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Soul of the Night

Barbara Sheridan and Anne Cain

Dedication

For Tiffany, who loves these kabuki boys as much as we do. We're grateful for your friendship and encouragement always.

Chapter One

San Francisco , Lunar New Year, 1872

Fog, thick enough to make the cold cling to one's clothes and skin, blanketed the dark alleys bordering the bay. Almost hidden by the fog, a short manlike creature wandered the empty streets. He traced a zigzagging path across the cobblestones, cutting through the dense whiteness despite the poor visibility. Every few steps, he stopped and sniffed the air before shuffling on.

There.

He paused, sniffing again to be sure.

Death.

The ghoul's squeal echoed in the alley. With the ocean so close by, the salt in the air sometimes overpowered the more subtle odors. But the sweet, tangy scent of flesh just beginning to rot somewhere up ahead was unmistakable. He dashed forward with more speed than any onlooker would have given his short, disproportionate legs credit for. At the end of the alley he found his prize, three men buried under the fog—their throats slit.

These three dead men worked for one of the tongs near the docks. He recognized the characters painted on the weapons strewn on the ground beside the dead bodies. The one who had killed them had been ruthless—the knife wounds on their bodies, deep and long as the blade, cut purposefully through the flesh and sinew. The killer's anger was obvious in each ugly line.

This was the work of the Poisoned Dragon...

Gobei squealed again and knelt down. His excitement dwindled to disappointment as he examined the bodies. Blood, still warm, pooled in their dead veins—the corpses were a bit too fresh for his liking. Gobei licked his lips and sighed as his stomach protested with a loud grumble.

"These won't do at all," he complained.

“Don’t worry, my friend, you won’t go hungry tonight,” the vampire Kiyoshi said, stepping from the deepest of the shadows on Gobei’s right. “There’s another tong man over in Fish Alley. One who won’t be missed, especially by the woman he beat to death.”

“Kiyoshi-sama.” The ghoul’s mouth twisted into his equivalent of a smile. The *kyuuketsuki* looked exactly as Gobei remembered from years past in Japan, with those rounded cheekbones and delicately arched eyebrows that matched the natural grace radiating from the vampire’s every movement. “When did you come to San Francisco? Are you still with the theater troupe?”

Kiyoshi looked past Gobei to the bodies on the ground, his sharp eyes seeing through the fog with no trouble. He offered no answers to the questions, his interest focused on the dead men. Gobei moved aside to give him a better view.

“You can feel his power, can’t you?” Gobei licked his lips and started to rub his hands together. “The one who did this.”

“Yes, I *can* feel it,” Kiyoshi whispered, crouching down to touch one of the dead men’s throats. Bringing the sticky fingers to his lips, Kiyoshi flicked his tongue over them.

Gobei laughed, his voice raspy like the sound of dead leaves rustling across stone. He’d known the boyish *kyuuketsuki* for many years now, long enough to understand his tastes and appetites. *Young...* Gobei chided himself for using the word; Kiyoshi was perhaps older than Gobei himself, and the ghoul had seen far more seasons than this city of San Francisco had. Eternally youthful, eternally beautiful in their terrible nature...such were all blood-drinkers.

“Kiyoshi, now you’ll be fascinated with this *Dragon* until you taste his blood personally,” Gobei taunted in good humor.

Watching as the vampire bent to lap at the dead man’s blood, Gobei’s stomach gave another loud rumble. He shuffled away, his hunger outweighing the desire to talk more with his friend.

“Where did you say that corpse was?” he asked, still rubbing his hands together hungrily. “Fish Alley?”

He walked down the alley without waiting for a response, then called over his shoulder. “It’s good fortune finding each other in the New Year, Kiyoshi...”

Lost in thought, Kiyoshi eyed the three bodies as he licked the traces of blood from his lips. It was faint but he could taste the essence of the one who’d killed them. Savage and beautiful, so reminiscent of the man from long ago, the *samurai* who’d whisked him and his adopted brother from their quiet village and into this endless life of bloodshed.

Good fortune. Kiyoshi repeated to himself. Had he ever had that? Not really. Not as the weak son of a low-level *samurai* who had to work the land like a common farmer to provide for his little family. Good fortune certainly hadn't been on his side the night the one called Kuro entered his and Liu's lives.

Kiyoshi closed his eyes to clear his thoughts before he stood. He didn't want to think of those times. Kuro and Liu were gone, his brother as dead to him as the Sengoku generals who'd terrorized their humble province back in Japan.

Like the little ghoulish Gobei, Kiyoshi soon disappeared into the shadows and made his way towards the Barbary Coast. All things told, good fortune had managed to grace his long life once. It led him to a prosperous village miles outside of Edo and to the humble little inn where a member of a ramshackle theater troupe was giving an impromptu "performance".

Good fortune had indeed led him to his Ryuhei.

* * *

Japan , 1864

"This is such an insult," a thunderous voice cried out, followed shortly by the crash of shattering glass.

Huddled under a thick cloak to ward off the last rays of golden sunlight cutting through the hills beyond Magome village, Kiyoshi stopped outside the dusty little inn where the uproar continued. Well, it seemed like an uproar compared to the peace and quiet he'd encountered throughout the rest of the town. Truthfully, it was nothing more than two men shouting and more broken pottery as one of them threw another piece against the wall.

"I've never been more offended in *all* my life. You call this *sake*? This is just piss-water you've left out in the sun."

Ah. An upset patron. A very upset patron. Kiyoshi cocked his head to one side and listened carefully.

Dutifully, the innkeeper tried to assuage the enraged man. "I'm sorry it's not to your liking, sir." He sounded tired. No, bored. That would be a better way to describe the flat tone. "We have other casks of *sake* in the cellar that might be of higher quality." Yes, there was definitely a hint of sarcasm to the *ryokan* owner's voice.

"I've come *three* times this week and tried *three* different vintages. They're *always* cheap and terrible."

"Maybe it's not the *sake* that's cheap, but the customer," the innkeeper's wife grumbled. Kiyoshi heard the unmistakably irritated tone of her voice from where he stood outside. Her words were soon followed by the sound of shattering glass as the patron threw another *sake* cup against the wall.

"What have I done to deserve this?" he wailed, on the verge of tears. "I come here looking for a decent meal, some good *sake*, and this is what I get? You want to pick my pockets too?"

"Of course not, sir." The innkeeper sighed. "The shame is mine for not serving better—"

"No—save your excuses." The patron stood with a rustle of material. "I'm leaving."

Sure enough, the man burst out of the inn wearing an expression of wounded pride. His high, striking cheekbones were colored a shade of pink that made Kiyoshi wonder just how much *sake* he had tried before deciding how terrible it was.

"Why do the Gods punish me so?" he cried out dramatically at a passerby who politely bowed in acknowledgment and scurried away.

"You." The man pointed at Kiyoshi quite boldly. "If you're a wandering musician, stay away from this establishment—they have *no* appreciation for fine culture and artists."

"I'm a simple farmer as most are around these parts."

The man seemed to wilt like a fresh-picked flower set out in the sun, his delicate-looking lips turned down in a pout. "Oh Gods, this is what I'm reduced to, acting for a bunch of inbred farmers who wouldn't know culture if they were drowning in it." His slim shoulders slumped and he dragged himself down the paved dirt street. "Oh Gods..." he sighed again.

Kiyoshi watched, then found himself following, though he usually preferred to keep to his own company whenever possible. The man's inner turmoil heated his blood, sent it coursing through his veins enough for Kiyoshi to pick up the sweet scent on the cool evening breeze.

They made their way down the dirt road, passing a few vegetable stands and some rather suspicious smelling carts of "fresh" fish. The man darted around the corner at an ink shop and stopped alongside the wall. Kiyoshi heard him waiting on the other side, his body pressed against the building, the stiff knot

at the back of his belt scraping the dry wood. Curious, Kiyoshi poked his head around the bend.

“You *are* following me,” the man cried. “Why would a farmer follow me? Gods! The *yakuza* sent you.”

Kiyoshi shook his head. “No.”

The man squinted at him and then his eyes widened in dismay. “Oh no,” he moaned. “Then *he* sent you. Oh Gods, I’m going to be assassinated in a backwater village by a boy no older than my last *kookan*.”

“No one sent me,” Kiyoshi assured him. “I was just curious. You’re an actor.” If anything, the man became more dismayed. “The *best* to ever grace the stage.” Humility clearly wasn’t his strong point. But then again, he’d had rather a lot to drink. The rich, earthy scent of *sake* filled his blood.

“Do you...enjoy *kabuki*?” the man asked hopefully.

Kiyoshi nodded and bowed to the stranger. “I have seen a few performances in Kyoto and Edo, both times the lead actor was incredible. He was so graceful and so engrossing in the part he played.” Kiyoshi paused. “I believe his name was Nomura—no, Nakamura. Yes, it was Nakamura.”

The man gasped, his delicate hand flying to his throat. “Oh, you’re just saying that to make me feel better, aren’t you?”

“I don’t understand.”

The man touched Kiyoshi’s sleeve, then pulled back. “When did you see these performances? Do you remember the plays performed?”

“I saw the first about ten years ago in Kyoto and the second a few years later in Edo. It was the same play actually—*The Love Suicides at Sonezaki*.”

The man whimpered and slumped back against the building. “It was *me* you saw. I debuted in Kyoto ten years ago. I took the theatrical world by storm and look at me now. One stupid mistake and I’m a wanted man suffering though bastardized Noh drama for illiterate inbreds who wouldn’t know an *onnagata* from a jar of rice powder.”

“You were wonderful,” Kiyoshi recalled. “I didn’t recognize you now, I’m afraid.”

“How could you?” Nakamura gave a depressed sigh, looking down at himself.

“I’m wasting away, fading into nothingness along with my career, my art, my dreams...”

While the actor continued listing the many things he expected he would soon lose, Kiyoshi listened with growing interest. It was obvious Ryuhei Nakamura

exaggerated his grief, his words and manners dripping with theatrics. But the bottom edge of his *yukata* was soiled with dust from the road, and the midnight blue color of the linen had faded to a dull, dreary gray. His long black hair was pulled away from his face and carefully gathered with a red cord at the base of his neck, but without any sunflower oil to keep the delicate strands from getting tangled.

Kiyoshi frowned. "You really must be in a mess."

Nakamura stopped in mid-sentence and buried his face in his hands. "Finally, *someone* who understands." His shoulders started to shake like he might be crying, but Kiyoshi couldn't smell any salty tears.

"Are you sure you're not an assassin?" Ryuhei asked, peeking through his fingers. "It's better if it ends now, you know, before the loneliness kills me..."

"I wouldn't be a very good assassin if I admitted it, would I?"

Ryuhei gasped, then shrank back against the building, his gaze darting as if seeking an escape route.

"I was joking, Ryu-san. I am but a simple farmer and sometimes a wanderer."

"Truly?"

"Yes."

Nakamura relaxed, but his blood still rushed with the power of his fear. Kiyoshi licked his lips even as he reminded himself that he had no cause drinking from a human until the deprivation weakened him.

No matter how thrilling it was.

Chapter Two

“I can’t offer you a feast, Ryu-san, but if you have no plans I would be honored to have you dine with me,” Kiyoshi asked.

Ryuhei’s face brightened. “Oh, *really*? Why that’s so kind of you. I—no, I just can’t.” He sighed heavily and turned to walk away. “I couldn’t possibly burden your hospitality, especially with good *sake* being so hard—and expensive—to come by.”

Kiyoshi removed a string of coins from within his sleeve and counted off a good number of them. “There’s more than enough here for a decent bottle or two and still have enough for steamed pork buns.”

That seemed to do the trick. Nakamura furrowed his brow and put the back of his hand to his forehead, as if coping with some tremendous internal struggle. He sighed, and rather dramatically at that. “I’ll take your invitation only because I don’t want to insult you.”

“Thank you.” Kiyoshi bowed and tried not to smile.

Ryuhei did smile though, touching Kiyoshi’s shoulder when he rose from the bow. “I certainly didn’t expect to make such a lovely new friend here in Magome,” Ryuhei said warmly. “What’s your name? And aren’t you a little hot under there? It’s really a warm evening.”

“Kiyoshi. My name is Kiyoshi Ishibe.” He slipped out of the cloak and draped it over his arm. “I don’t mind the heat, but the sun bothers me at times, so I try to keep covered.”

Ryuhei brushed a slender fingertip across Kiyoshi’s cheek and Kiyoshi felt himself leaning into the touch. He was certain he heard Ryuhei purr like a contented cat.

“Yes, with such fair skin I can see why you avoid the sun. I’m the same way, you know. After all, my looks are my fortune—or rather *were*...” He sighed and

dropped his arm.

Kiyoshi smiled. "I think the years have been most kind to Ryu-san."

Nakamura looked up and met Kiyoshi's steady gaze. Kiyoshi felt the man's passion begin to stir and heat his blood much as his fear had earlier, only now the scent was more fragrant and far more alluring.

"Shall we go?" Kiyoshi asked.

"Oh yes, of course." Ryuhei nodded. He smiled coyly and bowed his head politely, though his gaze traced a path along Kiyoshi's body. "Anywhere you choose, my friend. Just not there," he hastily added, gesturing down the road to the inn. "Really, the owner has no idea how to treat a customer, and certainly not one as esteemed as *me*."

Kiyoshi nodded in agreement. "I would feel so ashamed to give them my business after that outrage."

The response appeared to satisfy Nakamura immensely, who headed off in the opposite direction of the inn with a smile.

"I feel the same way," Ryuhei said. "There's another *ryokan* right off the bridge on the road that leads to Edo that looks far more hospitable. And if we should need to rest after our meal, I'm sure they'd have a room available..." He giggled softly as Kiyoshi fell into step beside him. "Wouldn't that be nice, Kiyoshi-kun?"

"Yes," Kiyoshi agreed, paying more attention to Ryuhei himself than what the man said. He admired the way Nakamura took care not to plod through the loose dirt, and the graceful movements of the actor's hands as he gestured while talking. It was unusual to see such elegant movements in mortals, affirming why Ryuhei had been such a popular and talented actor.

"Oh, Edo." Ryuhei's cheer dwindled a bit. "Now there was a city with plenty of lovely places to spend the night. And just as many lovely people to spend those nights with."

Kiyoshi watched as a bit of sadness deepened shadows he hadn't noticed earlier under the actor's eyes. Whatever had happened in Edo to spoil Nakamura's career on stage was still painful for the man to address, and Kiyoshi resisted the urge to inquire more. All of Ryuhei's emotions had carried such degrees of passion so far that Kiyoshi realized he wouldn't be able to bear sensing Ryuhei's sorrow.

So, he smiled gently and gave a short, respectful bow. "I'm sure you had quite a long line of admirers waiting for your attention, Ryu-san."

"Well, I don't like to brag..." Ryuhei brightened.

But of course he did. Kiyoshi contained a laugh and simply smiled and nodded. But he had to admit he wouldn't have minded being one of Ryuhei's "special admirers". Gods, how long had it been? It seemed like ages since he'd let himself get close to anyone in any way. Not since Liu left him half dead so many years ago...

His thoughts were interrupted some time later when Nakamura grabbed his *kimono* sleeve.

"Surely you haven't changed your mind, Kiyoshi-kun? You're walking right past the *ryokan*." He feigned a horrified gasp. "If I didn't know better I'd think you were trying to whisk me off to some private hideaway to have your wicked way with me."

"I would never think to do such a thing, Nakamura-san."

Ryuhei's sigh was quite genuine this time. "Such a noble young man you are, Kiyoshi-kun. Such a noble young man."

As it turned out, Kiyoshi's money went a long way in this small town. They were able to take some of the better seats on the knee-high platform along the inn's walls, with the nicely polished tables and clean chopsticks. Two bottles of warm *sake* were brought to them, along with the steamed pork buns as Kiyoshi had promised. The rice wine was just to Ryuhei's liking, so much so in fact, they drank a third bottle as well.

"You'll have to be careful with me now." Ryuhei giggled lightly behind his hand. "*Sake* tends to loosen more than just my tongue."

Kiyoshi felt his cheeks color as he glanced down at Nakamura-san's lap. If anything, it seemed to harden some parts of him.

"You're just so kind," Ryuhei cooed, then hiccupped. "You've made my stay here so much more bearable—enjoyable I'd even say." He reached across the low table and patted Kiyoshi's hand. "I thought you might've been a traveling musician when I first saw you." He smiled, his fingertips tracing the smooth skin on Kiyoshi's knuckles. "You have such long, graceful fingers. There's not a callus on them and your nails are so fine. That's quite unusual for a farmer."

"I never said I was a very good farmer," Kiyoshi replied softly as he turned his hand to lightly clasp Ryuhei's. He stroked the pad of his thumb across the pulse point on Nakamura's wrist and felt his own blood stir with the same steady rhythm of the actor's. He licked his lips, his fangs tingling in his mouth as they tried to extend in anticipation.

Forcing himself to release Ryuhei's hand, he signaled for the innkeeper. "Perhaps we should see about arranging that room and finishing our drinks in private?"

Ryuhei tilted his head forward to peer seductively up at Kiyoshi through a fringe of dark lashes. "I would like that, Kiyoshi-kun. I would like that very much."

The innkeeper trotted over and, pleased with Kiyoshi's generosity of payment, dashed off to prepare them a room. Ryuhei stood a bit shakily, dipping a little and murmuring about how "*That* was good wine."

He started humming old folk songs about *sakura* blossoms and the moon, and Kiyoshi thought Ryuhei had a sweet-sounding voice. "Those are pretty songs." He smiled at Nakamura, standing to help keep the actor steady as the innkeeper returned.

Apparently, Ryuhei's balance depended more on how close Kiyoshi was than any effect of the liquor. Dropping his arm around Kiyoshi's waist, Ryuhei didn't seem quite so tipsy after all. They followed the innkeeper up the wooden staircase that rose over the entrance to the kitchen, heading towards the room that had been readied for them.

"If I still had my *shamisen*, I could play those songs for you and you could sing them," Nakamura suggested playfully.

"I don't know the lyrics; you'd have to teach them to me."

Ryuhei gasped with mock horror. "But every child learns those songs."

"Neh...sometimes I forget things like that." Kiyoshi laughed nervously. He'd been born long before the first versions of those songs had been sung in any country village.

"Oh, Kiyoshi-kun." Nakamura giggled. "You can remember my performances from ten years ago, but not this?" Ryuhei stopped in the middle of the hallway. "You *do* remember me, don't you? You aren't saying it to be kind?"

"I do remember." Kiyoshi nodded adamantly until the sad expression lifted from the actor's face. "I couldn't forget such a stirring performance."

"Nakamura!"

They both turned in unison to stare over the railing at the man who'd just burst through the front entryway. His bright red costume was rumpled and soaked with sweat, the feathers crowning the brass lion's mask under his arm were limp and soggy.

Ryuhei tensed at first and then his shoulders slumped. "Oh no," he groaned.

“It’s Shosei from the Noh idiots...”

“Nakamura!” Shosei bellowed again, jabbing his finger up in the air rather rudely. “We had a show tonight.”

“Did we, Shosei-san?” Ryuhei blinked innocently.

The Noh actor sputtered and then shouted, “Yes.”

“Did anyone attend?”

“What the hell do you mean ‘did anyone attend’? Half this town must have shown up.”

“Did anyone *important* attend?”

“*You*—” Shosei’s round face turned the same shade of scarlet as his costume. “I had to play all three roles *myself*. I’m not paying you to chase ass in these *ryokan*.”

“You call that two-bit pittance *payment*?” Ryuhei leaned over the railing, just as worked up as the Noh actor. “It’s *robbery*. An actor of my skill stuck playing the role of *waki*—a meaningless secondary character? *Insult*.”

Kiyoshi looked around, nervous at the attention the scene was getting from the other guests. One thing was certain—this was a far better show than anything performed at the Noh.

“Robbery, is it?” Shosei shouted. “You washed up whore. You’re *fired*.” With that, he stormed back out of the inn.

Everything was silent in the inn for a long time afterward. Then Nakamura stood up straight and pronounced with all the dignity of an official in the emperor’s court, “It’s a good thing I quit first.”

Kiyoshi contained yet another laugh, rather surprised at how Nakamura brought so much lightness to his long, dreary existence. Oh, the man was most likely insufferable taken in large doses, but the sweetness of Ryuhei’s blood when he put himself into such a stir was undoubtedly worth the inconvenience. He touched Ryuhei’s shoulder and leaned in to whisper in his ear. “Perhaps we should get to our room. There’s no sense giving people a show they aren’t paying for.”

Ryuhei’s arm slipped around his waist once more, his hand gliding down across Kiyoshi’s hip. “Yes, my friend. Private shows have always been my favorite.”

Ryuhei kissed him the instant the innkeeper slid the *shoji* closed behind them. Kiyoshi responded with a need he hadn’t felt in ages.

The actor’s lips were soft and moist, his eager tongue tasting of the *sake* they’d

drunk together. Kiyoshi pulled back only long enough to set down the bottle of wine he carried, then wrapped his fingers around Nakamura's *obi* sash and jerked the man forward into another deep kiss. His nimble fingers made quick work of the tight knot until the *obi* fell, giving him free access to the burning flesh within the robe.

Ryuhei moaned into his mouth and arched forward as Kiyoshi ran his palm across the growing bulge contained within the front of the actor's loincloth. Kiyoshi let out his own soft moan as Ryuhei's lips slid down, the actor's tongue snaking out to glide along the side of Kiyoshi's neck as though it were a slice of ripe fruit. He teased the lobe of Kiyoshi's ear with his teeth, murmuring words of delight when Kiyoshi leaned in for more.

"Oh, you sweet, lovely thing." Ryuhei's hands stroked through the fabric of Kiyoshi's *kimono* the way a musician ran his hands over a beloved instrument. "I haven't wanted anyone as much as I want you, Kiyoshi-kun."

A lie, most probably. But it didn't matter, for the invigorating scent of the man's blood seeped from his pores, igniting the vampire's appetite in so many ways. Kiyoshi dropped to his knees before Ryuhei, nuzzling his hard cock through the fabric of the *fundoshi*. He slipped his fingers inside, fondled the dusky warm flesh incased within the loincloth. Ryuhei, knees quaking, squeezed Kiyoshi's shoulders to steady himself.

"Oh, Gods. I can't believe the effect you have on me." Ryuhei moaned as Kiyoshi began to tug the fabric free. "*Please* don't make me wait..."

Kiyoshi dropped Ryuhei's loincloth to the floor, staring as the other's flesh grew longer and harder still. He gripped the base of the erection and leaned in to stroke the rigid length with his tongue, licking at the top slit and the thick drop of fluid beading there.

"Oh, Gods." Ryuhei tangled his fingers in Kiyoshi's hair and tried to pull him closer. But Kiyoshi drew away, freed himself and stood as the actor whimpered, "Don't be a tease..."

Stepping back, Kiyoshi said nothing. He took the rolled futon mattress from the corner of the room and spread it across the wooden floor. Shedding his own clothing, he held out his hand in invitation.

Chapter Three

“Kiyoshi-kun, really...” Ryuhei purred as he shrugged out of his *yukata*. A light film of sweat glistened on his lithe frame, the sharp angles of the taut muscles in his shoulders and along his abdomen highlighted by the orange glow coming from the paper lantern near the entrance. He moved softly across the *tatami* and took Kiyoshi’s hand, guiding him down to the mattress.

“You’re so young and soft-spoken, I wondered if you might’ve been a virgin,” Ryuhei murmured between mouthfuls of Kiyoshi’s lips and neck. His fingers danced along the arch of Kiyoshi’s back and down around his trim waist as they kneeled before each other. “Now I think that perhaps you’re more experienced with methods of pleasuring than you let on.”

Delivered with a coy smile, the actor’s comments were clearly meant to both tease and flatter. Leisurely sliding one hand up to rub and toy with one of Kiyoshi’s hard nipples, Ryuhei reached between them with the other to take hold of Kiyoshi’s cock. His eyes grew wide.

“Gods,” he exclaimed. “Kiyoshi-kun—you’re *possessed*.”

Ryuhei’s grip tightened around the thick base before sliding up and down the shaft in gentle, rhythmic strokes. Aroused by Nakamura’s explorative touch and eager for more, Kiyoshi could only make soft moans. Tilting his hips forward, he rocked against the man’s hand and leaned forward to devour Ryuhei’s lips in a long kiss that thirsted for passion.

The strokes increased in intensity. Kiyoshi felt his fangs distend in his mouth but could do nothing to control them. The reaction was as innate, as physically unstoppable, as the erection stabbing up through Ryuhei’s fingers. Kiyoshi broke off the kiss and tried to push away before he gave in to the desire taunting his senses.

“You’re almost too fast to keep up with,” Ryuhei panted, his cheeks alive with more color than they’d gotten from the rice wine.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,” Kiyoshi whispered shakily. “I’m sorry, Ryu-san, I have to go...”

“No, no,” Ryuhei pleaded. He took Kiyoshi’s wrist in both hands and kissed each finger. “Please stay. I haven’t had such enjoyable company in a very long time. I’m usually not so...brusque...honestly. I misunderstood your excitement.” Nakamura touched the side of Kiyoshi’s head and encouraged him to ease down onto the bedding. The back of Kiyoshi’s head rested in Ryuhei’s lap and he caressed Kiyoshi’s cheeks with practiced delicacy. “I can see you’re a gentle soul in need of gentler methods.”

Ryuhei dipped forward, kissing Kiyoshi’s throat, then stretched out lengthwise so his lips could wander down the center line of Kiyoshi’s chest and belly, and along the swelling organ below his abdomen. He used such slow, practiced movements of his mouth, suckling at the flesh with his kisses.

Kiyoshi writhed and fought the dark hunger as long as he could, no matter how it made him ache to do so. He was on the verge of spilling his seed, half-drunk on the scent of Nakamura’s lust and the heat of the actor’s blood he could hear rushing through the delicate veins. With an animal-like growl, he wrested free of the sensual kiss and pushed Ryuhei onto his back.

Ryuhei shrieked with pleasure as Kiyoshi kissed and licked a searing path over his torso and abdomen. Gasping, Ryuhei tangled his fingers in Kiyoshi’s dark hair when the vampire’s lips closed over his rigid cock.

Positioning himself between the actor’s parted thighs, Kiyoshi reached underneath to grip the soft mounds of Ryuhei’s rear. He let his index finger press against the tight opening within, his mouth continuing to devour Ryuhei’s cock.

The climax hit Ryuhei hard, a cry rising out of him. Kiyoshi lapped up the thick fluid, savoring the heady excitement flavoring the come. His fangs ached and he could take no more. Ryuhei was still trembling, semen oozing from his cock, as Kiyoshi moved to nuzzle the place at the juncture of his thigh and quickly bit. The rush of blood as he sucked was intoxicating. Kiyoshi wanted to drain the man dry, but he fought the urge and turned his attention once more to Ryuhei’s erect cock. He cleaned the hot flesh with lips and tongue, more than a little drunk from it all by the time he pulled away.

“You wicked, *wicked* boy,” Ryuhei said between gasps for air. He shivered in Kiyoshi’s arms, lust radiating from his body and flooding Kiyoshi’s senses.

Kiyoshi murmured, bit the side of his tongue and bent to lick the little wounds on Ryuhei’s inner thigh, watching as the small bites began to heal. He lay

breathing heavily, his head resting on Ryuhei's hip. "I didn't hurt you, did I?" "Heavens no, dear one. You thrilled me beyond belief." Ryuhei breathed a contented sigh and moved the leg Kiyoshi lay against. "But you let me have all the fun. You didn't even come, did you?"

"It's all right, I'm fine. More than fine."

Ryuhei stroked his fingers through Kiyoshi's hair. "Such a rare treasure you are. A rare, unexpected treasure."

Kiyoshi didn't protest when Ryuhei moved to get the bottle of *sake*. He took a long drink when the liquor was offered to him, and he accepted the eager kisses the actor soon showered over his mouth and throat. He continued to bask in the euphoria of the blood taken and willingly gave himself to Ryuhei's probing touch.

The man's fingers teased Kiyoshi's opening, easing inwards with slow movements that stretched the tight entrance. Kiyoshi exhaled deeply at the pleasurable sensation and parted his legs further. His already stiff and aroused cock throbbed, aching to feel the same skillful touch.

"Oh, Kiyo-kun." Ryuhei giggled. He leaned forward, brushing his lips over the top of Kiyoshi's swollen head. "You'll make me blush."

Ryuhei was anything but blushing as he traced a line of kisses along the pulsing vein on the underside of Kiyoshi's organ. He mouthed the taut sac below the cock, suckling and kissing the sensitive flesh until Kiyoshi gasped and arched upwards off the futon.

Ryuhei dipped lower and withdrew his fingers from Kiyoshi. His tongue flicked around the stretched opening, leaving the area moist and Kiyoshi hungry for more than these playful explorations.

"Take me," Kiyoshi pleaded, his fingers slipping through the black strands of Ryuhei's hair as he cradled the back of the actor's neck.

Moving forward, Ryuhei gathered Kiyoshi in his arms. He pressed his lips to Kiyoshi's, the kiss deep and full of passion as they sank down to the futon. Ryuhei positioned his sex at Kiyoshi's opening, pushing in slowly at first. The feel of that hot, pulsing length filling his passage brought a cry of pleasure to Kiyoshi's throat.

Kiyoshi pulled out of the kiss, groaning out loud with each of Ryuhei's thrusts. Ryuhei buried his face against Kiyoshi's shoulder, wordless exclamations of ecstasy tumbling out as he settled into a pounding rhythm. In the heat of the moment, Kiyoshi lifted off the futon just enough to skim Ryu's shoulder with

one fang.

A droplet of blood oozed from the puncture wound. The sweet, vibrant scent overwhelmed Kiyoshi's sense of control and he pressed his lips to the bloody flesh and sucked deeply. The taste of it—so warm, delicious and erotic all at once—brought Kiyoshi to a fevered climax. With a moan, he spilled out between them, his fluid sticky and hot on his own belly and Ryuhei's. At the same moment, Ryuhei erupted deep within Kiyoshi's body and they came together in a series of coursing spurts.

Whispering Kiyoshi's name over and over again in a breathless voice, Ryuhei eased out. He sat up slowly, smoothing his hands over Kiyoshi's chest and tracing a finger through the sticky mess on Kiyoshi's abdomen. He brought the come to his lips, teasing Kiyoshi with another coy smile.

Kiyoshi sat up and caught Ryuhei's hand. He flicked his tongue over the man's finger to lap up the semen, and still breathing heavy from the sex, he smiled weakly. "Let's finish the *sake* instead."

Ryuhei touched his cheek and giggled. "We shouldn't let it go to waste."

When they caught their breath, they finished off the *sake* and fell back onto the futon, entwined in one another's arms. The actor sighed with such contentment, the emotion stirred Kiyoshi's heart.

"I'm so glad we've met, Kiyo-kun." Ryuhei nuzzled the side of Kiyoshi's neck, his breath warm and moist on the bare skin. His happiness resonated inside of Kiyoshi as well.

"So am I." Kiyoshi brushed his fingers through the actor's hair and along the smooth skin of his brow with some degree of wonder. How endearing this man's spirit was, the way he managed to touch a part of Kiyoshi's heart that had remained numb through the decades—centuries—after what happened with Liu. Kiyoshi's fingers traveled down past Ryuhei's jaw and along the side of his neck. Instinctually, they settled on the spot where the actor's vein pulsed just underneath the skin in a steady cadence that raced against Kiyoshi's fingertip. It was the pulse of a *human's* life...one quite different from his own.

"Tomorrow, I'll be sad to say goodbye," Kiyoshi whispered.

Ryuhei gasped and raised his head. "What? Why?" He propped himself up on one elbow and looked down into Kiyoshi's face with a pout. Gently, he touched Kiyoshi's cheeks. "Why say goodbye?"

"Nakamura-san..." Kiyoshi leaned his cheek into Ryuhei's caress, enjoying the warmth and tenderness so very much even if only for a little while longer. "I

can't stay..." He was so used to wandering, never staying in one place for too long...never finding love to ease his loneliness...

"You said that before, also." Ryuhei's pout deepened into a genuine frown of sadness. "Is the life of a farmer-sometimes-wanderer all that alluring?"

Unable to answer in a way that would've been truthful to them both, Kiyoshi closed his eyes and suppressed a sigh. He felt Ryuhei's lips brush against his cheek in a series of affectionate kisses.

"We could wander together then," the actor said. The heat of their passion colored his words, making each syllable sound all the sweeter beside the tenderness of what Ryuhei promised. "There's no place I can call home for long, and I have no reason to stay here in Magome. If we're both going to leave tomorrow not knowing where to go, then why not do so together?"

The thought alone brought a smile to Kiyoshi. The actor continued to kiss him hopefully, persuasively.

"Please stay with me." Ryuhei enveloped Kiyoshi in an embrace. He burrowed his face into Kiyoshi's chest, his eyelashes tickling the bare skin. "I mean what I say—that I've never enjoyed another's company more than I have yours. Please." The sincerity pouring from Ryuhei's very soul dissolved any lingering reservations Kiyoshi had.

Kissing Ryuhei's forehead, he found himself murmuring his agreement with the actor's pleas. "Yes," Kiyoshi breathed. "I'll stay with you, Ryu-san."

Sighing deeply, happily, Ryuhei relaxed in Kiyoshi's arms. Together they fell into a peaceful sleep, their bodies as one on the bed.

* * *

San Francisco , 1872

Ryuhei stared at himself in the mirror over the dresser. His hair was a mess, his clothes were wrinkled and worst of all, he was...*sweaty*. The cramped little room behind him was in just as bad a shape. It looked as though his traveling trunk had exploded in the center of the theater's dressing room. Costumes, jars of makeup—a few vials of *other* vital, lubricous oils—were scattered across everywhere and everything.

Ryuhei turned away from the mirror to take in the chaos around him. His eyebrow twitched.

He'd rifled through every inch of this room, had even gone downstairs to the spice-scented closet where the costumes were kept in between performances. But there was no sign of it. His gold silk *haori*—his best piece of formal wear he'd brought with him from Japan—was gone. Stolen. And he knew just who the thieving little attention-whore was...

"Hoshi, you *bitch*." Ryuhei stormed out of his dressing room. Where was Kiyoshi when he needed him?

* * *

Kiyoshi's sensitive hearing picked up the sound of Ryuhei's tantrum long before the theater on the fringes of Chinatown came into view. His lover must be upset at their colleague Hoshi...again. Shaking his head and suppressing a smile, Kiyoshi paused to close his eyes and let the angry passion in Ryuhei's words tickle his senses. These few years had been chaotic oft times and were he an average mortal, he might very well have left the overly dramatic Ryuhei by the wayside. But as it was, the depth of feeling the man put into everything he did intoxicated Kiyoshi each time they coupled and Kiyoshi dared to savor the sweetness of his companion's blood.

"Ah, there you are."

Kiyoshi opened his eyes as Akira took the steps leading down from the theater two at a time. "You're avoiding the fussy dick, aren't you?" the other actor asked with a wry smile.

Akira Sounoichi looked especially tall in the western clothing he wore tonight, the linen pants accentuating his already long legs and trim waist. His white cotton shirt was open at the collar and he reached into the breast pocket of his coat to pull out a thinly rolled cigarette. With his hair cut short in the American style, he gave the appearance of a Japanese official sent to this country to work on some treaty or another. And by *fussy dick*, Kiyoshi knew exactly whom the man referred to.

"I'm not avoiding Ryu-san. I just went for a walk." Kiyoshi self-consciously rubbed at the corners of his mouth to ensure no traces of blood remained.

"Ah." Akira lit the cigarette and took a puff, his eyes shining. "Then you're avoiding rehearsals with Hosh."

"Akira-kun, I would do no such thing." Kiyoshi shook his head, declining the offer when Akira held out the cigarette. Ryuhei insisted those "damn things"

would ruin his voice. Of course, Kiyoshi's non-mortal body could never be ruined that way, but how could he explain that to Ryuhei? "If Hoshi-san wants to work on the act tonight, then I'd be more than happy to."

"Ha! The happiness won't last long—Ryuhei's in the middle of another tantrum." Akira tossed the cigarette to the floor and crushed it under his foot. "Someone touched His Highness' wardrobe."

By *someone*, Akira meant Hoshi. Kiyoshi sighed, knowing the worst of the evening had yet to start. "I'll help Ryu-san find whatever it is."

Akira's brow twitched. "Or not."

"What do you mean?"

"I think Hoshi, uh, well... It's difficult to say."

"Not really, I'm sure." Kiyoshi's eyes widened.

Akira pursed his lips, then shrugged. "You may as well know before Ryuhei does. Hoshi took one of Ryuhei's *haori* this afternoon. It accidentally fell into a vat of camphor oil and was ruined."

"Accident? *Accident?*" Ryuhei bellowed from the theater entrance, making Akira flinch. "There's no such thing as an accident."

"You can deal with this, I don't have the patience." Akira gave Kiyoshi a weary look before deftly disappearing into the shadows.

Ryuhei dashed down the theater steps. "Akira, come back here. Tell me where that thieving little bitch is so I can scratch his eyes out."

Kiyoshi shuddered from the wave of Ryuhei's emotions that washed over him. He stepped forward and placed a hand upon Ryuhei's back. "Ryu-san. Please don't upset yourself. Hoshi's not worth the effort."

Ryuhei spun, his eyes wide with shock, his mouth partly open in a gasp. "But you don't understand. That bitch stole my *haori*. My *gold silk haori*. It was my favorite."

Kiyoshi nodded. "I know. It was a beautiful thing and you looked wonderful in it."

Deflated, Ryuhei plopped down onto the theater steps. "That bitch. He knew I wanted to wear it tonight. He *knew* I was planning a special evening for you to celebrate our debut in America."

"You were planning something for me?" Kiyoshi sat beside his companion. "A special evening?"

"Maybe..." Ryuhei pouted as he rested his elbow on his knee and cupped his

chin. "It's not like it matters now."

Kiyoshi stared at the man with growing surprise. He patted Ryuhei's thigh. "Oh, Ryu-san, you really did have plans."

Though he kept looking away towards the end of the street, Ryuhei shifted over on the step so his body pressed closer to Kiyoshi's. "No, no. I don't want your pity." He stuck his nose in the air, but didn't mean a word of it. Every line was delivered with his customary amount of proper drama while the emotions rolling off him were laced with a need for affection. "Maybe you should follow after Akira and go with him to that party where all the *gaijin* theater patrons are."

Kiyoshi shook his head firmly. "I don't want to go with Akira."

"But *kabuki's* the latest trend, you know. I'm sure you'll have lots of admirers." Ryuhei's pout turned genuine. "Perhaps Akira will bed you at last. I've seen the way he looks at you."

Kiyoshi touched Ryuhei's cheek, coaxing him to turn his head. "But I don't want him." He took hold of the actor's hand, brushed his lips along Ryuhei's knuckles and flicked his tongue across them before pulling away. "You're the only one I've ever wanted that way," Kiyoshi said softly, trying to silence the tiny voice in the recesses of his mind that kept whispering Liu Sakurai's name. These murmurs from the past...why did they come now, in this city?

"You're a silly boy, Kiyo-kun." Ryuhei rubbed his thumb over the smooth skin on Kiyoshi's wrist. Sighing, he collapsed back onto the steps and stared up at the black, starless sky. "Others want you that way. You're young, talented, attractive. You'll realize all this for yourself soon enough."

Kiyoshi blinked. "Realize what?"

Usually Ryuhei made himself clear when he threw a tantrum or sank into one of his attention-seeking moods. It suddenly occurred to Kiyoshi that this was neither of those episodes, and it left him puzzled.

"No, no, it's nothing," the actor insisted. He made an *oof* sound and scrunched down the steps so the hard edge didn't jab into his back.

"The *haori* is easy enough to replace," Kiyoshi said.

"Oh, the damn jacket doesn't matter," Ryuhei grumbled. He waved his hand through the air. "The whole idea was silly to begin with. I just thought it might've been a nice way to pass the time if we had dinner near that prosperous area, Nob Hill, and then spent the night trying a western bed for a change." He tilted his head to look at Kiyoshi. "You can laugh, go on."

Kiyoshi brushed a few wayward strands of hair back from Ryuhei's handsome face. "Why would I laugh? We haven't spent any real time alone without Akira or Hoshi in ages. And to be honest"—he leaned over and skimmed his tongue across the lobe of Ryuhei's ear—"I would much rather postpone the meal and go straight to the nearest bed with you."

"Ohhh, such a tease you are, Kiyo-kun. Whatever shall I do with you?"

"Anything you like, Ryu-san, as always."

Ryuhei's expression lightened at last, a playful smile tugging at the corners of his lips. He touched Kiyoshi's chin and drew him down into a kiss, his fingers stroking through Kiyoshi's hair. Pleased, if not muffled noises passed between them as they embraced, then Ryuhei broke away.

"Ow," he mumbled, reaching behind him to rub at his back. "One thing's for sure—a western bed can't be any more uncomfortable than these steps."

Kiyoshi took his free hand and pulled him up. "Let's go find that bed then." He grinned. "There's a hotel not far from here. I know the way."

Ryuhei's smile faltered and he stopped. Kiyoshi tugged at his arm. "Ryu-san?"

"Where have you been going at night?" the actor asked quietly.

Taken aback for a moment, Kiyoshi stared at Ryuhei in silent surprise. "What do you mean?" He blinked, honestly confused. "We share the same room over the theater. As we have wherever we perform."

Ryuhei slipped his hand out of Kiyoshi's grasp. "Sometimes I roll over on the bed and find your place empty, the futon long gone cold."

Kiyoshi exhaled slowly, while inside he groaned at his carelessness. "I get thirsty at night..." Which was not a lie at all. "So I go to get some water." That was.

Clever man that he was, Ryuhei clearly remained unconvinced. "There's always a pitcher of water by the dresser. And you were never this thirsty before we left Japan."

A small whimper escaped Kiyoshi. He'd been able to restrain himself before coming to America, but since setting foot in this city his thirst for blood had been getting the best of him. Three times this week alone he'd snuck out to satiate his appetite, his desire too strong to resist. After tonight he knew the cause. It was the lure of the Chinese assassin Gobei had spoken of—the Poisoned Dragon.

But he always waited for Ryuhei to be deep in sleep. He'd been certain he'd never be found out. Apparently, on at least one occasion, he hadn't waited long

enough to go slake his thirst.

“Ryu-san,” he said weakly. Damn. They’d been together for so long and not once before had Ryuhei’s mortal heart ever sensed anything different about him. Not even after those weeks at sea when they, along with the other members of the *kabuki* troupe, left Japan for America, cramped together on that small ship with a hundred other passengers. Not even then had his secret been so at the brink of being exposed as he felt it was now.

Some of the color left Ryuhei’s face as he surely took Kiyoshi’s silence to mean the worst. “You don’t have to explain yourself,” Ryuhei said with a limp shrug. “I know there’s someone else.”

“What?” Kiyoshi’s chin almost hit the floor.

“Does your other lover know about me, or are you better at keeping your secrets with him? Or her? That’s it, isn’t it? You’re throwing me over for a woman.”

“There’s no one else, Ryuhei. There hasn’t been since we met. You know that.”

“Do I?”

“You should.”

A silence like Kiyoshi hadn’t felt in centuries dropped between them and his heart sank within his breast. Before he could say or do anything, his sensitive hearing caught the sound of quick footsteps approaching. Heavy, American footsteps. “Someone’s coming. Maybe we should go inside and finish talking.”

Ryuhei stuck his pert nose in the air. “Perhaps it’s your new friend.”

“Ryu—”

“Forgive me...gentlemen?”

Chapter Four

Kiyoshi turned and glared at the American dressed in a rumpled fawn-colored suit with a small, careworn bowler hat upon his head. “The theater is closed and we don’t open until tomorrow,” Kiyoshi practically snapped.

The man cocked his head to one side and looked from Kiyoshi to the building just behind them. “Ah,” he said with a nod. “Ah, yes. I take it you gentlemen would be some of the performers or maybe stagehands?”

“Stagehands?” Ryuhei’s mouth gaped open in shock. “What an insult,” he thundered in Japanese. “If this is your new admirer, I’m seriously offended you’d pick an idiot like *him* over *me*.”

“He’s not my lover.”

“So you’re not stagehands?” the American asked lightly.

“No,” Kiyoshi said, his tone sharp. “We’re actors with the troupe.” *Now go away.*

Kiyoshi focused his thoughts to a direct command, channeling them straight towards this intrusive newcomer. He rarely ever used his abilities as a *kyuuketsuki* to influence a mortal’s mind, but this wasn’t an ordinary situation. Pushing out with as much power as he could, he repeated the command.

Go. Away.

And yet the American stayed right where he was, feet planted firmly on the ground, oblivious to what Kiyoshi was trying to do. He smoothed down the front of his frumpy suit and patted the sides of his face. “*Phew*,” the man exhaled in relief and then chuckled. “I thought that with the way you were staring, my nose might’ve fallen off.”

“Oh *wonderful*. A comedian.” Ryuhei sighed dramatically. “And a most unattractive one,” he added under his breath in Japanese, casting a disappointed glance to Kiyoshi.

Kiyoshi grimaced and turned once more on the American. “Leave us.”

“Well, now, I’d like to oblige, but you see I’ve been given this assignment. I’m Carl Gavin of the *San Francisco Register* and I’m supposed to do a feature on you all and your opening of this Kay Bookie theater of yours.”

“*Kabuki*,” Ryuhei corrected with an annoyed expression. “The word is *kabuki*.”

“That’s exactly the kind of honest, from-the-source information I’m looking for.” Gavin smiled cheerfully. “It must be somethin’ performing miles away from your homeland. How do you gentlemen like it here in San Francisco?”

Ryuhei looked as if he might throw up or start throwing things. Or both. “I would’ve had a better time acting on the seat of a tired old ass than coming here,” he said acidly. “Are you going to put that in your story?”

“Please, we’re not really in the mood to talk about this now,” Kiyoshi told the reporter. “Maybe some other evening.”

Ryuhei shot Kiyoshi a glance both pained and furious. “Maybe after you’ve given him a *shiatsu* and sucked that barbarian-sized organ of his,” he muttered, thankfully, in Japanese. It didn’t keep an embarrassed blush from rising to Kiyoshi’s cheeks, though.

“Let’s talk about something else then,” Gavin interrupted. “How about the dead bodies that’ve been turning up around here lately?”

Ryuhei gasped. “Bodies? Dead bodies? Near here?”

“Yes. Didn’t you hear any talk in the streets?”

“We don’t frequent the streets,” Kiyoshi said sharply. Once more he tried pushing out with his thoughts. *Go. Away. Now.*

The man did not budge. He simply rubbed the back of his neck as if the hairs were bristling. “Well, rumor has it that them Chinaboys are after one another over this and that. But from what I’ve heard, those boys tend to take care of their own messes. Most of the time that is, unless I’m guessing they want to get a message across to their opponents.”

Ryuhei whipped out a fan from inside the loose sleeve of his robe. “I don’t like the way this sounds *at all*.” He started fanning himself nervously, the gold silk flashing in the lamplight. “Vendettas, messes, killing...I saw enough of that in the civil war back home, thank you.”

The sight of a drop of a blood alone made Ryuhei Nakamura queasy, and Kiyoshi knew that during the Bakumatsu, the actor had been more than content to stay as far away from any sights of bloodshed as possible. He might be temperamental and throw loud tantrums from time to time, but as a whole, Ryuhei was one of the most non-violent men Kiyoshi had ever known. For that

reason among several others, Kiyoshi worked very carefully to keep the truth about himself a secret.

“I’m not sure you folks have anything to worry about,” the reporter tried to assure them. “I told you—the Chinese just stick to themselves mostly. These assassinations don’t mean there’s a danger for you.”

“Assassins?” Ryuhei squeaked. “There are assassins here?” His unease was now strong enough to tickle Kiyoshi’s supernatural senses—especially that of taste. If he were to sample some of the man’s blood at this very moment, the fluid would be deliciously flavored with Ryuhei’s fear.

“If it doesn’t involve us, then why ask us anything to begin with?” Kiyoshi turned on Gavin. “We don’t need to be terrorized.”

The reporter’s sharp eyes narrowed a bit and he rubbed his chin with his thumb and forefinger. “I didn’t know this would strike such a powerful chord.”

“Well it does.” *Now go away.*

The reporter blinked but didn’t budge, and Kiyoshi had to bite back the snarl that threatened to erupt from within. Either this mortal’s will was unaccountably strong or Kiyoshi himself was even weaker than Liu and Kuro had accused him of being so long ago.

“I suppose it is getting a might late and it seems that you—er—gentlemen have plans. My editor wants me to do a serial feature on you and your little theater. How you decided to perform in America, just what the hell this kabookie is and all.”

“*Kabuki*. It’s *kabuki*,” Ryuhei muttered.

“Sorry.” Gavin smiled sheepishly. “I’ll get that word right someday.”

“May the Gods be so kind to me.” Ryuhei snapped his fan shut and turned to go back up the stairs to the theater. “Good night.”

Kiyoshi almost called after him, but pressed a hand to his mouth to keep the cry in. Maybe this news of the Chinese assassin would help Ryu-san to forget his earlier suspicions, or at least distract him for a while. It was better than trying to convince the emotional actor that Kiyoshi had no other lovers or secret engagements. Though the truth would easily explain away all doubts.

The vampire looked away from the theater. He could never share his secret with Ryuhei.

“He’s quite a character, your friend is,” Gavin said after a moment. “The man who was supposed to be helping me on this serial as a Japanese translator said there was some kind of scandal with one of the actors back in Japan. Is that

true? Was it your friend? He seems the type to attract a ruckus.”

Kiyoshi gave the reporter a hard look. “The only scandal is that so many have failed to appreciate Nakamura-san’s talents. He is an incredible actor and it breaks my heart to see him have to play in rural theaters to meager audiences. I only hope that the American audience will come to the performances and give him the full respect he deserves. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” With that Kiyoshi turned and hurried up the theater steps.

The young actor moved up the steps so fast, Carl Gavin barely had a chance to call out after him. “Thank you,” he shouted as the theater doors silently closed behind the boy.

“Oh hell, what was his name?” Gavin sighed. He pulled out a palm-sized bound notebook from inside his coat and tried to jot down as many notes as he could before forgetting any details. The older one was Nakamura—Gavin scribbled the name down as he sounded it out. His translator would probably still give him hell over the spelling, Gavin guessed.

“Ah, well.” He sighed again, tucking the notebook away. Spelling of Japanese words aside, this theater troupe seemed an interesting bunch. Especially the young man from just now.

The boy’s stares were peculiar, to say the least. Carl was almost sure he’d felt a little nudge on his shoulder each time the young actor glared at him. Who was that boy? He didn’t look much older than Gavin’s nephew, who was still in one of those fancy secondary schools in Massachusetts, but here he was performing in a bona fide theater troupe.

“Hmm. More questions for next time,” he told himself before heading down the street.

Chapter Five

Distracted by the annoying reporter, Kiyoshi was a bit too preoccupied to sense Ryuhei's presence until the familiar deep voice reached out of the shadowy lobby to caress the back of his neck like a feathery kiss.

"Did you mean it, Kiyo-kun? What you said to that reporter about me?"

Kiyoshi stepped forward and took hold of Ryuhei's hand. "Of course I did. I told you the first time we met that I found your talent amazing." He stroked his mortal lover's cheek with his fingertips, studying the nuances of the faint light coming from the door leading upstairs as the soft glow danced over those high cheekbones and sparkled in the teardrops forming at the corners of Ryuhei's eyes. "You deserve so much more than this life has given you, Ryu-san," he whispered before pulling Ryuhei to him for a lingering kiss.

Their lips slowly parted and Ryuhei murmured, "Still such a silly boy." He pressed his cheek against Kiyoshi's, slipping his arms around the other's waist. "I don't deserve anything near as wonderful as this."

"Ryu-san." Kiyoshi ran his fingers gently along the nape of the man's neck. Sinking into the embrace, Ryuhei pressed closer and their shadows became one solid black form on the theater's wooden floor. Soon their lips found each other's once more, the warmth and sweetness of Ryuhei's taste filling Kiyoshi. A loud bang echoed through the empty lobby as the front door was flung open. Ryuhei gave a start and clutched Kiyoshi against his chest.

Three men stormed through the doorway, the one in front boldly holding a hatchet at the ready as though he meant to use it at any given moment. Kiyoshi's sensitive nostrils picked up the dull, rusty scent of old blood on the sharp blade.

Though smaller than the two goons flanking his sides, this man carried himself with an aggressive posture, his body tense and ready to lash out. With his

eyebrows scrunched close to his eyes and a scowl on his lips, his narrow face was set in an expression of contempt.

“Hey!” the man growled. He pointed to Kiyoshi and Ryuhei with the blade of the hatchet. “You two.”

Ryuhei’s heart pounded loud enough for Kiyoshi to hear. “You rude little bastard,” he shouted indignantly, masking his fear well. “Get out of this theater.”

“Don’t speak that Jap shit to me,” the man spat in accented English as he strode forward. He seized Ryuhei by the collar of his *kimono* and brandished the hatchet. “You’ll show me some respect and show it now,” he sneered before flinging Ryuhei backwards.

Kiyoshi caught him, too stunned to do more. That man—there was something oddly familiar about him. A scent. The scent he’d picked up earlier—the faint intoxicating scent of the one called the Poisoned Dragon.

“Gods!” Ryuhei made a strangled little sound in the back of his throat and pressed back against Kiyoshi. “This must be that Chinese assassin.”

“He’s not,” Kiyoshi whispered. *But, oh, how the Dragon’s essence clung to this one...* He opened his senses to the man and picked up the distinct scent of the Dragon. Wine, opium, perspiration, *semen...* The scent of sex. Kiyoshi’s mouth began to water.

Oblivious to Kiyoshi’s thoughts, Ryuhei retorted in English to the Chinese, “A hoodlum doesn’t deserve to kiss my ass, let alone get any respect from us.”

The two other thugs chuckled until their leader gave them a glare, his eyes bulging from their sockets. “Shut the fuck up, you idiots.”

Their chortles quickly changing into coughs, the men looked away and mumbled, “Sorry, Chao.”

“Chao. Ha! Your name should be Coward the way you’ve barged in here and harassed two performers of the arts.” That seemed to be the end of Ryuhei’s outburst. He shrank back a little into Kiyoshi as the Chinese man moved forward, hatchet poised to strike.

Though no one could ever get away with calling Ryu-san a warrior of any kind, Ryuhei couldn’t be called a coward either. Kiyoshi felt the actor tense in expectation of another shove or blow, but he made no move to run away.

“This is our part of town,” Chao roared. “And the Wongs say how things are run around here. *I say it.*”

“Then what do you want?” Kiyoshi demanded. “We have a contract to perform

here for the next few weeks. It was signed by the head of your Six Companies.” Chao smirked and Kiyoshi wanted very much to rip into the smug bastard’s throat and drain him dry.

“Those old men don’t know shit. This is Wong territory and I represent the Wongs. I want compensation for having to smell you Jap lapdogs every day when I walk by.”

Ryuhei gasped. “Why you insolent little—”

“How much,” Kiyoshi interrupted, taking a tighter hold on Ryuhei’s arm. “How much will it cost us to help you better tolerate our presence in your precious territory?”

Chao smirked again and handed the hatchet to one of his men before hooking his thumbs into the pockets of his western-style vest. “Well, it’s good to see there’s at least one smart Jap in the world.”

“*Bastards*,” Ryuhei puffed. “Of course money would be enough to make lowlifes like you happy.”

Chao gave the actor a long, thoroughly dirty look. “If anyone here knows how far a few coins can go, it would be you shits.” He sneered. “The whole world knows *kabuki* actors are only whores with dicks.”

All three gangsters laughed, Chao the loudest of all. “So, were both of you getting ready to work the streets before we barged in, or just practicing?” he mocked.

Ryuhei started to tremble again, this time from anger. “Throw some money at the little prick and let’s see if he chokes on the coins,” he hissed in Kiyoshi’s ear. A feral growl rumbled deep within Kiyoshi’s chest. “A better idea would be to break their worthless necks.” He was already moving forward, fangs distending within his mouth as every predatory instinct in his body caught fire.

Ryuhei grabbed at Kiyoshi’s shoulders. “You can’t fight these men, they’ll kill you. Stop.” The actor’s frightened plea cut through the haze of bloodlust consuming Kiyoshi’s reasoning.

Pausing, the vampire glanced down at the hands clutching the folds of his garments. Ryuhei’s hands—graceful and long-fingered. But mortal. With one flick of his wrist, he could break those brittle human bones trying to hold him back or shove away this man without any effort at all.

A chill ran through Kiyoshi and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. These weren’t his thoughts at all. He shook his head to dispel them and slowly noticed the sweet aftertaste of blood and power filling his mouth. This Chao

person had brought with him the essence of the Poisoned Dragon, and in this tension-filled situation, Kiyoshi had almost let himself be intoxicated by it.

“Kiyoshi-kun?” Ryuhei whispered, and Kiyoshi glanced up to find his lover’s eyes full of worry and fear. “What’s wrong?”

The heat spread over Kiyoshi’s cheeks, his pulse pounding in his throat. He dropped his gaze quickly. “Here—” He reached into the sleeve of his *haori* and pulled out a drawstring pouch. Not bothering to count the gold coins inside, he tossed the pouch into the air. “Take it all.”

Chao captured the pouch with a wicked grin and jingled the coins inside.

“Good.” He nodded. “That’s more like it.”

Giving his companions a smug look, Chao pocketed the money. “Let’s go,” he sneered. “These bitches have the rest of the night to work.”

Kiyoshi held back any kind of comment as the three gangsters stalked out of the theater, spitting on the floor and discarding their half-smoked cigarettes along the way, crushing them onto the clean, waxed floor. As soon as the last of the men slammed the door shut behind them, Ryuhei unlatched himself from Kiyoshi’s shoulders and collapsed onto the nearest, backless bench.

“T-t-those *pricks*,” he shouted in outrage. “They had no right. No right at all.” Ryuhei’s skin was blanched, the corners of his mouth drawn and his muscles tense. He abruptly stood as if he might go after those tong hoodlums, but then promptly flopped back onto the wooden bench.

“Thank the Gods they’re gone,” he spoke quietly as he wrung his trembling hands before him. “Did you see the look in their eyes? Pure murder. And *you*—” Ryuhei gasped at Kiyoshi. “Were you actually going to fight them?”

“I—” Kiyoshi started feebly, not even sure what he could or should say. But Ryuhei bolted up again, too nervous to stay seated for more than a few seconds, and headed straight to the backrooms of the playhouse.

“I need a drink,” Ryuhei whimpered. “Fuck that—I need *several* drinks...”

* * *

“They’ll probably be back, Kiyō-kun, then what will we do? You gave them your entire share of what we made from our last performance with that silly circus, didn’t you?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll handle them.”

“But they’ll hurt you. They’re insane.” Ryuhei threw his arms up over his head,

then started pacing the small bedroom he and Kiyoshi shared above the theater. He paused long enough to grab the bottle of *sake* he'd opened a short time earlier and began pacing anew, taking long swigs of the alcohol with every turn.

After the third pass he stopped dead and gestured to Kiyoshi with the bottle. "You really would have gone after that madman, wouldn't you?"

Kiyoshi stared at the floor. "I don't know, I wasn't thinking clearly. I was so angry."

"That's not like you. Not at all."

Kiyoshi glimpsed up through the hair falling across his eyes. He feared that Ryuhei knew what he was, despite the great care Kiyoshi had taken over the years they'd spent together. He sat cross-legged on the futon, his gaze drifting back down to his bent knees. "I couldn't help it. That Chao reminded me too much of...someone. Someone who made my brother desert me."

"A brother from a past you never tell me about."

Kiyoshi refused to lift his head when a cold silence fell between them. He remained withdrawn until a familiar rustle of silk and the glimpse of Ryuhei dropping to his knees before the futon caught his attention.

"Don't be foolishly heroic on my account, Kiyo-kun, please don't," Ryuhei pleaded, his soft tone begging forgiveness for his former harsh comment.

Kiyoshi finally looked up into the eyes that could be wide in awe like a child's or narrowed like the fiercest shrew's in a rage. "I won't, Ryu. I promise." He took his mortal lover's hand and kissed each fingertip slowly, drawing one after the other into his mouth for a gentle suck, his blood heating with each sensuous sigh Ryuhei expelled in reply.

"I'll keep you to that promise," Ryuhei murmured, reaching up with his free hand to brush the loose strands of hair from Kiyoshi's eyes. "For as long as I can."

Kiyoshi trailed the tip of his tongue over the length of his lover's small finger, letting his breath dry the faint moisture as he moved along. "Ryu-san." He pouted, feeling his heart give a painful little spasm. "I won't ever lea—" With the words *leave you* was how he would've liked to end his thought, though it might not necessarily be true. But Ryuhei's hand glided across Kiyoshi's chin, pressing two fingers against Kiyoshi's lips to silence him.

"Shh, Kiyo-kun. That's all I want for now."

Leaning forward, Ryuhei moved his fingers away so their mouths could close

over one another. They kissed slowly, Ryuhei tugging ever-so-gently yet demandingly on Kiyoshi's lower lip. The taste of *sake* passed between them along with the heat of each other's breath. Kiyoshi drank it all in, releasing his breath in a long puff as Ryu's mouth pulled away.

Settling back on his knees, Ryuhei trailed his lips along the collar of Kiyoshi's *kimono*. He used one hand to work open the part in the silk garment while making a path on the exposed, pale skin with more kisses. Hot and moist, his tongue flicked over the nipple on the right breast, and Kiyoshi curled forward to press his cheek against the top of Ryuhei's head.

As he moved his mouth and tongue in drawing motions that seemed to suck the very breath from Kiyoshi's shuddering body, Ryu-san undid the ties wrapped around Kiyoshi's waist. Pulling the *kimono* open, he slipped his hand inside. His touch mimicked the same rhythmic motions of his tongue on the hardening length he discovered below the smooth, tensing abdomen.

Kiyoshi moaned and tugged Ryuhei with him as he lay back on the futon. His blood was racing, his vampire senses taking in the passion emanating from the man atop him—feeding off them—his own desire building quickly.

“Take me, Ryu. Love me.”

With a smile, Ryuhei sat up and selected one of the jars resting on the lacquered tray beside the bed. He unfastened the ties around his waist and let the *kimono* fall past his shoulders. With a tug, his *fundoshi* came undone and he took some of the salve from the jar to coat his cock.

They tumbled on the futon, their limbs and bodies intertwining as both men surrendered to their desires. Ryuhei entered Kiyoshi, filling him with all the wetness and heat of mortal love. And Kiyoshi rode him, moaning softly until they collapsed together, exhausted, and sleep claimed them.

* * *

A breeze drifted in from the window overlooking the futon and touched the bare skin on Ryuhei's chest with its cool breath. The man stirred, groping for the warm sheets bundled around his waist and sighing happily as he slipped back under them. He turned onto his other side and reached out to pull Kiyo-kun close, wanting his lover's warmth as well.

His hand found nothing but a cold, empty space beside him.

Ryuhei propped himself up on one elbow and frowned as he glanced around the

empty room. The solitary little candle by the vanity burned feebly in the wind coming in from the open window. The pitcher of water next to the candle was still full.

“Kiyoshi.” Ryuhei sank back down on the futon. He stared up at the ceiling until his vision blurred and the tears streaked down from the edges of his eyes.

“So much for promises...”

Chapter Six

Carl turned up the collar on his coat against the night's chill as he reached the end of the street. He glanced over his shoulder. The theater was long gone from view as he reached the bottom of the hilly road and shivered in the dense fog surrounding him. In fact, Chinatown itself had all but disappeared in the murky mixture of shadows and fog.

"Where the hell am I?" Carl tilted his cap back and scratched the top of his head. The hum of the ocean and the ringing echo of bells being struck on barges were a lot louder now, the same way the smell of salt and fish was a lot stronger.

Carl groaned. "How the hell did I end up near Fish Alley?" And in a seemingly deserted part of the wharf-side district, no less.

No candles or lamps burned in any window that he could make out. No people could be heard anywhere up or down the street. Just a few hours after getting his first writing assignment for the *Register*, it was already well on the way of becoming an official blunder. There was no chance in a million he was going to impress the paper's editor with this kind of lackluster reporting and prove he could handle a serious story like the one about the Chinese tong wars. He'd offended the *kabuki* actors, misspelled half his notes, and was now lost somewhere near the edge of the city. Perfect.

Wait—footsteps. Before he could voice the sigh welling up inside of him, Carl heard the distinct *flop, flop, flop* sound of damp, soft-soled shoes on the cobblestones. The steps came to a stop in the dark alley off to Carl's right, followed by a dry, wispy cry of happiness in some oriental language.

So he wasn't too far from Chinatown after all, Carl noted with relief. The person in the alleyway was probably an old man making his way home through familiar streets. With some luck, the old fella might know just enough English to get Carl back on the right path to Palo Alto.

The old man started making some rustling noises, and Carl used them to help him navigate the dark alleyway. As he approached the low-standing, obscure little shadow that was all he could make of the old fisherman crouched by the side of the building, Gavin slipped in a puddle of water. He caught himself on a rusty gate that almost gave way with a loud creak. The old man fell silent and Carl cursed.

“Damn, I’m sorry.” He straightened up and fished in his pockets for some matches. “Didn’t mean to startle you there, sir. See, I’m lost and I was wondering if you could help me find my way back to town.” He struck one of the matches on the side of the brick building and the old man vanished as soon as the light went on.

Instead, Carl Gavin found himself staring into the ash-colored face of a red-eyed devil no taller than a child.

They both shrieked at the same exact moment.

“Holy shit!” Carl dropped the match and it went out in the puddle of water with a disheartening *pfft*.

“*Kiyoshi-sama, washiwa shireta,*” the creature cried out, its voice garbled and thick like it had something inside its mouth. It started running.

Carl fumbled for another match, but by the time his shaking hands managed to get the end lit up, the creature was gone. Carl dashed after it before common sense could get the better of him, and he nearly fell again on that same slippery spot. With a sick feeling in his stomach, he realized the water he was standing in was too red to actually be water. Looking back to where he’d first seen the creature, Carl now saw the body of a dead man propped up against the building—half-chewed around the neck and shoulder area.

The screams had woken up some of the folks in the building and a few lamps were lit, illuminating the alley at last. More screams followed when the people saw the mauled corpse and pretty soon the alley was filled with frightened but morbidly fascinated onlookers. Now that he had better light, Carl mustered up the courage to inspect the dead body closer.

Carl leaned forward and poked at the man’s head with the tip of his pencil, hoping he could expose the wound at the side of the neck a little more to see it better. Of course, the head flopped towards the gap where it had no support to keep it in place. It could only have been a handful of hours since the man was killed, if even that much—the body still hadn’t had a chance to stiffen up. But on this un-chewed side of the man’s neck, there was a strange mark. Carl frowned.

It looked like two pricks had been made into the skin with a sharp needle, about an inch and a half or so apart. A bit of dried blood had caked over the two odd indentations.

“Don’t touch that.”

Startled, Carl pulled away. A Chinese man with a long gray queue and black nightshirt held up a lantern to the dead body. “Or the ones who sent this man to the underworld will come for you.”

“What are you talking about?” Carl’s eyes widened and he furrowed his brow. “You know who did this?”

“Not *who*—there are plenty of things around here with nothing human about them.” The old man gestured to the body and two younger fellows came around to start wrapping the corpse in a white linen sheet.

“Wait. What about the police?” Carl tried to stop them.

The old man shook his head adamantly. “There’s nothing they can do. This isn’t the first body we’ve found like this, and it won’t be the last. Now move aside so we can take it away before the demon gets angrier.”

The men carried the body off to God knows where. Carl managed to convince the old man to show him back onto a familiar road, and he headed straight for his office at the *Register*, knowing he wouldn’t get a bit of sleep tonight.

There was suddenly a more interesting story than the *kabuki* show or even the Chinatown tongs.

Carl was writing the lead paragraph in his mind as he wound his way through the foggy streets. He stopped short when he heard a shout and the sound of footsteps in the distance. They seemed to pass right by him but he wasn’t able to make out a person. He followed the jumble of Chinese voices up ahead and paused to peek around the corner of a building. One man was yammering and clutching at his neck while two others looked on.

The bleeding man held a knife and Carl was certain he caught the sight of blood on the blade. The men jabbered some more, then began to drift away as the injured man grumbled in a mixture of Chinese and English.

The fucker bit me.

* * *

“Who were you with?”

Kiyoshi stiffened, then slipped the rest of the way under the blanket hours after he'd snuck away in search of the Poisoned Dragon. "I was alone," he said, settling himself on his side to watch the stiff set of Ryuhei's back and shoulders. "I just wanted to walk."

"You could have walked with me. The way we used to do back in Japan."

With the faintest rustle of silk, Ryuhei turned to face him, the pale moonlight from the window barely illuminating his face. What the light didn't reveal, Kiyoshi's own heightened senses did. Ryuhei had been crying. Crying because of him.

"Don't be angry with me," he whispered, reaching out.

Ryuhei pulled away. "Don't patronize me."

"I'm not."

"The fuck you're not." Ryuhei got out of the futon and jerked on his sleeping *yukata*, angrily knotting the *obi* sash at his waist. "Leaving in the middle of the night to go only the Gods know where." Ryuhei's voice wavered. "To be with who knows who..." His hands balled into trembling fists at his sides and he stormed across the room to the traveling case tucked under the vanity. "And after you'd promised. Why did you even bother? Why?" Ryuhei dragged the trunk into the middle of the room, flinging open the lid and letting it hit the wood floor with a loud bang.

"Ryuhei, *please*." Kiyoshi sat up on the futon, bringing his knees up to his chest. He rubbed the side of his neck where the nearly healed gash made by that Chao's knife itched maddeningly. "Please stop."

"Oh, of course," Ryuhei spat viciously. "This is *my* mistake, isn't it? 'Ryu-san is just throwing a fit, as usual. Typical Nakamura—doesn't he know his time for stage theatrics has come and gone, the old fool?' Oh, that's what everyone says, I'd be a complete simpleton not to know it."

He pulled out a jacket from the trunk and roughly tugged it on. "But I did make a mistake in thinking you felt differently. Now I know you call me a fool behind my back like everyone else does."

Suddenly Kiyoshi was there, as if transported by magic. Ryuhei gave him an indignant look and tried to walk away, but Kiyoshi's grip was more powerful than Ryuhei could have imagined. He found himself being turned around and pulled into a crushing embrace.

"Don't do this. Don't imagine things that aren't true. I would never call you a fool. I have always admired you. Always."

Ryuhei remained stiff, refusing to follow his instincts and hug Kiyoshi back. “You admire me. *Hrmph*. Wonderful. That’s just the type of *affectionate* word that gets it up for me.” Ryuhei snorted, his body still unyielding in Kiyoshi’s arms. “In Edo and Kyoto I had thousands of *admirers* too, most of them wanting a taste of my ass or dick more than anything. I guess I can still hump well enough to retain at least one of them.”

Kiyoshi pulled back. “Why are you talking like that?” he said softly, his lower lip quivering.

“Because it’s true.” Ryuhei’s voice cracked. “I don’t want your pity or your admiration.”

Kiyoshi dropped his arms to his sides and took two steps back. “Then what do you want? Do you even want me or am I filling in until you’re a star again and something better comes along?”

“Shouldn’t *I* be asking that question?”

“Should you?” Kiyoshi asked before grabbing up his *kimono* from the bench where he’d left it folded. He put it on, slipped into his sandals and left.

For several aching long seconds, Ryuhei stood there panting and feeling like he might throw up. Then he gathered himself and stormed to the open door.

“Go! Run to your secret lover,” Ryuhei shouted into the hallway, though there was no sign of Kiyoshi. “Don’t forget to tell him how much you like deceiving and manipulating the men you fuck.”

Oh, that was quite cruel. Ryuhei’s heart sank the moment those nasty words spilled from his mouth. But he pictured Kiyoshi in the arms of another, and his temper flared up enough for him to bang the door shut and give the bottom panel a kick for good measure.

Returning to the vanity, Ryuhei slammed his palms on the varnished surface. All the little knickknacks and bottles of makeup and ointments rattled. A glass jar of *oshiroi* was dislodged, and though Ryuhei tried to catch it, the glass slipped through his fingers to shatter on the floor.

“Oh no,” Ryuhei moaned softly. He dropped to his knees and tried to scoop as much as he could of the creamy white stage makeup into what was left of the jar. In America it was so hard to come by good theatrical makeup, Kiyo-kun had been so careful to secure the best before leaving Japan.

A sob broke out of Ryuhei. Followed by another and another as he gave up trying to salvage the mess he’d made of *everything*.

Wiping at his wet cheeks, Ryuhei looked up at his sad reflection in the vanity mirror. Thin—but nonetheless evident—lines showed under his eyes, and his once perfect black hair had flecks of silver every few strands. Ryuhei felt each one of his thirty-eight years in his body, his back protesting when he tried to roll back and tense up his shoulders to give himself the streamlined look all *onnagata* had to master if they wanted to impersonate a woman effectively on the *kabuki* stage.

He would never be a star again, Kiyoshi was wrong about that. Ryuhei's time had come and passed, his career shortened by his arrogance and vices. Too much *sake*. Too many lovers. At the peak of his success, he'd made more money in one night of indulging theater patrons than he did in a week of play performances. One time, a *samurai* had even traded his *katana*—his very soul—for a night in the great Nakamura's bed.

Where were they all now? No one had stayed by his side when he'd been forced out of Edo in disgrace after his last disastrous affair with the *daimyo*, of all people. No one cared...only Kiyo-kun...and somewhere along the line, Ryuhei had fucked that up.

"It was never meant to last anyway." Ryuhei dried his eyes on his sleeve. "I *am* an old fool."

Especially now. Ryuhei trudged to the window and pushed it open. He leaned out, letting the damp fog bathe his hot, tear-streaked face. "Oh Kiyo-kun," he whispered. "You made me feel so wonderful from the day we met. What's happened?"

Chapter Seven

The voices in the adjoining room woke Ryuhei from his fitful sleep early.

“I *knew* this was a mistake. I *knew* it, but did any of you listen to me? Did you?”

“Calm down, Hoshi. You’ll wake the others.”

“What others? Kiyoshi left last night. Twice. Didn’t you hear him? Oh, no, you didn’t—you were snoring too loudly.”

“You are such a pain in my ass, Hosh. Why do I bother?”

“Because you like being in my ass, dearest. That’s why.”

Ryuhei groaned and pulled the blanket over his throbbing head. Gods, why was he cursed with such a troupe of fucking misfits? He poked his head from beneath the covers, then reached out and groped for the *sake* bottle propped against a small lacquered box. There was barely enough liquor left to wet his parched mouth. He sat up, throwing the bottle against the wall through which he could hear Hoshi and Akira having their morning sex romp. The thumping next door came to a quick stop. Footsteps thundered up the hall, followed by a loud pounding on Ryuhei’s door.

“Nakamura.” It was Hoshi. “Get out here, you.”

Ryuhei scowled at the door, but refused to get up. The bitch could holler all he wanted. Preferably until he turned red in the face and passed out from expelling too much hot air.

No such luck to be had, however. Akira’s deep voice drifted through the closed door as he soothed Hoshi. It was the same kind of assuaging tone he’d used back in Japan to convince Ryuhei to start the troupe in the first place. Ryuhei scowled again.

“You’re so right, Akira,” Hoshi said a little too loudly and sweetly to be anything but waspish. “He must need his rest after all that hard work it took last night to drive away Kiyoshi. Enjoy that nice, big, *empty* futon, Ryu-san.”

"Enough," Akira said. "The theater managers are downstairs waiting to have breakfast with us. That's a little more important than these silly games."

"Yes," Hoshi agreed. "We don't have time for this nonsense."

Ryuhei snorted as the two men stomped back down the hall. He tried to go back to sleep, but the sounds coming from the city street below wouldn't allow it. Rolling out of the futon with a depressed sigh, he pulled the same *haori* he'd taken out of the trunk last night on over his sleeping robe. He trudged out to join the others at breakfast, more than a little hopeful he would see Kiyoshi there.

He paused at the bottom step of the staircase, surprised and annoyed to see the reporter from yesterday poking around the backrooms of the playhouse.

"What do you want?" Ryuhei jutted his chin out. "The theater's closed."

"Morning." The man tipped his hat at Ryuhei, but his manner was distracted. The American looked as if he'd had just as rough a night as Ryuhei. "I was hoping to talk to someone here in the theater about something that happened yesterday evening."

Oh Gods. Ryuhei panicked. Americans cared about the gossip surrounding his love life?

"I don't see how that's any of your business," he gasped out, indignant. "As if that's the first lover's quarrel to ever happen in the theater."

The reporter gave him the blankest look Ryuhei'd ever seen on another man's face. "I'm talking about the murders."

"Oh. *Oh.*" Ryuhei's eyes widened. "Did you say *murder*?"

"Not far from here at all, either. There were a lot of strange things happening last night."

The last bit of Ryuhei's appetite for breakfast melted away, and he gripped his jacket shut with a trembling hand. All he could think of were those terrible Chinese men who'd tried to assault him and Kiyokun.

"That's horrible," he said, forcing himself to remember the reporter's name.

"But what would anything like that have to do with us in the theater, Gavin-san?"

"I just want to know if you folks might've seen or heard anything...odd." He looked around, obviously on edge. "Where's your friend?"

Ryuhei shook his head. "I don't know. Kiyoshi...left. Early this morning. I'm hoping he's at breakfast."

An odd look appeared on Gavin's face that didn't sit well with Ryuhei at all.

“Mind if I join you for the morning meal then?” the reporter asked.

“That should be fine,” Ryuhei said quietly. What was going on?

Hoshi and Akira were in the kitchen area and once Hoshi—*that bitch*—found out Gavin was a reporter, he dominated the man’s attention as best he could with his lack of decent English skills.

And yet Gavin’s gaze kept shifting Ryuhei’s way as if he desperately wanted to draw him into a conversation. A private conversation no doubt. Ryuhei had had more than enough experience with those types of “I want you alone” looks to decipher this. Thankfully, Gavin’s expression lacked the extra sexual edge that would have made Ryuhei’s breakfast churn in his stomach if he’d done more than pick at the food on his plate.

Hoshi cleared his throat. The hacking was loud enough to make Ryuhei wonder if the bitch was trying to cough up a hairball like one of the cats scuttling around in the alley behind the theater. It certainly got the attention of the reporter who half-stood from his seat to see if Hoshi might be choking.

“Oh, no, no.” Hoshi flashed Ryuhei a smug smile. “I’m fine. But, Gavin-san, did you write that last part down?” He tapped the edge of the reporter’s notebook with his finger in a series of persistent jabs.

Gavin pushed up his bowler’s hat to scratch at his receding hairline. “I might’ve missed it.” He nodded apologetically. With good reason. Even if Gavin hadn’t been so distracted, he wouldn’t have been able to understand a smidge of the garbled, bastardized English Hoshi was so damned proud of.

“Everyone else does.” Ryuhei scowled, no longer able to bite his tongue. “You’re blowing so much hot air on the table our meal doesn’t have a chance to get cold.” He perked up a little, somewhat cheered that *his* English was about ten times better than Hoshi’s.

And you can thank Kiyō-kun for that.

Kiyoshi, where are you?

His usual amusement with baiting Hoshi wasn’t even entertaining him this morning and Ryuhei simply sat there toying with his food.

Hoshi launched into a tirade of curses and insults. At his side, Akira tried to calm the angry little man down while the theater managers—two well-to-do businessmen from Peking who were already nervous about trying to make a success out of a Japanese play in a primarily Chinese community—started shouting and pointing their fat fingers in Ryuhei’s direction. Ah well, he was the troublesome one, wasn’t he? It was always Kiyō-kun who diffused these types of

situations with his mastery over Mandarin and Cantonese as well as Japanese. How had Kiyoshi become so skillful with so many languages? Another question Ryuhei couldn't answer about his dearest. In fact, it had been one he'd never thought to ask before.

Ryuhei dropped his chopsticks onto his full plate and pushed away from the table. "Excuse me."

Damn that reporter. Gavin was on his feet and ready to follow. "I was hoping I could ask you a few questions, Mr. Nakamura."

"I told you, I don't know where Kiyoshi is." Ryuhei's chest tightened and he gave a short warbled sigh.

"He ran away. And good for him," Hoshi thundered. "He was out all night last night and hopefully all day today. Better to be alone than stuck with a selfish, spiteful old cow like you."

"Your friend was out all evening?" Gavin practically dove for his notebook and pencil.

Oh, *why* couldn't someone put a knife through Ryuhei's heart and be done with it? "No," he said bitterly. "He came back to me sometime after midnight after 'walking' and *then* left for good. Happy?"

"After midnight...he would've heard about the murders." Gavin-san succeeded in shutting everyone up with that line. After a second or two of stunned silence, everyone rushed in.

"What murders?"

"Who died?"

"Where?"

"Will this scare away our money?"

Ryuhei, Gavin and the other two *kabuki* actors stared at the manager who'd spoken. The man pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. "Uh, I mean, our *audience*...scare our audience away..."

"Kiyo-kun said nothing to me about that." Ryuhei clutched at the hem of his *haori* and turned back to Gavin. "But why should he? It's no secret the streets of Chinatown are full of gangsters; those are the ones involved in things like that. Kiyoshi wouldn't be involved."

"I didn't mean to insinuate anything, Mr. Nakamura. I just thought your friend might have seen or heard something that maybe he didn't think much of at the time. I spoke to the boys from the Chinatown patrol and they're baffled. It seems at least one of the bodies disappeared."

Kiyoshi could fairly taste the tension the moment he entered the door at the front of the theater. Ryuhei's agitation reached out like wispy tendrils to clutch at his insides. Voices drifted from the back of the building as he walked across the lobby—Hoshi forever trying to take center stage, Akira parroting him, the Chinese who managed the place and the white man, that reporter Gavin. Well, today the man would heed his mental prodding. Just the barest taste of the Poisoned Dragon's essence was enough to heighten Kiyoshi's psychic strength.

"Is there a problem?" Kiyoshi asked coolly as he entered the kitchen.

"Kiyo-kun," Ryuhei gasped. "You came back." His forehead was creased with anxiety, but his pouty lips curved up in a brief and obviously relieved smile. He continued in Japanese, whispering and glancing back to the reporter every few seconds. "This man keeps wanting to speak with you about some terrible murders that happened last night and I don't know why. What if it has something to do with those awful men who accosted us here in the theater?"

Gavin scratched at the scruffy bits of beard on his chin. "There's really no problem, Kiyoshi—did I get that name right? Hmm." The man scrunched up his brows and started flipping through the sheets in his notebook. "That sounds so familiar to me..."

"You were here yesterday," Ryuhei interjected. "And we've been saying his name all morning. Of course it must sound familiar."

"Why are you so defensive, Ryuhei?" Hoshi said, boldly pushing himself into the small group. "What are you afraid of?"

Ryuhei stiffened, glad that the bitch's English was so lacking, surely the reporter couldn't make sense of it.

Why am I suspicious?

"I—I'm *not* being defensive," he huffed, throwing his hands up in the air. "I just want some peace. Gods, how I suffer in this ridiculous ensemble." He stole a quick look over at Kiyoshi. The bits of food he had managed to get down during breakfast fluttered around in his stomach.

The young man's face was so...emotionless. Cold even. So unlike the Kiyoshi who offered comforting words whenever Ryuhei felt worn, or the Kiyoshi who returned his embraces as they slept in each other's arms. Since they'd arrived

here in America, things had been so different. Not just between them, but in Kiyo-kun himself.

Ryuhei already suspected another man, he was no fool. All these late nights, the weak excuses...it was obvious. But what if this new lover was dragging Kiyoshi into this bloody Chinese underworld? Yesterday, he'd been so bold with those gangsters. Ready to fight them even.

"I think you're full of shit, Ryuhei," Hoshi said smugly. "You know Kiyoshi's leaving you and you can't bear the thought. You have to find some way to explain it to yourself. Ha!"

"Shut your mouth, you fat cow," Kiyoshi snapped, his eyes as narrowed and dangerous as they'd been when he stood up to the Chinese. "Or I'll shut it for you."

An icy finger slid along Ryuhei's spine at those last words spoken with so much repressed rage he was certain this was a bad dream. That could not have been his sweet Kiyoshi speaking and yet one glance to the horrified faces of Hoshi and Akira told him this was all too real.

"Well, everyone seems to be on edge this morning." Gavin broke the tension-filled silence. "Strange things going on around these parts, strange things." The reporter paused and all eyes swerved towards him. "Tell me, gentlemen," he said softly. "Have any of you seen any...monsters walking these streets at night?"

Any other time, that kind of question would've made Ryuhei laugh and dismiss the man as a superstitious or ignorant rube. He stared at Carl Gavin now with a mixture of curiosity and confusion. "A *monster*?"

The reporter cleared his throat. "For lack of a better word, yes."

Hoshi and Akira burst into a fit of laughter. "The only thing monstrous we've seen around here is that hat he's wearing." Hoshi leaned against Akira's shoulder and waved his hand in Gavin's direction. "Tell him that."

"Sorry." Akira licked his lips and made a poor effort to control his smile while he spoke in English. "Maybe we're not understanding the question right."

Unperturbed, Gavin nodded and continued. "I was talking to some folks here in Chinatown who say, well, they say there's a demon lurking around at night who steals bodies away."

"And you think this is *true*? Oh, brother." Hoshi laughed again. "Those are silly stories. Children's stories, I tell you."

As ridiculous as this new topic of conversation was, at least it had shifted away

from the tongs and those terrible murders. Ryuhei's sigh of relief was cut short when he put a hand on Kiyoshi's shoulder. The younger man jumped under the touch, whipping about to face Ryuhei, all the color drained from his face.

"Kiyo-kun?" Ryuhei pulled his hand away, surprised and hurt that Kiyoshi had flinched so at the touch. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Kiyoshi turned his attention back to Akira and Hoshi who were still talking away.

Nothing. Another lie. Ryuhei's chest tightened and he nervously stroked his fingers over the collar of his jacket.

"So you haven't seen or heard anything unusual?" Gavin interrupted Hoshi, who was returning to his original topic of discussion concerning the theater and his own lustrous performances.

"No," Hoshi huffed.

"What about you?" The reporter squinted at Kiyoshi. "You look like you might've seen a ghost right now."

"It is as Hoshi said. Ghosts and demons are the stuff of children's nightmares." Without another word or parting comment, Kiyoshi turned and strode from the room, leaving Ryuhei feeling more alone than he had in years.

"This talk of monsters is foolishness, Gavin-san," Ryuhei said once he was able to find his voice. "We would appreciate having you write your article informing the good people of San Francisco about our performances and I'm sure Akira and Hoshi can give you all the information you need. You must excuse me. I'm not feeling well this morning."

"Wait a minute—" the reporter insisted, but Hoshi's intrusiveness came in handy for a change. The actor swooped in the moment Ryuhei turned away, positioning himself right between Gavin and any possible exit.

Ryuhei retreated upstairs, his steps growing heavier the closer he got to the top of the landing. Perhaps Kiyoshi was waiting in their room with that strange, loveless look on his face and more angry words to say. Even if that were so, Ryuhei would have the chance to express his regrets about last night and all the things he'd said.

Chapter Eight

Ryuhei opened the door with a timid little push. “Kiyo-kun?”

No answer.

The room was dark, the curtain having been drawn across the window and the candles having burned out in the early morning hours. Furnishings like the bed, trunk and vanity were discernible only as large obscure shadows. Carefully moving through the threshold so as not to bump into anything, he kicked off his *zori* and made his way to the bed.

Ryuhei pulled apart the drapes, flooding the room with light. Now he knew Kiyoshi had at least been here. The blue *kimono* the boy had been wearing was rumpled on the floor, the sandals tossed beside the material. The two bottom drawers of the bureau were pulled out, the clothing recently rifled through.

So Kiyoshi was leaving. Maybe this time for good.

Whimpering, Ryuhei bent over and picked up the rumpled *kimono*. He folded the silk with mournful sniffles as the tears welled up in his eyes. A deep brown, almost black stain marred the front of the clothing. Ryuhei frowned and rubbed his fingers across the splotch.

It was still damp. When he looked at his fingertips, they were stained red. He sniffed at them and dropped the *kimono* in horror.

Blood.

“Oh Gods—Kiyoshi.” Ryuhei covered his mouth with one trembling hand. “What have you done?”

“What exactly do you think I’ve done, Ryu?”

Ryuhei cried out and jumped. How had Kiyo-kun come up behind him that way? Where had he come from?

“You startled me, Kiyo-kun.” Ryuhei forced a smile. “My poor old heart isn’t able to stand such shocks, you know. You’ll have me gray before my time.”

“I think that time is closer than you like,” Kiyoshi said, reaching out to stroke his hand over Ryuhei’s unbound hair.

Ryuhei bit his lip and turned away. So that was it then. Kiyoshi was tired of him. Tired of being tied down to an old hag of a has-been *kabuki* actor.

“*Baka*, you don’t know anything being old,” Kiyoshi whispered.

Before Ryuhei could question how Kiyoshi had known what was in his heart, Kiyo-kun seized his shoulders, spun him around and backed him into the wall. Fear welled up in Ryuhei’s throat. He opened his mouth to cry for help but Kiyoshi covered his mouth with his own.

It was a crushing kiss, an angry kiss, but Ryuhei did not fight against it nor did he protest the way Kiyoshi yanked open his *kimono* and groped him through the fabric of his *fundoshi*. He allowed Kiyoshi to tear the loincloth from his body and though Ryuhei hated himself for it, he became aroused when Kiyo-kun turned him around and pushed him to bend over the five-drawer clothing chest. When Kiyoshi dripped some oil between the globes of his rear then buried his hard cock to the hilt in one harsh thrust, Ryuhei pushed back into him, craving more, fearing it would be the last contact they’d ever share.

His open *kimono* bunched up around his shoulders, Ryuhei gripped the edges of the dresser as his entire body seemed to spasm around the hard, swelling cock within his passage. Oh, he’d taken Kiyo-kun deep within himself before, but today was nothing like their past romantic encounters. Kiyoshi had always entered with a sort of timidity, relying on Ryuhei’s soft moans of encouragement to guide the penetration.

Now their bodies crashed against each other as some kind of primal lust consumed them. Anger, maybe even desperation, seemed to motivate the powerful thrusts Kiyoshi used to come to a climax both wonderful and savage.

“Oh Gods...” Ryuhei cried out, his back arching up as Kiyoshi’s come burst out. He pressed against Kiyoshi and reached down to stroke his own throbbing cock, catching his hot spurt as he came to a head.

When Kiyoshi pulled away, Ryuhei slid to the floor, panting. He’d never been fucked so roughly—so coldly—by his lover before. As much as the lust had excited him, it also frightened him. Leaning against the dresser, he held his *kimono* closed and clutched at the silk with both trembling hands, not sure why he felt so unaccountably dirty.

“Kiyo-kun...where did that come from?” Drops of perspiration ran down Ryuhei’s cheeks as his tears had not very long ago.

“Didn’t you like it?” Kiyoshi sounded out of breath.

“When you force yourself on someone, it’s usually for your own satisfaction,” Ryuhei whispered.

“Satisfaction,” Kiyoshi replied in a dull tone, his expression cold and unfeeling. Ryuhei averted his gaze, unable to take the pain this “new” Kiyoshi’s attitude brought him. Ryuhei looked up after a time, but Kiyoshi was gone. He’d left without uttering a word or making a sound.

He seemingly vanished as if Ryuhei’s peaceful years with him had all been a wistful dream.

The sun hurt Kiyoshi’s eyes, the top of his head, whatever bit of skin not covered by the long-sleeved *yukata*. Gasping in surprise and pain, he leapt back under the protective shade of the theater’s doorway before getting two steps from the exit.

What’s wrong with me? Kiyoshi demanded of himself as he pressed the back of his hand against the flushed skin on his forehead. The sunlight rarely affected him this way, certainly not after having fed so well so recently.

This problem wasn’t solely physical.

No matter how much he drank of blood or mortal wine, nothing eased the raging thirst making his throat dry and parched. He remembered the faint taste of the Poisoned Dragon’s blood that Chao had carried, and the saliva pooled in Kiyoshi’s mouth, his body craving more. Inside Kiyoshi’s heart a jumble of emotions fought for control. His mood spiked and then plummeted without warning, these quick changes brought on by the stress level of the situation. He glanced over his shoulder into the dark hallway leading back into the theater.

What just happened with Ryuhei—it felt like it could almost have been a rape. Kiyoshi was angry with the old actor. Angry because of Nakamura’s suspicions and mistrust. Angry because he wasn’t as Kiyoshi was. Ryuhei would die, leaving Kiyoshi alone once again.

Kiyoshi dashed from the threshold at the back of the theater house, wanting to escape his thoughts as well as the sunlight. The opposite end of the alley was shielded by the awnings covering each window of the textile mill that occupied the corner building. Searching for someplace peaceful to rest until evening, he moved through the most shadow-filled corners of Chinatown.

“Kiyoshi-sama.”

Panting, Kiyoshi stopped by the back of a humble temple and glared at the

shadowed doorway from which the hoarse voice had spoken. "Gobei."

The ghoul's pale head poked out from the black shadows, then darted back in. "Yes, yes," he hissed. "Come in, quickly. Do you know where you are going?"

"Leave me alone." Kiyoshi had to keep moving. He felt the urge from the tip of his spine to the ends of his already-extended fangs.

"You're moving through Wong territory," Gobei insisted. "But your tongue is compelling you, not your brain. You'll be caught."

Kiyoshi's eyes widened in shock. Was that where he was going? When had he decided on a path?

"You're off-color," the ghoul continued. "Come in here."

Kiyoshi approached the door, his feet crunching on the bones of fish that had been laid out in the alley for the stray cats. "Where am I?" he asked softly, stepping inside. The door led into a room barely large enough to hold three men standing shoulder-to-shoulder, cramped with brooms, a pail and a few statues of Chinese deities so old and worn their faces were unrecognizable.

Gobei closed the door behind them, blotting out the last of the irritating sunlight. "This is the *Tien Hau*. The monks here do good work for the humans in this city."

The ghoul shuffled around Kiyoshi, beckoning him to follow as they moved out of the tight storage room and into a hallway that also doubled as a schoolroom. Paintings of characters were pinned to the walls from the floor to a little more than halfway up to the ceiling. A few desks and backless chairs were propped up under the closed windows, the children who'd occupied them gone for the day.

"Do you live here?" Kiyoshi asked in amazement.

"When there's a job for me to do, yes." Gobei conspicuously flicked his tongue over the rows of serrated teeth that showed when he smiled. His grin dropped and he rubbed both of his knobby hands over his hairless scalp. "But today, no. They're letting me hide—as you should be."

"Why?" Kiyoshi licked his lips...so thirsty...

"Because you're not acting well. And—" Gobei stopped in such a sudden way Kiyoshi knew there was more to say.

"It's not just because of me." Kiyoshi frowned. "Tell me what else."

Gobei jumped at the harshness of his friend's tone. "I was seen by a human. But he saw the body *you* left behind as well."

"I didn't..." But he had. He'd almost forgotten the man he'd killed last night, the

one who'd been beating his woman. And then there was one he found that Chao... The man had carried the faintest trace of the Poisoned Dragon's scent and Kiyoshi had been craving that taste so desperately...

"*Ai-ya.*" Gobei shook his head, his cry of disappointment rattling in his throat. "You can't lie to an old friend, one who knows you too well. *Baka.*"

They reached the end of the hall and Gobei squatted low to the floor, raising a trapdoor by a thick brass handle. "That one's blood has your common sense in a mess—you've never been so reckless before."

Kiyoshi lashed out, backhanding the creature that had been his acquaintance since the days before the Tokugawa ruled Japan. "I'm not reckless."

The little ghoul picked himself up off the floor and wiped away the sickly green fluid seeping from his cut lip. "No, of course not, Kiyoshi-sama."

Kiyoshi glared at Gobei, but soon his tense stance eased and he sank back against the wall, his knees giving out until he crouched there, his face hidden by his hands. What was wrong with him? What had gotten into him since coming to this place?

Gobei shuffled over to give Kiyoshi's shoulder a cautious poke. "It's his blood," he whispered, jumping back when Kiyoshi looked up.

"Please." Gobei flinched as though he might be hit at any moment. "Listen. You've never given in to all your desires as a blood-drinker. You've always favored the mortal world. But this Dragon—there's something about his blood that is making you crazy."

"No," Kiyoshi protested, all the while realizing that his little friend was right. He wasn't being himself at all. He was acting recklessly, viciously. He was behaving like a monster to everyone. Including Ryuhei.

Gobei shook his head, cursing under his breath in Japanese as he pulled away from Kiyoshi. "You're in a bad way, my friend. A bad way," he bemoaned. The ghoul returned to the trapdoor and yanked it open once more. "But the worst of it is that someone knows," Gobei added dismally. "He's a persistent one—why, he was walking through the alleys this morning asking questions and more questions. When I saw he was heading for the theater, I sent a monk with a note to warn you and tell you to come here."

"What monk?" Kiyoshi inhaled sharply.

Gobei let the trapdoor crash down as he flinched from the look in Kiyoshi's eyes. "This morning you should have received my note. How else did you know to come?"

“I never got it.” Kiyoshi pushed away from the wall. “The reporter was already at the theater by the time breakfast started.” The monk would’ve left the note with someone like the theater managers or Akira.

Or Ryuhei.

“I have to go back to the playhouse.”

“No.” Gobei grabbed Kiyoshi’s sleeve. “Kiyoshi-sama, you’ll be discovered. What if they wish to hunt you? Your kind has never been loved by the mortal world.”

Chapter Nine

Kiyoshi-sama, please come to me at once! I am at the Tien Hau temple!

—Gobei

Ryuhei read the note again and again until his vision began to blur. So his suspicions had been right. Kiyoshi had taken a lover. A younger, more affluent lover no doubt. It had to have started back in Japan, because they hadn't been here in America long enough for him to meet anyone and become serious. Well, if *that* was the way Kiyoshi wanted things, then that was the way he would have them.

Crumpling the damning evidence, Ryuhei shoved it into the sleeve of his *haori*. He would find this Gobei and demand a full explanation before letting Kiyoshi know precisely what he thought of him and his philandering.

Ryuhei stormed out of the theater, barking at anyone who got in his way. Even Hoshi gave him a wide berth as they crossed paths on the steps leading down to the street.

"Where are you going?" Hoshi shouted. "We have a show to rehearse, and with Kiyoshi gone, we have no female lead." Hoshi put a hand on his hip, glaring at the unresponsive Ryu.

"Go fuck yourself, bitch," Ryuhei spat, his patience shot.

Hoshi stepped back, leaning against the iron railing. "I have Akira to do that for me," he said with a sneer. He shouted down the steps again as Ryuhei huffed away from the playhouse. "You'll have to work the streets tonight if you want some company, Ryu-san. Just don't ask for too much and you might be lucky enough to get a blind beggar who won't be too choosy with the cows he sticks his dick in."

Ryuhei turned the corner, trudging up the steep crest of one of this damned city's plentiful hills. "*Bitch*," he fumed. Did Kiyoshi laugh at those snide jokes

too? Was Kiyoshi laughing now in the arms of this Gobei?

His eyes stung with angry tears, but he refused to let them spill over his lashes. Ryuhei blinked them away and pressed forward, stopping only to ask directions from a flower vendor and a group of surprised-looking Chinese school children when he got too lost.

One of the little ones studied at the temple and was all too happy to point out the way. "It's not very far" was all Ryuhei could make of the boy's Mandarin, his own ability with the language being shamefully out of practice. The group led him the rest of the way, stopping across the street from the two-story building and pointing to where Ryuhei should go.

This was where Kiyoshi went each night, Ryuhei felt sure of it as he stared up at the red-painted pillars marking the entryway. Inside, Kiyoshi was with his lover now, maybe they were even fucking in front of whatever Chinese deity was housed here. What if this Gobei was a monk? The man who'd delivered the note had been one.

No, no. Kiyoshi with a holy man? Ryuhei couldn't bear the thought. How could Kiyoshi have left him for someone who probably rarely—if ever!—indulged in sex.

"Do you know someone from there named Gobei?" he asked the children. Their faces quickly lost any trace of smiles.

"Well?" Ryuhei demanded. Perhaps this wealthy suitor had bribed even the students to keep silent of his affair. The children stared up in horror at Ryuhei and then took off as one cluster of dark blue tunics and soft-soled shoes down the street.

Ryuhei's heart sank even as his anger rose. There *was* a Gobei here for certain...and he must have been here a while for the children to be so loyal to him. Kiyo-kun had been with this secret lover for just as long a time, slowly tearing away at Ryuhei's soul and not even caring.

Stalking up to the temple doors, Ryuhei pushed them open and slipped inside. The entryway was dark—no light from any windows. A few lanterns offered some spotty red light here and there, but it took Ryuhei a few moments to adjust. There was a staircase straight ahead, a table to his right with a wooden bowl to collect monetary offerings and a number of carefully folded paper sacrifices for temple-goers to take and burn for the Gods.

Ryuhei's arms were crossed within the wide sleeves of his silk *haori*, his knuckles close to aching from the pressure with which he squeezed his arms to keep his composure in check. His mind filled with fabricated images of his Kiyo-

kun engaged in all manner of depravity with this Gobei person.

Why the wretch's very name conjured up images of a sweaty-palmed, corpulent oaf who would paw at Kiyoshi's beautiful slender body before grunting against him like some sweating pig. The images became even worse as Ryuhei imagined Kiyoshi laving over this Gobei's massive belly, attempting to find his shriveled cock hidden somewhere within the greasy fleshy folds.

"Oh Gods," Ryuhei muttered as he felt his stomach churn. He was going to be ill. How humiliating.

"Are you in need of help, sir?"

Gasping for air to calm him, Ryuhei spun towards the sound of the voice. It was a monk dressed in simple red and orange robes, the top of his head cleanly shaven. "I'm looking for someone," Ryuhei said before pulling the crumpled note from the sleeve of his *haori*. "I wish to see this Gobei immediately."

The monk paled and Ryuhei's worst suspicion was confirmed. This Gobei was quite wealthy and influential. No wonder Kiyo-kun fell under his indecent spell. Of course Ryuhei couldn't exactly blame him. It was the wisest choice to go for affluence and influence over a washed-up *kabuki* actor. Oh, the humiliation...

"I-I don't know who you're talking about," the monk stammered. "There's no one by the name of Gobei in this temple. Perhaps you meant to go to a different temple. Let me see the note..." He reached out to take the wadded up piece of paper, but Ryuhei snatched it back and held it against his chest.

"Don't try to protect him," Ryuhei gasped out, mortified. "For shame—a holy man compromising his honesty for a lowlife like this. How much is he paying you for your silence? I should run straight to the American newspapers and have them tell the whole truth of things."

The old monk shook his head in ever-growing horror. "You mustn't," he implored, clutching his bent and knobby-jointed hands before him. "Please, I don't know how you learned of Gobei, but it's not as you seem to think. He helps us in many ways."

"Indeed—I can just imagine." Ryuhei tilted his nose in the air. "And I'm sure he helps himself to a few benefits along the way." One of them being Kiyoshi's body, no doubt. A sad whimper worked its way out of Ryuhei's throat.

Another monk appeared and consulted with the first in hushed tones, glancing frequently back to Ryuhei.

"Oh, stop trying to cover up for him. Take me to him at once or I'll find him myself, even if I have to tear this place apart."

With defeated sighs, the monks conversed again, then nodded solemnly. “Come, I will take you to him.”

“It’s about time,” Ryuhei said with a haughty air even though his stomach churned once more.

He followed the monk through a hidden door and down narrow darkened stairs until they reached a damp basement-like area. Setting his candle in a bracket just outside the door at the bottom of the stairs, the monk produced a key and unlocked the door, pushing it open quietly.

Ryuhei gasped at the sight before him. Kiyoshi, his back towards the door, knelt on the floor, bent over a man lying on a small cot. Tears stung Ryuhei’s eyes at the memory of how Kiyoshi kissed his neck that way. “Oh, Kiyoshi-kun, how could you?”

Kiyoshi’s head shot up and he turned, his mouth smeared with blood.

All the air rushed out of Ryuhei, his lungs refusing to suck in any more. *There was so much blood.* The thick crimson fluid covered the front of Kiyoshi’s *kimono*, the skin on his neck and cheeks—his hands. The sight of Kiyoshi bathed in the fluid made Ryuhei feel faint.

Had the young man been injured? Was the person he’d been kissing wounded somehow, or sick? So many thoughts raced through Ryuhei’s mind before the full horror of it sank in.

Kiyoshi was licking his lips even as he stared at Ryuhei. He was savoring the taste of the blood. He was *drinking* it.

“Gods!” Ryuhei gasped, the note slipping through his fingers as his hands started to tremble uncontrollably. He dropped to his knees, too shocked and afraid to make himself run from this place.

“Kiyo-kun...*what are you?*” he whispered.

“Ryu...” Kiyoshi’s voice was barely audible in the silent damp room. “I...I...”

Ryuhei shivered. Oh Gods... Kiyoshi had bitten him countless times, nothing more than nips and he’d never really bled or had pain...he’d thought it was just an odd proclivity. It was sexually exciting and Ryuhei hadn’t considered complaining about it...but Gods...Kiyoshi had been drinking the blood...*feeding* from him...

“He’s *kyuuketsuki*. A blood drinker.”

Slowly, Ryuhei turned towards the raspy sound that was more like a rattle of weathered old bones than a voice. Ryuhei screamed and reared back when he caught sight of the hideous little man stepping out of the shadows. “What are

you?”

“I am Gobei, the flesh-eater.”

Ryuhei gaped at this hideous demon with its short, disproportionate legs and claw-like nails on its hands. “*Flesh-eater?*” He pressed the back of his hand against his mouth to suppress another scream as the ghoul passed in front of him.

“We’ve been friends for a long time, Kiyoshi-sama and I.” Gobei snorted, shuffling to the still body lying on the cot. He poked at the arm with a satisfied nod and glanced back at Ryuhei. “Longer than you’ve known him, I would say.” “*Known* him?” Ryuhei choked out. He faced Kiyoshi, but found he couldn’t bear to hold his gaze. “I never knew anything about him, apparently.” A tear slipped down his cheek before he could stop it.

Kiyoshi could only stare and feel ashamed. He’d never wanted Ryuhei to know what a monster he was and now he’d found out in the worst possible way. Pulling a blanket up and over the now-dead man, Kiyoshi wiped the remainder of blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. The monks had brought the man into the temple after he’d been stabbed in an altercation between rival tongues. The man had been injured fatally but the wound was such that he would linger in pain for hours until death could claim him.

Kiyoshi had been only too glad to end the man’s suffering once he caught scent of the Poisoned Dragon upon him. It was his hand or the hand of someone very, very close to him who’d attacked the now-dead highbinder.

Fool that he was, Kiyoshi had once again been drunk on the mere taste of the Poisoned Dragon and had to have more. If he hadn’t been so intent on tasting the Dragon’s essence, he would have sensed Ryuhei’s presence nearby and could have fled and spared his dear lover this horrid discovery. But no, he hadn’t done a damned thing. Not a thing.

“I don’t even know myself anymore,” Kiyoshi whispered. “I’ve never been like this before. I swear to you, Ryu-san.”

The whites of Kiyoshi’s eyes stood out like twin crescent moons in the night sky, the soft curves of his face lost in shadows as he stared down at his blood-covered hands. Ryuhei wrapped his arms around himself to see if he could stop his body from trembling. “You’re an *oni*—a demon,” he moaned.

“No, I’m not.” Kiyoshi shook his head and clasped his hands together as though

in prayer. “Please don’t say that.”

Ryuhei pointed to the covered body lying on the cot. “You drink the blood of the living—look at that man. He’s dead now because of you.”

The ghoul hovering over the corpse looked up and frowned at Ryuhei. “Ah, idiot. Kiyoshi-sama eased this one’s transition to the next life.”

Pointing from the body to Gobei, Ryuhei burst into a fresh row of sobs. “And worst of all—you left *me* for *that*.”

“*What?*” Gobei squeaked, his bug-like eyes wide with shock at the implication of Ryuhei’s words.

Chapter Ten

Despite his own confusion and fears, Kiyoshi found the corners of his mouth lifting. This was why he loved Ryuhei Nakamura with all his heart.

Ryu was so very human, so full of stirring emotion that it made Kiyoshi feel almost human again too.

A bucket of water rested in the corner near the head of the cot and Kiyoshi rinsed the blood from his hands and mouth. He went to Ryuhei, sinking down to his knees beside his mortal love. His heart ached when Ryuhei pulled back. "Please don't fear me, Ryu. I would rather die than harm you in any way. I love you and only you."

Ryuhei stared into Kiyoshi's eyes, not blinking or saying a word. His lower lip quivered, but the tears had stopped running down his cheeks at least. Sniffing softly, he reached out with one trembling hand to brush his fingertips over the side of Kiyoshi's face.

"You look and sound so much like my Kiyo-kun...even feel like him." He frowned sadly.

"Ryu-san..." The ache in Kiyoshi's heart worsened.

"How long have you been this way?" Ryuhei pulled his hand back to clutch at the edge of his *kimono*.

"All the time I've known you." Kiyoshi bit down on his lower lip. "Before the first time I saw you on stage, even."

Ryuhei stared at the ground. "I never noticed. Eight years sharing a bed and not once did anything seem too strange that I could see the truth. Why didn't you ever tell me?" His shoulders slumped forward. "Did you always plan to leave me?"

"I never planned to leave you, Ryuhei," Kiyoshi said quickly, all the while trying to ignore the part of him that knew otherwise. He'd been all manner of fool for

thinking he could live as a normal man, that he could love someone and be with him always.

Always was quite the ominous word, wasn't it? Always to him meant things never changing, but to Ryuhei it meant a slow decline into old age and death. The actor had traveled too many miles, performed too many shows, drunk far too much *sake*, and now it was taking its toll.

Kiyoshi forced himself to observe all the little details he'd chosen to overlook through the years—the lines around Ryu's eyes, the numerous gray strands mingled in with the black of his hair, the tiredness that crept into his almond-shaped eyes so easily these days.

Feeling a tear slip down his cheek, Kiyoshi wiped it away and glanced down at his hands. The hands of an immortal killer. He looked up when Ryuhei spoke to him.

"How long? How long have you been this way? How old are you really?"

"I'd just passed my nineteenth summer when Nobunaga's men came to our province. An injured *samurai* appeared at our door one night, Kuro was his name. My brother—my friend Liu—begged me to ignore him, but I couldn't. I had to help him. I was such a fool. Nobunaga's men were chasing him, not because he was with a rival clan but because he was a demon, a *kyuuketsuki*..."

Bottled inside for so long, the details of those times poured out in a graphic recounting. Kiyoshi couldn't have stopped himself if he'd tried.

He told his story of passion and corruption, how Kuro seduced Liu into desiring this immortal life and Kiyoshi himself followed. Little had he known how much it would cost his happiness, his soul...or how much it cost him still...

When Kiyoshi finished, the underground chamber fell into a silence as deep as the shadows creeping in the damp corners.

"For three hundred years you've been alone?" Ryuhei whispered. Only sadness filled his eyes now where a few moments ago there had been horror and fear.

"But what about others of your kind?"

Kiyoshi shook his head. "I've only met a handful of others. None of them are too fond of a blood-drinker who tries not to take human lives very often."

"I found your *kimono* in our room. It was soaked in blood," Ryuhei burst out. "Why have you been running away at night? Why have you been acting so strangely?"

"I'm not even sure myself," Kiyoshi said quietly.

An odd little grumble from Gobei made Kiyoshi look up and frown before his

sad gaze shifted back to Ryuhei.

“There is a man, a Chinese, I don’t know his name. He’s one of the tong men, a killer, savage and remorseless. I know that they call him the Poisoned Dragon. Oftentimes the blood of certain persons is intoxicating to *kyuuketsuki* like the finest *sake* to a mortal man. I’ve tasted his essence in some of the men he’s dealt with...it flavors their blood, I’ve found myself craving it... I can’t explain. I’m sorry.”

“Ah! You can’t explain.” Gobei shook his head and scuffled around the cot until he was behind Kiyoshi and pointing at Ryuhei with a stubby gray finger.

“Listening to you talk now to this one it’s easy to understand. Kiyoshi-sama has always liked mortals so much, yes? You even pretend to be one. But the essence of this Dragon brings out the worst of your desires as a *kyuuketsuki*, and because you’ve ignored them for so long, they overwhelm you now.”

The ghoul’s observation sent a shiver of unease up Kiyoshi’s spine. “That can’t be true,” he insisted. “It’s only like rice wine...intoxicating, that’s all. I don’t lose control over myself.”

“When those men came to the theater last night, you weren’t yourself, Kiyokun,” Ryuhei whispered.

Kiyoshi’s stomach twisted. “That was different,” he said weakly. “They might’ve tried to hurt you.”

“Ah.” Ryuhei looked down at his hands as they clutched at the edges of his jacket. “Then everything that happened in our room today...the way you behaved, those words you told me...that wasn’t meant to hurt.”

Kiyoshi could find no words at all now so he remained silent, head bowed, a few stray tears falling from his dark lashes to his bent knees.

Chapter Eleven

Carl sat in front of the editor's desk, his notes and papers scattered on the maple seat beside him. A sheet with about two paragraphs worth of material on the *kabuki* troupe was pushed far to the edge of the desk while his latest story was in the editor's hands. Howard Albright's gaze kept scanning over the paragraph at the top of the page, where Carl had written:

Something more monstrous than the infamous "tong" hoodlums terrorizes the streets of Chinatown at night. Bodies, half-devoured and drained of blood, have been found in the back alleys behind Dupont Street. This is not the handiwork of rival underworld gangs, but of a mysterious creature that feeds on human flesh...

After a few more minutes, Albright lowered the sheet back onto the desktop. The editor scratched his thick gray beard and stared at Gavin over the top of his spectacles. Neither man said anything until Albright broke the silence.

"I'm still waiting for the punch line," he said in his gravelly voice.

Gavin cleared his throat. "It's not a joke, Mr. Albright. I saw the devil with my own eyes."

"You probably saw the bottom of one too many a bottle of cheap *bok jow* while you were loitering around Chinatown last night."

Shaking his head, Carl moved to the edge of his seat. "Now that's a perfectly rational conclusion to make, especially now that we're in a modern age and don't buy into superstitions as readily. But this, Mr. Albright, is *real*." He rattled off the list of evidence—his own eyewitness account, the stories he'd gathered from those living around Chinatown who knew of the monster, the way the bodies had been secretly taken care of by the frightened Chinese men.

Albright was less than convinced. "This is crazy, Gavin. I'm not printing this tripe until you've found some kind of concrete evidence."

"But—"

“No buts.” The editor shoved the article back across the desk to Carl and took a cigar from the box in the drawer on his right. “And I still want that article on the Japanese theater stuff.” He pointed at Gavin with the end of the cigar before lighting it up.

“The *kabuki* thing.” Carl sighed. “Maybe there’s someone else who could write it while I—”

Albright interrupted with a loud snort. “You want me to fire you and hire another staff reporter?”

“No.” Carl sighed again as he scooped up his papers.

“Great. Now they’re having their first show tonight and I expect you to be there.”

“Fine.”

But when Carl left the office, he was already determined to find some evidence to prove his story about the Chinatown monster was true. What that was going to be, he still wasn’t sure. As he exited the front of the building he bumped into a short, plump man in a brown suit who was coming up the steps.

“Gavin-san, *konnichiwa*.”

“Mr. Nishikawa.” Gavin shook the hand of his translator. “I was just heading out of the office, I’m sorry.”

Nishikawa nodded and reached into his briefcase. “Then I won’t take much of your time. These are the translations of tonight’s *kabuki* play for your article.”

“Thanks.” Gavin forced a good-natured smile as he accepted the papers.

Though, with these translations, he wouldn’t necessarily have to go to the performance and could spend that time looking for this Chinatown monster.

“By the way, Mr. Nishikawa, could you tell me what this means?” Carl shuffled his papers around and pulled out the scrappy note he’d jotted down with what the monster had said. Nishikawa coughed and Carl got the feeling the Japanese man was trying to hide a smile over the poorly Americanized words Carl had written.

“Were you at the playhouse today watching rehearsals?” Nishikawa asked.

“I was.” Carl frowned, confused. “Why?”

“This is someone asking for forgiveness from Kiyoshi, and he’s one of the actors, no?” Nishikawa said. “*Kiyoshi-sama*...the *sama* is an honorific.”

Carl’s mind raced. “Is Kiyoshi a very common name?”

“In Japan, not particularly. Here in America, less so.”

“I’ll be damned...” Hadn’t the other actors said Kiyoshi was out all night?

Hadn't Kiyoshi himself seemed a little strange, even to the others?

"I have to go." Carl shook a mystified-looking Nishikawa's hand. "But I *will* be at the playhouse tonight. Without a doubt."

* * *

Daylight had come and gone and Ryuhei was as he had been since leaving the temple some hours earlier—seated on a small, hard chair staring out the window of his room, yet not seeing anything other than Kiyo-kun as he'd left him, kneeling on the floor, head bowed, blood still staining his lips and fingers. Kiyoshi, his sweet, loyal, passionate Kiyoshi was an *oni*, an immortal demon who could kill without a moment's forethought.

Ryuhei ignored the knock that sounded upon his bedroom door as he had the others throughout the afternoon. He heard the door creak open but did not look to see who it was.

"Ryu-san," Akira said softly. "Kiyoshi still hasn't returned and you seem ill. Should we cancel the opening?"

"No." Ryuhei turned away from the window. "We have a duty to perform no matter the circumstance." Such brave words...if only they eased the troubles in his heart.

Akira diverted his gaze to the empty futon. "So it is true about Kiyo-kun..." He frowned.

For a moment, Ryuhei feared Akira had learned about the *kyuuketsuki*. But he realized what Akira meant when Ryuhei saw the pity in the other actor's eyes. Sighing, Ryuhei rose from his chair and started sorting through the costumes in the dresser.

Akira took that as reply enough and rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I'm sorry, Ryu-san." There was nothing but sympathy behind his words. "I know how much he's meant to you..." Thankfully, he let the remainder of his words trail off and Ryuhei was glad not to endure the lame condolences.

Over their years together as members of this ragtag troupe, Hoshi had often inferred that one day either Kiyoshi would tire of Ryuhei's temperament or that Ryuhei would have an affair, ending it all. The latter was a direct reference to the mistake that had ended Ryuhei's career in Japan and an attack on the sincerity of the love he felt for Kiyo-kun. Hoshi said those things out of spite and envy, he was certain. But Akira never dismissed those inferences or tried to

correct them, showing that, in some ways, he agreed. And why not, if he was also one of the more popular actors in Edo at the same time Ryuhei was? All the rumors and stories had reached his ears just as surely as they had Ryuhei's.

Glad as he was that Akira had no clue about Kiyoshi's secret, Ryuhei would've preferred not to hear the other actor's sympathies. Ryuhei turned away when Akira opened his mouth to speak again.

"We can cancel tonight, if you don't feel up to it."

"I'm not ill, Akira-san."

"If you're sure..."

"I am." Ryu gave him a brief smile before taking his costume for the evening and moving to the vanity.

Akira knew better than to argue or press the matter, and added only that the curtain would be rising in about half-an-hour. The door clicked shut and Ryuhei stared at himself in the mirror. He could still only see Kiyoshi's face.

* * *

Kiyoshi's sensitive ears picked up the sound of a clock chiming the hour as he made his way from the *Tien Hau* temple, the little flesh-eater, Gobei, not far behind. With practiced stealth they clung to the shadows, pausing when catching the scent of humans in the vicinity.

Behind one of the larger Chinatown buildings, a place called the *Gingbo*, Kiyoshi stopped dead in his tracks, his head swiveling to the left, tilting back, his nose catching and holding a very familiar scent indeed.

The Poisoned Dragon. He was inside. Inside with another who carried a similar but fainter scent. Kiyoshi held his breath and closed his eyes to focus his concentration upon the sounds and smells of the two men engaged in sex. Sex and blood mingling together, being tasted, savored.

Kiyoshi shuddered, a low moan escaping his slightly parted lips. Without thinking, he reached down to rub his palm over his swelling cock. Oh, he wanted them. He wanted them badly.

"Ah! Kiyoshi-sama." Gobei came up behind him, pushing Kiyoshi to continue going forward. "You must not stop. Keep going."

But the scent of the Dragon and his lover continued to drift his way on the cool night breeze. So many others in the *Gingbo* were indulging in sexual pleasures,

but the passion radiating from those two men stood out against everything else in its sheer, vibrant potency. Another whimper passed over his lips.

Gobei growled in frustration. “Not even the worst drunkard suffers for *sake* this way. Please, Kiyoshi-sama, you must go home before you do something stupid.”

“You don’t understand. You can’t understand what he does to me.” His cock rock-hard now and aching for release, Kiyoshi plunged his hand into the folds of his *kimono* and loincloth. He breathed as deeply as possible, his free hand reaching out to touch the bricks of the building, intensifying the connection with the Dragon and his lover.

Yes. Oh yes, he could feel them. He could feel the passion they shared, the animalistic lust that drove them not only in the bed, but the lust for the perfect kill that drove them through this life as paid assassins.

Kiyoshi came hard, just when the Dragon did inside the willing hot body of his lover, but it was not as satisfying as it was for the mortal. His release was an empty one, leaving him feeling dirty beyond the sticky wetness coating his hand and the inside of his *fundoshi*.

Kiyoshi slumped forward, his forehead resting on the bricks as the shame washed over him. Gobei tugged on his *kimono* back. “Kiyoshi-sama. Please hurry. Please go home where you belong.”

Kiyoshi wrapped his arms around his waist and shuddered again, this time under the burden of his guilt. He couldn’t resist the allure of these two men and the desires they inflamed in his immortal body.

“Go home where?” Kiyoshi leaned miserably against the cool bricks, hoping they could ease some of the burning in his soul. “I belong nowhere.”

“You have that mortal man,” Gobei tried to offer as comfort. “He’s devoted to you until he dies, I think.”

“Ryuhei.” Kiyoshi sighed, forcing himself to straighten and shut out the presence of the Chinese assassins within the building.

But the flesh-eater was right. Despite his faults and dramatics, Ryuhei Nakamura had been devoted to him in every way since the day they met and that was quite the accomplishment for a man known throughout Japan for his promiscuity.

Kiyoshi sighed again and looked down at Gobei before starting to walk once more. “But I doubt he wants me back. Especially now.”

“You’re wrong, Kiyoshi-sama.”

“We’ll see, old friend. We’ll see.”

“Then don’t wait to see here,” Gobei insisted. “Go quickly. Back to the theater.” Kiyoshi nodded, wiping his hand clean on the front of his *kimono*. “I should take a bath and change these clothes.”

“And ignore this Dragon. He’ll lead you to ruin.” Gobei furrowed his brow, the lines deepened and hardened by the black shadows.

A girl stepped out of the *Gingbo*’s front doors and crossed the empty street. Unaccompanied by an escort, she could only be a prostitute. Gobei followed her with his gaze, shuffling around Kiyoshi to give the other a better view.

“Maybe if you feed on someone else now, you can distract yourself...” The flesh-eater’s words trailed off.

“No,” Kiyoshi said quickly. “It’s better if I don’t. I need to go back to the way I was in Japan.”

* * *

“What is he *doing*, Akira?” Hoshi whispered frantically behind his silk fan. They stood some distance behind Ryuhei, who had gone off on some tangent and deviated so far from the practiced play they had no idea how to follow his lead.

“I don’t know, Hosh. I guess we just try to make it up as we go along the way he is.”

“Oh, please,” Hoshi huffed indignantly, his painted face drawn into a sour expression. “Like this is the first time he’s been tossed aside by a lover. He’s stealing my chance to shine on stage tonight. And it’s out of envy he can’t play the role of Okaji. Make him stop.”

“And lose face in front of the audience?” Akira held up his fan and glowered at Hoshi discreetly from behind the silk screen. “Just play along with it and for once stop being such a pain in the ass.”

Hoshi returned Akira’s glare, but knew better than to argue. Hoshi moved away, his steps small and graceful as being the female lead demanded, to rejoin Ryuhei by the artificial trees representing *sakura* in full bloom.

With another brief but livid glance back at Akira, Hoshi slipped back into the part of the teashop waitress, Okaji. “Kisen-san, the day is too lovely for such solemn thoughts,” he said coyly, adjusting his voice to sound more feminine. “A priest should have more appreciation for *all* the lovely things in his surroundings.”

It was a good effort to resume the flirtatious banter the two characters were

supposed to be engaged in. But in this performance of *Kisen*, Ryuhei had completely turned the playful lead around.

“What good is beauty if there’s no one to enjoy it with?” Ryuhei was dressed in a white *kimono* and black *hakama*, the tie at his waist white as well. Simple attire for a *kabuki* performance, and his makeup only lightly applied. He’d dressed for a drama, not a lighthearted play.

“I’m here to enjoy it with you, Kisen-san.” Hoshi giggled nervously and glanced at the audience. They were silent and unsmiling.

“Another empty vanity,” Ryuhei called out softly. “Companionship without love... it only makes the loss feel worse with each past memory it invokes. I would rather the *sakura* be dead and the sky gray as in the worst of winters if only the one at my side now was the one I loved.”

Hoshi held the fan up to shield his face and glared over at Akira waiting offstage. *Help me*, he mouthed.

“Life is an empty vanity at times, is it not?”

Ryuhei whipped his head around. Kiyo-kun looked absolutely breathtaking in the guise of a woman. Ryuhei pushed the glaring Hoshi aside and stepped forward, holding out his hand, beckoning Kiyoshi to come closer. “Life can be a cruel vanity with demons lurking where we least expect.”

Kiyoshi reached for Ryuhei’s hand. “But cannot demons have a heart that can break?”

“I cannot answer. Can anyone?”

“Only those who believe in an undying love.”

Ryuhei took Kiyoshi’s hand in both of his own and drew it to rest against his heart. “Some old fools lose their way as they walk this life and forget how to believe. Another vanity, this idea that age brings wisdom.”

With a rustle of silk as the layered *kimonos* he wore brushed together, Kiyoshi stepped closer. The pink and gold embroidered cranes on the long indigo coat trailing behind him shone in the theater’s lamplight, as did the delicate glass ornaments tucked into his hair. He pressed close to Ryuhei, resting his head on the other’s chest.

“So very true,” Kiyoshi said. “Even for those who would seem young on the outside.”

“Then is everyone—mortal and demon, young and old—destined to be alone?” Ryuhei closed his eyes. “Say that I’m wrong, even if it’s the one answer that’s not true.”

Kiyoshi touched Ryuhei's cheek, silently begging him to open his eyes. "The truth is that you are loved beyond all measure and needed beyond all reason." A collective gasp rose from the already stunned audience the moment the actors' lips touched. When the kiss did not end but deepened in passion instead, an excited murmur spread amongst the crowd, igniting a swell of applause that went unnoticed by the reunited lovers.

* * *

Carl Gavin was at the playhouse as promised but he wasn't in the audience. He was in the back, in the private quarters, making his way upstairs and to the actors' rooms. Damn, they were all locked.

From the hallway downstairs, the sound of applause drifted up to Carl. "Damn it," Carl cursed out loud. He was running out of time before the show ended. For the sake of getting to the bottom of things, Carl decided certain liberties needed to be taken, even as a law-abiding citizen.

The locks on the doors to the actors' rooms were more for privacy purposes than any type of security. At the end of the landing, one of the theater workers had left a box of tools behind empty cans of oil and soiled rags. Carl found a straightedge carpenters used to score lines on wood before cutting, the long, thin piece of metal just perfect for slipping in between the edge of the door and the doorframe. He was able to unlatch the lock on the first room off the landing and hurried inside.

Chapter Twelve

Theoretically, the plan was good.

In practice, Carl found there were a few stumbling blocks. He had no idea which room belonged to which actor, and if any of the notes or letters on the crowded vanity tops could've helped him figure it out, they were written in Japanese. If he'd been hoping to find some kind of evidence that an actor here had ties to the Chinatown devil, he wasn't finding anything.

No clothing with blood on it, no human bones stashed amongst the drawers of makeup, nothing.

But in the last room he figured he had time to check, he paused to give a quick look through the contents of a large traveling trunk the room's occupant had left in the middle of the floor. One of the things inside was a Japanese musical instrument that reminded Carl of a guitar. But when he plucked the strings, the twangy sounds it made were nothing like the western version.

"Another dead-end." He sighed.

Outside the room, someone was trudging up the staircase with loud steps, shouting angry words in Japanese. Gavin slipped out of the room, barely having time to close the door behind him as the actor who had accosted him at breakfast appeared at the top of the landing.

Damn! There was nowhere to hide.

The actor stopped at the head of the stairs and gaped at him. With a strangled cry, he rushed forward and bowed deeply, then lifted his head and began rattling off—something—in a mix of Japanese and English so heavily accented and mispronounced that it may as well have been Japanese too.

Gavin looked around nervously for any excuse to escape.

"Uh," he stammered, rubbing the back of his neck as he held up one hand to try and calm the actor down. "Really, I know you must be tired after the show...

you don't have to, uh..." Carl had no way to finish that sentence since he had no way of understanding just what the hell the man was trying to say in the first place.

* * *

Ryuhei couldn't remember the last time he'd had a finer performance. Not since before his scandalous affair forced him out of Edo. Nor could he remember the last time he'd been happier, and that was even longer ago still.

He looked over at Kiyoshi, who stood by his side, still dressed in costume and looking more beautiful than anything or anyone ever had or could. Reaching out, Ryuhei took the other's hand in his and gave it a squeeze. Kiyoshi tilted his head up from behind the gold silk fan he was half-hiding behind, turning those large, soulful eyes to meet Ryuhei's. Overcome with affection, Ryuhei leaned in and softly pressed his lips to Kiyokun's for a gentle kiss.

Another burst of excited murmurings and applause erupted around them. Ryuhei eased away from Kiyokun, bowing towards the theater patrons who had remained behind after the rest of the house had emptied out. The group had surrounded Ryuhei and Kiyoshi at the left wing just off the stage before the two actors could retreat to their private rooms.

"Wonderful performance, Nakamura-san," said a familiar, plump Japanese man in a western suit standing at the forefront of the group, bowing profusely. "I've never seen such a take on *Kisen* like that before, it was quite a treat. And your stage partner—just a splendor to watch."

Ryuhei returned the bow, savoring the moment. "The pleasure is ours, Nishikawa-san," he said humbly, squeezing Kiyoshi's hand once more. These patrons were all native Japanese living in this country now for various reasons, each one pleased and excited to have this taste of their homeland.

"This theater has some very prominent supporters here in the Chinese community," Nishikawa smiled. "The wife of an important businessman happens to be Japanese and she wishes to celebrate the appearance of fine *kabuki* acting here in America with a party. The entire troupe is cordially invited."

"That would be lovely," Ryuhei gasped out and grinned at Kiyoshi. The young man returned his smile weakly as he stepped back a bit.

"Wonderful." Nishikawa clapped his hands together. "We can all go in the same

carriage.”

“Ah.” Ryuhei’s smile wavered a bit. “That’s all right. Please, give us a while to prepare. We’ll take another coach a bit later on.”

Disappointed but understanding, the theater patrons left the address to the Yang’s house written on a slip of paper. Ryuhei pulled Kiyoshi with him as he made his way into the backrooms offstage. He didn’t know what to say at first, only that his heart was still too overflowing with happiness that Kiyo-kun had returned. Even after all he’d learned about his companion, that hadn’t changed the love he felt for him.

“We don’t have to attend that party, Kiyo-kun,” he said gently, taking Kiyoshi’s hand in both of his. “We can just stay here tonight, or go somewhere alone. Anything you like.”

Anything you like.

Kiyoshi wanted nothing more than to be in Ryuhei’s arms and held so tight the lure of that assassin couldn’t reach him or turn him into the monster his dear Liu had become, but no, he couldn’t be selfish. Ryuhei was glowing and receiving the appreciation he had been denied for so long. Kiyoshi couldn’t take that away from him. He wouldn’t take that away from him.

“We can go to the party.”

“Excellent!”

Ryuhei’s smile fairly lit up the darkened backstage area and Kiyoshi gave himself over to the crushing embrace and penetrating kiss of his mortal lover. When they parted, Kiyoshi ran one delicately powdered hand across Ryuhei’s cheek. “What of Akira and Hoshi?”

“We’ll send word that they can come along when they’re ready.”

* * *

It struck him the moment they alighted from the carriage, and once their host and hostess came to greet them, Kiyoshi’s head spun. These people, this woman—the Japanese married to the Chinese businessman had a tie to the Poisoned Dragon.

Kiyoshi was barely aware of speaking and thanking them for this honor. He allowed Ryuhei to sweep him inside and introduce him around to the

assembled guests. It was the final guest, however, led over by their hostess, who made Kiyoshi's pulse quicken to an alarming rate. The Dragon's scent, the man's very essence, was all over this young man—*within* this young Japanese man. Oh Gods, he was the one from that building. He was the Dragon's lover. "Nakamura-san, Ishibe-san, please allow me to introduce my son, Toshiro Itou." The young man reached out to shake Ryuhei's hand in the American fashion but Kiyoshi folded his own hands within the sleeves of his *kimono* and simply bowed instead. He didn't trust himself to touch the boy. It would be too much. Entirely too much.

"I don't mean to be rude, but I hope you'll excuse me," Toshiro said. "I have to meet with someone. I hope to watch one of your performances before your troupe leaves San Francisco." He bowed to them, then slipped away. Kiyoshi watched the young man and allowed his ears to pick out the traces of conversation he had with their host in the home's foyer.

"Toshiro. Don't forget you have that job to take care of later in the week with the Wah Ching."

"We'll handle it like we always do."

"The Elders expect nothing less."

So this young man and the Poisoned Dragon were lovers, and partners for the Chinese tongs as well.

Kiyoshi wanted to see them, watch them together...

"Kiyo-kun. Kiyo-kun, did you hear me?"

"I'm sorry, Ryu, I didn't."

Ryuhei frowned and guilt stabbed at Kiyoshi's heart. "Ume-san wishes us to adjourn to the dining room for some refreshments."

Forcing a smile and nodding, Kiyoshi laid his hand upon Ryuhei's arm and let his lover lead him away.

* * *

At the first opportunity, Kiyoshi slipped out into the small garden area of the house. He couldn't do this. He couldn't be here in this place where the Poisoned Dragon's presence was so strong. He took a deep breath and held it, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, his mouth clamped shut as he willed his fangs to stop prickling his gums, begged his mouth to stop watering at the craving for

the mysterious tong assassin.

His stomach ached. His palms were growing damp. He wanted to find that young man he'd glimpsed when they arrived, he wanted to drain the man, taste the essence of the Dragon in his blood.

He couldn't do this. He couldn't remain here a moment longer, but he had to. He had to do it for Ryuhei. Kiyoshi glanced over his shoulder long enough to catch sight of his lover. Ryuhei was in his element at last, truly where he belonged, surrounded by admirers, the center of attention and adoration. This made Ryu happy and, no matter how awful it was for Kiyoshi, he wanted his lover to have it, wanted to be nearby to share it with him.

Kiyoshi forced himself up the short garden path to return to the house through the glass-paned doors on the veranda. Ryuhei was sitting on the divan, fanning himself with Kiyoshi's gold fan as he laughed and talked with the other guests. The lady of the house wore an elegant *kimono* of black silk and violet blossoms, though the beauty of her dress paled in comparison to her own loveliness and graceful movements as she served the actor another glass of *sake*.

Some of the men in attendance were not mere theater patrons. The scent of dried blood under their fingernails tickled Kiyoshi's nose, letting him know they were also members of the tong. *Gods...would everything remind him of what he most desired and feared?* He turned around, prepared to disappear through the doors once more.

"Ishibe-san," the hostess called out to him. "Please join us for some wine."

Ryuhei snapped the fan shut and looked over his shoulder from the empty spot on the divan beside him to the doorway where Kiyoshi was standing now. A worried look crossed his face. Kiyoshi had been quiet enough to slip away without being noticed and it obviously fretted the other actor.

"Or at least to share in some of your company." Ryuhei's lips turned down in the faintest hint of a pout. "Only for a short while, Kiyokun."

Kiyoshi came forward and sat beside Ryuhei, allowing his hand to slip between them on the seat and clutch at the fabric of Ryu's fine silk *haori* as though it were a lifeline anchoring him to some shred of humanity. He would not become like Liu. He would not live for the kill.

Another one of those all-too-rare smiles spread across Ryuhei's face, crinkling the faint lines around his eyes. He put his hand over Kiyoshi's on the hem of his *haori* and tilted his head to one side to rest on the top of Kiyoshi's.

"The *sake* will taste better now that you're here with us," Ryuhei said. Some of the other guests nodded and agreed with politely cheerful responses or

compliments for Kiyoshi's performance in the play. But Ryuhei's happiness was deep and genuine, radiating from the center of his being, as was his concern for Kiyokun. He reached for his glass on the low table in front of the divan and poured some more of the liquor.

"A little drink is good for almost any trouble." Ryuhei offered the tiny cup to Kiyoshi.

He accepted the small cup of *sake* with a quaking hand and drank it quickly, waving off another. "Thank you, no."

"You look ill, Ishibe-san. Shall I send for a doctor?" Ume Yang asked.

"No, I'm tired, that's all."

"We can go then," Ryuhei said.

Kiyoshi turned to face his lover. "You stay. You're having a wonderful time. You need to stay. I'll be all right."

Ryuhei shook his head. "We go together—" He broke off as Akira and Hoshi arrived, Hoshi announcing their presence in his usual loud way. "Oh, Gods."

Their hostess motioned for her husband to greet their new guests, then addressed Kiyoshi and Ryuhei again. "We have a spare room. You're more than welcome to spend the night. You can go rest and Nakamura-san can stay here a while if he likes before joining you."

"I don't wish to impose—"

"It's no imposition. I would be honored." Ume bowed and excused herself to have a servant make the room ready.

Bitter after having his spotlight stolen from him at the play, Hoshi was doing his best to steal the attention of everyone in the room. Kiyoshi was glad for it as all the guests were temporarily distracted and their collective gaze was now on Hoshi and Akira.

"Kiyokun, we should go." Ryuhei's smile was gone, replaced instead with a worried little frown. He caressed the side of Kiyoshi's face and his frown deepened. "Do you have a fever? Your skin feels so flushed..." One of Ume-san's other guests—one of the tong men—crossed behind the divan, buttoning up his coat before stepping out into the garden. The moonlight glinted off the edge of a hatchet as the weapon was discreetly concealed underneath the coat.

Ryu-san had seen it as well. He looked back at Kiyoshi and shivered. "Is it that...the assassin?"

When Kiyoshi did not immediately answer, Ryuhei placed a hand on his throat and swallowed. "Is he here?" he asked quietly, his eyes wide with fright and

worry.

Kiyoshi shook his head and Ryuhei gave a short sigh of relief. He stood from the divan and helped Kiyoshi do the same. They slipped out of the drawing room unnoticed, but in the hall they met with Ume.

“The room has been made ready,” she said, a small crease marring her perfect brow. “Are you certain you don’t need a doctor, Ishibe-san?”

“I’ll take care of him.” Ryuhei thanked her with a deep bow, never letting go of Kiyoshi’s hand. Kiyoshi clung to the warmth in that gesture, in both spirit and body.

Chapter Thirteen

Upstairs, Kiyoshi threw himself into Ryuhei's arms the instant the door closed behind them. "Hold me, Ryu. Don't let me go. Please don't let me go," he begged, pulling Ryuhei's head closer to his. He kissed his mortal love with a fear-edged passion, his fingers tangling in Ryuhei's hair, pulling it free from the ties that bound it into a traditional topknot. "Love me, Ryuhei. Please."

Deep, vibrating sounds worked their way out of Ryuhei instead of words. He slid his hands up and down Kiyoshi's back as they embraced, his lips caressing Kiyoshi's earlobe and cheek before trailing down to press over his mouth. The contact felt so good—it helped to ease some of the hunger the Dragon's blood had stirred, gnawing at Kiyoshi's belly. There was only goodness in Ryuhei's passion, nothing like the dangerous fires that burned inside the assassin and threatened to destroy everything Kiyoshi tried to be.

But the conflicting desires were too much. Kiyoshi clung tighter to Ryuhei, his cock hardening even as his entire body began to quake.

Ryuhei pulled out of their kiss, gasping, his loosened hair cascading down to brush along his shoulders. "Kiyokun," he panted, wrapping his arms around Kiyoshi's trembling form. "It's all right."

Dear Ryuhei. The actor showered kiss after kiss on Kiyoshi's neck and shoulders, slowly pulling open the *kimono* and the undergarments, the *shitagi*, to reveal the bare skin underneath. With deft precision he undid the *obi* and assorted cloth and strings binding the elaborate garment shut. Ever the connoisseur of fine clothing, Ryu took the heavy *kimono* and laid it gently across the back of a wide chair. Kiyoshi couldn't help but smile at the gesture. He drew Ryu to him for a slow kiss before giving himself over once more to his lover's skilled hands.

Off came the *shitagi* and the various bindings until Kiyoshi stood naked. In his haste to dress for the performance, he hadn't even bothered to put on a

fundoshi and this brought a quiet chuckle from Ryuhei as he skimmed his hand over Kiyoshi's hardening flesh.

Kiyoshi whimpered and shivered as the heat of Ryuhei's passion flowed from his hand through Kiyoshi's wanting body. Ryu turned him to face away and stroked Kiyoshi's chin until he looked up to see the mirror across the way. "Gods, you're beautiful," Ryuhei whispered, dragging his lips across Kiyoshi's shoulder while his strong hand found Kiyoshi's rigid cock. With maddening slowness, Ryu pumped him with one hand, resting the other on the side of Kiyoshi's trim waist to hold him firmly so he could feel the rise of Ryuhei's own cock through the layers of silk he wore.

"I want you, Ryu. I want to feel you in me," Kiyoshi pleaded.

"Soon, *kimi*, soon," Ryuhei said, kissing his neck. "First I want you to come for me. I want you to see what *I* see when you do." Ryuhei stroked harder, while his other hand slipped around to fondle Kiyoshi's rear, massaging the tight opening and the swell of his sac.

Kiyoshi thrust into Ryuhei's hand, his gaze glued to the mirror and his own expression as well as Ryuhei's. The desire shot through him with each firm stroke of Ryu's hand and he felt his natural bloodlust rise with it. He clamped his jaw shut and concentrated on his reflection of the pleasure his lover brought him with each loving touch. He cried out Ryuhei's name when he came, his body quaking from the force of the climax.

He grabbed Ryuhei's hand, brought it to his lips and licked his own salty fluid away. Then he pressed Ryu's palm to his flushed cheek. "Fuck me, Ryuhei. Please."

Once the actor shed his clothing, he and Kiyoshi tumbled to the bed in a tangle of arms and legs, their bodies touching anywhere and everywhere possible as they kissed and caressed like they did the first time they were together. Stopping only long enough to catch his breath, Ryuhei laughed softly as he reached over to the nightstand to retrieve the small stoppered bottle of camellia oil their hostess had so thoughtfully provided.

Kiyoshi snatched it away and rose to his knees. He kissed and licked a path from Ryuhei's soft lips across his toned chest and flat abdomen until he came to the thatch of springy black curls edging Ryuhei's groin. Holding Ryuhei's erect cock with one hand, Kiyo dripped the oil over the swollen head with the other. Kiyoshi straddled his lover and leaned in for a kiss, positioning himself as he did so. "I love you, Ryu, now and always," he whispered before impaling himself with an urgency that made them both gasp.

Kiyoshi took the entire thick, firm length inside himself, his muscles clenching around the hot organ. Spasms of pleasure raced up his spine and he placed both hands on Ryuhei's chest to feel the heat steaming off the man's body, the blood pumping through his veins.

Ryuhei's hands shot up to grip the sides of Kiyoshi's hips. His fingers slipping on the sweat-glazed flesh, he coaxed Kiyoshi to rise up and then sit back down in a steady rhythm. His cock eased into the stretched opening, sliding up into the clenching passage only to slip back out. Even coated with the salve, Ryuhei's cock caused so much friction, sending wave after wave of pleasure through Kiyoshi.

Blood rushed to Kiyoshi's groin as his cock once again swelled to another full erection. Ryuhei released Kiyoshi's hips to wrap his hands around the engorged shaft, rubbing and gently squeezing the cock until thick opaque fluids oozed out of the sensitive slit on the head.

Moaning, Kiyoshi pressed down with his lower body in time with each of Ryuhei's upward thrusts, Ryuhei's cock pushing deeper and deeper. Ryuhei gasped, his cries more like whimpers as he kept up the ever-increasing passionate pace of their lovemaking.

"Inside of me..." Kiyoshi clutched at his mortal lover's shoulders for leverage as he rocked back and forth with his hips. "Come inside of me."

Ryuhei didn't stop stroking Kiyoshi's cock, not even when he reached his peak and his seed erupted inside of Kiyoshi's passage to ease the burning friction at last. Kiyoshi came again, splattering through Ryuhei's fingers as his fangs pierced through his gums with a painful stabbing sensation. Blood filled his mouth, making him thirsty for more that wasn't his own.

He collapsed on top of Ryuhei's heaving body, another kind of orgasm racking his body. Whimpering, shivering, he nuzzled against the side of Ryuhei's neck, licking at the salty flesh and tasting the blood pumping under the skin.

Kiyoshi didn't realize when his kisses changed into a bite. He was just aware that Ryuhei's life filled his mouth the same way his lover's come filled him now. It was so sweet, this thick, metallic-tasting fluid and the love he could taste within it. He didn't guzzle the blood, but instead lapped leisurely at it to savor each drop.

Ryuhei pressed a hand to the back of Kiyoshi's neck. He choked out Kiyoshi's name before another moan tumbled from his lips. His cock hardened again still buried deep inside of Kiyoshi. He climaxed once more, come bursting from his head as his heart pumped more blood through the bite on his neck.

“Oh, Gods! Kiyo-kun, I’ve never felt this way. Ohhh...” The actor’s voice trailed off and he squirmed, his fingers stroking through Kiyoshi’s hair. He grew silent and stiffened a bit, tentatively touching the side of Kiyoshi’s face. “Kiyoshi... please...don’t hurt me...don’t....kill me...”

The words sliced through Kiyoshi’s heart like a *samurai’s* sword, cleaving it in two. He jerked his head back and watched the blood oozing from the small punctures on Ryuhei’s neck. The delicate pale skin was beginning to bruise. He was so mortal, so frail...

Tears trickled down Kiyoshi’s flushed cheeks. “I would never hurt you, could never kill you...”

The voice of his once beloved Liu rang in Kiyoshi’s ears. *You could and you might. Especially the way this fascination with the Poisoned Dragon affects you. You’re a killer, dai-dai. A killer just like me. It’s what we are, now and forever.*

“Oh, Ryu, forgive me, forgive me.” Kiyoshi leaned forward and licked the wound, knowing his saliva could help it heal. He scrambled off the stunned Ryuhei and grabbed the white under *kimono* and the simple tie to close it, throwing them on haphazardly. “Please forgive me...I do love you.”

Rubbing the side of his neck, Ryuhei sat up slowly. “Wait,” he called out weakly. “Don’t go.”

Another stab cut through Kiyoshi’s heart. Had he drained that much blood to leave Ryuhei so weak? He wiped away the fresh tears stinging his eyes. “I have to.” His voice trembled. After what he could’ve done...

“Don’t go to him.” Ryuhei was still trying to rise out of the bed. He rested his hand on the night table to steady himself. “Please, Kiyo-kun,” he begged. “Don’t go to that man. Don’t leave me for that assassin.”

Ryuhei stumbled and Kiyoshi rushed forward to catch him, fearing he would fall to the floor. “Ryu-san!”

The actor wrapped his arms around Kiyoshi’s neck. “Promise me you won’t go looking for him if you leave me, or I won’t get you back, will I?”

Kiyoshi held Ryuhei close, the man’s fear washing over him like a cold, numbing rain. “I wasn’t going to look for him. I want nothing to do with him,” Kiyoshi assured his lover, wishing he could be so sure in his own mind.

Ryuhei pulled back and cupped Kiyoshi’s cheek with his hand. “Stay with me. Please. You didn’t hurt me. I was being an old fool. Stay with me, *kimi*. Stay always.”

“Oh, Ryu.” With the pad of this thumb, Kiyoshi smoothed away the lone tear

siding down his mortal lover's cheek before he kissed him tenderly. He tilted Ryuhei's face, looked at the small punctures on his neck and kissed them gently, satisfied that they were healing quickly. "I love you with all that I am, Ryuhei. I always will."

Ryuhei smiled and Kiyoshi saw the exhaustion creep into his eyes. "Then let's go to sleep, Kiyo-kun. I want to wake up in your arms."

* * *

Long past midnight, a clock chimed somewhere in the house. Although the sound was faint for mortals' ears it was enough to rouse Kiyoshi from his light sleep. The sound of someone coming up the stairs and two going down brought him fully awake. He untangled himself from Ryuhei's limbs and eased out of bed to have a cup of the jasmine tea long gone cold.

The small handleless cup fell from his hand when something prickled his senses. He whipped his head around to make sure the sound of the cup hitting the carpet hadn't disturbed Ryuhei.

His heart hammering within his chest, his mouth watering and fangs hurting his gums, he pulled his *kimono* tighter around him, crept to the door and out into the hall. He fell back against the wall, a cold sweat breaking over his cool flesh. He picked out the sound of the hushed men's voices in the entry hall downstairs. One of them, this evening's host, Yang-san and the other...the other...*the Poisoned Dragon himself*.

The assassin's scent and power wafted up from below, covering Kiyoshi, clouding his senses, making him tremble with a craving like none he'd ever known. He clutched at his stomach. It ached to be filled with the man's blood, his semen, his *everything*.

Moving of their own accord it seemed, Kiyoshi's feet carried him to the edge of the landing. He grasped the banister, the surface of the polished oak nearly cracking under the pressure of his fingers. He leaned over the railing, listening to the hushed voices below and not understanding a word.

His attention was captivated by the boiling emotions that flowed from the Dragon—such anger, such violent and blazing passion. *Oh for just a small taste...* Salivating, he took a step down onto the staircase.

No. Kiyoshi gasped, rushing backwards from the stairs until he felt the wall against his back once more. He pressed his hand to his mouth and took several

long, low breaths to steady himself.

In the room behind Kiyoshi, Ryuhei sighed in his sleep, the bedframe creaking softly as he rolled over. Kiyoshi pushed away from the wall and slipped back into the room, closing the door behind him and locking it as though that could keep the warring desires in his soul at bay. Climbing back into the bed, he curled up next to Ryuhei and tried to focus on his lover, and only his lover. Ryuhei's scent, his even breathing, the warmth rising from his uncovered skin... Ryuhei turned over again, unaccustomed to western-style beds and restless in his sleep. He draped an arm around Kiyoshi and murmured drowsy words of love, though not even half-awake.

Kiyoshi clung to his lover and to the calming warmth of the half-formed words. He closed his eyes and fought the hunger pangs knotting his insides. He couldn't. He wouldn't. He belonged here. With Ryuhei. Only Ryuhei.

In time he made out the sound of a door closing and slowly felt the strongest lure of the Dragon fade into the distance with the man's departure. He heard his host come up and return to his own room.

It seemed an eternity, but gradually the craving for blood faded and Kiyoshi snuggled closer to Ryuhei. This was where he belonged. This mortal man's love and calming influence was all he needed.

* * *

"Another one." Carl knelt beside the man's body while the policeman who'd discovered the corpse held a lantern overhead. The flickering orange light bounced off the fog creeping around them, giving the whole back alley a disturbing, haunted air.

"What's that?" The policeman bent over to take a closer look, scrunching his thick, red eyebrows. "These types of fellows end up dead all the time, I'm afraid. They get involved with these gangs, you see, and then end up this way. It's a damn shame."

"Bring the light closer," Carl said through clenched teeth. It was more than a damn shame for young men like this one to live and die this way for the sake of the tongs. But this one had met an especially cruel death.

The black material of the man's tunic covered most of the blood, but Carl could still smell it—pungent, metallic and everywhere. A spray of the fluid clung to the wall above where the body was propped up against the damp bricks. The

man's throat was gone, replaced by a wide, gaping slit that had torn practically through the entire neck. How the head had remained attached was something Carl couldn't begin to guess.

Both of the man's eyes had been gouged out, leaving streaks of more tacky blood on his pallid cheeks. From one empty socket, an oriental fan jutted out and Carl reached over to take it.

"Fuck!" the policeman swore as the body slumped on its side, the head falling away from the neck at an awkward angle.

Carl unfolded the fan and stared at the gold silk. Chinese letters were still visible where the blood hadn't soaked through.

"Christ." The policeman shook his head, looking at the fan instead of the body. "I can't read any of their letters, but I can recognize some of the symbols the gangs call themselves by. That's nothing I've seen before, that I can tell."

Carl had already started to suspect this wasn't a typical murder associated with the rival Chinese gangs. His reporter's instincts had picked up on it the minute he left the theater to try and find whatever party the actors were headed for. Instead, he'd felt compelled to join this policeman doing rounds through the district.

"I have a translator who might be able to help." Carl stood, wrapping the fan in a handkerchief. "Mind if I keep this?"

"Suit yourself. It's just another dead Chinaman." The policeman sighed, altogether too indifferent for Carl's taste. "They usually sort this out themselves. But the newspaper loves these kinds of stories to keep their readers, eh?"

Carl pursed his lips together. "Something like that."

He left the policeman to take care of matters, already thinking about where he could find Nishikawa.

Chapter Fourteen

Nishikawa sat at the table in his sleeping *yukata*, his appetite none the worse for wear even with the dull throb of a headache behind his eyes from too much *sake* the night before. But Ume-san was too fine a hostess and her wine too good to refuse, as was the company. A headache in the morning was a small price to pay for such a well-enjoyed evening.

One of the cooks entered the dining room with a fresh pot of *sencha* to put down at the table. As Nishikawa set aside his chopsticks to pour himself a glass of the fragrant tea, another household attendant paused in the doorway to announce there was a visitor to see Nishikawa.

“He says he is a client of yours.” The Chinese attendant spoke in English and wore western slacks and a tweed vest. A worker for Ume-san’s husband, no doubt. “And that you’re helping him translate the *kabuki* plays. He says it’s urgent.”

Surprised, Nishikawa frowned. “Send him in.”

The attendant disappeared and returned a few moments later with the reporter in tow. Nishikawa rose and greeted him with a short bow.

“Gavin-san, good morning,” he said. “This is a strange surprise.”

“Sorry to bother you here, Mr. Nishikawa.” The reporter paused, then awkwardly gave a half-bow himself. “But I didn’t think this could wait. When the managers at the theater told me you might be here, I came straight over.”

“You look as though you haven’t slept all night.” Nishikawa offered him a spot at the table, knowing Ume-san’s hospitality would easily allow for a new guest even in light of another’s boldness in acting the host. “Would you like some tea?”

“Actually, I’d rather you translate this if you can.” Gavin-san withdrew a long item wrapped in a handkerchief from his pocket and placed it on the tabletop.

Nishikawa opened it and gasped. “What happened to this beautiful fan?” He stared at the silk and shook his head. “Half the poem has been ruined as well.” “You can read Chinese then?” Gavin-san asked hopefully. “Yes, but this is *kanji*.” Nishikawa sighed. “And it’s a *tanka*—Japanese poetry. It’s a story of two lovers, but most of it has been ruined by the—what is this anyway?”

“The writing is Japanese then.”

Nishikawa nodded. “But what are these stains?”

“Looks like dried blood to me,” Gavin said quietly.

A loud gasp caught their attention as Ume’s other guests came in from the garden. It was the *kabuki* actors Hoshi and Akira. “Oh! Do get that vile thing away. How can we possibly enjoy the fine meal Ume-san promised us with *that* there...wait a minute.” Hoshi poked Akira. “Isn’t that one of our *onnagatta* fans?”

* * *

“Oh Gods,” Ryuhei groaned as he and Kiyoshi stepped into the corridor outside their bedroom and heard the unmistakable grating sound of Hoshi’s voice.

“Why is that cow here?”

“I imagine Ume-san asked them to stay as she did us.”

“Let’s just sneak out the kitchen door.”

Kiyoshi shook his head. “No. You need a decent meal. You still seem rather weak and pale.”

Kiyoshi lowered his head in shame. Ryuhei tilted it back up with a gentle press of his fingers and rested his forehead against the shorter man’s. “It isn’t your bite that made me tired. It’s the marvelous fucking you gave me.”

“Ryuhei—” Kiyoshi’s protest was cut off by the press of Ryuhei’s lips.

From below, a loud knocking disrupted their perfect quiet moment and it was Kiyoshi’s turn to groan at the sound of the American reporter’s voice. “What does he want?”

“Probably to report on the performance last night.”

“Maybe we *should* go out the back way.”

“Nonsense,” Ryuhei said, grabbing Kiyoshi’s hand in his. “Let’s face our annoying demons head-on and put them behind us for the rest of the day.”

“Demons?” Kiyoshi’s shoulders slumped forward.

Ryuhei stared at him in mock horror. “Of course. We have the worst one in our midst right downstairs.” He made a face in the direction of the bottom of the staircase. A cry rose out of Hoshi from somewhere in the dining area, a high-pitched little wail that made Ryuhei think of when cats accidentally land in a puddle of water. He pulled Kiyo-kun close from behind, pretending to hide behind him.

“Be careful—the bitch either wants to feed or mate.” Ryuhei giggled playfully. “Neither would be pretty to see.”

Kiyoshi focused on keeping calm and not allowing the Dragon’s lingering presence to stir up his vampire urges once again. When they entered the dining room all heads turned their way and Hoshi pointed. “Kiyoshi was using that fan last night.”

Kiyoshi looked from Hoshi to the reporter who held his fan—a fan now caked with blood and alive with the Poisoned Dragon’s power.

Beside him, Ryuhei gasped. “Gods!” He tightened his hold on Kiyoshi’s hand and pressed his other hand to his throat. Quickly enough, he recovered and his gaze swept around the room to take in everyone who sat at the table. He forced out a light burst of laughter.

“But that’s a mean joke, Hoshi-san,” he admonished lightly. “Taking a fan that looks like one of Kiyo-kun’s and ruining it that way with ink.”

Hoshi’s face turned red. “Idiot. That *is* Kiyoshi’s fan and that’s not ink—it’s *blood*.” He arched an eyebrow at Ryuhei and smirked with some sort of inner satisfaction.

What little color was left in Ryuhei’s complexion drained away. Kiyoshi felt his lover’s fingers grow cold and begin to tremble against his palm. “That would be terrible.” Ryuhei swallowed. “Thankfully, that’s not Kiyo-kun’s fan. I burned his in a temple last night before the party as an offering of thanks to the Gods. Surely we are not the only Japanese in San Francisco, are we, Nishikawa-san?” Ryuhei asked the translator.

“Obviously not,” Ume Yang added from behind him.

Nishikawa nodded. “I have seen fans like this. I believe there’s a Japanese merchant over on—”

“There,” Ryuhei interrupted, pointing an accusing finger at Hoshi. “Now stop with your lies. You’re just jealous of Kiyo-kun and have been from the start. I

should throw you out of the company on your fat ass.”

“Oh really.” Hoshi pushed up from the table, his hands balled into fists at his side. “You can try. Without my family’s financial support, this fucking little joke of a theater troupe wouldn’t even exist.” He stuck out his pointed chin and skewered Ryuhei with a positively vile look. “So go ahead—kick me out on my ass. You’ll be selling yours on the street in a week just to make enough money to buy a one-way fare back to the backwater shit towns in Japan you came from.”

Akira stood, patting Hoshi on the shoulder. “Now, now, Hoshi. Let’s not say things we’re going to regret later.”

“No, I’m glad he said it,” Ryuhei shouted. He glanced over at Kiyoshi, relief visible in his eyes despite what Hoshi had said.

Dearest Ryu-san...he wanted the change in subject even at his own expense. “All of our honored theater patrons can understand just the kind of spoiled brat we’ve been indulging backstage,” Ryu roared.

“Gentlemen, please,” Ume said.

Ryuhei raised his hand. “Please, dear Ume-san. You must forgive my obnoxious soon-to-be former colleague—”

“Obnoxious? I’ll show you obnoxious, you worn-out, old piece of shit—” Hoshi stomped his foot.

“Hoshi!” Akira tightened his grip on Hoshi’s shoulder.

“Let me go, Akira. I’ll scratch his eyes out.”

Ryuhei made a grand bow, then kissed Ume Yang’s hand. “Dear lady, do forgive me but Kiyoshi and I simply *must* go. You must come back to the theater before we leave San Francisco. As our guest.”

“I would like that.” Ume returned the bow with a graceful one of her own.

“Thank you.”

Ryuhei took hold of Kiyoshi’s arm and spirited him out the front door. He briskly led the way until they were two streets away, where he stopped and leaned back against a building.

“Ryuhei. What is it? Are you ill?”

“No, but I need a drink.” He pointed to the small establishment one of the theater managers had taken them to when they’d arrived in San Francisco.

“There.”

Kiyoshi tried not to notice the curious stares of the men inside at the sight of him in the woman’s *kimono* from last night’s performance. Ryuhei took a small

round table in the far corner of the room and called out an order to the man serving another customer. When the bottle of wine was delivered, Kiyoshi poured and waited while Ryuhei tossed back the drink and then another.

“What is it, Ryu? Are you worried about Hoshi withdrawing the funding?”

Ryuhei looked at him with a mixture of surprise and...was that loathing? Of course it must be. What else could it be?

Though he hated to do it, had learned to automatically suppress it so long ago, Kiyoshi allowed his mind to open and reached out to read Ryuhei's thoughts.

“You think I did that? You think I killed someone with the fan?”

Ryuhei's mouth fell open. He broke away from Kiyoshi's gaze to stare into his glass. His hands started to shake so badly some of the wine sloshed over the rim of the cup. “I—you—” He stumbled with the words. “Did you... Can you read thoughts?”

Taking the glass from Ryuhei's hand, Kiyoshi swallowed the lump in his throat. *“But is it true? Is that what you think?”*

Ryuhei gave a start, obviously frightened at hearing Kiyoshi's unspoken voice within his mind, and pressed both hands over his mouth. “I don't know,”

Ryuhei whispered, shaking his head. “Forgive me, Kiyo-kun. I understand so little about what you are, only that this—this man's blood—it changes you.” He dropped both hands to the table and reached for the bottle of wine.

Kiyoshi placed his hand over Ryuhei's, stopping him. Ryuhei looked down, but Kiyoshi willed him to look up. He captured his mortal lover's gaze and held fast.

“I did not do this thing. I did not leave you last night. But the one they call the Poisoned Dragon was there at the house. I felt him, heard him speak to Yang-san.” Breathing a dispirited sigh, Kiyoshi let Ryuhei's hand go and finished his thought aloud. “Was the fan downstairs? Could he have picked it up for some reason?”

Ryuhei nodded. “I left everything in Ume-san's drawing room to go upstairs with you. I was so careless...I didn't even remember the fan.” A choked little sound worked its way out of his throat. “You really didn't leave last night, did you?” His voice wavered.

“No,” Kiyoshi whispered. “I stayed for you.”

Ryuhei reached across the table and took Kiyoshi's hands, lifting them to his mouth so he could kiss each finger. “Forgive me, Kiyo-kun,” he begged. “For doubting. For not giving more of myself to you.” Ryuhei moved one of his hands to his throat, rubbing the dark red bruise where he'd been bitten.

Kiyoshi pulled away, hating the monster that he was. What a fool he'd been to think he could be normal, that he could live amongst people again, even dare to love someone. "I should go. Go back to Japan, or perhaps just stay here in America, find some out-of-the-way place where I won't be a danger to anyone."

"No." Ryuhei's eyes went wide. "You can't." He cradled the other's hand in his own, his thumb stroking across Kiyoshi's palm.

The actor's mind was a blur of confused and hurt thoughts. Kiyoshi tried to break the contact he'd created, but found he couldn't close himself off to Ryuhei that easily. "It's for the best," Kiyoshi insisted, but how those words hurt to say aloud. "I've fooled myself into thinking I could belong here... *anywhere...*"

Ryuhei's brow creased, his lips forming a frown. "At least try to come up with a better excuse than that weak one. Of course you belong here. Who else will stop me when I drink too much? Or keep me from strangling that bitch Hoshi?"

Kiyoshi grasped Ryuhei's hand, a melancholy smile curving his mouth. "There isn't any place I'd rather be, but I don't want to put you in danger." *Especially from me.* He wanted to say more but words eluded him, so he simply closed his eyes a moment and let all the emotion he felt for Ryuhei flow from the depth of his heart. He didn't know if it would transfer as easily as his thoughts could, but he hoped it would.

Oh, Kiyō-kun. You have no idea how much you mean to me. I don't think I can survive without you.

Opening his eyes, Kiyoshi gazed at his lover, but before he could form a thought, a familiar voice broke the calm.

"Well there you two are," the reporter Gavin called as he barged towards their table.

"How in fuck—?" Ryuhei stared in shock at the reporter before sitting up straight and squaring his shoulders. "Gavin-san, please." He held up his hand in a dismissive gesture as the reporter came to a stop at their table. "Maybe your body was at the breakfast table this morning, but your mind was elsewhere. Kiyō-kun and I have had enough headaches for one day, thank you."

"But you two ran off pretty damn fast." Gavin helped himself to an empty seat at the next table. "I didn't get a chance to finish asking some questions."

"And I'm sorry but you won't have that chance now either." Ryuhei stood. "We have things to do before rehearsal and—"

"Do you ever have anything to say?" Gavin focused on Kiyoshi, his sharp blue

eyes narrowed and one eyebrow arched. "I noticed the whole time back in the house you couldn't take your eyes off the fan."

Kiyoshi glared at the brash American. "I have much to say to those I *choose* to converse with. I have little to say on this matter to you. Of course I was looking at the fan. I was as curious as anyone as to what was on it and how it came to be in such a state." *Now go away.*

The reporter flinched. Kiyoshi had used as much force behind the unspoken command as he dared to without risking a permanent injury to the man's consciousness, but it had almost no effect. The mortal must somehow be innately protected from Kiyoshi's mental powers. The thought disheartened Kiyoshi greatly.

Gavin glanced down at his arms where the hairs on the back of his hands were standing on end. "Did either of you just feel something?" he asked distractedly as he rubbed his hands together. "It was like..." He stopped in mid-sentence and looked up at Kiyoshi, his frown deepening.

"Maybe it's the guilt over the mess you caused earlier that's gnawing at you," Ryuhei blurted out. He skirted the table and tugged at Kiyoshi's sleeve. "We should go, Kiyo-kun, before the rest of our day is ruined."

"Did you do that?" Gavin asked, ignoring Ryuhei.

"Do what?" Ryuhei asked sharply, knowing full well what Gavin meant. He'd almost cried out at the force of Kiyo-kun's unspoken command echoing in his head.

"I'm not sure what," Gavin said, massaging the back of his neck. "But it was something. Something...not quite natural."

His assessing gaze shifted to Kiyoshi, who remained silent and unblinking, and Ryuhei skirted to the side so he could block the reporter's view.

"Such questions. I'm outraged," Ryuhei huffed. But he reached up to touch the bruises on the side of his neck absentmindedly, nervously. The reporter's sharp gaze followed the movement.

"What odd-looking marks." Gavin frowned and took a step closer to get a better look. "How did you get those?"

"What?" Ryuhei's eyes widened, but he took a step back when he realized what marks Gavin referred to. He tilted his chin up. "Gavin-san, I must insist that you get out of our way. We have no information for you. We were at the Yang house all night...in bed...together...fucking each other's brains out to be exact."

Everything in the restaurant came to stop around them—no one spoke or touched their food, even those waiting on the customers froze in place with their attention on the three men at the back table.

“Wha—? Gavin started to ask, a few moments behind understanding Ryuhei’s words than everyone else. “Oh...*oh*, well I...” Without having to look, Kiyoshi knew the man’s face had turned bright red. He could feel the rise in Gavin’s body heat even from behind Ryuhei.

“That was one of your questions, yes?” Ryuhei glowered. ““Who was Kiyoshi with last night, and what was he doing?’ Well, now you know—*me*.”

“That’s, uh, actually not...” Gavin mumbled as he got up from his seat. “Maybe we can talk about this another time...”

“Oh, fine.” Ryuhei snorted and folded his arms across his chest, tucking his hands into the sleeves of his *kimono*. “You can ruin our day with your gruesome junk, but squirm like a silly virgin when we don’t give you the answers you want.”

The reporter rubbed the back of his neck again. Kiyoshi shifted to see past Ryu’s head and smiled to himself as he watched the man’s unease. “Well, um, well...I suppose I’ll let you gentlemen get back to...well whatever it is you need to get back to. I’ll stop by the theater for an interview soon.”

Ryuhei pushed past Gavin. Kiyoshi followed.

“Ryu. Let’s go home. I want to be with you. I want you to hold me and not let me go until we have to be on stage. I promise not to...hurt you in any way.”

Ryuhei stopped walking and turned to look at Kiyoshi. He touched the vampire’s cheek and smiled. “Anything for you, my love. Anything.”

* * *

Carl Gavin moved until he could see the pair through the small front window. There was something strange about those two beside their *proclivities* and he was going to find out what it was. That little one was...different...unusual. Not quite right somehow and Carl wouldn’t rest until he found out why.

Chapter Fifteen

Kiyoshi followed close behind Ryuhei as they cut through Chinatown to reach the theater. Before they turned onto their street, they stopped at a teahouse to buy some dumplings. “Now maybe we can enjoy a meal in peace together after all this,” Ryuhei said, lifting the lid off the box to smell the hot steamed buns inside.

But when they arrived at the theater, chaos greeted them.

The front doors were wide open. The pungent scent of camphor oil and turpentine streamed out of the building along with what appeared to be the entire crew of stagehands. A crowd of curious bystanders had gathered outside the theater to see what was going on. “Akira?” Ryuhei rushed forward, trying to push through people.

Akira stumbled out with the last of the stagehands. He coughed and fanned the air in front of him before grabbing some man in western dress from the crowd. “Ryu-san, we’re ruined,” he told the stranger, his words a bit slurred.

Ryuhei pulled him away from the confused-looking bystander and slapped Akira once on the side of his long face. “Akira, you’ve inhaled too much of those fumes. Come to your senses.”

“It’s Hoshi.” Akira slumped back against the building. “Everything’s a mess.”

The box of food fell from Ryuhei’s grasp. “What. Did that *bitch*. Do now?”

Akira coughed to clear his lungs. Once the coughing took hold it doubled him over for a time. He straightened, rubbing the center of his chest. “He had someone read him a review of the performance. It wasn’t very good.”

“*Wasn’t very good?*” Hoshi screamed from the threshold of the theater. All eyes turned to the stocky actor who stood glowering at them all like some fierce Japanese demon, his cheeks livid, eyes wide, hair a mess and sticking up at odd angles. “It wasn’t very good?” he shouted again. “It was humiliating. The

man said he'd never seen such a ludicrous display of indecent emotion in public before." Hoshi barreled down the few steps and came to stand before Kiyoshi. "And it's all because of you, you little piece of talentless country shit. "Oh, really." Ryuhei turned on Hoshi, his eyebrow twitching. "There's only *one* talentless shit here and it's not Kiyo-kun."

"Don't you start up with me again." Hoshi smacked his thigh with the rolled up newspaper he clenched in a sweaty fist. "You wouldn't know talent if it came up out of the ground and bit you on the ass. Just listen to this—*this*..." He unbunched the crinkled newspaper and stared at the sheet for a second in furious silence. "Fucking English," he hissed. His face grew redder and he stalked over to Akira. "Read this. You"—he pointed to Ryuhei—"just listen."

"Evening last, San Francisco was graced with a performance by a renowned *kabuki* troupe from Tokio, Japan. At least, San Francisco was *supposed* to be thusly graced. This reporter feels we were cursed with a group of wretched imposters.

"If, however this is the best of 'esteemed and ancient entertainments' the Mikado's empire has to offer then perhaps our late Commodore Perry would have been wise to see that Japan had kept its door closed and thusly kept its insipid excuse for an entertainment inside its shores."

The silence was amazing really, even the bystanders mutely awaited the next response. They didn't have to wait long.

"Did you hear that?" Hoshi seethed, taking a step forward, small hands clenched into fists at his side. He poked Ryuhei in the chest. "And do you know *why* we were written of that way? Because of him." He stuck his finger out at Kiyoshi then moved to poke Ryuhei again. "Because of him and you and your stupid, fucking, pathetic little lovers' spat."

Hoshi continued poking Ryuhei in the center of the chest hard enough to make the older actor step back with each glancing blow. "You are a disgrace. I don't know why Akira and I put up with you. We're leaving, do you hear. Le—"

The angry shouts turned to a whimper when Kiyoshi took Hoshi by the wrist. "Stop it," he said in a low, menacing tone. "Stop doing that to Ryu-san or I will snap your arm like a twig."

Hoshi's mouth flapped open and closed, but nothing more intelligible than a few squeaks came out. He stared at his arm in Kiyoshi's grasp, the color leaving his face as he started to shiver.

"It's all right, it's all right." Ryuhei rushed forward, touching Kiyoshi's shoulder. "There's no need to be that way, Kiyo-kun. That's just part of Hoshi-san's

charms.” There was a nervous edge to his voice even though he tried to laugh lightly, adding an unusual sharpness to the sound. He reached down to touch Kiyoshi’s hand and pulled away the instant his fingers grazed the cool flesh. Gods! What was this power, this sense of viciousness he’d felt? Ryuhei gasped and shook out his hand. “Please let him go, Kiyo-kun,” he whispered. “Please.”

* * *

From a distance, Carl Gavin watched in amazement as the plump actor crumpled to his knees. From the force of that Kiyoshi’s grip? But it hardly looked like his fingers were even closed on the other man’s wrist. And Nakamura’s reaction—it was strange the way he jerked away as if burned. Or was that *fear* the older actor had shown?

“What the hell is going on?” Carl whispered under his breath, now totally convinced the answer was going to be more than he’d ever considered.

* * *

Ryuhei finished one last pass on the floor with the rag and sat back on his heels, panting. He wiped at his forehead with the back of his hand and gave the stage a discriminating look. “Not too bad.” He sighed aloud. Especially for only one man’s work.

Before storming out with his suitcases in tow, Hoshi had left the theater practically in ruins. He’d kicked over props and spilled jars of paint and thinner all over the wooden stage. It was the same kind of treatment Ryuhei’s *haori* had received, and just thinking about the spoiled garment made Ryuhei’s temper flare all over again.

“Bitchy little brat,” he grumbled. As he straightened, his back spasmed and he winced. “Ow,” he whimpered, rubbing the sore muscles right at the base of his spine. Cleaning floors in the Japanese style—on hands and knees, racing along the wooden boards to give them a swift and even stroke with the rag—was fine when he’d been a young apprentice in Edo. It wasn’t such a good thing anymore.

Ryuhei stood, wanting a warm bath even if it meant trying to get into one of those cramped wooden tubs the westerners used. He longed for one of Kiyoshi’s long back rubs, the kind that worked out all the knots and stiffness from

Ryuhei's tired muscles. He'd always marveled at the strength in Kiyo-kun's slender hands and small shoulders, now he knew where the young man's strength came from.

"A *kyuuketsuki*," Ryuhei whispered. A *blood drinker*. When he thought about it, he noticed things about Kiyoshi in memories past that he'd never concerned himself about before. How Kiyo-kun had suffered from sun sickness on long journeys between cities if they traveled in the summer and without a covered coach. How Kiyo-kun's beauty had remained unchanged by time, something Ryuhei took as a blessing from the Gods. Little had he known.

But Ryuhei could never think of his Kiyo-kun as a demon, no matter what. Kiyoshi was a gentle soul, he never harmed anyone. And when he acted strange now it wasn't by his doing, but because of whatever dark urges boiled in his immortal blood thanks to that cruel assassin. Worried, Ryuhei looked around the empty theater and wondered where Kiyoshi had run off to now.

Working alone in the theater while Akira tried to bring Hoshi back and the theater managers visited theater patrons in an effort to undo the damage done by the horrible review, Ryuhei had been too distracted to notice when Kiyo-kun had slipped out. After what had happened out front, Kiyoshi had seemed ashamed and reserved though Ryuhei had assured him things were all right. No harm had been done. After all, Hoshi had still been able to take his luggage and storm out of the theater.

But Kiyoshi had avoided looking into Ryuhei's eyes, nodding half-heartedly at whatever was said in an effort to cheer him up. He'd offered only a weak smile when Ryuhei touched his chin and kissed his cheek, telling him that all would be fine.

"I've ruined the troupe." Kiyoshi had looked down at his sandaled feet again. "Hoshi will never come back and we don't have the money to hire the stagehands we need."

"But that's the good thing." Ryuhei chuckled despite the seriousness of the situation. "Just the thought of the bitch not returning is a dream come true." That had wrested a little laugh out of Kiyoshi, and he'd pulled out of Ryuhei's arms to rearrange the seats Hoshi had tossed about in his tantrum. Then Ryuhei had turned his attention to the other cleaning chores that needed to be done, his dull human senses missing his dearest's escape.

Ryuhei crossed the stage, still rubbing his lower back. Should he go searching for Kiyo-kun? There were still a few hours before the show tonight—if there was going to be one, that is—there was time.

* * *

Making use of the vampire sense he so often suppressed, Kiyoshi wandered the busy streets of San Francisco unnoticed, or barely noticed by those whose innate sense of perceptions were stronger than most. When darkness fell, Kiyoshi once again found himself within the boundaries of Chinatown in general and in the domain of the Poisoned Dragon specifically.

Kiyoshi sensed them long before they stepped into the sparse pool of yellow light from the streetlamp. The flame flickered, bathing them both in a wavering shadow. One tall and thin, the other a little shorter, trim but slightly broader in the chest and shoulders. Both had dark hair cut fashionably in the western way, the taller was Chinese from the look of him, the shorter Japanese. He was the one at the party, the Poisoned Dragon's lover, his partner in bringing death to those who opposed their tong.

Kiyoshi's attention swung back to the taller man, the Chinese, the Poisoned Dragon himself, and he shuddered. Oh, the man was incredible. They both were, actually. The perfect team, both consummate predators in their own right. Such deadly control they radiated, so many degrees of passion passed between them as they spoke in hushed tones and brushed against each other while approaching the restaurant. Kiyoshi knew from glimpsing their thoughts that the establishment fronted a gambling den run in competition to the Wongs. Too often, this young, rival clan had interfered in the older family's affairs and the two men had been sent to handle the situation.

Guards for the gambling den appeared from the darkness surrounding the restaurant. The Poisoned Dragon and his younger partner whipped out razor-sharp knives from their suit jackets and slit the men's throats without hesitation. Kiyoshi shivered as the power of the two assassins swept over him. They were magnificent in their savage beauty, their dark eyes narrowed, flashing with danger, their well-toned bodies moving with graceful stealth. They were glorious angels of death and Kiyoshi shuddered once more, reminded of the fierce master who had created him and Liu.

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

A bleeding man stumbled from the front of the building and ran in Kiyoshi's direction. The vampire seized him with blinding speed and dragged him to the shadows, tearing into the gash already at the base of his neck. The stark fear roused by the Dragon made the man's blood utterly *intoxicating*.

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

Kiyoshi closed his eyes again and savored the excitement churning through his veins. His body tingled, his hands trembled and his knees nearly gave out as he finally pulled himself to his feet a moment before the Dragon and his lover came out with a young woman in tow. Kiyoshi melted back into the shadows as they hurried past across the way and disappeared around a corner.

He wanted more. He craved more.

* * *

Gavin had wanted to spend the remainder of his afternoon poking around the offices of the Six Companies, the association of Chinese businessmen who'd played a part in bringing the Nakamura *kabuki* troupe to San Francisco. When he'd tried to ask Nishikawa some questions, the translator was more than a little perturbed at Carl for the scene at the theater patron's house. Carl had tried to explain it away as a misunderstanding. At least that hadn't been as embarrassing as the encounter in the restaurant afterwards—something Carl made certain *not* to mention to Nishikawa. Nonetheless, the translator was reluctant to share any more information on the troupe, save that he knew Akira Sounoichi had been a well-respected narrator for a *kabuki* theater in Edo while Ryuhei Nakamura was once the greatest of actors to grace the stage. But Nishikawa knew nothing about Kiyoshi Ishibe or the one who simply called himself Hoshi, and promptly told Gavin to look elsewhere for the information.

Though he would have liked to visit with the men from the Six Companies, Gavin found himself pulling a punishment detail courtesy of Albright for having used Nishikawa's synopsis of the play as his report and review while the other publications in the city wrote scathing articles lambasting the troupe for not following the prescribed script past the first few minutes of the play.

Well, he couldn't really complain. As far as punishments went, this could be far worse. He might have been sent home for a few days without pay, but instead was relegated to his editor's sister to clear out the room of a recently deceased boarder of hers. A British chap who was quite the bookworm and who had more tomes and periodicals than he had clothing or other possessions. As Gavin skimmed through one of these magazines, Mrs. McCleary excused herself to check on the dinner preparations in the kitchen.

Though many pages of the periodical seemed to have run afoul of a rodent, the remaining pages were more intact and the first full page caught Carl's eye. It was the opening of a story called *Carmilla*, a tepid melodramatic bit of stuff that no less pulled him in to turn page after page.

"I'll be *damned*," Carl whispered. He crossed the room, stubbing his toe on a box full of assorted dust-coated knick-knacks, but managed to hop his way over to the oil lamp on the cramped little desk. *Carmilla* was no ordinary frivolous tale. The author wrote of strange creatures that hunted in the night, draining the blood of their victims...something Carl found altogether too familiar.

Holding the article up to the lamplight and suppressing a chill, he reread the last section that had caught his attention:

He said that the patient was suffering from the visits of a vampire! The punctures which she described as having occurred near the throat, were, he insisted, the insertion of those two long, thin, and sharp teeth which, it is well-known, are peculiar to vampires; and there could be no doubt, he added, as to the well-defined presence of the small livid mark which all concurred in describing as that induced by the demon's lips...

The first dead body Gavin had found had had strange marks on his neck just like the ones described in this tale. Last night's victim had been too brutalized to notice any such damage, but Gavin had the gut feeling he would've seen them there as well. And the actor—Nakamura—didn't he have strange marks too?

Obviously Nakamura was as alive as he himself, but...

But it will, in these cases, husband and protract its murderous enjoyment with the refinement of an epicure, and heighten it by the gradual approaches of an artful courtship. In these cases it seems to yearn for something like sympathy and consent. In ordinary ones it goes direct to its object, overpowers with violence, and strangles and exhausts often at a single feast.

"And there's one thing—one *person*—tying them all together." He rubbed his

forehead as he rolled the magazine up. “Kiyoshi Ishibe.” Nakamura’s admitted lover.

“Mr. Gavin, I don’t hear those boxes bein’ moved out and it’s almost dinnertime,” Mrs. McCleary called up the staircase. “Don’t expect me to feed you if you’re going to take all night about things.”

“Eh, just a moment,” he shouted back. At the rate things were going, it would take him all night to finish up this room. Mrs. McCleary’s boarder had been one of the worst packrats Carl had ever seen, and that was saying something, considering all the odd trinkets and newspaper clippings he kept himself.

He moved to the window, shoving it open and testing the lattice that clung to the side of the building. Cleaning house would have to wait. The night only lasted a few hours and this was a large city. If he wanted to find this supernatural hunter—this demon—there was no time to lose.

Chapter Sixteen

Kiyoshi trailed the carriage, darting past the people walking the streets and alleys of Chinatown. He was fully aware of their stares but paid no heed, for he was too beside himself to concentrate on cloaking his presence from their senses. “Out of my way,” he spat in Japanese, bumping aside one particularly slow-moving man.

“What the—Hey! Hey!”

Growling, Kiyoshi shook off the man’s attempt to grab the wide sleeve of his *haori*. He was losing the Poisoned Dragon’s scent.

“Mr. Ishibe!”

The man’s familiar voice froze Kiyoshi. The reporter. Gavin.

“Hey now, what’s got you in a tizzy? You all right there, Mr. Ishibe? You look a bit peaked. You having a cold sweat? Maybe you’re coming down with something serious.”

Kiyoshi jerked back when the reporter attempted to touch his forehead. “I’m fine,” he said, averting his gaze. “I’m in a hurry that’s all. I’m late for the performance. Excuse me. Please.”

“I’ll walk with you then. I need to do a new review—”

“No,” Kiyoshi shouted, pushing out with both his voice and mind. “You’ll only slow me down.” With that he dashed into the nearest alley.

“Wait.” The reporter stood on the pavement, stunned. He shook out his arms and head to rid himself of that strange stab of pain in his temple, then ran after Kiyoshi. “Wait!”

The alleyway wrapped around a row of three-story buildings and Carl lost sight of the street behind him. There were almost no windows facing into the alley, so hardly any lamp or candlelight spilled into the shadow-filled lane. He pressed on, squinting into the dark, murky corners for any sign of movement.

“Mr. Ishibe,” Carl shouted. The cry echoed in the empty alleyway. “Nakamura was lying, wasn’t he? That was your fan stained with blood—the blood of your victim.”

Kiyoshi’s sensitive hearing picked up the reporter’s accusation and he froze. The fool. He had nothing to do with any death, certainly not with the fan. It was the Poisoned Dragon’s doing but it was putting him, more importantly, it was possibly placing Ryuhei at risk as well.

He had to get back to the theater, to make it seem as if nothing was amiss.

* * *

Ryuhei leaned out the doorway in the back of the theater and held a candle to shed some light in the dark alleyway. Two stray dogs with splotched coats trotted past, sniffing around for scraps of food. At the end of the lane, two men were boarding up the windows at the laundry with wooden slats that fell into place with forlorn-sounding bangs. But no sign of Kiyo-kun.

He stepped down and into the alley. Some of these shadows were very dark after all. Too dark for a single candle to penetrate from far away, even. Maybe Kiyoshi lingered there, enjoying the darkness and night air. All the old stories Ryuhei had heard told of how *kyuuketsuki* were fond of shadows and the night, among other things...

“Like human blood,” he whispered to himself, kicking at a program from last night’s performance that someone had discarded. “Maybe it does go down like *sake*. Who could resist drinking blood then?”

His breath caught when he heard the unmistakable sound of wooden *geta* sandals clacking along the ground as someone hurried into the alley.

Kiyo-kun.

Ryuhei wasn’t sure if he should be relieved or frightened, for his lover’s face was taut with strain and his eyes were wild and fairly glowing red in the darkness.

Kiyoshi stopped abruptly in front of Ryuhei, his eyes even more frightening up close. “That fucking reporter was following me. He accused me of that murder, the man who had the fan stuck in his eye.”

Startled by the barely controlled rage in Kiyoshi’s sharp tone, Ryuhei took a half-step back. “No,” he gasped out, his fear melting into worry. “But after what I said today in the restaurant, I thought he’d stay away for a good while.”

Kiyoshi turned to look over his shoulder at the way he'd come up. "He should keep to his own business, the old fuck."

Ryuhei frowned and looked around the empty alley to make sure it still was empty. "Please, Kiyō-kun, keep your voice down," he whispered, blowing out the candle. In the almost complete darkness, Kiyoshi's eyes glowed like two smoldering embers. "What if that man followed you here?"

He started to ask where Kiyoshi had been that the reporter had found him, but thought better of it and bit down on his lower lip. He reached out with his free hand and gently squeezed Kiyoshi's shoulder. "Come inside and if he looks for you at the theater I'll say you've been out all evening."

Kiyoshi hurried inside, forgetting to kick off his sandals until he was halfway to the stairs. He stopped, turned and kicked them off so violently one almost caught Ryuhei in the head. Instead, it struck the wall above his shoulder, leaving a gash in the plaster.

Ryuhei trembled, his hand raised to his throat. "Kiyō-kun, please. Try and remain calm. That man will not bother you here. I won't allow it."

"You can't stop it," he snapped, hurrying up the stairs.

Ryuhei followed, hesitating at the bedroom door that stood ajar, one hinge bent from the force with which Kiyoshi had pulled it open.

Ryuhei closed the door as best he could and leaned back against it. "Kiyoshi. What happened this evening? Where were you?"

Kiyoshi spun and glared. Ryu swallowed hard.

"I was out. I took a walk. That's all I did."

Ryuhei closed his eyes a moment and licked his parched lips. He saw the faint stain of red on his lover's mouth, a few telltale spots of dried blood on the black fabric of his *kimono*. "Please don't lie to me. I deserve that much respect."

"What are you trying to insinuate?" Kiyoshi was suddenly right in front of Ryuhei. He'd crossed the distance with such speed Ryuhei's mortal eyes had never even registered the movement. "You're no better than that fucking reporter."

"Kiyō-kun, you're not thinking clearly. The things you're saying, that tone..." Ryuhei exhaled slowly, trying to keep his voice even.

"You're the one talking stupid. I don't have to explain anything to you," Kiyoshi snarled. He actually bared his fangs at Ryuhei, the sharp tips glinting in the light from the lantern hanging above the doorway.

But instead of feeling fear, Ryuhei's pulse quickened with anger. "How can you

say that to me?" He stood straight. "To protect you, I *lied* and put myself—my honor—at stake. And I worry for you." Ryuhei frowned and stepped forward, no longer intimidated by Kiyoshi's rage or the dangerous light flickering in his eyes. "You can read thoughts, my ass. Do you know how scared I am that this assassin's blood is driving you mad? That one day I'll never see you again, either because you've left me or because you've been killed by the Gods know what?" Ryuhei's voice trembled with anger. "I don't want any more lies, Kiyoshi. The worst one being that you say you love me, when everything you've been doing proves you don't."

Kiyoshi snarled again, wanting very much to—rip through Ryuhei's throat. *This assassin's blood is driving you mad.*

It was driving him mad. It was making him think things, do things, feel things he hadn't in how many centuries? Not since the very first killing spree with Kuro and Liu. Kiyoshi held up his hands, and staggered back until he bumped into a lacquered chest. "I don't want to be this way. I don't like it, but I can't stop it."

"I'll help you. Tell me what to do."

"I don't know." Kiyoshi shook his head. "I don't know."

Ryuhei moved into the room, dropping his unlit candle to the floor. "There has to be something," he insisted, his face drawn with concern. "Whatever it is, please tell me."

"I don't know," Kiyoshi cried out in frustration, almost on the verge of tears. He wrapped his arms around his waist and doubled over. "Ryu-san, you don't know what it feels like inside me...how it hurts..."

Ryuhei took Kiyoshi by the shoulders. "It's in the blood, yes?" Cupping Kiyoshi's chin between his thumb and forefinger, Ryuhei gently encouraged him to look up. "If the Dragon's blood does this to you, could someone else's help calm you?"

"I don't know," Kiyoshi mumbled, closing his eyes, trying his best to draw in the quiet strength of his lover. He opened his eyes, feeling the sting of guilty tears. "I don't dare ask such a thing. It's too dangerous, especially now..."

"Then you think it would help."

"Perhaps." Kiyoshi closed his eyes again when Ryuhei reached up to open the collar of his *kimono* to expose the now faint marks from last night. "It's too dangerous," he whispered. "I care too much to put you in danger."

And yet Kiyoshi found himself pressing close against his mortal lover. He ran his fingers through the silky strands of Ryu's hair and drew him in for a kiss. He trailed his kiss down from Ryuhei's lips to brush his cheek before kissing his neck with a feathery gentleness.

"I'll be all right," Ryuhei said softly. He dropped his hands to Kiyoshi's waist and held him close. "Please, Kiyo-kun. Drink."

Kiyoshi trembled, as much from fear as from the desire for the taste of blood. He kissed Ryu's neck again, stroking his tongue languidly back and forth across the bruises that remained. "Just a taste, I promise. Just a calming taste."

Smiling as he nuzzled his cheek against Kiyoshi's hair, Ryuhei closed his eyes. "Just a taste then," Ryuhei whispered. But from the love radiating from Ryu, Kiyoshi knew this man would give all his blood without any protest at all. Ryuhei tilted his head to the side, exposing his neck invitingly.

"A taste. A tiny taste." Kiyoshi's fangs extended and he pierced the soft flesh of Ryuhei's neck once again, drawing in a mouthful of the hot blood, allowing it to settle in his mouth and slowly trickle down his throat. It did calm him, the warmth of Ryuhei's love tamping down the madness that lingered in the blood of the man the Dragon had scared from that gambling den.

He wanted to suckle his lover more but stopped himself and flicked his tongue across the wound to help it heal. He hugged Ryuhei close. "Thank you. Thank you."

"Anything for you, my love," Ryuhei said as he rubbed his hands over Kiyoshi's back.

Kiyoshi tilted his face up and lightly kissed Ryuhei on the mouth before returning to lap at the two small puncture wounds. With a soft, satisfied sigh, Ryuhei leaned into the embrace. A growing bulge at the front of his *kimono* pressed against Kiyoshi's hip, as Ryuhei's cock swelled.

Groaning, Ryuhei slipped out of the embrace and rubbed a hand over the erection beneath the silk cloth. "Kiyo-kun," he whispered shakily. "If you don't want more blood..."

Without a word, Kiyoshi dropped to his knees and made quick work of his lover's carefully knotted loincloth. Taking only enough time to plant a glancing kiss on Ryu's abdomen above the tangle of black curls, Kiyoshi sucked in Ryuhei's cock, settling quickly into a gentle, persistent rhythm. Ryu's passion heated his blood and seeped into Kiyoshi's consciousness, making him want more than just to bring Ryuhei pleasure.

He pulled away, tugged off his *kimono* and knelt on all fours. “Fuck me, Ryuhei. I need you to.” He lowered his forehead to the floor, his discarded garment a makeshift pillow. He was only half-aware of Ryuhei opening the drawer of the wooden chest to search for the container of oil he kept there. The instant he felt Ryu’s slick cock poised at his entrance, he pushed back, groaning as Ryuhei met his backward thrust with a forward one, stabbing him completely.

Ryuhei took Kiyoshi hard, gripped his shoulders, kissed his back and licked a path along his neck while continuing to pound into his willing body. The sensations exploding through Kiyoshi overpowered the chaos of the Poisoned Dragon’s influence. His mind focused only on the feel of Ryu playfully nipping his shoulder as his mortal lover came in a hot spurt.

Arching his back under the pleasurable sensation, Kiyoshi pressed up against Ryuhei’s heaving body. He moaned, enjoying the fullness of the cock nestled so deeply within him, the heat of Ryuhei’s breath on his shoulder, the pressure of his lover’s torso pushing down on his. The bite on his shoulder tingled with delight and he moaned again before realizing why it felt so good.

Ryuhei was sucking at the spot, his tongue sliding back and forth across the flesh. Kiyoshi knew what he was trying to do—draw blood.

“Don’t!” Kiyoshi scuttled forward, away from Ryuhei. He turned and pressed back against the lacquered chest, the wood cold and harsh against his hot, naked skin. He rubbed his hand over his shoulder and exhaled in relief when his fingers felt only two crescent-shaped indentations. Ryuhei’s bite hadn’t been able to draw blood or even break the skin.

Breathing heavily, Ryuhei sat back on his heels and shrugged out of his sweat-soaked *kimono*. “I’m sorry,” the actor panted. “I thought...I felt...” He swallowed and said nothing more, but crawled forward until he knelt before Kiyoshi.

Ryuhei gently pushed on Kiyoshi’s knees, coaxing them to part. He leaned in and brushed his lips over the head of Kiyoshi’s cock before dipping down to lap at the creamy wetness trickling out of Kiyoshi’s tender opening and below to the heavy sac.

“Oh, Ryuhei...” Kiyoshi’s words dissolved into a sigh and he leaned back, allowing Ryu to do as he pleased for as long as he pleased.

Outside in the hallway, footsteps came to a stop at the dressing room. From the faint but nonetheless pungent smell of tobacco that wafted in through the bottom of the door, Kiyoshi knew it was Akira before the man knocked and called out, “Ryu-san?”

“Oh, let him knock.” Ryuhei winked and stretched out between Kiyoshi’s legs,

resting his head on top of Kiyoshi's upper thigh. "The prick didn't even stay to help me clean up his cow's mess. If we stay quiet, he'll wander away."

Kiyoshi ran his fingers through Ryuhei's hair, but stared at the door. Akira lingered in the doorway, waiting. A few moments passed and he knocked again. "Ryuhei—it's the American reporter. He has more questions about Kiyokun."

Ryuhei had started to doze on Kiyoshi's lap, but instantly his eyes opened and he sat up in alarm. "Why won't that man leave us in peace?" Ryuhei huffed, but his pulse had skipped a beat. Kiyoshi's sensitive ears picked up the change in the rhythm and he knew his lover was afraid.

"I'll set him straight once and for all." Ryuhei stood, gathering a *yukata* from the chest behind Kiyoshi.

Kiyoshi rose to his knees, his fingers grasping the material of Ryuhei's robe. "He's here because of me. He saw me a while ago—I—I was trying to follow them. The Dragon and his lover. They raided a rival tong's gambling house..." His hands fell to his sides and he lowered his head in shame. "I'm sorry."

The actor sighed heavily, but not with surprise.

Ryuhei's grief washed over Kiyoshi, forcing his shoulders to wilt under the burden of his own shame now coupled with Ryu-san's.

"Oh, Kiyokun." Anger would've been far easier to endure than the disappointment in Ryuhei's voice.

Kiyoshi recalled his friend Gobei's words and repeated them mournfully. "I should've been more careful. This is all my fault."

Ryuhei clicked his tongue and took both sides of Kiyoshi's face in his hands.

"Gavin is the one with too much curiosity for anyone to have peace around here." He offered Kiyoshi a small smile. "He doesn't really know anything or the police would be here, I imagine. I think he's just smitten with you," Ryuhei teased.

Kiyoshi tried to smile but even that feeble attempt was interrupted by the sound of the reporter's voice ringing out in the corridor over Akira's protestations. Grabbing a robe for himself, Kiyoshi followed Ryuhei to the door. "Mr. Gavin, I must insist that you leave us alone. We are trying to get ready for a performance," Ryu shouted.

"But I need to speak with you." His gaze darted to Kiyoshi. "Alone. It's a matter of life or death."

Ryuhei laughed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Is it now? And how exactly is that?"

Again the reporter's accusing gaze swung to Kiyoshi, who stood leaning against the doorframe as Gavin motioned for Ryuhei to come closer. Kiyoshi pretended to be occupied with a silk painting on the far wall as he listened to the hushed voices.

"You have to listen, Mr. Nakamura. Please. You have no idea what you're dealing with."

Ryuhei laughed flippantly, but Kiyoshi knew his lover well enough to sense the well-masked nervousness behind it. "Oh, I know *exactly* what I'm dealing with," Ryuhei said loudly and waved his hand through the air. "But I don't have time to deal with these kinds of infatuations anymore. It's flattering really that you think being apart from me is a matter of life and death, but let's not pretend, Gavin-san. Nothing could ever last between us."

Akira buried his face in his hands. "Ryuhei," he groaned. The reporter's cheeks turned a cherry red, but as embarrassed as he was, he didn't leave.

"That's not what I'm trying to tell you," Gavin muttered, casting more suspicious looks at Kiyoshi, though the way he held his body he was clearly more self-conscious than before. Though obviously uncomfortable about doing so, he stepped closer to Ryuhei and whispered again. "Mr. Nakamura, I-I know how you think you feel about him." Kiyoshi could hear each word no matter how quietly the reporter spoke. "But I have reason to think this is a terrible lie you've allowed yourself to believe, and it's *your* life that could be in danger."

Ryuhei laughed. "Oh, Gavin-san, surely you must be turning to writing tales of fantastic fiction and no longer reporting the news."

The silence took Kiyoshi by surprise and he glanced over to see the reporter's eyes grow wide.

"Yes," Gavin said excitedly. "That will convince you." He grabbed Ryuhei's arm and leaned in close. "Please meet me after your performance. I'll be at the Lotus House around the corner. Please come. Alone."

Gavin sprinted for the stairs and Kiyoshi took a few steps forward, wondering how Ryuhei would answer Akira's very curious expression.

"As if I don't have better things to do after a performance than entertain his silly fascinations." Ryuhei lifted his hand to his throat and laughed. "Really."

Akira looked unconvinced. "Right," he said, arching his eyebrows. "Hmm." He put his hands on his hips and stared down the staircase where Gavin had just fled.

"But at least he's gone for now," Ryuhei said with a relieved sigh once his

laughter dwindled. “We should probably get ready for tonight’s show.” He draped his arm around Kiyoshi’s shoulder and started to turn back into the room.

“Ryu-san, hold on.” Akira stopped him.

“Yes?”

“That reporter keeps wanting to see you alone. Isn’t that why he came to Ume-san’s house this morning? To see you? Well, aside from that business with the fan, that is.”

“Yes.” Ryuhei blinked as if indifferent, but Kiyoshi felt his lover’s muscles tense. “He’s such a nuisance, that man.”

“Maybe he does have something for you after all.” Akira rubbed his chin. “If you sleep with him, maybe he’ll write us a more favorable review. It could save our acting troupe.”

Kiyoshi nearly laughed when Ryuhei bristled.

“For your information, Akira, the day I stoop that low is the day I kiss that bitch Hoshi’s ass on the way down.”

* * *

Akira spent much of the next day looking for Hoshi and then cajoling the angry actor into returning to the theater. Kiyoshi was grateful to Akira for this, not only for the sake of the play, but because he felt badly for having caused the problems in the first place.

Although the tension was thick in the air, the small *kabuki* troupe got through their performance according to the planned script. The audience seemed well-pleased and two reporters came backstage to conduct interviews. Ryuhei let Akira and Hoshi hog the attention, and quickly ushered Kiyoshi upstairs.

“Are you going to meet Gavin?” Kiyoshi asked quietly as Ryuhei sat before the bamboo-framed mirror he’d brought from Japan and began to remove the layers of white makeup.

“It’s the only way to get him to stop this nonsense of his. I’ll listen and tell him he’s being a complete fool, that I’ve known you for years and know you intimately inside and out.”

Kiyoshi heaved a long sigh and came to stand behind his mortal lover. He draped his arms around Ryuhei’s shoulders and bent to rest his forehead against the back of the actor’s head. “These past few days I wonder if I even

know myself anymore.”

Ryuhei placed his hands over Kiyoshi's and leaned back. “Things will be better once we leave here for New York in a few weeks. All you have to do is keep yourself from thinking of that man. I'll help you. I'll stay by your side day and night if I have to.” He pulled away and shifted in his seat to look up at Kiyoshi. “I won't lose you to this assassin's darkness, Kiyoshi. I can't.”

“Can I come with you?” Kiyoshi asked.

Ryuhei brought Kiyoshi's hands to his lips as he frowned. “It's too dangerous, Kiyo-kun,” he said gently.

“I'll stay where he can't see me,” Kiyoshi argued. “In the shadows.”

“It's not the reporter who worries me.” Ryuhei released Kiyoshi's hands, wrapping his arms around Kiyoshi's slim waist. When he looked up into Kiyoshi's face, his eyes were full of concern. “You were following *that* man earlier. What if he's still nearby? With Gavin keeping me preoccupied, I won't know if...” His words trailed off.

“You can trust me,” Kiyoshi finished. Ryuhei lowered his head, but Kiyoshi crouched to meet his lover's gaze once more. “You're right. I can't even trust myself about this.” He held Ryuhei's hands in his. “I wish I could change things. I wish I could just be like everyone else again.”

“How did you...did you choose it?”

Kiyoshi pressed his fingertips to Ryu's lips. “I didn't ask for it, no. I'll tell you everything later. When you get back. If you're worried, you can walk me to the *Tien Hau* temple first. Gobei will make sure I stay there until you come for me.”

Ryuhei shook his head and brushed his lips across Kiyoshi's. “No, you wait here. I know you'll be here when I get back. I promise not to take long.”

“I love you, Ryuhei. Always.”

“Always, Kiyo-kun.”

Chapter Seventeen

Shivering under his *kimono*, Ryuhei moved through the fog-shrouded street away from the temple where Kiyoshi insisted on waiting. The flesh-eater had met them in the *Tien Hau's* main hall and promptly latched on to Kiyoshi's sleeve, dragging him away into the chambers buried beneath the building. At least Kiyo-kun would be safe from the Dragon's influence this evening, without a doubt. Gobei would not have it otherwise.

But seeing Kiyoshi with the ghoul unnerved Ryuhei somewhat. Watching the two of them retreat into the temple's shadows reminded Ryuhei through association that Kiyoshi wasn't human. Perhaps Ryuhei's mortal love wouldn't be enough to help.

A light drizzle started to fall from the sky, adding an even more somber touch to the ambiance. Ryuhei quickened his pace, eager to get this meeting over with and return to Kiyo-kun. The Lotus House came into view through the misty streets, the round, gold paper lanterns hanging from the ledge of the pitched roof. Ryuhei darted into the restaurant and shook the moisture out of his jacket.

"Mr. Nakamura." Gavin beat the hostess to greeting Ryuhei before she even had a chance to approach. Standing at his table, the reporter gestured that Ryuhei should join him. "I'm so glad you came," Gavin said, craning his neck around Ryuhei's form to see if anyone else had entered the restaurant.

"Yes, and alone too," Ryuhei muttered, both irritated and nervous at once. He sipped a cup of ginseng the hostess brought to the table, hoping it would calm his stomach. He shifted in the backless chair, uncomfortable and wishing the Chinese served their meals on low tables, where cushions on the floor made for better seats.

"Good." Gavin nodded and waited for the old woman to leave them before continuing. "How well do you know Mr. Ishibe? Uh...*really* know him."

“Intimately, Gavin-san. Haven’t I made that clear to you?” Ryuhei stared as the reporter got red in the face and pulled at the tight collar of his shirt. Wanting to end this inquisition as quickly as possible, Ryuhei leaned forward. “When you’ve fucked a man for eight years there isn’t much of anything you don’t know about him, am I making this clear enough for you?”

“Uh...” Coughing uncomfortably, Gavin looked down at the table, away from Ryuhei’s stare. His lips moved to form words, but only a scratchy little noise came out. All the while, his face turned a deeper shade of red making him look like one of those terrible, squishy tomato-things westerners used in their salads. “If that’s all then.” Ryuhei stood, smirking. “Good night.”

“Wait—” Gavin forced out. “Uh, okay, so you do, um, *know* him somewhat, but there’s something else he hasn’t told you. Mr. Nakamura—from what you’re saying, it sounds like he has you under some kind of...” He stopped in mid-sentence and ran his hands through his hair nervously. “Good Lord,” Gavin muttered. “Mr. Nakamura, Kiyoshi isn’t what you think. He’s not even a man. And I’m almost positive now he has you under his supernatural influence.”

Ryuhei’s sharp laugh drew notice of those around them and he moved to stand close to Gavin, whispering in his ear, “You, Gavin-san, are the one who’s under some delusional influence. I assure you that Kiyoshi-kun is every inch a man. I sucked his cock not an hour ago. I’ve sucked quite a few in my day actually and if sucking yours will stop this ridiculous escapade of yours to get my attention, then so be it. Let’s rent a room upstairs.”

Gavin nearly fell backwards right off his seat.

“No.” He flailed his arms and managed to grab the edge of the table to catch himself. The man’s face wasn’t just red—it was a deep, unhealthy, purplish hue. Scooting as far away from Ryuhei as he could without actually getting up from the chair, Gavin reached for one of the napkins on the table and wiped it across his creased forehead. Flustered and more embarrassed than any other person Ryuhei had seen in a long while, Gavin coughed and choked on his own breath. “No, no, no, no,” he insisted. “No. That’s just—I didn’t mean—*no*.”

If things were different, Ryuhei wouldn’t have been able to stop from laughing at Gavin’s discomfort. But the man’s persistence could mean any kind of danger to Kiyoshi-kun. “Leave us in peace.” Ryuhei sighed heavily. “The most unusual thing you might find about Kiyoshi is that he continues to stay with me as my lover when anyone else would have left me long ago.”

“He stays to take advantage of you and to use you...” The reporter’s voice trailed off as Ryuhei stiffened, both hands clenched into fists. “I-I didn’t mean no

offense, Mr. Nakamura. I mean, you're a fine figure of a man. No, I don't mean it like that." He exhaled a long breath and ran his hand through his sweat-dampened hair. "Wait. Here. Read this." He dug into his suit jacket and pulled out a folded booklet. "You'll see that I'm right."

Ryuhei waved it away. "I do not read the language very well, Gavin-san. I'm sorry."

"Please. I can get Mr. Nishikawa to read it to you."

"No." Ryuhei folded his arms inside the wide sleeves of his *haori*. "Now I must ask you to stop this foolish pursuit of yours. If you do not stop these wild accusations about Ishibe-san, then I will have no other option than to inform your employers and the police. Good night."

Nakamura turned on his heel and swept out of the restaurant. Carl stared after him, flabbergasted. He became aware of the other patrons' glares and decided to salvage as much of his pride as he could.

Dropping a few coins on the table to cover the actor's tea, Carl scooped up the magazine and his hat and made a fair dash for the exit. Outside, he caught a glimpse of Nakamura rounding the corner at the end of the street, holding his head up high as he walked through the light drizzle.

"Dammit, Mr. Nakamura." Carl sighed. The actor had done a fine job of embarrassing the daylights out of him, but Carl couldn't deny the sincerity behind the man's words. Ryuhei fancied he loved that little monster and wanted to protect him any way he could. But that misguided affection could prove fatal. It was a concern to Gavin now that the next body he discovered might be Nakamura's.

"That was quite a ruckus in there."

Carl put on his hat to shield his already wet head from getting more soaked with rainwater. He tucked the magazine away into his coat and turned to face the stranger who'd addressed him. It was the same old man he'd encountered in the back alleys after witnessing the red-eyed devil feasting on human flesh.

"You don't know enough to mind your own affairs?" The old man raised a bushy eyebrow.

"I guess I'm stubborn that way." Gavin sighed again.

"What do you hope to accomplish here?"

"There's something amiss here in Chinatown." Gavin clenched his jaw. "And I'm going to put a stop to it."

"Bah," the old man said, flinging his long gray queue behind his shoulder. "You

can't stop what's been around since before any of us. The only ones to stop it are the Gods. If they choose to listen."

Carl's hopes shot up. "You know all about this, don't you?" He pointed down the gloomy, dark street. "Back in the alley that evening, you knew exactly what it was I'd seen. This isn't a surprise or shock to you at all."

The old man frowned. "Take my advice and just leave things be."

"In good conscience, I can't. Neither can you, sir," Carl insisted. "I won't ask for much help at all, only that you tell me how to capture these *things*." The creature he'd seen in the alley was not Ishibe, though they were connected.

* * *

Oh, Gods. The man knew about Kiyokun. He knew, damn him, and he was a threat Ryuhei didn't know how to eliminate. Perhaps he should try and hire one of those tong men to dispose of Gavin. That would be the easiest solution, but could he do it? Yes. Yes, he could if it meant keeping his Kiyoshi safe and by his side.

A wagon clattered down the street and Ryuhei paused before the large window of a closed shop. He stared at his reflection, a nagging voice within his head telling him all the things he didn't want to hear.

But will he stay by your side? Can he control that urge of his to find that assassin? And even if he does, how much longer will he stay? Look at yourself. He's so young and always has been. Look at you. Old fool.

Ryuhei forced himself to press on with heavy footsteps. By the time he returned to the temple, the rainwater had worked its way into every silk fiber of his clothing. The cold crept right into his bones and he shivered something terrible as he passed through the tall red gate. Ryuhei stepped in through the front door which had been left unlocked.

An old monk was praying quietly by candlelight at the end of the main hall. Two sticks of incense burned in the brass holder before the monk, filling the temple with the fragrant scent of sandalwood. Ryuhei paused to take a few calming breaths, but nothing seemed to ease the trouble in his heart. Giving up, he continued down the hall and knelt in front of the trapdoor.

"Kiyoshi, I've come back," he said, almost listlessly, and knocked on the wooden surface. Another chill worked its way up his spine and he sneezed.

Gobei the flesh-eater opened the door and Kiyoshi rushed forward. "Ryu." He

pulled Ryuhei to his feet and swept him inside as effortlessly as if he were a child. "You're soaked through. Come here."

Kiyoshi ushered him to a small brazier across the room and began peeling away the sodden layers of clothing. Ryuhei shivered and continued to do so even after Kiyoshi placed a thick blanket around his shoulders.

"You should have gone back to the theater. It was so much closer, now you'll catch your death," Kiyoshi said, taking a cloth and drying the ends of Ryuhei's dripping hair. "Gobei, please get more wood for the fire and ask Denghui for some hot tea."

"Kiyoshi-sama—"

"I know," Kiyoshi snapped. "Tell him we'll leave as soon as the rain stops. I won't have Ryu-san getting ill. Surely he can understand that."

Grumbling all the way, the ghoul trudged up the steps and disappeared through the door. Kiyoshi continued drying the ends of Ryuhei's hair. "Some hot tea is all you need and you'll be fine." He kissed the top of his head and reached down to make sure the blanket was bundled tightly around Ryuhei.

"It doesn't matter," Ryu burst out. There were no tears in his eyes, at least. The cold had left him too numb for those. "Maybe I should just catch my death and be done with it. You can take Gobei back to Japan with you and be safe."

Ryuhei felt so small, so insignificant next to Kiyoshi. He would never be able to keep his Kiyo-kun safe from the reporter or the Dragon, nor would he be able to keep his promise to love Kiyoshi forever.

"Don't talk like that, Ryu-san," Kiyoshi implored as he lovingly stroked his fingers through Ryuhei's hair.

"I'm going to die anyway," Ryuhei whispered. Even if he could make Kiyoshi stay at his side, which was another empty hope. Ryuhei turned sad eyes to Kiyoshi. "Promise me one thing, Kiyoshi-kun. One last thing..."

"What, Ryu?"

"When I go...just make sure Gobei doesn't eat me. I don't want to leave an ugly, half-chewed-up body behind."

The actor slumped forward with a drawn-out sigh and Kiyoshi had to blink back a tear of laughter. He knelt and gathered Ryuhei into his arms, cradling him lovingly. "Oh, Ryu, you have many years to live and I'll be right there with you, I promise. And no, Gobei will not...he won't. I promise."

"This is a serious matter and you're laughing," Ryuhei accused with a pout.

"No, no—save your embrace for someone you aren't teasing horribly." But he

leaned back into Kiyoshi's arms for all his bluster, turning just a bit to the side and wrapping one blanketed arm around Kiyoshi's waist.

"That man was so unpleasant, the old bastard," Ryuhei mumbled into Kiyoshi's chest. "Gavin-san has nothing else better to do with his time than harass us. He needs a lover—or at least a good substitute for one—to keep him busy. *Ha!* Akira must have one of those wooden cocks he bought before we left Tokyo. Let's see what that reporter says if I present him with one of those."

"Oh, Ryu," Kiyoshi said, tilting Ryuhei's face up towards his. He dipped his head, capturing his lover's lips with his own and drawing in the calming influence of Ryuhei's love and concern for him. They were still locked in an embrace when Gobei returned, making certain to enter loudly enough to draw their attention away from one another.

"Denghui says we have until midnight, then we must go."

Kiyoshi nodded, his left hand continuing to brush through Ryuhei's wet hair. He pulled back to take the teapot and poured Ryu a cup.

"The monks said they need to perform a purifying ritual tonight," Kiyoshi explained. "They feel the need to cleanse this place and cast a protective spell over it in an effort to repel any unnatural forces. I can't be here after that and neither can Gobei. Please let him come to the theater with us. I promise you he'll stay in the cellars and won't be a problem." He cast a stern look to the ghoul who paced the far corner of the room and grumbled to himself.

Ryu grimaced, then sipped his tea. "If it's what you want, Kiyoshi-kun, so be it. Perhaps he can help you. You need to stay away from the streets at night, especially with that reporter nosing around."

Kiyoshi rested his head upon Ryuhei's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry I'm so weak. I'm sorry I'm not normal." He paused until the silence threatened to consume him. "I'm sorry I ever burdened you with a thing like me."

"*Bah!* Kiyo-kun, how can you say things like that?" Ryuhei scolded, placing his glass of tea on the bench beside him. He cupped Kiyoshi's chin in his hands, his fingers as warm and soft as his voice. "If you were normal, you would've had better sense than to put up with me all these years. All the stories I've heard of *kyuuketsuki* always leave out the part about their extraordinary patience."

Gobei interrupted with a burst of dry, crackly laughter. "Is that not so?"

Ryuhei shot the ghoul a dirty look before coaxing Kiyoshi down to sit beside him. "There's always someone in the audience who just can't keep quiet," he snorted, indignant. But he leaned in and placed a soft kiss on Kiyoshi's brow.

“Please don’t regret being with me.” Ryuhei frowned sadly. “You’ve given me so much happiness.” He looked away from Kiyoshi’s gaze. “I wish I’d given you at least a fraction of happiness in return.”

“You have, Ryu. You have.”

Their lips had barely touched when Gobei shrieked loud enough to rattle the teapot and cup. “Spare me your vile displays,” he cried, flailing his arms as he ran back and forth across the chamber.

Ryuhei let out a groan of disgust. “Of all the—” His voice failed him when Kiyoshi gave a violent jerk in his arms and doubled over. “Kiyō-kun?”

“We have to go. Gobei and I must get out of here. The monks have started their ritual. We’ll be all right once outside the temple boundary.”

“Yes, right away,” Ryuhei said. Rubbing his hand across Kiyoshi’s back, his brow creased with worry. “You’ve become so pale.” He gasped. “Why are the monks doing this?”

“Denghui had a vision tonight before you came.” Kiyoshi tried to stand, but his legs almost crumpled underneath him. Ryuhei was at his side right away, the blanket falling to the stone floor. Kiyoshi leaned against him gratefully. “He says the Gods are warning the temple of something, but what, he can’t say. Only that he needs to purify the grounds.”

“But why hurt you in the process?” Ryuhei asked.

“Ah, you know nothing. It’s not intentional.” Gobei grunted as his pacing grew more and more agitated. “Purified grounds or barriers are always dangerous—even deadly—to us *oni*.”

Kiyoshi gave Ryuhei a weak, sad smile. “That’s the nature of all demons.”

Ryuhei nodded. “Then it won’t be long before I start to feel the effects too, seeing as how I’ve been called a demon by quite a few pissed off stage managers.”

Kiyoshi smiled and clung to his mortal love. “Let’s go home.”

* * *

The next weeks were difficult to say the least. The Poisoned Dragon’s business for the Wongs brought him into the area more and more frequently, so much so that even the patrons in the theater whispered amongst themselves of the living demon’s murderous exploits.

No matter how softly the people whispered or how far away they sat, Kiyoshi heard their murmurings. On occasion, someone in the audience would bring with him a hint of the Dragon. Those nights it was especially hard for him to endure the length of the performance, his attention straying to the seats in search of the one who'd been in the Dragon's presence. As soon as the show ended, Kiyoshi raced to the private quarters upstairs in full costume to lock himself away from the temptation.

Chapter Eighteen

Days crawled by with painful slowness. Kiyoshi's heart became restless, his thirst insatiable. Yet he had no appetite for either food or blood.

"You have to eat something, Kiyō-kun." Ryuhei knelt by the futon one afternoon, gently rubbing Kiyoshi's back. They were in their room, Kiyoshi curled up on their bed facing the wall. Even the sun had become intolerable.

When he received no reply, Ryuhei made a worried noise somewhere between a choke and a sigh. "I saw Gobei downstairs before coming up to check on you. He told me he'd found...he found someone for you to drink from last night, but that you'd refused. When was the last time you've had anything at all in your belly?" The actor reached around Kiyoshi's side to take his hand. "Your fingers are cold as ice, Kiyō-kun," he fretted.

"What did you expect from a monster, Ryuhei?"

"You stop that right now. You stop feeling sorry for yourself."

Kiyoshi glanced back over his shoulder. "Feeling sorry?" He snorted his contempt and turned back to the wall.

Ryuhei grabbed Kiyoshi's shoulder, coaxed him onto his back and leaned down over him. "Yes. Feeling sorry for yourself. I've done it enough times to recognize it on sight."

Kiyoshi closed his eyes. "Leave me be. Leave me entirely. Please. For your own good."

"*You* are for my own good, Kiyoshi, don't ever doubt that." Ryuhei smoothed the hair back from his lover's face with gentle swipes of his fingers. "I love you, Kiyoshi. I would have been dead long ago if you hadn't given me something to live for." He leaned in for a soft kiss and smiled. "Let me help you. Drink from me. You said that my blood calmed you. Let it help you now."

Gentle and loving, the warmth of Ryuhei's touch helped push away the wicked

lust churning within Kiyoshi. Some of the unease plaguing his soul faded. He shook his head from side to side on the futon. "I'm just not hungry," Kiyoshi mumbled. Pressing a hand over his waist, Kiyoshi felt the annoyed flutters of his empty stomach. He sat up with an irritated groan.

"Some fresh air will help." Ryuhei gave a firm nod and stood to uncover the window over the futon.

Gold and brilliant sunlight burst into the room. It hurt Kiyoshi's eyes and the uncovered skin on his chest and back since he was naked from the waist up. Quickly, he wrapped himself in a blanket and went to the door.

Ryuhei followed him through the doorway, down the corridor to the door that led to a narrow, creaking staircase to the rear of the stage area. "You do need something. Look at yourself, Kiyo-kun."

Kiyoshi paused at the bottom step and peeked out from under the blanket. Ryuhei came up beside him and grabbed his shoulders.

"What?"

"Locking yourself away in a room all day, shying away from sunlight." Ryuhei frowned. "It's not healthy."

Up ahead, in the shadowy corners where the stage props and curtains were kept between scenes, someone muttered a curse about there being too many live rats under the stage and not enough dead ones. Gobei, dressed in a borrowed costume from the play, shuffled between the props.

"Gods," Ryuhei gasped out and squeezed Kiyoshi's shoulders. "You're turning into *him*."

The little flesh-eater shot Ryuhei a menacing look, then barged his way outside though the rear stage entrance.

"But I've always been like him—a demon, a feeder on mortals like you."

Ryuhei cupped Kiyoshi's face. "No, not always. You weren't always what you are now. You were a man once and you're still very much human. An *oni* can't love or be loved."

"I want to believe you," Kiyoshi whispered.

Ryuhei gazed into his eyes. "Hurting yourself is hurting me, *kimi*." He tugged on the collar of his *kimono*, took hold of Kiyoshi's hand and raised it to his neck.

"Let me help you. Please."

"Ryuhei..." Kiyoshi moved on pure instinct, his fingertips found the vein on his lover's neck. He stroked the pulsing skin and licked his lips, his mouth watering.

“Go on,” Ryuhei breathed, tilting his head invitingly.

Kiyoshi leaned in and gave a little gasp just before his lips touched Ryuhei’s flesh. Kisses replaced the soft strokes from his fingers on the vein, and in his mouth, the gums tickled as his fangs descended.

“I shouldn’t do this.” Kiyoshi hurried away from the bottom of the stairs, loathing the hunger pangs gnawing at his belly. “What if I can’t stop?” With that assassin skewing his ability to reason... He stopped trying to run away and leaned against a storage crate, his shoulders slumping in despair.

“So help me, Kiyo-kun—” Ryuhei appeared at Kiyoshi’s side again. “Drink from me before something happens.” His eyes were full of concern, his spirit troubled enough to make Kiyoshi’s heart ache. Ryuhei’s brow creased and he frowned. “You’re forcing me to do this.”

His hand darted into the crate and pulled out an old knife still in its sheath. “If I cut myself you’ll have to drink, even if it’s just to heal me.” He slipped off the wooden cover and to Kiyoshi’s surprise, pressed the tip to his neck.

“Fuck!” Ryuhei dropped the knife and rubbed at the tiny gash where he’d only broken the skin. “That hurt,” he whined.

A little bit of laughter escaped Kiyoshi after weeks of not making that cheerful sound. “Oh, Ryu-san.” The depth of love Ryuhei bore for him only made the blood smell sweeter still. Leaning close, he lapped at the small cut.

The sharp tips of his fangs grazed over his lover’s flesh. Giving a little gasp of surprise, Ryuhei shivered. “They’re so...hot,” he breathed, leaning his head back and leaving his throat completely exposed. “The warmth that should be in your fingers is in your...your...” The last syllable melted into a sultry moan.

Kiyoshi pressed down on the side of Ryuhei’s neck in an open-mouthed kiss. Sharper than any man-made needle, the fangs punctured the bare skin effortlessly. Kiyoshi pulled back. Thick, fat droplets of blood oozed out of both puncture wounds, the sweet scent enough to fill his head with a heady intoxication.

“My fangs,” Kiyoshi whispered in response to the other’s half-finished sentence. “All the heat from my body is there.” Surrendering to the need of his flesh, Kiyoshi dropped the blanket and pushed his lover against the wall, his hands tangling in the silk of Ryu’s jacket.

His lips gravitated to the bleeding. Pausing after every swallow to murmur his gratitude or kiss the bite, Kiyoshi suckled the blood. After weeks of being empty, his stomach growled lightly at such rich and sudden nourishment.

But the blood flow slowed all too quickly. Once again he pulled away, frightened he'd drained too much at once or that Ryuhei would faint. He pressed close and found what was causing the change.

"All of my blood is *there*." With his back still against the wall, Ryuhei shifted. The full length of his engorged cock pushed out from the part in his *yukata* and rubbed against Kiyoshi's hip. "Kiyo-kun," he moaned. "The more you drink, the harder I get."

"You know it's the same for me," Kiyoshi said quietly before leaning in to lick the wound on Ryuhei's neck. He forced himself away, letting one hand drift down to stroke Ryuhei's cock. The actor moaned and pressed back against the wall. Kiyoshi dropped gracefully to his knees and took the hard length into his mouth while his fingers teased and lightly tugged the heavy sac between Ryu's legs.

Ryuhei's breathing quickened as Kiyoshi set into a quick rhythm, mouth and tongue caressing, fingers exploring, tickling the cleft of Ryuhei's rear, pressing into his tight opening to stroke the sensitive places within.

"Oh Gods, Kiyo-kun."

Ryuhei dug his fingers into Kiyoshi's scalp as he climaxed in a series of shudders, his hot fluid coursing down Kiyoshi's throat, every bit as tempting as his blood had been. Kiyoshi gulped it down, pulling back to slowly lick the remnants away as Ryuhei continued to shiver and murmur his delight.

"At least do *that* in your *own* room," Hoshi growled from the top of the stairs. "Spare us, please."

Kiyoshi pulled back and turned away, his hand over his mouth, his body too aroused to retract his fangs quick enough to be unnoticeable.

"Hoshi, you *bitch*," Ryu shouted, folding the front of his *kimono* over himself.

"That wasn't the least bit necessary and you know it. What do you want?"

"That *gaijin* reporter is here again. He wants to speak with you, he says it's urgent."

Ryuhei made a disgusted sound, then laid his hand gently atop Kiyoshi's shoulder. "I'll get rid of him at once, Kiyo-kun. Why don't you wait for me in our room?"

"I'm going to stay here for a minute. I don't want Gavin to see me."

"All right. I'll be back before you know it."

Kiyoshi nodded but did not turn around, though he very much wanted to turn Ryuhei's feather-light kiss on the cheek into something more.

Kiyoshi sank to his knees on the wood plank floor as soon as he felt both Ryu and Hoshi's presence withdraw. He rested his forehead against a wooden crate and sighed. This was so difficult and that Gavin wasn't making things any easier.

"Kiyoshi-sama, are they gone?"

Kiyoshi glanced up to see Gobei peeking down at him. "Yes. What's wrong?"

"He's coming."

Kiyoshi's breath caught in his throat. Asking "who" was unnecessary. With Ryuhei far away at the front of the theater, Kiyoshi could sense the other's approach now. The air seemed to crackle with unseen energy, as when a storm rolls down from the mountains of Kyuushuu.

The Poisoned Dragon...so close.

"Him and his lover both." Gobei's face twisted into a sour expression.

Blood pumped through Kiyoshi's veins in such a rush he felt light-headed, disoriented. Slowly, he gathered himself up and clutched at the blanket wrapped around his body. Yes...the young one was with the Dragon, his essence sharp and radiating so much power and frustration.

"Eh! Where are you going?"

Kiyoshi made a gesture that the ghoul should be quiet. "They're hunting," he breathed. Oh, yes...the scent of their blood was laced with adrenalin, giving it a bitter edge like dry wine. Kiyoshi allowed that scent to call him forward.

"Kiyoshi-sama, wait." Gobei darted around him to block the side door leading into the alley. "The mortals have a play tonight, yes? Shouldn't you be getting ready?"

Following the lure of danger, the scent of predators, the sound of angry voices, Kiyoshi started towards the rear door.

"Kiyoshi, don't." Gobei tugged on the blanket. "Don't go."

Kiyoshi swatted him away like an annoying gnat. "I know what I'm doing."

The vampire peered into the alley, almost pitch black with the darkness of the night. The shadowy forms of five men moved as if in a dance. A brutal, savage choreography of violence both beautiful and frightening all at once. The scent of blood was heavy and thick in the alley, with flashes of steel knife blades catching in whatever sliver of moonlight pierced the black.

Three of the men fought for their lives. The other two reveled in taking it from them. The graceful and all-too-familiar killers moved as one, cutting down the others without pause, and the sight stirred Kiyoshi's soul in a way that

repulsed and excited him. He licked his lips, his gaze never leaving the assassins. Oh, they were *magnificent* up close.

He inhaled slowly, closed his eyes and savored their scent, his cock jutting up between his legs with varied degrees of hunger. So full of power they were. So full of passion that heated their blood and pumped it through their veins in a heady rush that reached out to him. He shivered at the thought of touching at least one of them, tasting him. His mouth watered, his canines extending like the claws of a cat.

The assassins prodded their victims with the toes of their boots. The last one groaned but it was obvious he hadn't long to live. The Dragon pulled his protégé to him and licked a spatter of blood from his cheek. He looked at the fallen victims and laughed. "I doubt the show on the stage will be this entertaining," he said as he led the way to the main street.

Slipping into the alley after the men left, Kiyoshi quickly drank what he could of the last man the Dragon's disciple had stabbed, rendering him quickly into Death's hands.

Kiyoshi's sensitive ears picked up the sound of Gobei trying to distract the perturbed Ryuhei inside the theater. "Kiyoshi, you'd better get in here. We need to dress for the performance."

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

Only tonight was different. Tonight was wonderful. Tonight he would feel those two *watching him*.

Tonight, the Poisoned Dragon and his protégé would be here in the theater.

Chapter Nineteen

“Akira and Hoshi will leave tomorrow as planned but you and I must leave San Francisco tonight. That Gavin is going to cause you a world of trouble. The man is positively possessed by finding this *Chinatown Demon* of his.” Ryuhei paused. “You are listening to me aren’t you, Kiyo-kun?”

Ryuhei’s words barely registered within Kiyoshi’s mind as they put on their makeup for the performance. The blood flavored by the Dragon and his lover rushed through Kiyoshi’s veins, roaring like a turbulent ocean in his ears.

“Of course I am, Ryu-san. You and I leave tonight.”

“Yes. The sooner we’re away from Gavin and that assassin the better.”

Nodding, Kiyoshi accepted Ryuhei’s kiss with a passion that never truly reached his heart.

They pulled apart, Ryuhei’s painted face still set in a worried frown. “Kiyo-kun...” he started, his fingers tightening on Kiyoshi’s shoulders.

“Yes, yes, I heard you the first time.” Kiyoshi again nodded mechanically, slipping out of the other’s hold with ease. He shrugged off his *yukata* and pulled on his costume for the first act, looking back towards the doorway and hoping for a glimpse of the stage and the audience where the Dragon surely awaited destiny. “We’ll leave...tonight...” Kiyoshi whispered.

“Thank the Gods.” Ryuhei exhaled in relief. He glanced down to tie an embroidered indigo sash around his waist. “The less time we waste here, the better. And a train ride is always nice, yes?”

Kiyoshi leaned against the doorway. He nodded, as if agreeing with Ryu, but didn’t really pay much attention. In fact, he was oblivious to the few stagehands scurrying back and forth across the narrow hallway outside to make final preparations for the show. His gaze was locked on a place beyond the thick, maroon curtains leading to the stage.

Ryuhei's heart sank to the pit of his stomach where it settled uncomfortably beside the small portion of rice shrimp dumplings he'd managed to down for lunch. "Is something wrong?" He pressed a hand against his queasy belly. The stillness in Kiyoshi's body, the total focus of concentration, was unsettling. "Is it that reporter?" Ryuhei asked quietly.

The vampire considered the question, his brow furrowed as if fighting to reign in his attention. Ryuhei followed the direction of Kiyoshi's gaze to the shadowed box on the left of the stage. "Kiyoshi?"

Kiyoshi turned away from the box and scanned the crowd briefly. "Yes," he said flatly, pointing to the reporter Gavin standing near the back. "He's here and he looks like he wants something."

"Fuck!" Ryuhei gave the ties at his waist a tug that was both nervous and angry. "With so many people in this damned city you'd think there would be someone else he could harass. Come away from there and close the door until the show starts."

Kiyoshi stood frozen to the spot, his silk-draped figure silhouetted in the doorway. Had he even heard Ryuhei speak, or was he just choosing to ignore the words?

Frowning, Ryuhei stepped away from the dressing table and reached for Kiyoshi's shoulder. "Kiyo-kun?"

Kiyoshi turned and pierced him with a ravenous stare.

Oh Gods. It was the look *that* man roused in him—that assassin. But surely he wasn't here. How could he be? No one that evil and insane could be a patron of the arts.

"I'm not afraid of that mortal," Kiyoshi breathed and a shiver made its way down Ryu's spine. "Or of any mortal, for that matter."

Ryuhei swallowed and lifted a hand to his throat, unable to meet the ferocity in Kiyoshi's eyes. A complete stranger's eyes couldn't have been any less familiar than those that belonged to his dear one. "Just be careful, Kiyo-kun," he relented.

A shadow flickered across the floor and when Ryuhei looked up, the doorway was empty. He let out the breath he hadn't even realized until now he'd been holding, while within his chest, his heart hammered away. He leaned on the doorframe for support and saw Kiyoshi up ahead, waiting just off stage.

"Well, I'm afraid," Ryuhei whispered.

“Of not being able to steal enough of the stage for your bloated ego?” Hoshi said as he stormed out of his dressing room, sneering when Ryuhei gave a start. “Just make sure you don’t fuck up tonight’s show seeing as how it’s the last one.”

“Hoshi,” Akira cautioned from the dressing-room doorway.

“Put your bitch back on his leash, Akira.” Ryuhei pushed past the other actors and made his way to the edge of the stage, waiting as the translator set up the play in both Chinese and English for the assembled patrons.

He turned to Kiyoshi, who appeared more beautiful than any natural woman. The hungry, angry look from before had turned wistful and it was obvious that Kiyo-kun was still distracted. So much so that it took a prod from Akira to get Kiyoshi to go out and begin the play.

Before Ryuhei’s eyes and the entire audience, Kiyoshi stumbled through the poem that opened the first act. He recited what verses he recalled with an airy sense of detachment, his gestures graceful but half-hearted. And always his head kept turning to scan the men and women seated at the foot of the stage and those in the shadowy balconies above.

Hoshi snorted and folded his arms across the front of his white monk’s costume. “I knew one of them at least would fuck up.”

Bristling, Ryuhei whipped around to defend his lover. Hoshi was the talentless hack in this troupe—an upstart who delivered his dialogue without the slightest trace of maturity or passion. The only reason they all tolerated him was for the money the troupe needed to survive. Tonight, none of that seemed to matter to Ryuhei anymore.

Before he could snap at Hoshi, Ryuhei was pulled back to the edge of the stage curtain by Akira. “What’s Kiyo-kun doing?” Akira hissed in Ryuhei’s ear. “He’s never been so amateurish.” He opened his eyes wide. “Did you get him drunk?” “Of course not,” Ryuhei snapped, pulling away. “He’s out of sorts, that’s all. He isn’t feeling well. We should cancel the performance.”

“Like hell we will,” Hoshi interrupted. He barged onto the stage and picked up the next part of Kiyoshi’s recitation.

To Ryuhei’s horror, Kiyo-kun let him and drifted off to the fringes of the stage, scanning the crowd again and again. And all the while Carl Gavin stood there, taking notes in the dim light and staring at Kiyoshi the way a predator stared at a bit of unknowing prey.

“Oh Gods.” Ryuhei covered his mouth with the back of his hand. Did Kiyo-kun

even realize...or care? Akira gave Ryuhei a look that was part exasperated, part concerned, and then went on stage to try and draw Kiyoshi back into the performance.

“He’s distracted.”

For the second time that night, Ryuhei was startled out of his thoughts by someone speaking almost in his ear. Jumping down from the scaffolding overhead, Gobei landed soundlessly on the floor beside Ryuhei. The ghoul gestured to the stage where Kiyoshi was once again turned to face one of the balconies, completely ignoring Hoshi’s monologue.

“His mind is somewhere not there.” Gobei shook his head and made frustrated grumbling noises.

“It’s that reporter,” Ryuhei cursed under his breath.

“No, no, you,” the flesh-eater growled, but his sharp tone only proved his concern for Kiyoshi. “It’s the Dragon.”

Ryuhei’s limbs went numb. “That terrible man wouldn’t be here. He can’t be here.”

“He is.” Gobei wrung his hands together and gnashed his teeth with a sharp clicking sound. “I saw him from up there,” the ghoul added, nodding up to the scaffolding.

On stage, Akira gave up trying to coax Kiyoshi into some of the play’s flirtatious dialogue. He gave Ryuhei a pleading look as if to say, “Fix this.”

Ryuhei made his entrance and plunged in, twisting the familiar words to smooth over the gaps, touching Kiyo-kun’s hand to garner his attention and coaxing him into picking up his part. Kiyoshi wanted to please Ryu-san, he truly did, and he tried as best he could, but the blood of the Poisoned Dragon’s lover was overflowing with turmoil. When the young man had made eye contact with him at one point, Kiyoshi effortlessly plucked a few of his thoughts.

He meant to kill his mentor tonight. Here in the theater, no less. The young man was determined, even driven, and though confident of his own deadly skills, he wondered if his heart could be held at bay long enough to do the deed.

Ryuhei stepped in front, blocking Kiyoshi’s view of the balcony. “Can’t I keep your heart for one more night, Kiyo-kun?” he whispered so neither the audience nor Akira and Hoshi could hear. He caressed Kiyoshi’s cheek, a small frown tugging at his lips. “Please.”

Waves of emotion washed over Kiyoshi, inflaming his already overactive senses.

The depth of Ryuhei Nakamura's love and concern coupled with the turbulent passions emanating from the Dragon's disciple above. He gasped and leaned into his lover's caress as his body responded to the rising lust within.

"Backstage...take me..." Kiyoshi breathed.

"We don't have time for this, Kiyo-kun."

"Of course we have time. Please don't deny me. Loving you calms me. I need this, Ryu. I do..."

Kiyoshi stared into Ryuhei's eyes, all the while pushing with the power of his mind, willing Ryuhei to do his bidding. Kiyoshi pulled away, delivered his lines to Akira, then turned back to Ryu.

Ryuhei breathed heavily, his back half-turned to the audience, his arousal obvious. A shadow deepened the front of his costume where his cock pushed up against the cloth. "Gods," he gasped softly as he crossed the distance to stand before Kiyoshi again. Desire flickered in his eyes, and Kiyoshi knew the man's soul was almost completely enraptured by the silent call.

"Whatever you want is yours." Ryuhei sighed, reaching out for Kiyoshi's waist with trembling fingers. He would take Kiyoshi away now—fuck the performance, the play—everything. Only Kiyoshi's need mattered. All of this was apparent from the heated, passionate look in Ryu's eyes.

But in the wings off to the end of the stage, something moved among the shadows and jarred Ryuhei out of the thrall. Dazed and blinking as if just waking from a strange dream, he squinted into the darkness. Kiyoshi whipped around.

The reporter.

Carl Gavin waited offstage, that tacky bowler hat and cheap suit unmistakable even in the poor lighting in the wings. The man wore a grim but determined expression as he watched Kiyoshi closely, a dark bundle of the Gods-know-what in his hands. Ryuhei clutched Kiyoshi tighter and pulled his lover away back to center stage.

"The play," Ryuhei stammered. "We have to finish it first."

"Yes, please." Hoshi moved beside them and held up a silk fan to hide his face, which was contorted with rage. "How nice of you to remember the performance before running off to fuck somewhere."

Kiyoshi fixed Hoshi with such a glare, the bitch actor shrank back. Ryuhei touched Kiyoshi's hand, diffusing Kiyoshi's anger. Less agitated, though still *hungry*, Kiyoshi was able to force himself back into his role as the female lead.

Carl Gavin viewed the strange goings-on with rapt interest. There was something not right with that Ishibe and now Carl was more certain than ever that the man was the demon responsible for the recent deaths. He was exactly like that vampire in the story.

No doubt about it—Ishibe had some kind of hold over Mr. Nakamura. Carl would never claim to be an expert on *kabuki* theater, but there was no denying the change in the actor's attentions. From the moment he went on stage, Nakamura had been steering Ishibe through almost every line, filling in spots where the other had left off in a distracted haze. Something—or someone—up in the balcony had Kiyoshi completely enthralled, and his performance was suffering.

But the moment Nakamura stepped between Ishibe and the view of the balcony, his whole demeanor changed. He ignored the rest of the stage, his gaze locked on Ishibe and...his, well, certain masculine attributes were obviously excited. Carl coughed nervously and made a point to look away from the front of Nakamura's costume.

His eyes fell on Ishibe once more. The young man was beautifully disguised as a woman, his soft, rounded cheeks glowed in the gas light as Nakamura pulled him back to the middle of the stage and away from the wings. Knowing what he knew now, it was difficult for Carl to believe that someone so innocent in appearance, so graceful in movement, could be...

"A monster," Carl whispered grimly. But even in *Carmilla*, that was the method used by these strange creatures to entice their prey. The old man Carl had spoken with in Chinatown only confirmed it. These *chiang shih*—vampires—could seduce a mortal and garner his or her loyalty while they gorged their unholy appetite for blood without remorse.

One of the other actors began singing a traditional Japanese song within the play and the audience applauded, cheerfully unaware of what lurked on stage. Nakamura kissed Ishibe briefly on the cheek before joining in the song, the gesture so full of affection that Carl's heart sank. He looked down at the bundle in his hands, unwrapped the black cloth from around the lacquered box and slipped his hand under the lid.

The charms inside weren't meant to kill, but to capture. Carl couldn't bring himself to do anything so drastic, but if he could just stop the vampire from taking any more lives and get the proof he needed to show the editor at the *Register* that creatures of the night did in fact exist...

“Damn,” Carl swore under his breath. Nakamura kept throwing wary glances in his direction and guiding Ishibe as far from this end of the stage as possible.

The performance drew to a close and Gavin fingered the paper charms he’d tucked into his pocket, watching as Nakamura kept taking steps to lead that monster Ishibe to the far side of the stage. There was no telling what the vampire had in mind to do to Nakamura once they were alone.

“Dammit, man, I’ll save you from yourself if it’s the last thing I do,” Carl muttered as he ducked behind the painted backdrop to get to the other side of the stage before the play concluded.

A few stagehands were running back and forth, among them the two theater managers. Carl darted around them, ducking under props and the heavy sandbags used to weigh down the pulleys on the curtain. One of the actors stormed through a part in the curtain, shouting in Japanese and broken English above the audience’s applause and the noise backstage.

“Oh no.” Carl recognized Hoshi even under the makeup. Before he could dodge the loud-mouthed brat, Hoshi blocked his path and started flailing about.

“Gavin-san, don’t tell me you saw this terrible performance tonight of all nights.” The rest of his words were a garble of poor English and what Carl was certain were Japanese profanities. The curtain flopped open as the crew moved a prop off stage and Carl caught a glimpse of Kiyoshi retreating into the far wing with Nakamura.

Ignoring the indignant shouts from the spurned actor, Carl rushed past Hoshi and raced for the far wing. He crashed into a stagehand and a box of empty oilcans clattered to the floor. “Sorry, sorry.” Carl turned away from the mess. Just up ahead, Ishibe had paused, distracted by the crash.

“Mr. Nakamura—*wait*.” Carl dashed forward, one of the paper charms in hand.

Chapter Twenty

“The fool wants to capture me like a fucking animal.”

A menacing growl rumbled in Kiyoshi's chest and Ryuhei let go of the grip he had on his vampire lover's hand. “I'll hold him off. You go to our rooms to get changed and wait for me there.”

Kiyoshi slipped away before the words had finished passing from Ryuhei's lips. He dashed upstairs with the speed of his kind, stripping away the layers of costume and makeup in mere blinks of an eye. But he didn't wait for Ryuhei. He hurried back out to the narrow corridor that led to the theater's upper tier.

Kiyoshi lingered in the shadows, lured by the scents of blood and passion, anger and longing that came from the two assassin lovers. So it was the younger one who'd survived. Kiyoshi shivered as the young man passed by so closely. Other mortals, tongue men by the look of them, followed and once they'd gone, Kiyoshi stepped through the balcony curtain. He touched a pale hand to his head as it swam from the bloodlust sweeping through him.

Oh, the scent of the Dragon's spilled blood was intoxicating, and his heart was still beating, barely. The assassin wasn't ready to let go of life just yet. Kiyoshi advanced, bent and lapped at the blood oozing from the dying man's abdomen. The moment the thick fluid touched his tongue, a jolt cut through Kiyoshi's body. Oh, the taste. It burned as it trickled down his throat, the tips of his fingers and toes—even his cock—tingling with the power of it. So enraptured were all of Kiyoshi's senses, he knew of nothing else but the blood on his tongue until it was too late.

The Dragon suddenly jerked forward, crying out with pain and fury. He caught Kiyoshi off-guard, grabbing his hair and jerking his head up.

Kiyoshi gasped in surprise, catching a glimpse of the assassin's wild eyes. Savage instinct alone controlled the man, his jaws clamping down over

Kiyoshi's exposed throat. The bite sawed through the flesh, blood gushing out of the wound. With another cry, the assassin fell back to the floor, spent. Kiyoshi pressed a hand to his bleeding neck and surrendered to his own instincts. He lunged for the man's throat to finish the Dragon off once and for all.

* * *

"Oh Gods," Ryuhei moaned, slumping back against the door when he saw the disarray of the empty room. Changing out of his stage costume as quickly as he could, Ryuhei grabbed the packed valise and hurried back downstairs only to be confronted once more by an agitated Gavin.

"Stop! Right there," Ryuhei bellowed, surprising himself by the strength and urgency he projected. He raised his arms on either side of him and barred Gavin from going up the stairs. The reporter skidded to a stop.

"Mr. Nakamura, get out of the way," he pleaded.

"Absolutely not."

"This is a matter of life or death, can't you see that?"

"I know it is," Ryuhei thundered, pulse pounding in his ears. Of course it was a matter of life and death, hadn't it always been? Kiyoshi was everything to Ryuhei—a companion, a lover—the very reason he'd found to keep waking each dismal morning after his disgraceful exile back home. Now this reporter had somehow learned of Kiyoshi's secret and thought himself some kind of protector or demon slayer—someone who could rid the world of a devil. Ryuhei choked.

"He's not a demon, no matter what you damn well think."

Gavin tried to push past. Ryuhei blocked his path again. "Stop this, Gavin-san."

"Mr. Nakamura, please. You don't understand—"

"I understand everything. You will not capture Kiyoshi. He is nothing that you imagine. Now leave us. We have a train to catch."

"But, Mr. Nakamura, he has you under some spell. You aren't thinking clearly."

"I am thinking *quite* clearly—" Ryuhei broke off when Gobei dropped down from the rafters above the stage. He waved his stubby arms through the air. Ryuhei jabbed a finger in Gobei's direction. "There. There's your demon."

Gavin spun, muttered an exclamation and rushed after the little flesh-eater who disappeared behind a packing crate.

Ryuhei dashed to the narrow stairs and went up to the balcony, calling Kiyoshi's name.

"Kiyoshi, where are you?"

No. Not Ryuhei. Not now. Kiyoshi gasped, blood spraying from his parted lips. The Dragon lay on the floor, still at last after a few more stubborn spasms. A crimson stain spread on the carpet underneath the body with all the blood Kiyoshi had not been able to drink. No one could endure such a loss of life-giving fluid.

Kiyoshi blinked wildly. Just now—had the Dragon flinched? It was a fluke. It had to be. The assassin couldn't survive. The Poisoned Dragon was dying.

Ryuhei called out again, closer this time. *"Come on, Kiyoshi. We must leave for the train depot, now."*

It was a fluke, Kiyoshi told himself again as he backed out of the curtained box and wiped his mouth, his hands. The wound on his throat was already healing. But the Dragon wasn't healing.

Kiyoshi had ensured the man's demise by drinking so much of his blood. It was over. Kiyoshi hadn't made this assassin the same as what he was. The Poisoned Dragon was dead.

His lungs burning for air, Carl Gavin raced after the little devil. The creature darted from shadow to shadow among the assorted props and ducked under stage ropes that tripped Carl's longer, clumsier legs. Though the devil had disproportionate limbs, it somehow managed to keep just two or three steps ahead of Carl, always out of reach.

With a hoarse cry, it dashed through a curtain on Carl's left and scurried across the stage. Carl launched himself forward, sliding on the waxed floor and finally managing to snag hold of the creature's costume.

"Got you," Carl gasped out.

"Let go. Let go, you stupid mortal." The devil whipped around with teeth bared, jerking back and forth so violently Carl could barely keep his grip.

"Christ!" It was the same gruesome face Carl had seen that fateful night in the alley weeks ago. He dropped the box he'd been holding and it clattered open. The paper sutras fluttered out and Carl snatched one of them up. Making sure the side with the painted Chinese writing faced the demon as he'd been instructed, he pressed the charm against its skin.

“Ahh!” the devil wailed and tried to pull away, its face contorted with pain. “Let go. Let go. Let go.”

“No.” Carl shook his head, though truthfully he felt almost sorry for the creature the way it was carrying on. “You’re the one who’s been terrorizing this town.”

“No, he hasn’t, my friend.”

Startled, Carl turned to face the man who’d spoken. It was an old monk, dressed in robes, a string of lacquered beads wrapped around his thin wrist knobbed with arthritis. The lines on his face deepened as he frowned sadly at Carl.

“Who are you?” Carl’s eyes widened.

“Please let him go, Mr. Gavin.”

Startled again that the old monk knew his name, Carl released the demon before he could think better of it. The creature’s wails stopped and it scurried around to hide behind the monk, muttering what sounded suspiciously like curses in Chinese.

“Thank you.” The monk bowed gratefully.

“But—” Carl stared, completely dumbfounded. “Isn’t that the demon that’s been killing in these parts?”

“Many creatures murder in these streets.” The monk sighed. “Not all of them being demons, as you say. Gobei and the other you sought, Kiyoshi, they are not the monsters you believe.”

“How do I know what you’re saying is true?” Carl asked bluntly, realizing it was a pointless question. Everything about the monk radiated a sense of pure honesty and goodness. There was no reason to doubt. “So, Mr. Ishibe...?”

The monk nodded. “He will be gone soon and no more trouble to you, Mr. Gavin.” Gobei peered around the monk, skewering Carl with a nasty glare. The monk laughed softly, though the sound was tired and heavy with whatever burden he bore. “Gobei, too, won’t be a bother.”

“Who are you?” Carl looked over at the monk.

“My name is Denghui. I’ve dealt with the many evils that cross between our worlds longer than you have, Mr. Gavin. And there’s more left yet.” Again, he gave that strange, weary smile.

“What’s going on?” Carl gathered the sutras and tucked them back into the box.

“Your part is done for now, my friend. But I’ll ask you for one thing—those charms.”

Carl held the box out to Denghui. "These? I got them from another man I met in town who was quite well learned in folklore. He said they would work on demons." He gave Gobei an apologetic, if not wary, look.

"Yes." Denghui nodded. "They're quite powerful, but maybe too much so." He took the box, opened it and dropped something inside that rattled around as he muttered a chanting prayer.

"They will work better now." He handed the box to Gobei, who was able to reach in and not be hurt by the charms anymore.

"I'll be damned," Carl murmured under his breath. The creature took one of the charms and whatever it was the monk had dropped in, then disappeared under the stage curtain.

"Will you write your story, Mr. Gavin?" Denghui asked.

"Not sure yet," Carl answered honestly. "It's not something I'm going to ever forget though. I think I need to keep investigating."

The monk turned away, heading back into the theater. "Then we may meet again if the Gods are merciful with me tonight. Goodbye, Mr. Gavin."

Carl nodded and stepped off the stage. When he looked behind him, Denghui was gone, though he could still hear the old man's slow, shuffling steps. He didn't want to give up so easily but knew he had no choice. This situation was in the monk's hands now.

"Other demons, eh?" Carl pondered as he left the theater, closing the door behind him. There was going to be another story to write soon enough. He was sure of it.

Chapter Twenty-One

“Kiyoshi.”

“I’m coming, Ryu-san.”

Ryuhei was racing from one balcony to another, ripping open the heavy drapes at each stop. Kiyoshi stepped out of the box and clutched the curtains shut behind him.

“I’m here,” he panted heavily as Ryuhei rushed up to grab his shoulders. The touch made Kiyoshi gasp, his senses ablaze from the intoxicating power of the blood. Ryuhei’s anxiety and passion hit him with the force of a powerful blow and he threw back his head, crying out in a mixture of pleasure and agony.

“Don’t...touch me.” Kiyoshi writhed out of Ryuhei’s grip, looking away from the man’s soulful brown eyes so full of confusion, worry and pain. How very mortal those eyes were. Laughter spilled from Kiyoshi’s lips, flecks of blood splattering on the back of his hand as he covered his mouth.

“We don’t have much time.” Ryuhei swallowed. “We have to go now.” He grabbed Kiyoshi’s sleeve. “Now. Please. Gobei won’t be able to distract Gavin-san for much longer.”

“As if I give a fuck,” Kiyoshi snarled. He flashed his bloody fangs and shoved past Ryuhei. “He’s been a bother far too long. It stops now.”

“Kiyokun. *No.*” Momentarily frozen, Ryuhei was torn between looking into the curtained box and following Kiyoshi—or rather the demon that looked so much like his Kiyoshi.

Whatever might be behind those drawn curtains, Ryuhei knew deep in his heart it couldn’t be good. The situation quickly becoming more and more desperate, he flew after Kiyoshi.

“*Stop,*” he shouted for the second time that night. He took the steps two at a

time, racing to catch up with Kiyoshi. “You can’t do this, this thing you have in mind.” All the moisture was gone from his mouth.

“Oh, really?” Kiyoshi froze at the bottom step, his fangs glinting wickedly as he sneered.

“He means well.” Ryuhei tried to swallow. “Gavin-san thinks he’s up against a monster.”

How Kiyoshi covered the distance to suddenly loom in front of Ryuhei was beyond his ability to comprehend. “What if he does face a monster?” The *kyuuketsuki* laughed.

“You’re mad,” Ryuhei whispered.

“Perhaps I’ve always been.”

Kiyoshi ran through the narrow corridors at the rear of the theater, Ryuhei close behind. A jumble of small crates blocked the way and Kiyoshi leapt. But he came crashing down when a dark shape darted out and tackled his ankles.

“Gobei,” Ryuhei cried out.

Kiyoshi growled like an animal, the little flesh-eater straddling his chest. Ryuhei ran up to them.

“The reporter is gone and Kiyoshi-sama is safe at last,” Gobei grunted as Kiyoshi thrashed about, clawing at something on his forehead.

“Oh Gods,” Ryuhei gasped. The ghoul had affixed some type of paper prayer charm to Kiyoshi’s head—with a small iron nail.

“Give me the one that fell—*hurry*.”

“What?”

“The sutra, fool. He’s strong. One isn’t enough.”

Hand shaking, Ryuhei picked up the paper charm from the floor and held it out to Gobei.

“Don’t hurt him,” he begged when the flesh-eater stuck the charm with the nail in the center of Kiyoshi’s chest. Kiyoshi gave a shuddering scream and collapsed back to the floor, his eyes rolling back into his head.

“You killed him.” Ryuhei covered his mouth with a shaking hand.

“No, Kiyoshi-sama is a powerful one. He’s only unconscious. That carriage is waiting. Throw this coat over him and let’s get him in it before he awakens.”

Ryuhei cradled Kiyoshi’s limp form in his arms. The front of the coat moved ever so slightly with each labored breath of air Kiyoshi managed to take in. “He feels so light—those things are hurting him.”

“Idiot.” Gobei clutched at the sides of his face and shook his head in dismay. “Would you rather have him tear at your throat?” he snapped, but without the usual amount of surliness.

The ghoul was just as strained by the goings-on though he tried to mask it. “Go, more tong men are coming with weapons that would kill both you and even the sleeping Kiyoshi-sama. *Go.*”

As Gobei retreated into the shadows, Ryuhei made his way through the darkened theater with Kiyoshi. He stopped to hide behind a tall wardrobe when the sounds of voices and footsteps drew near.

“We’ll take his head back to the elders.”

The grating voice was easy to recognize, though from Ryuhei’s hiding spot he never saw the man’s face. It was the same thug who’d accosted them in this very building for money all those weeks ago. Chao was his name, and once more he was accompanied by a number of other hatchet men.

“And the body?” one of the others asked.

“Fuck it as much as you like for all I care.” Chao snorted, though his voice had a bitter edge. Everyone laughed and soon they all passed by, heading in the direction of the balconies.

What...who...had been behind that curtain? Ryuhei chose not to dwell on it any longer. He slipped out through the back exit and cut around the alley to find the carriage waiting in front just as Gobei had said. Inside were the haphazardly packed cases he’d managed to slap together before the show, though it was the flesh-eater who must have remembered to pack them into the carriage when he summoned the driver.

Ryuhei whispered a quiet thank you to the strange but loyal demon and eased Kiyoshi into the cab. As he climbed inside, he called for the driver to begin moving as quickly as possible for the train depot. Throughout the entire ride, Ryuhei carried Kiyoshi’s unconscious form on his lap, gently running his hands through the sleeping man’s hair but not daring to remove the sliver of cold iron pinning the sutra to his lover’s brow.

* * *

Ignoring the curious stares and whispers of all he passed, Ryuhei carried Kiyoshi to the train, their tickets held in his fingers. “Ishibe-san injured himself at our theater performance,” he muttered to the conductor who escorted them

to their private compartment. Ryuhei laid Kiyoshi on one of the long seats, then took the seat opposite, watching with dread as the vampire began to stir.

Though his mouth was near dry, Ryuhei swallowed hard as a feral growl accompanied Kiyoshi's rousing. He was caught off guard by the slew of Japanese obscenities spewing from Kiyo-kun's lips. The *kyuuketsuki* pulled the iron nails free and flung them forward where they embedded themselves in the wall mere inches above Ryuhei's head.

"How dare you do that to me?"

Ryuhei pressed back against the seat, the wool wrapping on the cushion scratching at the back of his neck. "Gobei did it."

Kiyoshi hissed viciously, a wicked sound that made Ryuhei's heart leap into his throat. "That interfering little fuck," the *kyuuketsuki* spat as he tried to sit up, only to collapse back with another furious growl. Flecks of crimson light flashed in Kiyoshi's unblinking eyes, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he breathed the stuffy air in the compartment.

Fingers trembling, Ryuhei reached overhead to take the nails. The blood on the tips was still wet. "But I would've done it myself if I'd known how," he said quietly, his pulse wild with a mixture of fear and concern. "Something's wrong with you, Kiyo-kun."

Kiyoshi sucked in his breath as if rebuilding the strength sapped by the prayer charms. In an instant he was across the compartment, half on top of Ryuhei, pressing him back into the seat until the cushioning refused to give any more.

"So you think you could subdue me?" Kiyoshi laughed and plucked the nails from Ryuhei's hand. "You haven't the balls." With that he took one of the nails and trailed the sharp tip along the edge of Ryuhei's jaw, going back and forth, pressing in a little harder each time, his smirk growing wider as Ryuhei squirmed and clenched his jaw against the pain.

Kiyoshi laughed again and leaned in to suck at the blood. He shuddered and pulled back, his eyes wide, the angry redness gone, replaced with fear.

"Ryuhei..." He looked at the nails, dropped them and stroked his finger lightly over the wound he'd made. "I—I—" He fell back, missing the opposite seat and collapsing to the floor. He buried his head in his hands. "Oh Gods..."

Releasing the breath he'd been holding in one shuddering gasp, Ryuhei slid off the seat. He knelt on the compartment floor, one hand on the roughly woven carpet, the other pressed against the still bleeding cut on his chin.

Gods—he'd been so sure he was about to die, and then suddenly the demon became his beloved again.

“Kiyoshi,” he choked out, scrambling forward on hands and knees until he was wrapping his arms around the man’s shoulders. “What’s happening to you? You have a fever.” Kiyoshi’s skin nearly burned to the touch and Ryuhei shrank away.

“It’s his blood. The Dragon’s. I drank from him.”

Ryuhei licked his dry lips as he saw that crazed red fire dance within the depths of his precious Kiyoshi’s dark eyes. He was drunk on the assassin’s madness. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“Bed. Yes...” Kiyoshi sat up, his nostrils flaring as he inhaled deeply. “Have you any idea how good you smell, Ryuhei? It’s what first drew me to you, you know. The scent of you, of your blood, so full of emotion it made me lightheaded like *sake* used to when I was mortal.”

As he spoke, Kiyoshi leaned close. His breath was hot and damp on Ryuhei’s neck, sending a jolt between Ryuhei’s legs.

“The scent of my blood...” Ryuhei swallowed. The words terrified him even as they stirred up an erotic desire he felt powerless to resist. It had been the same way on stage early this evening.

He stood shakily, absently rubbing a hand across the bulge of his cock before reaching down to help Kiyoshi up. “*Sake* tastes finer, I’m sure.”

Kiyoshi rose only as far as his knees. He clamped his hands on either side of Ryuhei’s lean hips and looked up, his eyes smoldering in their intensity.

“Oh, no. You’re wrong.” He worked his hand into the side slit of Ryuhei’s *hakama*, leering when he felt skin through the opening of the *kimono* and not the customary loincloth.

His thumb brushed over the swollen head of Ryuhei’s cock, collecting the sticky droplet of wetness. He pulled his hand free, brought his thumb to his lips and flicked his tongue across it. “Give me what I want, Ryuhei. Make yourself come for me.”

Lightheaded, his rigid cock thrusting forward with desire, Ryuhei found himself stroking over the front of his *hakama*. The ties were coming undone in fingers that moved of their own clever accord, acting on the lust that tugged at his groin and danced in Kiyoshi’s glazed eyes.

“Better than *sake*...” Ryuhei formed the words with the same lazy slowness he used to rub his fingers through the tangles of thick, dark hair and the length of his pulsing sex below. Precum gathered in a heady bead at the tip of his cock. He dragged the flat of his thumbnail to gather it up, noticing only as an

afterthought that some of the blood from the cut on his jaw had dried on the nail. “Why does it feel like I’m drunk on rice wine too?” Ryuhei closed his eyes, dizzy. He offered his sticky-coated finger to Kiyoshi.

Kiyoshi moved enough to turn the latch on the compartment door then seized Ryuhei’s wrist. Eagerly he lapped up the blood-tinged semen, groaning as he savored the co-mingled tastes on his tongue. He dropped Ryuhei’s arm and settled back on his heels, his own erection tenting the silk of his *kimono*.

“Do it.”

The sensual command forced every muscle in Ryuhei’s body to tense, his back arching as he threw back his head in a shuddering gasp. No one he’d ever pleased had been able to touch him this way, his very being aching with the need to fulfill Kiyoshi’s desire.

Drawing his hand across his throbbing cock, the languid strokes were replaced with forceful, strong jerking motions. Ryuhei moaned as the first wave of arousal rocked his body, his organ pushing against his fingers as the blood rushed to his groin. With his climax approaching quickly, Ryuhei gripped Kiyoshi’s wrist and pried his hand from his hip.

Ryuhei spread his legs open and brought Kiyoshi’s hand to the curve of his backside, guiding it towards the opening sore with desire.

He cried out when Kiyoshi thrust three fingers inside at once, so unlike his usual gentle probing. Yet Ryuhei was powerless to feel anything other than a burning lust at the pounding invasion prodding the sensitive spot within.

Ryuhei’s knees nearly buckled when Kiyoshi used his free hand to grip the base of his cock. Kiyoshi jerked him forward to take the throbbing length deep into his throat as Ryuhei’s seed gushed out.

Ryuhei pitched forward, husky cries working up out of his throat. His hips undulated in a pounding rhythm, thrusting into Kiyoshi’s mouth one moment and then pushing back against the wriggling fingers thrusting deeper into his passage the next. His hands scrambled over the seat, clawing at the itchy cushion coverings as he tried to find a grip on anything he could use as leverage.

Suddenly he was thrown lengthwise along the seat, grunting as his bare and sore bottom slid across the cloth. The back of his head banged into the firm armrest and left him dazed and gasping, the small compartment swirling around him.

“So much better than *sake*.” Kiyoshi loomed over Ryuhei, capturing his lips with a greedy, demanding kiss. Ryuhei sampled his own salty, bitter essence

before Kiyoshi pulled away and grinned.

“But there’s still something even better to have.” His fangs were fully extended and stained with blood. Ryuhei felt a trickle of the hot wetness roll down from the side of his mouth and reached up to find his lower lip bleeding from two faint puncture wounds. Then Kiyoshi was gone.

“Come back,” Ryuhei cried out weakly. The train jerked forward as it started pulling out of the station and Ryuhei tumbled to the floor.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Striking his head a bit below the curtained window, Ryuhei's world turned to gray, then back to normal again before he could marshal the strength to stand. Somewhat disoriented, he redressed himself, then hurried out to the narrow corridor. He rushed from car to car but could find no sign of Kiyoshi. Ryuhei stumbled back to his own compartment, shaken and sick to his stomach, and prayed he was lost in some insane nightmare.

This couldn't be real. This couldn't be happening. Was it truly possible for that assassin's blood to make Kiyo-kun act like such a madman, afraid and gentle one moment, cruel and violent the next?

The compartment door slid open on its tarnished track with a hollow screech and the small enclosure filled with a flickering orange light. Ryuhei looked up from his hands clenched tightly on his lap and nodded mutely at the conductor before gathering himself. "Yes?"

"There's been some trouble in the third-class cars." The man pierced Ryuhei with a stern look from beneath thick gray brows. "There's been some violence, though no culprit has been found."

Ryuhei's heart sank. "That's terrible," he whispered. "What happened?"

"Not sure, seeing as how most in third class are the Chinamen heading inland for the railroad." The conductor heaved a curt yet weary sigh. "No one can understand what in damnation they're saying, but other passengers heard a scream."

"I heard nothing. Everything's fine here," Ryuhei said a little too quickly and perhaps too anxiously.

The conductor gave him a long look. "Yes, well, you speak English fine enough. I'd like for you to come help us sort out what's going on."

"I'm Japanese. Unfortunately, I couldn't help you with the Chinese language."

Ryuhei bowed his head in apology, muttering a prayer under his breath that this horrible man would just go.

“What about your companion?” the conductor persisted. To Ryuhei’s dismay, the man scanned the compartment, his frown deepening with apparent suspicion. “Where is he? Didn’t you say he was injured or ill?”

“Very ill.” Ryuhei pressed his lips together until he tasted fresh blood oozing from the puncture wounds. “He’s in the sleeping compartment.” As the conductor sucked in his breath to ask another question, Ryuhei stood and interrupted him. “He can’t be disturbed right now or his condition might worsen. He has a fever, a bad cough. It’s best he’s left alone to rest.”

The conductor’s eyes widened and he stepped back from Ryuhei, fear tightening the lines in his bearded face. “Yes, yes. Keep him from the rest of the passengers, please. I don’t want a damned epidemic to spread with all that’s going on besides.”

“He isn’t contagious,” Ryuhei insisted. “He ate something bad in San Francisco, that’s all.”

With a skeptical look and a few more curt words of warning, the conductor went on his way to visit with other passengers. Ryuhei stood in the open compartment’s doorway and waited until the light from conductor’s oil lamp brightened the far end of the car, then he slipped out in the opposite direction.

He resumed his search for Kiyokun, worry overcoming his weariness as he crossed over into the sleeping car. There was dread also; dread that the mysterious culprit of whatever violence had occurred was in fact Kiyoshi.

Most of the compartments were full of sleeping passengers at this hour. Their soft snores and drowsy noises were a steady drone in the backdrop along with the steady chugging of the train. Ryuhei checked each bunk, peeking in through the curtained edges to see who slept inside. The ones reserved for himself and Kiyokun were empty, which was no less than he expected. Burying his face in his hands, Ryuhei leaned back against the tall window at the end of the row of sleepers, sinking into a feeling of helplessness.

Something knocked against the glass with a dull thud. A few moments later, it knocked again. Ryuhei turned about and squinted to try and make out what could possibly be rapping against the side of a *moving* train. As he stared, a black object smacked into the glass again and vanished into the darkness too fast for Ryuhei to make out. He pushed up the pane and stuck his head out just enough to look up at the top of the train.

The rushing wind sucked away his cry.

The small body of an older man dangled from a chain that had been fastened to the roof of the car, swaying in the movement of the train. His feet knocked into the top of the window again and Ryuhei knew the man was dead.

“Oh Gods.” Ryuhei jumped back inside and fell against the window, his stomach heaving, his fear like a cold *katana* slicing through his heart. Kiyo-kun was responsible. He had to be.

“What’s going on?”

Ryuhei looked at the conductor. He couldn’t speak. All he could do was point to the opened window and back away.

He ran back to the main compartment, locked himself inside and fell onto one of the seats.

“What a weak little creature you are,” a voice laughed in the darkness from the seat across the way.

Ryuhei pushed away from the seat, away from that cold yet painfully familiar voice. Leaning forward now so that his face was gilded in the frosty moonlight from the compartment window, Kiyoshi licked his lips and grinned at his lover.

“Why, you’re shaking.” The *kyuuketsuki* chuckled softly.

“What have you done?” Ryuhei whimpered.

“I told you—I wanted something that tastes better than *sake*.”

“Kiyoshi, you *have* gone mad.” Ryuhei clutched the front of his *haori* to keep his hands from trembling so noticeably. “This is my fault. That man’s blood has poisoned you. I never should’ve insisted we go to San Francisco. We should have stayed in Japan—the way you wanted.” Fuck that *kabuki* troupe and his ego for not letting him walk away with Kiyoshi before things went so wrong.

“Oh, but I’m glad we came to America. Very glad.” Kiyoshi moved quickly, pinning Ryuhei to the seat as he’d done earlier. “Don’t fear me, Ryuhei. Have I ever hurt you?”

Ryuhei licked his dry lips, his lower lip still sore from Kiyo-kun’s earlier bite.

“But you’ve never been like this. I never knew you were...different before.”

“I’m different, but I’m still a man,” Kiyoshi said before leaning in to lick the side of Ryuhei’s neck, his hips thrusting forward, his rock-hard erection touching Ryuhei’s thigh. “A man who wants you more than ever.”

Ryuhei moaned against the famished lips that pressed into his own. As spent and weakened as he was, his body was aroused once more by the need he could taste in Kiyoshi, along with the faint hint of blood. Ryuhei’s cock stiffened against the inside of his lover’s thigh and he nearly lost himself in the sexual

urges coursing through him.

“No...” With more than a little effort, he broke off the kiss and tried to pull himself up the seat and out from underneath Kiyoshi. “You might be a man, but not the one I love.”

With a mere tug he was back beneath the vampire and staring up into eyes so familiar yet full of a fire he could not understand.

“Look at me, Ryuhei. I am Kiyoshi. I’m the Kiyoshi you never wanted to acknowledge. The Kiyoshi I tried to suppress for too long.”

A chilling fog crept into his brain and Ryuhei could only stare and feel.

Oh Gods, how he felt Kiyoshi’s desire burning through the layers of silk separating them. He squirmed and Kiyoshi continued to stare down at him, one hand working between them to stroke Ryuhei’s hard length. “There’s no use resisting. You know you don’t want to.”

“Gods,” Ryuhei cried out breathlessly. His hands were gliding up and over Kiyoshi’s hips, guiding the other closer to him. Only a few thin layers of material separated their hard, pulsing flesh. The heat pouring from Kiyoshi’s body was almost unbearable and at the same time irresistible. “But it’s not right,” he panted between more of those fevered kisses. “Kiyoshi would never kill like that.”

The memory of the dead man hanging from the roof of the car now seemed blurry and irrelevant as he yanked open the ties of Kiyoshi’s *hakama*. His hand slipped within to take hold of the firm cock, the organ hot and pink underneath his fingers.

Kiyoshi batted Ryuhei’s hand away and pulled him into a crushing embrace. His scorching kisses and the sharp nips of his teeth made Ryuhei shudder with a mix of lust and fear. He was barely aware that Kiyoshi was stripping him and shoving him to the floor, rolling him over and jerking his hips until he was kneeling, his forehead pressed to the jostling floor of the locked train compartment.

“Relax,” Kiyoshi growled as he positioned himself.

Ryuhei was only too aware of the burning of his sensitive flesh as Kiyoshi thrust into him—without benefit of the lubricating oils they’d always used.

His hands tightening into fists on either side of his head, Ryuhei cried out. He’d been taken roughly before when he was still a popular actor in Japan, much in the same way. Pinned to the *tatami* by some of his more aggressive lovers, he’d taken their hard, coarse thrusts only to spread his legs wider to feel them

penetrate deeper. Love hadn't mattered then—only lust. Like now.

The first of Kiyoshi's hot spurts eased the friction and Ryuhei pushed back. The swollen cock slipped further in, filling the contracting passage with its entire length.

Wincing, Ryuhei grunted as Kiyoshi started pounding into him with a relentless rhythm. Another burst of thick fluid came inside of him, and he writhed under the force of Kiyoshi's passion.

"More..." he panted. Gods, what was he saying—no, demanding? Ryuhei arched his back until he felt Kiyoshi's heaving breath on the back of his neck. "Don't stop," Ryuhei moaned.

A throaty laugh echoed behind Ryuhei and Kiyoshi grasped his hips harder, plunged in deeper. His vampire lover's breath was hot against Ryuhei's neck, the words slithering into his ear. "You're as much an animal as I am about some things, you can't deny that." Kiyoshi suckled his neck, his teeth nipping but not breaking the skin. "Don't ever deny me, Ryuhei."

"I won't."

"Because you can't."

Kiyoshi laughed and snaked a hand around to grope at the sensitive bulge between Ryuhei's legs. With a few strong pumps, Ryuhei spurted into Kiyoshi's taunting fingers.

"I would never want to," Ryuhei groaned through his teeth. But his words only made Kiyoshi laugh harder and a piece of Ryuhei's heart broke. He loved Kiyokun no matter what, even this way. Somehow, the poison that infected Kiyoshi's mind had to be beaten.

Blood...that was the only answer...

"You're just too much, Ryu-san," Kiyoshi mocked with another harmless, teasing nip to the back.

Ryuhei's head swam with countless hazy images and remembered sentences from the time that man's blood had inflamed Kiyoshi before.

"If the Dragon's does this to you, could someone else's help calm you?"

"I don't know," Kiyoshi whispered. "I don't dare ask such a thing. It's too dangerous, especially now..."

"Then you think it would help."

"Perhaps."

And it had helped. He had helped and his Kiyoshi had been his gentle lover

once more.

“That man you killed,” Ryuhei panted. “If you thought his blood was better than *sake*, why don’t you taste mine?”

A sound like a purr tumbled from Kiyoshi’s lips, vibrating the skin at the nape of Ryuhei’s neck.

“Be careful what you say, Ryuhei, I just might do it.”

“I want you to.”

“But you fear me,” Kiyoshi teased, sliding his hot tongue around the lobe of Ryuhei’s ear.

“I love you. You didn’t hurt me before, you won’t now.”

“But I’m different now, didn’t I just prove that?” he asked, squeezing Ryuhei’s balls until he cried out.

“I-I trust you, Kiyo-kun.”

“But do you trust me with your life?” He squeezed again, twisting the sensitive sac of flesh.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ryuhei whimpered and squirmed underneath Kiyoshi, his cock hardening again despite his fear. The compartment spun out of focus around him and he felt nothing but the insistent pressure gripping his balls and igniting his desire all over again. That hazy dreamlike quality returned to his senses and he realized it was Kiyoshi's essence drowning out his very consciousness.

"I-I trust you...with my life," he whispered hoarsely, fighting to stay awake. "I'm not afraid."

Kiyoshi snickered. "Not even to die?"

"Not even to die," Ryuhei lied. He was terrified of losing his life, but he was more frightened to lose Kiyoshi to the madness poisoning his blood. The *kyuuketsuki* laughed, and Ryuhei feared his thoughts had been read. But Kiyoshi leaned close and flicked his tongue along the edge of Ryuhei's ear.

"Let's find out how true those words are."

Kiyoshi entered him again and though it was painful, it was much less so than before. Ryuhei found himself pressing back into each languorous thrust. He whimpered as Kiyoshi licked his back and shoulders and suckled at his neck.

"Yes, Ryuhei, give me all your passion. I want to taste it."

Ryuhei clamped his eyes shut and gave himself over to the sensations the vampire roused within him. He groaned when Kiyoshi pulled out of him, and Ryuhei looked around, frightened that he'd find himself alone. But no, Kiyoshi was there, sitting back on the seat and crooking his finger, a wicked gleam in his red-tinged eyes as he stroked his rigid cock with his free hand.

Ryuhei went to his lover, straddled his lap and impaled himself upon the hard flesh, throwing his head back when Kiyoshi gripped his hips and moved him effortlessly up and down his length.

Moaning loudly each time he was emptied and suddenly filled by that engorged

cock, Ryuhei wrapped his arms around Kiyoshi's neck and clawed at the back of his *kimono* for leverage. Wet with perspiration, his fingers slipped uselessly on the silk and he arched forward until Kiyoshi's head was pressed to his chest. His own *kimono* rolled off his shoulders as he heaved against his lover, his body quaking and cock aching to be jerked in the same crashing rhythm.

The sharp sting of his lover's fangs scraped against Ryuhei's flesh right below his left nipple. He jerked upright, his hands snaking through Kiyoshi's dark, tousled hair. But there was no blood. Kiyoshi still would not break the skin.

"Oh, Kiyo-kun—" Ryuhei's pleas were cut off by the press of Kiyoshi's lips. His tongue invaded Ryuhei's mouth as his body did the same and Ryuhei could taste the lingering metallic flavor of blood.

Ryuhei whimpered and Kiyoshi groaned into his mouth before pulling away. He slipped a hand between them and pumped Ryu's cock. "That's it. I can taste the heat in your blood. It will be so very much sweeter when you come."

Every muscle in his body ached, but still Ryuhei struggled to meet the demands of his lover. With each breath, he cried out Kiyoshi's name until his voice was raw with the effort. The surge between his legs intensified—his cock rigid and balls aching. Kiyoshi's tugs became harder, more forceful.

"Come already," Kiyoshi taunted a moment before semen burst from the tip of the swollen head.

Spent, Ryuhei pitched forward with another moan. He braced himself on the back of the seat and his fingers discovered one of the nails still embedded in the wood. He pried it out with the last of his failing strength and pushed the tip against his lip to reopen the two puncture wounds.

The salty taste of his blood filled his mouth and he dropped the nail. Ryuhei grabbed either side of Kiyoshi's head and pulled his lover into a kiss, praying the whole while that his blood would repair the damage to Kiyoshi's soul done by the Poisoned Dragon's blood.

Kiyoshi sucked in his breath when Ryuhei's hot blood passed his lips. It burned his tongue but not in the way the assassin's blood had in San Francisco. It was a searing warmth, but was also gentle and seeped inside, flowing, making him crave more.

"Oh, Ryu," he said, pulling away, his fingers stroking the soft skin of the actor's neck.

"Take me, Kiyo-kun. Let me help you. Please."

“I’m beyond redemption. The hunger is too much. I feel it deep in my belly.” He tried to push Ryuhei off him, but the actor refused to be moved.

“Take it,” Ryuhei pleaded. Hearing his Kiyoshi’s sweet familiar voice gave him strength to stay straddled on his lover’s waist. He captured Kiyoshi’s lips in another kiss, working the other’s mouth open so the blood could trickle inside. “Come back to me, Kiyoshi,” he murmured weakly.

“Ryu, no—”

“Yes.”

Kiyoshi murmured something unintelligible before deepening the kiss. Ryuhei was lost in the swell of love flowing between them and was barely aware of the prick of Kiyoshi’s fangs upon his shoulder. Ryuhei writhed on Kiyoshi’s cock still buried to the hilt within him as the sucking aroused him again.

The passion gripped Ryuhei as well and he stroked himself to a quick climax. Kiyoshi jerked away, blood upon his lips, his tongue swirling out to catch it all and clean his fangs in a swift fluid motion. The strange red fire was back in his eyes.

“I love you, Ryuhei. Too much.” He forced Ryuhei from him and was gone before Ryuhei could grab his *kimono* and stand.

Ryuhei stumbled out of the compartment, the soreness in his body making itself known. He called out for Kiyoshi to stop, though it was already too late. “You can’t go.” His voice cracked and tears streamed down his face. “*Kiyoshi.*” He’d brought Kiyo-kun back to his senses only to make him flee in shame. Ryuhei rubbed his face dry with the back of his sleeve, cursing himself for making another mistake. Even Kiyoshi mad with that terrible man’s influence was better than no Kiyoshi at all.

The train screeched loudly and Ryuhei was thrown forward as the train came to a shuddering stop. Other passengers peered out of their compartments with puzzled looks. The train wasn’t scheduled to reach its stop until morning... Gasping, Ryuhei pulled himself up. The body. He’d been so lost with Kiyoshi he’d forgotten about it. The conductor must be stopping the train to hunt for the killer and turn the body over to an undertaker. Ryuhei dashed down the length of the car, desperate to find Kiyoshi before he got off the train or was somehow caught by the conductor.

Ryuhei fought his way through the awakened passengers and ran from car to car, then out to the platform only to be stopped by a local lawman. A thick-headed local lawman who could not understand him through his accented

English.

They shoved him into the depot and placed him on a small locked room where other men came to interrogate him—one a Chinese interpreter.

“I’m Japanese, you fools. And I need to get back on the train.”

They apparently took his agitation and desire to leave this place as a sign of guilt. They insisted on escorting him to a jailhouse just west of the station—and by insistence, they threatened to have Ryuhei bound at his wrists and ankles. Ryuhei’s misery worsened with each step away from the train station, his desperation tempered only by the understanding that if he struggled, he could be held here in the god-forsaken town for who knew how long.

“My father was just a harmless old man,” a man cried out from within the rickety-looking jailhouse. His voice cracked, strangled with grief that made his accent seem heavier than it might have otherwise. “My family runs a small textile business—don’t you dare brush this off as a tong incident.”

“Quiet down.”

“No,” the man insisted. “My father’s killer has to be found. *Please.*”

Ryuhei swallowed the bile burning in his throat. As the sheriff pushed him up the steps, he saw the Chinese man leaning against the deputy’s desk, not bothering to conceal the tears of grief running down his cheeks. He was dressed in a western-style shirt and trousers, so different from the dress of a rail worker.

“Mr. Fahlong.” The deputy gave Ryuhei and the sheriff a glance as they entered.

“We’re doing all we can.”

The Chinese man turned to face the door. He was maybe thirty years old at the most. Along with the suffering and anger evident in his face, the look of utter loss in his eyes broke Ryuhei’s heart. The murdered man on the train...it was this man’s father.

Kiyoshi had caused this anguish.

“Who is that?” Fahlong stared at Ryuhei. “I thought I saw a man dressed like that near our compartment before my father vanished.”

“Just someone we need to talk to.” The sheriff pushed Ryuhei into the room and gestured to the deputy. “Take the Chinaman out.”

“Does he know who my father’s killer is?” Fahlong resisted being dragged out. He grabbed at the front of Ryuhei’s *kimono*. “Do you know what happened? *Please.*”

“I’m sorry.” Ryuhei’s mouth quivered. “I-I don’t know anything.”

Long after the deputy had shoved Fahlong out the door, the young man’s

expression of utter devastation continued to haunt Ryuhei all through his own interview.

After a few more questions, the sheriff finally agreed to contact the theater in San Francisco. By the time telegraphs were sent to the American promoters back west who'd arranged the *kabuki* tour, the train was ready to depart.

The fool of a sheriff and the town's mayor kept Ryuhei back, trying to lavish apologies on him for the inconvenience.

"I have to go." He rushed past them and through the depot to the platform, pushing his way through the crowd of townspeople who'd come to watch the excitement despite the late hour.

"Ryuhei."

Ryuhei stopped, turned and followed the flash of blue so similar to Kiyoshi's *kimono*. He ran around the side of the depot but found nothing. The train pulled out and he sprinted towards it, stumbling, falling and picking himself up as the train gathered speed. He ran alongside shouting, but no one paid any attention.

"Ryuhei!"

That time he realized the sound of Kiyoshi's voice was inside his head and he looked up. Kiyoshi lay on the roof of the speeding train, lifting a hand in farewell.

"I'm sorry, Ryu. It's better this way."

"No, it's not!" Ryuhei stumbled on, almost tripping on the tracks. The train careened away faster than he could ever hope to reach it, the love of his life fading from view into the night.

"It's not better at all," he cried out desperately...uselessly. His voice couldn't reach the train any more than he could. Ryuhei sank to his knees, choking on the dust left in the train's wake and on his tears. *"Kiyoshi."*

No reply echoed in Ryuhei's mind or heart. Kiyo-kun was gone.

Never before had Ryuhei felt so entirely alone.

After trudging back to the platform, Ryuhei dropped onto a narrow wooden bench. He remained there all through the night and into the following day until the next train from San Francisco pulled in carrying Hoshi and Akira, who coaxed him into joining them in their compartment. Ryuhei barely heard Hoshi's constant prattling and complaining about their experience in California and his complaints for the degradation that surely awaited them back East.

Ryuhei showed no more liveliness than an animated puppet until they reached

the first town outside California and the buzz of gossip drifted in through the partially opened compartment window.

“Nastiest thing I ever did see the way that Chinaman was all battered up from falling out the train. If you ask me, he was probably pushed, bruises all over his face and back. It were a right mess. Ain’t even worth burying if you ask me.”

“Where are you going?” Akira asked, running after Ryuhei when he bolted from the compartment. “We’re only staying a few minutes. You’ll get left behind again.”

Ryuhei paid no mind to his friend as he plunged through the car and out to the platform to find the men who’d been talking as they ferried baggage. Agitated, he prattled off in a mixture of Japanese and English until he got control enough to ask slowly where the Chinaman’s body was, as his Japanese friend was missing and he feared for his life.

One of the train workers gestured off-handedly to a wooden building across from the depot station. A crooked sign hung in front of the porch’s open door, words in different languages painted on the knotty wood. A number of people crowded the tight little porch in a line, some Chinese, others Mexican. It was a station for immigrant workers or visitors.

“They took the body in there to figure out what to do with it.” The train worker tossed in another piece of luggage and went back to his work with the others, though they kept a curious eye on Ryuhei as he hurried off to the station.

Inside, the crammed room was hot and stuffy. Shouts back and forth in mixed tongues drowned out any hope for a normal conversation and Ryuhei forced his way to the front of the line. The official at the counter listened to his story and, visibly happy that the body might be taken from his custody, hurried Ryuhei to the back of the station.

Ryuhei’s stomach clenched when he saw the body covered with a sheet as it lay on a table in the backroom. The sickeningly sweet scent of decay hit Ryuhei the moment he entered the room and he fought the urge to be ill. *That can’t be Kiyokun under there.*

“Is this your friend?” the official asked with a hint of sympathy as he pulled back the cloth.

Ryuhei pressed the back of his hand across his mouth to hold in the cry of relief. “No.” He shook his head. The man on the table was dressed in the black loose-fitting garb most of the Chinese who worked on the railways wore, a long braid of hair trailing off the edge of the table.

“That’s good news for you then.” The official pulled the cloth back over the

body, but not before Ryuhei could make out the two puncture wounds on the battered neck right along the jugular.

He was able to maintain his composure until he left the station, then doubled over outside as he retched. The stench from the body would not leave his nostrils. As relieved as he was that Kiyoshi was not the one lying there, it troubled him to know the cause of the man's death.

Kiyoshi had killed him. Another murder. The memory of Fahlong suffering in his grief back at the last train station cut through Ryuhei's heart. Could it still be the influence of the Dragon's blood? Had Kiyoshi been changed permanently? At least they both seemed to be traveling on the same route.

Ryuhei returned to the compartment moments before the train pulled out of the depot. He ignored Hoshi's crude remarks and Akira's concerned ones.

* * *

Ryuhei feared it would be the same at each town the train stopped in, but it wasn't. No rumors of mysterious deaths or unusual happenings circulated among the travelers or station workers.

Until they reached New York City. One of the first things to greet Ryuhei upon leaving the sprawling train depot was a young newsboy waving a sheaf of papers in his ink-stained hands, proclaiming "Strange Murders near the Upper West Side."

A clammy finger of dread slid its way down Ryuhei's spine as he fumbled in his *haori* sleeve for his money pouch. With quaking fingers, he took out a few American coins and dropped them into the urchin's outstretched palm.

Akira tugged on his sleeve. "C'mon, Ryu-san. We have a carriage to take us to the hotel."

"You go. I'll find my own way."

"Ryuhei—"

"Just *go*."

"Oh come on, Akira, let's leave the whiny little bitch to wallow in his own misery."

Akira sighed heavily. "Hoshi, don't start..."

"Fine." The stout actor flipped his nose up in the air and turned away. "You can find your own damn carriage too." He stomped off down the crowded street,

giving dirty glares to anyone he bumped into.

"I think he's starting to rival your dramatics, Ryu-san," Akira said with a half-smile.

"It suits him." Ryuhei bunched the newspaper under his arm, too distracted to care. Kiyokun had come to the city after all; Ryuhei knew he was responsible for the strange deaths described in the paper. That sense of dread would not leave him.

"Did you hear what I said?" Akira gripped his shoulder, shaking him out of his thoughts. Ryuhei stared blankly at the other man.

"You've been a wreck since before we left San Francisco—you and Kiyokun both." Akira frowned. "The whole train ride you said nothing, but I want to know—what happened? Did he...did he leave you, after all?"

Ryuhei jerked away. "If I felt like talking about it, I would."

"As if I didn't know *that*." Akira snorted. "Ryuhei, we've been friends for years. You wouldn't let a fly land on your rice bowl without the whole city hearing of it."

"Just leave me alone." Ryuhei turned, too preoccupied to give much of a fuck over anything but finding Kiyoshi again.

"*Ryuhei*," Akira called after him.

But Ryuhei pressed on until the tall dome-shaped roofs of Grand Central Depot were far behind him and he couldn't hear Akira anymore.

Nothing but a sick longing in his heart to find Kiyoshi guided his steps as he navigated the strange city. The names of the places mentioned in the article meant nothing to him and no one could give him directions he could follow in the maze of streets and alleys full of more buildings than he'd seen in his life.

Exhausted and worn to the core of his soul, Ryuhei's urgent search became an aimless wandering as the afternoon dwindled away. He walked near the piers, keeping the Atlantic on his left to retain some kind of bearing until finally, not even that mattered. Had he really hoped to find Kiyoshi this way, strolling through these unfamiliar streets and harried Americans? Or maybe he'd expected his dear one to fall into step behind him as he had all those years ago, curious to see what kind of purpose drove an old fool to trudge up and down the cobbled streets with such desperation.

Laughing at himself until bitter tears trickled out of the corners of his eyes, Ryuhei collapsed into a seat at the bar in a tavern near the waterfront. His appearance garnered a few stares from some of the other patrons, not that he

gave a fuck. He dropped a handful of coins on the table, enough to get him a full bottle of whatever western shit they drank here instead of *sake*, then left to find a carriage that would take him to the hotel near the train station.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Despite the myriad scents filling the Grand Central Depot, Kiyoshi had no trouble picking out those of Akira, Hoshi and especially Ryuhei when they alighted from the train. He clung to the fringes of the crowd, his head bowed, hands shoved deep into the pockets of his western jacket, his keen eyesight tracking his countrymen's every move.

He watched Ryu buy the newspaper and skim the lead article. His mortal lover's unease washed over him, causing Kiyoshi's shoulders to slump. Ryu knew, of course he did. Damn the Poisoned Dragon and his violent blood for bringing his *kyuuketsuki* instincts to the fore as they hadn't been in two centuries.

As Kiyoshi expected, Hoshi caused a bit of a scene. It also came as no surprise when Ryuhei left Akira and went off on his own. Kiyoshi followed, keeping Ryu in his sights as he wandered the bustling streets of New York, heedless of where he was going and who he was surrounding himself by. More than once Ryuhei was almost accosted, but each time Kiyoshi sent out forceful silent warnings that made the would-be assailants back off and seek an easier target. Finally, with darkness settling over the city and weariness settling into Ryuhei's body, the actor hailed a carriage and asked to be taken to his hotel. Kiyoshi stood and watched until the carriage faded from view before forcing himself to close off his heart and allow his predator's instincts to take control. This was a prime hunting ground and he planned to make the most of it.

Clad in the dark western suit and soft-soled shoes he'd taken from one of the Chinese he'd killed on the train, Kiyoshi prowled the night through the city's crowded ethnic neighborhoods, the distinct smells of each area guiding him to the next—the pungent garlic of the Italians, the cabbage of the Irish and Germans, the familiar spices of the Chinese.

The western neighborhoods also carried the stench of human waste, the

reeking clutter of strewn garbage that would so easily conceal the crumpled remains of his dinner companions.

Through the thick, persistent odors that dogged his heightened abilities, Kiyoshi picked out the faintest trace of something finer...sweeter...

Perfume.

A scent of lavender and sandalwood, delicate and fading. Kiyoshi closed his eyes, reaching out with his senses and mind as he focused on that hint of sweetness. It was a woman, walking beside a man, recognizable by the more acidic edge to his odor. They were both silent save for a few sparse words exchanged that concerned a play they'd just finished attending. But her heart raced with a kind of passionate exhilaration, the blood rushing to her limbs and to wet her sex as they walked on. Her thoughts were back in the theater, on a particular actor she had seen and still lusted after.

And how Kiyoshi lusted after her in turn.

Not in the same sense, but for her passion, her blood...her life.

Now Kiyoshi stalked through the winding alleys, not as a scavenger, but as a hunter whose mouth already watered with anticipation. Leaping over the wooden slats of a fence that barred his path, he landed gracefully on the other side in a crouch.

The couple walked past the entrance to the alleyway only a handful of feet from where the hunter waited, the woman's violet skirts rustling softly in the wake of her steps. With that visual contact, all of her essence filled Kiyoshi. He heard only her pulse, tasted only her blood, saw only her ivory skin. The only part of himself still uniquely his was the raw hunger gnawing at his belly, demanding immediate reprieve.

Once, it might have frightened Kiyoshi at how easy the predator within now came alive. But how different and exciting it was compared to the quiet meals he'd taken with the monks back in San Francisco...those merciful kills that sated his body's need for blood, but not the need to kill. And the Dragon's blood had left him more thirsty than ever. So much so, Kiyoshi wondered if he would ever be sated again.

Tears coated his face with a wetness that felt alien as he sprinted down the alley. In two leaps he covered the distance to fall in step behind the man and woman, his feet barely touching the cobblestone walkway. They were oblivious to his presence, completely unaware that a demon hovered at their backs, poised for the kill. Around them, the gas lamps offered useless amounts of orange light in small pools on the pavement. No one else walked the street, no

lights were on in the windows of the buildings on either side of the avenue.

Kiyoshi breathed on the back of the woman's neck, the golden curls at her nape stirring gently. She thought nothing of it, the down-soft hairs rising the only sign she'd felt anything at all. Oh, the total ignorance of his prey made the hunt all the more alluring. Kiyoshi's fangs tingled, his tongue burned for the salty taste of blood, his stomach clenched painfully.

A sob hiccupped in his throat as the desire wracked his flesh. Alarmed by the sound, the man and woman suddenly came to a stop.

"Heavens," she gasped softly. The melodic undercurrent in her voice drove Kiyoshi mad.

"Can I help you?" the man asked.

"Yes." Kiyoshi wiped at the tears in his eyes and smiled.

The next moment he was at the man's throat, the sharp nails on his hand tearing through the jugular. A crimson spray leapt out of the wound as the man dropped back, a gurgle dying in what was left of his throat. Kiyoshi turned to the woman shrinking against the side of a brick building, her beautiful face a mask of horror. She opened her mouth to scream.

"Shh." Kiyoshi was suddenly before her, his bloody fingers on her lips to silence the cry. He kissed her cheek, savoring the taste of her fear and what it did to the already intoxicating aroma of her blood. He pushed out with his mind, letting his essence wash over and numb her troubled thoughts. The woman collapsed in his arms, unable to resist Kiyoshi's power.

Her head rolled on his shoulder, exposing her slender neck to Kiyoshi's expectant fangs. When he bit into her flesh, the warmth and full flavor of her blood spilled into his mouth. He drank greedily, the tears sliding down his face as he swallowed.

But he was still not satisfied. The ache had spread to his heart, which was heavy...lonely...

Gasping, he dropped her lifeless form. He stared at her crumpled body beside her murdered companion's and felt the weight of what he'd done. Not since his first days as *kyuuketsuki* had he succumbed to this seductive enjoyment in hunting. How ruthless he seemed now...so much like the monster he'd once feared Ryuhei would discover him to be.

The thought of his mortal lover broke him. Kiyoshi ran down the street and on until the scent of his victims was gone. He leapt up to the roof of a building, leaving the city to sprawl out far below him.

* * *

Ryuhei stood at the window of his hotel room, his head resting upon the painted frame. He gazed out at the teeming city, not actually seeing New York, but rather Kyoto at dusk. He remembered walking in the cool spring night with Kiyoshi by his side as they made their way through the *Hanamachi*, Kiyo-kun hanging onto his every word as he regaled his lover with tales of the old days and the theaters packed to the rafters, the lush parties thrown in his honor by wealthy benefactors at the finest teahouses in Gion. Brash as he was, he bragged of the other, more private parties, the ones at the high-level brothels in the Shimabara Pleasure Quarters. He'd even been presented at the Imperial Court once and performed for the Emperor Komei himself.

Sniffling back tears, Ryuhei returned to his bed and finished off his second bottle of French wine for the day. As he drank, Ryuhei leafed through the newspapers he'd acquired these past few days. Each one was turned to an article of a "ferocious madman" terrorizing the city. In both rich and poor sections of New York, bodies had been found, their throats ripped open as if by some feral beast. It could only be Kiyoshi—no, not Kiyoshi, not his gentle, loving Kiyoshi.

It was the demon roused by the blood of that fucking Chinese assassin.

Ryuhei thought of searching for him, but the vampire's senses were so much sharper than his. Kiyoshi had to know Ryuhei was here in the city, and still he chose not to appear. Ryuhei crumpled the paper in his hands.

"Come back to me, Kiyo-kun. Please."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ryuhei's breath caught at the sound of the soft knock upon his hotel room door. Could it be? Did he dare to even hope that his Kiyokun had returned to him?

He deflated, his shoulders sagging in the folds of his silk *kimono* when he opened the door to find Akira there. He began to close it without a word but Akira put up his hand. Ryuhei didn't have the strength or desire to push him out. "Go away," he muttered, turning from the door. He walked across the room and fell face first across the wide bed. "Just go away and leave me be."

The feel of Akira's hand rubbing across his back in a show of comfort served only to bring a miserable moan from Ryuhei's lips. "Leave me alone."

"You've been alone too much I think."

Ryuhei turned his head from the pillow to glare at Akira. "What do you care? What does anyone care?"

"You've been my friend for years. I care."

With a contemptuous snort, Ryuhei buried his face in the pillow once more.

"Hoshi didn't mean it, you know. We do need you. And I think you need to perform."

"I need to be left alone."

"I'll be back."

"Don't bother."

Ryuhei turned his head after a time and stared at the window, watching as the light shifted and the shadows lengthened, eventually casting the room into twilight.

He'd had a dream...a foolish one where he'd given up waiting for Kiyoshi and

wandered New York's maze of avenues and alleyways, completely lost. During the pointless search, Ryuhei kept coming across bodies like the one of the man on the train, hanging by their necks and drained of blood. The memory of the dream left a sour taste in Ryuhei's mouth, and he pushed down the blankets and pulled open his robe to rub his stomach as it twisted.

Ryu collapsed back and threw his arm over his face. What an old fool he was. Such an overly dramatic fool coming apart at the least little incident. No wonder Kiyoshi preferred the life of a demon to a life with him.

He breathed a dispirited sigh when the door creaked open some time later, but did not turn to look. The gentle pressure of someone sitting on the edge of the bed, the feel of a hand rubbing across his back brought only another sigh in response. "Go away, Akira."

"I'm not Akira. Does that mean I can stay?"

Oh Gods.

Ryuhei could swear that his heart stopped. It took great effort to turn onto his back, but he did.

Was it Kiyoshi or was it just another dream?

Kiyoshi grasped his hand and held it in place over his heart. "It's no dream, Ryu, but...perhaps I'm still a nightmare to you." Kiyoshi's face was drawn, his full lips pressed into a thin line as though he wanted to say more but couldn't find the words. Maybe he hoped Ryuhei would say them instead.

Ryuhei turned his head towards the window, his hand slipping from Kiyoshi's. "I don't know what to think anymore. I haven't for a long time now."

"I'm sorry," Kiyoshi whispered. "I shouldn't have come. I'm sorry."

Instinctively, Ryuhei reached out to grab Kiyoshi's arm when he felt his lover move to leave. "Where have you been?" he asked, sitting up. "What have you been doing?"

The guilty look in Kiyoshi's eyes and the way he lowered his head in shame confirmed the worst.

"It was you, wasn't it? The mysterious animal that attacked men down near the docks."

"Yes."

Ryuhei clambered out of bed and backed against the window, his arms folded tightly within the wide sleeves of his *kimono*. "Is that why you're here then? To kill me at last?"

"No."

“Then why have you come?” he asked sharply, trying not to acknowledge the pain in Kiyoshi’s wide dark eyes. It was the same pain that had been rending his own heart to shreds these past days.

Kiyoshi lowered his gaze. “I knew it was a mistake,” he said softly before rising from the bed. “I’m sorry. For everything.”

Ryuhei bit his lower lip, determined not to allow his foolish heart to speak through him. But it was in vain, as he knew it would be. “*Kiyo-kun*,” he called as Kiyoshi pulled the door open. He took a half-step forward, his teary eyes focused on Kiyoshi’s back. “I—I’ve been lost without you. I’ve been worried sick about you...about us...”

Kiyoshi remained with his hand on the doorknob and his back turned. “You don’t need me. And I was never that important a part of the acting troupe.”

“Fuck the acting troupe. I’ve given control of it to Hoshi. I don’t care about it anymore.” Ryuhei collapsed back against the window ledge, his voice faded to a near whisper. “I don’t care about anything since you’ve been gone.”

In the blink of an eye Kiyoshi was across the room, gripping Ryuhei’s shoulders. Kiyoshi pressed against him hard enough the ledge dug into Ryu’s lower back. Kiyoshi parted his lips, his fangs extended, saliva sliding from the needle-sharp tips. His brown eyes glowed with a hellish fire.

“I can taste your fear, Ryuhei.”

Ryuhei said nothing. He couldn’t summon the words, any words.

As quickly as he’d pounced, Kiyoshi let him go and seated himself on the edge of the bed, his head bowed, his hands clenched together between his parted knees. Ryuhei could only stare, certain that he’d imagined things just now. But then Kiyoshi looked up and it was *his* Kiyoshi, his precious, gentle Kiyo-kun.

“You’ve been missing a monster. Stop wasting your time, your life, on that. Please.”

“I haven’t missed a monster. I’ve missed *you*. I’m dying without you by my side.” Kiyoshi frowned and looked at the floor.

Ryuhei approached and knelt on the floor before Kiyoshi, one hand resting lightly upon his treasured lover’s knee. “I may be a self-centered old fool but I’m not entirely stupid. I always knew there was something unusual about you, but I didn’t want to question it. I didn’t want to drive you away. You’re the only person to ever show a genuine interest in me, not Nakamura the actor, not the Nakamura the sexual adventurer, but me—Ryuhei. Overreacting, overly emotional, entirely too temperamental for his own good, Ryuhei.”

Kiyoshi reached out to caress Ryuhei's cheek. "I never meant to lie to you."
"You didn't. You never lied, you simply never told me what I didn't press to learn."

Ryuhei leaned more into Kiyoshi's touch, drawing as much comfort from the simple contact as he could. "I'm afraid," Ryuhei said after the silence became too much to bear.

Kiyoshi tried to pull away but Ryuhei gripped his wrist. "I'm not afraid of you. I was on the train, but not now. That demon's blood isn't twisting you any longer, I can tell."

"Then why are you afraid?" Kiyoshi asked, rubbing the pad of his thumb across Ryuhei's cheek.

"I'm afraid that you'll leave me for good. I'm afraid that you'll become disgusted by the way I continue to age."

"No—"

Ryuhei pressed his fingertips to Kiyoshi's lips to silence him, then stood, coaxing Kiyoshi up with him. He moved until they were facing the mirror atop the walnut bureau.

"Look at me. I'm so much older than when we met and you're still so young, so beautiful. You could have any lover in the world, any attractive young thing who caught your fancy—man or woman. Why would you continue to want me as I age even more, then die?"

Kiyoshi slid his arm around Ryuhei's waist and rested his head upon the actor's shoulder. "I will always want you, Ryu."

"Then let me be like you." Ryuhei regretted the words the moment Kiyoshi jerked away, a look of abject horror upon his beautiful face. "I knew it. I'm not worthy in your eyes. I'm too old, too much a dithering, foolish bitch to make you happy for much longer."

"I can't do it." Kiyoshi was now the one showing fear.

"You mean you won't."

"It's too dangerous. I'm not really sure how it happens, I only know how it happened to me. I could kill you just by trying and if I didn't, you'd still be like I was. It's horrible at first. It's as if all the power in the world is at your fingertips and you have to use it. It's just like the way I've been. The Poisoned Dragon brought it all out in me again. I can't do that to you. I won't."

What was left of Ryuhei's heart finished breaking into a dozen fractured little pieces. "Fine," Ryuhei said numbly, returning to the bed. He plopped down as

he had when Akira had come, face turned into the pillow. A few moments later, he heard Kiyoshi leave and quietly close the door behind him.

It was true then. Kiyoshi didn't want him.

Soon the pillow was soaked with his tears.

* * *

Kiyoshi returned three days later to find Ryuhei much as he'd left him—alone in the darkened room, an untouched food tray on a small table near the door. The bowl of soup was still full and had long gone cold. But the sight of the food gave Kiyoshi a terrible pang of hunger deep in his stomach, reminding him that he hadn't fed once during these past few evenings. For Ryuhei, he didn't want to be this monster anymore.

He faced the bed. The open window allowed an early evening breeze to drift in, ruffling the a few strands of Ryuhei's hair where they brushed the pillow top.

"Leave me alone, Akira," Ryuhei said without looking. "Isn't it time for the troupe to move to Philadelphia?"

"I believe they're on their way to the train depot now. You should join them."

Ryu turned just enough to glare at him with red-rimmed eyes almost devoid of the passionate life that had first attracted Kiyoshi.

"Have you come to gloat?"

"Why would I?" Kiyoshi asked, closing the door behind him. Ryu sat up.

"Why wouldn't you? Surely you find it all amusing—a wretched old fool trying to cling to his pathetic human life before he withers and grows old."

"You'll never be a wretched old fool, Ryu-san, and if you were I couldn't love you any less," Kiyoshi said as he approached the side of the bed. He brushed wayward strands of black and silver hair behind Ryu's ear. "I love you more than you can know—I can't bear you not knowing that. You've given me so much, you've made me feel so normal again. I don't want to lose that, but I'm afraid."

Lowering his head, Kiyoshi fell silent. He looked up at the feel of Ryuhei's fingers brushing over his.

"I don't want any great powers." Ryuhei's eyes brimmed with tears. "I don't want to be a harbinger of death. All I want is to be with you. For as long as I can."

Kiyoshi squeezed his eyes shut. “What Kuro did was so long ago I don’t think I remember it all. It seemed so simple, yet how could it be? I know he told Liu about it in great detail, but I didn’t want to hear. I didn’t want anyone to be the way we were. I still don’t. It’s an existence, but not a real life at all some times...”

“I don’t care,” Ryuhei insisted. “Without you, I have nothing. That’s all I want—to be at your side always.”

Clasping Ryuhei’s hand, Kiyoshi brought it to his lips to caress it with a feather-light kiss. “I want that too, but you don’t understand what it’s like. You have to be at the brink of death. You might die before you can drink enough to make the change—if it happens at all. I could kill you by trying to make you immortal.”

“But I’m going to die anyway, if not now then a week from now, a year from now. No life is certain in this world. If I can die in your arms, that will be enough.”

Kiyoshi welcomed the kiss when he was coaxed forward. He drank in Ryuhei’s love like the potent elixir it was and had always been to him.

“That would be enough for you,” Kiyoshi murmured when they parted. His eyes filled with tears and he pulled away, wrapping his arms around his waist. “But I can’t see you go through the things I have.”

The look of dismay on Ryuhei’s face couldn’t be put into words, his feeling of utter abandonment slamming into Kiyoshi like a hard blow to his midsection. “It doesn’t matter as long as I’m with you, Kiyo-kun. If I must die, then let it be in your arms.”

Kiyoshi shook his head. “I—I can’t.”

Ryuhei brought a hand to his throat, then let it drop limply to his lap. “Then stay with me, at least. For a little while longer.”

Only a dry, half-formed croak escaped Kiyoshi’s lips. If he stayed, something wrong was bound to happen again. “Mortals and demons don’t belong together in this world,” Kiyoshi breathed.

“I see.” Ryuhei looked down at his hand, still resting limply on his knee. “Goodbye, Kiyo-kun.”

Kiyoshi ran before Ryu could see the tears start to spill.

Ryuhei woke a few hours later, not even realizing when he’d drifted off. He sat up on the bed, the back of his neck sore from being unaccustomed to these

thick pillows under his head. The window was wide open, letting in gusts of cold air and droplets of rainwater that soaked through the light silk of his robe. Shivering, he pulled the glass pane down into place. Night had just fallen over the city; all that was left of the sunlight a dusky glow on the horizon as a drizzle fell from the thick clouds hanging low in the sky.

Somewhere out there Kiyoshi must be wandering the maze of twisting streets and alleyways. How many would he kill tonight?

His stomach twisting in anguish, Ryuhei turned away from the window. He reached for the wine bottle, only to find it drained completely dry.

“Fuck...” Ryuhei dropped the bottle back onto the nightstand. It wobbled a second before rolling off and hitting the carpet with a dull thud. Feeling utterly without hope, Ryuhei cradled his face in his hands and let the dry sobs build up in his chest though no more tears could be forced from his eyes.

Taking the last of his money from the top drawer in the stand, he threw a rumpled jacket over his *yukata* and left the room. He’d buy as many bottles of liquor as he could afford and guzzle them down until he felt nothing at all. Better that than this loneliness, this emptiness.

“It’s *him*, damn you.”

That voice—the pain in it rivaled Ryuhei’s own. He’d heard it before as well. Ryuhei froze at the top of the stairs and listened closely to the men talking in the lobby below.

“These stories in the papers, it has to be *him*,” the man insisted, his Chinese accent thickening as he grew more agitated. “And what of these latest rumors that another man was killed tonight?”

It was the young man whose father... Ryuhei tried to swallow but his mouth was so dry. The man back at the train station—Fahlong had been his name.

“Keep your voice down and come upstairs to rest, you’ve had too much drink,” another fellow tried to assuage him. “Tomorrow you have to speak to your mother about what happened, you can’t be this distraught when you see her.”

“I can’t meet her knowing that killer is free,” Fahlong roared. “The police are saying another body has been found on the streets near here, his throat ripped into as my father’s was. And before that, another woman and her fiancé as well. It’s not coincidence—we brought this monster with us from San Francisco, Uncle.”

Ryuhei stumbled down the stairs, clutching his *haori* shut and not even caring he’d dropped his coin purse on the steps. The silver pieces spilled around his

feet as he reached the bottom, clinking loudly in the otherwise silent hotel. Fahlong and his uncle whipped around to see the source of the noise. “You,” the man gasped and juttied his finger through the air. He lunged forward and grasped the banister. His young face was hollow and drawn from the sleepless nights he must have spent dwelling on this tragedy. “I know you from the train.” “Has a body been found tonight?” Ryuhei whispered, his heart thudding wildly. “Where?”

Fahlong’s eyes widened into two piercing orbs. “You know who the killer is, don’t you!”

“Stop this, you’re mad with grief.” Fahlong’s uncle sighed. “Come upstairs and rest.”

“No.” Fahlong grabbed the front of Ryuhei’s jacket and pushed him back against the wall. “Answer me, you bastard.”

“*Fahlong.*” The man’s uncle pried him away from Ryuhei. “Please forgive him—his father’s life was taken and he knows nothing but grief. He even believes a *chiang shih* is responsible.”

Ryuhei’s chest tightened, making it hard to breathe. “Th-that’s not possible,” he stammered. The need to defend Kiyo-kun was so strong, even now. Yes, Ryuhei ached for the other man’s loss, but only because Fahlong didn’t understand. Or maybe it was he himself who wouldn’t accept the truth.

“That’s what I tell him.” The uncle shook his head. “Come to your senses, Fahlong.”

“You’re both wrong.” Fahlong shoved away from the older man. “Grief isn’t the only thing I feel, Uncle,” he snarled, his face twisted with hate as he swiped the hair from his eyes. From the inside of his coat, he pulled out a nickel-plated revolver.

The old man gasped and Ryuhei shrank back against the wall, a cry of alarm caught in his throat. Fahlong waved the weapon around wildly, whether from madness or drunkenness the threat was all the more clear.

“I’ll hunt that fucking devil down myself if no one will help me,” Fahlong screamed. He rushed away from the stairs and bolted out through the front doors. Moaning his nephew’s name, the older man darted after him into the night.

His heart pounding so badly the sound of his blood rushing through his ears was all he could hear, Ryuhei stared after the two men. *Hunt the devil...* Fahlong meant to slay Kiyoshi.

Hotel guests peered out of their rooms, even the girl working the front desk frowned at him in curiosity. Ryuhei ignored them all, only one thought dominating his mind as well as his heart.

“Kiyo-kun,” Ryuhei moaned.

He stumbled away from the wall and shoved past the small gathering in the foyer to run into the street. Before that boy could find Kiyoshi, Ryuhei had to first.

Praying to whatever Gods would listen for help, Ryuhei raced down one street and then another. His sandals slapped against the damp pavement and he blinked away the droplets of rainwater blurring his vision. There was no sign of Fahlong, or of Kiyoshi. Ryuhei choked back another dry sob and leaned in the doorway of a small church not too far from the hotel.

Where were they? “Gods, help me,” Ryuhei pleaded.

The sharp crash of glass on pavement sounded behind him. He pushed away from the cathedral’s door and noticed the glow of a lantern in the alleyway behind the old structure.

Gulping down another steadying breath, Ryuhei charged towards the light. He slid to a stop, his sandals slipping on the wet surface. He grabbed onto the edge of the brick building opposite the church to catch himself from falling.

The lantern rolled back and forth on the ground, the flame stubbornly clinging to life on the spilled oil among the shattered glass. The corpse of a man lay beside it, his skin a grotesque shade of gray in the dull lamplight, the blood pooling around the two, tooth-like puncture wounds, thick and black. Ryuhei covered his mouth with a hand and dropped to his knees beside the body.

“Kiyoshi,” he cried out into the shadows flickering beyond the reach of the flame’s light.

“*Murderer.*”

Ryuhei spun around to face the open end of the alley.

Fahlong stood panting a few feet away, his face still twisted in that same horrible expression. “It was you,” he choked out, his eyes bulging within their sockets. He pointed the revolver, aiming it straight at Ryuhei.

“He doesn’t know what he’s doing,” Ryuhei pleaded, too softly for the man to hear. “Leave Kiyoshi alone.”

“How many have you killed this way?” Fahlong screamed. “How many lives have you stolen? Answer me.”

Ryuhei rose to his feet, his arms dangling at his sides. He blinked away the

rainwater that fell into his eyes, his body shivering from the cold and so much more besides.

The man would never stop hunting Kiyoshi, would never see reason again. Madness flashed in his eyes; he could barely hold the gun steady.

“Why did you kill my father?” Fahlong demanded. His voice cracked.

“Because I’m a fucking *monster*!” Ryuhei yelled.

“*You devil*,” Fahlong shrieked and the crack of the gunshot boomed inside the alley.

The force of the blow slammed Ryuhei against the brick siding.

He doubled over, gasping to take back the air that had been knocked out of him. Blood filled his mouth. A burning agony ripped through his stomach, making it all the harder to breathe or move.

Ryuhei pressed his hands to his belly, the pain blinding him, and a choked cry escaped his throat. The rainwater soaking the front of his *yukata* felt so hot. He stared down at his wet fingertips and blinked away the tears stinging the corners of his eyes until some of his vision returned.

The rain had turned red.

“Fahlong, what have you done?” The older man grabbed his nephew and wrenched him around. “You’ve shot someone.”

“This is the monster who stole my father’s life.” Fahlong struggled. His uncle knocked the gun away.

“You fool—look at how he bleeds.” His uncle moaned. “He’s a *human* man.”

Ryuhei slumped forward, one hand at his waist, the other on the ground for balance. The burning flared up inside his belly, a stabbing, searing agony that wracked his entire body. He tried to cry out again, but couldn’t catch his breath. His chest felt too heavy, each gulp of air brought such sharp, stabbing torture to his lungs.

“That’s not true,” Fahlong screamed. “He’s a *demon*.”

Ryuhei threw up. Blood and bile spilled past his lips.

“Oh God,” Fahlong gasped.

His uncle pulled him back. “Come away, hurry. Before the police come. Hurry.” They ran off, their footsteps echoing in Ryuhei’s ears after their blurred figures vanished.

Ryuhei pulled himself up, slipped and lost his balance. He slammed back against the brick wall and moaned.

“Kiyoshi,” he whimpered, stumbling forward. *Find Kiyo-kun...*

The body understood it was dying before Ryuhei himself did. His legs gave out just shy of the alley’s entrance. He dropped to the pavement, in too much pain to even cry out. He rolled onto his back and stared up at the utter blackness of the sky overhead. That crushing feeling in his chest worsened and when he coughed, more blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

And this damn rain getting in his eyes offered no comfort whatsoever.

Squeezing his eyes shut and shivering, Ryuhei laughed at himself. The sound died in a wet gurgle within his throat. In a village outside of Edo, he and Kiyoshi had run through the rain once. “What a pleasant memory to have now,” Ryuhei mouthed the words, the sound lost to his own ears.

“*Ryu-san.*”

Kiyoshi’s voice called from within that memory. Or perhaps it was real after all. Warm droplets splattered on Ryuhei’s cheeks—so different from the coldness of the rain. Soft hands cradled his head.

“Ryu-san.” Kiyoshi wept over him. “No.”

Ryuhei forced his eyes open and touched a bloody hand to Kiyoshi’s cheek, leaving a crimson stain on the pale flesh. “It is you.”

“No, no,” Kiyoshi repeated. He tried to lift Ryuhei off the ground, but the movement caused too much pain.

“It...hurts too much,” Ryuhei gasped. “Please, don’t.”

Kiyoshi trembled, moaning again when he saw the blood oozing through the fingers Ryuhei kept pressed against his belly. “The rain covered your scent until it was too late.” Kiyoshi’s voice trembled.

“Would you have come?” Ryuhei dropped his hand away.

Kiyoshi sobbed. “I’m so sorry.” He leaned forward, kissing Ryuhei’s brow and cheeks and lips. “I’m so *sorry*.”

“You’re here now.” Ryuhei smiled. It didn’t hurt quite as much anymore, but he couldn’t feel those tender kisses either. How sad...

“There’s not much left.” Ryuhei coughed, his eyes focusing on the crimson droplets that splattered on Kiyoshi’s chin. “Take what there is. Don’t let me linger to die this way.”

Kiyoshi stared down at the man in his arms, in too much shock to say more than an endless repetition of denial. “No, no, no.” His voice quivered. He held

Ryuhei tighter. “You won’t die. No.”

Tears flowed down his cheeks as he tore open Ryuhei’s *yukata*. Where the blood hadn’t spread, the skin was very pale. Lighter than even Kiyoshi’s own, more ashen, closer to the color of death. The bullet wound was small—the size of a coin—yet so much blood rushed out of it. Kiyoshi leaned over, dragging his tongue over and around the wound.

The flow of blood to the outside stopped as Kiyoshi’s saliva healed the opening, but that in itself meant nothing. The bullet hadn’t pierced through Ryuhei—the wicked little thing remained lodged inside the body after ricocheting on bone and tearing through so many of the soft, delicate organs. Ryuhei continued bleeding internally, his suffering just as pronounced on his face as ever.

Kiyoshi sobbed. “I’m sorry.” He clutched Ryuhei to his breast and sucked in a hoarse cry when he felt his lover’s heart stop.

Let him die.

Kiyoshi dropped Ryuhei to the rain-soaked ground. He covered his mouth with both hands and stared in horror and grief at Ryuhei’s still body, wet tangles of his loose, disheveled hair framing his colorless face.

This madness with the Dragon’s blood—only Ryuhei’s *mortal* love had given Kiyoshi the strength to overcome it.

This existence was not a real life at all some times...

Let Ryuhei die? Let the dearest love you’ve ever known slip away into nothingness because you’re afraid?

Ryuhei could only have thought the worst of Kiyoshi during these past few days, and still he came. He hadn’t been afraid. And now he was paying for it with his life.

Kiyoshi screamed and bit down into his own wrist. He gashed open the vein and bent low over Ryuhei. Pressing the bleeding wound to Ryuhei’s lips, he tilted Ryuhei’s head back with his free hand and prayed as much of the fluid would go down as possible.

The blood could heal the damage done—it had to.

The gash on Kiyoshi’s wrist healed itself and he tore into it again to try and work more blood into the man.

“Please,” he sobbed. “Ryu-san...”

So many minutes passed...and nothing. Kiyoshi dropped his wrist away, numb.

With a cry that rattled Kiyoshi’s very bones, Ryuhei suddenly jerked into a sitting position. He clutched at the front of his *yukata* and pressed his other

hand to his belly.

“Kiyoshi!” His scream died in his throat as he stared around him, his eyes wide. Kiyoshi grabbed Ryuhei’s shoulders, pulling him into an embrace. “Ryu-san,” he gasped and pressed his ear to Ryuhei’s chest, a relieved sob escaping him when he heard the erratic, but at least present, beating within.

“I was shot,” Ryuhei whispered hoarsely. He looked down at his waist, felt the healed bullet wound and stared at his bloodstained hands. “This is such an ugly thing.”

“I had to do it.” Kiyoshi’s voice broke. “You were dying.”

“I did die.” Ryuhei finally met Kiyoshi’s gaze, his face drawn and eyes still wide with shock or revulsion. Kiyoshi couldn’t tell. “You, you made me as you are?”

“Please don’t hate me,” Kiyoshi whimpered.

Ryuhei turned away and stared into the rainy alley where the oil still burned beside the corpse of the man.

Kiyoshi lowered his head. “I had to do this. I couldn’t let you die even if you do hate me. You’re alive and well and that’s all that matters.”

Ryuhei’s thoughts raced through a murky cloud in his mind. He felt so strange, the pain replaced by a detached tingling sensation in his limbs and at his waist. His mouth was full of the taste of blood—his own blood—Kiyoshi’s words ringing in his ears. He looked down at his waist again, blinking away the rainwater that clouded his vision.

The scars from the gunshot...the wound had bled terribly. But it had healed, leaving the skin pink as newborn flesh. Everything had been real. Ryuhei had been dying and Kiyoshi was here now.

“Say something, Ryu-san,” Kiyoshi whispered.

Ryuhei sat on his knees, his lips parted but no words formed. All of this felt so strange, his heart racing one moment, then slowing the next. He was disoriented, troubled and confused as he tried to sort the memories of everything that had just happened.

When Ryuhei didn’t—couldn’t—say anything, Kiyoshi assumed the worst. He rose to leave.

“Kiyokun,” Ryuhei cried out, finding his voice at last. “Don’t leave me again.”

“Never again, Ryuhei.” Kiyoshi dropped to his knees in front of him. He wrapped his arms around Ryu and held him so tight both men could hardly breathe. “Never again.”

“Let’s go away from here,” Ryuhei whispered. “Together.”

Epilogue

“How does it all look?” Ryuhei smoothed out the front of his vest and stared critically at his reflection in the narrow mirror nailed into place on the cabin wall. The bed creaked softly over his shoulder.

“Very European. And lovely, of course.” Kiyoshi came from behind, slipping his bare arms around Ryuhei’s trim waist. His skin gleamed in the moonlight filtering through the curtains in the round window, all but white against the deep crimson velvet. “Not that you could look anything less.”

Ryuhei smiled, his eyes bright and skin free of the lines of age or sorrow. He was eternally youthful and beautiful now, but more happily so, eternally loved.

“One day you might get tired of saying those flattering things to me,” he teased, resting his hands over Kiyoshi’s. “Not that I’ll tire of hearing them.”

“We have a long time to find out.” Kiyoshi’s lips brushed against the back of Ryuhei’s neck where his deep black hair had been cut short in a western style. “A very long time.”

Ryuhei turned, gathering Kiyoshi in his arms. He eased his naked lover back and onto the unmade bed, mindful of the gentle rocking of the boat in the ocean water, the faint sounds of foghorns rolling from the English shoreline still miles away but close enough for his keen ears to pick up. Mindful of the way his heart beat evenly in time with Kiyoshi’s, of the way their scents mingled and blurred from the weeks spent in this small cabin and enjoying each other’s bodies.

Closing his eyes, Ryuhei delicately pushed out with his thoughts as Kiyoshi had been teaching him to. “*I love you.*” He was rewarded with the silky warmth of Kiyoshi’s lips on his. Smiling, Ryuhei leaned away once the kiss ended and cupped his dear one’s cheek.

“Are you as happy as I am?” he asked aloud, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it anyway.

Kiyoshi pulled Ryuhei down completely on top of him and held him close.

“*Ah!* You’ll crease the suit,” Ryuhei teased playfully as he showered Kiyoshi’s neck and cheeks in kisses.

Kiyoshi laughed and caressed both sides of Ryuhei’s face. “Oh, Ryu-san.” He shook his head and smiled contentedly. “I’m more happy than I could ever say.” Looking off to the side, his eyes shimmered in the early evening light. “After so many years of wandering I’m not alone anymore. I’ll never be alone again.”

“Neither will I,” Ryuhei whispered.

About the Authors

Barbara Sheridan and Anne Cain started writing yaoi, a subgenre of m/m fiction, together in Fall of 2005. They have been having a blast ever since. Both authors have a soft spot for vampire lore, and their stories almost always have a supernatural or paranormal twist. Barb and Anne are also fascinated with Asian culture and mythology, from Chinese legends about *chiang shih* to *samurai* movies, anime and Japanese pop culture. They love their stories and are always thrilled to know others enjoy them as well.

To learn more about Barb and Anne, please visit www.dragonsdisciple.com. Send an email to Barb and Anne at poisoneddragon@dragonsdisciple.com or join their Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Barb and Anne! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dragonsdisciple/>

Look for these titles by Barbara Sheridan and
Anne Cain

Now Available:

Blood Brothers
Soul of the Night

Coming Soon:

Dragon's Disciple

Forbidden love and repressed desires of the past and present linger in the atmosphere of San Francisco's Chinatown.

Dragon's Disciple

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Available May 8, 2007 at Samhain Publishing

Dao Kan Shu, a *chiang-shih*, a vampire, hunts under the cover of darkness, his lust for blood and the craving of a once mortal heart awakened by an art student, Ken Ohara.

Drawn to a hot new nightspot, Ken discovers that his own hidden past is bound to that of the club's owner known throughout the Chinese underworld as *The Poisoned Dragon*. Fascinated by Shu's dark world, Ken is soon caught in a dangerous web of triad societies, blood lust and a strange relationship he can barely begin to understand.

Fine Arts professor Leigh Gachelsing, tormented since childhood with visions and spirits, discovers a link from the mysterious club owner to Chinatown's violent past where two assassins feared as demons once hunted the streets. He joins Ken's advisor, Magda Silivasi, who is determined to save her student before he is lost to the echoes of a past life and the deadly embrace of a vampire.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Dragon's Disciple*:

San Francisco , Present Day

It was like a dream. Ken felt as if he were a spectator watching Shu take his hand and lead him across the wide room into another—the bedroom. The older man's voice was like the alcohol, dulling his senses, slowing—no, wiping away his reaction time so that all he could do was follow Shu's lead.

He sat on the soft bed, engulfed by the weird feeling of having done this, here, with Shu before. He was transfixed by the older man's gaze. Those eyes so full of an inner fire he knew he'd never be able to capture properly on canvas. There was danger there, boredom...and was that a hint of sadness?

Shu closed his eyes. "Who are you looking for?"

"You?" Ken heard himself whisper.

Shu opened his eyes and frowned. He brushed his fingers along Ken's cheek.

"There can be no doubts," he hissed softly.

“I...” Ken swallowed, struggling to find something to say.

Shu pushed Ken back on to the mattress. He sank into the layers of black silk sheets. Shu leaned over him, still stroking his face.

“Tell me again, Kenichi...who?” Shu whispered.

That odd sense of familiarity, of having been here before with Shu, filled Ken again. He swallowed hard, though his mouth was becoming bone dry. He felt strange—happy and full of both longing and fear while a voice that was and yet wasn’t his own said, *He won’t hurt you. He’ll never hurt you.*

“I...” Ken closed his eyes and that freaky dream from before ran in shadows through his mind. His blood raced through his veins, pooled in his cock and jerked his balls with a burning ache. His fingers tangled in the silk sheets. His breathing became ragged. He hardly recognized his own voice. “I’ve been looking for you, Dao Kan.”

That voice...how he missed it...Shu’s breath caught in his throat as the memory assailed him.

“Toshiro.”

Shu cradled his lover’s head in his hands. He ran his fingers through the gray-streaked hair and stared into a face where the handsome lines of age were creased with pain.

Toshiro struggled for breath. Shu could hear the blood pooling in his lungs, drowning him. “I’ll find you again.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Shu whispered.

And after so many long, empty years of waiting, he’d been found at last...

Shu’s hands trembled and he grabbed Ken’s chin, facing him forward. He traced the young man’s lips with his thumb, brushed the tousled hair out of those aching familiar eyes. “My Toshiro,” he said softly.

With a smile full of longing, Shu leaned in close. He took Kenichi’s—Toshiro’s—lips in his own. Gentle at first, the warmth of the touch flooded his senses. He pressed into him, hungrily, desperately, and with enough force to bruise the young man’s full lower lip.

Ken was lost to the sensations coursing through him. He gripped Shu’s shoulders, kissing him back with the same hunger he was shown. He arched up, bringing their groins in contact enough to send a jolt through his rock-hard cock.

The need, the want, the sense of having felt this way with this man before, consumed him.

But it also frightened him as he felt the oddest shift in perspective. No longer was he watching from without, he was living it from within himself again. And now the truth hit him like a dead weight. He was kissing another man. He was turned-on like never before by another man. And he wanted this man to fuck him senseless now and forever. He broke from the kiss, his breathing ragged, his face covered in beads of cold sweat. “I-I-I’m, I’m not gay. I’m not. I can’t do this. Please. Let me go.”

Let him go? After all this time? Impossible! Shu gripped Ken’s chin and forced him back down onto the mattress. Fear clouded the young man’s eyes where only moments ago a passionate fire had consumed them.

“I’ve waited several lifetimes for this moment and you want to run away?” he said softly, his voice a dangerous whisper. “Don’t be stupid.” Shu leaned close. Ken’s breath blew against his cheek with each ragged gasp. It had the sharp odor of panic, and through it Shu felt that damned uncertainty again. He hissed and dug his thumbnail into Ken’s chin.

“You’re afraid...” Shu said. He leaned back, pulling his hand away from Kenichi’s face. He licked at the droplet of blood caught under his nail and his frown vanished. He laughed softly. “But this also...excites you. I can taste it in your blood.” Shu ran his hand down Ken’s chest, his fingers brushing down the hardness pushing at the front of Ken’s pants. “I can feel it in your body. I won’t let you go. Not again.”

Oh, God, it did excite him. It excited him more than he could believe. Ken felt that inexplicable shift in perception again but it was just for a second. And this time it was him thinking that he’d done this before, that he wanted to do this again and it was definitely his own voice echoing in his ears.

“I don’t want to leave.” He reached out, touching Shu’s face, peered deeply into those hypnotic and dangerous eyes. He tangled his fingers tightly in the thick black hair, pulling Shu’s face towards his own.

Shu leaned down into the kiss. He took hungry mouthfuls of Ken’s lips, greedily satiating a desire that had ached inside him for so long. This was who he wanted—who he’d waited endlessly for in boredom and loneliness.

He touched the sides of his face with gentle caresses, and pulled slightly away. Shu's tongue slid across and past Ken's lips until he found the small cut by his chin. He lapped at it tenderly, the intoxicating taste of the young man's blood calling to him.

Shu kissed the wound and smiled at him. His hands moved down to the front of Ken's shirt, slowly unfastening the buttons until the bare skin was revealed.

Ken groaned. Part of him still couldn't believe he was here doing this but he wanted to, needed to. Shu's touch was gentle but firm and so unlike the caresses of the girls he'd been with. He shivered when the cool air of the room touched the flushed skin of his newly bared chest. He raised himself up, tugged the shirt off then reached between them and fumbled with the button of his jeans. He tugged at the zipper, groaning again as lust swept through him fast and hard. "Touch me," he pleaded. "Touch me *everywhere*."

Shu bent his head and ran his tongue across Ken's small hard nipples, bringing another groan from Ken's lips. He writhed from Shu's expertise like someone out of one of Lok's porn movies, but he didn't care. "Touch me," he pleaded again, jerking at the constricting fabric of his jeans.

"I'll do more than touch you, Kenichi." Shu's tongue trailed up along Ken's throat and over his cheek. "I'll flood your senses...consume your very thoughts," he breathed into his ear. Shu's tongue flicked across the tender flesh of the earlobe, his hands brushed along Ken's arms and chest in fleeting strokes. "I'll devour you body and soul...because you're *mine*."

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