former husband's shirtfront. "You'll protect him won't you? You'll keep him safe, I know you will."

Although it was brief Ume saw a flash of uncertainty in the depth of Ookura's warm brown eyes. And Ookura Itou was never uncertain about anything. Ever.

"Something has happened. Something is wrong. Where is Toshiro?"

"I'm not sure," he said at last. "He was behaving irresponsibly, acting out causing trouble in the town. He packed his bag and left a few days ago."

Lau moved along the door, his ear pressed to the thick wood. He searched for a hollow in the dense material and found one that conducted the voices in the room quite well.

"He what?" Ume asked. She was surprised, caught off guard. The smooth, melodic timbre of her voice wavered, and Lau held his breath.

"It doesn't matter," Itou countered. His tone also had an edge. "He's a grown man and more than capable, let me assure you."

"He may be grown in years but he's never been out on his own!"

"And whose fault is that, Ume?"

“Damn you, Ookura!”

“My name is Kashitaro now.”

“No matter what you change your name to you’ll always be a bastard first and foremost!”

Lau stepped to the side of the door only seconds before it flung open. Ume stormed away, not bothering to close it behind her and Lau reached out with one hand to push it shut. A few feet ahead, she paused on the landing, shivering under her loose robe.

A few tense seconds passed, but Itou did not follow her out. Lau exhaled slowly, finally remembering to breathe, and he came up beside her. Ume turned to face him, her beautiful face full of worry and anger. “Damn you,” she cursed again, just audible enough for the whisper to reach Lau’s ears.

“I’m sorry.” Without thought, those words of sympathy just fell from Lau’s lips. She buried her face in her hands and swayed, but he caught her in his arms and lifted her off the floor. How light she was, more like a wisp of air somehow bound in silk, than a flesh and blood woman. Though the warmth of her body proved otherwise.

Lau carried her from the hotel through the back entrance, and secured a carriage outside. When they reached the heart of Chinatown, Lau ordered the driver to pull up in front of a rundown-looking vegetable market. With Ume

still in his arms, he climbed out and disappeared into the dark shop.

"She's just exhausted, the poor woman. When was the last time she's had a decent meal?"

"I don't know."

"Poor woman."

Ume slowly drifted awake and opened her eyes. She was on her back, lying on a narrow, somewhat stiff bed. Her back ached and so did her head, but at least the lamps were turned down low and the voices were hushed.

"Look, she's awake." The first two who'd spoken back and forth had been an old woman and a man. This was a girl.

"An-mei, bring some food and tea," the old woman said harshly. "Be quick!"

"Go with her," the man spoke again, and this time Ume recognized his voice. She sat up on her elbows and found Lau sitting at the edge of her bed, no longer in the hotel uniform but in the comfortable, loose fitting clothes most of the other men in Chinatown wore. The old woman he spoke with pursed her thin lips, but nodded her silver-haired head obediently. She joined the young girl waiting by the door and then they both left.

Ume looked back and found Lau staring at her. "You

lost consciousness,” he said quietly. There was a long space between words before he finally spoke again. “Are you pregnant?”

Ume groaned. “No I am not pregnant as if that’s any of your concern.” She averted her gaze. “Toshiro’s birth was...difficult. I can’t have any more children.” She looked around the dimly lit room. “Where am I?”

“In Chinatown. Somewhere safe.”

He didn’t say anything more and before Ume could demand a definitive answer the older lady and the girl returned. The food was simple, tea, rice, cooked vegetables and fruit but it smelled heavenly and Ume’s stomach grumbled in response. “I’m sorry,” she muttered.

The older lady smiled as she set the tray down. “It’s all right child.”

The lady took Lau aside. Ume glanced at them and then to the little girl who was perched silently on the end of the bed eyeing a plump piece of persimmon. Ume handed it to her. “Are you hungry? You can have this? I can’t eat all this food.”

The girl looked towards Lau and the woman and satisfied they couldn’t see her she snatched the fruit and turned her head to eat it.

Suddenly Lau was there scolding the girl. The woman yelled at her as well and they mad her leave the room.

Ume frowned and pushed the tray away. “She’s just

a child. She was hungry what's the harm?"

"She needs to follow the rules she's given."

"She's a child."

"And if she's indulged she will be spoiled like your son."

"You don't know anything!"

"But I heard all I needed to."

"Yes, that's right," Ume seethed. "You're Ren's spy now, aren't you?"

Ever the stoic, the only hint of an expression Lau gave was to scrunch his eyebrows and twitch his goatee. "I just do my job," he said quietly.

"And that includes lurking in doorways and eavesdropping on me?" she glared. "You have no right to judge the way I've raised my son, not when you act no better than a common thief." She moved her legs over the side of the bed, fully intending to get up. Lau was suddenly at her side.

"Don't try to stand just yet," he said. "Not until you're sure of your balance."

Frowning, she pushed his hand away when he tried to lift her legs back onto the mattress. "Concern is another part of your job?" she snorted. "You're just a man of all---"

He kissed her.

Softly, briefly, their lips just barely brushing. But it was a kiss nonetheless, and it was enough to silence Ume.

For a time at least.

The instant Lau pulled away she slapped him then stood her hands balled into fists at her side. "Despite what you and Ren think I am no whore and I do not make myself available for anything wearing pants." Lau said nothing and she brushed past him. "I'm getting out of here."

"Dressed like that?"

Ume turned her hand on the door. "I don't have much choice do I?"

"It isn't safe."

"What do you care? I'm sure you and Ren would be only too happy to see something bad befall me."

"That's not so," Lau said, the side of his face where she'd struck him still a bright red. He crossed the floor and opened a cabinet propped against a corner of the small room. "I wouldn't have brought you here if it was."

While he rummaged inside, Ume folded her arms across her chest. "Please spare me," she said through gritted teeth. "I'm practically nothing to you people." That did little to explain why Ren went to her rescue...

Lau turned around, a small bundle in his hands. He came toward Ume unfolding the layer of protective rice paper to reveal a carefully folded tunic and pants. Gold and white flowers danced across the sky blue silk in a delicate pattern, the looped knot buttons a soft shade of azure along the collar.

"You can wear this," he said softly.

"This is beautiful," Ume whispered as she accepted the garments. She looked from them to Lau and gave a small frown. "Who did this belong to?"

"My wife."

Ume blinked in surprise. "Where am I?"

"This is my house."

Ume refolded the paper over the clothing and handed it back. "I don't think your wife will want a common Wong whore wearing something that must be special to her."

Lau crossed his arms over his chest. "My wife died years ago while having our daughter."

"I'm sorry."

"So am I."

The ensuing silence filled the room until Lau spoke. "Please wear those for now then I'll take you back to Mr. Yang's. I sent someone to the hotel to retrieve your things."

Ume shook her head. "He doesn't want me there any more than I want to be there."

"Don't be stupid!" Lau snapped. "Mr. Yang risked his life for you. He risked the wrath of the Elders *for you*. The only thing that saved Cho from killing him over this was his excellent service until now."

"I didn't ask for his help," Ume retorted. "And I certainly didn't ask for the job of assassinating that old lecher!" She emphatically reached out with the clothes,

shoving them at Lau, too angry to care about manners.

Lau frowned, but refused to unfold his arms from across his chest. "Do you think he wanted to send you after Leung? The elders insisted on it!"

Frustrated, Ume held the wrapped garments to herself and turned away. "Well if he was so keen on obeying them in the first place, he shouldn't have bothered saving my life."

"He loves you."

Ume blinked, letting the words sink into her brain. "How can he love me? He doesn't even know me. You're lying!"

"I don't lie where Mr. Yang is concerned though I wish I was lying. You're trouble for him. You're too impulsive, you cause him to follow suit and this business of his running off to Leung's is the perfect example."

Lau fixed her with a harsh look that made her take a step back and hug the clothing to her chest as if they were a shield.

"Being with you can only lead to his destruction."

"Then why do you want to take me back to him?"

"Because he'll want you there. It doesn't matter what I think of you. If he wants you by his side then he'll have you."

"Thank you," Ume said bitterly. "I've always longed to be thought of as property."

"He thinks of you as more than that," Lau brushed past her. He seemed to take extra precaution not to meet her eyes. "I won't say anything else about this."

Lau closed the door with a definitive bang that added *Now, get dressed* without the actual benefit of words. Ume had no more desire to protest.

The last person Ume expected to see sitting in the parlor at Ren's house was her former husband, but there Ookura was like some hereditary prince the diamond stickpin fastening his cravat sparkling in the yellow glow of the oil lamp on the table beside him.

"Hello my dear," Ren said with barely contained disgust.

Love her? Lau thought he loved her? Madness.

He gestured to the empty place beside him on a small settee. "Please sit. Itou-san and I were having a wonderful little chat about...things. It seems you left his hotel room without benefit of proper clothing and although *someone*—he cast a glance to Lau--sent a boy to retrieve them he decided to deliver your thins himself."

Ren stroked his chin and sat back against the gold embroidered cushions. "How nice of him, yes?" His eyes swept over her and the delicate silk clothing she wore. A vein on the side of his head twitched and he looked away

quickly.

“Though I see you’ve managed well regardless,” Ren crossed his legs and removed his glasses to wipe at the already sparkingly clean lenses. “I’m afraid you’ve made this journey in vain, Itou-san.”

“Hmm,” Ookura steepled his fingers before him, his eyebrow arched regally. “To be frank, Mr. Yang, that’s not the sole purpose for this visit.”

“How surprising,” Ren’s voice was flat, his eyes sharp and dangerous. His mannerisms suggested he was anything but surprised.

Sensing the tension in the air, Ume drifted over to the liquor cabinet and poured two glasses of scotch. She handed one to Ren first and the other to Ookura. The two men stared at each other over their untouched glasses of the amber liquid.

Ren broke the silence first. “What do you want, Itou?”

“Ume will not be staying here in San Francisco. She’s to accompany me.”

Ren’s glass shattered on the parquet floor.

“Like hell she is,” he growled, his hands tightening on the arms of the chair.

“I’ve been informed that she’s only here because of Iwakura’s swelling debts to the Chinese mob,” Ookura’s eyes flashed with anger. “By working with your *Elders*”-

--the emphasis on the word clearly was meant to belittle Ren's power---"and utilizing some of my unique resources to help relieve the strain caused by certain actions against the power Dr. Leung, I'll expect Ume to be released from this enslavement as recompense."

"Oh, Itou," Ren laughed dryly. "You expect far too much."

"Do I, Yang-san?"

Ume watched Ookura smugly sip his drink and she didn't know if she should thank him or despise him. Part of her wanted to believe that he was calling upon his own questionable "resources" to help the Wong Elders out of true lingering affection for her, but the glint his black eyes told her only too well that this was mainly a challenge for him. And Ookura Suzuki Itou always loved a challenge and being the man atop the heap when all was said and done.

Ume could see the last of Ren's self control disappear. He leapt to his feet, pointed at Ookura. "Fuck you, Itou. You're not in Japan, and you're certainly not running one of your enterprises. This is my house, my *city*." He glanced at Ume, his chest heaving. "*My woman*."

True to form Ookura smirked and sipped his drink before setting it aside and standing to take advantage of the height difference he had over Ren. "Your woman is she?" He straightened the cuffs of his fine silk shirt. "They way I heard her tell it she's your prisoner, you look upon her as nothing

more than a typical back alley whore.”

Ren seemed undaunted by the obvious difference in height and build. He glared at Itou as he shrugged out of his coat. “Maybe that’s what you’re used to seeing when she stands before you,” he spat.

“After fucking her, you left her to bear your bastard child and abandoned her to satisfy whatever other desires you had,” Ren added coldly. “Check those sources who’ve been keeping you informed---they’re *wrong*.”

Ume listened and watched and had the hardest time believing her eyes and ears. Ren Yang and Ookura Itou... fighting over her? She stood and moved between the two men. “Stop this foolishness, both of you.”

Lau approached and glared at Ookura. “Maybe you’d better leave here Mr. Itou.”

“That will be my pleasure,” he said glaring at Ren. “But I’m taking my wife with me.”

“Former wife,” Ume corrected. “You divorced me and left me.”

“We were young Ume and I didn’t know about Toshiro.”

“But now that you *do* know about him what have you done? You let him run off, you seemed *glad* that he was gone.” Pain pierced Ume’s heart when she saw the truth of that final fact in the depths of Ookura’s eyes. “Do you even have *any* idea where he’s gone or is he’s safe?”

Ren placed his hands upon her shoulders and she stepped back to lean against him, drinking in his solid comfort and strength.

Ookura frowned. "It appears that he left Pagoda Springs in the company of a Chinese man and headed toward Denver. In my private train car no less."

Yang stiffened behind Ume. She turned her head to face him, startled by the sudden way he tensed. "Ren...?"

"He would know the type of man who wooed Toshiro away very well, Ume," Ookura added.

Ume turned and stared. "What does he mean by that?" she asked, feeling a sinking pit in her stomach. "Tell me, Ren!"

Ookura didn't give him the chance to speak. "It would seem both you and our son are whores to the Chinese syndicate."

"We sent one of our men to Colorado recently. He exchanged a glance--a clearly worried glance--with Lau. "Shu is his name. He's one of most efficient *boo how doy we have*."

Ume gasped, whipped her head around to look at her former husband until Ren gripped her shoulders again and gently turned her face toward his own.

"Shu did not kidnap your son. I knew nothing about Toshiro and I doubt the Elders did either. If the boy followed Dao Kan it's because he wanted to. Shu is many things but a

kidnapper isn't one of them. At least not at my command."

"Where is he?" Ume asked, oblivious to anything but the worry tearing at her for her son. "Where is he now?"

Though he pulled her close, Ren looked away from her eyes. "I don't know. I wasn't even aware that anything like this had happened; not until now."

Ume found herself sinking into that embrace. "I'm scared for my son. Will he be all right?"

"I don't know."

Ookura snorted at Ren's answer. "That should be more than a good enough indication of the ineptitude in the Wong Family's intelligence. I wonder what other shortcomings you might have, Yang-san."

Ren bristled. "Whatever those shortcomings may be, leaving the woman I love is *not* one of them."

From the corner of her eye, Ume saw Lau lower his head a fraction. Ookura's temper on the other hand, flared. "This exchange of words is pointless," he glared. "As a piece of Chinese wharf-trash, you're far out of your league, Yang."

Ren moved around Ume, his face set with deadly resolve. "Get out of our house, Itou. Now."

"With pleasure." Ookura straightened his cuffs and retrieved his hat and silver handled waking stick. "Ume. Come with me." When she did not immediately fall into step behind him as she'd done back in the days when Tokyo was

Edo he turned to give her a questioning look. "Well?"

"I'm staying here until I know what happened to Toshiro and that he's safe."

The corners of Ookura's mouth turned. "Only for Toshiro, of course."

Yang stepped forward, blocking Ume with his broad shouldered frame. "Of course," he all but snarled. "A mother's love isn't as easy to put aside as a father's duty might be. Goodbye, Mr. Itou."

Lau also moved forward to escort Ookura to the door. With one last cold look, the man Ume had once loved so dearly left.

Ren stood with his back to her, unmoving and silent. She stepped around and looked up into his face, no longer darkened with an expression of anger, but nonetheless troubled or even pained. He looked away and then crossed the parlor to the frenchFrench doors that lead out to the small garden on the side of the house.

"We'll find your son," he said as he stepped out. "Then if you want to follow him, you can. I won't keep you here against your will."

PART THREE

YEAR OF THE DRAGON

CHAPTER 23

An insignificant tong errand boy was waiting for Shu when he and Toshiro disembarked from the train in San Francisco.

“What is it?” Toshiro asked when he noticed Dao Kan’s relaxed expression tighten into one of disgust as he read then crushed a small note in his fist.

“Fucking aggravation as usual,” Shu muttered before stuffing the crumpled message into his jacket pocket. “Come. I’ll show you the real San Francisco.”

The first thing Toshiro noticed on the walk from the train depot was the reaction of those they passed. It was as

if Dao Kan was known on sight by both whites and Chinese alike. Even some of the tougher looking Occidentals avoided his gaze or crossed the road at his approach and Toshiro knew that this was what he wanted. He wanted to command the respect, even the fear that Dao Kan Shu did by the mere force of his presence.

"All that stretches from the Barbary Coast to the start of Nob Hill is part of the Wong's territory," Shu spoke casually, the corners of his lips hinting at a smile as his dark eyes darted from one nervous face to another. "Or it soon will be."

Anyone else could have said so, and it would have had the airs of being an arrogant boast. Dao Kan said it in almost bored tone, as though nothing less should be expected.

"There are a number of lower tongs who run around these streets like brats thrown out of a house too small to deal with their impudence, the Chinese cites of Canton and even Shanghai their worn mothers ever pregnant with more upstarts," Shu snorted. "They find their way here to San Francisco and are nothing more than tiresome thorns trying to scratch away at what the Elders have already established. You'll find them the most common, simple and lackluster of those we deal with. None will be a challenge to you, my Toshiro."

The crowds around them became more dense as they

continued on, with more and more Chinese in black tunics and soft-soled shoes. Clay street narrowed, merchants and vendors lined the walkways on either side with baskets of their goods, be it fruits from the orchards north of the city or silk threads that promised to outlast the end of days. Toshiro eyed them all, soaking in the increasingly hectic atmosphere.

“This is nothing,” Shu chuckled in amusement as he eyed Toshiro. “The principle markets in Chinatown dwarf these by far.”

“It’s more crowded then I imagined,” Toshiro moved between a throng of passersby, his traveling case tight against his side.

“No less then three children or two men to a cot for the lower class,” Dao Kan raised an eyebrow at him, his smile widening as he whispered. “Of course, for those with more means, two men sharing a bed is done for other reasons.”

Toshiro smirked, his cheeks heating from more than the warmth of the sun shining down from the cloudless blue sky overhead. “Is that so?” he said coolly.

“This is a city of many pleasures to be had,” Shu turned right down the next street. “Many of them right here on the *Dupon Gai*.”

Dupont street must have marked the beginning of Chinatown. Every shop or restaurant or business

establishment had banners or signs painted in Chinese characters. Singularly Chinese faces bobbed in windows or moved down the dirt avenue. A mixture of smells, from the delicious scents of mixed spices to the tangy odor of freshly burnt opium assaulted Toshiro's senses. Another careful survey revealed most of the establishments for what they were: gambling parlors, opium dens, more than a few pleasure houses.

"I see what you mean," Toshiro raised both his eyebrows at a young prostitute who stood at the street corner, her face smiling, her eyes shadowed.

Dao Kan grabbed his elbow and moved him forward. "That's one pleasure I would recommend not indulging in with these women."

The girl lowered her gaze then hurried across to the market on the other side of the street. She glanced back at Toshiro then looked away when Shu skewered her with a vicious look. "Stay away from her kind."

Toshiro shrugged before pulling away from Shu's grasp. "I'm not interested in them, I have too much else to explore and learn here."

Shu laughed. "Such a good pupil you are."

Shu's flat was located atop a small restaurant at the far end of Dupont and they entered through the front. Toshiro was impressed they way the small staff began fawning the instant they saw Dao and he knew it wouldn't be long before

they showed the same deference to him.

They passed into the kitchen and Dao handed Toshiro a lacquered tray and began point to various dishes warming. The old cook scurried piling the chosen items into bowls and placing them on the tray. Satisfied Shu waved the man off then led Toshiro to the small locked door that led upstairs.

The room was fairly large, simply furnished yet immaculate the dominant pieces being the bed along the left wall which was draped in a red and gold brocade cover, a deep green divan and a mirrored armoire set between the two front windows that looked out over Dupont..

“Put the tray there, Dao said pointing to the low table in front of the divan.

Toshiro did then turned to watch the older man strip off his jacket, vest and tie.

Each shed garment dropped to the carpeted floor with a soft flop and Shu regarded Toshiro with a bemused expression. After unfastening the first three buttons on his shirt, he paused and laughed. “Is my pupil a voyeur as well?”

“No,” Toshiro licked his lips to conceal a smirk. “He’s simply very observant and interested in his teacher’s every move.”

“Oh yes, of course.”

Still smiling rather wickedly, he turned away to pour some water out of a porcelain pitcher that rested on the

dresser into a basin. He wet his hands and splashed his face, drying them on a folded towel beside the pitcher. Raising his eyebrow at Toshiro's reflection in the small mirror before him, he took a cigarette case from the top drawer and a box of matches. "I welcome you into my house and you're going to stand there in your soiled clothes?"

He moved to the window, pulling aside the drapes and shoving the glass open. He sat in the sill and leaned back against the edge of the wall, his face and body framed by the bright afternoon sunlight.

"The pupil has his *sensei*'s interest as well," Shu exhaled and stared at Toshiro through the swirling smoke. "In fact, the teacher is rather observant as well. Undress for him."

Flashing a wicked grin Toshiro moved over towards the dresser. He removed his jacket shirt, tie and then his trousers. With only the silk loincloth like fundoshi covering him he bent to retrieve his handkerchief with his unbandaged hand and wet it.

Shu sucked in his breath a little harder than necessary as he watched his young protégé tease him by swabbing the damp cloth over his torso. Toshiro was still young still almost boyish in build but soon that would change, soon enough his muscles would be more developed. More toned and far more alluring than they already were.

"Wicked boy," Shu taunted. But he shifted his

position in the sill, suddenly cramped and tight beyond what even the narrow window could dictate.

While Toshiro slowly worked the damp cloth, Dao Kan mimicked the deliberate movements with his own hand across his chest. From here, he could see the young man's nipples harden as a breeze drifted in from the window and caressed the moist flesh. Shu could feel them as well in the two firm points underneath his own shirt and exploring fingertips.

"Lower," he whispered throatily to himself, his gaze locked on each firm muscle that flexed or shifted on Toshiro's lithe body. "Move your touch lower..." Dao's hand dipped down, stroking at the taut seam in the center of his trousers.

"You mean like this?" Toshiro asked with mock innocence as he skimmed the wet cloth over the front of the silk *fundoshi* binding his genitals. He squeezed the cloth let the silk soak in the cool water and groaned as his cock responded to the delicious sensation. He dropped the cloth to the floor and stroked himself as Dao was stroking his own straining cock. "Don't you think we're too old for games? Why don't you just fuck me now?"

"Perhaps I'd rather watch you find a way to f*ck yourself."

Toshiro smirked, his gaze skimming the dresser then sweeping back over to Dao who was watching him

with anticipation. With calculated slowness he unwrapped the fundoshi freeing his straining erection and aching balls. With a languid stroke to each he moved to the dresser and slid a half burned candle from it's brass holder then took up the small covered jar of an herbal salve. He took both to the bed, turned down the coverlet then settled back width ways to give his rapt audience the best view.

"I'd rather have you," he said softly while stroking a dollop of the oily salve across the candle. Positioning one foot on the bed's metal footrail he stroked his tender opening with slick fingers, his gaze never breaking with Dao's.

"It's not...for the student to make such demands..." Dao's whisper faded into a slow hiss of pleasure.

Toshiro's raised cock and tight balls pulled away from the young man's probing fingers, giving a more than clear view of the sensitive, pink flesh. Slick with lubricant, he brought the end of the candle between his widely spread legs and continued stroking with the firm stick. With a throaty groan, Toshiro pushed the edge inside. The tight skin around the opening turned a deeper rose-colored shade and reluctantly spread apart to give the thick candle passage.

He took three inches of the slippery wax inside himself and then clutched at his rock-hard cock, stroking and squeezing the shaft quicker and harder until his come burst from the slit and trailed down his trembling fingers.

Dao Kan nearly ejaculated on himself.

He ripped at the buttons on his pants, his organ protruding out, stiff and hard and long. Putting out the half-used cigarette on the sill and then flinging it out to the street below, he lunged forward. Dao slathered on some of the salve, hissing again from the jolt of desire that coursed through him as he leaned over Toshiro.

“Such a dreadful little tease you are,” Dao muttered, reaching down to slide the candle from Toshiro’s hot body.

“I’m not teasing now,” the younger man answered, stroking one wet fingertip across Dao’s lower lip.

His desire rumbling like a growl in his chest Dao licked the salty fluid then buried himself to the hilt in Toshiro’s willing body with one quick thrust.

Both men groaned and panted, the sheets rumpling around their undulating bodies. Toshiro spread his legs to receive Shu, but it wasn’t enough. Hooking an arm underneath one of the boy’s bent knees, Dao Kan forced him further open still as he thrust forward though his entire length was already tightly nestled inside.

He came in a hard spasm and they both cried out again. Shu pitched forward, still rocking at the hips, and pressed the side of his face on Toshiro’s heaving breast. Each moan that passed over the young man’s lips echoed first in his chest, drowning out his thundering heart beat for only a moment. Dao groped between them, pulling and tugging at Toshiro’s hard cock that pushed up against his waist as he

tilted his head and licked one of boy's nipples. He closed his mouth over the small, hard nub, scraped the sensitive flesh roughly with his teeth and suckled.

Toshiro shuddered underneath him and suddenly erupted. Hot spurts soaked through Dao's shirt.

Exhausted and gasping for breath, Shu pulled away. He sat back on his heels, his thick cock slipping free from the boy's ass. A small droplet of blood beaded at the base of Toshiro's left nipple. Shu picked up the only evidence of his roughness on the tip of his finger and licked it up.

"How sweet you are," he whispered hoarsely, collapsing half on top of the young man.

Toshiro grunted softly under the weight, but reached up with one hand to trail his fingers through Shu's hair. Dao managed to slip out of his soiled shirt and kick off his loosened trousers before lying back across Toshiro's arm. They stayed that way until their breathing finally eased and their pulses calmed, the warm afternoon air drying their sweat-glazed flesh. They dozed, listening to the muted sounds of dishes clattering in the restaurant below and the shouts of people walking along the street outside.

An unusual sense of peace settled over Dao. He propped himself up on his elbows and glanced over at Toshiro. How at ease he was, sharing his bed with this young man...

Leaning down, he planted a lazy kiss on the purplish

bruises still apparent on Toshiro's throat. "You'll stay with me," Shu whispered, caressing the boy's chin. "But not in this small flat. We'll need to find someplace more appropriate for us."

Toshiro ran his fingers through Dao's perspiration dampened hair. "Of course I'll stay. This place is nice enough. You don't need to go to any trouble because of me."

He propped himself up and gestured to the food. "we should eat that."

Clicking his tongue, Shu dragged his thumb along the bottom of Toshiro's lower lip. "Such sweet concern over me," he teased, his eyes narrowing. "Don't worry, I won't ever inconvenience myself over you. We'll have a finer house because I say so."

Toshiro looked away, the hint of a pout playing across those full, tender lips. Shu laughed, genuinely amused over the nearly well-concealed hurt in the boy's face. "Don't play the role of a spoiled child. It's not nearly as attractive as the one of brutal killer."

Still smiling, Shu sat up. "Now what a ravenous appetite you have," he teased, glancing at the tray they'd brought up from downstairs. "But is it for cold food or something *else*?"

Toshiro reached out, brushing his fingertips over the nest of curls surrounding Shu's cock. "How many times do

I have to tell you? I'll take whatever you want to give me," he said coyly, bringing those fingers back up to his lips and sucking on them slowly. Any look of hurt in his eyes had vanished.

"Maybe for dessert," Shu smirked. He took Toshiro's hand and flicked his tongue over the moist fingers. "Bring us our meal first."

With a grudging little sigh that sounded more like a disappointed whimper, Toshiro rolled off the bed. Shu sat up and moved to the end of the mattress as the boy brought the lacquered tray to the bed. He wrapped an arm around Toshiro's waist and pulled him down to sit across his lap.

Toshiro watched Dao eat the way an artist would study a subject before painting it. Those same hands that could wield a knife with such deadly precision now used the chopsticks with a supple grace and fluidity that made his pulse quicken and his balls twitch. Dao Kan Shu was far from being a kind and certainly could never be a loving man but he was precise and focused and dedicated to the things that interested him—albeit in his own unique way.

Staying here in San Francisco, learning from him, even being used for Dao's pleasure was sure to be a rich education in and of itself.

Shu caught him staring, and raised an eyebrow. "And I assumed you were hungry." He squeezed Toshiro's hip with one hand and dropped the chopsticks onto the tray.

Taking one of the small rice dumplings from the plate, he brought the morsel to Toshiro's lips. "Eat. The evening is just get started and you'll need your strength."

Touching his fingers to Shu's wrist, Toshiro ate out of the man's hand.

"That's a good boy," Dao Kan whispered and stroked his cheek before taking a piece for himself. He took half a bite and then offered the rest to Toshiro who made sure to lick each finger clean. Shu laughed, clearly pleased, and shifted underneath Toshiro so they both rested more comfortably as they continued sharing the meal.

Unbidden the image of his grandmother and her pet cat came to Toshiro's mind as Dao fed and "petted" him. Of course he wasn't about to complain. No one had ever paid such close attention to him and if this led Dao to petting and stroking him in others places he would play along.

Finished with the main meal Toshiro peeled the orange that was left. It was ripe and juicy and as he peeled, the juice tricked between his fingers and down his forearm. Chuckling, Dao lifted his arm and licked the sticky juice away making Toshiro squirm upon his lap.

Dao sucked and nipped at his arm and slid his hand slogn Toshiro's thigh to stroke over his hardening cock.

"I believe it's time for dess—"

A loud knock interrupted and Shu scowled at the locked door as if willing the intruder to go away.

“Fucking nuisances,” Shu glared. A tirade of curses in Cantonese followed as the pounding at the door continued. Toshiro squirmed as Shu’s grip tightened on his arm and hip.

“Dao,” he warned softly. Shu’s hold slackened, but his eyes blazed with fury. Toshiro felt him tense as a voice called from the other side of the door.

“Shu, open this damned door!”

CHAPTER 24

“See who it is.”

Toshiro frowned a but scrambled off the bed and grabbed his pants. He opened the door a crack. I wrap a towel around my waist and open the door a crack. A tall Chinese stood in the hall the hall, to stocky guard flanking him. The man's eyes were hard behind his rimless eyeglasses.

“Where is Shu?”

“Who the fuck wants to know?”

“Toshiro!”

Toshiro, jaw dropped and he looked past the Chinese to see *his mother* step out from behind the guards. “*Okaasan?*”

Across the room, Shu's hands clenched at the tousled bedsheets. He sucked in his breath, a light glaze of nervous perspiration beading on the bridge of his nose and brow.

MOTHER?

Dao Kan rose from the bed, dragging the red sheets

behind him as he stormed across the floor to stand just behind Toshiro. He threw open the door completely, the brass handle hitting the wall with a bang that made the frame tremble. A woman dressed in a tight black dress stood in the hallway while Ren Yang and a three man entourage moved behind her.

Furious, Shu pulled Toshiro away from her outstretched arms and looked past her to Yang. The Wong leader's purpose here was only a distant and irrelevant concern in light of this. "Who the fuck is this whore?" Dao Kan demanded, his chest heaving.

The woman whipped her head from Toshiro to Shu, her painted face draining from color as she took his naked form in. Her smooth brow creased and she ground her teeth, the corners of her mouth pulling back in a frown. Shu narrowed his eyes at her and moved forward to strike her---a moment before she lashed out.

The blunt end of her fan revealed itself to be lacquered iron as it crashed into his chin. His head snapped back from the force of the hit, his teeth clamping down on the side of his tongue. He hadn't even seen it coming.

Toshiro gasped.

Shu turned back, blood pooling inside his mouth. The thick fluid ran down his chin as he snarled. "You *bitch*..." He reached out ready to snap her filthy whore's neck.

"Shu!" Yang's sharp tone interjected. He appeared

over the woman's shoulder, placing a restraining hand on her forearm then pulled her away from the door and Shu's reach, holding her close within the protective range of the bodyguards.

"I couldn't have thought of a more appropriate greeting myself for this animal," Yang said. The woman---Toshiro's mother---continued to glare at Shu.

"Perverted bastard," she whispered harshly.

"Ume," Yang snapped.

"Control this harlot," Dao's voice trembled. "Or *I* will."

"Dao, please," Toshiro said quietly, touching his elbow.

He shook Toshiro off. "What do you want, Yang?"

"What do I want...hmmm..." Yang adjusted his glasses and takes a step forward. "I want to know why in the hell you're fucking around when there's work to be done." He snapped his fingers, calling the bodyguards forward. "Take the by to my house."

Toshiro ducked under the guards outstretched arms and slid across the floor, he grabbed the knives from the tangle of their clothes, tossing the jade handled one to Shu who struck out at once. The bodyguards drew pistols. Shu stopped the knife a hair's width from Yang's throat.

"Watch it, Dao Kan," Yang growled. "I'm not some Tang lackey you can slice and send to his superiors in

pieces.”

Shi smirked, “I see you heard of our adventure in Denver.”

“You don’t share in my amusement or applaud my initiative?”

“No, I fucking don’t. And neither do the Elders.”

Shu pulled the knife away and frowned. “I expected them to be more appreciative.”

“Oh, I think they’re almost at their limits with antics, Shu,” Yang said. “I know I am. Why don’t you take a seat on that well-used bed of yours so we can have a little *talk*?”

Yang was be a fool in Dao’s eyes, but he did represent the Elders and never made a move without their authority. If Yang was here, I didn’t doubt the old men sent him. This was part of their game, and he could play by their rules---for a time.

Yang dismissed the guards, allowing Ume to stay. “Why don’t you join Dao Kan, Toshiro, I’m curious to know how many times he’s fucked your ass.”

“That’s no one’s fucking business but mine.” With a smirk he added, “Are you jealous that he doesn’t want you?”

“You’re quite the little bitch, aren’t you?”

“I think you’re mistaking him for the slattern you have at your side, Yang,” Shu’s lips curled into a smile. “Toshiro does make a good point, however. Would you

like me to stretch out your bleeding asshole for you.”

Shu’s head snapped back as the lightning quick punch came out of nowhere. Shaking off the hit Shu jumped to his feet and Toshiro did too. Yang pulled his own pistol. Shu did not move further once Toshiro pressed a bandaged hand to his chest. “At least you had the balls to strike me, Yang,” He brushed Toshiro’s hand away, but wrapped his arm around the boy’s bare shoulders. “I thought the elders had castrated you long ago.”

It sickened Ume to see the way that ugly bastard draped his arm around her son and it sickened her more that Toshiro was quite at ease, even *pleased* to have it happen. But she couldn’t deny that he was very much his father’s son at this moment from the haughty lift of his chin to the scorn in his eyes and the regal air with which he carried himself.

She grabbed the back of Ren’s jacket. He turned a bit and slipped his own arm possessively around her waist. “Your lovely mother has made herself quite useful to the family, Toshiro, you should be proud of her. If you can perform half as well as she has we may have quite a lot of use for your services.”

Ren kissed Ume’s cheek and looked back to Shu. “I’m going to take *mei-mei* to get a bite to eat. I expect to see you and your...young protégé downstairs in fifteen minutes.” Ren’s expression hardened. “We need to discuss Denver,”

he said flatly.

Shu returned the glare of Yang's pet Lau who was waiting outside the door to kiss Yang's Cantonese as* as always. However, once the door shut behind them, Dao shoved Toshiro down onto the bed. "How could you be so fucking useless?" He grabs the ivory handled knife the younger man never brandished and stabbed it fiercely into the mattress.

"In Denver, you killed without hesitation, but today you act like you barely know which end of the knife to hold," Pulling back his hand Dao stopped short of slapping Toshiro. Instead he brushed his rough fingertips over the remaining bruises left by Ling Po's man. "You were so beautiful that night," I whisper. "Why the hesitation now? Is it that woman?"

"It was a shock to see her--my mother--here and dressed like than and with that man--Yang? He's your boss. I couldn't stab them...I need to find out why she's here and how she can be working for him." Toshiro closed his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want empty apologies," Dao snapped before pulling away. "I want you to remember your promise to me."

He expected Toshiro to be fearless, fierce and loyal. He should be prepared to give his life if asked and even more prepared to take the life of another when expected to.

But above all. Toshiro was his---and Dao would not let him forget that. “Remember that *she* doesn’t want you, Toshiro,” He said in a low voice. “You told me she sent you to this country, *alone*, to live with a man who’s only claim to you was that he *fucked* her and left her pregnant. You *are nothing* to her...and she should *be less than nothing* to you.”

“You’re right,” Toshiro said after a time.” He opened his eyes and brushed his fingers along Dao’s bare arm. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Good.” Dao covered Toshiro’s body with his own, his hands groping, possessing the young man’s flesh. He yanked open Toshiro’s trousers, roughly thrust two fingers into the boy’s still slick ass, probing until Toshiro writhed beneath him, begging to be fucked once again. When he was spent, Dao pulled out and stood, pulling Toshiro along with him. “We’ll wash then see what Yang wants,” He grabbed Toshiro’s chin. “But mind him---he has the crafty tongue of a serpent.”

“I want him dead, Ren,” Ume said quietly but firmly after shooing away the fawning serving girl . She poured tea for herself and Ren. “He’s taken advantage of my son and I want him dead. If you won’t do it I’ll do it myself.”

“Calm down, mei mei.” Ren lit a cigarette and reached for one of the breakfast dumplings the kitchen girl placed at the table. “I don’t want you to do anything rash or

stupid, like getting yourself killed. You got lucky with that hit you landed upstairs, but Shu won't be caught off guard again quite so easily. That's something to remember--make sure your attack counts the first time." He took a bite of the dumpling. "Besides, perhaps your sweet little boy isn't all that innocent."

Ume stabbed a dumpling with her chopstick. "He most certainly isn't innocent after that monster molested him and you know he did. Did you see the bruises on Toshiro? The cuts? You need to kill that man like the mad dog he most certainly is."

She glanced to that little toady of a boy sitting near the door, the one who came to Ren's house this morning, "You heard what that Chao boy said about how Shu behaved...." She fell silent as the bastard in question finally appeared with my Toshiro in tow. Ume touched Ren's arm and leaned in close. "My son is terrified. Look at him. He can't even look his own mother in the eye....And it's all That man's fault."

Ren looked up from his tea to watch the two men approach. He sighed under his breath. "I don't know how your son got involved in this," he whispered, affording her a quick glance that was not as hard as it might've been. "I'm sorry, but...he'll have to be dealt with."

Shadows of the bruises he'd received at the Elders' hands still darkened his jawline and cheekbones, reminding

Ume that not even Ren had escaped punishment from those cruel, stern men. Nonetheless, she felt a flash of anger and worry. Surely he could something for Toshiro, at least for her sake if what Ren had said with Ookura was true...

"Please Ren, Toshiro is an impetuous boy and I think he can be so very useful to you," she murmured quickly. "He's young enough so that you can mold him to suit your needs...I'll be very, *very* grateful if you look kindly upon him..."

Yang looked back to Toshiro and that horrid man as the restaurant patrons and attendants both cleared a path for them. "For my fair plum, I'm willing to give him a chance," Ren said warily, his expression clouding with disgust. "But that depends that on how useful your son is willing to be."

"He's holding on to Shu like he actually *cares* what happens to that insane killer, and what's even more surprising is that Shu seems to actually give a fuck about the boy. This situation seems...complicated."

As his last words echoed in Ume's mind, Toshiro and Shu reached the table. She glared at the assassin with all the fierce protectiveness of a mother concerned for her son. All Shu gave her in return was an amused smile and a hate-filled stare as he traced the fingers of his right hand along the side of Toshiro's hip and around the curve of his backside. *Bastard*, Ume cursed silently.

With a snort, Shu addressed Yang. "We didn't come

down to share breakfast with your whore. Why is she here?"

"Her business with the Wongs is none of yours, Shu," Yang placed the teacup onto the table and steeped his fingers over the steaming rim. "You should be more worried about how upset the Elders are with you."

"As worried as she is for her son, perhaps?" Shu said coldly. "She should be warned to mind her own affairs."

"Why you insufferable piece of shit--" Ume broke off as Ren gripped her thigh beneath the table. She glared at him for doing nothing to help, for just sitting there and allowing her boy to be fondled by this bastard. Yang's hand slipped off her leg and she turned her frown to Toshiro. How could he get involved in this? *How?* He never looked her way and she pushed away from the table to stalk across the room to where that toad Chao Jin waited.

"Someone needs to kill that miserable bastard," Ume muttered as she brushed past Chao to peer out the small window.

Across the now very quiet restaurant, Shu smirked at her retreating form. "Yes, do keep your whore in check," he remarked with smug satisfaction.

"Maybe I should be a little more disciplined with my whores," Yang clenched his jaw. "Look at you---I ask you to go to Colorado and all you did was fuck things up."

Shu made sure his pleased expression did not falter.

“As well as you’ve been fucking her?” he asked.

“You’d have to ask him about that,” Yang pointed to Toshiro. “He would know exactly what that feels like since that’s probably the only thing you’ve been using him for.”

Toshiro was staring to the side, his eyes on his mother. If he heard what Yang said, he showed no sign. Dao Kan barely heard Yang as the man continued blathering away a list of threats and obscene innuendos. Dao’s smile faded into an angry snarl, his teeth grinding in anger. His fist slammed on to the tabletop, the dishes clattering and half the people in the room giving a start at the loud bang. Surprised, Toshiro jumped in his seat and Shu stared at him coldly.

“Serve us both tea.” He could barely stop his words from trembling with the anger that swelled inside of him. *That woman should mean nothing---less than nothing---to you, Toshiro.* Shu’s hands clenched into trembling fists.

Toshiro glanced up at him and nodded quickly. Though Yang pushed his empty cup towards him, the young man ignored the Wong leader and turned over Shu’s cup first. He filled it then did the same to his own.

“Here, *sensei*,” Toshiro offered.

Shu took the cup and frowned. “That’s better,” he hissed.

Yang, meanwhile, glared at Dao Kan with eyes full of hatred over this display of power. But Shu was too upset to enjoy the other’s displeasure. And things only worsen when

that *bitch* returned to the table, drawn by the commotion. Uninvited, she sat between Toshiro and Yang, her painted face set in a stern expression.

She was next to Toshiro. Only inches away.

Furious, Dao Kan clutched at the teacup in his hand to stop himself from throwing it into the woman's face. He should kill her now, but Yang would certainly get involved and would have to be killed as well. That would cost Shu too much with the Elders, and even he understood his need for their support here in San Francisco.

Suddenly, the cup shattered in Dao's hand. The hot liquid mixed with blood and splattered on the table as the glass cut into his skin. He reached out with his other hand and yanked Toshiro's seat closer to him. "Sit here," he hissed. In his rage, he didn't even feel the pain in his hand.

The woman grabbed Toshiro's shirtsleeve. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to."

Dao Kan hissed sharply under his breath at witnessing the touch. He almost rose from my chair to strike her across that face of hers. But Toshiro slipped from her grip, and Shu's lips curled into a satisfied smile.

Toshiro didn't look at her as he got up and moved his chair to Dao Kan's right side. "I don't plan to listen to you, that's for certain," he said as he grabbed a napkin and pressed it into Shu's palm. The shards embedded in the skin were pushed further in, but the sting brought with it only

pleasure.

“Good boy,” Dao whispered, his free hand dropping down to stroke Toshiro’s knee.

CHAPTER 25

Yang casually lit another cigarette. “Who do you listen to, Toshiro?” He blew a cloud of smoke across the table. “Are you just Shu’s puppet, or do you have a voice of your own?”

Toshiro smirked at Yang and his mother.

“I’m whatever he needs me to be when he needs it.” He sipped his tea and glanced to that useless Chao. “I have a voice of my own and a mind of my own and knife of my own that almost castrated your little lackey over there. I was almost killed that night in Denver when Ling Po barged in and he damn near *helped* them....”

He left the implication unspoken as he glanced again to Chao then and sipped his tea.

Toshiro’s answer pleased Shu who laughed softly, still stroking the boy’s knee and relishing in the obvious discomfort the gesture causes his mother. Reaching up, he touched the side of Toshiro’s neck where the bruises there

are an ugly reminder of how that piece of filth working for Po almost stole his pupil's life.

"Yes," Dao frowned deeply. "That attack was quite unwarranted." He stared into Toshiro's face, studying the soft curves of his cheeks and the fierceness of his eyes. "In retrospect, we should have dealt more harshly with them," he added in cold whisper. "They deserved to be punished with more severity for harming *my* Toshiro."

"Your sense of restraint leaves much to be desired, Dao Kan," Yang snapped. "After breakfast, we're all going to pay the Elders a visit and you're going to *apologize*." Shu knew quite well the only form of apology the Wongs take is paid in blood.

"I think the mess in Denver is excusable given the circumstances," Shu lit a cigarette he pulled out of the case tucked in his breast pocket. He flicked the ashes on to the table top, ignoring the bowl of rice porridge brought over by a nervous boy. "The men Ling Po represented were stealing from the Wong's business."

"Appearances need to be kept, Shu," Yang growled. "Even a small gang like that can bring unnecessary trouble to our Elders and you had better pay closer mind to my orders."

Shu narrowed his eyes, sensing an unease from Yang that stemmed from more than just a few ruffled feathers. "You've done something to displease them yourself, haven't

you?”

“I’ll warn you again to mind only your own affairs,” the tong leader whipped off his glasses and rubbed at the lenses with a square of white cloth. He was such an easy book to read.

He laughed and touched Toshiro’s. “Now follow your own suggestion, Yang.”

Toshiro leaned into the caress, smiling as he looked over to his mother. “So what are you doing here in America? Are you planning to fuck my father into taking you back? He’s quite wealthy and practically owns that pissy little town he lives in.”

The woman visibly flinched. “I’m committed to service with the Wongs.”

Laughing, Shu draped his arm over Toshiro’s shoulder. “Whore,” he chuckled. “Just a whore.”

“I think this makes for a fine circumstance,” Yang interjected coolly. “Mother and son reunited; maybe Toshiro’s father can join us as well.” He put his glass back on the table as his tone took an acidic edge. “Wouldn’t that be nice, Shu? We could all be one happy fucking family.”

“Where would you fit in, Yang?” Dao Kan arched an eyebrow. He took a sip of tea and then passed his cup so Toshiro could drink from it.

“Fuck you, Shu.”

Toshiro’s mother leaned over and said something

quietly to Yang then got up and headed toward the door like a bitch with her tail tucked between her legs, finally beaten into submission by her master. Yang snapped his fingers and two of his men left to escort her.

Shu toyed with the ends of hair that brushed Toshiro's shirt collar. "I wonder, is her service in bed is worth the trouble, Yang?"

"Toshiro should ask himself the same question of the company," Yang countered before rising. "We have to get to the Elders. Just you and I."

Grumbling Dao stood as well. "A bothersome meeting but one that can't be avoided I suppose. Toshiro stood and Shu waved him off. "You wait for me here. This won't take long."

Yang had continued on ahead, exiting through the front door just past the cluster of empty tables by the stained glass window. Stubbing his cigarette out on the remains of his uneaten meal, he narrowed his eyes at Lau, the one bodyguard who remained near the table, a silent threat passing between them. Lau looked away first, and Dao smirked before taking his time in following after Yang.

Outside the restaurant a carriage waited. Yang climbed into the cab and Shu started after him.

"Such an obedient little dog you've acquired Dao Kan," Yang snorted. "You must be proud."

Shu stopped halfway up the step. "What did you

say?"

"Another boy for you to fuck up," Yang shook his head as he faced the window next to his seat. "I'm surprised he's lasted this long."

"*What* did you call him?" Dao Kan's voice dropped to a low whisper.

Yang faced him, his brows knotting behind the round frames of his glasses. "I called him a *dog*, Shu. He could never be anything more than that to a bastard like you."

"Don't you fucking dare!" Dao Kan exploded. The horses gave a start at his shout and the two attendants outside rushed to steady the carriage. "The filth he skims off his shoes is not worth half of your value, you piece of *shit*."

My god," Yang said dryly. "Are you offended?"

"Loathing for Yang filled him, the emotion bitter and almost palatable in his mouth as he spoke. "Don't *fuck* with me, Yang, unless you're ready to bend over and take it up the ass," he spat. "If you *ever* speak of him that way again, so fucking help me, I'll do it with a heated poker and watch as your insides smolder."

Shaking with fury, Dao Kan jumped down from the carriage. Yang leaned out the open door, his face white with rage.

"Shu!" he shouted. "Come back here!"

Two of the attendants moved to stop Shu from walking away, but one look from him sent them cowering

back to the carriage. A wise decision for their own safety--in the temper he was in, Dao would have killed them both on the spot right here in the open. Already the fingers on his right hand tightened around the handle of the knife tucked into his jacket.

"The Elders know where to find me," he turned away from Yang. "I'm not wasting this evening in their company or yours."

No further protests came, and Shu disappeared among the crowded street.

Toshiro was unlocking the door to Dao's flat when a man called to him from the bottom of the stairs.

"Boy, wait."

It was Yang's man, Lau. "What do you want?"

"Mr. Yang wants you to go to his house and wait with your mother until the meeting is over."

"Shu told me to wait here."

Lau's eyes narrowed. "Shu works for Mr. Yang. They'll both be going to house once the meeting with the Elders is done. Come."

Toshiro stayed put. He'd missed his mother more than he'd realized until he saw her earlier. And though he never thought he could be afraid for her, he was, especially after the way Shu looked at her when she hit him with her tessen. And he was sure that useless fuck Yang wouldn't

protect her if it came down to her or him being in front of Shu's blade. If she said anything rude to him at Yang's house—and she would...

"All right. I'll go."

Ume could have kissed Lau when he brought Toshiro to her, but as it was she simply returned his late wife's garments which she'd cleaned and pressed herself. "Thank you, for everything," she said casting a glance at Toshiro who sat on the divan, his handsome face colored with a morose expression. Lau simply nodded and excused himself

She sat beside her son and tried to tale hold of his hand. He pulled away and glared at her much as he had the day she watched his ship depart Yokohama for America. "Toshiro, please don't do this. I know you're still angry at me, but I thought it was for the best—"

"The fuck you did!" He got up and stalked over to the front windows then spun and hit her with a look that was purely his father's. "You wanted me gone. I was a burden to you and in Iwakura's way."

"I was wrong! I know that now. Why can't you forgive me?"

"Why should I? What's it going to do?"

"It's going to give us both piece of mind." Ume rose from the divan and moved toward him. She reached to touch

his bruised face only to have him jerk away. "Look at you! Look what's happened to you since you've been with that Shu. He's horrible. Toshiro. Stay away from him!"

He impaled her with a look so similar to the one his father had the day he divorced her that Ume felt her heart tear open like never before.

"Don't you tell me what to do! You don't know anything! Dao Kan is the first person in my entire life to ever want me around. He appreciates me. You disgust me."

"Toshiro."

Ume stepped back, folding her hands together in front of her. Such hurtful words---and he'd meant each one of them.

She blinked quickly to hold back the tears that threatened to work their way past her lashes. Ever proud, she wanted her son's love, not his pity. Was it too really too late to be the mother youth and ambition had prevented her from being?

"I can't believe you'd hate me so much," she said quietly, her heart aching dully inside her breast.

"Well I *do*," he shot back, despite the twinge of protest deep in his own heart.

He'd always wanted her attention, her affection and now she was offering it but at what cost? He wanted to be with Shu. Shu was exciting, powerful, he potential to be on top of anything he did and Toshiro wanted more than

anything to partake of it all with him.

“You’re so much like your father right now.”

Ume kept her chin high, her shoulders square. Only her voice sounded broken, and the small smile she gave him looked sadder than any expression of grief he’d seen her wear before.

“I don’t give a shit.” Toshiro meant that more for the pain growing inside of him, and he looked away. The sun was setting behind the house washing the Eastern-facing garden in grays and dull purples. Even the rose blossoms lining the iron fence were colorless, cheerless...

“Ah,” Ume sighed in soft agreement. “I just want you to be happy--.”

“Leave him alone.”

They both turned to the drawing room’s entryway where the cold voice had come from. The French doors hung open, a long shadow stretching across the navy blue runner that fed in from the hall. Shu stood with his arms hanging down at his sides, shoulders tense beneath the black coat. He moved forward slowly, his eyes trained on Ume.

“Get away from him, you filthy *bitch*.” Dao Kan never spoke above a whisper. “I won’t let you poison his mind.” His hand tightened into a fist around something.

Toshiro’s pulse quickened. *Oh, no...*

“Get out of this house,” Ume muttered, stepping forward, pausing to grab her iron fan from the end table.

Shu reached into his jacket.

Toshiro rushed past his mother to place himself between them. "Dao Kan, please."

"Insolent *bitch*," Shu seethed at Ume, giving no sign he'd heard Toshiro.

Dao Kan grabbed him by the elbow, yanking him away from Ume's approach as he continued moving forward. "Satisfy your aging cunt with Yang's flaccid cock and stop fucking with *him*." He squeezed Toshiro's arm and pulled him close, almost protectively.

"By chance alone you birthed him, now burden him no more with your *useless* existence. Crawl off and die along with the rest of the diseased whores in the back alleys of Chinatown."

"How *dare* you talk to *me* that way?"

The words had barely left Ume's lips when Toshiro spun out of Shu's grasp and punched him full force in the mouth. the older man staggered back, blood trickling from his lower lip.

"You raise your hand to *me*?"

"My mother is no cheap whore. I won't have anyone talk that way about her. Not even you."

"Hmph."

Shu wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand and spat a wad of blood onto the hardwood floor at Ume's feet. "For such a loveless and uncaring mother, it's a waste

of concern,” he hissed. “Tell me Toshiro, did she worry over your welfare on those long nights she spent fucking your stepfather?”

Heavy footsteps echoed in the hallway and Lau burst into the room. “Ume---” he came up beside her, his face flushed from the quick run. “Shu, what’s going on?”

“Nothing of your concern.”

Dao Kan turned away and crossed the floor. He paused at the doorway, and called over his shoulder. “Toshiro. Come.”

“Toshiro, don’t” Ume pleaded. “He’s a monster. He’ll hurt you more than he already has.”

Toshiro gave her a long cold look. “He wants me more than you ever did.” With that he turned and followed Shu out.

Ume looked to Lau. “I’m afraid for him. Isn’t there *something* Ren can do?”

“The Elders value Shu’s *efficiency* in certain matters. We’ve gained quite a bit of territory since he joined us last year.”

Ume crumpled onto the nearest chair. “I’m so afraid for Toshiro.”

Lau placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’ll try to talk to him. Perhaps he’ll listen to someone other than you.”

CHAPTER 26

Bells rung out on the docks, their deep metallic song echoing in the evening air. The last of the sunlight made a lazy streak of orange near the horizon line while workers closed the gates to the warehouses lining the pier in preparation for nightfall. A man in a drab, soot-covered shirt went down the walkway, lighting the lamps with a long, thin match.

Ren Yang dropped his cigarette into the foamy water below the walkway and watched it disappear into the blackening depths of the Pacific Ocean. Sighing, he leaned against the wooden rail and closed his eyes.

He never went to the meeting with the Elders. After Shu's bizarre little temper tantrum, Ren had fully intended to go and insist the mother fucker be dealt with. Permanently. The man was an excellent assassin, but insane---a liability. By now even Cho must realize that.

However, by association Toshiro would be

considered a problem as well. And Ren would not watch as Ume suffered the unnecessary death of her son. So instead he ordered the carriage driver to continue on past the house where the Elders waited, and let them continue waiting away the rest of the afternoon.

"Things were far simpler without you, *mei*," Ren whispered. It didn't matter that they would be less enjoyable, less fulfilling. He looked down the walkway towards the rolling waves that had brought her to San Francisco. They would be the same ones to carry her back to Japan.

Going against any measure of common sense or desire for self-preservation, Yang left the Wong's pier without the accompaniment of any bodyguards. If any rival tong wanted their chance at a Wong leader, they could have it. Recklessly, he took the longest path back to Chinatown, frowning bitterly as the familiar territorial markings of the *poisoned dragon* started appearing in shop windows and restaurant doors. Ren reached his house without event, his mind no less troubled after the lengthy walk.

No censure from Lau waited for him as he nodded in greeting to the two guards positioned outside. There was no sign of his faithful if not damn over-protective friend. Inside, he found the dining room prepared for dinner but otherwise empty. The cook saw him and rushed to bring him fresh tea, but he waved the old woman to stop.

"Where is she?" The cook knew he meant Ume.

When the old woman indicated she was upstairs, Ren went up and knocked on the only door he found closed. “Ume,” he said. “What’s going on?”

She did not reply and he pushed open the door to find her standing near the front window, her lovely face cast in shadows of the fading daylight that could not hide the stain of tears upon her smooth cheeks.

Ren stepped into the room, pulling the door shut behind him. “Talk to me *mei*.”

She turned to face him and he felt his heart gripped with a concern he’d rarely felt for another in his years on this earth.

“He hates me, Ren. My son absolutely loathes me and I can’t blame him.”

“Oh, *mei mei*,” he whispered, coming to stand behind her.

He gathered her in his arms for a deep embrace, cradling the back of her head as she buried her face against his chest. The warmth of her tears seeped through his shirt as she sobbed softly.

“He’s a foolish boy, Ume,” he comforted her between soft kisses on the top of her head. “That’s all. Pay him no mind.”

She looked up at him. “How can I, Ren? He’s all I have in this world. He’s the only son I can ever have and he’s at the mercy of that animal who works for you. That bastard

came here. He insulted me enough so that Toshiro punched him and still he let Shu lead him away.” She knotted her thin fingers in his shirt. “You have to do something. Your Elders have to do something about that man!”

“It’s complicated, Ume. Whatever short comings Shu has as a human being, he is very good for business.”

Ume pulled away her lovely face a mask of revulsion. “Short comings? *short comings*? That man is an animal. Less than an animal. He must be stopped!” She wiped her face, went to the armoire and grabbed a silk shawl and her tessens then rushed toward the door.

Ren ran to block her way.. “Ume, what are you trying to do?”

“I’m going to save my son! If you won’t do it then I’ll beg old man Cho to do something. I’ll do whatever it takes to make him listen to me. If he wants an assassin I’ll get Ookura to send one of his Yakuza friends. I’ll *be* that assassin if I have to.”

Ren listened with growing alarm. He was shaking his head even before she’d finished speaking. “No. Absolutely not.”

“I’m not asking your permission!” Ume tightened the shawl about her.

“Good, because I’m not giving it!” Ren grabbed her shoulders, hoping to get some sense into her while he could.

"This is foolish---you're no assassin. For all your skills, Leung's dogs nearly killed you! Do you think sex is weapon enough to murder Shu? Or *this*?" He knocked the tessen out of her hand and clattered to the floor.

"Whatever's passing between your son and that bastard, I can tell you Toshiro is not in mortal danger. But Dao Kan *will* kill you. Don't you understand that?"

"I don't care! You can't possibly understand what is is to fear for a child. Toshiro is all I have. He's *all I have*!"

"Damn you, *mei*!" Ren shook her. "You have me--- you'll *always* have me. Does that mean nothing?"

He broke away from her, his heart thundering in his chest. "Forget this," he said hoarsely. "Just go. You've never had any desire stay and I'm not going to force you to remain here as a prisoner." He turned his back, stared out the window. "Your beloved Ookura bought your freedom from Cho so take it."

The smell of lamp oil hung heavy in the air of the now disheveled flat above the restaurant on Dupont Street as Dao Kan Shu continued to break whatever lay in his path of destruction. Breathing heavily, his face dripping with sweat he threw over the divan and kicked it into pieces then turned his wrath on the bed Toshiro sat upon, but the iron frame refused to give into his rage.

Having no more external victims Shu turned his anger upon himself and tore at this clothing, tearing his jacket, vest, shirt and tie to shreds. He stopped only when his eyes caught a small lacquered box that had fallen from his jacket.

“Are you finished?” Toshiro asked quietly. “Will you let me clean this mess now so we can have a decent place to sleep?”

Shu whipped his head around, his dark eyes wild. “You mean you aren’t going to sleep with your mother and Yang so they can protect you from my evil clutches?”

“Stop being ridiculous. I came back here with you didn’t I?”

Shu seized him by the throat but Toshiro refused to show fear. Dao Kan would not hurt him, of that he was certain.

“You should *not* have been there to begin with!. You left after I specifically told you to wait for me *here!*”

Toshiro pried Dao’s fingers from his throat one at a time then stood to look the older man in the eye. “Let’s get one thing straight. I’m here because I *want* to be. You are not my master and I won’t let you act like one.”

“Of course,” Shu said throatily. He touched the swollen edge of his mouth, flicking dried blood off with his trembling fingertips. “You’re all too happy to show off your independence. Or is it your *indifference*?”

Toshiro frowned, but bit his tongue. Dry, angry laughter burst out of Shu.

“Had anyone else had so much as touched me, let alone had the audacity to strike me, I would’ve *bitten* off each of their fingers and watched the blood flow from their mutilated hands,” he snarled. “Instead, you’ll be fucked long into the night, and enjoy it. You clever, wicked thing.”

When Dao Kan stepped away, Toshiro could see the outline of a semi-hard erection already straining at the seam of Dao Kan’s trousers.

Still muttering angry threats and hateful curses, Shu dropped down to his knees on the floor and took up the palm-sized box that had fallen out of his coat amidst the battered litter. A tiger from the Chinese zodiac was etched into the black lacquer in flowing red lines, surprisingly intricate given the small width of the surface. Shu flipped it open and shook out whatever was inside into his hand before tossing the box to break apart against the wall.

“I spent the afternoon searching for this.” Dao held up a silver tie pin, elegant with its faceted edges and the small pearl set at the head. “A gift for a deserving pupil. Maybe I can find another more appropriate purpose for it now.” He dragged the sharp tip across his palm, reopening the wounds from the cut glass.

Toshiro watched as Dao made another cut and another then raked the sharp pin up along his forearm. He

slid off the bed and reached over to stay Dao's hand when the older man raised the pin to his neck. "Don't do this."

"Don't make any *fucking* demands of me. I've warned you before." Shu dropped the pin, his hand darting up to Toshiro's face.

Toshiro tensed, ready to deflect the blow when it came, but the touch was gentle, a stroke across his cheek made with sticky fingers coated in drying blood.

"No one I've ever known before can take this, or welcome it as you do," Dao whispered. "How many of the fools in this city could last? Curs like Chao break in a week, sycophants like Yang even less. That's why I want you here with me now. And I won't have anyone try to take you from me, ever."

"I'm not going anywhere. We're a team now."

"Yes," Shu hissed softly, cupping his other hand along the other side of Toshiro's face. "That's my Toshiro. My Toshiro."

Dao Kan repeated it over and over as his thumbs rolled along the bottom of Toshiro's lips and faint hint of a cleft dimpling the chin. Shu leaned forward, brushing his mouth along the path his fingers made.

Sighing gently, Toshiro touched Dao's wrist and tilted it up. He brought the man's injured palm to his lips, kissing it. He ran his fingers through Shu's sweat dampened hair. "Why don't you take a bath and I'll straighten some of

this mess.”

“Leave it,” Dao reached behind Toshiro’s head, dragging down the rumpled coverlet and sheets to the floor. “Leave it all the way it is. Never change.”

He pushed Toshiro back to lie against the sheets.

It was well after midnight when Ren left the *Gingbo*. He ordered Lau not to accompany him despite the other man’s protest. His personal safety didn’t matter any more, nothing seemed to matter much any more. What a pathetic thing he’d been with the *Gingbo*’s best whores eager to slave over him and he’d pushed each and every one away, preferring instead to sit in the dark and drink, his only companion the memory of Ume’s tear streaked face.

The men seated outside his house jumped to attention when Ren approached. He barely acknowledged their presence as he let himself into the silent house. A faint yellow lantern glow was visible behind the staircase. His house keeper must be waiting up like the old mother hen she was. “I’m home (grandmother?) go to bed,” he called before stripping of his tie and heading up the stairs.

“I sent her to bed hours ago.”

Ren froze and turned toward the banister, his heart thudding as Ume appeared.

“I couldn’t sleep so I decided to have a cup of tea.”

“Why here?” Ren asked sharply. “I’m surprised you aren’t with your beloved husband letting him f*ck you into the dawn.” The words hit their intended target dead center and Ume cast her gaze down, but Ren did not waver. He couldn’t. After a time she looked up and he wished to hell she hadn’t.

“I packed my things. I called for a carriage, but I couldn’t do it. I don’t want to go to him. Ookura puts himself first and always. He doesn’t want me, he never did. He married me to get my father’s name and dojo.

“Then go to Master Cho. I’m certain he’ll have a place for you. He might even set you up in your own house and you can have your precious son with you.” Ren refused to acknowledge the hurt in Ume’s eyes or the aching of his own heart when she breathed a long weary sigh and looked down to the floor once again.

“Yes, I suppose I should since I obviously made a mistake in thinking you wanted me.” Still looking down, she wiped her eyes and hurried off to the kitchen.

“It wouldn’t be the first mistake you’ve made,” he called after her, instantly regretting the words as he said them.

He was such a hypocrite. Not an hour ago he longed for her company, her touch...Just imagining his life without her had left him feeling more devoid of happiness and full of grief then he’d ever felt before. And here he was trying to

wound her as deeply as she had him.

“Fuck,” Ren cursed himself for being such a fool.

Inside the kitchen, Ume wept. Her sloping, graceful shoulders bobbed up and down with each gentle sob, her face lay buried in her hands. Ren paused in the entryway, mindful of the lump that rose in his throat as he watched her suffer so much heartache only a few feet before him.

“Ume,” he said hoarsely. “I don’t want you to go. That’s what I told you earlier.”

Ren went to her and took one of her wrists in each hand. “My fairest plum,” he whispered. “I...love you.”

She cried harder and clung to him the way a drowning man clings to a life preserver. He stroked the top of her head and told her it would be all right, that she was welcomed here. Needed here.

After a time she looked up. “But what of Toshiro?”

Ren dried her tears with his fingertips then gave her hands a gentle tug until she stood. He wrapped his arms around her and held her close, vowing to keep her with him always. “Don’t worry. I’ll look out for him and so will Lau.”

CHAPTER 27

A ray of sunlight found its way through the curtainless window and hit Toshiro right in the eye. He clamped his eyes shut again and turned over, groaning as his shoulder pulled on the sheet and his hand throbbed like a bitch in heat. The air of the small room was thick with the lingering scents of sweat, opium and sex.

Toshiro rubbed his eyes and opened them to look at Dao Kan sound asleep beside him on the floor and snoring lightly. He almost looked like a peaceful little boy.

Almost.

Propping himself up on one elbow Toshiro took in the destruction Dao had wrought the night before. It looked like the work of a madman.

“Look at you! Look what’s happened to you since you’ve been with that Shu. He’s horrible. Toshiro. Stay away from him!”

Toshiro looked at his bandaged hand colored once again with the blood from the cuts Shu had given him that

night in Denver. He reached back and touched the rear of his shoulder where Shu had etched the characters for Dragon and Power into his flesh. It was totally insane on the surface but a part of Toshiro welcomed the pain, welcomed the satisfaction that he alone was able to take it, even savor it over the others Shu had known, especially that little bastard Jin Chao.

Slowly untangling himself from the rumpled sheets and Dao's limbs, Toshiro rooted around in his discarded clothing for his pocket watch. It was almost noon. Pulling on his trousers he gathered up some clean clothing then went to wash in the room at the end of the small hall. Afterward he went down to the restaurant intending to have a quick meal and to order something to take up to Dao later.

"Toshiro, wait."

From the edge of the kitchen, a man dressed in suit of pressed umber-colored tweed called out to him. The man unfolded his arms from across his chest and took a few steps forward. It was yang's lapdog, Lau.

Toshiro frowned at the bodyguard. "What do you want?"

"Are you alright?"

"What?"

"Your mother worries for you, still" Lau's deep voice carried across the clattering of dishes and banging of pots coming from the cramped kitchen behind him.

“My mother worries about no one but herself.”

A nervous looking cook darted between him and Lau, bearing a heavy tray with stacks of bamboo steamers filled with dumplings. Toshiro watched him run the tray back and forth between the crowded tables before looking back at the bodyguard. “Is that all? I have business to see to.”

“Why are you so cruel to her?” Lau furrowed his brow as he stared down at Toshiro. “She cares for you and all you show her is contempt instead of respect or affection. How unfortunate for her to be mother to such a spoiled child.”

“Go back to kissing Yang’s ass and leave me alone,” Toshiro muttered, pushing past the bodyguard to go claim a table in the main room of the restaurant.

Toshiro hit Lau with a vicious look when the older man sat on one of the backless seats across from him. “Maybe your English isn’t so good,” he said before repeating his earlier comment in Cantonese. Lau’s frown brought a smirk to Toshiro’s face.

When the little man from the kitchen came to take his order Toshiro ordered for himself, dismissing the waiter before Lau could speak.

“Such balls you think you have, boy,” Lau said. “Shu will take those from you soon enough and then you’ll be no better than the cowering little whores for sale in the *barracoon*.”

Toshiro snorted. "I'll see you there first, asshole."

When the waiter returned and placed a cup of tea before Toshiro, Lau reached across the table and pulled the glass out of reach. "Is this a game to you? Maybe by hurting your mother, you feel more important than you really are?"

Lau pressed his lips together and exhaled slowly through his nose. Toshiro glared.

"Fuck off," Toshiro glared. "You're no one to be lecturing me."

"It's not a lecture if you'd *listen* like a man and not pout like a rotten child you'd know that Shu is insane---he'll hurt you. Ume knows this."

"And who are you to address my mother with such familiarity? Is she your whore as well as Yang's?" Toshiro paused and gave Lau and even colder look. "Is there a man alive besides myself and Dao Kan that she hasn't fucked to get her way in this world?"

"You damned fool," Lau shook his sadly. "Is that what you really think of her?" He regarded Toshiro with a somber expression.

"She was prepared to die for you, you know. From the moment she felt you were in danger, she would've faced the demons of hell themselves to keep you safe from that madman."

Lau sighed. "And you mock her."

Toshiro glared again then snatched back his tea cup. He took a sip then stared down into the murky liquid, trying not to remember how his mother had so boldly stood up to—the way she attacked Shu with her tessens... “It’s not that I really hate her or anything...”

“Whatever mistakes she may have made as a young mother, don’t be angry with her to mask your own self-pity, Toshiro,” Lau continued. He paused when the cook returned to the table and placed a piping-hot steamer on the empty spot in the center.

Toshiro lifted off the thin bamboo cover. He stared down at the four small, ear-shaped and white dumplings resting on the lotus leaf inside, but couldn’t muster his appetite.

“Ume is proud and stronger than what might be best for her,” Lau said. “But she cuts as easily as any woman, and as her son, your knife will always be sharpest.”

Toshiro glanced up but didn’t say anything. What could he say? Lao was right damn him, his mother had shown only concern these past days. She had written him after he left Tokyo but he hadn’t bothered opening the mail let alone replying.

Lau rested his elbows on the table and they just sat there in silent thought, the restaurant buzzing around them. The cook returned one last time with a cup of tea for Lau, who accepted with a nod of thanks.

“Here,” Lau reached across the table for Toshiro’s chopsticks and served out one of the dumplings on an orange-rimmed plate. “Wasting a good meal is only thing more unforgivable than upsetting a good mother.”

It was a poor attempt at a joke, but Toshiro smiled anyway and took the chopsticks.

“I’m sorry I spoke so familiarly of her,” Lau said, “but the love I see inside of Ume reminds me of someone else I knew very well.” He paused as if to consider his words, and then added, “I still miss her.”

“I’m sorry.” Toshiro toyed with the dumpling on his plate and let the silence such as it was in the busy restaurant fall over them again. But it wasn’t a strained or awkward silence. It was comfortable almost the same type of thing Toshiro had experienced back home with his friends. Just being near them was enough companionship there wasn’t any real need for conversation at times.

Some tong men came in to eat and Lau excused himself a moment to speak with them and Toshiro was struck by the friendliness in the man compared to the stoic he was when around Yang and Toshiro decided that this must be the “real” Lau as opposed to the “working” Lau.

When the older man returned he politely asked if he could have the remaining dumplings since Toshiro seemed uninterested. “Be my guest. I’m not too hungry, he said, lifting the extra plate the waiter had brought earlier.

“Those men have families in Canton,” Lau pointed with the top ends of his chopsticks over to the tongs at the nearby table. “They’ve pledged themselves to the Wongs in return for their wives and children to be brought over safely. Its better for them this way because the Six Companies often limit the number of family memembers who can enter the city’s port. The Companies are good men, but too concerned with satisfying the political interests of the rest of San Francisco.”

By the rest, Toshiro knew he meant the non-Chinese, or non-Asian for that matter, portion of society. He chewed thoughtfully on a beansprout, still crispy even after having been steamed inside the *har gau*. “The Wongs do some good then too.”

“Yes,” Lau nodded slowly. “But for these good things, those men over there are expected to make a lot of sacrifices. They’re willing to d*e, if need be.”

“I know,” Toshiro said quietly.

“But for the ones they love, that sacrifice is very small.” By they, Toshiro knew Lau meant Ume as well.

“They could just forget about them,” Toshiro scrunched his brows together. “Maybe their family can take care of themselves.”

“You’re young but I doubt you’re stupid, so why say such things?”

Toshiro shot Lao an angry look then signaled the

waiter for more tea. "Do you know why she's here? Why she's 'in service' to the Wongs as Yang said."

"I imagine it's a complicated affair as such things often are."

Toshiro frowned and sipped his tea. It had something to do with Iwakura. There was no other explanation. The bastard was involved in a great many "questionable" things on behalf of certain members of the new Meiji government. He put down his cup of the clear, gold colored liquid from which the fragrant scent of chrysanthemums drifted up with the steam. "Why didn't she just stay in Japan? No one can force my mother do something she doesn't want to." Toshiro found he spoke with pride. His mother *was* strong in will and character, just as Lau had said. When he thought about it, Toshiro was the same way. As angry as he could be with Ume, he missed her and he did love her.

"Maybe that's a question better asked by her son." Lau gave him a short, half-smile that could've been happy or sad or neither emotion at all. "Though I know why she stays." Lau sipped his tea then set the cup down and gazed coolly at Toshiro. "What she cares about most in this world is here. What she cares about most is you, boy, don't belittle her commitment to you now whatever mistakes she may have made in the past."

Toshiro grunted non-committally. He glanced out the window as a merchant rolled a narrow cart down the

sidewalk in front of the restaurant, shouting that he had fresh Honey Pemolos from Guangxi. Toshiro used the short, paunchy man as an excuse not to look at Lau. "I don't hate her," he said finally.

Lau seemed to know that was all he was going get on the topic for now and he didn't press for more. He nodded when Toshiro turned back to the table. "I'm glad to know that. I'm sure Ume will be too."

Reaching across the table, Toshiro poured some more tea into Lau's cup. "How long have you known--" He stopped in mid-sentence when a loud, strangled cry rose up from behind him.

"What is *this*?"

"Shu," Lau answered calmly, looking past Toshiro's shoulder. "We're having lunch."

Toshiro whipped around to face him, an expression of open shock on his young, handsome face. Dao Kan narrowed his eyes at the boy before turning his glare on Lau, who remained as impassive as ever.

"Having *lunch*...?" Shu's voice cracked.

Did they take him for a simpleton?

Toshiro and Lau were sitting at one of the smallest tables in the restuarants, hardly an arm's length apart and speaking in hushed tones. Like spies conspiring behind the back of an unsuspecting fool, or lovers planning a secrete escape from prying busybodies.

Dao Kan stiffened, his muscles tensing until they spasmed across his shoulders and back.

Taking a seat at the table, he clenched a napkin in his hands and wrung it tightly. He twisted the cloth over and over again until his fingers went numb and all he felt was anger.

"I've told you before to stay the fuck out of my business," Shu seethed at Lau.

"Exactly what business of yours am I in, Dao Kan?"

Toshiro reached out to touch Dao's arm. "Let's go upstairs..."

The young man's fingers brushed along the bandages wrapped around the fresh cuts from last evening. Underneath the strips of cloth, the tender flesh throbbed softly with the memory of the tie pin's painful slices and Toshiro's care afterwards. Shu's stomach twisted.

"I--" Toshiro started, but Shu slammed his palms on the table sending the plates clattering and grabbing the attention of all around.

"Don't fucking touch me," Dao said, his voice lowered once more into a venomous whisper. He impaled Toshiro with his glare. "Are you enjoying the food and Lau's stirring companionship? Is this amusing you?"

"We were just talking," Toshiro started to rise. "Let's you and I go back upstairs." Grabbing his arm in a deathlike grip, Dao pulled him back to the chair and yanked the seat

closer. "We're not finished here yet."

"You don't need to follow his command, Toshiro," Lau interjected, glancing at Shu with something that could only be pure condescending. "As much as my colleague thinks otherwise he holds power over no one in San Francisco."

Dao Kan's jealous anger vanished as the last words hung in the air between them. He suddenly understood why Yang's dog was here with Toshiro, whispering in the boy's ear.

"You and those clever lips, Fey Hu Lau," Shu's voice trembled with a different kind of fury, one that was laced with fear.

Smashing his fist on the table once more, the teapot overturned. The glass cover shattered when it rolled to the floor, a dark stain spreading out across the red tablecloth like blood spilling from a wound. Shu made another choking sound, his eyes darting from the stain to Lau. The corners of his mouth pulled back in a snarl.

"Everything you say is meant to poison!" Dao Kan cried. With each word, he tightened his hold on Toshiro's arm a little bit more. "He's trying to *steal* you from me."

"Stop this nonsense, Shu" Lau frowned.

In response, Dao Kan shoved the plate of uneaten dumplings and the empty steamer across the table. "Shut up!" he spat. "You're the dog who slunk in here, tail

wrapped around your balls, to try and pry into my matters. Go away!”

Lau stared at him coldly. “No.”

“Fuck you, Lau,” Dao snarled.

“The Elders won’t keep tolerating this shit.” The bodyguard’s hands drifted to the edge of the table. Shu knew he was reaching for a concealed weapon, perhaps a knife or the silver-plated pistol he frequently carried.

Shu burst into a fit of laughter that ended in a throaty growl. “You think you can frighten me with *them* or Yang? Do you think *you*---an insignificant piece of Canton gutter filth---can intimidate me? You can pull out a whole fucking case of pistols from inside your coat---they would do nothing for you.”

Releasing Toshiro, Dao Kan leaned across the table towards Lau. The two men’s eyes locked in a fierce stare.

“I’ll only tell you this once more,” he hissed. “Stay the fuck away from him. He’s *mine*.”

Lau’s eyes flickered. “No, he’s not.”

Dao Kan’s self-control shattered.

Obscene screams, sounds that had no meaning except for the crazed fury behind them, leapt out of him. He overturned the table with more speed than anyone could’ve expected, his hand wrapping around Lau’s throat before the wood even hit the floor. He shoved Lau straight back into a pillar made of brick.

“You *fuck!*” His shrieks took a form of coherency that was no less abhorrent. “You won’t take him away from me!”

Shu’s freehand found the handle to his knife tucked into the back of his pants. With a flash of steel and jade, he swung out with the blade. The edge of the knife thrust straight into Lau’s belly.

“Die!”

He pulled upwards and out, blood spraying from the gaping gash in Lau’s lower torso. Then he flipped the knife around and drove it deep into Lau’s heart.

Each of the strikes were wild and ungraceful, made with hands that couldn’t stop shaking. Seized in a rush of adrenaline and panic, his body moving only on the instinct to kill this threat. He lashed out blindly, defensively, no better than a cornered animal protecting her young.

“No!” Toshiro’s voice cut through the thundering in Shu’s ears. Toshiro’s hands closed around his as he brought up the knife to strike again. “No--stop!”

With just that one command, the rampage ended. Panting, sweat running down the sides of his face, Dao Kan senses took hold of themselves again. He released Lau’s neck and lowered the knife. Turning to Toshiro, he found he could not make his body stop shaking.

“He was going to take you from me.”

CHAPTER 28

“No, no,” was all that Toshiro could manage as he looked at the crumpled bloodied form of Fey Lau. The rest of the diners seemed as shocked as he was and he looked around wildly until his gaze fell upon a familiar loathsome face.

“Don’t stand there Chao, help Lau!”

Toshiro’s harsh command not only mobilized Chao but the others as well and they swarmed around the fallen man while Toshiro kept this attention on Dao Kan.

“His words were poison...lies...” Still breathing heavily, Shu looked down at the crowd of people gathering around the body. There was so much on his knife.

Toshiro’s head ached. He felt sick. “Dao, please...”

“He---he’s dead!” Chao stuttered. “Mr. Lau’s dead!”

Dao Kan started to laugh, a hollow sound full of bitterness. “I should hope so.”

Bolting to his feet, Chao started for the door. Toshiro grabbed him and shoved him into the wall. “Where are you going?” he cried.

"To find Mr. Yang! He has to know about this!" Chao shoved away from him. "This is all *your* fault, you little fuck! Look at what you've done---Lau's blood is on your hands for not staying where you belong!"

Stunned, Toshiro stumbled back as Chao rammed past him and disappeared out the restaurant door. All at once, everyone made a rush for the exit.

"Wait!" Toshiro tried to stop the same cook who had served him lunch only a few moments ago---or was that a lifetime ago? "Please help me."

"It's bad luck to touch a dead body," the man looked so terrified, the whites of his trying to swallow the two spots of black in the center. "And when Yang comes with his men..." He slipped out of Toshiro's limp grasp and then disappeared along with the rest.

"He's not ," Toshiro shook his head. It was a mistake. These fucking idiots didn't know a dead body from a live one. He dropped to his knees beside Lau and tried to shake the life back into him.

"Get up, you stupid shit!" he begged.

"By now he's at the gateway to hell where he belongs," Dao Kan whispered hoarsely.

Ume's blood ran cold when Jin Chao burst into their diningroom and began yammering to Ren in Cantonese. He

was speaking so fast she couldn't make it all out but she did make out the words, *dead, murdered by Shu*. Her teacup fell from her hand the delicate porcelain shattering on the tabletop,.

"Oh Gods, Ren...."

"It's Lau," he said his eyes hard, his face almost drained of color. "I'll kill that miserable f*ck with my own hands for this!"

Ume rushed after him. "Ren please. Don't hurt Toshiro." Tears coursed from her eyes when he spun and gave her a vicious look.

"If he had a hand in this I make no promises."

"I'm coming with you—"

"No!"

Her sobs echoing through the entrance hall, Ume collapsed against the door when Ren slammed it behind him. *Oh, Toshiro, what have you done?*

Chao entered the hallway from the dining room, his cheeks still flushed with color from his run across town. Stopping when he saw Ume blocking the door, he slowly came forward, averting his eyes from hers.

"Yang might not hurt him, but the Elders will have him killed," he said, jamming his hands into his pants' pockets. "I feel sort of sorry for you. But you should've taken your son out of here when you had the chance."

"Get out of here! Get out of my house this instant!"

When Caho made no move to leave she grabbed a vase from the table to the left of the door and flung it at him. It shattered against the doorframe showering porcelain shards down upon his head. "Get out!"

"Fucking Jap bitch," he growled, pushing past her.

Oh Gods, what could she do. The Elders *were* mean enough to have Toshiro killed. She had to do something. She had to.

She ran upstairs grabbed her shawl and her iron fan and rushed back downstairs. Ren's housekeeper was waiting nervously by the door.

"Don't do this thing. Don't involve yourself."

Ume wiped her tear stained cheeks. "I'll do anything to save my son. Anything."

"I know what you mean to do," the housekeeper wrung her hands and shook her head back and forth. "But talking to the Elders will do nothing. They might kill you as just the same as your boy!"

Ume's grip tightened on her tessen. The kind woman's words only made her more determined, more desperate. She moved to the door and the housekeeper followed after her.

"Please, Lady Ume. Mr. Yang cares for you, he loves you! Don't throw away this happiness for your son--he's made his own decision on what path to take with his life." She pointed out to the street. "Look, Jin Chao is already halfway to their parlor by now. By the time you get there,

their minds will be set.”

Ume touched the older woman’s arm. “Thank you for your concern but I have to try if I don’t I won’t be able to live with myself.”

The housekeeper grabbed Ume’s hand and thrust a small paper charm into it. “May the Gods protect you and yours and bring you back . Master Yang needs a woman like you.”

Ume hurried down the street. The housekeeper watched her disappear from sight. The old woman wrung her thin hands and whispered a soft prayer. “Watch over them, Xi-Wangmu.”

Outside the restaurant, Ren jumped down from the carriage. Crowds were forming in the streets as the story of a tong killing in the middle of the day raced through Chinatown. The blue of the sky, the heat of sun, the cries of “Murder” shouted among the people---it all seemed so surreal.

Ching hopped down next to him, and two more bodyguards appeared at his side. Someone handed him a pistol, or did he already have it in his hands? All that mattered was that he felt the weight of the gun in his palm now, and it gave him satisfaction to know that in a few moments, it would weigh less by seven bullets.

“The boy had nothing to do with this.”

Ren whipped around, certain he'd heard Lau's voice. "What?" he asked sharply.

"The boy is still inside the restaurant," Ching repeated for his benefit. That's right...it hadn't been Lau's voice at all.

Taking the front steps two at a time, Ren burst through the front door. He saw nothing at first but the darkness of the restaurant and the bright splatter of red along the far wall. He followed the trail down with his eyes to body the slumped body on the floor, painted just as red as the wall was. He registered some movement and his heart leapt, but it was only Toshiro who looked up from where he was kneeling by Lau's broken body.

"Get him away from there," Ren barked to the bodyguards, pointing to Toshiro with the end of his pistol as he moved forward. They swarmed forward and pulled Toshiro to his feet.

"Don't you touch him." Shu was suddenly there, stained with Lau's blood like everything else in the restaurant. His knife was in hand and he was already moving forward to slit the throat of the first guard who'd grabbed Toshiro.

"Dao Kan!" Yang's roar echoed in the empty room. He raised the gun again but pulling a thin little trigger seemed too easy a punishment, too quick a way to end the life of this son of a bitch. He swung out and smashed the end

of the grip across Shu's jaw.

One of the guards lashed, out caught Shu in the gut with a punch that dropped him to his knees courtesy of the lead lined glove the guard wore. The man clamped down on Shu's neck pressing the major artery and cutting the blood flow enough to render him unconscious.

"Dao!"

The other guard held Toshiro fast, his arms pinned behind him. Toshiro met Yang's furious stare with one of his own. "It was an accident. He didn't mean it."

"Shut the fuck up! Nothing Shu does is an accident! And he'll pay for this. The Elders will have his head once and for all!" Yang snapped his fingers and more guards rushed in. "Take them to Cho," Yang ordered.

"No!" Toshiro elbowed the guard who had him from behind. "I won't let them kill him!"

Ching ran forward, grabbing Toshiro's wrist to try and pin him against the wall. "You'll do as we say, boy!"

"No!" Toshiro wouldn't stop struggling.

Ren watched, wondering if Toshiro had fought this vehemently for Lau's sake.

"Then we won't take them to the Elders," Yang spoke, his voice hoarse and unfamiliar to his own ears.

"Mr. Yang?" Ching looked alarmed.

Turning away from the them, Ren glowered at Shu's unconscious form. "You *bastard*," he whispered. He spat on

Shu's body and lowered the end of the gun until it pressed into the side of Shu's scalp.

"You fucking son of a bitch," he spat again. "I'll kill you myself."

"No!" Toshiro wrenched free of the guard's grasp, kned the man in the groin then charge Yang, knocking him backward onto a table. He and Yang wrestled for the gun.

Shu began to stir and pulled himself up on one elbow. "Don't touch him!" He struggled to his feet, this time dropping both guards with slices across their knees.

"Enough!"

The booming voice froze the men.

Master Cho entered the restaurant flanked by a contingent of armed guards with Ume Itou trailing behind. She rushed forward to comfort both her lover and son and Shu snarled.

"Take him," Cho flicked his wrist and another wave of body guards came forward. They grabbed Shu and pulled him away from Toshiro, from the wounded men moaning on the floor...away from Lau's body...

"He's mine!" Yang pushed away from Ume, barely hearing anything she said or asked of him. "It's my right to see him suffer for what he's done!"

Cho held up his withered hand, the joints swollen and frail for arthritis and yet none the less commanding. "Do you wish to join Dao Kan Shu?"

Ren swallowed back a cry of grief and fury. The Elder frowned darkly. "He serves the Wongs, Yang, and it is *our* right to determine his punishment."

"What about the boy?" Ching demanded, his voice still tingling with pain as he leaned against the wall, his hands between his legs. Ume held on to her son, her arms protectively gripping his heaving shoulders.

"Our fair plum will see to his judgment," Cho didn't even glance in Toshiro's direction. Instead, he turned to leave the restaurant and beckoned for the guards to follow.

"Bring Shu, and if he struggles, break his legs."

Dao Kan pushed away from the guards and followed of his own will. Of course he wouldn't be foolish enough to contradict any command from the Elder, at least not openly. They left the restaurant, and the room was silent once more.

Ren dropped to his knees, burying his face in his hands. "Take Toshiro to the house before Cho changes his mind," he said quietly.

"Fuck you," Toshiro growled as he pulled away from his mother and darted to the door. But the old man's carriage was already gone, the horses nothing more than a trace of dust filtering up from the street. He collapsed against the lamp post, only half aware that his mother was at his side once more.

"Toshiro please. Don't make matters worse by going there. Master Cho gave me his word that neither of you

would be killed.”

“What did you do, fuck him into it?” Toshiro pulled away and pushed past her and back into the restaurant and up to Shu’s flat.

“Did you , Mei?” Ren asked when Ume went back inside and stood beside him as he draped a cloth over Lau’s body. He waited until the injured men had been removed before rising and gripping Ume’s chin. “Did you fuck Cho into being lenient?”

“No. I only begged for my son’s life and told him that I’d give mine in return to keep Toshiro safe.” She pulled free and folded her arms across her waist. “Does the truth really matter, Ren? I’m sure you’ll believe what you want.”

Heaving a sigh Ren sank down onto one of the tables still standing upright, his gaze going back to the body of his fallen friend. “He didn’t deserve this. He was a good man. A good friend. Better than I deserved at times.”

Ume went to him, cradled him against her breast and rested her cheek on the top of his head. “I’m so sorry, Ren. I truly am.”

Toshiro occupied his mind by cleaning up the apartment and then helping to clean the restaurant after Lau’s body was removed. It was well after dark when he was done and edging close to midnight when he couldn’t stand the wait anymore and went to pace the block out front,

scanning the street in both directions waiting, hoping for any sign of Dao's arrival.

He was leaning against the lamppost nearly dozing off when the sound of hoofbeats roused him from his stupor. An open wagon raced down the street two men in the back as the wagon raced by something—someone was thrown to the ground.

“Dao Kan!” Toshiro ran forward dropped to his knees and prayed with all his might that the half-clothed body before him was not a corpse. Tears of relief filled his eyes when Shu groaned and Toshiro gently turned him over, pulled out a handkerchief and did his best to wipe the blood and grime away from Shu's handsome face.

“It fucking hurts....”

“I know, I know.” Toshiro smoothed back the matted black hair from Dao's eyes both of which were swollen and bruised from who knew how many beatings. “Be still, please.” Toshiro took the handkerchief and wiped at some of the dirt on Dao's torso. He was bruised in so many places but a cursory feel of his arms and chest didn't reveal any obvious broken bones.

Dao groaned and tried to sit. Toshiro stopped him. “Wait. You have to let me help you..” He stood, gripped Dao's wrists and gently pulled, quickly moving in to take the brunt of the older man's weight against his body. “We need to get you upstairs.” He brushed a feathery touch

against Dao's bruised cheek. "This might hurt," he warned before bending his knees and hoisting Dao Kan up over his shoulder.

Toshiro prayed he wasn't causing any more injury but Dao's moans and grunts as he made his way slowly up the narrow stairs did nothing to ease his worry. Once in the flat he lay Dao on the bed pulled off his pants and rushed to get a cloth and warm water. He cleaned away as much of the dried blood and grime as he could then sat beside the half-conscious Shu and slipped his arm beneath his shoulders to hold him close.

"No one can kill me," Dao muttered. "No one ever will..."

"Of course not. I won't let them," Toshiro whispered, stroking Dao's cheek with his fingertips.

"No one will take you from me or poison your mind against me. You're mine. My Toshiro..."

"I'm not going anywhere," Toshiro assured him. "I'll always be here."

New Year, 1872

Ume peered out the curtain and watched her son Toshiro stride down the narrow sidewalk until the fog swirling from the bay swallowed him and cast him into the dark night.

Looking back on her life she could say she would never have imagined things to turn out the way they had.

She certainly never imagined that her only child, her beautiful son sired by the most handsome samurai ever to grace the streets of old Edo, would one day be a paid assassin for a Chinese tong in America. Of course, Ume never imagined that she, herself would be allied with the same tong or be married to one of their most feared leaders.

After saying a silent prayer for Toshiro's safekeeping as she did several times a day Ume turned away from the window and went to pour herself a glass of brandy. She sat in one of the thickly padded chairs near the fireplace and stared into the dancing yellow-orange flames, hoping this New Year would bring her son some measure of happiness—true and lasting happiness.

Toshiro walked down the deserted Chinatown street, hands shoved into his trouser pockets, jacket collar turned up against the chill night air. "Fuck you, Yang and your precious Elders, too," he muttered as he turned the corner past his mother's house and took the shortcut down one of the alleys towards the Gingbo where Dao Kan would be waiting.

It came as no surprise when he was accosted by the "singsong" girls, the prostitutes hovering inside their crib houses, looking out the little windows in the doors.

"You come inside?"

"Your father just go out."

"Four bits feel me, six bits do me."

Toshiro simply shook his head and kept his eyes focused before him. Half the girls were nothing but kids—"extra mouths to feed" sold off by their parents in Hong Kong or tricked into sailing with the lure of "respectable husbands waiting" by representatives of the Wongs and other members of Chinatown's "Companies".

"Well, well, Shu let his Jap lap dog roam off the leash tonight."

Toshiro stopped and glanced over his shoulder at that useless fuck Jin Chao and his hatchet carrying protectors.

"What's wrong?" Jin cocked his head to one side and pouted in mock concern. "Don't tell me...did Shu find someone else to play with tonight? It wouldn't be the first time you know."

The enforcers behind the young gang leader laughed and started murmuring among themselves. Useless fucks...they were no better than the gossiping old women who lingered outside of the tea houses near the Tien Hau temple.

Chao himself joined in with a small chuckle, but his eyes betrayed him. He would look at Toshiro's tailored French suit and then glance quickly down the front of his simple shirt and overcoat, or he would stare at Toshiro's short, western-styled hair-cut and then run his hands through

his own hair. With about as much subtlety as a fog horn blaring in the Bay, Jin Chao was comparing himself to Toshiro. Just as he'd been doing since that night in Denver.

Toshiro smirked and leaned against the outside wall of the whore house, letting his coat fall open so Chao could see the ivory-handled knife tucked into his pocket. The chill of the night air against his body was worth the look of jealous fury that passed over Chao's face. His rounded cheeks drained of color and his forehead turned a shade of purple above his thin, scrunched up eyebrows.

"Jap piece of shit---" Chao spat. "You deserve to be down here with the rest of the whores."

Toshiro took a step forward, his knife already out and poised to slice Chao's belly when the glow of a lantern bobbed into view.

The singsong girls shut their door windows one after the other with decisive little clacks

"You China boys having troubles tonight?" the burly policeman asked before striding down the alley with another member of the Chinatown patrol in tow.

Toshiro turned and slipped the knife back under his jacket. "No trouble here. Just two acquaintances passing the time."

"Well pass it elsewhere."

Toshiro smiled. "Oh I plan to and in better company as well."

With that he strolled out of the alley and headed to the Gingbo.

A hostess greeted Toshiro at the entrance, her silk-draped body framed by the soft lamplight just inside the doorway. Her painted lips curled up in a smile, but the gesture seemed forced. When she spoke, her words wavered with a nervous edge.

"Mr. Shu is upstairs," she said, closing the door behind Toshiro. "Waiting."

He crossed the parlor full of the Wong's men and associates bent over Mah Jong boards or leaning back in cushioned seats with their tea or liquor. Up the staircase, Toshiro moved through the hall where the sounds of sex came from beyond closed doors or dark corners. The brothel was in full use tonight.

Toshiro found Dao Kan in the last room at the end of the hallway, lying across the large bed and propped up on several pillows. A solitary candle burned on the bedside table, flickering in the breeze that blew in from the open window above it, the dull orange glow barely illuminating half the room. The air--thick with the scent of opium--prickled Toshiro's nostrils.

"Dao Kan?" Toshiro asked, closing the door behind him.

"How nice of you to come." Shu's response was

slurred as if with sleep and he laughed softly. But his tone shifted quickly, his voice suddenly bitter. "Does your mother send me her love?"

Toshiro frowned as he came to the bed. Shu's eyes were half-closed, his breathing shallow. Even in the poor candlelight, his skin looked pale and feverish.

"Shit," Toshiro whispered hoarsely. Fucking opium. "How much have you already taken tonight?"

Shu laughed again. "If you're so concerned, you should have been here earlier."

With a shake of his head and a weary sigh Toshiro pulled off his boots, jacket and tie and sat on the edge of the bed.

"It's the New Year," he said, reaching a hand out to smooth back Dao's hair. "I always have dinner with her on the New Year. You could have come, you know."

He regretted the last words even before they finished spilling from his lips. Thankfully Dao was too groggy to launch into his usual tirade. He simply growled, "Fucking whore. Fucking Yang."

Toshiro leaned over and reached for the bottle of *bok jow* from the bedside table. The cheap liquor was a far cry from the imported brandy his mother and her husband served tonight. Of course the best liquor came with a steep price only this time it wasn't gold he'd had to pay but slivers of pride.

You're well-liked Toshiro. You have quite the future being my 'son'. It's a pity you let yourself be held back by that crazy fuck, Shu. He's becoming a disgrace to the tong, Toshiro. It's that simple.

Shu sat up with a low groan, his head pounding from too much alcohol and not enough drugs to have eased him into sleep. A wave of nausea washed over him, and he swallowed the bitter bile that filled his mouth. Any more opium tonight and the next time he closed his eyes, and he might not wake.

But Ume would love that, wouldn't she? Toshiro's mother would enjoy seeing him dead, her son back within her suffocating grasp once again. The bitch never could refrain from meddling in his affairs with Toshiro, be it something related to their duties as assassins for the Wongs...or otherwise.

Shu leaned over, his lips brushing the back of Toshiro's neck. "Your mother has no appreciation for me," he whispered. "I believe she's *envious*." He laughed softly, his breath stirring the feathered tips of Toshiro's hair.

"Each night, I taste her son's body and fuck his sweet flesh for hours on end," he kissed the nape of Toshiro's neck. "She'll never know such ecstasy herself."

Toshiro pulled away. "My mother may be many things, but she isn't like that."

He took another drink of the *bok jow* then set it aside.

Without warning he turned and seized a handful of Shu's hair. Pulling him down to the mattress Toshiro kissed him hard, shifting so that his body covered the older man's.

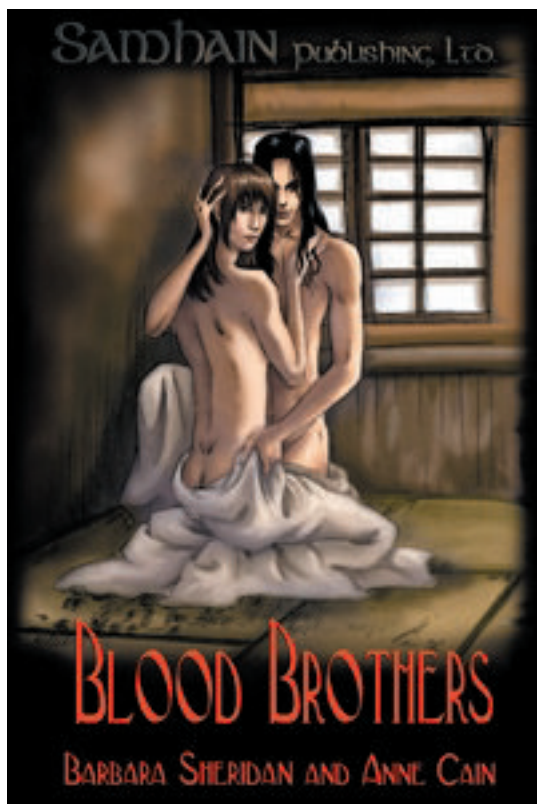
Shu groaned as Toshiro pressed down on him, though this time the sound came from pleasure. His head swam and ached, but the satisfaction that came with having the younger man with him at last eased the pain. He reached up and stroked Toshiro's hips, encouraging them to sway rhythmically against his body. Though too full of pride to admit so, he'd longed for Toshiro...the opium and liquor a poor substitute for his actual need.

Shu broke away from the kiss and gasped for air. "My Toshiro," he said huskily, reaching up to caress his lover's cheek.

THE END....for now

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