



ON
Wings of Blue
OF
ANNE CAIN

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On Wings of Blue

Anne Cain

Dedication

Barb, Tiffany, Debs, Bobbi—thank you helping my imagination to soar with your friendship and love.

Chapter One

Eiji plucked a few final chords and allowed the last mournful notes to echo from his *shamisen*. He set the instrument on the *tatami* mat beside his cushion and reached for the paper fan resting on the low, polished table before him. “That’s it?”

On the other side of the table, the castle’s elder musician raised a bushy eyebrow at the young man. “That’s the song you plan to perform tonight for Lord Fujiwara?”

“Yes,” Eiji replied, his tone listless.

The old man grunted. “Those somber notes will not sit well with him at all. He likes his entertainment to be joyful, pleasant.”

“But it’s the best I can manage.” Eiji fanned himself, refusing to meet the elder’s gaze. How he hated this small, stuffy room so close to the kitchens, where the heat of the stone ovens easily made its way through the walls of wood and paper. He had nothing but distaste for the silk kimono he wore, the padded cushion he rested on, this castle—everything. Eiji bit down on his lower lip to hold back a sigh of frustration, and glanced to his left.

A narrow part in the screens revealed a corner of the gardens, bathed in the late-afternoon sunlight. Plum blossoms drifted on the early summer breeze while butterflies danced through the air, flaunting their freedom with each flutter of their beautiful white and gold wings. The sight made Eiji long for his home in the mountains of Kyushu, far south from here. He was only a boy the last time he saw his father’s land, but he remembered it well enough to appreciate those carefree days he’d spent playing in the sun.

“You’re such an ungrateful brat,” the old man snorted. He set his cup of tea on the table. “Consider yourself lucky to be in the hands of such a fine new owner. He has a use for young ones with a talent for music.”

“I’m sure,” Eiji muttered bitterly. “Lord Fujiwara cares only for the arts.”

For the better part of a month, Eiji had been nothing short of a prisoner within these castle walls. Of course, Fujiwara merely proclaimed him a guest—albeit a *permanent* one. Before this “appointment” to the warlord’s court, Eiji had been part of a small, humble band of traveling musicians with no real aspirations for greatness. The group of young men possessed a love for music and a close friendship. That alone prompted them to remain together on the road.

On their way through the countryside to reach the capital, the group stopped for a night of rest at this particular village. They held a small performance to earn their stay at an inn, and ended up luring quite an audience within the establishment’s downstairs common area.

Guests drifted out of their rooms and leaned over the railing to listen to the music. Dozens of new customers drifted indoors, crowding the inn despite the dusky heat of the evening. The owner and his three daughters raced back and forth between the kitchen and the tables with cups of barley tea and melon cakes, casting appreciative looks at Eiji and his companions for the boost in business.

“Play us another song,” someone in the audience called out.

“Yes!” several other voices added until the exclamation was carried on the lips of all present.

Swept away in the moment, Eiji started playing a cheerful song on his *shamisen* to match the high spirits in the room. His companions joined in with their respective instruments, exchanging pleased grins.

Gauging the audience’s reaction, Eiji glanced out across the room. Everyone seemed happy enough, paper fans fluttering and heads nodding in time with the song. Quite a few women and more than half the men seated throughout the room returned his glances with coy looks of varying degrees. Eiji felt the heat spread across his cheeks.

It was always the same, no matter where the group of musicians went. Though he never said as much aloud, Eiji was the youngest and most talented among the other performers. His skill with *shamisen* could move even the most battle-worn samurai to

tears, or delight even the most cynical heart. And from the many kind and flirtatious words he heard after each concert, Eiji knew people found him very attractive.

He never saw that beauty in himself. After months of traveling on foot, a layer of dust always seemed to cling to his skin and the sun had left a splattering of freckles on the bridge of his nose. Eiji was only of average height, his hair an unremarkable length down to his shoulders and pulled back in a high ponytail to keep his neck cool. The strangest colors of gold and green flecked his eyes, which he knew were too large and round already—especially when compared to the elegant almond-shaped features of his companions. But enough would-be suitors—both male and female—propositioned him each night to make it clear to Eiji that he was an object of desire.

He shied away from this sort of attention, uncomfortable with the thought of sharing his body with just anyone. But the other performers in Eiji's company welcomed the extra coins smitten patrons tossed their way. No harm had ever come of it either—Eiji found most suitors were satisfied with a kiss or two, content to let their imaginations carry out the rest of their sexual fantasies. As such, he was more than happy to continue bowing and sharing a few coquettish smiles with the audience for the sake of his friends.

But everything changed that night.

As Eiji's gaze drifted out across the audience, a man pulled back the curtain at the entrance of the inn and stepped inside. Though casually dressed in an ash gray *yukata*, one sleeve hanging down his back so his right arm remained free of the robe, the stranger carried himself with an imposing air. Two curved swords were tucked through the black sash at his waist, one close to three feet in length and sheathed in black lacquer, the other shorter and encased in red. Light from the oil lamps in the room glinted on the gold carvings on each weapon's *tsuba*, the guard at the head of each leather-wrapped handle.

The man was certainly not one of the village's lower-class samurai who worked primarily as farmers until called on for service in battle.

Tall, broad-shouldered and with a piercing gaze that never drifted too far from Eiji, the samurai made his way along the side of the room until he stood close to the front of the audience. He leaned against one of the wooden beams supporting the stairs to the

inn's upper chambers, arms folded across his chest. Something more cold and cruel than the lust Eiji typically found in the eyes of his observers glimmered in this man's stare.

Distracted, Eiji struck a sour note on his *shamisen*. He tried to regain his composure, but floundered for the remainder of the piece. When the song ended, he stood from his mat and excused himself, despite the protests from his fellow musicians and many in the audience. Careful to avoid the stranger, Eiji cut through the crowd and started up the staircase as his friends resumed performing.

"Perhaps Lord Fujiwara's fancy is misplaced," a deep, commanding voice called out. A few men who'd gathered near the stairs, most likely to try luring Eiji into their beds, turned on their heels and bolted up to their rooms.

Before he even turned to address this stranger, Eiji knew it could only be the imposing samurai. The man stood just before the landing, arms still folded across his chest and that hint of cruelty darkening his already sharp features. He fixed Eiji with another piercing stare, one that cut straight to Eiji's core as sure as the *katana* at the man's hip would have.

"What amusement could my lord find in a child like you?" the samurai growled. His critical gaze drifted over Eiji's entire body as if to peel away the layers of clothing and reveal the nakedness underneath.

Eiji shrank away from that stare, holding his kimono closed at his chest. "I'm not sure I understand," he said quietly.

"You will," the samurai whispered. "Unless that pretty face of yours hides a very poor intellect. I doubt you're quite so innocent."

"Tsunayoshi." A man came up beside the samurai with a short, but respectful, bow. "We should hurry back to the castle with him. Our lord has been waiting too long already."

"So this *is* the one after all?" Tsunayoshi turned back to Eiji with another scowl. "The boy you went back to the castle to tell Lord Fujiwara about?"

This other man nodded, his stare also fixed on Eiji. "He is quite lovely. Sure to become a favorite of our lord's."

Tsunayoshi's expression darkened. "Yes. A pretty new toy that's easily broken."

Eiji clutched his *shamisen* at his side. "What are—?"

"You're coming with us," Tsunayoshi hissed over his shoulder. "Your *services* have been requested by the lord of this domain, Fujiwara-sama."

Eiji's eyes widened. "Why?" he stammered.

The fierce samurai whipped around, hand at his sword. "One more word in protest and I'll take pleasure in cutting you down," Tsunayoshi seethed. "You *and* all of your companions. Am I clear?"

Eiji backed into a wooden column, breath stuck in his throat. He managed a nod and the samurai pivoted back around.

"Let's go," Tsunayoshi snapped. His companion waited until Eiji fell in step before leaving as well, and the three men set out from the inn.

Two more vassals waited outside with a total of four horses, swords through their belts also. So many warriors were not necessary to capture one musician, and certainly not a young man still two summers shy of his twentieth year, whose skill with a sword was non-existent. They no doubt were here to help in serving the punishment for any trouble Eiji might have caused. How cruel their lord must be.

Eiji walked beside them through the dark village. The castle's crimson gates came into view over the crest of a hill, illuminated by paper lanterns and guarded by more vassals. Inside the courtyard, he was escorted to a bathhouse and made to undress. A maid whisked away his *shamisen* along with his dusty hemp kimono, while another returned with a white silk *yukata* and new slippers.

High-ranking court officials and lords never wasted this much effort on someone of such a common status as Eiji's. A concubine, however, might be lavished with such luxuries when it was expected that she—or he—would be servicing someone of importance. He imagined having to sleep with this heartless lord, taking the man's cock in his mouth or feeling the rigid organ deep within his body.

Nearly in tears, Eiji bathed and desperately tried to think of some way to get out of this situation. He'd never even fallen in love with someone—how could he give himself to a man he already despised?

In a little while, another vassal appeared at the bathhouse and led him into the castle proper. They entered a grand hall with polished wood floors and silk screens painted with cranes and flowers. The attendant bowed and Eiji did likewise. At the end of the hall, on a knee-high platform, sat Fujiwara.

“You are lovely.” The lord smiled and gestured for Eiji to approach. The long silk sleeves of his kimono grazed the floor as he returned his hand to his lap. He looked Eiji over from head to toe.

“Such graceful fingers you have, and a beautiful body also.” Fujiwara stroked his chin. “I'd like to see all these lovely qualities put to proper use.”

Eiji's cheeks burned and the lord laughed. He clapped his hands in amusement.

“Shy as well?” Fujiwara arched a black brow. “How charming. But I'm sure you're more skilled than you let on. Play something for me.”

The vassal who'd escorted Eiji into the room stepped forward with the *shamisen*. He laid out a mat on the floor, and Eiji sat to play a short song.

Fujiwara licked his lips. “Wonderful.” He reached for a fan on the waist-high table beside him. “I think I'm going to enjoy your company very much, Eiji. It's not often such talented and attractive guests come to stay at my castle.”

The lord leaned forward, snapping his fan open and batting the silk in a provocative manner. “I should like to see a different kind of performance from you.” Fujiwara licked his lips again. “What other *instruments* can you handle so skillfully?”

Eiji bowed until his forehead touched the mat. “As weary as I am now, I'm afraid I would be a clumsy performer.”

Laughing, Fujiwara dismissed Eiji with a wave of his hand. “Go and rest, then.”

Eiji backed out of the room as quickly as he could manage without tripping over his own feet. The maid waiting for him outside the room closed the *shoji* and led him

through the castle halls until they came to the back quarters. She showed him the room that was meant to be his and Eiji turned down an offer of a meal.

“I’m not hungry, thank you.” He retreated into the room and closed the door. Curling up on the futon that had been laid out for him, Eiji stared up at the ceiling feeling miserable to the core.

Days turned into weeks and Eiji’s unhappiness grew. He had no money of his own, no name or lord to cry to for help. His life belonged to Fujiwara now, a man whose greed Eiji saw first hand each day. No matter how many samurai Fujiwara had in service, how many lovely concubines dwelled in his private chambers or how much rice he ordered to be brought to the castle from the village farms, it was never enough.

The lord had any number of skilled musicians performing throughout the day within his courts, but now that also failed to satisfy.

Sitting in the hot, stuffy room behind the kitchens, Eiji turned to meet the stern gaze of the elder musician. In very fact, the older man was also a talented *shamisen* player, but Fujiwara wanted to take more than music to bed with him each night.

“Fujiwara is a tyrant,” Eiji cursed under his breath.

Across the table, the old man straightened with a little gasp. He leaned over and slapped Eiji across the mouth, just hard enough to sting the skin.

“Mind your tongue, boy,” the old man warned, “and use it only in service of and *on* Lord Fujiwara, unless you want to end up with a worse fate. The samurai who displease him are allowed to take their own lives in an honorable death, but yours won’t be anywhere near as kind.”

A woman called out softly from the other side of the closed *shoji*, asking for permission to enter.

“Come,” the old man barked. One of the castle maids knelt in the entryway, her head bowed so her long black hair draped over her shoulder.

“Lord Fujiwara would like to see Eiji-san.”

“Go on, then.” The elder musician settled back on his cushion, giving Eiji another harsh look. “And don’t you dare displease him.”

Chapter Two

Eiji gathered up his *shamisen*, bowed to the old man and followed the maid out. They walked through the castle halls and past large, open rooms fit to entertain a hundred guests or more. When they reached Fujiwara's private chambers, the maid knelt before the *shoji* and whispered through the part in the screen to a male attendant within. The vassal announced Eiji's arrival.

Muffled noises drifted through the closed door, followed by a throaty call for Eiji to enter. With her head bowed, the maid slid the *shoji* open and moved to one side. Eiji stepped in, doing his best to contain the gasp of shock that threatened to escape from his lungs.

Fujiwara lounged across a thick padded futon, his *yukata* open along the front to reveal the toned muscles of his chest and abdomen, his hair loose and brushing past his shoulders. A naked man knelt on all fours between the lord's knees, robes gathered in a bundle near his feet. He tossed his head back and Eiji sucked in another surprised noise as he recognized Tsunayoshi's profile.

A peal of laughter rolled off Fujiwara's tongue as he caught Eiji's gaze. The lord hunched over his lover, running a long-fingered hand along his spine. "Don't stop, Tsuna," Fujiwara breathed, leaning back. He traced his finger along the samurai's squared jaw before dropping a hand to his groin. He rubbed his hand along the erect cock glistening with Tsunayoshi's saliva and pushed his thumb back and forth over the tip as he let out a throaty moan.

Tsunayoshi bent low, taking the swollen head in his mouth. As he sucked in a series of drawn-out, undulating motions with his lips, he caressed Fujiwara's shaft with a trembling hand. He used his other hand to pump the erect cock between his own legs, the organ hardening until it pushed straight through his fingers perpendicular to his abdomen.

More of those muffled noises filled the room as Tsunayoshi brought Fujiwara to the cusp of pleasure. The warlord gave a shuddering cry, beads of perspiration trickling down the sides of his face and dotting his brow. He looked towards Eiji again and laughed, dark eyes flashing in the beams of golden light that filtered through the open windows.

“Join us,” he purred, gesturing to an open mat that had been laid out an arm’s reach from his own. To his lover, he commanded, “Make certain you swallow.”

Eiji hesitated before crossing the *tatami* and dropping to his knees on the mat. He kept his eyes focused on the woven braids of straw underneath his legs and did his best to ignore the raspy moans and gasps as Fujiwara climaxed only a few feet away. The warmth of the summer afternoon seemed to vanish and Eiji shivered, his stomach knotting.

“Enough,” Fujiwara grunted. He slapped Tsunayoshi across his backside. The sound was loud enough to make Eiji jump.

“Get out of here.” Fujiwara gestured to the doors through which Eiji had entered.

“Yes, my lord,” Tsunayoshi panted.

A shadow moved across the floor followed by the rustle of silk as the samurai shrugged into his robes. Eiji glanced up again and found Tsunayoshi staring at him. The samurai gave him a smug look, his wet lips curling up in a wicked smile, as he knotted the front of his robe closed.

“Tsuna,” Fujiwara drawled. “Your lingering is starting to displease me.”

The smile vanished from the samurai’s face. He skewered Eiji with a terrifying look full of hatred. To Fujiwara, he offered a final bow of respect and backed out of the room. Eiji watched him leave, flinching at the sharp sound when Tsunayoshi slammed the *shoji* shut.

But Tsunayoshi’s loathing made sense now. His loathing for Eiji stemmed from jealousy, a bitter resentment inspired by the passion the samurai felt towards his lord. Eiji would’ve been more than happy to leave Fujiwara to the samurai’s affections—hell, it most certainly had not been his choice to come to this castle.

Mouth dry, Eiji stared back down at the mat. The situation continued to worsen by the moment.

“You act as if such things are uncomfortable for you, Eiji-kun.” Fujiwara laughed.

Eiji cleared his throat. “Not at all, Lord Fujiwara.”

“Then look at me.”

Eiji tried to swallow and leaned back on his heels. Fujiwara was now sitting, his robe open to reveal his toned body and still very erect cock. The man obviously was not satisfied with the sexual efforts of his vassal, and he arched his lower back as if to display the persistent erection. Eiji averted his eyes, his heart pounding in his chest as his mind raced. What if Fujiwara intended for *him* to resume where Tsunayoshi had left off?

He steeled himself and met the lord’s gaze. “Yes?”

“So you are uncomfortable.” Fujiwara narrowed his dark eyes.

“Not at all,” Eiji lied, and rather unconvincingly even to his own ears. His voice cracked at the end of his words and he cleared his throat.

Another burst of laughter came from Fujiwara. “It would seem otherwise.” His mirth died and he eyed Eiji with a cold, even look. “Somehow, you’ve managed to avoid the invitations to my private chambers each night for the past few weeks. My feelings are going to be hurt.”

Eiji swallowed, choosing his words carefully. “I’m only a musician, hardly skilled at anything else.”

“With such full, sensual lips as yours, I don’t think you’d require much practice.” Fujiwara raised an eyebrow.

“I’d much rather entertain you with music.” Eiji smiled nervously.

“And so full of talent you are.” Fujiwara reached for a glass of sake from the table beside his futon. “Your music is the loveliest I’ve ever heard. I’d hate to even imagine you performing for someone else. In any capacity.”

Eiji had heard enough rumors through the castle maids to know that Fujiwara possessed a cruel and jealous heart. Stories of all the concubines and vassals the lord had murdered in a rage made Eiji’s heart skip a beat in panic.

“There’s no one but you to perform for, Lord Fujiwara,” Eiji said quietly.
Fujiwara sipped at the wine. “For your sake, I hope so.”

Chapter Three

Eiji carried his *shamisen* out to the garden, his heart still beating wildly from his encounter with Fujiwara. All manner of curses raced through his mind and for a wild moment he thought of trying to sneak out of the castle grounds. But he'd never get far enough to escape, not before Fujiwara's samurai hunted him down. Tsunayoshi being the worst of them all, with his sharp eyes and fierce voice that promised a certain death.

Voices drifted down the path from just beyond the blossom trees. Eiji rounded the corner and found a handful of Fujiwara's concubines giggling at something on the ground and poking it with the tips of their silk fans.

"Look at those lovely wings," said one of the girls, laughing.

"We could have them pressed into a book, or embroidered in a sash perhaps," another suggested.

Curiosity got the best of Eiji and he came up behind the group of women. A small butterfly with pale golden wings fluttered helplessly on the grass, too frightened or maybe too injured to fly away.

"Leave it alone," Eiji scolded the girls sharply. Startled, they scurried down the path to return to the castle.

After setting his *shamisen* down in the shade of a maple tree, Eiji doubled back to the kitchen. He asked one of the servants for a small bowl of warm water with honey then returned to the garden. There he found the little butterfly where he'd left it.

"Here you go." Eiji knelt on the grass and set the bowl close to the tiny creature. The butterfly fluttered up to the rim and sipped at the water.

"Better?" Eiji asked gently. The butterfly batted its wings with a little more strength this time and flew off into the garden.

With a sigh, Eiji sat beneath the tall, swaying branches of the maple trees and picked up his *shamisen*. Taking comfort in his music, he practiced until the skies started to turn a soft shade of rose and the sun dipped near the horizon.

Gradually, he became aware of more butterflies gathering in this corner of the garden. Some landed on the bowl to drink of the sweet water while others darted from blossom to blossom, their gossamer wings shimmering against the pink sky.

A butterfly far larger and more beautiful than the rest appeared among them. Its midnight blue wings were traced in the brightest gold, and a swirling pattern of silver decorated its body. Entranced, Eiji stared until this butterfly paused in mid-air just before him.

“Hello.” Eiji smiled. The butterfly fluttered around in a small circle, as if it meant to return the greeting.

Laughing at his silly thoughts, but nonetheless delighted with this new audience, Eiji started playing a lilting, happy song that seemed appropriate for his new friend. The beautiful creature landed on the neck of the *shamisen*, seemingly as spellbound as Eiji was.

When the piece ended, the butterfly fluttered its wings. The gesture was so much like one of gratitude or appreciation that it touched Eiji’s heart.

“Thank you,” he said softly, brushing his fingertip along one of the butterfly’s paper-thin wings. The butterfly fluttered up and landed on his outstretched finger. It weighed next to nothing, its touch a delicate little caress on Eiji’s skin.

“Something so beautiful needs the right name.” Eiji thought a moment. “Hakusa.” *Gossamer*, like the exquisite loveliness of the creature itself.

The butterfly fluttered off into the garden with a happy little dance through the air.

* * *

Every afternoon that followed in the rest of the week, Eiji would find himself in the company of the butterfly. He played his *shamisen* for hours, happier with the kindness of

this creature's company than he'd been since he could last remember. He was so caught up in the moment, he didn't notice the time pass until the last of the sunlight vanished.

He put his *shamisen* away while the butterfly fluttered around in the darkness, its wings all but sparkling in the faint light of dusk. "I guess it's time to say goodnight again." Eiji smiled, but sadness weighed heavily in his heart. Each passing day, it became harder to leave the gardens.

"You understand Lord Fujiwara is displeased with all this."

Eiji frowned and turned towards the stern voice that spoke to him from the stone path beyond the trees. Tsunayoshi cut a striking figure, silhouetted by the orange glow of the lanterns hanging from the castle veranda. Only one of his arms was tucked in the sleeve of his *yukata*, the other bare so he could better draw the *katana* or *wakizashi* tucked into his belt.

Picking up his *shamisen*, Eiji joined the samurai on the path and bowed. "All this?" Eiji asked, his mouth dry.

Tsunayoshi said nothing in reply, turning on his heel and striding off instead. But he projected an air of fury with each heavy, purposeful step he took towards the castle. Eiji followed, but at a distance. Apparently, the passage of time did nothing to cool Tsunayoshi's fiery envy. They walked in silence, leaving their sandals on the path before stepping up to the *engawa* and heading directly to Fujiwara's chambers.

This time Fujiwara, fully clothed, sat on a cushion atop the raised platform that lined the back wall. Dropping to his knees before the warlord, Eiji pressed his forehead to the polished wood floor. He waited in silence, trembling underneath the thin silk of his *yukata* despite the warmth of the night.

"Eiji-kun." Fujiwara's voice was soft, almost gentle. "When we last spoke, I feared the moments you played your *shamisen* for me each evening were brief enough. Yet, for the past few days you deprive me of your company entirely."

"I..." Eiji's words failed. No excuse seemed good enough and the truth—that Eiji preferred the solitude of the gardens with peaceful creatures like Hakusa—would make Fujiwara furious.

Fujiwara stepped down from the platform and knelt on the tatami beside Eiji. “Of all the court musicians I have, you are my favorite,” he whispered. The lust in Fujiwara’s voice sent a shudder through Eiji’s body. “Don’t make me take by force what is rightfully mine.”

The lord traced his fingers along Eiji’s shoulder and back. He slipped his hand around Eiji’s waist, and drifted lower to touch the length of Eiji’s cock through the silk.

“Such a lovely sex you must have,” Fujiwara purred.

Before he could stop himself, Eiji jerked away, his entire body trembling. A look of utter displeasure darkened the warlord’s face.

Fujiwara drew back, hands tightening into fists on his lap. “Who has charmed you away from me, Eiji?”

“No one, my lord,” Eiji said in a shaky whisper, his hands trembling at his sides

“Then what the fuck compels you to deny me!” Fujiwara shouted and Eiji flinched.

At the sound of his master’s harsh voice, Tsunayoshi stepped forward from the doorway. He raised his hand, hand poised to unsheathe his sword at the slightest hint of a command from his lord. Fujiwara raised a hand to stay the samurai.

“Answer me,” Fujiwara hissed, his eyes locked on Eiji.

“I...” Eiji stammered, his mind racing for an excuse that would be good enough to assuage the furious lord. “I’m only working on a new composition.” He swallowed. “A very special one.”

“Is that so?” Fujiwara returned to the platform, settling back on the cushions. “Then you will play this new composition for me immediately.”

“It—it’s not worthy for your ears yet.” Eiji bit down on his lower lip. “But when it is ready, it will be only for *you*. That’s why I practice in the garden—I want no one else to ever hear the notes that are yours alone.”

That seemed to change Fujiwara’s disposition greatly. He stroked his chin, the corners of his mouth turning up in a wicked smile. “The summer festival is in three days,” he said. “Make this composition ready within that time.”

“Of course.” Eiji bowed.

“Then you will perform it for me in my private chambers.” Fujiwara smiled, an expression devoid of kindness. “Before sharing my bed.”

Eiji pressed his head to the wooden floor, his mouth dry as rice paper. “Yes, my lord.”

Fujiwara dismissed him. Eiji stood then skirted past Tsunayoshi, who eyed him menacingly until he reached the end of the hall and turned towards the servants’ quarters.

Chapter Four

For two sleepless nights and days, Eiji stayed within his room. He turned away all meals, focusing only on the pieces of rice paper spread out before him on the tatami. He'd managed a few broken words of poetry, poor lyrics for a song that try as he might he could not bring to life on his *shamisen*.

"This is hopeless." Eiji gave up, slipping the musical instrument back into its cloth case.

A single tear rolled down his cheek and spilled onto the shiny black wood. Though Eiji certainly didn't want to die, the thought of never seeing Hakusa again hung heaviest in his heart. He'd spent so much of his life performing for others, but never felt any happiness truly his own. That he'd fallen in love with something so small and fine as that enchanted creature, he had no regret.

Eiji wiped his cheek dry with the back of his sleeve. Outside the window, the sky was already dark. Still, he hoped maybe Hakusa would be lingering in the garden. Eiji slipped out of his room, sliding the shoji shut behind him as quietly as possible so no one in the adjoining rooms would hear. He moved through the hall and stepped out onto the *engawa*, the veranda surrounding the castle.

Most of the preparations for tomorrow's festival celebration were going on in the Tsuki courtyard, the easternmost section of the garden. Eiji encountered no one else in this quiet corner of the grounds. He followed the stone path until all but the castle's pitched roofs were hidden behind the tall maple trees.

By the time Eiji reached his usual spot, the last of the sunlight had vanished. As he expected, there was no sign of those brilliant wings of blue on any of the surrounding blossoms. Crushed, he sat on the grass and leaned back against the trunk of a tree. He closed his eyes to keep the tears from slipping past his lashes.

"Please don't cry," a soft voice called out to him from overhead.

Overhead, a man probably no older than Eiji's own eighteen years perched on a tree branch. Long, flowing strands of silver hair framed his handsome face and swept past his shoulders, down his back. Delicately arched eyebrows furrowed in a look of concern as a hint of a pout tugged at the corners of his lips. He jumped down from the branch, landing silently on the ground beside Eiji.

The young man could only be one of Fujiwara's guests for the festival, and an important one from the manner of his dress. A thin line of gold traced the hem of the young man's jacket, which was painted with the most extraordinary pearlescent ink, a swirling, barely visible pattern decorating his robes. His *hakama* matched, the loose-fitting pleated trousers of indigo silk tied at his waist with a silver sash.

Pushing away from the tree trunk, Eiji gave a deep bow of respect. "Forgive me. I thought I was alone." He moved to leave and stopped when the young man reached for his hand.

"Don't go," the stranger begged. "You act as if you don't know me, Eiji."

Why the son of some upper-class samurai or lord would know the name of an entertainer, Eiji couldn't begin to fathom. He looked up in surprise and felt the heat spread across his cheeks as he studied the other man's face. The man's beauty stole Eiji's breath, while the gentleness in his hand made Eiji long to feel that touch everywhere.

"Don't you recognize me?" the man asked.

Eiji shook his head. "If I'd seen you before, I wouldn't be able to forget."

The young man caressed Eiji's cheeks. "I'm Hakusa," he said, smiling.

"What?" Eiji gasped, his eyes widening.

"It's true." The young man leaned close. "When you stopped coming to the garden, I kept waiting for you here. All that time, I prayed to the gods and begged them give me this form."

Eiji raised both eyebrows. "I've gone mad," he gulped. "Either that or you're a demon."

Hakusa laughed. “No, no.” He took Eiji by the wrist, his touch delicate and full of tenderness. He placed Eiji’s hand over his breast. “The heart that beats here doesn’t belong to a demon. It belongs to you.”

Eiji spread his fingers open on the silk. Beneath the cloth, the steady beat of a heart and warmth of a human body were unmistakable. The rhythm of the pulse quickened under his fingers, and a heated blush spread across Eiji’s cheeks. “It is all true then,” he breathed.

A smile dancing on those plump, playful lips, Hakusa closed his eyes. He lifted Eiji’s hand to his mouth and blew his warm breath along the first finger.

“Remember? I kissed you here.” Hakusa smiled. He pressed his silky lips to the side of Eiji’s finger.

Eiji’s heart skipped a beat at that gentle caress, a shiver of delight traveling down his arm and farther still. “I do remember.” Eiji bit down on his lower lip, his face burning. In a smaller voice, he added, “But I think I like the way *this* kiss feels even better.”

Eiji leaned in and touched his lips to Hakusa’s. The warmth from the other man’s body radiated through Eiji and his sweet taste, almost like honey, filled Eiji’s mouth. Drawn to this heat as it continued to spread through his body, Eiji pressed closer. Their mouths worked together in slow, rolling motions as the passion in their kiss deepened.

Eiji’s sex responded, his cock stiffening and rising below the folds of his robes. The swollen tip brushed against the silk, the touch gentle but erotic enough to make the organ harden even more. Moaning under his breath, Eiji broke out of the kiss. He’d never been so swept away by the desires of his body or of his heart.

“Mmm,” Hakusa murmured. “I think I like these kinds of kisses better too.” His mouth curved up in a smile as he lowered his gaze to Eiji’s lap, an expression both playful and seductive at once. “What else can we do with our lips?”

“You really don’t know?” A soft, breathless chuckle escaped Eiji.

“But my body is new.” Hakusa laughed also. “Please don’t tease me. I still have much to learn.”

Eiji’s blush deepened. “I can show you.”

“I hoped you’d say that.” Hakusa moved back in with a kiss. His lips traced a path down to Eiji’s chin, his eyelashes fluttering against Eiji’s cheek before he swept back up and kissed Eiji above the brow.

“Why are you so warm here?” Hakusa caressed both sides of Eiji’s face.

That gentle, fleeting touch was almost enough to crumble the last of Eiji’s self-control. “That’s not the only place I’m blushing.”

Hakusa smoothed a hand down Eiji’s chest and waist. His fingers grazed over the hardness tenting the front of Eiji’s robes and he bent low, lips replacing his hand as he continued to explore. Eiji sucked in his breath, his cock jerking up towards Hakusa’s kisses from underneath the cloth.

A whimper came from the back of his throat as his hips thrust forward, the ache in his sex undeniable. He wanted the velvety touch of Hakusa’s mouth on his cock and the caress of those full lips on his organ’s throbbing head. Eiji longed to slip the length into the depths of Hakusa’s mouth, to feel that warmth envelop, surround and claim his cock.

As if hearing his silent pleas, Hakusa drew open the robe. He rubbed at the hardness at Eiji’s front, freeing the swollen penis from the white loincloth at Eiji’s groin. Hakusa flicked his tongue over the head, lapping at the trickle of precome that glistened from the slit. Making soft sounds of contentment, he lapped his tongue down the length of Eiji’s sex and traced a path of kisses back to the tip.

Moaning as each of these suckling motions sent a wave of pleasure through his tense body, Eiji slid his fingers through Hakusa’s hair. He cradled the back of the young man’s neck as his hips pumped forward of their own accord, driven by a need for release. His cock bathed in kisses and sucked on with firm but gentle tugs, Eiji squeezed his eyes shut and tilted his head back.

An orgasm spiraled through Eiji, sending him over the edge of restraint. A burst of come jetted from his cock, the wetness spilling out of him as he gave a short, breathless cry. Hakusa placed a steadying hand on Eiji’s hip, the other holding the base of Eiji’s erection while he feverishly lapped at the head.

A short final spurt came out of Eiji as the pull in his groin receded. Spent and panting, he leaned back against the tree trunk. “Hakusa,” he breathed.

The young man drew back, his lips glistening with a mixture of his own saliva and Eiji’s come. “I’m for you, my love,” Hakusa whispered.

Eiji brushed his fingertips over Hakusa’s cheeks and across his forehead. He felt each eyebrow, touched the soft thick lashes framing Hakusa’s exotic silver eyes, let his fingers graze those silky lips. “So you chose this form because of me?” Eiji whispered, his mind and heart still reeling.

“From the moment you first sat out here and filled the garden with your beautiful music, you had me enchanted,” Hakusa explained. “When I saw your kindness to my children the day you saved one of my sons from those castle girls, I fell completely in love with you.”

“Children?” Eiji asked.

“I’ve hundreds.” Hakusa spread open his arms, laughing playfully. “Maybe thousands—I’ve lost track.”

“Obviously.” Eiji gave him a skeptical look.

“I’m serious.” Hakusa waved his hand through the air. “At the end of summer, they follow the winds south to find warmer weather. Most of them forget the way back here afterwards and I never see them again.”

“That’s kind of sad.” Eiji scratched the back of his head.

“Not really.” Hakusa grinned. “It’s in their nature to be free and beautiful, I’m happy for all of them as long as *they* are happy.”

“I’ve never known such love,” Eiji sighed, tucking a few strands of silver hair back behind Hakusa’s ear. Oh, he knew lust well enough, having seen it on Fujiwara’s face and in the eyes of his audience during performances.

“But now you’ll know it forever.” Hakusa smiled, and the beauty of his expression forced Eiji’s heart to skip a beat. Hakusa leaned forward, his lips parted and eyes half closed.

It took all of Eiji's willpower to pull back before they kissed. Hakusa gave him a hurt look, a pout tugging on the corners of his mouth.

"Have I done something wrong?" he asked.

Eiji shook his head. "Never." Earlier, he'd been too overwhelmed by the heat of their shared passion to consider any danger. Now the threat of Fujiwara's jealous rage sank in, sending a cold shiver up Eiji's spine. "But we'll both be killed if we're caught like this." He could just imagine Fujiwara ordering Hakusa's execution in a fury, and Tsunayoshi more than happy to personally serve out the punishment. Eiji rested his forehead in his hands, trying not to imagine Hakusa suffering at the hands of the warlord or his ruthless samurai.

Hakusa cupped Eiji's chin. "Are you talking about that lord?" He chuckled, almost dismissively. "He won't do anything to us, Eiji."

"You don't know him," Eiji insisted. "He's a greedy, selfish man."

"I've been around longer than you might expect." Hakusa winked. "I know just how much of a petty lord Fujiwara is."

"Then we should stop." Eiji's shoulders slumped forward. "And you should leave before I cause you any trouble."

"I have a better plan." Hakusa gave him a comforting smile. He leaned forward and pressed his lips close to Eiji's ear to whisper, "We're leaving this place tonight."

Eiji's eyes widened. "How?"

"Trust me," Hakusa assured him. Slipping his arms around Eiji's waist, Hakusa drew him into an embrace. Their bodies pressed close together, so once again Eiji felt the steady beating of the other man's heart through their robes. So much warmth and this quiet sense of strength radiated from Hakusa's body and into Eiji's own. He'd never felt more content, more loved, than he did now.

"Let's leave right now," Eiji murmured against Hakusa's chest. "While they're all distracted with the festival."

Hakusa squeezed Eiji's shoulders. "Yes." He grinned, standing up and helping Eiji to rise. He glanced around at the floor and clicked his tongue. "Ah, you forgot your *shamisen*."

"Damn." Eiji clenched his jaw. "I'll go get it."

"No, it's all right," Hakusa assured him. "We'll find another later on."

"I don't want to leave it here." Eiji frowned.

Hakusa squeezed his hand. "Go quickly then."

"Wait here." Eiji slipped away and ran down the path towards the castle.

Chapter Five

Two concubines knelt on either side of Fujiwara, the ornaments in their hair making a soft tinkling sound as the young women moved to serve him sake and fresh rice dumplings. The lord swatted them away with an irritated huff. “Get away,” he spat, refusing to acknowledge either the food or drink.

He slapped the closed handle of his *tessen*, an iron fan that also doubled as a weapon, on the floor before him. The sound of the metal clanking on wood echoed sharply in the alcove. “Tsunayoshi!”

The samurai stepped out from under the covering a few paces ahead of Fujiwara, where he had also been watching the entertainment for the summer festival. “Yes, lord.” Tsunayoshi bowed deeply.

“These musicians and actors bore me.” Fujiwara narrowed his eyes at the group of performers across the way.

“They are the finest in the province,” Tsunayoshi said

“But I don’t give a shit about them,” Fujiwara growled. He turned his glare to Tsunayoshi. “Where is Eiji? It’s time for him to debut the new song promised to me.”

The samurai bowed again and moved to leave. “I will bring him immediately.”

“Tsunayoshi,” Fujiwara called out and the vassal paused in mid-step.

“Yes, my lord?” Tsunayoshi regarded him.

“Make sure he understands I’m *not* to be disappointed,” Fujiwara hissed.

Tsunayoshi’s hand immediately moved to the handle of the sword tucked into his belt. “I will see to that personally.”

* * *

Eiji slipped into the castle through an open door on the veranda. He had left his sandals on the stone path in the garden, and moved through the empty hall without

making a sound. Although the way his heart pounded in his chest he almost had himself convinced someone would hear the beating.

Not even the servant girls or lesser vassals seemed to be about. The festival called on everyone in service to the lord to be assisting with the celebration in some way or another. Eiji made it all the way to his room without incident and slid the *shoji* aside.

Silver streams of moonlight filtered through windows, illuminating everything just as a lamp might have. All was as he'd left it earlier in the evening. The sheets of poetry scattered across the floor, the blankets and bed clothing a rumpled mess on the futon and his latest meal shoved in the corner, untouched. In the midst of his notes was the *shamisen*, waiting to be rescued, same as Eiji.

He picked up the instrument and placed it carefully in its cloth case. He took nothing else, left quickly, his thoughts only on Hakusa waiting for him in the garden. He was careless.

As he reached the end of the hall and darted out onto the *engawa*, Eiji ran headfirst into Tsunayoshi.

With a gasp, Eiji fell back onto the wooden floor, his *shamisen* landing beside him.

"Where are you running to?" Tsunayoshi scowled. Kicking the instrument aside, he lunged forward. He grabbed Eiji by the collar and shoved him against the wall of the house.

"I—I—" Eiji stammered.

"He's running away with me."

Tsunayoshi whipped around. "Who the hell are you?"

Hakusa stood at the foot of the veranda, his silver eyes flashing. "That's none of your concern. But you can give our farewells to your master on our behalf."

"So, it is as Lord Fujiwara said. Eiji has been carrying on as a *whore* and you are the one he's been servicing." Tsunayoshi drew his sword. "The only message I'll carry to Lord Fujiwara concerning this betrayal will be written in your blood."

“No!” Eiji pushed off the wall and lunged at the samurai. But Tsunayoshi’s reflexes as a warrior were far sharper. He pivoted around, the deadly edge of the *katana* flashing as the blade cut downward in an arc.

A flash of blue and gold silk swirled between Eiji and the path of Tsunayoshi’s sword. Strong arms wrapped around Eiji and lifted him off the ground, the wind rushing about him. He heard the sound of wood cracking as the sword crashed through the floorboard and Tsunayoshi cursed. “Damn you!”

Eiji opened his eyes and found himself safe in Hakusa’s arms as they crouched on the stone path a few paces away from the veranda. “Gods,” he breathed. Hakusa’s eyes flashed with an unearthly beauty.

Tsunayoshi pulled his sword out of the floor with a snarl. “A sorcerer,” the samurai hissed.

“If only.” Hakusa grinned at Eiji. “Let’s go!”

He pulled Eiji to his feet and they sprinted down the stone path hand in hand. Behind them, Tsunayoshi shouted for aid. Hakusa quickened his pace and sprinted silently along the path while Eiji ran barefoot just behind him.

The path wound through the maple trees. Eiji caught a fleeting glance at the spot where he’d been with Hakusa only a few moments ago. How quickly things had changed. They reached the crest of the hill and found themselves staring down at the end of the path. The castle wall loomed before them, more than twice the height of a man, the stones black and ominous in the darkness.

“Oh no,” Eiji panted. But Hakusa gave his hand a reassuring squeeze.

“We haven’t been caught yet,” he assured Eiji.

Just off to the right side of the path was another maple tree. Hakusa ran towards it. Before Eiji could give a gasp of surprise, Hakusa leapt up to the lowest branch—one a good three feet beyond the reach of a tall man—lifting Eiji along with the greatest of ease. They climbed farther up the tree, Hakusa bouncing from branch to branch as if weightless, Eiji right at his side.

At the highest branch, Eiji made the mistake of looking down. He clutched at Hakusa's jacket, dizzy and frightened. "Oh gods." Eiji's voice came out as little more than a squeak. "We're so high up."

Hakusa stopped just long enough to kiss Eiji on the forehead. "Trust in me."

And Eiji did—with all his heart. Closing his eyes, he held fast to Hakusa as they sprinted right to the end of the branch.

Nothing but the night air surrounded them the moment their feet left the branch. Eiji felt the coolness of the wind on his face and blowing through his hair, his body carried forward on the breeze as free as any bird or kite. He opened his eyes and caught a glimpse of the village spreading out beneath them.

Row after row of rooftops swept past as hundreds of people swarmed through the maze of streets and avenues for tonight's festival. Fireworks burst in the sky around Eiji, their colors more vibrant and alive than they'd ever seemed to him as a spectator anchored to the ground. He glanced back down and the village gave way to sweeping farmlands. He soared past the rice fields and ponds, all mirrors reflecting the silver beauty of the moonlight overhead.

But the earth was greedy to claim them once again. The air's cool kisses across Eiji's flushed cheeks came to an end as they lost speed. Eiji and Hakusa sank lower through the sky as they came up to the edge of the wild forests at the foot of the mountain. Together, they landed as gently as a feather touches upon the ground.

A sigh of awe passed over Eiji's lips. He ran both hands through his tousled hair, unable to stop the huge grin from spreading across his face. He whirled around, laughing with more joy than he'd felt in his entire life. "That was incredible—!"

"Oh, that was nothing." Hakusa laughed weakly. "I used to be able to fly much farther, when I had wings..." His words trailed off as he fell to his knees.

"Hakusa!" Eiji dropped beside him, catching him before he toppled to the side.

"I'm all right." Hakusa offered a small smile. But the color had drained from his skin and his eyes lost some of the exotic glimmer. "Just tired."

He shivered and Eiji held him close. “I’m not a fool.” Eiji swallowed. “You’re losing your strength in this mortal body.”

“But it’s a very small price to pay.” Hakusa leaned into the embrace, nuzzling the side of Eiji’s neck. “And one I willingly pay for you, my love.”

Each word struck a chord in Eiji’s heart. He cradled the back of Hakusa’s head as he covered the man’s cheek with one soft kiss after another. Hakusa’s hands moved over Eiji’s back as he tilted his face up to meet Eiji’s lips with his own.

Hoof beats thundered in the distance along with the angry cries of samurai prepared for battle. Eiji pulled out of the kiss with a strangled cry.

“Those are Fujiwara’s men.” He cursed under his breath and eyed the crest of the hill with worry. “Damn him—why does he even care? I’m not worth anything to him!” Eiji helped Hakusa to stand and gave another cry when he saw Tsunayoshi thunder over the hill ahead of the others.

“We have to hurry.” Eiji moved towards the forest with Hakusa leaning on him for support. The horses would have trouble in the underbrush, giving them just enough time to hide.

Hakusa stopped and leaned against a huge camphor tree—its trunk alone had a girth to rival the width of some of the halls in Fujiwara’s castle. Eiji doubled back and tugged on Hakusa’s jacket. “Please,” he begged. “Hurry.”

Pressing a finger to Eiji’s lips, Hakusa looked up at the branches spreading out overhead. “Ancient One,” he pleaded in a low whisper. “Will you help an old friend?”

The tendrils of leaves swayed in the breeze, the rustling like hundreds of hushed whispers. The pungent scent of its sap filled the air, similar to the smell of pine trees but fresher, sharper. Branches creaked and twigs snapped in a series of sharp cracks that drowned out the sound of the approaching samurai. Eiji jumped as a tremor moved down through the trunk, making the very ground quake beneath his feet.

Hakusa moved behind the tree, wrapping himself around Eiji. “No matter what happens, stay close,” he breathed in Eiji’s ear. “The Ancient One is very dear to me, but also very blind.”

“‘Blind’?” Eiji asked.

“He has no eyes,” Hakusa explained, “but feels every breeze through his leaves and branches, and senses all vibrations in the earth through his roots.”

“Like their footsteps,” Eiji whispered.

Hakusa nodded and brushed a hand gently over the tree’s bark. “Stay very still in my arms, Eiji. He might not recognize you until it’s too late.”

Eiji nodded, though he had no idea what Hakusa meant. But he trusted his companion and asked no more questions. Pressing his lips together in a tight line as he waited for what might happen, he leaned in close to his friend’s body and tangled his fingers in Hakusa’s coat.

Tsunayoshi pulled up to the very entrance of the forest, about a dozen feet from where Eiji and Hakusa stood. The samurai dismounted from his horse as the other warriors caught up.

“Eiji!” Tsunayoshi shouted. “No matter where that devil carries you, we will find and kill you on Lord Fujiwara’s word. Come out and face this punishment so you may die with whatever is left of your dignity, you *whore*.”

Eiji flinched within Hakusa’s arms. He glanced up and for once saw that any trace of that gentle smile had vanished from Hakusa’s lips. Hakusa narrowed his eyes as he looked out into the clearing.

“Instead, show us with what dignity *you* plan to die,” Hakusa called out.

Tsunayoshi turned towards the sound of Hakusa’s voice, sword already in hand. “You’re another bastard who will feel the taste of my blade tonight,” he growled as he moved under the branches of the camphor tree.

The earth buckled beneath Eiji’s feet and a deep, rumbling groan vibrated through the camphor tree. Hakusa held him close against the trunk, as the branches cracked overhead. Those long trailing leaves whipped through the air in a series of high-pitched whistles that made Eiji’s ears ache and tears spring to his eyes. He peered over Hakusa’s arms, his vision not so blurred that he couldn’t make out Tsunayoshi stumbling to the ground.

As the man struggled to regain his footing, a tendril wrapped around his left ankle and hoisted him into the air. Terrified, the horses reared and threw off the samurai mounted in their saddles. The men hit the ground, and in a panic, turned heel and ran. Tsunayoshi himself roared with fury and slashed his sword through the air.

He sliced through the tendril and hit the ground, hard. Another groan echoed from the camphor tree, its branches whipping and cracking through the air. Blood gushing from his nose, Tsunayoshi rolled onto his feet. He swung his sword around, cutting through the air like a madman.

More tendrils surrounded him, coiling around his neck and wrists and ankles until he could move no more. The camphor tree lifted him back into the air, tightening its hold. At last, Tsunayoshi lost the grip on his sword. He opened his mouth and shrieked, the last of his courage gone.

Another groan shook the tree down to its gnarled roots. The leaves whipped around through the air in a fury while those binding Tsunayoshi pulled taut. A terrible wrenching sound, like a cross between thunder and the ringing timbre as a metal smith pounds fresh steel, drowned out the man's screams. The tree snapped its tendrils back and Tsunayoshi scattered throughout the clearing in pieces.

With one final tremble, the camphor tree shook its branches and settled down into a state of complete stillness. Not even the breeze rustled its leaves anymore. One of the bravest samurai, who'd remained behind to watch the ordeal, ventured just close enough to retrieve Tsunayoshi's head, then he bolted away towards the village on foot, his horse long gone.

Chapter Six

Eiji turned away from the scene, pressing his back against the trunk. He tried to speak but the wonders of all that had passed caused words to fail. Hakusa leaned over him and stared down at the ground, unable or unwilling to look at the bloody mess beyond the trunk.

“I don’t think Fujiwara will pursue you again.” Hakusa dropped his hands to rest on Eiji’s hips.

Eiji threw himself into Hakusa’s arms, covering his dear one’s neck and cheeks with kisses. Hakusa caressed both sides of Eiji’s face and stepped back, encouraging Eiji to follow with his fleeting touches. They moved deeper into the forest, finding a path through the underbrush

Hakusa led the way, reaching behind him to take Eiji’s hand. A glade soon opened up before them, bathed in silver light from an opening in the canopy overhead. Beneath their feet, a thick carpet of soft moss and the fallen blossoms of the surrounding cherry trees spread out across the earth. A brook cut a path along the opposite end of the clearing, with the bubbling murmur of fresh water.

“We can rest here for tonight,” Hakusa suggested, letting go of Eiji’s hand.

An ethereal aura lingered over this glade, reminding Eiji very much of his companion. The trees appeared young and fresh, without the deep lines of age that marred the bark on trunks. But their branches reached high towards the starry heavens, thick with leaves and more blossoms to replace those that had fallen. The trees were ageless, young and ancient both at once. Like Hakusa.

Eiji crossed the small enclosure and knelt beside the brook. He sipped at the liquid, cool in comparison to the warmth of the summer night, and splashed his face clean of all the dried tears. He could hardly believe all the things he’d experienced tonight, the love

he felt between himself and Hakusa the most wonderful of all. Eiji sat back on his heels with a contented sigh and looked over his shoulder.

Hakusa stood in the center of the glade, undressing. Slipping off his *haori*, he spread the jacket open over the ground like a makeshift bed. He unfastened the ties at his back to loosen his *yukata* and tilted his head as if sensing Eiji's stare. With one of those sweet, gentle smiles that never strayed too far from his lips, he let the robe fall away from his body.

The moonlight highlighted the definition of the muscles along his lithe form. A breeze stirred the shimmering strands of his hair, brushing them over his shoulder to reveal his naked backside. Swirling patterns traced in silver followed the curve of each shoulder blade, glimmering almost the same as his hair. His back tapered to a trim waist, and past that, the shadowy hint of a dimple formed above each buttock. Hakusa turned, revealing the well-defined muscles on his chest and belly. Below his abdomen, a thatch of silver curls surrounded the base of his growing erection.

Eiji released his breath in a low sigh. The blood rushed through his body, his cock swelling in response. He dropped his hand in his lap and touched himself with trembling fingers. His sex had never felt so hard or reacted so prominently as it did with desire for Hakusa.

Eiji's gaze returned to Hakusa's cock, now standing almost straight up, parallel to his toned abdomen. He ached to take the weight of that organ in his hand, to taste the droplet of precome beading on the tip or feel the shaft push deep into his body. Rubbing his hand over the stiffening cock in between his own legs, Eiji let out another shuddering breath.

Across the glade, Hakusa held out a hand towards Eiji. "Lie next to me."

"Hakusa." Eiji felt himself blush, his cheeks burning as if with a fever.

"Make love with me." Hakusa moved forward, his erect cock bobbing with each step. "Please."

No force on earth or in the heavens could have kept Eiji from rising to his feet. Pulling on the ties of his clothing as he approached, he loosened the front of his robe. He

met Hakusa halfway, their bodies only a hand's width apart, their heat radiating between them.

"I love you, Eiji," Hakusa whispered. His fingertips danced along both sides of Eiji's face in a caress and swept down to glide along his collar. Hakusa gently pulled the material away from Eiji, slipping the kimono off his shoulders. He dipped in, claiming Eiji's lips in a slow, open-mouthed kiss.

Sighing into Hakusa's mouth from the pleasure of the silky show of affection, Eiji leaned in towards the embrace. Hakusa's hands drifted downward, running along the sides of Eiji's body and settling on his hips. Their erections met, the sensitive tips rubbing together as the two men moved closer.

Gasping, Eiji tilted his head back. He shrugged out of his robes entirely, letting the material tumble down around his ankles. He stood naked before Hakusa, smiling even as he felt his blush deepen. Nothing stood between them now, free to indulge and explore each other in the most intimate of ways.

Sliding his arms around Hakusa's waist, Eiji closed his eyes. "I'm afraid that I'll wake up tomorrow and find this is just a dream."

Hakusa pressed close, and Eiji felt the other man's erection swell against his hip. "Sleep with me now so when you wake up in my arms tomorrow you'll know it's not." Hakusa laughed softly.

Eiji showered Hakusa's neck and cheek with kisses, Hakusa's sweet, unearthly taste filling his mouth as it had the first time their lips touched. Hakusa smoothed his hands down Eiji's back, his fingertips brushing the curve of Eiji's rear and drawing him close.

Murmured words of pure happiness passed from Eiji's lips and he gave himself completely to their embrace. Hakusa guided him towards the center of the glade until they stepped onto the smooth silk of his open coat.

Together, they eased down onto the makeshift bed. Eiji sought out Hakusa's lips, drawing them into another passionate kiss that made his body tremble. His tongue slipped into the warm depths of Hakusa's mouth, savoring that sweet floral taste unique to this man.

Wordless sounds of happiness and pleasure vibrated between them. Hakusa moved his hands up and down Eiji's hips, his fingers gliding on the sweat-coated skin. Reaching down past Eiji's hips, Hakusa brushed his fingertips along the throbbing length curving upwards from Eiji's groin.

Moaning into Hakusa's mouth, Eiji arched his back. His hips pushed forward into Hakusa's touch, more blood rushing to his already erect cock. Hakusa leaned back onto the bedding and Eiji tumbled after him. They rolled over on the silk, Eiji shifting until he lay beneath his lover.

His lover. Those two simple words sounded incredibly beautiful to Eiji. A shiver of pleasure traveled through his body and he sighed.

Hakusa moved a hand between them, touching and feeling his way across Eiji's chest. He kissed Eiji's mouth and throat, pausing to suck on each taut nipple as his hand continued its explorative path. He found Eiji's cock, stroking the firm length as a pleased groan vibrated in Eiji's chest.

Eiji writhed, his hips rocking upward in time with the steady pace Hakusa used on his sex. A trickle of wetness oozed from the slit on his cock, helping Hakusa's hand to glide over the pulsing organ. Eiji arched, rubbed at Hakusa's back with both hands, feeling the muscles along the shoulder blades flex.

A soft whimper escaped Hakusa. He sat up and brushed some of the long strands of hair away from his sweaty brow, panting heavily. "Touch me there again," he begged, stretching out face down beside Eiji.

"Oh," Eiji breathed. The silver patterns tracing Hakusa's shoulder blades appeared more brilliant, more pronounced with his arousal. Eiji moved his fingertips over the swirls, Hakusa gasping and arching up on his elbows. The skin there was so sensitive the touch was as erotic as if Eiji were lavishing the attention on Hakusa's sex.

Continuing to fondle the markings, Eiji felt the pull in his own cock. Wave after wave of ecstasy coursed through Hakusa, visible in the young man's expression of pleasure. Eiji leaned over him and again brushed the patterns, using his lips instead of his

fingers. A spasm jolted through Hakusa, his muscles tightening and flexing under Eiji's mouth and tongue.

The need for release swelled within Eiji. He drew back onto his knees and gripped his hard, engorged cock. Sucking in a shuddering breath, he pumped a hand over the throbbing length and held fast onto the thick base with his other.

Panting, Hakusa rolled onto his side and sat up. He moved his hand over Eiji's before taking over the jerking strokes with smooth, purposeful tugs of his own. Eiji whimpered, spreading his legs open out of reflex as his cock pulsed in Hakusa's grip. He leaned in close, reaching down to take Hakusa's erection in his hand as well.

Hakusa moaned, his penis heavy and flushed in Eiji's palm. He pushed in with his hips, encouraging Eiji to tug on the thick length. "Harder," he pleaded in a trembling whisper, massaging the taut sac below Eiji's cock with firm but gentle fingers.

Rubbing both hands along the organ, Eiji quickened the pace of his strokes. He groaned as Hakusa did the same, and they fondled each other with a mixture of tenderness and desire. Their bodies trembled as they each brought the other close to their peak, precome spilling down their erect cocks.

Eiji cried out as a shudder of pleasure spiraled through him. Come erupted from his cock, bursting into Hakusa's hand. The wetness splattered through Hakusa's fingers onto his belly, glistening in the moonlight. Eiji watched Hakusa close his eyes and tilt his head back, lips parted in a silent cry. A moment later, he felt Hakusa tremble in his hands and a hot, wet gush of fluid emptied into Eiji's fingers.

Breathing heavily, they collapsed back onto the silk robes. Hakusa cradled Eiji close, kissing him and murmuring, "I love you so much." But his cock remained hard and erect, pushing up against Eiji's waist.

"You haven't emptied yet," Eiji panted, shifting his lower torso off Hakusa to relieve the pressure.

"It's enough to share your happiness." Hakusa kissed his brow. He repeated those same tender words he'd used in the garden. "I'm for you, Eiji."

His heart overcome with love, Eiji straddled Hakusa's upper thighs. He rubbed his hands over Hakusa's cock, spreading the warm come over the entire organ until it glistened with the creamy fluid. The shaft stabbed up through his fingers, wet, hot and throbbing.

Eiji raised himself on his knees and positioned his backside over his lover's rigid cock.

"Eiji," Hakusa breathed.

Eiji placed a fingertip over Hakusa's lips. "Please."

He lowered himself onto the cock. The engorged head found the opening between the rounded cheeks of his rear, stretching it wide as it pressed in. Eiji stiffened, a groan catching in the back of his throat as his anus flexed around the thick, wet sex. Hakusa grabbed his hips, supporting his weight.

"It feels good," Eiji assured him, breathless. And by the gods in heaven, how good it did feel. He pressed down, that firm cock pushing deep into his ass. The muscles in his passage contracted around the length, the tender glands within sending waves of pleasure throughout Eiji's body as they were stroked.

Pushing all the way down, Eiji settled on top of Hakusa. The downy silver curls surrounding the base of Hakusa's erection brushed against the edges of Eiji's stretched opening. He whimpered at the delicate feel of the hairs brushing against his sensitive entrance, his sex hardening all over again. Rocking back and forth against the rigid shaft buried in his ass, Eiji rode Hakusa's cock.

A throaty groan bursting out of him, Hakusa snapped forward. He grabbed the sides of Eiji's waist and moved his hips in a series of thrusts that shoved his penis deeper still. All of the sensation in Eiji's body centered on that pulsating organ in his ass, more cries tumbling from his lips as the friction of his movement made his entire body quake.

Hakusa cried out and Eiji squeezed his eyes shut. A gush of hot fluid erupted deep inside his passage, soothing the friction on his contracting muscles. Another spurt followed and Eiji squirmed, filled so completely with his lover's cock and semen he

thought he might burst. Another orgasm shot through him, a few more spurts of come splattering onto Hakusa's belly as Eiji emptied out as well.

Collapsing back onto the rumpled bedding, Hakusa drew Eiji along with him. His cock slid free of Eiji's passage, and Eiji whimpered at the sudden emptiness. A trickle of fluid oozed from his expanded hole, his anus throbbing as the opening relaxed.

"That was wonderful," Hakusa breathed, his voice thick with emotion and hoarse from his cries. Eiji kissed his throat, and traced a path upward to suck for a moment on Hakusa's full lower lip.

"I'm yours too, Hakusa," Eiji murmured. He buried his face in the crook of his lover's neck, kissing the flushed skin and drinking in his sweet scent. "Now and always."

"I love you, Eiji." Hakusa cradled the back of his head, kissing Eiji's ear and cheek. He continued showering Eiji with words of love until they drifted off into a deep, satisfied sleep.

Golden streams of sunlight fell across Eiji's eyes, waking him some time in the morning. For a moment, he blinked up at the pale blue sky showing through the branches overhead and wondered if it all had been a dream after all. He was afraid to turn over and find the spot beside him was empty, Hakusa nothing more than a fleeting memory of a sweet vision.

An arm draped around his waist and he felt a warm kiss on the back of his neck. Silky lips nuzzled him, suckling tenderly at his skin. Heart in his throat, Eiji turned over and found himself looking into the silver eyes of his lover.

"Good morning." Hakusa grinned at him.

"Hakusa." Eiji returned the smile, brushing a few shimmering strands of hair from the man's brow. Leaning in, he pressed his face against Hakusa's chest and listened to the even rhythm of his lover's heart. "You are real."

"Just as I said." Hakusa kissed the top of Eiji's head. "You'd wake up wrapped in my arms and lost in love."

Eiji leaned his head back and claimed Hakusa's lips with his own. Their kiss deepened, both men leaning into the embrace and refusing to let go.

Lost in love. That was exactly how Eiji found himself, for now and always with the one he loved.

About the Author

Author and graphic artist Anne Cain has had a pencil in hand for just about as long as she can remember. She loves exploring different genres in her fiction and art, especially if there's a yaoi or m/m twist. A die-hard fan of all that's special about gay romance, she has also published several stories with co-author, Barbara Sheridan.

Anne loves different cultures, trying out new foods and dabbling in different languages. Fascinated with Asian mythology and pop culture especially, her work is often influenced by these themes. Whenever she's not chained to the computer, she's watching anime, reading books, or stealing some game time on her sister's Wii.

To learn more about Anne, please visit <http://annecain.deviantart.com> or <http://www.dragonsdisciple.com>. Send an email to Anne at annecain.art@gmail.com or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Anne! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/dragonsdisciple>.

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Lost Souls

Enter into a world of magic, lust, love and betrayal.

Magic and the Pagan

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Evan Bartholomew lives life as a gay pagan with a deep interest in magic. Not wise choices in the small town where he resides. When he comes across a book of magic in an old bookstore, he fantasizes about the portrait of a man within its pages.

The first time Evan attempts one of the spells in the book, he finds himself in a world he never knew existed, completely clueless. A world of demons, magic, a queen who wants to kill him, a king who lusts after him, and the man of his fantasies, Aidan Lorie.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Magic and the Pagan*:

A dark hunger radiated in the mage's eyes as he stalked toward the bed. He stopped briefly at the foot of it, his gaze gliding over Evan before he sank down and crawled on his hands and knees. With only the lightest touch from the mage, Evan spread his legs. Aidan leaned down and started at Evan's thigh, right above his knee. With every upward inch, Aidan placed another soft kiss to the inside of Evan's leg.

Whatever remained of the nervousness evaporated and a deeper tingling radiated through Evan. He needed this. Gods, he needed this—needed this man more than he thought was safe. Every kiss, every touch Aidan made was pure, torturous pleasure, and it was all Evan could do to hold on and pray he wouldn't combust from the inside out before they even got started.

When he reached Evan's cock, Aidan took it in his hand and slid the tip of his tongue slowly up the shaft. Evan's breath caught and he dug his fingers into the bed. Aidan moved back down and licked softly over Evan's balls, sucking first one and then the other gently into his mouth, and Evan nearly died—or at least that's what it felt like. He'd never felt anything remotely so good, and dear gods, the mage wasn't even inside him yet. Aidan stroked his hand up and down Evan's cock as his tongue drifted back up the shaft. Then he licked the flared head before closing his lips around it.

Evan's hips jerked upward of their own accord, the heat of Aidan's mouth pure bliss. When Aidan's mouth closed around him, Evan damn near forgot to fucking breathe. He tangled his fingers in the mage's long hair and the exquisite texture slid over his skin, much like those lips moving over his shaft.

Aidan swallowed and relaxed his throat as Evan's cock slid in to the root. Then the mage moaned softly, creating a steady vibration Evan felt from his head to his toes. Oh, gods... Aidan's other hand slid under Evan's ass, squeezing it gently as one finger teased at Evan's hole.

"Aidan." Evan spread his legs even more, the urge to push onto that finger threatening to overwhelm him.

More...please, Aidan, more... Evan moaned and began to writhe, head tossing from side to side as Aidan's lips moved up and down his shaft, the mage stopping long enough to suck the tip before swallowing him down again. Fire. That's what Aidan's mouth felt like: silken fire. Evan arched and Aidan groaned, and the whole damn world exploded behind Evan's eyelids. He shouted Aidan's name, tears pricking his eyes as the pleasure slammed into him with enough force to leave him breathless. Aidan swallowed, then pulled slowly off of Evan's cock. He sucked a finger into his mouth as he spread Evan's legs farther apart. Teasing Evan's hole, he gently pushed his finger inside. "Push back against it."

Evan felt positively boneless, but gods, he wanted to feel Aidan and not just a finger. He bore down, a soft moan escaping him. "Aidan...more..."

Aidan rose and added a second finger and spread them both apart. Evan gasped, eyes wide as he stared at the mage. Aidan's gaze smoldered, and Evan's breath left him. He rocked his hips downward and groaned. "Now, Aidan. Oh, gods, please...now."

After a moment, Aidan withdrew his fingers and stretched his body over Evan's. A small jar suddenly appeared near Aidan's hand, hovering in mid air and Evan couldn't help but think such powers would be beyond awesome. He chewed on his bottom lip as Aidan dipped his fingers in the liquid then coated himself with it. Propping himself on one hand, Aidan positioned his cock at Evan's entrance. As he slowly pushed inside, he caught Evan's mouth in a kiss.

Oh, sweet... Evan's moan filled the kiss and he wrapped his arms and legs around Aidan, desperately trying to get the man closer, deeper. Aidan filled him until Evan was aware of nothing but the mage and the sensations coursing through him.

"Relax around me," Aidan murmured against Evan's lips. "I won't hurt you, Evan, and I won't move until you're ready." After he buried himself slowly in Evan's body, Aidan stilled. The touch of his hand along Evan's side sent a warm current through him, helping him to relax.

Evan drew his head back to rest on the pillow. A slow tremor ran through him as he inhaled deeply. Pain and pleasure edged at his senses with the fullness of Aidan's cock inside him.

Aidan stroked his fingers over Evan's cheek and smiled down at him. He cupped Evan's face and brushed their lips together. "So warm and tight." His tongue snaked out to lick at Evan's lips. "Slick...hot." More energy flowed into Evan from Aidan's light kiss, and Aidan shifted.

Evan just wanted more. He threaded his fingers through the mage's hair, combing through it, letting the strands fall over them as he whispered, "Fuck me until I can't see straight, Aidan. I want to feel it all."

Aidan groaned low and started moving his hips, his cock stroking in and out of Evan's ass in long, easy thrusts. Keeping his weight off of Evan's chest, he gripped Evan's hip with the other hand, pulling Evan up with every thrust.

The slower rhythm made it easier for Evan to follow and he soon found his own demanding pace. With the friction inside him building, he stared up into Aidan's eyes. A soft whisper escaped him almost like a prayer, "Sweet Cernunnos, I'm lost in you."

"Aye," Aidan murmured. With every stroke inside Evan, Aidan rotated his hips, grinding their bodies together in time to their rhythm. "Come for me. When you are ready, do not hold back." His fingers dug into Evan's hip as he pulled Evan up to meet his increasing thrusts, pushing deeper. Releasing his grip, Aidan wrapped his fingers around Evan's cock and began stroking.

Evan needed release from the strengthening tension created by each motion in him and on him. The racing of his heart echoed Aidan's as he kept his eyes tightly closed, lost

in the feeling. A rising moan took over before he started to shake. It was too much. His back bowed and he cried out, lost in pleasure he'd never known before. It filled his entire being, leaving him dazed and breathless.

“Yes,” Aidan purred. Seconds later a deep growl erupted from Aidan, and he buried himself in Evan as his cock pulsed with his release. Evan's name fell from his lips in a whispered benediction with every tremor.

Evan held on, aware of Aidan's orgasm as it filled him. His eyes flew open to watch the play of pleasure over the mage's face. Aidan chanted Evan's name, and the sound burned into his mind. He relaxed slowly beneath Aidan, far too aware of the warmth blossoming somewhere deep inside him. Aidan kissed him softly and pulled out. He rolled onto his side, pulling Evan to him. “I wish...” His words trailed off as if he was unsure of what he wanted to say.

Evan burrowed against him, closing his eyes again. “Don't talk, Aidan. It's not necessary.” The words were muffled against the mage's chest.

Laughing softly, Aidan kissed Evan's hair. “Aye,” he whispered. “Sleep. And know that I'm here.”

Somewhere in his heart, Evan understood this was only temporary, and the knowledge hurt.

One grieving man is forced to uphold an ancient bargain—by giving birth to a dragon. If only life were that simple.

Father of Dragons

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After his lover is executed for the simple crime of being a commoner, Xeras, a young nobleman of Tirrin, turns his back on his life of privilege and flees into the wilderness.

Weighed down with grief, exhaustion and hunger, Xeras awakens from one confusing night in the forest with the ghostly voice of his lover in his head—and the embryo of a dragon implanted in his side.

When Xeras encounters Carly, the charming Duke of Ballot's Keep, he is far from ready to fall in love again. Still grieving, and angry about the predicament into which he's been forced, Xeras accepts an opportunity to go after the dragons who have been making life difficult for the people of the local towns.

But there is sinister magic behind the machinations of the dragons, magic that emanates from Xeras's distant home island of Tirrin. Magic that puts the lives of both Carly and the tiny infant dragon in danger. Xeras finds that he can't turn his back on either of them.

For their sake he must face down his own countrymen and somehow thwart the Tirrin mages' evil plans.

Book 1 of the Ballot's Keep series.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Father of Dragons*:

The young man peered at Xeras with a slight squint, suggesting that his eyesight was less than keen. "Is there a problem?"

"Well," Xeras explained with exaggerated care, "that rather depends on how you look at it. I am going to Ballot's Keep, and you are going in that same direction. I am going on foot, which is not only a damp and exhausting proposition, but also rather slow.

You are traveling a little quicker and in a lot more comfort in this sound carriage of yours. Now as it happens I am on the road ahead of you. So I could get courteously out of your way and let you travel on—no doubt splashing me with mud in passing—or I could walk, even more slowly, all the rest of the way knowing that those well-mannered horses of yours are not likely to run me down.”

“Or,” the young man added, “as we are all going to Ballot’s Keep we could do the sensible thing and offer you a ride.”

“What?”

Drin’s laughter tickled his ears. *I like this one. He’ll drive you crazy, my dear.*

The young man smiled slightly at Xeras’s surprise. “Was that not what you were, in your own rather interesting way, suggesting?” His open, wide and rather pleasingly symmetrical face seemed just as charming as his words. His eyes were rather small, which was an unwelcome reminder of the stone dragon, but as he was in possession of a carriage Xeras was willing to forgive that one small failing.

Xeras stood and stared at him for a moment. The boiling edge of his anger refused to dissipate even in the face of what certainly seemed to be good will. As he walked to the side of the carriage, they could simply drive off and leave him behind, but that suspicion was forestalled as the man jumped out onto the muddy verge and gestured for Xeras to climb in ahead of him.

With really no sensible objection to make, Xeras walked over and peered into the dark interior. Two bench seats faced each other. On the forward-facing seat sat a young woman in a demure but densely embroidered grey dress who regarded him with amusement. “Why don’t you get in before you get soaked?”

“It is a little late for that.”

But Xeras did clamber in and sat with a distinct squelch on the rear-facing seat. The young man jumped back in spryly and seated himself next to the woman. He pulled the door shut again with a vigorous jerk, and fastened it. Xeras stared at them both incredulously, incensed that in their charitable good sense they gave him no obstacle to rail against, nothing to fight. Sure, it was an irrational feeling, but with an infant dragon

passing for a boil on his stomach and the ghost of his dead love whispering in his ear, Xeras didn't feel inclined to be rational.

"I am Katinka," the young lady said with a nod. "This is my brother Carly—the Ballot Duke."

"The Ballot Duke?"

"You don't know what that is?"

"No and please don't explain. I imagine you get tired of doing it and I don't really give a damn, so I might as well save you the trouble."

Carly laughed explosively, slapping his hand on his knee. A knee that Xeras noted, reflexively, was attached to a substantial and well-muscled thigh. The man's overall frame was rather impressive, if built more square than lithe. Xeras glared at him, even finding the man attractive angered him.

"Here's one who might give you a run for your money, Tinka. And he has prettier eyes than you to boot."

Prettier all 'round, but we won't hold that against her, Drin piped up. But Xeras was determined not to react to his asides any more, let alone when others might see it.

"I can hardly help that I was not born with bright green eyes," Katinka replied primly. "And I really don't care what you seem to be suggesting about my character or that of our guest. Some of the old boys at the keep may think me a harridan, but I don't see them complaining when doing as I ask gets the drain working properly or stops the food from spoiling."

"I don't have green eyes," Xeras interrupted.

"But you do," Carly corrected with a bemused glance. "Bright green eyes, as my sister was kind enough to mention. And not an unpleasing shade at that."

Xeras looked at him, then leaned his head back against the seat as the carriage began to rumble down the road. He'd liked his eyes hazel; Drin had liked them that way too. "Damn it. That really is taking a liberty."

If he ever caught up with Plegura, dragon or not, they were going to have *words*.

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