



LEGEND OF THE AUTUMN WIND

Wind of Change

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Legend of the Autumn Wind

Book One: Wind of Change

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DEDICATION:

To Jet Mykles for a perfect cover.

And to Auburnimp, for being there when I needed
her most.

BOOK ONE:
WIND OF
CHANGE

This story is a work of pure fantasy, and many events detailed herein are the product of the author's imagination rather than an effort to follow actual Japanese history. Any perceived cultural faux pas made regarding samurai or the Japanese culture during this time period are made deliberately on the author's part, as this is not meant in any way to be an accurate portrayal of the historic time period.

^ Before and after italicized dialogue indicates the silent telepathic communication of a demonic entity.

* Before and after italicized dialogue indicates speech carried on the wind.

~ Before and after italicized dialogue indicates the wind talking to someone.

PROLOGUE

EMBERS ON THE WIND

Fire painted the night in lurid brilliance and sharp darkness. The screams of the villagers, the shouts of the bandits and the shrill cry of a wounded horse rang in the chill air; a madman's chorus singing on the outskirts of hell.

Ryu stood on the porch of his family's home exactly where his father had told him to stay, guarding the door, protecting his elderly grandfather, aunt, sister and the handful of servants cowering inside the house from the attackers.

Somewhere out in that madness was his father, and the two young samurai in their family's employ. Alive or dead; he had no way of knowing.

And if his father died, it would make him the head of their family—if any of them were still alive when the battle ended.

From the screams and the number of obviously armored shapes he could see out in the night, the prospects of survival for any member of his family—or the village—weren't terribly good. He gripped the hilt of his katana, his slender hand tightening until his knuckles went white. "Please keep my honored father safe, spirit of the Autumn Wind."

A gentle breeze touched his hair, ruffling a cascade

of hair dark as a moonless night, which fell almost to his knees.

With such beautiful hair, it would be easy to mistake Ryu, the son of a samurai, for a girl. His too-pretty face and his slim build only added to the illusion. If it weren't for the pair of swords at his side and the men's clothing he wore, anyone would have taken him for a young woman rather than the nearly grown boy he was.

The rust-colored kimono and deep brown hakama of his family helped identify him as being male, though among his family, the wearing of hakama wasn't a complete guarantee of masculinity. His own mother had donned them and gone into battle against attackers when she'd been a young woman, fighting at her husband's side. She too had worn their family badge of three maple leaves with pride.

A small clan, theirs had little of wealth, but they did have pride in who and what they were: guardians of the Autumn Wind, bearers of the secret way of the sword taught to Ryu's great grandfather by a wind spirit. One that lived near the top of the mountain at the foot of which their village stood. The name of the village was Akikaze: Autumn Wind village, where the Fujishima family, who also used the family name Akikaze, lived.

A village that was now on fire, a family that was in danger of dying down to the last child.

Earlier in the day his hair had been even longer, but his Aunt Hideko had impulsively grabbed it and cut the end off with a kitchen knife, laughing that she'd finally gotten to trim it a bit. She'd always

scoffed at the superstition that his hair was never to be cut by steel, but the traveling monk had been very explicit in his warning the day Ryu was born: Never put blade of steel to the boy's hair or tragedy would befall their whole village.

Everyone believed it, except his Aunt. For seventeen years not a single hair on his head had been touched by steel. If his father felt his hair needed a bit of a trim—which he seldom did—he cut it with a bit of sharp stone, or burned the ends off carefully.

The boy fought the tears that wanted to fill his eyes and wished there'd never been any such words spoken, or that his Aunt would have taken them seriously. Of everyone, she'd been the only skeptic.

Screams tore through the air, shrill, full of terror and pain, and he moved even closer to the edge of the porch, praying to all the spirits of the mountain, the village and the nearby river and to the ancestors of his family that none of the bandits would come to their house, that the attack would be stopped before everyone else was dead.

A faint breeze whispered through the boy's hair, tugged gently at his silk clothing. It carried the acrid stench of burning straw, wood and...other smells he didn't even want to consider.

It was all so horrible to Ryu. He'd grown up on tales of war and bravery, but he'd never thought such things would happen here. Those were things that happened somewhere else.

Until tonight. Tonight, it was all too brutally real.

He took a step forward, trying to see a tangle of shadows that were moving near the home of the

village basketmaker. He could tell there was a fight going on, but not who or how many combatants were involved.

Ryu clutched the hilt of his katana and fought the fear roiling inside him. He was samurai; he would fight, and possibly die to protect his family and the village that was the only home he'd ever known.

But he didn't want to die.

Not now, not yet.

And he certainly didn't want his younger sister Kazue to die. Kazue, the only sibling he still had.

A woman's terrified wailing caught his attention, the voice familiar. His Aunt Hideko. Eyes widening with panic at the possibility that bandits had somehow gotten into the house from the back, he spun around, katana half drawn, to find his aunt kneeling near the open door of their home. Her face was white with terror, hands clasped tightly in prayer. Even over the terrible din of the fight, her voice was clear as she prayed, "Forgive an old fool, spirits of the wind! Please forgive me, spirits of Akikaze! I didn't mean to offend you, truly I did not. Do not bring harm to my babies, please! Let the punishment for cutting his hair be mine alone! Please! Oh, *please!*" she screamed the last plea out, voice shrill with desperation.

He glanced into the night, shoved the katana back into the scabbard and looked out into the dancing shadows. There was no one near their home yet. He made a decision and went to his Aunt's side, laying a gentle hand on her shoulder. "It's not your fault," he said, trying to reassure her. But his voice lacked

conviction. It *was* her fault, and everyone would blame her no matter what was said. Everyone in the entire village had known his hair was not to be cut until the day he married or a terrible calamity would befall them and despite the warning of the monk, she'd cut it and here they were, listening to death and fire as it roared through the village.

Ryu's brown eyes shone rust-colored as he looked into the flame-torn night. More screams tore through the boy's heart; people he knew, people his family was responsible to protect, were being murdered and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He had a duty to obey his father, and his father had told him to protect their home and family.

He and looked at his aunt kneeling in the doorway instead. She was staring into the night, face streaked with tears, guilt weighing on her soul.

It was hard for Ryu not to be angry. Hard not to scream out his own fear and anguish at her stubborn disbelief. Now she *did* believe, and it was too late.

But he loved her and kept his silence. Angry words couldn't stop what was happening. Nothing could.

Instead Ryu knelt down, put an arm around her and gave her a gentle hug. "There have been bandits attacking villages for months. This isn't your fault. It's just a coincidence."

"No, no, go away! You shouldn't touch me," she said, pushing at his hand. "The spirits will hear me and all the blame for this will be mine alone."

"I think it's too late to plead with them. Please go into the house where you will be safe."

She shook her head vehemently. "Please, Ryu. We

both know what I did. This is all my fault. Mine."

He started to say something, but she held her hand up.

"For seventeen years, bandits and wars happened somewhere else, to other people. Seventeen years of peace and tranquility gone with the slash of a blade, and that *is* my fault."

Shouts of triumph broke through the din, bandits cheering in joy. Anything that they found pleasing must mean something devastating to Ryu and his family.

The woman got to her feet, and he rose also. They were both staring out into the night. Most of the village was on fire now, half-seen shadows running between the burning structures. Bandits, villagers fleeing for their lives, men fighting and dying.

"Who are they?" his aunt asked of the shadows running toward their home.

"I don't know."

Another scream tore at Ryu's already frayed nerves, and he took a step forward, coming to the edge of the porch, gazing into the depths of the shadows, looking for the source of the latest death cry, wondering who it had been; friend or foe?

The shadowy forms resolved into a group of village women running up the path to the house out of the jumping shadows.

The boy gripped his katana tightly.

"They are coming!" the women shouted, turning with their spears to take up defensive positions in front of the house.

A boy a few years younger than Ryu joined them.

He looked up at Ryu. "Your father is dead. He told me to tell you."

Ryu nodded, refusing to shed tears. There wasn't any time for mourning, but behind him his aunt started to wail out her grief.

Had his mother been alive, she would have been there too, guarding what was hers: protecting her children.

New motion appeared in shifting darkness and a riderless horse ran past, its eyes white-rimmed with terror.

It wasn't any of their horses, so at least one bandit had died.

Footsteps approached from behind the boy.

"Ryu, go in the house. Guard the back door."

The boy looked up at his elderly grandfather.

The man was carrying his own swords. The ones that he'd carried since he'd become head of their family almost fifty years ago, and he'd donned his armor, the shiny black lamellar reflecting the fires eating the village.

"Grandfather—" He bit off the protest as being unbecoming of a samurai, or an obedient grandson. His father had left him there, but his grandfather, the *real* head of their family had given him a command. "Yes, Grandfather, I'll watch the back of the house."

He knew in his heart that his grandfather was trying to protect him from the greater danger that would be coming at them from the front of the house. The old man was trying to save his life.

Respect for his elder made him go, but fatalistically, he didn't think any of them were going

to survive tonight.

Another agonized cry ripped through the chaos-filled sounds coming from the village and he paused just inside the front door, turning to glance out into the night.

The fire was spreading, a the last of the buildings — was it the potter's house? — had started to burn.

Off in the distance lightning flickered and the wind shifted. The promise of rain. The renewal of life. Ryu didn't think there would be any renewal here, wasn't sure there would be anyone among the living once the bandits were gone.

The group of women, the village boy and his grandfather stood in front of the house. The old man looked so proud, so brave in his armor and his grandfather drew both swords as several men came rushing toward them.

From the back of the house there was a crash of shattering wood and the scream of one of their servants tore at his hearing. He knew the voice of the middle-aged woman who had been his mother's companion and had stayed on to care for them, doing the household chore of cooking for their family and the rest of the small household.

The woman came hurrying into the front room, her face suffused with fear until she saw the boy. "Ryu! One of the ruffians has come into the kitchen!"

Face grim, Ryu nodded and strode forward, both of his blades gleaming in the dimly lit interior of the house. The wind followed him through the open front door, as if it were leading him toward the danger.

He crossed the main room and went down the

short hall past the room where his mother and grandfather had patiently taught him to read, then passing his grandfather's room, he turned down the corridor, hearing the sounds of something fragile being broken.

Crockery, from the sound of it.

A blade slashed through a paper wall and Ryu paused, wakizashi up at guard in front of him, katana down and behind him. He looked at the man, his own heart pounding.

"A child!" the bandit scoffed. His own katana flashed, seeking to remove the minor obstacle preventing his search of the rest of the house.

Ryu ducked the sweep of the blade, shifting from a left-handed to a right-handed stance in one graceful motion. Years of training carrying him through the move without thought, he went to the attack.

The corridor was more than high enough, and the boy's reach just short enough that the tip of his katana wasn't impeded by the wall as it whistled toward its target, the blade coming around and upward in a rising arc from floor level to shoulder height on the bandit.

And then it was falling, the blade moving fast, cutting the air with a soft whistle.

Song of the wind...

Something his grandfather had drilled him on since he'd been five years old.

Steel bit flesh.

Cursing, the bandit stumbled back, hand going to his shoulder, dark eyes full of shock before his legs gave out and he collapsed.

Then died.

The boy stared.

He'd...*killed* someone.

Shouting from the front of the house drew his attention from the dead man at his feet and he turned, running back the way he'd come to find a battle raging at the front door.

Seven bandits were facing off against the women and his seventy-four-year-old grandfather and unarmed Aunt Hideko.

He reached the door as one of the women fell, crying, dying.

"*Akikaze!*" his grandfather shouted, the old man's blades flashing like falling stars in the night.

The steel sang and a bandit reeled, stumbling backward, eyes wide in shock as he felt his life slipping away.

Turning from the dead woman, the other bandit went for the old man.

"*Noooo!*" Ryu screamed, launching himself off the porch, his own wakizashi deflecting the man's katana from his grandfather's unprotected back while he was still in the air. But there was too much strength behind the attack, and the boy's arm almost went numb from the impact, the blade spinning from his hand to land in the dirt a few feet away.

He stumbled as he landed, and spun to face the killer.

"Children that play at being samurai die!" the bandit snarled, his sword sweeping for the boy's head.

Ryu leapt back, the tip of the sword narrowly

missing his face, a kiss of wind blowing over his cheek from the blade's passage as he turned, his movement taking him closer, his lesser reach no longer a hindrance as he got inside the man's guard. Fear at the narrow miss making him a bit reckless, he lunged forward, the tip of his katana scoring a shallow gouge under the man's eye before the bandit could completely evade the attack.

Furious, the bandit countered, his sword ringing sharply against the boy's blade, almost taking it from his hand.

Ryu retreated quickly, but his foot hit something and he nearly fell. Off balance, it was the only opening his opponent needed to finish the fight.

The katana was struck from his hand, a burning flame of pain lanced into his body. Something hard struck him across the face, sending bright points of light to fill his vision.

Dimly he was aware of being down in the dirt, of his grandfather shouting in rage and something wet and warm spattering his cheek before everything slipped away.

Between the setting of one sun
and the birth of a new day
lives change

With the flash of a blade
the stroke of a brush
worlds change

Fate steals one way of life
and offers another
live or die?

Poised on the edge of a blade
the answer is found
in blood

To live is to know hope
and there is no hope
in death

Alive there is hope for a future
Father, Grandfather let me find the way
to honor!

1609~Akikaze Ryu

CHAPTER ONE

CHERRY BLOSSOMS AND BLOOD

One Year Later

Shimazu Haruhiro, one of the Shogun's most trusted and—to hear Haruhiro tell it—abused retainers sat in the branches of a cherry tree, watching the petals as they showered the ground.

He wasn't in the tree because he wanted to be closer to the blossoms. No, he was using the height the tree afforded to watch the group of men lying in ambush on the roadside just a few hundred feet from the inn.

There were seven of them. Dirty and disheveled ruffians who might once have been samurai. Times were hard for everyone, too many wars had left the land drained and tired, the people from the Emperor down to the lowliest field-hand exhausted by years of bloodshed. With the country united by the new Shogun, the wars had finally stopped, but the situation remained critical. Bandits were ripping up the countryside, terrorizing the populace and destroying as they pleased. Few lords had the wherewithall to keep sufficient samurai in their pay as retainers, so not much was being done to curtail the ravages of the murderous thieves. Food shortages and the high prices for rice turned more and more

once reputable samurai into bandits as their lords released retainers no longer needed for standing armies from their service.

The whole country was like a predatory animal caught in a trap. It had chewed its own paw off to escape the trap, only to discover that an even worse situation was being a crippled animal unable to feed itself.

Whole villages burned and that only made matters worse, increasing the food shortages that were at the root of the problem to start with.

It was a really disheartening situation.

But it wasn't really Haruhiro's problem.

His problems were much worse than simple bandits.

He was hunting a demon.

He was also searching for an orphaned boy and his younger sister.

A boy who had the potential to become what he himself was: a demon killer.

And the girl? He smiled; she too carried a special ability. Magic. Also as yet untapped. The pair of them could prove to be invaluable allies.

He crossed his ankles and waited while the gentle spring breeze carried the sweet scent of cherry blossoms and another shower of petals in its gentle arms.

All he had to do now was wait, like the bandits.

But he suspected his wait would prove much more fruitful than that of the men. At least he hoped so.

It was just a matter of convincing the boy he was sincere in his offer of work. Haruhiro knew from his

days of following the young ronin and his sister that the boy was proud, but would take any job offered, even that some were beneath the dignity of a samurai's son just to keep his beloved sister fed and clean.

Haruhiro hadn't waited long before he heard the sound of footsteps on the road, and the voices of a girl and boy carried to him on that soft breeze.

"There's an inn ahead, Ryu, can we stop there? I'm hungry," a girl's voice said, the sound showing tiredness, on the verge of tears.

"Kazue, we have no money," came the reply, the voice that of a young man.

He was so far away that they were difficult to hear, and the sound of their voices were flattened and lacked much distinction. Haruhiro nodded to himself. *These must be the two I'm looking for, then. The old woman at the village told me the girl's name is Kazue and the boy is called Ryu, so this must be them. How many brother and sister orphans with those names could there be?*

Haruhiro could hear the children but not see them; the pair still much too far away, hidden behind a screen of trees. But his heritage gave him very keen hearing— among other things.

"Maybe they'll let us stay if I help them clean up the place or make a meal." The girl's voice had a hopeful note.

"Maybe."

The man he'd already identified as the leader of the bandits spoke to his men. "I think I hear them. Everyone be quiet and get ready."

Sunlight caught on steel as the men drew their weapons. Eyes as keen as those of a hawk noted the poor quality of the blades the men were carrying. Cheaply made and not well cared for though they were, the wakizashis and katanas the men carried would still be lethal despite the rust pitting and notches in the edges of the blades.

Haruhiro sat up and watched the bandits intently, waiting and listening. The wind carried the conversation the siblings were having to him. He couldn't really tell what their voices were like because the distance leached the tones away.

"I'm hungry, Ryu."

"I know, and I'm sorry, Kazue. Maybe we'll find some berries to eat somewhere."

"That's what you said yesterday. It's too early in the year for berries."

The samurai could hear how petulant the girl was, hunger making her short-tempered and unhappy.

"Forgive me, sister, I don't mean to fail you."

"I know. I'm sorry, Ryu. I'm just so hungry."

Haru edged forward on the branch of his cherry tree as two ragged, travel-stained and obviously young travelers came walking up the road. The boy would scarcely have come up to his chin—not much of a shock there, as he was rather freakishly tall—and the girl was even smaller and more delicate in appearance, probably two or or three years younger than the boy. He could see that the boy wore the two swords of a samurai, rather than just the katana of a ronin or the wakizashi typical of a simple bushi—a solder of common birth. Masterless as he was, he took

a lot of risk carrying two swords the way he did. Town officials might challenge his right to wear both swords since as a ronin, he didn't have the right to both, not under the current laws.

The girl was carrying a long stave, a traveler's walking stick, probably meant to help keep her feet steady over rocky ground.

The branch of the cherry tree dipped and swayed in a stronger gust and he finally saw their faces, only his own odd heritage giving him the ability as they were still a good distance away.

The both of them were wearing broad straw hats to keep the sun from their faces, which in turn kept Haru from getting a good look at them. He could see they both had falls of dark hair that had been tied back, though oddly the boy's was much longer than the girl's.

The boy raised his head, glancing up at something, the motion revealing his face to the gaze of the watching Haruhiro.

The man's breath caught, heart stepping up its beat as he got a good look at the young man.

Even through the dirt, there was no mistaking the youth's uncommon appearance. Like a pearl that had fallen into the dust, the luster was dimmed but impossible to fully conceal. Looking at him, Haruhiro didn't think a solid layer of mud could have dulled this boy's perfection.

The girl at his side showed that they were brother and sister even if her words had not already made that fact evident, for she had the same soft mouth and wide brown eyes, a fine straight nose and refined

cheekbones. He could see both young people had a natural pallor that put the most famous geishas to shame.

And if anyone would know that to be true, it was Haruhiro. He'd seen more than his fair share of geisha—common prostitutes too, for that matter—to make him a good judge of such things. *No wonder they're wearing those hats.*

He also had a fine appreciation of masculine beauty, and the boy...was affecting him the way few women ever could. He shifted on the tree branch, keenly aware that he'd sprouted a rather stiff branch of his own.

"Beautiful," he murmured. "Just like the old woman in that village said he was." The Shogun's retainer was now convinced that he'd found the boy and girl he'd been trying to find. And it was about time, too.

He'd been searching the countryside for almost half a year, ever since he'd first heard rumors about the boy's skill as a swordsman. Or, more to the point, since he'd heard the boy claimed to know the Autumn Wind style. In his twenty-some-odd years of life, Haruhiro had only seen one practitioner of that style and it had been one of the most beautiful displays of swordsmanship he'd witnessed in his entire life, and the man in question, an older samurai in the service of a lesser warlord who'd come to offer his fealty to the Shogun, had admitted he only knew the rudiments of the style.

If this kid even knows a bit more than that old samurai did, he'll be worth apprenticing in the trade,

the man thought as he watched the two make their slow way closer.

Haruhiro rubbed his chin thoughtfully and nodded. There was no doubt he'd found the young ronin he'd heard so much about. And if there *had* been any doubt, the girl walking at his side totally dispelled any reservations that they might be the wrong children. She was as beautiful as the boy, and even more delicate in appearance.

The fact that there were so many displaced orphans roaming the countryside meant he'd had trouble locating this pair from among the rest. It was a dismal sign of an ongoing problem even the Shogun was at a loss to solve. With most people hard pressed to feed their own families—much less the homeless children that were filling the towns and cities drawn to centers of population by starvation—it was no wonder that so many died. Some few found employment working as servants in wealthy houses, enduring endless drudgery for a bowl of rice a day, hardly better off than they'd been before. Bad as that might be, there were far worse things that happened to the orphaned children.

The man's mouth became a grim line of frustrated rage as he remembered the pitiful remains of a pair of young girls who'd died at the hands of bandits. Their end had neither been swift or merciful. Haruhiro had seen so much death already as one of the Shoguns trusted retainers that the sight of dead children hurt worse than any wound he'd ever received in battle. When he'd caught up with that particular trio of ronin turned murderers, he'd made sure they'd endured

suffering no less horrible than the little girls had endured.

But there was so little he could do to help the living that—shameful as it was—even he had found himself turning his head away from the pleas of children he couldn't help.

It was a sad state of affairs.

And it was one that brought demons out of hiding, drawn to the suffering the way a starving man was drawn to the promise of food.

He might not be able to help all the starving children, but he could do something about the demons.

The boy and girl had paused on the road, the girl crouched down and worrying at her sandal while her brother stood over her, head up, alert and wary.

It was a good sign, the way the boy stood as guardian to his sister while she was preoccupied, showing as it did the boy's intention to protect her, along with the sense to be vigilant and wary of danger. Whether from surviving an attack or by simple prudence hardly mattered. What was important was the boy's wariness in any situation.

I can't save every child I find, but at least I might be able to save these two.

While they were ragged and a bit too thin, it did appear that the boy was managing to keep them fed enough that they weren't emaciated the way so many of the waifs he'd seen were. Haruhiro also knew what the boy had been doing to keep them fed. He'd heard the stories of a boy of surpassing beauty who fought challenges against anyone who would offer money or

food as a prize if he won a fight. If the boy was even half as good as he'd heard...well, he'd wait and see what happened when the boy met the waiting bandits.

Haruhiro squinted and nodded when he saw what he was really looking for. Despite the distance and the strong afternoon sunlight, he could see the dim rainbow shimmer that surrounded both of the children. The kiss of magic that his own unusual heritage permitted him to see.

When the boy turned a little to look up the road, Haruhiro got an even better look at him. A glimpse only, but the ache it sent to his groin was powerful, pure lust that sent a shudder of desire through him and almost cost him his perch in the cherry tree.

Children? You can hardly call him a child, but he's not yet a full-grown man either. He smiled. *There's plenty of time to change that. Plenty of time....*

Another breeze rippled through the branches of the cherry tree that held Haru, carrying away more cherry blossoms that it lifted upward, swirling them along in its invisible arms to drop them as a sweet rain of petals over the brother and his sister. The girl stood up, her face turned to the gentle whirl of petals, her laughter reaching Haru, sweet as a song.

"Look what the wind brought us, Ryu!" she cried out and started to dance through the petals that spun slowly around them before falling to the ground.

The boy smiled at her. "Now if only it would bring food to us."

The girl pouted. "I'm sure the wind spirits would bring us food again if they could."

The samurai sat up on his branch as her words told him a story greater than any he'd suspected.

They have the blessing of the wind spirits, Haru thought. It was as sure a sign as any other that the boy and girl were more than worth the weeks he'd spent tracking them down.

"If there's nothing for them to bring us, it's not their fault," he heard the boy agree as they drew closer to the bandits who still lay in wait for the unsuspecting pair.

Maybe I should have chosen a hiding spot closer to those bastards, Haruhiro mused as he watched the men hiding in the ditch behind a screen of brush and weeds. They were motioning to one another, getting ready for their attack on the hapless children. *Damn, I probably should have hidden in the pine tree behind those guys. At least I would have been close enough to offer my help.*

Too late to change my mind now.

The boy abruptly stopped. He put a restraining hand on his sister's arm, bringing his sister's steps to a halt. His whole demeanor was tense, his head had tilted to one side as if he were trying to catch a distant—or very faint—sound.

Or as if the wind is warning him to caution, the samurai mused as he saw how the boy's hair and clothing were ruffling in an errant breeze running counter to the direction the wind was pulling at the trees. He nodded. This Ryu was everything he'd hoped for; all he needed was a little more training and experience and he'd be a force to reckon with—just like Haru himself.

The Shogun's man watched the boy, just able to make out the intent expression on his face as if he *were* hearing something only audible to him. He watched as the youth turned to whisper something to the girl at his side, then nodded as the teen took a few steps past the girl.

He's good. Even as young as he is he has the sense to listen to the wind. He knows something dangerous lies ahead of him. Remarkable, really, in one so young. He must have received excellent training.

The dim rainbow aura of magical ability shimmered more brightly around the boy, and the samurai's eyes widened.

The bandits saw the boy and the girl had stopped. They burst out from the bushes, screaming their battle cries, obviously thinking they could scare the pair of children.

Fools, they expect them to run. They don't seem to realize that the boy isn't carrying those swords because he thinks it makes him look more like a man. Idiots. He grinned fiercely as he saw the girl move to stand behind her older brother. *Oh, yes, they're everything I'd hoped they'd be.* Haru was pleased that the pair were standing their ground despite the odds against them. It showed they both had courage and were disciplined enough not to panic.

To the youth's credit, he had his hand on the hilt of his katana, but had not drawn it. Haru scooted forward on the branch, trying to get a clearer view of what was going on.

As he watched, the boy, whose name he knew to be Ryu, dropped into a fighting stance. The boy

moved with such grace that Haruhiro was completely certain he'd found the perfect candidate to be his apprentice. Few seasoned warriors moved with such fluidity.

"What do you want?" Haruhiro heard the boy demand. He had to strain to hear the youth's words and found that he regretted yet again not selecting a tree closer to the action. But it was much too late to do anything about that at this point in time. He'd just have to stay where he was and observe from a distance.

When his demand met with no response but coarse laughter, the boy repeated himself, even louder this time. Loud enough that Haruhiro was able to clearly hear his voice. "Tell me what you want!"

While the boy's stance was pure aggression, the sound of his voice matched his looks, soft, like a gentle wind rather than the growl of an angered warrior.

It was a voice suited to the whispering love poems, not making bold demands or arrogant statements. The hard shaft between Haruhiro's thighs twitched and his balls ached at the sound.

Later. Later, he promised his lusting flesh. Much later, his common sense added.

"We want the girl!" the bandit that had hung back from the boy's immediate vicinity replied, his own stance arrogant and self-confident.

Haruhiro marked him as an utter coward, and their leader. His eyes narrowed, but he made no move to aid the boy and his sister. He wanted to see if the youth could handle himself in a fight before he

insulted him by stepping in and offering help. Strangers just didn't do that, unless there was good reason. It would be offensive to *any* warrior, even worse if the warrior was young and full of self-pride.

"Well, you can't have her. Go away, all of you! I don't want to kill anyone, but I won't hesitate if you force me to fight."

The bandit leader laughed, and his men joined in readily. Haruhiro smiled too, but it was a feral grin. The fools weren't taking the boy seriously. It was a mistake he didn't think they'd rue for long. Not if even half the stories he'd heard were true.

"You can't have her, so go away and leave us alone!" the boy stated.

Haru detected a harder edge in his tone, though it would hardly be noticed by the men facing him. They were too busy laughing to pay close attention to anything but their own amused contempt of the children they faced.

Yes, go ahead and laugh. Enjoy it while you can.

Their leader was still grinning as he said, "But you know, now that I've gotten a look at you, I think we'll just take you too. You'll both bring a good price at any of the right brothels in Yoshiwara."

The men were edging closer to him. "Don't draw that sword. Come on, be nice. We're not going to hurt you. We'll even give you food," the grubbiest of the men said.

"I mean it, stay away!" Ryu ordered. He was standing his ground, ready to draw his katana the instant any of the men got within striking distance.

The bandit leader was grinning at him. He knew the look. Lust. The boy's dark eyes narrowed as he actually gave ground and backed away a step from the man in front of him. He could tell they were surrounded, but he needed to get his sister out of the way first before the fight started, because having her so close would hamper his ability to defeat the men threatening them.

Ryu took another step back, pretending to retreat as if he feared to actually engage in a battle with them. It wasn't going to be easy for him to take them all on, but he'd do it, since there was no other choice.

But his sister needed to be out of the way.

"Run, Kazue," he murmured.

The girl hesitated. "Ryu, I can't leave you."

"Get out of the way, little sister."

"Well, all right, but I'm not going far," he heard the girl say as she moved out of the way of the men confronting them, taking up a position behind him and holding her staff at the ready.

"That's fine," the boy replied, gaze narrowing. His heart was racing the way it always did before a fight. The old scar on his side from the bandit's sword thrust ached.

"Give up, boy," The bandit leader urged.

The boy favored him with a smile. "No, dog's leavings, it's you who should give up."

"Too bad. I didn't want to damage that pretty face of yours, but you leave us no choice," the bandit leader stated with a false air of sorrow that was quickly spoiled by a leering grin. "If you won't play

nice, we'll just break you. We haven't had much fun lately."

His men laughed.

Ryu's eyes narrowed but he didn't reply.

"That's right, boss, we can always sell the girl and have some fun with him.

"And if he's still alive after we're done, he'll be more docile, won't he?" their leader questioned.

"He sure will," one of the others replied, chuckling evilly.

They had closed in as they taunted him, the men now within reach of his katana. He took a slow, cleansing breath, let it out. The faint breeze tugged at the end of his hair, lifted the edge of the straw hat he was wearing.

The men were watching his face, two of them leering at him, three of them smirking. Confident he posed no threat.

"I've given you the choice to leave us alone. Too bad you didn't listen."

The teen drew his katana and wakizashi, the matched blades a silver-white blur. As they sped through the air toward the nearest bandits, the blades sang through the air.

Behind him he heard his sister's shrill battle cry, the sound like that of a hawk as it swooped on unsuspecting prey. He heard a sharp crack, wood striking flesh, and a bandit howled in pain.

At least she can protect herself for the moment, he thought as his body moved through the attack on their enemies. He pushed the distraction of worry aside and focused on what he must do to keep them

both alive.

Blood rained on the dusty road and Ryu spun quickly to his left, the short blade of his wakizashi blocking the rusty mess of a katana even as the katana in his own fist struck flesh and bone and a second of their would-be captors dropped to the dirt. This one was screaming and clutching what remained of his sword arm rather than bleeding his life out in silence as the first man he'd killed had done.

From the corner of his eye, Ryu could see his sister boldly facing one of the men, her staff ready to block or strike. He couldn't see the man she'd hit, but the sharply muttered imprecations told him the bandit was still conscious, and probably able to fight.

There were still five bandits they would have to beat and those weren't good odds, especially when the men were now watching them with wary respect.

Haru watched the girl with increasing interest. He'd heard several stories about the pair of children, but none that had mentioned the girl also had a warrior's heart and was able to defend herself. It *was* possible she was just presenting a brave front to their attackers, but seeing how she gripped the simple weapon told him she had at least a passing knowledge of how it should be used.

The girl backed away, then darted for an opening in the circle that was closing around them both.

Two of the men darted past the boy, going for his sister.

There was the rapid flicker of the boy's swords, the sun catching them in flashes bright as silver lightning.

Haru watched as the boy fought off the bandits he and his sister were facing, and the Shogun's retainer could only stare with eyes widened in stunned amazement. The boy wasn't just good, he was incredible for a warrior of so few years and presumably scant experience in fights of this type.

He was content to simply watch the boy and see how he handled himself until three of the bandits attacked the young swordsman, taking the slim youth off his feet and sending him rolling through the dust.

Haru watched, not even realizing he'd stopped breathing. The boy needed help now, but he couldn't get there fast enough and he knew it.

The men were caught flat-footed, stunned into immobility by the boy's speed as he rolled gracefully to his feet, apparently not bothered in the least by the cloud of dust that had rose to swirl lazily around him.

Haru edged out farther along the branch, wondering if he should go to the boy's aid finally or not. As he considered it, the dust, which should have started to settle to the ground, appeared to be picking up speed, as if it sought to cloak the boy's actions from the bandits.

The five men were starting to look uneasy. The strange behavior of the dust made them ill, the men glancing around themselves, their expression betraying an edge of fear.

Haru smiled. *Realizing your mistake now, are you?*

The samurai watched as the boy spun, his long hair fanning out around him like a banner, his wakizashi a blur in his left hand, the katana held high over his head as the dust spun around him. It was trying to

protect the boy, trying to confuse the bandits. Haru squinted, and he could make out the hazy forms of two wind spirits amid the slowly drifting brownish cloud.

The wakizashi collided with a bandit's blade and the katana fell in a sweeping arc that ended in a horizontal stroke, the weapon singing through the air in a blur that Haru found difficult to follow even with distance in his favor.

A bandit screamed and staggered away from the boy, his own katana falling from his hand as he clutched at his belly briefly, then crumpled to the ground.

The rest of the bandits took a few steps away from the boy swordsman, Haru able to tell from their movements and expressions they were even more uneasy over the deadly turn their simple ambush had taken.

The boy was backing away from the men now, his sister moving with him, standing close, but not so close she'd prevent him from being able to fight as the bandits withdrew a few paces, either ready to leave the children alone, or to plan a new strategy.

Haru saw a tinge of red on the boy's hand. Blood. His eyes narrowed. It *was* possible the blood was from one of the bandits the boy had killed, but as he watched, he saw a few drops of blood fall onto the dusty road. Haru frowned as he mentally reviewed the last bandit assault. They'd knocked the young warrior to the dirt, and he realized that they'd done more than that. One of their katanas had lashed out, quick as a serpent's tongue, to lick the boy's biceps.

He squinted as he studied the boy's arm. His right arm.

The men had intended to cripple him, but they'd failed in that. At least they seemed not to have attained their desired goal, because his fingers were still wrapped around the hilt of his katana.

But he was bleeding and in pain from an injury that might be deep enough to weaken his grip.

"Damn," he sighed. "Go help him and possibly insult him, or stay here and worry he'll be killed." Haru's frown deepened as he regarded the standoff between the boy and the five remaining bandits. "Decisions, decisions," Haru muttered, annoyed with the whole situation.

As he watched, the boy flicked both blades and returned them to their scabbards while the bandits continued to confer among themselves.

"Why don't you just leave us alone?" the girl stated, her tone full of anger.

It brought a brief smile to Haru's lips. She's got courage enough for a warrior, that girl, he mused. So does the boy.

Now what should I do? Help or just stay here and hope for the best? I'd hate to lose him – or her, for that matter.

The bandits had apparently finished their plotting and Haruhiro watched as the men closed the distance. The pair of children just stood there, the boy's face impassive, the girl angry, her staff held at the ready. If they got much closer, they'd be right at the edge of the boy's limited reach. Too close, and he still didn't show any sign of being ready to launch another attack.

The Shogun's retainer picked at the bark of the cherry tree and considered what he should do. While it was true he'd wanted to see what the boy was capable of and he didn't want to offend him, there was the nagging worry that inexperience would get the two of them killed. The boy was already injured.

He was just getting ready to hop down out of the tree when the boy gave a shrill, ululating scream and charged at the men, both of his swords in motion. The katana was going so fast Haru could hear it humming through the air like a hive of angered bees.

That eased his mind somewhat over the boy's injury, but the fact remained there were still too many bandits left and this time his attack—sudden and fast as it was—didn't catch any of the men off their guard as his prior attacks had.

The bandits scattered out of the boy's path, the one he would have struck blocking his blade, but just barely.

Haru's frown changed to a snarl as he realized what the bandits had accomplished. The boy and his sister were separated by several paces now, and the bandits were closing with them both. Four focusing on the young man, the last one—the bandit leader—stalking the girl.

And then he noticed something that chilled his blood. The boy who'd been doing so well stumbled, swaying on his feet.

Haru stared, looked at the boy through eyes that noticed more than his beauty. He was too thin. Much too thin.

The boy had fought well for someone on the brink

of starvation.

He vacillated, wondering if his aid would be accepted by the pair. But when Ryu stumbled, he knew it was just a matter of time before the bandits' numbers—and the boy's evidently weakened state—ended the fight in the favor of the bandits.

There was no more time to debate his course of action. "I'm going to have to help them now."

Haru jumped from the tree and ran toward the conflict, desperate to arrive before the bandits achieved their goal of capturing the boy and his sister.

Ryu glanced at his sister. His mouth tasted as if it were filled with ashes as the bandit leader menaced her. There was nothing he could do to help her at the moment, his own situation a dangerous one as the remaining bandits surrounded him, the men equally spaced and waiting for him to make a move.

He could feel the blood trickling down his arm, the wound more of an annoyance than a danger. It stung, and if he held his katana at a low angle, the blood turned his grip on the hilt into an uncertain thing.

He took a slow, steady breath, let it out through his parted lips as a gentle stream of wind. He was tempted to use the special skills his grandfather had taught him, but uncertainty of his own ability to retain control kept him from using all but the simplest of the tricks he'd learned.

Movement beyond one of the bandits drew his gaze and he saw a man in the garb of a samurai—and carrying the two swords of one—running toward them.

He didn't know the man, and he wondered what his intentions were. Did he plan to help the bandits for a share of the prize he and his sister represented, or was he intent on taking it all for himself?

Or, less likely, did he intend to help them?

One thing he'd already learned in his short time as nominal head of their poor and ill-fortuned family was that no one helped them unless they wanted a favor in return. A single instance of 'generosity' by another ronin had soured him to accepting any further 'kindness' when the man had boldly demanded his sister as the price of that 'aid'. He hardly considered his sister to be worth nothing more than a paltry half bowl of badly cooked rice that they'd been given by the ronin.

Like so many others, Ryu had been forced to kill that man too.

Distracted by the man's approach, only his agility saved him from the sudden rush of the bandits as they came for him, their rust-dulled swords seeking flesh.

He managed to block two of the incoming swords, but Ryu couldn't help the choked cry that was torn from him as a blade's edge caressed his skin and grated along a rib from behind.

He broke free of their trap, barely, with bright points of light filling his vision.

Instinct alone moved his swords to defend himself from their continued attack or he would have gone down, wounded and possibly dying.

"Don't kill him, idiots!" he heard the bandit leader shout at his men.

Ryu backed away, stumbling, dizzy, his matched swords keeping two of the men well away from him. He was too disoriented to realize the other pair he couldn't see were doing their best to sneak up behind him until he heard them and spun to fend them off, the swords he carried whistling through the air as he lashed out, half blinded by something warm and wet that was flowing over his face.

"Ryu!" He heard his sister scream his name, turned his head in her direction and something hit his head, sending another series of bright lights like festival fireworks through his vision. He staggered, vainly tried to defend himself, but the odds were heavily against him. Dazed and wounded, he could barely remain on his feet, much less keep fighting. He managed to drive the point of his wakizashi into one of the bandits, but only the howl of pain confirmed that he'd hit flesh. He went down under a barrage of fists, sword hilts and kicks.

"RYU!"

He wanted to get up. Wanted to save his sister from the bandits. He got to his hands and knees. There was more pain as the men kicked him.

He could hear their harsh laughter. It reminded him of the calls of crows—or ravens. Hurting and humiliated, he fell into the dirt and lay there too weak to move, but their feet kept striking him, stamping the breath out of him repeatedly until the entire world started to go dark.

Kazue. My poor sister. What will become of you if I die?

Something wet and warm splattered his face.

Is it raining? But no, that didn't make any sense.

The feet stopped pounding him.

Dust swirled into his eyes, blinding him even more than the sticky wetness over his face. Ryu heard his sister screaming his name before her slender hands were pulling at him, turning him over.

Terror filled her eyes and he blinked, her face distorted and blurred by motes of bright light that spun and flashed through his field of vision.

If she was there, she wasn't hurt. If she was touching him, she was safe.

It was strange. He certainly didn't remember killing all of the bandits.

He tried to focus on her face and noticed a smudge of dirt on her nose.

"Talk to me, Ryu. Please say something."

"You have dirt on your nose," he muttered, his mouth dry as the filth he was covered in, thanks to the bandits.

She smiled at him. "Leave it to you to get half killed and then notice something so trivial."

Bandits.

The word echoed through his mind. He had to get up. He'd been fighting.

His fingers groped through the dust, searching for his dropped weapons as he tried to sit up. Kazue's hand on his chest stopped him.

"You stay right there and don't move," she admonished. "You can't get up, not yet. Those men hit your head and you're bleeding."

"Hn..." he mumbled, becoming more aware of the ache in his skull now that she'd mentioned it. But that was just a dull throbbing that he could ignore, unlike

the burning pain in his scarred side. He touched it and felt a wetness that he dully realized had to be blood.

"Let me look at that," his sister said as she peered into the gash in his kimono. "Doesn't look too bad but it's near the old scar," she explained. "It probably hurts a lot more because of that."

He just grunted another wordless reply, vaguely aware that it was so quiet he could hear the wind and birds. "Where are the bandits?" he asked.

"That samurai who came to help us has killed them."

At first he didn't know what she was talking about, then he remembered seeing the man. "Oh."

If he wasn't hurting so much he might have been embarrassed at being rescued by a stranger. He might have berated himself for being a fool and letting those men defeat him so easily. But his head wasn't cooperating; his thoughts slow as a rain-starved creek.

"He looks a mess, how badly hurt is he?" he heard a deep voice ask.

He saw Kazue look up, give a hesitant yet grateful smile. "He's got a bump on the head, and he's got a cut and lots of bruises, I guess. They were kicking him."

"I saw that. Bastards. They won't be waylaying any innocent travelers anymore." The man's voice slipped into his mind, clear as the tolling of a temple bell through a chill fog. It was a voice that sent a shiver down his spine.

A shadow fell across Ryu, and he heard the rustle

of fine silk, the soft creaking of woven sandals as someone crouched nearby. He wanted to see the man of the temple bell voice, but he was just out of his line of vision.

"I'm Shimazu Haruhiro," he heard a man say by way of quick introduction.

Ryu saw his sister bow politely and reply, "I am very pleased to meet you. This is my brother, Akikaze Ryu. I'm..." she hesitated, frowning intensely as she tried to decide what to tell him. "I'm Kazue, our grandfather was Fujishima Hisato, the lord of Akikaze Village," she explained, naming their grandfather and his position to show they'd once been part of a proud samurai family. "I thank you for saving us."

"Those bandits needed killing."

"Yes," she agreed, her hand wrapping around one of his and squeezing gently.

Ryu gave his sister a smile, unaware that it came out looking more like a pained grimace than his usual reassuring grin. He felt so strange, as if he were listening to the conversation from far away rather than lying there in the dirt of the road within reach of both speakers.

"Has he said anything to you? Do you think he's going to be all right?" that rumbling voice asked.

"Yes. Well...really, I'm not sure. He was talking to me, but," he saw her shrug and a frown pulled at her mouth, "he's stopped talking to me."

Had he stopped talking to Kazue?

Sorry, I didn't mean to ignore you. But his voice is really...nice, and I just want to listen to it, Kazue, he told

her, unaware that he wasn't speaking out loud.

A face, angular and very male swam into his view.

It was a very handsome face, and it matched the voice so well. Masculine, the expression without any emotion as befitted a samurai. He felt a rush of warmth coloring his cheeks, too dazed to realize he was being rude and staring. The man's eyes were a silvery violet! An unusual color he'd seen in the petals of flowers, but never in anyone's eyes.

But it was the man's mouth that drew his gaze. Firm. Held in a tight line, neither smiling or frowning. Ryu wondered what it would be like to feel those lips touching his the way his former lord— *the horrible pig!*—had tried the day he'd taken Kazue and left the man's estate.

Even with his strange eyes, this samurai was much more attractive than his former master had been. But then again, so were most pigs.

He didn't try to stifle the soft giggle that slipped from him because he wasn't even aware of it.

The strange-colored eyes regarded him thoughtfully.

"But he was talking to you before?"

"Yes."

"Hmm..." The man bent closer to look at him. Ryu managed a slight smile.

"Do you think he's he badly hurt?" the thunder rumble voice asked.

"I don't think so, but I can't tell for certain. I wish I could take him to the inn and give him a bath. Those wounds need to be washed and tended, and after all this, he could use some food. He's lost blood, but I

don't know enough to judge the severity of that."

"Hmm...." The sounds sent a shiver through Ryu and he closed his eyes. Listening to this man was pleasurable, the deep tones of his voice soothing. Unlike the harsh, nasal voice of his former master.

"Well, as far as the inn goes, I think that can be arranged," the man said. Ryu felt a big hand close on his chin and turn his head with a gentleness at odds with the stern look on the man's face. He shivered at the touch and opened his eyes to see a broad expanse of chest. The man was bigger than he'd realized.

I wish he would hold me. I'd like that very much.

"He needs to rest. I think they hit him pretty hard," he heard the samurai tell his sister and wondered who this 'he' was they were both talking about. It certainly wasn't him. He was fine.

I'll get up in a minute. Just let me catch my breath, he told them, still unaware that he wasn't saying a thing they could hear.

"Hmm..." he heard the man murmur as he bent even closer. He could feel the soft touch of the man's breath on his cheek as the violet eyes looked into his. "His eyes aren't focusing very well."

"I'm worried that they've broken his skull," he heard Kazue say to the samurai.

Well, whoever 'he' is, we should help him. I'll get up soon. I promise.

The sun was so bright he couldn't keep his eyes open any longer, so he closed them. *I have to get up soon to help whoever it is that needs us, but it is so nice just lying here and resting and listening to this samurai talk to Kazue. Sleep would be better. Yes, I'll sleep for a few*

minutes and then I'll be able to help that 'he' they are talking about.

Gentle fingers probed at his scalp; it hurt enough to make him open his eyes again, but it wasn't anything he couldn't bear in stoic silence as befitted a samurai. He'd been hurt much worse than this. At least he was pretty sure his injuries last year had been much more severe, based on the fact he hadn't been awake and aware much for several days after the battle.

"Well, he's got a lump the size of an egg on his head, and his scalp is cut, but I don't think anything's broken," he heard the man say.

"Your voice is nice, but...why are your eyes that color?" Ryu blurted out.

Haru started to chuckle softly, as the boy's younger sister went white in embarrassment. At least he'd finally shown he still retained some semblance of consciousness, even if it had taken a while for the boy to acknowledge his presence.

"I'm sorry, he's not usually rude," Kazue said as she politely lowered her gaze.

"Well, getting hit in the head like that might just rattle anyone's sense of proper behavior," he explained to the mortified girl. "I'll let it pass." He winked at her, trying to put on a less threatening demeanor for her benefit. "Besides, I didn't rescue the two of you just so I could get mad and kill him over a silly question, no matter how personal or rude it might be."

"Rude? Did I say something to offend you?" The boy seemed genuinely confused, and the Shogun's

man came to the conclusion that he probably didn't even know what he'd said, much less remember it. That *wasn't* a good sign, despite his own pronouncement that the boy's head didn't appear to be broken. *He probably needs a doctor, but the nearest one I know of is more than a week's journey from here. By the time we could get there he'd be dead, if this is that serious.* The doctor was also in the opposite direction to the one in which the samurai needed to go, which made the choice even more difficult.

He frowned. It was very important to keep the boy alive. But it even more important that he stop the demon he'd been sent to deal with because that was by the Shogun's order, not his own decision. If it came down to that sort of a choice, he only had one to make. He'd have to go after the demon and let the boy die.

But Haru did have one other option. A very risky option that he wasn't sure he should try with someone he didn't know. It would reveal his true nature and irrevocably show what he was to everyone that was present. And for all he hoped to have the boy as his apprentice, it was too much to let a stranger or strangers—even a magically gifted boy and girl—see.

Then again, the boy's confused state might be enough to shed doubt on anything the young warrior might witness or remember about what Haru had done to help him.

Hmmm... the samurai mused. If I can get a private room and keep everyone else out long enough...

It was worth a try. *I can worry about any*

repercussions later. If it comes down to life or death, I'd rather take the risk and make sure he survives.

The young man tried to sit up, but when Haruhiro firmly placed his hand in the middle of his chest, it convinced the boy to stay where he was. Haru was easily strong enough to keep a grown man flat on his back, much less a skinny, half-starved and injured boy.

"I think he needs rest," Haruhiro explained to the girl, who just nodded her agreement.

"I'll rent some rooms at the inn and see if we can't get him cleaned up and put to bed. What do you think?" He was leaving out some of the details in favor of just getting her to agree. Once they had rooms, he'd make sure she wasn't present when he took care of her brother.

He watched as a glimmer of hopefulness warmed her gaze, only to see it fade, her eyes going dull and lifeless. The sudden change in emotion spoke to him more eloquently than the most beautifully composed poem. They'd been betrayed before. Probably more than once to cause such sorrowful distrust as he detected in her expression.

She's a pretty girl, and men can be worse than demons. At least with a demon, evil is in his nature, but a man can choose good or evil and until he reveals himself, you never know which way he's taken. He sighed. Lately, too many men were choosing evil because it was an easier road after so many years of warfare. To be a good man, one had to forget killing and for far too many bushi, ronin and samurai, it was a way of life they couldn't set aside.

Of course, Haru hadn't set it aside either, choosing to accept his commission as the Shogun's demonkiller rather than take up a boring life at court.

If nothing else he could put the girl at ease, *if* anything he could say would do that. He decided on the most direct course of action he could take.

He'd just tell her part of the truth.

Haruhiro bowed formally. "I, Shimazu Haruhiro, a retainer to Tokugawa Ieyasu, the Shogun, swear on my honor that no harm will befall you while you and your brother are in my care."

"You're...a retainer of the Shogun?" she asked. He could hear the incredulity in her voice as her gaze lifted to look him in the eye.

It's almost as if she's trying to see any lie I may be telling simply by just looking at me.

Hmm... I wonder if she can see a lie in a man's eyes. I've heard of some with the gift of magic who have that ability. If she can, it might help explain how the two of them have managed to stay alive so long. He focused his own sight and saw the rainbow shimmer that surrounded her. It was bright, full of starry sparkles that he hadn't noticed from a distance.

She's already able to use her magic. This is great. It means she's aware of what she can do, which will certainly make training her as a demonkiller much easier. He noticed the intensity of her regard. *From the looks of it, maybe she can see a lie in a man's eyes. That's a useful talent.*

She was looking at him as if she didn't quite believe his story.

Or maybe she can see a bit of what I am in my eyes and

doesn't know what she's seeing. That's bound to make her uneasy. But he had a quick solution to that.

"Yes. I can show you my papers if you like. Or wait—" He tilted his sword so she could better see the tsuba—the hand guard—which bore the Shogun's own crest. He'd given Haru a set of his own swords after he'd saved the man's life in a battle.

"Oh!" the girl exclaimed as she saw the guard of the blade. It had to prove the man was telling the truth. No one would dare use the Shogun's own crest without permission on pain of death. The life came back to her dark eyes and she offered him the faintest hint of a smile, a trace of genuine hope lighting her face.

"Is that good enough for you, then? I'm willing to show you my papers." Chances were the girl couldn't read very well, if at all. Few women were properly educated in these sad times.

"That won't be necessary," she replied, which was probably a good indication that she was unable to read. "I accept your promise, Shimazu Haruhiro."

Her bow was as formal as his own had been.

He patted the girl's forearm gently, trying to further reassure her of his friendly intention, but she flinched slightly and he pulled his hand away with a contrite smile. "I've got a good idea why you're hesitant and afraid. I promise, I won't do anything that could compromise your virtue."

"Thank you, Shimazu-sama," she replied, giving him the formal title of 'sama', or lord, to show her respect.

"You might want to wipe the dirt off your nose

before we go," he teased gently.

"Now you sound like my brother," she said and the smile she gave him was warm as spring sunshine and brought an answering smile to Haruhiro's face.

While they'd talked, the boy's eyes had drifted closed, and with that his face contorted to show the pain he wouldn't express while in control of his body.

Haru frowned. *He might be hurt a lot worse than I thought. Those men were kicking him very hard. Damn, I should have just helped him fight from the start.* But he also knew that there was no point in berating himself for what had happened. He couldn't change it, and he'd thought he'd done the right thing in letting the boy try to fight his own battle. Still...looking at the boy, he did feel responsible for the young man's injuries. He'd waited too long to come to their rescue and that *was* his fault. *This is going to slow me down, but there's nothing to be done about it now.*

"Where are my swords?" the boy asked, opening his eyes. His voice sounded odd. Slurred and slow, the words mumbled rather than being clearly spoken. Haruhiro didn't like that, not at all.

"I have them right here," his sister stated.

"Good." The boy's eyes drifted closed again. Haruhiro didn't like that either. Coupled with the boy's inability to properly focus on their conversation and the size of the bump on his head, it was becoming more and more apparent that Ryu was hurt much worse than he'd thought.

"We need to get him to the inn," he told the girl.

"Yes, I think you are right," she agreed, a worried frown creasing her brow and tugging her mouth

down sharply. "I'm not sure he can walk yet."

"He won't have to walk," Haruhiro told her as he gently lifted the dazed boy. He hid the frown that wanted to twist his face into a less than human visage when he noticed how terribly thin and underfed the teen warrior in his embrace was beneath the concealment of his clothes. He felt positively fragile, nothing like the strong young warrior he'd expected. The kimono and hakama the boy wore hid his true condition from prying eyes. More pride. Or an effort to look less desperate than they were.

It also told him how hard that fight must have been for the boy. Weak from hunger, he'd still made a good showing for himself despite his debility.

Nothing but bones and a little muscle. He's in worse shape than I thought. He cast a sidelong glance at the girl. She appeared better fed, though still too skinny. Haru quickly came to the conclusion that when the pair *were* fortunate enough to have anything to eat, the boy had been giving his sister more than a half share.

"Put me down," the boy protested the words so slurred the man had trouble understanding him. He struggled weakly, and it awoke something in Haru. A kind of need, a desire to protect the boy against hurt and pain, a warmth that flooded his entire being and burned like summer sunshine in his chest. He held the boy closer to him, lowering his head to whisper into his ear. It was difficult to speak through the tightness in his throat, but he managed. "It's all right. Take it easy. I'm trying to help you." But more than simply wanting to help Ryu, the samurai realized he

never wanted to let the boy in his arms go.

He wanted to cry, to scream at the world for all the pain it had caused this slender youth; wanted to shout his anger to the sky and tear down the whole of the world if it would make things right for the boy.

Instead, he drove the strange feelings aside, swallowed to relieve the constriction in his throat and carefully schooled the emotions tearing at him, preventing them from showing on his face.

With his head still lowered near the boy's, he said, "Swallow your pride, young ronin. You're badly injured, and you couldn't walk even if I did set you on your feet."

At his words the girl looked up at him with alarm showing in her wide, dark eyes. Not wanting to scare her, he just winked conspiratorially—as if he were fibbing to her brother—and mouthed, 'I don't want him arguing with me.'

It wasn't the complete truth, of course, but Haru didn't want her to break down on him and start crying the way women tended to do when given bad news. He didn't have time to comfort her. Not if he wanted to get this boy to the inn and take care of him.

Haru also hadn't waited for the protest he knew would be forthcoming from the young man either. He was already striding toward the inn at a pace the girl had to run to match since he was so tall. He also walked very fast when there was a reason.

He would have run—perfectly able to do so with as light a burden as the young warrior represented—but he didn't want to jar the boy that badly.

"I'll walk," the boy replied, proud and stubborn as

the son of any lord might be when faced with such an ignominious circumstance.

"Not this time," the samurai retorted. They were already getting closer to the inn.

"I'm *not* a child."

"That remains to be seen," Haruhiro retorted, instantly regretting the insult he'd just made against the young warrior. Too late, as he discovered.

"If I were able, I'd challenge you over an insult like that," the boy told him through clenched teeth, anger lending clarity to his words.

"Were you able, I'd not be carrying you." He snapped back, and regretted that too. He sighed. He was letting his own emotional state rule him, and that was making him speak to the boy in ways he had no right to do. "Look, I'm sorry. I had no right to talk to you like that. Please forgive my rudeness. You're hurt and your sister is very worried."

"Hn." The boy grunted a noncommittal answer to his apology.

"Really, I *am* sorry for being rude."

"Fine. Apology accepted. Now put me down."

"Ah...no." He lowered his voice considerably and spoke softly to the boy. "See, you probably can't walk and I don't want to scare your sister. She's scared enough," he explained, hoping he could use the girl's evident worry for her brother to make the boy see sense. "You're covered in blood and dirt, you know, and she's worried sick about you because those bastards hit you over the head awfully hard and, well, you haven't been very rational."

At least the boy was talking now, and he sounded

more aware than he had been when Haru had first arrived.

"Fine."

Haru picked up his pace a bit and the girl hurried along after him, burdened with her staff, both of her brother's swords, and running as well as she could in worn sandals that had been mended repeatedly, from their ragged appearance. Like everything the siblings were wearing, from their straw hats to the sandals on their feet, their garments were long past the point where they should have been replaced. Even their once fine clothes were threadbare and showed the stains of hard use.

They need clothes, but that will have to wait until we get to a real town. It's not likely there are any suitable clothes to fit them around here and I certainly won't dress them as peasants, not even for a few days. They both deserve better than that.

"Down. Down, please!"

Haruhiro heard the strain in the boy's voice, so he set the young man down on his own feet and was forced to ease him to his knees when his prediction that the boy couldn't stand on his own proved all too true. The young ronin was very pale under the blood and dust, and he looked worse than he had even a few moments ago. That brought a harsh frown to Haru's face, which in turn became a scowl of grave concern as the teen started to dry heave. The boy would have vomited if there'd been anything inside him to come up, but there wasn't. Not even water left his body.

Starving to death and I stood by while those murderous

bastards nearly killed him all because I was worried about his pride. Stupid, stupid fool. You nearly let him get himself killed for the sake of his pride and your own curiosity. You should have just killed those men yourself. It was perfectly in your right as a retainer of the Shogun, but no, you left it to a boy.

Some warrior you are.

Haru knelt down and put an arm around the boy and started to rub his back, hoping he could calm the wracking violence of the boy's retching by that action. It used to work for him when he was a boy.

Ryu's sister reached them and dropped to her knees on the other side of her brother.

"Ryu! Are you all right?"

"Yes," the boy replied, but his voice was still strained, his fists clenched tightly on his thighs as he sat perfectly motionless.

"Are you nauseous?"

"Yes," the boy answered, surprising Haruhiro with the truth when he'd expected a brave-faced lie.

Well, he's not totally lacking in wisdom. He probably has better sense than someone else sitting here. Haruhiro was very unhappy with the way things had turned out. He'd never wanted the boy to be hurt, but here they were with his hope for an apprentice slipping away because the boy was obviously badly injured.

He might die. Gods, I don't want that.

A gentle finger of wind pulled at his clothes and Haruhiro wondered what the wind spirits were trying to tell him. But in his heart he knew what they were asking. To save the boy there was only one possible solution.

The girl looked at Haruhiro, worry and fear etching her expression into one that was pure anguish. He understood her worry. They'd been through so much together, it was only natural they would have formed bonds tighter than most brother and sister siblings would typically have in a samurai family. Haruhiro patted her shoulder gently, trying to offer hope where she saw none. "I'm sure he'll be fine in a few days."

"You're sure?" She was staring at him, searching his face for the sort of untruth people told when there really wasn't any good news.

"Yes," he replied, truthfully as he fully intended to make sure of it himself. There was no other option. Without him employing his own abilities to insure the boy lived, there would be little hope he could recover from the head injury. He'd seen this sort of thing before on the battlefield so many times he'd lost count. Vomiting after a head injury was always a bad sign, and the person was seldom the same afterwards. Worse, they often died.

I'm not letting him die. He got hurt, and it's really my fault. I could have stepped in sooner or taken care of those bandits myself, and I didn't.

"Can I pick you up now?" he asked the boy and got a slight nod in response.

He lifted the teen and held him close, felt the wind touching him, saw it flow along the boy's slender frame, tugging at clothes and hair before it shoved the samurai's shoulders, urging him on, demanding his help.

Whatever power lay in the boy, it was strong if the

spirits of the wind would make demands of someone like him.

Haru looked down at the girl, looking up at him with an odd look in her dark eyes.

"Will you be all right if I go ahead, or do you need me to stay with you?" he asked the girl.

"Go on, I'll manage."

"Good girl."

This time he did run.

Kazue watched the big man as he raced toward the inn, staring after him in shock. "How can he run as fast as a horse?" she asked the wind.

She knew the wind wouldn't actually speak to her, it seldom did, but it had many ways of communicating with them. A faint breeze flowed across her eyes and she focused on the samurai's retreating form, seeing a strange shimmer like colorless flame swirling around him for an instant until it flickered out.

"I know he has some kind of power, and that makes him like us in a way." But she had already known that. No normal person had eyes the color of the man who'd just saved them.

The wind swept across her ears and she could hear a faint sigh, almost an agreement, but not quite.

"Something else, then."

This time the soft touch of the wind on her cheek was an agreement.

She slipped off her sandals and picked them up. "We'd better go."

The wind tugged gently at her hair and clothes,

urging her after the departing samurai who was nearing the inn at a speed she'd have thought impossible for any human if she didn't know the things she already did.

"Here we go then, wind," she murmured and started to run after the Shogun's retainer.

Her speed increased gradually, the wind helping her along. Unlike the man, she couldn't put on a burst of instant speed because the wind didn't work so quickly for her. As Kazue's own pace increased, dust swirled high into the air, the wind trying to help her catch up with the samurai who was carrying the other child of Akikaze away.

Sensing something out of the ordinary—besides the wind that was pushing at him, trying to make him hurry—Haru glanced behind him to see the girl running swift as a deer in his wake, carried along on the arms of the wind. He could actually see the pale forms of the wind spirits in the swirling dust.

He couldn't help but smile.

Yes, these two will be wonderful apprentices, and I'm sure the Shogun will have no problem accepting them as such. Not when it will give him two more official demonkillers in a few years' time.

The samurai smiled and kept running, feeling the magic as it flowed from the girl to the boy in his arms and back again. It tugged at his clothing, pulled at his hair and he could actually sense it telling him to hurry, telling him to help the son of the Autumn Wind.

CHAPTER TWO

INN HOSPITALITY AND BARGAINS

When Haruhiro arrived at the inn, the owner and his wife were waiting outside, both bowing low and welcoming the samurai profusely, obviously afraid of such open displays of magical power. But Haruhiro could also hear a hesitant gratitude in their voices, as if they wanted to thank him but worried he was just another of the same sort as the newly dead bandits.

Those men have evidently been terrorizing them for a while now, so I guess knowing they're dead is probably a relief. But from their demeanor, I'd guess they're worried we're going to be more bad guests. People of power often just take whatever they want rather than politely paying for what they require.

Too many bad people around these days. Maybe I should add 'bandit killer and all around bastard extermination' as part of my duties to the Shogun. It would certainly be more satisfying than simply letting abusive people go on doing awful things to people, and it's certainly justified. Not like I haven't done it before, either.

A few more dead bandits and other dangerous criminals would only be a step in the right direction for everyone, but demon killing still has to be my priority. I just can't take the time to go out of my way to track down those sorts of people if there is a demon on a rampage somewhere. But any I run across in the commission of my normal duties are

going to be fair game.

Once the boy is strong enough to travel. He glanced down at the limp form in his arms. And that might take some time.

He bowed his head politely to the innkeeper and his wife, showing them the respect they deserved, even from a retainer of the Shogun. After all, if there were no innkeepers there'd be no inns, and that would be terrible. Haruhiro hated to sleep outside, and sleeping outside in the rain was pure torment.

"I'd like a room for myself and this boy, and one for the girl. I'll need water to clean his wounds and some bandages to bind them. Do you have this?"

The man glanced at his wife who nodded, both of them nervous, scared. Haru could see it clearly in their eyes; scent the fear in the air like bitter herbs burning in a hot flame.

Kazue arrived, panting and even more dusty and disheveled than she'd been a few moments ago, her hair half out of the ponytail she wore it in, her hat askew. The dust that had risen on the wind that had carried her drifted to the ground around their feet, dissipating like a strange dry fog. Frowning, she patted at her clothing and sighed. "I think I should try to avoid doing that. It certainly gets one dirty."

"She'll want a bath also," Haru told them and hoped the inn had more than one tub for bathing. Most did, but one never knew.

The woman just looked worried as her husband, the innkeeper, motioned the samurai into the inn, "Please enter. Our humble inn welcomes you...?"

The innkeeper was waiting for his name, which

wasn't unusual in the least. People liked to know the names of anyone they were speaking to, especially if they were about to do business. It *was* only polite.

"Shimazu Haruhiro," he replied. "I'm sorry for being rude and not introducing myself first. But you see I'm worried about this boy. Those bandits really gave him hell."

"We saw, Shimazu-sama," the man admitted.

Well, they can't be faulted for being rude, Haru mused when the man automatically gave him the honorific of a lord rather than that of 'san', which would have been acceptable.

Haru noticed the man didn't give his own name. It wasn't uncommon for someone to be called by their profession rather than a specific name, especially when it was a commoner being summoned by someone of greater station, like a samurai. But he'd rather know their names. Calling for the 'innkeeper' or the 'innkeeper's wife' would get tiring.

"Do you have a name?"

"I'm Goro, and this is my wife, Junko, Shimazu-sama," They both bowed to Haru.

He'd never liked the honorific of 'sama' attached to his name, though he did have a right to it. He was of high enough caste that he could have ridden a horse, but since they were difficult to care for and demons tended to kill them if they got the chance, he'd decided to pursue his duties on foot.

"Do you have a room?" he asked the man and glanced down at the boy in his arms. The teen seemed to be asleep, but he could feel the wind as it impatiently tugged at his hair. If Innkeeper Goro and

his wife noticed that the breeze around him ran counter to the prevailing wind in the area, they didn't say anything, which really wasn't all that unusual. Few people wanted to call attention to themselves in the presence of those who could use powers beyond the norm.

The innkeeper bowed. "Yes, yes, of course we have several rooms." He frowned. "Well, actually, we've only one available at the moment. The others were being used by those evil men, and they're dirty."

"Slovenly animals, that's what they were," his wife added.

The innkeeper glanced at his wife and said, "But we can get them cleaned up, and then you can have any of them you like."

"The clean room will be fine, Innkeeper Goro."

"As you say, Shimazu-san."

"That young man fought bravely to protect this pretty wife of his," the innkeeper's wife remarked, giving the girl a tentative smile.

"I'm not his wife, I'm his sister," the girl corrected as she patted at herself. Dust flew from her clothing. "He's Akikaze Ryu, and I'm Fujishima Kazue. Lots of people make that mistake. I don't know why, but they do."

"Ah, forgive the mistake, please," the woman apologized, and bowed again.

"It's nothing," the girl replied politely. "Please don't concern yourself over it."

Haru had listened to the exchange, noting the way the girl spoke like the daughter of an important man, not a commoner as her appearance might suggest to

someone who failed to look past the dirt and grime covering her. His keen observation of her grace had already told him she was gently born and bred, the daughter of a proud samurai family rather than farmers or simple tradesmen.

"Welcome to you too, then, Kazue-hime," they replied, giving her the honorific of princess, reserved for a nobleman's daughter. "And to your honored brother, Akikaze-sama, also," the innkeeper replied and beckoned her into the inn as Haru stopped on the first step leading inside. He kicked his sandals off and stepped up onto the porch of the inn. It was immaculate, not a leaf or speck of dirt visible. The man and his wife took pride in their business; the place was in excellent repair as well as being spotless.

"Where can I take him, innkeeper? He needs to be tended quickly. We've already delayed more than I like." It was true, but politeness required they get past the formalities, though they were taking much longer than Haruhiro felt was good.

So long as the boy is breathing, I can save him. Hear that, Wind? Keep him breathing and he'll be fine in a few days. He didn't think the wind could hear his thoughts, but the breeze that was pulling at him didn't relent.

"This way, please, Shimazu-sama," the innkeeper stated as he entered the building and hurried across the main room, going toward a set of narrow stairs. "The rooms are upstairs."

This room was where guests could eat and drink. It too was very clean, though there were some signs of recent damage to a few tables, and he could see the

pillows on the floor had been mended repeatedly. That too looked recent.

"Well, Goro-san," he gave the man the honorific out of respect for his profession, "I'd guess you're well rid of those poor excuses for bushi."

"Oh, yes, we're very grateful to you, Shimazu-sama!" the innkeeper replied enthusiastically and bowed low. "They were very bad men. Very bad."

"Someone will need to bury them. Is there anyone near that can do it, or should I take care of it later?" Haruhiro didn't care to handle the dead, but if he had to he would, and he'd just ignore any ghosts lingering around their bodies. It was pretty tiresome listening to them complain that he'd killed them, and besides, it wasn't fitting for a samurai to do the job of the lowest caste workers in the country, though he'd done it a number of times. Haruhiro preferred not to leave unburied dead lying about because you never knew if they might wind up being inhabited by a terrible ghost or, even worse, a demon. There were enough of both roaming around and he had no intention of adding to their numbers.

"There's a man who can do it. His hut isn't far from here."

"Good enough. Now about that room...we really do need it."

"Ah, yes, of course, Shimazu-san. This way, please," the man said as he continued into the inn, motioning for Haruhiro to follow.

He started up the steps, following the innkeeper.

That was when Haru noticed Kazue following them and shook his head. "You help the innkeeper's

wife get that water and those bandages. Make sure they're good and clean and the water needs to be warm. When you've got them, send them up with the innkeeper."

"Please," the girl pleaded, "I want to stay with Ryu."

"Not right now. You can come up later. Right now what needs to be done is better done without a sister watching."

She actually pouted. "He's *my* brother. Besides, I took care of him the last time he was hurt."

"And I'm the one paying for the rooms at this inn," he shot back as he started up the steps on the heels of the inn's owner.

"Well, you don't have to be so mean!" she retorted.

Your social skills need work. Haruhiro spared her a look, worried she might be about to cry, but her eyes were full of insulted anger rather than the tears of girlish petulance he'd expected. He did feel bad about treating her so harshly, but he really needed her to be elsewhere so he could do what was needed to save her brother's life. He didn't want to be mean, but he didn't have time to argue. Every moment wasted might mean the boy's death, and they'd already wasted so much time in conversation.

They reached the top of the stairs, which opened out onto a corridor lined with doors. The innkeeper quickly led Haruhiro to a door at the end of the corridor. "I'm sorry to say this isn't my best room, Shimazu-sama, but I'm afraid those men have made a mess of the better rooms."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Haruhiro stated.

The innkeeper pulled open the sliding door, revealing a sparse but very clean room. "Will this be suitable for Shimazu-san?" he asked. "I can hurry and make one of the better rooms presentable if you like."

"Yes, this will do, thank you, Goro-san," he said as he stepped into the room. Honestly, right now, he wouldn't have cared if they'd been offered space in the stable so long as he had privacy to take care of the boy. "Now if you will excuse me, I have to tend this boy. Give me a bit of time alone with him before you bring up the water and bandages. I need to assess his injuries."

"Of course, Shimazu-sama." The innkeeper stepped out, bowed deeply, and the door was pulled closed behind him. Haruhiro put the injured teen down on the floor. There was no sense ruining the futon bed with all the dirt and blood covering the boy.

He took off his swords and set them aside where they wouldn't be in the way.

"Hey, can you hear me?" he asked the younger man. There was no answer. He patted the boy's face gently and got no better reaction. The breeze fluttered through his hair and clothes, urging him to action.

"I'll help him, you just make sure he keeps breathing. I have to get ready," he told the wind and started to examine the boy more closely. He didn't know what the breeze he felt moving around him meant, but he hoped it indicated that the wind was trying to help somehow.

In addition to the first lump on the boy's head, there was a tear in his scalp he'd missed before.

Instead of a lump, this place felt soft under the samurai's probing fingers and when he touched it, the boy moaned.

"Damn. His skull *is* broken. How could I have missed that?"

A frown turned his face into a mass of harsh lines that lessened his human appearance greatly, his face distorting, darkening slightly as his true nature surfaced with the frustration he felt.

Calling on his inhuman heritage came with risks. Risks not only for the person he was trying to save, but danger to himself as well.

"No other choice. I've got to do this if I'm going to save him. Damn."

He stripped the clothing from the boy, his gaze roving over the younger man's much too frail body. He could clearly see every rib, the hard lines of the boy's hipbones, elbows and knees forming knobs in limbs that were little more than bone.

He looked even younger and more vulnerable unconscious and naked.

He found an old scar down the boy's side, almost as angry a red as the drying blood and the new wound that had bisected the old one. The healed wound showed that the young ronin wasn't a stranger to pain—or the touch of death, since the old wound could easily have proven fatal if it went as deep as it looked to have gone.

Haruhiro touched the scar. Flickering images entered his mind. Images of fire, a village burning, fighting, terrible pain and a sorrow so deep it brought tears to the samurai's eyes.

Gasping, he sat back and shook himself free of the boy's mind. It had been only the lightest of mental contacts and was as deep as the man could go, but it had been enough. More than enough.

He touched the boy's face. *He's brave enough to face demons.*

A pang of guilt filled Haru as he recalled how bravely the boy had faced seven opponents. The boy was near dead from starvation and he'd let him fight seven bandits with only his sister for help. He felt like a total ass for allowing it, the anger at himself far outweighing the rage he felt for the men who'd attacked the boy. They'd chosen evil as their path, they did as their natures dictated. He was hardly better than they were, but he wouldn't have let the boy fight if he'd just known how weak the young ronin was, and how close to death he'd been already.

Stupid. What would make you think that he'd be any better fed than the rest of the starving hordes of children roaming the countryside? Those stories of him winning money and food by fighting were probably greatly exaggerated.

The boy's poor physical condition could be cured with regular meals. While it was bad enough, coupled with the masses of bruises showing on the boy's body, it might take the boy a long time to fully recover. The men had kicked him viciously despite their leader's admonishment to keep him alive, and Haruhiro berated himself for letting them do so much damage.

He owed the boy for what he'd allowed to happen.

He put the ruined clothing aside and watched the

slow rise and fall of the boy's chest. It was too slow, and a finger set to the side of the boy's throat revealed that his heart's beating was also slow.

A chill wind from nowhere pulled at his clothes and hair. The windows of the room were closed, the rice paper letting in light but nothing else.

They were reminding him that there was magic that needed working, but he needed to see the boy's wounds and determine what he could and couldn't do for the young ronin before he made the attempt. It was a dangerous thing he had planned and he could accidentally irrevocably change the boy in ways that would be more dangerous than the wounds in his skull or worse—Haruhiro could kill him if he weren't careful.

There was also the risk Haru would fall so deeply under the power of his true nature that he would change and become something more dangerous than the bandits had been.

He wished there was a better answer, a better choice, but he'd chosen not to help the boy before and now there were no other options left. He'd chosen a path earlier, and this was where it led.

The wind swirling around him started to grow colder and he shivered slightly as it pulled urgently at his hair.

Akikaze. The Autumn Wind.

"I'm not going to let him die. I promise," he told the unseen spirits.

He didn't know if they believed him, or even if they understood, but they moved from him to the boy, the errant breeze making the boy's hair flutter.

His chest rose as he drew a deeper breath, one of the wind spirits keeping the boy alive as best it could.

The boy was out of time.

Haru removed his kimono, revealing more than just sleek muscles. There were scars covering his chest, arms and shoulders, the legacy of many battles marking his body.

He reached behind himself and drew a small blade from the obi that also held his swords, and kept his kimono closed. The tanto didn't match his swords. It was the one he'd carried since boyhood, given to him by his father.

His father...

He shook himself. *This is no time to be thinking about the past.*

He raised the blade to his chest and pressed the tip to his skin. Blood spilled down his chest as he pushed the blade deeper, cutting himself over his beating heart. He drew a shallow line of blood from the boy with the same blade, then put the tanto aside. Done with that part of it, Haruhiro pulled the boy into his lap, holding him so that the boy's bleeding chest was pressed to his. Making sure his own life and that of the boy were flowing together.

Heart to heart. Blood mingling.

It was the only way to save the boy.

But it could just as easily kill him.

"Don't you die on me," he whispered into the boy's ear. Closing his violet eyes, Haru softly chanted:

"Demon heart and demon soul.

Demon blood to make you whole."

A pale glow the color of tarnished silver formed

around Haru and the wind that had been drifting around them both grew stronger, the paper walls rattling with the increased force.

He could feel the power rising in himself and he held the boy tighter.

“Demon blood drawn by knife

“Demon strength to give you life

“Demon soul that will never tire

“Demon heart full of fire

“Grant this boy your power.”

The boy in his arms twitched as the magic started to take hold of them both, Haru’s demon blood seeping into the boy’s skin. But as the chant implied, it would be more than just some of his blood that Haruhiro gave to the boy. It would be a fragment of his own soul.

A demon soul.

This was the secret he shared with only one other person. Only one man in all of Nippon knew of it. The Shogun.

He’d saved the man’s life the same way he would save this boy.

By giving him a little piece of his soul.

The glow intensified as Haruhiro felt the drain on his magic, felt the slow tearing as a bit of his soul started to come free.

He gritted his teeth. It hurt. It hurt worse than a physical wound.

Much worse.

But he refused to cry out.

He couldn’t cry out, because that would bring the innkeeper, his wife and Kazue running. And he didn’t

want them to see this.

Didn't want them to see him what he really was: the son of a Demon Lord.

His skin slowly changed to a ruddy color, and small horns erupted from his forehead as his teeth became jagged and turned the color of iron.

"Demon blood

"Demon soul

"Heed my order

"Make this boy whole," he chanted softly.

The pulling became stronger still, and he groaned as the bit of his soul began to fully separate itself. It was time to lay the boy down, and he eased the limp form in his arms to the floor.

There was no trace of blood left, which meant the magic was working.

Now *if* he could actually keep the boy from dying, it would be worth the pain he was enduring.

The wound on his chest was gaping wider, something moving in the wound like a small mouth struggling to spit out its own tongue. The center of the wound turned to a deeper shade of red and the maroon area wiggled, the piece of his soul beginning to fill the bloody cut on his chest. It grew even darker until it was almost black. Haru groaned from the pain, more of his blood spilling over his chest as the cut opened wider, the fragment of his soul writhing in the shallow wound like a worm in the earth.

A blast of wind ripped at him, its touch cold as the first kiss of Winter, or the last bitter breath of Autumn. Frost coated his arms and shoulders, dusted his hair. His breath formed clouds of mist that quickly

spun away on the strong wind.

He shivered from the cold. This wasn't his magic, it was the magic of the Autumn Wind, the magic that belonged to the boy and his sister, and it was doing something. Something he didn't understand, but didn't have the ability to analyze while his soul was being ripped apart.

He gritted teeth that were almost totally black, fists clenched at the agony of what he was doing to himself. The talons digging into the palms of his hands drew blood, but he hardly felt that minor hurt over the ripping sensation of his soul having a shred torn out.

"Demon blood and demon soul

"Demon life to make you whole," he croaked out despite the pain.

Haruhiro grabbed his kimono and shoved some of the fabric into his mouth to muffle the sharp cry of pain he knew he wouldn't be able to prevent when that piece of his soul finally broke free. Sharp teeth tore through the silk as easily as a man could bite through a pickle.

His skin was maroon now, his true nature fully revealed. At least there was no one to see him. No one to scream and flee in horror at his terrible appearance. Teeth still locked in the silk, his body arched from the strain, sweat beading his face, dampening his skin so that it shone like polished lacquer in the dimmed light from the windows. The kiss of the chill wind turned the sweat to ice that pattered to the tatami mats on the floor, the small crystals of ice glittering in the sunlight like tiny jewels.

The fragment of soul struggled to gain its freedom, a finger width fluttering in the gaping wound, wiggling, unable to break free of the larger portion. Haruhiro nearly passed out from the agony of it, only the silk jammed into his mouth keeping his cry soft enough that it wouldn't attract attention he didn't want. Anyone coming in now could ruin the spell, or worse, get that bit of his soul the boy needed to stay alive.

The fragment of his soul finally tore loose, fluttering like a black butterfly on the icy breath of the wind. Haruhiro watched as it flew around the room, caught in the icy gale that whipped around him with such force that it shoved the futon against the outside wall and threw Ryu's clothing into the air so that his kimono and hakama danced madly around the room as if they were two people chasing the black butterfly.

That alone should have brought the innkeeper and his wife up to see what was happening. But it didn't, gods be thanked.

Haruhiro watched the sliver of his soul spin past, dimly aware through the pain that dulled his mind that the color was fading from black to stormcloud grey as he watched. The bit of his soul was changing in the grip of the windstorm that tore at his hair like vicious hands, but carried no violence to the boy lying on the floor.

The wind whirled the bit of his demon soul around the room, the fury of the blast of air diminishing as the air warmed and the shred of demon soul paled further.

It drifted slowly closer, and now Haru could see

the color had changed to the warm red-brown of an autumn leaf, its shape like that of the faded crest on the boy's garments. A Japanese maple leaf.

The bit of Haruhiro's transformed soul fell on Ryu's chest and lay there a moment before it sank into his skin and faded from sight.

The wound in Haruhiro's chest started to heal and the cut he'd made in the boy's chest faded as dramatically as the leaf-shaped bit of demon soul had. The other wounds on the boy's body remained little changed, though the bruising had faded somewhat and when he checked, Haruhiro found that the head wounds which had threatened the boy's life were almost completely healed.

The samurai slumped wearily, the evidence of his true nature fading as the magic he'd woven faded away. He was exhausted in body and soul, though his mind was still alert.

But he didn't have time to rest. That would come later.

Much later.

He had to take care of the boy and the boy's sister first.

Once that was done and he had a bath and some food, he would rest.

But the boy came first.

Haruhiro regarded the teen critically. It would be a few days before they could travel.

A few more days delay, when there was a demon ravaging a town not too far away.

He had a duty to the Shogun. But he didn't want to lose track of the boy and his sister again, and that

would be too easy to do if he left them here at the inn. The boy was proud. He wouldn't accept pity from anyone, not even a wealthy benefactor.

At least Haruhiro didn't think he would.

The samurai reached out with a hand that shook worse than an elderly man's to touch Ryu's cheek.

It was warm and as he watched, a trace of color returned to the too-pallid skin. His fingers moved down to the boy's throat and he felt the steady throb of a heart beating in the strong slow pace of sleep.

The magic had worked and from what he'd seen, Haruhiro didn't think he'd have to worry about the bit of demon soul changing the boy, since the Autumn Wind seemed to have changed it to something less dangerous.

At least that's what he thought—and hoped—the wind had done.

Ryu's eyes opened, and they were the same color as the wind-altered piece of Haruhiro's soul: the shade of an autumn leaf.

"Where am I?" the boy asked, looking around himself in confusion. "And, forgive me if we've been introduced, but who are you? Where is my sister?"

"We're at an inn. Your sister is downstairs with the innkeeper's wife, and I'm Shimazu Haruhiro," he said.

"Oh." The boy glanced around, then frowned up at him. "How did I get here?"

"You were in a fight against seven bandits. I kept the bandits from killing you. It hasn't been that long ago."

"Oh." The boy repeated the soft reply, and Haru

was starting to become painfully aware of his beauty and the melodic tones of his voice. If he weren't so tired his cock would have responded, but as it was it lay still, which was better, really. The boy hardly knew him, and he suspected the teen wasn't one to take casual lovers.

"You need to rest."

"Hn." The boy sounded sleepy, but he was too dirty to put into bed. Haru felt his cock twitch when the boy laid a hand on his thigh.

"Thank you for saving Kazue," he murmured.

Haru couldn't help himself, he gathered the boy into his arms, expecting a protest.

Instead, Ryu laid his head against Haru's chest and closed his eyes. The boy acted as if it were perfectly normal for them to be like this: Ryu in his lap, cradled in his arms.

The samurai shuddered, because it certainly felt *right* to him. More right than it should have felt. He hardly knew the boy.

But it didn't matter. He wanted him with a fierce desperation he'd never experienced in all his twenty-three years of existence.

He sat back and caressed the boy's hair, soothing him to sleep the way one would soothe an ill child.

It wasn't long before the boy's breathing slowed into the even pace of someone deeply asleep. Haruhiro sat there, holding him, feeling the warmth of the teen in his arms. The emotions he'd felt before, that desire to protect and keep the boy safe from harm, filled him. He pulled the boy close, face almost in the dark fall of hair. He smelled not of blood and

dust, but of cool wind and the sweet scent of damp leaves.

He looked down at the sleeping boy and couldn't resist the urge to sample the youth's lips. He lowered his head to steal a kiss, just knowing the boy's mouth would be sweet as ripe fruit.

This is wrong. I'm not a thief. I want him awake and aware when I kiss him. I want to see his reaction, want to know if he's ever been kissed before.

^Does it really matter, though? You can take what you want now and then kiss him later. Chances are he won't be any the wiser, so what difference will it make?^

True, what harm could it do?

Haruhiro frowned, face contorting a bit. He reached up and touched his own forehead, the frown darkening when he felt the faint knob of a horn trying to erupt from his skull. His true nature was near the surface, and would stay that way until he recovered from the spell he'd cast to save the boy.

Damn, I'm going to have to be careful. If I make any mistakes, I'll wind up being what I am sworn to hunt.

And the only way out of that would be to kill himself.

Yes, I have to be very careful for a while. He looked at the sleeping boy's face, so innocent and young. Innocent. That was it. His demon blood was drawn by what he sensed in the boy. Innocence and magical ability that had barely been tapped.

All the things that most attracted his kind.

And that was more than enough of a warning that his demonic nature was seeking freedom. He'd kept it fully under control since the end of the war, and he

didn't intend to set it free. Not now. Not ever. Warned by his own conscience, he held the sleeping boy and ignored the desires that were trying to entice him into wrongdoing.

The innkeeper should be along soon with the water and bandages. At least he hoped so.

He felt his cock start to harden and decided that keeping the boy in his embrace – and on his lap – was a mistake. He needed a bit of distance and a lack of physical contact with the object of his desire. He also needed some kind of distraction from Ryu's beauty.

Haruhiro laid the teen on the floor and left him there. He could straighten up the room before the innkeeper arrived. He pulled the futon back where it belonged and was just putting the head rests back when a soft scratching told him of someone's arrival at the door. "I've brought water and bandages, Shimazu-sama!"

It was the innkeeper.

Haruhiro checked to make sure his horns weren't showing, touched his teeth to make sure they too were normal and then called, "Come in."

The innkeeper entered with a small tub of clean water and a mass of bandages folded over one arm.

"Set the bandages here," Haru told him, indicating the futon. "The water you can put near the boy there."

The innkeeper did as he was told. "Does Shimazu-san require anything else?"

"Send up some food. We both need to eat, and so does the girl."

"Of course, Shimazu-san. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

The man was hovering and Haruhiro started to ask what he wanted when he remembered he hadn't paid the man yet. He dropped to his knees and pulled his kimono into his lap. He'd bitten through the cloth and it was probably beyond salvaging. He'd have to remedy the clothing situation as soon as they reached a town. Sighing, he reached into the kimono to pull a string of coins from concealment inside the left sleeve. Gold glinted in the light from the windows as he removed a single coin from the tough silk cord that bound it. "We'll be staying here until the boy is strong enough to travel."

"Of course, Shimazu-san," the man replied. Haru saw how the man's eyes lit up when he saw the small fortune he was carrying. *Well, after having those damned bandits staying here, the sight of money must be a welcome one. At least he knows I can afford to stay here, so that should go a long way to getting what I need to take care of this boy and that sister of his.*

He tossed the coin to the innkeeper and the man suddenly seemed embarrassed. He bowed low. "Shimazu-sama, I don't..."

"I know you don't have the money to give me the difference between that coin and the cost of what I'm asking for. Don't worry about that, Goro-san. We're going to be here for a while, and this boy needs to eat well in that time. I'll consider it an even exchange for all the trouble we're going to be."

"But Shimazu-sama, it's far too much, really." The man glanced at the coin in his hand. It was close to what he might expect to make in an entire season.

Haruhiro shrugged. The Shogun had given him a

considerable sum to cover his expenses and he tended to be generous with the money as it helped to leave a good impression, not only of himself, but of his lord also. And the fact that he'd gotten a small sum of money off the dead bandits—and it was very apparent that they'd not paid the innkeeper, their kind never did if they could get away with it—only made it proper for him to make restitution in the Shogun's name.

"Consider the rest to be for all the trouble the bandits gave you. As a retainer of the Shogun, I feel it's your due for all the damage they did."

The innkeeper bowed low yet again. "Thank you, Shimazu-sama."

Haruhiro waited until the man had backed out of the room and closed the door. Once the innkeeper was gone, he reached for the water and started to clean the dirt and blood off of the boy. He found himself studying the slender form, the beauty of the boy's delicate face. He had a mouth that begged to be kissed.

Snarling silently at himself, Haruhiro shoved aside all thoughts of a sexual nature and went about the business of getting the boy clean enough to put him to bed. Once the worst of the dirt was gone, he pulled the covers on the futon aside and put the boy to bed. His cock twitched with the desire to be sunk into the boy's warmth and his balls ached with the need for release.

This is going to be pure torment. I hope there's a brothel at the next town. I'm going to need to get rid of this frustration.

But looking at the perfect beauty of the boy sleeping so peacefully beyond the reach of worry and pain, Haruhiro knew that no amount of time with a prostitute would lessen what he felt. This went beyond the scope of simple lust.

Something about the boy had touched his heart in ways no one else ever had, and probably never would.

But the boy needed to rest. The object of his newfound emotions, this raging desire that filled him and wouldn't be denied wasn't in any condition to engage in love-play.

Not yet.

No, right now all he could do was wait. Wait, and let the boy regain his strength.

But after that...

Haruhiro smiled.

After that Haruhiro would do everything in his power to win the boy's love.

Nothing less would do.

* * * * *

Later that day...

Kazue watched her brother as he slowly ate the bowl of rice she'd brought up for him, the girl all too aware of the man seated by one of the open windows in the room. The sun had turned the few clouds she could see outside a pale red shade as the setting sun made its farewells to the day. It also colored the man's face and his closed eyelids with a reddish cast that made

him look inhuman despite his handsomeness. It was just an illusion caused by the light, but it made her look away, not wanting to see a demonic creature where their benefactor sat. He was quiet, unmoving, but she didn't think he was asleep.

He made her nervous, not because he was the tallest man she'd ever met, but because of how the sunlight made him look. Fierce and dangerous. And she supposed he really was both of those things. Being samurai, it was expected of him. And it was a very good thing he was a samurai, because he'd saved her brother by fighting off the bandits. He was also kind. Paying for their stay at the inn was nothing short of generous.

But she'd long ago learned that such generosity always came with a price of some sort. Even from samurai. Or especially from samurai who felt they were owed for their kindness.

She just wondered whether it would be Ryu or herself that was expected as payment.

She pushed aside the dismal thought and concentrated on other things, like the fact that Ryu was alive and awake.

Kazue was happy to see her brother sitting up, alert and none the worse for his ordeal, though he still seemed too pale and listless. "Are you sure you feel okay?" she asked him.

"Yes. Please don't keep asking me how I am, Kazue. You'll become a nag like Aunt Hideko was if you don't stop doing that."

At the mention of their dead aunt, she looked down at her hands in her lap rather than let him see

the tears filling her eyes. "I'm sorry, Ryu," she whispered. "I don't mean to pester you."

She heard him sigh. "I know. I'm sorry too," he told her and she felt a hand on her shoulder, her brother patting her gently to soothe her.

"And I'm sorry for saying that about Aunt Hideko too. I...it was a terrible thing to say about her, and she deserves more respect from me."

"We shouldn't say anything bad about the dead. I don't want to take a chance that her spirit might hear us being mean to her."

Her brother just nodded and swallowed the rice in his mouth.

"You know what the priests always said, we should only have good thoughts and memories of our family, Ryu. I don't want their spirits to hear us and be unhappy because we're disrespectful," she murmured quietly.

"I don't either," her brother agreed. He set the rice bowl aside and put his arms around her in a hug. He was so very thin. She'd just turned a blind eye to it before, but she could no longer do that. He'd suffered hunger just to keep her fed, and she felt terrible guilt over it.

It wasn't really quite proper for them to have so much physical contact. A samurai—or a ronin, for that matter—wasn't supposed to show so much affection in front of strangers, but they both felt so alone in the world. Now that they were bereft of their family and any hope of a home, they clung to one another with desperation.

If something happened to Ryu...she just didn't see

how she could go on living.

More tears welled up in her eyes and she brushed them away in annoyance. There was no reason for them. But more spilled out just the same.

"Don't cry, Kazue. Everything will be all right. You'll see. I'll find someone who'll take me on as a retainer," her brother told her, his voice kept to a bare whisper because he evidently didn't want to bother their benefactor.

She looked up at him and forced a cheerful smile. "I know you'll find a new lord, Ryu." But she didn't even want to think about what might happen then. Like their former lord, any new lord might expect to her to become his mistress—no one would take a girl with no dowry or family as a wife, no matter how well-respected their grandfather had been in his youth—or send her to live at a shrine. Then she would never see her brother again, and the life of a nun certainly didn't suit her.

Ryu brushed her tears away with gentle fingers, and she put on a brave smile. "We'll be just fine," she stated, forcing a bright tone into her voice that her internal turmoil spoiled so that it came out a little too brittle sounding, like their aunt when she was upset and didn't want anyone to know it.

"Kazue-chan, don't cry. I'll get us out of his mess. I promise you I will."

Haruhiro opened one eye just the barest slit so he could look at the pair without appearing to do so. They were close. Very close, but not in a way that might hint at something perverted between them. No,

they were just two children who'd suffered too much hardship and relied heavily on one another for comfort and mutual support.

"Please eat more, you need to regain your strength, Ryu. We can't stay here forever, you know."

"I'm full, Kazue."

"But..."

Haruhiro sat up straighter before he intruded on their conversation. "He's right. Eating too much at one time in his condition will only make him sick."

Both of them turned their gazes on Haruhiro, and he offered them a nod and a slight smile.

They were both looking at him, their faces carefully blank, which drove home their close resemblance and their innate distrust of him. Up close, no one could mistake them for anything but siblings. Beautiful siblings, that would cause him unending problems with people trying to sell them or lure them away with promises of a happy life.

But at least they seemed to have sense not to believe such people, or they would undoubtedly already be working in a brothel or trapped in the life of a sexual plaything to some lord or other.

"It will?" the girl asked him.

He nodded. "Yes. He's been too long without a real meal inside him. And he's not exactly well at the moment. That beating those bandits gave him only made things worse, and I'm very sorry about that."

"Why should you be sorry?" the boy asked him. "I'd be dead if you hadn't come along and saved me."

Haruhiro tried to hide his embarrassment, but he'd never been good at that. He ran a hand over his head,

his gaze lowered. "Well, you see I could have stopped them before you even arrived but I, umm..." He gave a soft chuckle. "Well, I wanted to see you fight."

When he looked up, the boy was just staring at him, puzzled, but the girl was frowning, her expression one of outrage.

"You let my brother fight them alone when you knew they were there all along?" she asked, her voice harsh with the anger that blazed in her eyes. "How could you be so callous? He might have been killed! You...!"

The girl got to her feet and Haruhiro could read her intention in every line of her slender body. She was going to stalk over and hit him. He could tell from the way she was poised, like a hawk about to swoop onto unsuspecting prey.

"Kazue..." The way the boy said her name, quietly but with an edge sharp as a katana, served to silence the girl's tirade. "Sit down."

Obediently she did as Ryu told her, sitting down beside the bed. "He should have helped you."

"Why?" the boy asked her. "He has no obligation to do anything for us, Kazue. I'm just a masterless ronin and he's a samurai in service to a greater samurai or some fine lord. He is under no obligation to do anything for me, or you. He chose to save us, but he didn't have to do that any more than he had to bring us here and pay for this room or our meal."

The girl hung her head. "I know, but..." She went quiet, her hands worrying at a fold of her still-dirty kimono.

They have to have better clothes, but one thing at a time.

"Well, since the subject has come up, I suppose I should tell you that I've actually been trying to find you both."

Two sets of deep brown eyes focused on him with open distrust and some hostility from the young ronin.

"Why?" the boy questioned, his voice betraying his distrust.

Well, he's direct and comes to the point, if he does tend to be blunt about it. Nothing wrong with that, really, and it sure beats the sycophantic way people behave at court. Still, it could be construed as bad manners in a samurai, though no one would expect anything better from a ronin or a simple bushi.

"I know of your grandfather and the style of swordsmanship he sometimes taught. I heard that a boy ronin who claimed to know the style was roaming around the countryside fighting duels for food or money. They said he was good, and that he called himself Akikaze Ryu. I wanted to see if he was as good as the stories said he was."

"Hn," the boy grunted. "Well, you've gotten your answer."

Haruhiro heard the bitterness in the boy's voice. He felt he'd failed when he'd been taken down by the men, it was very apparent.

"You made a good showing against overwhelming odds," he stated. "I'm genuinely impressed."

Both of them were watching him, the girl's gaze wary, the boy's openly distrustful.

"I lost. How could you think that was a good display of my skills?"

Haruhiro sighed. This wasn't going the way he'd hoped.

"Look, you're good. I can see that. But you don't have enough experience in fighting against odds like that. You're too young to have fought in the wars, and that many opponents are a challenge to even an experienced samurai. Honestly, I don't know of any young men your age that could have done as well as you did."

He watched to see what Ryu's reaction to the flattery would be: most young men would bask in such praise.

The boy just frowned.

He didn't even react to my compliment, so he probably has no real esteem for his abilities and that's just as dangerous as being full of himself. But it's easier to cure.

The girl was looking from her brother to him and Haruhiro tried another tactic to direct the conversation the way he wanted it to go.

"You fought also. I didn't expect that."

She bowed her head modestly. "My grandfather said that the future wife of any samurai should be able to protect her own home from invasion." She sighed. "Not that I'll have to protect any home now."

Haru watched the boy pat her hand. "You did all right, Kazue. I just wish you'd had more lessons."

"So do I."

"I might be able to arrange that," Haru suggested.

Two heads snapped up, two pairs of rich brown eyes regarded him. Neither of them spoke, but there was a lot more distrust in their gazes. They'd been offered things before and had their benefactors turn

on them; he could see that clearly in their stares.

"I thank you, but my sister and I can't accept such generosity."

"Oh, don't think I'm being generous. I want something in return."

The distrust turned to mild hostility.

"You can't have her," the boy stated firmly.

"I don't want her," Haru replied truthfully. He also refrained from mentioning that he'd gladly bring the boy to his bed. It would only drive a wedge between them, so he kept his desires to himself and went with his initial reason for following them.

"I'm looking for an apprentice..." he glanced at the girl, "or two."

Haruhiro waited to see what the two would say about his remark.

The boy's whole demeanor was distrustful, and it made the samurai wonder just how many people had sought to deceive the two teens since they'd been rendered homeless, without a family or lord to protect them.

"Apprentice? What sort of an apprentice do you mean?" Ryu questioned.

"Yes, I'd like to hear your answer to that," Kazue added.

The girl was more curious than anything, though she did seem wary of his intentions. The boy, however, was showing signs of open hostility in the way he stared at Haruhiro. The man decided that neither a smile or a frown would help him in this instance. The two were as unlikely to react well to a frown of dismay or a smile to show friendly intent—

he suspected they'd seen both too often in the past—so he kept his features carefully neutral to avoid giving any wrong impressions.

This is going to be harder than I'd anticipated. It's probably a good idea to get right to the point to help dispel any misconceptions they might have about what I want... Though what they are probably thinking isn't too far off the mark as far as the boy goes. But he also wasn't going to force the young ronin into a relationship. He'd give him time and a chance to say yes or no.

But he certainly hoped it wouldn't be no.

He cleared his throat. "I need apprentices to learn my trade."

"Which is?" the boy instantly prompted.

"I track down and kill demons," Haruhiro replied and waited for them to respond to the statement.

"Ah," was all the boy said.

The girl just nodded.

"So, you kill demons. Why would you offer to teach us how to do that? Why not someone better with a sword than I am?" Ryu questioned. The boy was making no effort to hide his cynicism or his distrust.

The girl whispered, "He isn't lying, Ryu."

Ryu turned to stare at his sister and for some reason Haruhiro couldn't grasp, he felt like an unwanted intruder in the room, the emotion so strong he almost stood to leave. His skin was tingling and that could only mean one thing.

Magic. But I can't tell which one of them is doing it.

A thread of wind pulled at his hair and he suspected the boy was trying to drive him away. But

why? He was offering them a chance to escape the dreary life they were trapped in, and the boy's resistance puzzled him.

"Well, what do you think?" he prompted, trying to find out what they were thinking about, and exactly why Ryu was so resistant to his offer.

"I really do need the help. I'm really good at being a demonkiller, but it's quite dangerous when you work alone."

"Why would you single us out just to be your apprentices when I almost got myself killed fighting a few bandits?" the boy countered, his tone hard-edged with barely suppressed emotion.

Something terrible must have happened to them. Something worse than the bandits today.

The girl looked a little upset, but she gave Haruhiro a trace of a smile. "Please excuse my brother's lack of manners. We've been offered similar positions with other samurai and the men making the offers were never honest in their dealings with us."

Haruhiro did frown, but he quickly smoothed his features again. "You have my word as a retainer to the Shogun..."

"We've had similar promises," the boy cut him off abruptly. "I do appreciate your help during the fight. And I also appreciate your generosity in giving us food and shelter, but..."

Haruhiro held up his hand to silence the boy. "Just hear me out," he urged.

"No."

The refusal caught Haruhiro totally off guard. He had expected the teen to eagerly jump at the offer to

become samurai in the service of a lord—technically the Shogun himself, since that was whom Haruhiro served and fealty to him would be fealty given indirectly to the Shogun. But this... No, he hadn't expected to be turned down.

The girl was staring at her brother as if he'd just sprouted horns. "Ryu..."

Just his name, but there was a plea in it, and something passed between the siblings. The girl's face set into a slight frown, the boy's showing stubborn resolve.

"Ryu...please hear him out."

The girl's bottom lip quivered and the boy pointedly looked away from her, his hard gaze on Haruhiro.

"Fine."

Leave it to a female, Haruhiro thought. At least he has to hear me out.

"Getting back to our discussion," he began, "You lost with the bandits because the odds were too great for someone of your inexperience and condition. You aren't in good health, as anyone can plainly see."

"Hn," the boy grunted in reply, and Haruhiro abruptly understood that was what the boy did when he was uneasy with a situation. He resorted to wordless answers and curt replies that bordered on rudeness.

"I would have died," the boy admitted. "And then they would have taken Kazue..." He went silent, still staring at Haru.

"Yes, you would have. But you didn't because I was there." He moved closer to the two teens. "I've

been looking for the two of you for a while now. Following you from town to town."

"Why us? You didn't answer before."

"Because you're the best I've found with a sword. It's not just anyone who can become a demonkiller," Haruhiro told them honestly. "It takes a certain type of swordsman."

"So I've heard. What makes you think I'm that type?"

Haruhiro met the boy's gaze squarely. "I think you know what makes you the perfect candidate. Despite your denial over the bandits, you've won a large number of duels for a boy your age."

"I'm not a boy."

Haruhiro offered the teen a slight smile. "No, I suppose you aren't."

He had to hide the shock at the fiery blush that blazed across the boy's cheeks at his words. *Oh, now this is getting very interesting. It looks like he's attracted to me despite himself.* The samurai had a sudden flash of insight. *So that's why he wants to run. He's fighting the attraction and wants to get as far away from me as he can.*

He didn't want to press the issue. Not yet.

Refraining from making any comment about the blush still brightening the boy's face, Haruhiro said, "I'm making you a genuine offer of employment in my service. Or if you like, we can call it a teacher and student relationship, whichever suits you better."

"What about my sister?"

"What about her? My offer is for both of you."

"No. I don't want her fighting."

The girl snorted in annoyance and crossed her

arms over her chest. "Then what was I doing today, Ryu? And what did I do that time those two drunken ronin attacked you?"

Haruhiro felt like an intruder as the two siblings started to argue.

"You fought. But I didn't like it! I don't want you fighting, Kazue."

The girl sniffed disdainfully. "You never like me to do anything but follow you around like a lost puppy. I'm tired of being nothing but your shadow, Ryu."

"I don't want you to get hurt!"

"No, you'd rather I stand off to the side and be worried sick about you getting crippled or killed! If I could fight better, I could help you and then I wouldn't be quite so useless!"

"You can't help me when I'm dueling. You know that."

"Yes. But what if you get killed doing it? You know what those men you fight will do to me. Do you want me to be raped if you die?"

The boy just stared at her in shock. His voice was softer, when he answered her blunt question. "No, of course not, but they would kill you if you fight them."

She just stared at him in horror. "And if I'm raped, do you think I'll *want* to live? Damn you, Ryu! You men are all alike. It's always about *your* honor. Well what about mine? If I'm going to be raped, I'd rather die fighting! Do you think Mother would have meekly let anyone take her like that? Do you think Father would have wanted her to be raped without putting up a fight? No, Mother would have died fighting, and Father would have been proud of her."

And that's what I'll do, so you may as well teach me, so I've got a chance to avenge you or at least die a virgin."

The boy was pale now, eyes full of horror at his sister's bold speech.

Haruhiro was doing his best to stay out of the fight, but the girl *was* right. If only she could make the boy see it, there would be a good chance he'd have two apprentices instead of the one he'd hoped to acquire. If the girl's magical abilities were even half as powerful as he suspected they might be, it would be well worth the extra effort training her would take.

"And if you get all scarred up, who will want to marry you, Kazue?"

"You know very well that Grandmother fought at Grandfather's side and he certainly didn't mind her scars. He called them her beauty marks!"

"She got them after they were married."

"What makes you think anyone is going to want to marry me at all? I've got *no* dowry, *no* land, and *no* family but you! Ryu I don't have *any* chance to be married! *None!* Why can't you accept it? I have!"

"I'll find a way, Kazue."

"Yes, I'm sure you want to, that way you can be rid of me!"

The room went dead silent. There were tears on Kazue's cheeks, and the boy had his head bowed and was staring at the cover over his lap.

The samurai saw a damp spot appear on the cover. It was quickly joined by another, and a third.

"I'm sorry, Ryu-san," the girl said, giving her brother the honorific to show she was truly

apologetic.

"So am I, Kazue-san."

Haruhiro coughed to remind them they'd been talking to someone else, who was still in the room.

"You said you had more than one reason for wanting the two of us. What is your other reason?" The suspicion was back in the boy's eyes.

"I'm sure you can guess, but I'll just come right out..."

"We aren't going to be your bedmates. Forget it!" the boy snapped.

Haruhiro sighed. The boy was being very defensive. It was yet another clue to the underlying reason the boy wanted to turn down the offer so much: he had a powerful attraction to him, and Haruhiro wasn't about to let the boy run. Not when the attraction was mutual.

"That isn't what I was going to say."

"Wasn't it?" Ryu's tone was like acid and it burned in Haruhiro's ears.

I'd wager he's not even aware he's using magic against me right now.

"All right, I'll just come right out and tell you my biggest reason for wanting the two of you. You're right, I've seen swordsmen better than you. Much better. But they don't have the one thing all demonkillers need."

The boy snorted. "A pretty face?"

"No, boy, magic. You two are the only ones I've found who have the innate ability for the magical and martial arts. And a demonkiller has to have both."

He watched the sister and brother look at one

another. The boy raised one eyebrow.

"Don't blame her," he said. "I can see it around both of you. It's like a rainbow-colored mist. And it's pretty strong with both of you, but you knew that already, didn't you?"

The boy didn't agree, but he also made no effort to deny Haruhiro's statement. "So what would you expect me to do?"

The girl glared at Ryu.

"Learn from me. I can teach you to fight better, and how to use your magical abilities. Demons are magical creatures and, at best, they are difficult to kill."

The boy was staring at him. "How did you get to be a demon killer?"

How to answer this...hmmm...and how much should I tell them? I probably shouldn't give them the full truth. Not until I know I can trust them with a secret.

"My father taught me how to fight them."

The boy was staring at him hard now, and so was the girl.

"There's more to it, but I don't think I need to tell you about my personal life."

The boy frowned. "You know magic, then. You'll teach us?"

"Yes. I'll teach both of you everything I know about fighting demons."

"My sister isn't going to fight demons," the boy said, "but I'll let her learn to fight. She needs to be able to protect herself in case I'm not around to help her."

"So you're agreeing?"

"Let me think about it."

He's tired. That argument with his sister took a lot of energy out of him. He needs to rest.

"Fine, then. You rest and think it over." He got to his feet. "When you've decided you come and tell me. I'll be somewhere around the inn."

He headed for the door.

"You mean it, don't you?" the girl asked.

"Yes, I mean it."

Ryu watched the man leave, his mouth locked into a stern frown.

"No," he told his sister. "I don't want to be around him."

The girl looked at her brother. She'd seen him blush and suspected what the problem was regarding the handsome samurai and her brother. Young as they both were, she'd known about Ryu for a while now. It was why he was so insistent she find a husband.

"Ryu, you can't run from your feelings forever," she ventured.

"Yes, I can," he retorted softly.

She sighed. "I don't like seeing you so unhappy."

"I don't trust anyone enough for that, Kazue. I can't."

"I know," she agreed despondently. "But I can always hope you'll find someone."

He gave her a smile. "Don't worry about me."

"Well, I do. You're so unhappy."

"And you aren't?"

"I guess you're right. We're both unhappy."

Ryu lay down on the bed and closed his eyes. "For now. We won't always be unhappy, Kazue."

She picked up his empty rice bowl. "I'll take this downstairs. You just rest, big brother. That's one thing he said that you can't argue with. You aren't well at all."

"I'll be fine."

"But you won't be fine, and neither will I if you don't take this offer from that demonkiller samurai."

"Kazue, please, not now. I need to think."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Ryu, he's a retainer of the Shogun. Think about that."

Ryu sat bolt upright. "What? How do you know that?"

"He told me so himself."

"Oh, he's probably a liar."

"No, Ryu. I know he's anything but that."

"So he told the truth."

She nodded.

A retainer of the Shogun. That would make me a retainer to the Shogun as well, if I take him up on the apprenticeship. It was something he would have jumped at under slightly different circumstances. But his attraction to the man made him uneasy, and anything that made Ryu uneasy was something he either had to fight or flee.

He didn't think fighting the man would gain him much at all, which left running, and he didn't think Kazue was going to let him run. Not this time.

"Ryu, this is the chance you — no — *we* need. Both of us. Isn't it what you've wanted?"

He nodded.

"Stop running from yourself, then. Be who you are and take a chance that you've found what you were searching for ever since we lost our family." She squeezed his hand. "Please, Ryu."

He relented. "Okay, Kazue. I'll do it. But I won't tell him now. I don't want him to think I rushed into the decision."

"You rush a decision?" She laughed softly. "Father was right, you take longer than an old man when it comes to making a choice."

"I don't want to make any mistakes that will hurt us."

"I know." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Get some sleep."

"Okay."

She got up to leave, but paused at the door. "I love you, Ryu."

"I love you too, Kazue. Even if you are a pain in the behind."

"Me a pain in the behind? Ha! You're much worse than I am."

"Probably," he agreed.

"Go to sleep."

"Nag."

"Stubborn."

Laughing, Kazue closed the door.

But once she was gone, Ryu had trouble going to sleep. He was haunted by the sharp tang of blood, odd violet eyes and the feel of strong arms embracing him. Arms that seemed to promise a safe haven...and love.

CHAPTER THREE

DEMONKILLER AND APPRENTICES

The next morning...

Haruhiro was nothing less than astounded when Ryu joined him in the main room of the inn in time for breakfast. His sister was walking very close to him, yet somehow managed not to seem as if she were helping him keep his feet even though her arm was through his and he could clearly tell the boy needed her help.

Junko, the innkeeper's wife, smiled at them. "I did my best to mend your garments, Akikaze-san."

"My thanks," the boy told her with a slight bow of his head as he let the woman motion them to the same table where Haru himself was seated.

He already had a big bowl of pickled vegetables and another of steaming rice set in front of him.

"Hungry?" Haru asked the siblings. He was surreptitiously eyeing the boy. *Still too pale, and I don't think he should be out of bed, but I'll give him credit for his determination. He doesn't seem willing to surrender to pain, that's something at least.*

The boy grunted as he eased himself to one of the seats on the floor. His sister sat down beside him and nodded. "Yes, Shimazu-san, we are."

Ryu was glaring at her; she just returned the stare.

"Order whatever you like." He smiled. "The Shogun is paying for all this, you know."

The thin veil of hostility masking the boy's uneasiness vanished to be replaced by wide-eyed shock. "The Shogun? Why?"

Haruhiro offered the boy a slight smile. "I'm his official demonkiller, his retainer. He gives me money for expenses." Haruhiro shrugged. "It's my duty to him."

"Oh, I see," the boy murmured.

"It must be very exciting," the girl remarked.

"Oh, yes, dangerous too. But it pays well, though I suppose that would be of little importance to my corpse if I get myself killed fighting demons alone." He was trying to get an inkling of what the boy's decision might be from his sister. *If she even knows.*

"And you want us to learn how to do this dangerous thing from you?" the boy asked him, voice barely more than a whisper.

"Yes. With three of us, it would be much less dangerous."

"Two," the boy insisted.

The girl stuck her tongue out at the boy and countered, "Three. I'm going to be a female bushi and a demonkiller too, whether you like it or not, Ryu."

The boy gave her a sour look, but didn't argue. From his expression, though, Haruhiro didn't think he'd heard the end of the argument. Then it occurred to him that the boy had just all but agreed to be his apprentice.

"So does that mean you'll be my student?"

"Yes," Ryu replied in that same almost-whisper, as if he didn't want anyone else to hear his agreement...or as if he wasn't too sure of what he was

agreeing to.

"Well, you don't sound very sure that this is what you want to do, so maybe you should reconsider."

The boy's head snapped up and he met Haruhiro's gaze with defiance in his eyes, and something more. Determination. "No! I want to do this!"

"Do you?" Haru asked, his own voice lowered to a soft, silken whisper.

Ryu abruptly looked away, that same fire rising to burn across his cheeks. "Yes."

Haruhiro smiled and nodded. "Before we go any further, I want you to understand that once you've agreed you won't be able to change your mind later. You'll be a retainer of the Shogun, and that's not something you can just decide you don't want to be anymore. He doesn't take desertion very well at all."

The boy's gaze returned to meet his, the blush faded but still visible. "Desertion?" Ryu's eyes narrowed as he stared at Haruhiro. "Why would you think I'd do something like that?"

"Because you've done it once before, haven't you?" Haruhiro asked bluntly. He knew more about the boy than he'd let on, but certain details were murky: like the reason he'd walked away from his hereditary obligation to his family's lord.

"You bastard!" the boy snarled, as he got to his feet, surprising Haruhiro with the venom in his voice. "How dare you offer me a position with the Shogun and then throw it back in my face with such a terrible insult!"

The girl was staring at Haruhiro as if he'd just stabbed her through the heart. Tears welled up in her

eyes, "Why is everyone we meet so hateful! *Why!*" she screamed and bolted out of the inn.

"Speak to me again, and I'll kill you!" the boy snarled and followed his sister out, head up, back stiff as the pillar of a temple.

Well, you've done it this time, fool. You've got all the diplomatic tact of a pile of dung.

Haruhiro sighed. This misunderstanding wasn't going to be an easy one to remedy. He could already tell he'd deeply offended both teens. He got up and followed the pair out of the inn.

Ryu put his arms around Kazue and pulled her close. "It's all right, Kazue. We'll be okay. We don't need anyone, not so long as we have each other."

She was crying too hard to be able to talk, the disappointment of yet another false offer of help—of promised employment that was nothing but a joke played on them by a cruel man—was more than she could bear.

It had hurt him too. Worse than ever, because he'd wanted it to be real this time. He'd wanted what the man could offer both of them: a sort of security they hadn't had since their lives had come crashing down in a single night of death and flame.

He stroked her soft hair and held her close, giving her what pitiful comfort he could offer, his own heart heavy, mouth full of the bitterness of yet another shattered hope.

Ryu didn't know how many more he could take before something inside his heart broke completely and took away what little will to live he still retained

after so much pain. His very soul felt full of stone. Heavy and dulled.

If it weren't for Kazue, I'd have given up already and just let death have me. He closed his eyes and stood there feeling his sister's warmth pressed to him, her grief so strong it shook her body like a gale shook a tree. *I miss Grandfather and Father. I miss Aunt Hideko's nagging.*

A faint wind tugged gently at them, but the wind spirits their grandfather swore would protect them couldn't really help them now. And no one else would.

He'd promised to keep her safe. He'd promised so many things. And he could give her nothing.

A year since they'd lost everything, and each passing day saw them with less to lose, less reason to hold on to hope, less reason to stay alive.

He heard a sound, footsteps approaching behind him. Not the timid steps of the innkeeper or the shuffling steps of his wife. No, these were the bold striding footfalls of a very tall man.

"Go away. I meant what I said," Ryu told him.

There was the rustle of silk. "Akikaze-san, I did not mean to give you such a grave insult. Please accept my humble apologies."

The boy glanced behind him to find the older man down on his knees, head bowed in an offer of formal apology.

He looks so sincere. As if he means it, but how can I believe that after what he said to me? I'm so tired of being hurt, so tired of struggling to live when all I want to do is lay down and die. But I can't do that. I won't let Kazue die.

"Why should I accept? So you can treat me to more of your abuse? I'm sure you've had a good laugh over my desperate grab for a chance at a better life than the one I have, but I'm not a fool, no matter what you might think. Now go play your games elsewhere. I'm not interested."

That's a lie. I am. I want more than this black existence I have. I want more for Kazue. If I had to live like this but knew she was safe and happy, it would be worth the suffering.

He turned his back to the man. It hurt too much to see him.

He held his sister tighter. The thing that hurt him most had been the fact that he'd actually believed the samurai was sincere. *And I wanted him so much.* He felt tears trying to form in his eyes, and refused to let them fall.

"Akikaze-san, I am truly sorry for what I said."

The man sounded so sincere, his voice even broke as if he were torn by emotion.

"You missed your calling. You should have gone into Kabuki, or maybe become a Noh player." He couldn't help the bitterness that filled his voice, or the way the hurt tightened his throat, making his replies sound strained.

I'm so tired. I wish I could just go back inside and sleep, but that's not possible, not now. He just wanted to cry like a child and let it wash away the pain. But he already knew that nothing could take his pain away. The ache in his side wouldn't stop, and the new wound lay hot as embers across the old injury.

"Akikaze-san, is there any way I can make this

right?" There was desperation in the man's voice now. It sounded so real, but Ryu knew it for another terrible joke and he wasn't going to be lured into being laughed at any more.

"Go to hell," the boy gritted out.

"Akikaze-san, please let me make this right. Tell me how."

He wasn't falling for any more tricks. Not by this man or anyone else. *I'll become a bandit first...*

The thought sent a chill cold as the touch of winter down his spine. Then he realized it was the Autumn Wind wrapping around them both, pushing gently at him, trying to get him to turn around.

For what?

He looked at the man kneeling behind him. The wind pulling at him with such icy rage was nothing but a cherry-petal adorned breeze around the samurai. As he watched, the wind dropped its burden of petals over the man, covering him in their soft fragrance.

Kazue looked at what the wind was doing, then she pushed at Ryu. "It's an omen, Ryu. Listen to the wind, it never lies."

He nodded. She was right. The wind was their friend, and it always told them the truth. But this Shimazu had still insulted him. "Apology accepted, but don't ever insult me again."

The man bowed low and got to his feet, Ryu very aware that the man towered over him, his own head not even reaching the man's shoulder. He looked up into violet eyes, then lowered his gaze, feeling the heat of blood trying to color his face.

Why does he affect me so much? I've never felt this way about anyone else. Not this strongly, anyway.

"I'm sorry too," he told the man, and forced himself to raise his head and meet the man's gaze. "But what happened between myself and my former lord is..." he sighed, "painful and complicated."

"My offer is still open," the samurai told Ryu, strange violet eyes locking with his.

The heat came back to Ryu's face and he abruptly turned to face his sister, unable to meet the man's strange stare. *His eyes are so odd, and they feel like they're looking straight into the depths of my soul. Or into my heart.*

He's so tall and handsome, and I want him. He could feel his heart hammering, feel the pulse all the way to his groin.

Think about something else. Anything else, he told himself. "I won't tell you what happened between my former master and myself. I...can't." That wasn't totally true. He wanted to confide it in someone, but it was too awful to tell his sister. And much too personal.

The memory of what the man wanted went a long way to chill his thoughts so that his desire for the Shogun's retainer abated.

"Well, you don't have to tell me what happened between you and your former daimyo. Not ever if you don't want to, all right? I understand that some things are just too personal to discuss."

"Thank you for that," Ryu replied softly. He *wanted* to be able to tell his Shimazu Haruhiro the truth, but it was so painful and embarrassing that he just

couldn't put it into words. Kazue didn't know the full story, but the memory did make him see her point regarding rape. He'd almost been a victim of it himself, and he didn't want her to experience what he'd almost had happen to him.

"Yes, we'll be your apprentices."

"Good. Very good!" was the man's enthusiastic reply. "Now let's go have something to eat and then we can get down to the formalities."

"Okay," Ryu agreed, and wiped his sister's face with the sleeve of his ruined kimono.

She gave him a watery smile. "I love you, big brother."

He hugged her close, and a little too tight. "I love you too, little sister."

Kazue looked at the big man who had caused them so much grief already this morning and wondered how much more her brother would have to suffer before his life—and hers—got any better. *He shouldn't have to worry about us so much, or struggle so hard to keep us alive. He's a good man. He deserves more than this bare existence we have. He deserves love and happiness.*

Spirits of the Wind, I know nothing is forever, but please, please give him a better life, she prayed silently.

As they followed the samurai back to the inn, she wondered if he would be a good master or a bad one. She hoped desperately for the former, but her cynical side told her to expect more bad than good. That was just how life was, at least in her admittedly limited experience.

That's not really true. We were happy until the bandits came and destroyed our lives. If only Aunt Hideko hadn't cut Ryu's hair, we'd still be living in Akikaze Village with Father and Grandfather and Aunt Hideko and...then what? I'd get married and never see Ryu again, and he'd stay home and be forced to marry a girl he'd never love.

Maybe Aunt Hideko cut his hair because Fate decreed we were to find new lives. Or maybe the Wind whispered into her ear and caused our lives to change. Maybe we're fated to be more than just a simple wife and a samurai protecting a small, inconsequential village.

And maybe hunger is making me go slowly mad. She sighed and pushed aside the daydream. It was always a pleasant dream to imagine them happy and healthy, Ryu with a fine horse to ride, many kimonos to wear and the armor of a samurai. She'd be happy to live in his shadow then, an obedient sister to help care for his estate.

And he'll find a handsome man who will love him.

She shook her head and looked at Shimazu-san, a gleam of speculation in her dark eyes.

They entered the inn and Kazue sat back down where she'd been before the Shogun's retainer had insulted her brother.

He's never been that touchy over misspoken words. I wonder if the attraction he feels for this man is affecting his judgment. She thought about it and decided that was probably the case, though Shimazu-san's question *had* upset and angered her very much too, and anything that upset her served to anger her overprotective brother.

It was really as much her fault as the samurai's that

her brother had gotten so upset.

"Please, order what you want to eat," the man instructed them as the innkeeper and his wife descended with the suddenness of swooping hawks on their table. She could see they both looked distressed. *They must have seen what happened, and I guess it upset them.*

"Can we be of any help to our honored guests?" Goro asked, as he and his wife both bowed. They appeared both upset and a bit frightened too. She could see the fear in the faint glow that surrounded them when she shifted to the magic sight her grandfather had taught her how to use.

I bet they're worried Ryu and Shimazu-san are going to get into a fight and damage their inn. I hope they don't, but Ryu is on edge. He's ready to fight with Shimazu-san. It's almost like he's scared of the man...

Then it dawned on her that her brother *was* afraid of the man in a way. He was afraid of the emotions rising in him, emotions stirred to life by the handsome older samurai. She knew how much the man's presence affected him, even though he hadn't said a word to her about it. She'd seen him blush so many times now that there couldn't be any question about it. Her brother wanted the older man in a way she'd never seen him want anyone.

Not even the son of their former lord. Not that she'd gotten to see them together very often, sequestered in the part of the house reserved for their former lord's wife. She'd thought it odd the way the women seemed to live so much apart, but if the lord himself were okama like her brother, it made some

sense. A wife was a necessary evil to a man like that, one who needed an heir but nothing more than that.

It made her happy for Ryu and sad too, because once he had a lover, he might not pay as much attention to her. *Well, that's only right, I guess. We grow up and stop being children, and he is older than I am.*

I hope he can be happy. I really do. I'd like to see him laugh and smile the way he used to before all this happened.

Especially before Saneyori, and the lies he must have told my poor brother.

Haruhiro just offered a friendly smile to the innkeeper and his wife as a reassurance that he and the boy weren't going to tear the place down around their ears. "My soon-to-be students are hungry."

"Ah, yes, of course," Goro said, "what would the honored young people care for? We have rice, of course, and a wide variety of pickles ready to serve. And misoshiru, if either of you care to have that also."

"That sounds good," the boy said.

"Yes, it does," the girl agreed.

The innkeeper's wife scurried away and the innkeeper bowed low.

Haruhiro frowned. "Rice and pickles for them both also. Small portions for now. They'll eat again in a few hours."

"Anything Shimazu-sama wishes is our pleasure to fulfill." He waited until the man was gone, then he looked at the boy. *Yes, that's it, just think of him as a child and maybe you won't want to pull him into your arms and kiss the breath out of him.*

Something dark and unpleasant rose to the surface

of his thoughts. *^Kiss the life out of him...^* floated through his mind, and he shook himself and fought the dark urges, casting them back into the blackness from which they'd arisen.

Damn, I hate using blood magic.

"Now what?" the boy asked him, and it took Haruhiro a moment to realize the boy wasn't referring to what he'd have to do to keep the darker half of his nature in control.

"You swear your fealty to the Shogun through me."

The boy's face grew very serious. "No tricks?"

"No tricks," he agreed.

"What proof do we really have that you are who and what you say you are?"

"My word isn't good enough?"

The boy's frozen stare was enough answer to that question without the addition of words.

"All right." He reached into his kimono and pulled out the papers he carried as proof of who he was and held them out to Ryu.

The teen took them and unfolded them, the girl leaning closer to peer at the lines of writing.

Haruhiro wasn't sure either of them could read, but most people would recognize the seal of the Shogun at the end of the document, and it served to identify him to just about anyone.

The innkeeper's wife scurried up with a tray that held two normal-sized bowls of misoshiru and one much larger one. "I brought Shimazu-sama a bowl. Just leave it if it isn't to your liking."

He smiled at her and accepted the bowl while she

put the smaller ones down in front of Ryu and his sister.

They gave Junko quick nods of thanks and went back to their study of the document. Their heads bent closer together until they touched and Haruhiro could see a faint brightening of the energy around them.

Interesting. I wonder what they're doing now.

After a few moments the shimmer faded and the pair sat up straighter.

"We believe you," Ryu told him as he handed the document over.

"Eat," he instructed. "You'll both need your health if you're to learn how to fight demons."

The boy picked up his bowl and sipped at the hot broth. His sister frowned at him and pointedly stared at the spoon that had been left for his use as she picked up her own.

A pretty blush spread across the boy's cheeks and Haru felt a flash of heat burn through his veins and the almost heavenly vision of the boy's face.

Gods grant me the strength, he thought as he watched the boy start to eat, his every movement graceful, controlled with the perfection of a true artist of the martial arts.

That something so simple as eating could be so beautiful to watch stunned the samurai and sent a thrill of want all the way to his soul. The rising dark that lurked there went still, and Haruhiro blinked as his father's voice seeped into his consciousness from the memories of the past.

'The demon soul you have will never remain bound. Not by you. You will always have to fight it and control your

nature on your own, unless...'

'Unless,' he'd asked.

'Unless you find the one who holds the key to the lock that will forever bind the darkness in your soul.'

And who would hold such a key? How do I find them?

'You'll find them when and if fate decrees it. And as to whom that will be...' he'd smiled then, 'it will be the one that truly loves you.'

He watched the young samurai seated across the table from him and wondered, Is he the one? Is that why I've wanted him from the moment I saw him? The boy was so beautiful that he couldn't imagine *not* wanting that slim body clinging to him as he gave the boy pleasure.

Haruhiro pushed the thought aside.

Later. Much, much later...if at all.

He needed something else to think about, so he picked up his bowl of soup and sipped, focusing his thoughts on nothing but the flavor of the broth and the taste of the bits of seaweed and tofu that added interest to the otherwise plain fare.

Goro arrived with the rest of the ordered meal and Haruhiro let the teens eat in peace. There was time enough to take care of the formalities that would officially make them both retainers of the Shogun.

It brought a faint smile to his lips when he thought about it. No one would dare assault them now. Attacking a retainer of the Shogun was an act of treason, and it carried the pain of death as a deterrent to anyone foolish enough to make trouble for such an august person.

While it wouldn't stop everyone, most samurai and ronin would think twice before starting trouble with the siblings. And Haru himself would be there as a further deterrent.

I'd better write to Ieyasu. The Shogun will have to send us the required papers to prove who they are to the guards at the stations along the Tokaido if we have to go into any large cities along that road.

He looked over the rim of his bowl and couldn't help the smile that took control of his face at the realization the boy might just be *the one* who held the key that would bind the darkness inside him forever.

* * * * *

Later that morning...

Because of the seriousness of what they were about to undertake, they'd gone up to the privacy of the room he'd been sharing with the older man. Ryu let go of his sister's hand and gave her a reassuring smile. They weren't totally sure they were doing the right thing. Even with the blessing of the wind laid on the man in the form of cherry blossoms, they weren't totally at ease. They'd been on their own for so long that the change in their status from wandering nobodies to official retainers to the Shogun was just too hard for them to wrap their minds around.

Ryu dropped before his knees, pulled his pair of swords from his obi and laid them on the floor before Shimazu-san and bowed until his head was touching the tatami.

Not having any sword, Kazue repeated the gesture with her staff, laying it before the samurai and bowing just as low. From the corner of his eye, Ryu could tell she was as scared as he was over what they were doing.

It was a grave undertaking, swearing an oath of fealty to Shimazu-san. It made them answerable to an even higher authority, the Shogun himself, and while any oath was a serious thing, not to be given lightly, this was an oath that carried special responsibilities with it.

Upholding the Shogun's law, for one.

Demon hunting, for another.

"Shimazu-sama, please accept these swords as a sign of my humble request to become your most unworthy student. I shall execute your every order, obey your every whim with no regard to my own life or personal safety."

"I accept your oath of loyalty. Please take these swords back then, Akikaze Ryu."

He did as he'd been instructed, putting his swords back into his obi and listened while his sister's petition was accepted.

"Akikaze Ryu, you are ready to carry out your oath to me?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Stand up," the samurai who was now his lord commanded, his tone commanding obedience.

He rose to his feet and stood there regarding his new master. His heart was hammering in his chest, excitement and fear warring for possession of his body.

The man was watching him critically, eyeing him with those strange purple eyes. "I order you to kill your sister."

Ryu thought his heart would burst and he started to shake.

Gods, gods, no, please, not this. Anything but this.

"My lord?"

"You heard me. Do it."

His sister was looking up at him, eyes filling with tears as Shimazu-sama, their lord said, "You are to die, Kazue. That is my order to you."

She pulled the hair from the nape of her neck and he could see her hand shaking as she prepared herself to die. She bowed low, her entire body starting to shake in the grip of the same terror that held him in its iron claws.

He turned to face the man who was his master. He wanted to plead for her life, wanted to beg to die in her place, but he'd given his oath to obey.

He had no choice.

He would do what he must, but after he would try to kill the man who'd taken the only joy from his life. Better to die than live with the murder of his sister blackening his soul.

"I'm sorry, Kazue," he said through the tightness in his throat and the blackness that was filling his heart.

"I know, Ryu."

The room blurred in his sight as tears filled his eyes. Obedient to the order of his new lord, he drew his katana and lifted it high over his head.

I have to do this. Gods and Wind forgive me. Ancestors

forgive me.

The sword sang toward his sister's neck, even as his heart felt like it would break into a thousand pieces.

There was a sharp clang and a squeal of metal striking metal.

He blinked to see another sword was interposed between his own blade and his sister's tender skin.

A hand fell on his shoulder. "Well done, boy, well done," Shimazu-sama was saying to him. He felt the wetness of tears on his face, the feel of the big hand clasping his shoulder, but the rest of him was numb. Mind and body gone dead with the order he would have carried out.

He was samurai, Shimazu-sama was his lord and he could have done nothing else. To be samurai was to obey.

Yet his sister still lived, the girl on her knees and weeping tears of relief.

His mind was sluggish, not fully accepting the fact that Kazue still lived.

Maybe I'm losing my mind finally. She's really dead and I just think she's crying.

The katana slipped from his fingers and he just stood there staring at the weeping corpse at his feet.

Dead. She's dead and I killed her. I'm just seeing her spirit and my mind won't let me see her body.

"It was a test, Ryu. I needed to know that you were truly loyal and ready to obey any order I gave you. And I'm sorry I had to test you so horribly, but it was the only way to be certain."

He heard the words, but they made no sense.

"Boy, do you hear me?"

The world was fading; the sound of his sister's lost soul weeping for the murder he'd just committed wound itself deep into his mind. He was barely aware when strong arms wrapped around him. The darkness rose up and swallowed him down like a koi dragging a hapless bug below the surface of a pond.

"Ryu!" the girl cried as her brother went limp in his arms.

Haruhiro gathered the teen up and then took him to the futon where he lay him down gently.

He'd barely let the boy go when the girl threw herself down beside him and clung, weeping, to his chest.

"Ryu, my poor brother." Her tear-streaked face turned to him, and she said, "You're a terrible man! You're so mean to my brother! I hate you! I really do hate you!"

The girl's anger shouldn't have mattered, but Haru found himself cringing inwardly at the vitriol she aimed at him.

"You said yourself he's unwell! What do you want to do, kill him?"

"No, of course not," he replied to her shrill accusations.

"You're an awful man! No, you're as bad as those demons you claim to hunt. You like terrorizing children, don't you?" She abruptly stood up and jabbed him in the chest with a finger that managed to inflict a taste of pain on him.

Magic. She's using magic without realizing it.

"I, umm..." He backed away and she stalked closer to him, her finger still directed at his chest. He didn't want to hurt her, but he didn't want to feel the angry power she was directing at him again. "I'm your lord, so calm down. I won't hurt either of you."

"Ha!" She pointed at her brother. "You call that not hurting us! You told him to kill me!"

A small fist came for his chest and he grabbed her wrist, capturing the other one to keep her from hitting him anymore. Even without a lot of power or skill behind that finger jab to his chest it had stung, and he didn't want to find out what might land with any punch she delivered. Unrestrained magic could kill, and not always just the person it was directed at, either.

"Damn it," he cursed when her perfect white teeth sank into the back of his hand. But he was smiling too because she certainly had the spirit to become a female warrior, even if her training was lacking.

Fierce as a mother bear protecting her cubs. I sure as hell wouldn't want to be the object of her fury.

His eyes went wide in shock and pain when she drove a knee up into his groin and he realized he *was* the object of her rage. Not for the first time did he thank the inhuman heritage that made him more resistant to injury. But it still brought tears of pain to his eyes.

"Stop it!" he told her, giving her a little shake. "Stop it now before one of us gets hurt."

"No!" she shouted in his face and tried to bite him again.

"Kazue, stop it!"

The sound of her brother's voice ended her attack, and Haruhiro let her go. She bolted to her brother's side, throwing her arms around him and almost knocking him over backward, flat onto the bed.

He heard the boy's hiss of pain.

"Ryu, did I hurt you? Oh, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

The boy wrapped his arms around the overwrought girl and patted her back. "I'm okay," he said, "and you can't go around attacking Lord Shimazu like that. We're sworn to obey him."

The boy was staring at him over the girl's shoulder, his large brown eyes still showing the anguish and confusion he'd sown in the boy's soul with his terrible command.

Haruhiro decided it was time to explain his actions. "It was a test of your loyalty and willingness to follow my orders. It's imperative that I have your total obedience without question. You have to be ready to do what I tell you no matter what it is I want you to do, including being forced to kill one another. Demons are clever, and they sometimes take on the seeming of a friend or family member to get close enough to kill."

"They can do that?" the girl asked.

"That and much more. I'm sure you've heard legends about demons, but believe me, anything you've heard in those stories is just the beginning of what some demons can do. Their powers are as varied as the names they use and no two I've encountered have been exactly alike in any way."

"Well, you could have just told us that, you didn't have to scare us the way you did," she told him.

Haru opened his mouth to reply, but the boy beat him to it. "No, Kazue, it wouldn't be the same. He needed to know we'd actually obey him no matter what."

"It was a pretty mean thing to do, though," she argued.

Haru noticed how the teen samurai was watching him, a peculiar expression in his rich brown eyes. He was sitting there with one hand moving slowly along his sister's back, trying to soothe her anger and tears, but his attention was really on Haruhiro. He could tell from the faint trace of color on the pale cheeks.

I wonder what he's thinking.

On consideration, after what he'd just done to them both, he wasn't sure he'd want to know. The boy's thoughts probably weren't all that friendly toward him and might possibly involve some violence, if the intensity of the boy's stare was any indication of the direction his musings had taken.

"Don't be so hard on him, Kazue," Ryu said. "Father and Grandfather could be mean too when there was no easy way to teach something. Remember when we first started to learn to fight and they would hit us pretty hard with their practice weapons?"

She nodded. "Yes, it was mean too. It hurt."

"And what did they tell us? Do you remember?"

"That it was to teach us to ignore pain so we'd be ready to face pain during a real fight and not flinch or freeze."

"That's right. Do you remember what else they said?" The boy was still watching him, eyes unreadable.

He understands at least, even if he doesn't care for the way I got my answer.

"Grandfather told me that it was the only way to learn that lesson."

"Good. So now do you understand why Shimazusan tested us?"

"Learning to obey him is another lesson like that one, then?"

Those beautiful brown eyes were still locked on Haru. "Yes."

"Well, we did what he wanted."

"Yes. But you have to remember that no matter what he orders or what happens to us, he's our lord now and we can never attack him or disobey. Understood?"

The girl nodded. "Yes, Ryu, I understand."

The boy's stare locked to his own and he asked, "Satisfied?"

"You'll do," Haruhiro admitted with a nod. *Yes, he does understand. I'll make demonkillers out of them yet.*

"Now if you're done with your hysterics," he smiled a little to soften the words, "we've got work to do."

"Work?" Ryu questioned him.

Haru could see how tired the boy was, but some things couldn't wait.

"Yes. You don't think either of you are fit to fight demons yet, do you?"

The siblings both shook their heads.

"Well, come on, then. You've got to get your strength built up and she needs to learn how to fight better, and neither of those things are going to happen

up here."

Haru started for the door. "No more crying, either. If you want to be a bushi, girl, you can't go about with a soggy face. You've got to be fierce or no one will take you seriously, and that can get people killed."

"Ha! I made you back up just then."

Haru frowned. "Yes, you did, but that was because you were using magic without knowing it. That's something else you need lessons for: how to control that energy, or you might hurt someone."

"Meaning you," Kazue retorted.

"Meaning someone you don't want to hurt, like myself, or even your brother."

"Oh." Her expression became crestfallen, but it only lasted a brief moment before her face brightened. "But if you teach me, I could use it to protect myself?"

"Yes. You might even be able to use it to protect your brother or even me."

"You? You're so big I bet you never need anyone to save you."

He smiled at her. "Not usually, you're right. But even I get into trouble I can't easily get out of sometimes.

"From demons?" the boy asked.

"Yes. Size isn't much help against them." He sighed. "Most of them are even bigger than I am, so that's something else you'll have to be ready to face. Very large, terribly dangerous opponents."

"Hn," the boy grunted in response.

"Let's go, then," the girl said, eagerly getting to her feet and holding a hand out to help her brother up.

The boy stared at the offered hand, then got up on

his own, his movements still graceful despite his poor condition.

"All I expect you to do, Ryu, is rest and eat as much as you can for a few days. Once you're a bit stronger, then I'll see what you're capable of in a one on one fight."

"I'm well enough for that," the boy argued.

"No, you aren't!" Haru and Kazue both stated firmly.

Ryu frowned. "Two nags. I'm doomed."

Kazue giggled and Haru couldn't help laughing at the resignation he saw on the boy's face.

"Cheer up, Ryu," Haru told him as he patted the boy on the shoulder. "I promise not to nag you."

"Thank you, sensei-san."

Haru winked at the girl, trying to build a more friendly relationship now that they'd agreed to be his students and all the unpleasantness was over—for the time being, at least. "I'll let your sister do the nagging."

The boy groaned.

"Anything I want you to do will be an order, of course."

"Terrific," the boy said sourly. "Now I really *am* doomed for certain."

Kazue broke out in a fit of giggling while Haru just smiled as they started down the stairs.

This might just work out fine.

He cast a sidelong glance over his shoulder at the boy and felt the same thrill of desire and longing he'd had since he'd first seen the young man.

Brown eyes met his, and a blush crept across the

perfection of his face.

Haru smiled.

Ryu smiled back, and the samurai thought his heart would either stop or burst because it was a warm, friendly smile and it brought a brighter wash of color to the boy's cheeks.

By all the gods, I think he might just want me as much as I want him!

He wanted to take the boy in his arms and kiss him to find out if what he thought he saw in the boy's eyes was really there. If all that blushing was a sign of the boy's desire for him, but he knew it wasn't safe. Not yet. Not until he could be sure of his darker side not gaining control and making him do terrible things to the boy.

They had time.

And the boy wouldn't be going anywhere that he himself didn't go. Not now that the two were his retainers.

^He's yours to command...^ the terrible voice of his darker self whispered.

But not to abuse. And I won't, so shut up!

Haru hurried from the inn, needing a moment to himself to fight down the rising urge to brutally take the boy, to get what his body craved, what the demon half of himself desired.

^Why not? You know you want him, and you know how to get what you want, don't you?^ the voice asked.

SHUT! UP!

Harsh laughter filled his mind as the demonic half of his soul made war on the human half on the battleground of Haruhiro's mind.

CHAPTER FOUR

TEACHING AND LESSONS

The next day...

Ryu sat in the sun with his eyes closed, feeling the light breeze touching his face as gently as Kazue sometimes did when she was trying to get his attention.

It felt good to have a full stomach, to be clean and rested without the sore places that sleeping on the ground always left. He did ache from the beating he'd taken from the bandits, but it wasn't anything he couldn't bear, and the cut in his side was healing well.

He wasn't a ronin anymore, and that was an even better turn of events. More than he'd ever expected to have happen to him, regardless of the reassurances he'd given to Kazue during those long months of aimless wandering they'd done.

A shadow fell across him and he opened his eyes to find his master, Shimazu-san, standing over him. He instantly rolled to a kneeling position and bowed his head.

"Just rest. That's what I came over here to do," he told him as he took a seat beside him and looked down the dusty road toward the cherry tree that lay not too far away. "Beautiful day," the man commented as he plucked a grass blade and put it

between his lips.

"Yes, sensei-san, it is," he agreed, keeping his eyes turned away from the man's face. So long as he didn't look at his master, he could keep the blood from burning through his face—or finding its way to that *other* location that was even more revealing of his feelings, and much more embarrassing. It was upsetting, too, that his emotions showed so plainly, when all he wanted to do was ignore how the man made him feel.

Not that doing so was easy. He very much wanted to *not* ignore how his new lord made him feel. Worse, he wanted to let the man do the things lovers did. Things he'd had whispered into his ear by—

He sighed and pushed *those* memories aside. They were just too painful.

"Your sister is learning rapidly. I'm pleased with her progress, really, but don't tell her that."

"I won't tell her," he affirmed as he tried to relax and enjoy the quiet peace of the inn's yard. But the arrival of Shimazu-san had ruined it for him. He couldn't be at peace with the man sitting so close he could have easily touched him.

And he was appalled when he found that he'd almost done just that, his hand creeping toward the older man's arm as if it had a mind of its own. He abruptly stood. "I'm going inside. The sun is getting too warm."

The man's violet eyes were watching him intently. "Is that really the reason you're leaving?"

Ryu wanted to say yes, but that would be a lie, and one didn't lie to their lord.

He looked away.

"I didn't think so," the man replied softly. "I give you my word that I won't do anything to you. Now sit back down here and enjoy the morning."

Ryu didn't move. *I want to, but I can't. Your word means nothing when all I want is to let you wrap your arms around me, and...* He sighed. "I should go keep Kazue out of trouble."

"No need. She's with the innkeeper's wife, Junko. She's teaching Kazue how to cook fish."

"Oh," Ryu whispered. He didn't want to sit there with the older man. He didn't want to be alone with him.

But he had no more excuses, and nowhere else to go. Leaving would be rude.

He heard the rustle of silk and felt a hand close on his arm, gently urge him to turn around.

"What are you afraid of, Ryu?"

He kept his head bowed, not wanting to see the man's too-handsome face, or the hard line of the man's mouth. A mouth he wanted so very much to feel on his own.

"Tell me." It was a softly spoken request.

Ryu shook his head.

The man bent down until his head was beside Ryu's; his violet eyes seemed to be looking right into his soul. "I think I know."

Ryu attempted to pull away, the touch of the man's warm breath on his cheek sending the betraying color to his face, making his heart race and the blood pool in that other place that would truly betray how he felt. But he couldn't go far. His master's grip on his

upper arm prevented his retreat.

"Don't. Just..." His own words were reduced to a choked murmur by the emotion flooding through him, pounding in his veins, pulsing through the traitorous flesh that revealed more than he wanted the other man to ever know. "Don't... please..."

Fingertips brushed his cheek, a thumb traced the shape of his lips and he shuddered, the ache between his thighs growing along with the flesh there.

An old memory surfaced, ugly, the feel of hands on him in places he didn't want them. He shoved at his master with all his meager strength. "*I said no!*"

The hand on his arm let go and he stumbled away, turning his back to the older man, not wanting him to see the fear or the way his body had betrayed him.

"I'm not going to hurt you," Haruhiro told the boy. He could see the fear in the way the boy was standing, scent it in the air—bitter as burnt hair. But there was anger in the stiff way Ryu held his shoulders, angle of his head still proud and unafraid.

Hmmm...I wonder...? Haru mused, eyeing the boy and mulling over his reaction to being touched. *I can see he wants me. I guess he's had a lot of negative experience with men who've wanted his body, but why does he resist when it's what he seems to want? And the fear. I wonder why he's afraid?*

The boy spun around and Haruhiro actually recoiled, backing away a step from the fury he could see in the young samurai's eyes.

"Don't presume that just because I gave you my fealty I'll give that to you, too! I won't! Not ever! Not

even if you command it! So don't even try!"

Command it! Well, now... I think we've gotten to the heart of that little mystery. His former lord wanted him for something other than the typical duties a samurai would perform. Not unusual, but probably not something Ryu was ready to give.

"I wouldn't do that," he assured the younger man as he took another step away giving the boy a wider margin of comfort.

"Do you have any idea how many times I've heard that? Or from how many men?"

"No, I don't," Haruhiro admitted. "But you've never heard it from me."

Ryu's expression was contemptuous. "I've known what you expected of me from the start. I'll be your student, I'll learn how to kill demons and work the magic you say I'll be able to command, but what I will never do is give my body to you."

But that's not what you want, is it? Haru sighed. *Stubborn, that's what he is.* But he couldn't help smile inwardly at the boy's determination not to yield to his own desire—or Haru's. "Fine, then. But before you decided to live the life of a monk, you might consider what your body is telling you." He pointedly looked at the boy's groin and the evidence of his arousal. "I think parts of you know what they want, even if your mind is trying to refute that evidence."

The color blazed over the boy's face but the anger didn't abate. If anything he got even more furious. "I don't care what happens to my— It doesn't matter. It's not what I want."

Haru kept himself from laughing—just barely—

when the boy couldn't even name the part of himself that was betraying his lust for the older man.

"Liar," he said instead. "But that's okay. I'll let you tell this lie. But don't tell me any more of them. Understood?"

The only reply he got was an angry scowl.

"Am I understood?" Haru growled.

A shudder passed through the teen's body and he abruptly looked away, turning to hide the evidence of his increased arousal from Haruhiro.

It was all the man could do to keep a rein on his darker half and not have his way with the stubborn boy as the sharp scent of arousal reached him.

He took another step backward, but the perverse breeze wrapped him in the boy's fragrance. He gritted his teeth and tried to ignore his own swelling cock.

Damn the boy, we want each other, why can't he just accept it?

"I expect an answer," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"Yes, my lord, I understand you."

The boy's voice was just as strained as Haruhiro's.

Damn it! I want him, why isn't that good enough?

^*You can take what you want...*^ his lurking darker side whispered.

SHUT UP! SHUT UP!

^*He's so small and delicate. It would be so easy to take what you want...*^

But nothing in life worth having came easily, except perhaps warm sunshine.

Just shut up, damn you!

Laughter filled his head with the darkness of his demon half and Haruhiro did his best to blank it out, focusing on the boy and their conversation instead of the *thing* that lived inside him.

"I think you owe me an explanation for your actions."

"No, I don't, Shimazu-san. I don't owe that to anyone."

Haru felt a flash of his own anger rise to the surface, but he quickly crushed it under the force of his iron will. He didn't dare let himself become angry with the boy and possibly lash out at him. Not only would it shatter any hope of trust between them, but he might very well injure Ryu. He was in such fragile condition, and anything that Haruhiro did might result in injury. That would only delay Ryu's recovery.

Haru rubbed his hands over his face, closed his eyes and took a deep breath to restore his own calm. But it was a near thing, the other side of his nature was stronger than it had been in a long time and he was having a lot of trouble keeping it reined in and under his control.

"We need to set a few things straight here, Ryu. Whether you like it or not, you *are* bound by your oath to me, for good or bad. That isn't going to change, as I have no plan to release you from your bond of fealty to me."

"I know." The boy's voice was a dulcet whisper that rolled through the man's mind and went right to his groin, where it lay there like a hot coal to warm his balls and lift his cock until it was hard.

I can't even talk to him without one or both of us getting sexually excited. How in hell am I going to teach him to fight more effectively and use his gifts for magic if both of us spend all our time tense with arousal and arguing from the frustration? This was certainly a dilemma, and there was no answer for it that was readily apparent to Haru.

^But there is an answer, isn't there?^

Shut the hell up!

He took a step closer to the boy, saw his hand reach out to grab Ryu, and Haru froze, staring in horror at the talons visible at the ends of his fingers. The demon side of himself was very close to escaping his control. Far too close.

He took a deep breath and pulled his hand away from the unsuspecting boy.

Why can't you just give up? I'm not going to hurt him. And I won't let you do it either.

More midnight laughter poured like a poisoned fog through Haru's mind.

^But this is such a wonderful game we're playing. I wonder who will win.^

Haru made an effort and shoved the demonic presence beyond the wall where it normally lived while the boy stood there, unaware of the battle raging within his master. A battle between good and evil just an arm's length away.

"We're going to be living close together on the road, Ryu. How are you going to fight what your body obviously wants?" And how am I going to keep from succumbing to the temptation of your beauty? But he didn't ask that out loud. That would be his own

painful burden.

^It doesn't have to be painful. Throw him down, and...^

Haru closed his eyes and made a greater effort to drive the demon into the recesses of his mind.

"The same way I refused to eat when there was only enough food for one of us," the boy informed him. "I control my body, it does not control me."

"Ah. Well, you must have great willpower, then. So do I, for that matter... just not with this damned demon fighting me."

^What fun it would be to break him, to make him beg for...^

Haru was glad the boy wasn't facing him because he suspected his face didn't look altogether human at the moment. Not with the black half of his soul so determined to gain its freedom.

Summoning up the magical power that he could use without touching the darker side of his own soul, Haru used it to bind the demon at the heart of his own being. Within a heartbeat of time he realized it wasn't going to hold, but it would at least give him a brief respite.

Good thing too, since the boy turned to regard him, his face set in a frown of determination. "You've seen how determined I can be." He motioned to his gaunt body, and Haru sighed.

"Yes, I've seen how strong your willpower is," he granted, "but emotion is harder to fight, especially this sort of need."

"I'll manage, but will you?" the boy challenged.

The samurai shrugged. "I guess we'll find out, won't we? But don't blame me if I fail this test. I've

never been good at denying myself pleasure." He let his gaze sweep over the boy, "And even ragged and scrawny, I can tell your body was made for pleasures only a man can grant you."

The boy's eyes blazed, but the teasing words had the effect Haruhiro had expected they would, the boy's cock going hard, a flush of color returning to warm his cheeks.

"I won't deny that I'm okama." There wouldn't be any point in refuting the truth that he was sexually attracted only to other men. Of course it wasn't unusual for a young samurai's first sexual encounters to be with other samurai. That was just the way things were. Wives were hard to come by, and few men were successful in finding one. Ryu had never felt a trace of desire for any girl he'd ever seen, and he'd seen quite a few in his travels with his sister.

No, only men could awaken *that* need in him. Taking that under consideration, he had to admit that he'd never reacted to men he felt were his equals or were of a lesser caste. Not even the hard muscles of a laborer could excite him the way an older samurai could. It was what had betrayed him to his former master, and that had led to a lot of pain. Not that his master had been able to arouse that sort of reaction in him. The man was a disgusting pig. But his oldest son...

Ryu could still feel the heat of the kisses they'd shared searing into his mind and body. He felt his erect flesh twitch at the memory. He'd wanted Saneyori very much...at first.

But he wanted Shimazu-san with a far greater intensity than he'd ever believed was possible in his limited experience of such things. It was a test of his resolve not to throw himself into the older samurai's arms and let him do all the things lovers did together...whatever those were.

"Then why fight your nature so much?"

"It's not my nature I'm fighting," Ryu retorted, "it's ruining my life that I'm resisting!" He spun on the ball of his foot and started to stalk away from the older man.

A hand closed on his shoulder, but before his master could forcibly turn him around, Ryu broke away from his hold and turned to face the taller man, his hand on the hilt of his katana.

"Master or not, if you try to force me, I'll kill you!" Ryu snarled out, ready to fight if that was what it would take to stop the man's advances.

Shimazu-san just held his empty palms out to him, "Easy, Ryu, just take it easy. I've got no intention of raping you, though from your reaction, I'd guess at least one man has tried."

Ryu kept all trace of reaction hidden. At least he thought he had, but from the way his master was searching his face, he might not have been as thorough as he'd believed he'd been. And the heat rising to his cheeks wasn't helping him conceal his feelings either.

He makes me so angry, yet, I want to let him kiss me. Gods, why does my life have to be so difficult? I just want him to hold me, but... But what? He's not Saneyori. He retreated further out of the man's reach. But what if

he's like Saneyori? That bastard was so good at hiding his real intentions.

And this time it's really too late to worry about what Shimazu-san's intentions are. You've sworn to serve him, haven't you?

"I'm right, aren't I? Someone tried to force you. You can tell me about it if you want."

"No." Ryu let his hand slip from the hilt of his katana, but he was still on edge, ready to defend himself if this new master of his proved to be as lax with his promises as his former master had been.

Please don't let him be like those others. Please, he prayed silently, not even sure to whom his prayers were going.

One of his master's hands moved toward him, and Ryu struck it aside with his own hand, knowing that his own puny strength—or his dubious skill with a sword—couldn't stop Shimazu-san if he really wanted to use him.

The world tipped and pitched and he felt himself hit the ground before he even realized he'd been attacked. He landed on the grass facedown with his master's weight pinning him there as easily as he would have held a kitten.

He wanted to scream, but he knew his sister would get hurt if she came to help him. The innkeeper or his wife would be no help, not against a samurai.

He closed his eyes and waited for his clothes to be torn off, for the feel of hard hands on his body.

I can bear this. I'm samurai.

Instead of his clothes being ripped away, Ryu felt the man's hands grip his shoulders and hold him to

the ground.

"Lesson one. You do not presume to tell me what I can and cannot do," the man stated, his voice a harsh, commanding snarl in his ears.

Oh, gods...oh, gods...

Ryu's heart started to race at the sound of his Shimazu-san's voice. It was a deep, rumbling growl that went right to the flesh between his thighs. Fear and a giddy sense of helplessness combined into a mix of emotion that turned to flame in his blood. His groin ached and he couldn't help the shudder that passed through him.

"Do you understand this lesson?"

"Yes, Master," he choked out through the sensations that were trying to overwhelm his resolve not to give in to desire. There was a hardness pressed to his backside, a hard length that had nothing to do with the steel weapons they both carried and every thing to do with the sword every man was born with. Ryu's mouth went dry. He could feel the heat of the stiffened flesh through the layers of intervening cloth and he was acutely aware of the powerful body that pinned him to the hard ground.

He dug his fingers into the grass and fought the whimper that tried to escape from his throat.

"Second lesson. Never raise a hand to me in threat. You don't begin to have the skill you would need to fight with me, so unless you'd rather die than learn, you'll refrain from such stupidity. Understood?"

"Yes, Master," he gasped out. He'd never felt so aware of another man's presence, not even the few times he'd found himself similarly pinned by other

men intent on having what they wanted from him.

This was different. So very different than those times someone had intended to force him to yield to their desires.

He hadn't wanted them. Hadn't wanted what they promised to give him.

This was different. He wanted Shimazu-san. Wanted to feel the pleasures those other men had promised. He wanted to experience the Beautiful Way of love between men under the skilled hands of his handsome master. He wanted to learn the art of shudo from Shimazu-san, wanted him to be his sensei in more than the martial arts. He wanted the older man to teach him about love.

Tears blurred his vision and he struggled to escape, wanted to run and hide from what the older samurai was making him feel. Forcing him to admit.

And he was ashamed at the thought that he wouldn't resist if this man decided to take what he wanted because it was, deep down, what he wanted and couldn't simply surrender. Not yet.

The worst part was, he didn't even know why he felt he had to resist, but something, some sort of instinct, told him that this was the wrong time to give in to his own lust, or that of his lord.

A hand closed in the hair at the nape of his neck. It was tight, possessive, but it wasn't painful. It should have hurt a little, but instead it sent a blaze of wild heat through his body that turned to pure flame in his groin. He moaned and heard an answering growl from his master that brought a whimper from his own parted lips and the pallor of mortification to his face.

"Tell me you don't want me to take you. Tell me what I'm doing now doesn't make you want more. Can you do that and not lie?"

"N...no..." he heard a low moaning reply he hardly recognized as his own voice.

"Lesson three. You can deny what you feel to yourself, but don't try to lie to me about it. Understood?"

"Y...yes, M...master."

He wanted more. He wanted to feel Shimazu sensei's hands touching him, wanted to know what his kisses would be like, how it would feel to surrender himself to the handsome older samurai as he'd nearly done with the only other man he'd ever really felt anything for: Saneyori, the eldest son of his former master.

Warm breath touched the nape of his neck. "You're so beautiful, little Ryu. Your face makes a man dream of pleasure, drives him wild with the need to have you. I want to be the one who shows you "

He trembled at the words being whispered into his ear.

"Do you realize how beautiful you are?"

"N...no..." he whispered.

Lips brushed along the angle of his jaw, and he closed his eyes as the touch sent a blaze of need through him. The hardness pressed to his bottom turned his knees weak as Shimazu-san moved his hips suggestively.

"Gods..." Ryu didn't even know he'd said that out loud.

"You know what you want, and I know what I

want. I think they're the same thing, don't you?"

"N..."

"No lying."

"Yes. I want you," he admitted through a flood of tears. He had to think of something else. He just had to regain control of his emotions before he surrendered and gave Shimazu-san his body.

If only Saneyori had taken me as his retainer under circumstances a bit better than those I was offered. I could have remained a samurai and not spent a year as a homeless ronin. I could have loved Saneyori if he'd given me the chance.

But it hadn't been offered, and handsome and virile as Saneyori was, his father didn't share the qualities that drew Ryu to the Lord's son. No, the Lord himself had gone to fat and smelled strangely. He'd also delighted in being cruel, telling Ryu all sorts of horrible things about killing children and women during the wars in ways. The stories had turned Ryu's stomach and made him loathe the man so much he couldn't stand to be in the same room with him, much let him do *that*.

He could have quietly accepted things for the sake of his sister if only he hadn't found out their real ambition regarding him.

If...

If both of them hadn't been bastards with only a single thing on their minds.

Thinking about what they'd almost done to him, what they'd almost done to Kazue and what they had done to his family went a long way to cool the fire in his groin. He focused on those painful memories

rather than the powerful body pressing him to the grass.

The hand at the nape of his neck let go. "Lesson four, when I ask you to tell me something, you will tell me what I want to know. Nothing that has happened to you will be a secret to me. Nothing. Understood?"

"Yes, Master." He could feel tears wetting his cheeks and spilling from his eyes. The warring of his desire for the man, his fear and the frustrated anger making wreckage of his prior determination to resist. And the painful recollection of his past, while it did cool the fire burning in his body, only served to remind him why he didn't dare trust anyone fully: not even Shimazu-sama, his lord.

The weight of his master left him and he could move if he chose to do so. He stayed where he was, however, awaiting his master's permission to get out of the dirt because he hadn't been given any indication that he was allowed to move.

"There will be no more foolishness from you directed at me, do you understand?"

"Yes, Master."

"Now sit up. We're going to have a discussion about the incident that has made you run from your own feelings."

Ryu got to his knees and sat there with his head bowed, his whole posture properly respectful of his master's skill and dominion over him. Teacher and student. Samurai and Lord.

I should never have accepted a position as his retainer. I've made another mistake, I just know I have. The

knowledge made him want to cry, but that was a child's reaction, and he didn't dare show he was nothing but a scared boy to this man.

"I expect better behavior from someone born to a samurai family as notable as yours. I think your father and grandfather would be unhappy with you, don't you?"

It was true. If his father and grandfather had seen how he'd acted toward his sensei, his lord, they'd have stopped speaking to him. He'd been horribly rude, and said and done things no samurai would say or do to their lord or a respected teacher.

"Yes, Shimazu-sama." He bowed his head lower, ashamed. He'd acted badly, more like an unmannered barbarian than the son of a samurai.

The man sat down opposite him, and when he dared to glance at his master he found that Shimazu was offering him a slight smile that warmed his violet eyes. Eyes that Ryu found both intriguing and somewhat frightening.

It isn't natural for a human being to have eyes that color. I wonder why his are like that. Is it from fighting demons, or...is there another reason? I wish I knew.

"So tell me what happened."

"It's complicated," he automatically stated. It was the same thing he told everyone when he wanted to avoid having the conversation. Enough people had asked over the last year and he'd just started saying that to avoid the entire thing. He really didn't want to talk about it. Not with anyone. But he didn't think he was going to be given a choice. Not this time.

"I'm sure it is. So, tell me what happened. From the

beginning," Shimazu-san prompted. His tone was gentle, the smile meant to reassure, but there was a hardness in his gaze that told Ryu there would be no evading the story this time.

Ryu bowed his head, sighed and closed his eyes to the present. He had to remember the horror and anguish that lay in his past. A past that his new lord wanted to hear about in detail, apparently.

"To understand what happened with my former master, you have to know what happened to my family."

"All right. Tell me. Tell me everything," the older man urged, his voice even softer, more soothing.

For a moment it was difficult for Ryu to reconcile the two faces of his master. Cruel and demanding one moment, kind and gentle the next.

But he understood. His master was much more true to his role as samurai than Ryu himself was, and the teen knew it in his heart. He could be brave, could fight, he could even write poetry and do calligraphy better than most young samurai his age. But what he couldn't manage was the coldness needed to be a real samurai. He just couldn't achieve the distancing of emotion needed to really face a battle—or a decision—with cool dispassion. Not yet, anyway.

Maybe never, he admitted to himself.

"Sometimes talking about a thing takes some of the sting out of it."

He looked up at his lord. "I'm not sure where I should begin."

"Tell me about the night your lives changed."

"You know about it?"

Shimazu-san shrugged. "Just rumors. When a village burns and leaves everyone homeless, it's fuel for gossip."

Ryu nodded. It was true that there had been stories about what had happened at Akikaze Village that night, but mostly he'd heard about it while they'd still been fairly close to their ravaged home. He hadn't heard the stories for months, though. But they were also a very long way from the place they'd once called home. An entire province lay between where they now stood and the province where they'd been born. They'd done a lot of walking, but considering everything, they really hadn't traveled too far from home, almost as if some unseen cord bound them to their prior lives.

Gone almost a year, but they could have walked back to their village—or its remains—in under three weeks.

"It happened a little over a year ago. It was dark and almost everyone had gone to bed. I woke up because I heard someone screaming. Everyone in the household was awake, but it was my Aunt Hideko who figured out the man yelling for help was the night guard that watched the road into our village. There was only one way in, you see, and we'd never had any problems. Not even during the war. We knew about the war, but it never touched us. We were safe. Our village was protected by the Autumn Wind just as my grandfather said we'd be...until that night."

Ryu paused, fighting with the pain that threatened to choke him into silence. Neither he or his sister ever spoke about that night. Not to anyone, including one

another. His only exception had been his former lord, who'd demanded to know what had happened. *As if he hadn't already known.*

And now his new master wanted to know how he'd come to be ronin, why he ran from the feelings he had for the tall and handsome man that was his new lord. Shimazu Haruhiro wanted answers, but it was difficult for Ryu to speak about the past.

"Go on, please." The words were said in an encouraging manner, without any of the harsh demands his lord had imposed when he was giving the 'lessons' to Ryu.

Ryu swallowed and tried to distance himself from the ache in his chest, but it was so hard to do. The memories—a year old, it was true—had left wounds in his heart that didn't want to heal. Wounds that might never heal, because part of who he'd been had died that night along with the rest of his family.

Along with his father and grandfather.

"We felt blessed by that protection," he stated finally. "The war ended and we'd been unscathed. Everyone said it was because of me, of the special love the wind held for me."

"Do you think that's true?"

"A traveling priest said it was, and that so long as my hair was never cut by anything metal, the village would be safe no matter what kind of awful things happened elsewhere."

"Ah. Well, if a priest makes such a prediction, it's always best to listen. Often they are right."

There was a moment of silence as Ryu remembered what his Aunt Hideko had done, and tears filled his

eyes. So many people dead over something so stupid as hair being cut.

"But do you think it was true?"

"No. I think it was my grandfather that the wind loved."

"Loved?"

The boy nodded. There were some things about his family that would never be spoken about to anyone who wasn't part of the family. He'd promised his grandfather that their family secret would be kept, and he intended to honor his promise to his grandfather and never speak of it. Not even to his new lord.

He went on with his story. "Everyone did listen to the priest. They were afraid not to, because he promised a disaster would befall us if my hair were cut before my marriage. For years no one cut my hair, and we stayed safe. But...." He smoothed a fold of his tattered hakama and sat there looking at his own fingers, trying not to think about what he was saying.

It's a story. It doesn't hurt to tell it. But it did. It hurt. It hurt worse than his recent battle wounds.

Without conscious volition, his hand strayed to touch his side where the scar from that night showed on his skin. It too still hurt. His head lowered more, his shoulders drooping, his body trying to curl inward around the old pain as he'd done the night he'd been wounded.

"But?" the man prompted him to continue his story.

"My Aunt Hideko thought my hair looked so ragged at the end. She told us how much it bothered

her for people to see me looking like a wild boy come down off the mountain, so—" he sighed, "she decided to trim it."

"She did that before you heard the night guard screaming?"

Ryu nodded. "Yes, I'm sorry my story isn't making much sense."

"You're doing fine," his sensei told him. The man's hand reached out as if to give him a reassuring pat, but it was quickly pulled back, as if his lord had decided against touching him at the last moment.

And he didn't want his lord to touch him. Not when every touch made the blood rush to his face and his penis. Both things were too distracting.

My Lord himself was entirely too distracting as a whole, really.

Ryu quickly resumed his tale. Don't look at him, he told himself as he started to speak. "When nothing happened immediately, we thought we were safe. That the priest had just made that prediction to impress us and get a free meal. We all felt foolish over it, especially my father. But," he frowned, "he didn't cut my hair after that, so I don't know, maybe he was just making light of what my aunt had done to keep everyone from being afraid."

"What happened then?"

"As I said, we'd all gone to sleep. When the night guard started to shout the alarm, no one was ready except my father. He was in his armor and waiting. At least I think he must have been, because when my father left the house right after the guard started to scream for help, he was already armored. He told me

to guard the house." Ryu clenched his fists. "That was the last time I ever saw him or spoke to him."

"I'm sorry this is so painful to you, but I want to know what happened."

Ryu just nodded and swallowed the lump in his throat. It lodged in his chest, making it hard to breathe and no matter how much he tried to swallow it down, the lump wouldn't go away.

"As fast as my father left the house, by the time he reached the front gate where the village guards were assembling, the bandits had already set the rice fields and one of the houses on fire."

Ryu told his lord about everything that happened that night. How he'd fought, how he'd tried to defend his family, his home, and how he'd nearly died.

It was a sad tale, but so many villages and towns had burned during the war, it was a familiar story in some ways. The fact that the war had long been over before Akikaze Village burned was a major difference.

Haruhiro frowned. *If it was so well hidden, how could bandits even find it? And why? It wasn't as if they'd get a lot of money in such a place, and they certainly couldn't have been after food. They burned the buildings where the food would be. So what motive did they have to attack, if not wealth or starvation? It makes no sense at all to attack a village just to burn it...*

Unless you've got a motive that's not immediately apparent.

He'd heard a rumor that the lord who ruled that province had promised some of his retainers special

favors and that older families—those who'd gained their posts from the Lord's father—had been driven out of their hereditary positions in favor of new samurai.

But the rumors hadn't mentioned that he'd ordered any of those families to kill themselves or be put to the sword by his retainers.

Though he'd heard one rumor that not all of the changes were carried out peacefully. There'd been stories of a few rapes and killings, but not of samurai families.

He scratched his chin and wondered if there was more to the rumors than traveler's stories after all, because that many bandits in such an obscure and wealth deprived province made little sense.

"So everything burned, including the crops?" Haruhiro asked the boy, seeking confirmation that food stores couldn't have been a motive.

"Not everything. Just most of the buildings and one rice field."

Maybe they were after the food then. Too bad it's so far away. I'd go there and find out exactly what happened – if anyone's left to tell me.

"And your family was dead except for your sister and yourself?"

"Grandfather was still alive in body," he replied softly. "But our family was disgraced. We'd let so many people die, and the village and our own home were all gone. Then some of the Lord's retainers arrived and they loaded me into a cart. I don't remember much of the journey, but Kazue said I almost died.

"We were taken to the Lord's estate."

"And your grandfather?"

"He couldn't live with the disgrace. He committed seppuku to wipe away the dishonor on our family." The boy's voice dropped to a choked whisper. "Our Lord told him that one of us had to die, either him or me, so Grandfather..."

Haruhiro nodded his understanding. He could hear the pain in the boy's voice and knew he must have stood as his grandfather's second, which meant he'd had the duty to decapitate his own grandfather to keep the old man from suffering.

No wonder my order for him to kill his sister was so painful. He's already had to kill one person he loved. Damn.

He wanted to enfold the slim body in his embrace and hold Ryu until the pain was gone. Haru wanted to let him know that he would keep him safe, but he remained where he was and just listened. He knew the boy wouldn't welcome any comfort from him. He'd only think he was making advances, and Haru didn't dare any physical contact. Not with the darker half of his soul so close to the surface. It had already almost gotten the better of him today, and only an act of pure willpower had kept him from hurting the frail young samurai.

He'd been cruel, and the last thing this poor boy needed was cruelty. He'd had more than his fair share of that already in his short life without him adding to the boy's emotional anguish. He wondered if the brief encounter with his darker half had done any lasting emotional harm. He also had to ponder whether he'd

done any physical injury to him. The boy was so weak, and Haru worried it wouldn't take much effort on his part to hurt him accidentally.

He wanted to examine the boy for new injuries, but he wasn't sure it was a good idea. To be alone with the boy and have him unclothed might be more than his flagging willpower could take.

No, he had to be careful not to even touch the boy, because the evil side of him was so strong any physical contact might result in that half of him escaping his control completely and doing things he'd regret the rest of his life.

^Who cares what he wants?^ that voice whispered in his head. *^Take what you want. Have your pleasure with him. Enjoy him as you wish, drive your hard shaft into him until he screams.^*

I won't do it. Not like that. Not ever.

^Are you so sure?^

Yes! I'm Shimazu Haruhiro! I'm not a demon! I'm a man!

^And men are so honorable?^

Amused laughter rolled through Haruhiro's thoughts as his darker nature tried to push him into doing the unthinkable. He clenched his fists and mentally shoved the wicked thoughts aside. Ryu deserved a lover, not a rapist and he'd be damned and dead before he'd become the latter of the two, no matter how much the demon half of his soul wanted it otherwise.

While he'd been preoccupied with his internal battle, the boy had continued his story.

"...offered to let me stay at his estate and be one of

his retainers. He gave me time to decide, because I was still so sick. While I was recovering I met his son, Saneyori. He was so handsome, and..." the boy shook his head, a blush rising on his cheeks. "I thought being a retainer in the same house with him would be a great thing. And he seemed to like me also, because—" the blush turned to a fiery shade as he continued, "he took me into his arms and kissed me. It felt so good to be held and kissed that I almost agreed to stay as a retainer to his father right then and there."

Embers of jealousy came to life in Haruhiro's heart, burning with a fierce, enraged heat. The boy had been held and kissed by another man. One the boy found handsome.

The envy bit into Haruhiro's mind with jagged fangs.

^The little tease, he's been with another man. Why wait?^

Kissed. He said they only kissed.

"I was treated like an honored guest and I sat with the Lord and his men at every meal. It was," the boy shook his head, "wonderful. It made me feel as if I fit, as if I wasn't without a home of family after all. And Saneyori spent a lot of his time with me, he even let me watch him train, took me riding on their horses.

"I didn't see much of Kazue, but since it was the Lord's house, I didn't question that. I know in larger homes the men and women don't live together. But I barely thought about her most of the time, terrible as that may seem, Saneyori kept me so busy I barely had time to think about anything at all."

Haruhiro noticed that Ryu was absently rubbing at his side and he wondered if he'd further deepened the cut from the bandits or if he'd damaged the scar that marred the boy's pale skin with his rough treatment.

Lessons. Damn it, I didn't want to treat him like that!

^Didn't you?^

No.

^He has such beautiful skin, doesn't he? So pale and nearly perfect. And with so much red blood beneath it.^

You're so tiring. Why not just shut up? I'm not going to hurt him.

^What makes you think you haven't hurt him already?^

Really, just give up. I'm not going to rape him.

^Did I ask you to? No. But he's been with another man. Just listen to him. You know he didn't just kiss this Saneyori. He just admitted this Saneyori was keeping him busy, so what do you think they were doing? I can tell you they weren't playing Go.^

Haruhiro sighed and clamped down on his own thoughts. Trying to push the darker half of himself back behind the mental wall where it normally lived wasn't easy under the best of circumstances. He'd had a lot of trouble with it in the past, and every time he used demon magic made it harder to ignore that half of himself. But now there was a breach in the wall that he couldn't close. A hole left by what he'd done to keep Ryu from dying.

^You won't get rid of me that easily.^

Maybe not, but I don't have to listen to you, either.

Haruhiro focused his mind on the boy's story, trying to block out the whispering of his demon half.

"We'd been there about a month when the Lord started to tell me...." The boy paled, and Haruhiro wondered exactly what had happened. "He started to tell me stories about the war, and how he missed doing some of the things he'd enjoyed while the fighting was going on. His stories were—" the boy shook his head, "just terrible."

"War is terrible," Haruhiro admitted. *If a few stories about some battles could get him so upset, how can I expect him to kill demons?*

"Yes, Grandfather fought in wars too. He told me about the men he'd killed. It's a samurai's duty to fight for his lord. It was why Grandfather was awarded the village to rule. It didn't even have a name then, and there were only a few people living there. Grandfather was a retainer of the current lord's great-grandfather and he's the one that gave guardianship to our family. He was an old man, almost eighty when he conferred the village on Grandfather, but he was still the lord of the province. He died a few years later, and his son and then his grandson simply confirmed our family as guardians of the village."

The boy went quiet again and Haru sighed, realizing that he wasn't going to be told what sort of story could keep him from swearing fealty to his own lord.

"What did he tell you, if it wasn't about fighting for his lord in the war?"

Haunted brown eyes regarded him. "He told me about how much fun it was to ride children down and trample them under the hooves of his horse."

Dear gods... Haru thought, but kept his silence.

"He told me he liked to have his pleasure with young boys and then make them beg for mercy before he put them to the sword."

Anger rose up in Haruhiro and he gritted his teeth to keep from saying anything.

"I thought I loved Saneyori, but I couldn't stay under the roof of such a monster as his father. I just couldn't, but I wanted to be with Saneyori so much that I almost agreed in spite of myself. But he made a few things very plain to me." The boy's voice turned bitter. "He didn't want me as more than a diversion until he was married. Then his father told me that he would be happy to keep me as one of his favored retainers if I'd give myself to him. In consideration for that, he'd be happy to pay for my sister to go to an amadera, and she could spend her days in quiet contemplation as a nun."

The anger seething in Haruhiro's chest grew as he listened to the reason the boy had refuted his loyalty to his former lord. *No wonder he was so insulted by what I said. This former lord of his is nothing short of a beast fit for nothing but the kiss of steel.*

"I...thought it over. Kazue would be somewhere safe. At least that's what I thought, but..." he shuddered and would no longer meet Haruhiro's gaze. "I didn't trust any of them. I pretended to be asleep and when I was sure they wouldn't notice I snuck out and started spying. I crawled under the house and crept around, listening. I heard their real plans for me. They wanted me to teach them the Autumn Wind style of fighting so they would be

superior swordsmen. They planned to raid and steal from surrounding lords."

Ryu wiped at his face, and Haruhiro saw that there were tears on his fingers.

The young samurai's voice broke as he continued. "The worst part was them laughing at what an old fool my grandfather had been. He'd killed himself over the raid and all along it had been the Lord's own men who'd burned Akikaze Village. It was all for the secret of our fighting style and they were certain if I was the only living person who knew it, I'd be willing—and stupid enough—to teach them."

Haruhiro watched the boy crying silent tears as he said, "They thought me a naive and stupid boy, and I heard Saneyori say how easy it was to manipulate me with a few kisses."

Well, that explains a lot. No wonder he doesn't want me. He has been hurt and betrayed before. Bastards. I need to pay them a visit one of these days. Or maybe a letter to the Shogun would be in order. Yes, that might just work, but that will have to wait.

"That's terrible," he said gently, still refraining from making any overture to the boy that might be misconstrued.

"It hurt to hear their laughter, and I knew I couldn't stay there. After that, I didn't believe the Lord even intended to pay to send Kazue to be a nun. He'd lied about everything else, so how could I trust anything he said?"

"You couldn't, of course," Haruhiro agreed.

"So the next morning I told him I'd prayed to the Wind and it had shown me that my fate lay

elsewhere."

"What did he say about that?"

"He said I could go, but that Kazue and the master book for my family's style would be remaining behind."

"Bastard. He didn't have any rights to either."

"No, he didn't. I told him the book could stay, but in consideration for that he had to let my sister go."

Haruhiro frowned. "You left the book with him?"

The boy just gave Haruhiro a cool smile and nodded. "I did. I left with Kazue that afternoon with nothing but the clothes on our backs and my swords."

"But anything that belonged to your family..."

"Was considered forfeit when I didn't swear my oath of loyalty to him."

"He had no right to do that either."

The boy shrugged. "He's a lord, he does as he pleases."

"Yes, I guess most lords do that, regardless of what would be proper." Haru watched a butterfly drift past as a brief silence fell between them. "So you don't have the style book for your family?"

Ryu smiled and Haru noted a glitter of smug pleasure in the boy's gaze. "There never was a book. Grandfather wrote out a bunch of random things about different sword moves, but it's nothing to do with the Autumn Wind style."

Haru nodded and let an appreciative smile curl his lips, "Clever. You can't steal something that was never written down, can you?"

"No."

"So the only way to learn your style is from

someone that knows it?"

"Yes."

Haruhiro nodded appreciatively. "Yes, that is smart." He watched an errant breeze play with the boy's long hair. "But you aren't a master of the style, are you?"

"No."

"And there's no one to teach it to you, is there?"

The boy made a gesture with his hand and the breeze that always seemed to accompany him rippled through the grass. "The wind is my teacher. It always has been. It taught my grandfather, and my father too, and now it teaches me."

Haruhiro raised an eyebrow at the surprising revelation. It made sense, though. Since the style was rumored to have been given to the boy's grandfather by a Wind spirit, then it made perfect sense that the wind continued to teach the family.

"Will it teach me?"

The boy's eyes met his, and he could see the drying tracks of tears on his face. "Maybe. If I say it should."

"And will you?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"And if I order you to?"

"You can order me, but you can't make the wind obey."

"No, I guess you can't."

Ryu wanted to go find a quiet place where he could be alone, but his new lord hadn't dismissed him, so he had to stay there, an uncomfortable silence lying between them sharp as a drawn sword.

"Your obligation to your former lord was clear when you arrived in his residence," the man stated.

A hard lump filled Ryu's chest at those words. His new master disapproved of the fact he'd left the service of his former lord, but that was to be expected, really. He should have done what they wanted, but his own sense of pride and honor hadn't let him simply accept such a betrayal. And the uncertainty of his sister's future had only added to his pain and anger.

"Had that been your only consideration, leaving his service would have been a betrayal. As it stands—and I believe what you told me about him is true—his betrayal of your family in such a cowardly manner removed any obligation you had to him."

The boy looked up, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. He wasn't being condemned for his actions, then, which was a relief, though he really had nothing to worry about. He was already Shimazu-san's retainer. Unless Shimazu-san thought he'd somehow betrayed his former lord and took him back for the punishment that entailed—a fast death by execution—he had nothing to worry about. He knew he'd been released from service by his former lord, so he had no fear of that.

Ryu waited to see what the older samurai would say next.

"What he did," his lord shook his head, a sternly disapproving look darkening his handsome visage, "was nothing short of a betrayal to your family. As your lord, he is supposed to support your family as they guarded one of his own villages from harm. But

if he sent those men himself to act the part of bandits as you claim, his action was the act of a coward and a statement of intent to make war on your family. Any obligation you or your family had to him was negated the moment he sent those men to do his dirty work. The fact they did so under the guise of bandits only adds to the crime.

"If he'd just wanted to remove your family as guardians, he could have done it by ordering your family to commit seppuku for whatever reason he chose."

"I know," Ryu said quietly. He'd had a year to wonder why the man hadn't done it that way, and he'd never found an answer, other than the obvious one. With them all dead, there would be no one to teach them their family's fighting style.

"He did all that damage to gain control of you, plain and simple," Shimazu-san stated, further convincing him that the whole thing *had* been nothing but a deliberate effort to gain control of someone who could easily be manipulated into training other warriors in the Autumn Wind style.

Shimazu-san was quiet, to all appearances lost in his own musings.

"That's the one thing I never figured out. What was there to gain in having me teach some of his retainers my family's style?"

"He had a plan in mind, and whatever it was—or is—can't be good. Not if he's willing to kill a family loyal to him just for the sake of gaining control of an obscure sword style few people have even heard of."

Ryu frowned. "What difference would it make? It

takes years to become a master of the style, and not everyone can learn it."

The man regarded him for a moment. "No, I suppose they can't, considering what you've told me about how it's learned."

"I think he wanted Saneyori to learn, and a few others, but what would make a few men learning our style important enough for him to kill my family and ruin a productive village?"

Shimazu-sensei's face twisted into an angry scowl, "I can think of any number of things that would prompt someone to do such a malicious thing. And from what you told me of his *stories*, any one of the things – or even a few of them – are possibilities.

"They are all acts of treason against the Shogun or the Emperor too. So is what he did to your village. *If* we can prove it was him behind the bandit attack. Lord or not, if he caused deliberate damage to his own holdings, that's a betrayal of his oath of loyalty to the Shogun and it carries a death penalty for him and his family if the Shogun wants to take it that far."

"I have no proof, though."

"No, you don't. And right now I don't have time to investigate the incident. I might never get the chance, with so many demons in need of my personal attention."

"We can't ever go back anyway, so it really doesn't matter."

"It might, though, if he's planning treason against the Shogun."

"Hn. I hadn't thought of that."

"I might just be reading more into the situation

than really lays behind his actions, but then again my instincts tell me this wasn't just a way to get your family off that land and you into his clutches. He's up to no good." Haru rubbed his chin as he thought about what the boy had said.

"He's up to no good, but demons come first?"

"Unfortunately, yes. They are my priority, and even you admit you can't go back. There's really nothing left for you there and you're in my service now, so it's not like you could resume your prior lives as guardians of the village, is it?"

The boy shook his head. "No, Shimazu-san, it's not."

The little bit of breeze that always seemed to play around the boy grew in strength.

Ryu...where are you?

It was Kazue's voice, carried by the wind that had begun to tug on Ryu's clothing.

Ryu, lunch is ready.

"Lunch?" Haruhiro questioned. "Didn't we just eat breakfast two hours ago?"

The boy nodded. "It's just an excuse. She's realized she doesn't know where I am and she's sent the wind to find me with the pretext that it's time to eat. She always makes an excuse because she thinks I won't come talk to her if she just asks me to keep her company."

"Oh. Still, sending the wind to find you—" he smiled. *Not bad for someone who isn't really trained to any extent in the magical arts.* "—that's a pretty good trick she has there. Do you know how to do it?"

"Yes. We've been doing it since we were children."

"Ah." Haruhiro refrained from mentioning that Ryu wasn't much past childhood, and Kazue wasn't an adult by any means. He knew it would only insult the boy, so he kept silent.

Ryu? I know you're out there somewhere.

"She's not going to stop calling me until I go and talk to her."

"Won't the wind tell her where you are?"

"Probably," the boy replied, tone gone sour. "But she expects me to come to her and probably eat, so I'd better go."

Haru suspected that the boy just wanted to escape his presence. *Not a bad idea, an hour apart. Then I can drag him outside and see what he's capable of.*

^Oh yes, what a great idea! A few kisses, a hand where it will do the most good – or your cock, which would be even better...^

This is getting very tiring.

^And here I was enjoying myself. How sad that you're getting tired. Of course, if you just give up, we can get on with the fun.^

Oh, shut up.

This time he ignored the laughter.

"Go on, then. Go upstairs to our room and get some sleep afterwards. I want you rested for this evening."

"This evening?" the boy was frowning.

"You've had a few days to rest, now I want to see this fighting style of yours."

"Fine."

Haruhiro raised an eyebrow at the boy's brusque answer.

Ryu bowed. "Yes, Shimazu-sensei."

"Much better."

He motioned the boy a dismissal and watched as the teen hurried off, slapping at the dust clinging to him.

If he could just keep that other half of him quiet, he might make some progress with the boy.

^If you'd just let me out think of all the wonderful progress that would be accomplished. Him on his knees, whimpering as you drive your...^

Shut up! Haru snarled mentally as he stalked away from the inn heading for the nearest stand of trees and a little much needed privacy where he could take at least one thing that plagued him in hand and get some relief.

^You're just no fun!^

* * * * *

That evening...

Ryu watched as Shimazu-sensei guided Kazue through a new attack form, the man skillfully helping her get her body at the correct angle with a gentle tap of his hand or by repositioning her arms or legs.

The man was a good teacher, very patient and tolerant of the mistakes she kept making, and Kazue was already making some progress. It was encouraging to see her doing so well.

He studied the motion of the attack that Shimazu-san was guiding her through. It was familiar, but he couldn't place it until the samurai guided her arms

over her head so that the end of the staff was raised high in the air.

When he was a very young boy he'd loved to watch his mother practice with her naginata—a long staff with a short sword blade at the end. It was her weapon of choice. Had she still been alive she would have been fighting with a naginata at his father's side, defending her home the night their way of life came to an end.

Knowing his mother, she would have died at his father's side and been proud of the honor to die as a bushi.

What was I thinking? Kazue has every right to fight, just as I do. Our mother was a female bushi, and—in a way—so was Grandmother. It's been the tradition of our family for the women to fight to defend their homes and children. And I have no right to deny Kazue the same chance.

He sighed. *Not that we have a home, or are ever likely to have children.*

And that thought led his mind along a new path. *I wonder if Shimazu-san has a wife? I wonder if he'd want one in a few years?*

Kazue was smiling at the older man, and she seemed pretty happy to have his attention.

Hmm...she'll be sixteen in a month. I wonder if he has a house in Edo or rooms at the Shogun's palace? He remembered how sexually aggressive the man was toward him, and realized he saw none of that in the older samurai's manner with his sister.

He treats her as if she's a great lady, and he's her teacher. It might work, but how can I get him interested in

her?

More to the point, he was wondering if he should even try. *What do I really know about Shimazu-san? Just that he's a retainer to the Shogun and hunts demons. That's not much.*

But the man might also be Kazue's best chance to find a husband.

There was still the matter of her dowry, which was sadly lacking.

"Now bring it down on the post as hard as you can," he heard the man urge Kazue.

The staff came down on the wooden post with a soft 'thwop' sound.

It was the same problem their father had always had with Kazue. She never put forth her best effort, and never exerted her full strength when attacking anything; be it their father in full armor, or an inanimate object, it didn't matter.

Ryu's frown was mirrored by that of their teacher.

"Kazue, I'm sure you're stronger than that. Try again, please."

The staff came down with a whooshing sound, but the end result was much the same; a muted thump as the staff hit the wooden post.

If it had been hitting an unarmored person it would have hurt, but it certainly wouldn't do anything to stop a determined attacker. An armored attacker probably wouldn't have noticed the blow.

Their father had berated her numerous times for *'Dusting my armor so nicely, but failing to stop the man who is going to kill you if you didn't fight back!'*

They both loved their father dearly, even after he

shouted and yelled unkind things about their shortcomings as warriors, but they'd both understood he wanted them to be the best, and they'd often fallen short of his expectations.

Ryu had already come to the conclusion that their new lord was a patient teacher, unlike their father, who often got frustrated at how slowly Kazue—and even Ryu himself—progressed in their studies of the martial arts.

Defensively, Kazue had always done well, and was able to deflect all but Ryu's most devastating combination attacks. It was her attacks that were lacking in power. She was reluctant to injure anyone, though he had to admit she'd done an admirable job during their encounter with the bandits. He hadn't been in a position to see if she was attacking or just defending herself.

If she wanted to be a female bushi like their grandmother—and their mother—she'd have to learn to be more aggressive.

Kazue's attacks were weak, while her defense was good. His defense was lacking while his attacks could be devastating—if he just worked a little harder. Their father had often muttered unhappily over those facts, saying if he could somehow merge them into one being, he'd have a perfect student.

Their grandfather always laughed over their father's disgust and often reminded his own son about the way he'd always despaired over him when he'd been a boy.

Ryu wiped his eyes. *I miss you both so much.*

"You have to do better than that, Kazue. You have

to put all your strength behind the strike or you won't ever get the feel for it."

"Yes, Shimazu-san, but.."

Ryu saw the man put his fingers to Kazue's lips and shake his head slowly from side to side. "What have I said about that word, Kazue?"

The girl bowed her head in shame. "You told me not to ever say 'but', Shimazu-sensei."

"That's right."

"Forgive me, sensei."

"Forgiven." He moved to stand behind Kazue; wrapping his arms around her, he smiled down at her. Standing behind her like that, Ryu got a very good idea just how big Shimazu was, his sister's head barely coming to mid-chest on the man, and she wasn't really that much shorter than Ryu himself.

It drove home the fact that if their new lord wanted to rape either of them, there would be nothing Ryu could do to stop him short of getting in a lucky katana strike and killing the man instantly. Short of that, he didn't think he'd be able to stand against the man in a fight.

It was a sobering thought.

A thought that drove home how dangerous the handsome samurai was, and sent Ryu's heart racing with the thrill of knowing that the dangerous man wanted him.

Don't be stupid. All he wants is to sate his lust and you're just convenient, since you're his student and he won't have to pay to use your body.

Hn. I bet he'll go and get what he wants the first town we get to with a brothel full of women. He only wants you

because you won't cost anything and there's no brothel in this town.

But there was that nagging little voice at the back of his head that told him he was being an idiot for not giving in to the older man's advances, because it was pretty apparent the attraction he felt for Shimazu-san was mutual.

Shimazu-san had guided his sister's arms through the motion of the attack, going very slow, so that the end of the staff made only a faint tap as it came to rest on the top of the post.

"Now let's try this," the samurai told his sister. He gripped both her wrists in his and guided her hands over her head until the staff was tilting backward over his shoulder. He guided her arms down slowly, just as he'd done several times already, not stopping until the end of the staff hit the post with the same soft tap.

"Now you want to imagine this is the head of a bandit who wants to kill your brother," their sensei told them. "Would that little tap have made him let Ryu alone?"

"No, Shimazu-sensei."

"That's right. So you want to keep him from hurting Ryu, don't you?"

"Yes, sensei."

The man let her wrists go and stepped away. "Now I want you to bring the staff up high, the way I just showed you. I want you to make that man leave your brother alone. But this time you're going to scream like I taught you, okay?"

"Yes, Shimazu-sensei."

Their teacher reached out and pushed her arms until the staff was almost touching the ground behind her.

"I want you to make that staff go fast and hit the post, and don't forget to shout."

"I won't, sensei."

He let her go. "NOW!"

"Heeyai!" Kazue shouted as the staff came down with a swooshing noise that ended in a loud cracking noise as the end of the staff snapped off.

"Good! Excellent!" Shimazu-san's voice was loud, full of satisfaction and Ryu couldn't help the smile curling his mouth as his sister stared at the remains of her staff.

"I broke it!"

"Yes! Yes, isn't it wonderful!" Shimazu-san exclaimed as he patted her on the shoulder.

Goro and Junko, the innkeeper and his wife had come out on the back steps of the inn to see what all the commotion was about.

"She broke her staff!" their teacher cried out as an explanation.

His mood proved contagious and Goro replied, "Wonderful This sounds like a reason to celebrate! We'll provide a special meal tonight in honor of the event!"

"Yes, yes! Please do!" Shimazu-san agreed as he smiled at Kazue, patting her on the shoulder, his look proud as any a father would have given. Kazue grinned back.

Maybe this won't be so bad, being sworn to serve him. At least he's nice to Kazue.

He's nice to you too, the unwanted voice reminded him. More than that, he really wants you, and you want him. Why resist?

But he knew why. He was afraid. Afraid that once Shimazu-san got what he wanted, they'd find themselves tossed aside.

The idea scared him, yet at the same time he knew it was stupid. They were his retainers, and he'd taken their oaths. He wouldn't have gone to all the trouble to convince them of his sincerity to be their master if he'd only wanted Ryu's body.

The feel of Shimazu-san's hard-muscled body pressing him to the ground turned Ryu's mouth dry, not from fear, but from the kiss of desire that burned through his veins. Determined not to give in, he focused his mind on what was happening around him.

Shimazu-san wasn't going to go to the trouble of asking them to be apprentice demonkillers and then training them just to dump them for a night or even a month of using him.

Deep down, Ryu knew that Shimazu-san wasn't like that...

At least, he didn't think he was.

Haru caught the boy's smile when she'd broken her staff, but then he'd noticed that the teen's eyes had clouded, thoughts turning inward, the smile fading into a blandness of expression that was at odds with the troubled darkening of the boy's gaze.

I wonder what he's thinking about?

^Why you, of course.^

I doubt that.

^Why, when it's the truth?^

Oh, shut up.

^But he really is thinking about you. He's thinking how much he wants you.^

Is he really?

^Would I lie? No, wait, don't bother answering that,^ the demonic half of his soul said amid a torrent of burbling laughter that filled his mind.

Haru gave a pained sigh.

"Sensei-san, what am I going to do? I can't practice without a staff."

Her delicate face—so similar in form and color to her older brother's—was turned up to him, a woeful expression showing her remorse at breaking her weapon. "Don't worry," he told her as he walked toward the inn and a short pole that was leaning near the back door.

Goro the Innkeeper smiled as he approached. "Shimazu-sama, your student is doing very well! You must be very pleased."

"I am," Haru agreed as he wrapped his hand around the new staff. It was thicker than the one she'd been carrying, which would mean she'd need time to get adjusted to the weight and the differences it would entail. "She's been nothing but willing since she agreed to become my student."

"My wife says she's going to be a good cook if she keeps trying," Goro stated, still grinning. There was a glimmer of something in the man's eyes that made Haruhiro pause. "And she's a very pretty girl too, don't you think?"

Ah, so that's it. He thinks I took her to be my student in the hopes of making her my wife later. He glanced in Kazue's direction. She is pretty, but...she feels more like a sister to me than anything else.

"Yes, she's quite pretty, but you know, so is that brother of hers," he smiled.

"Oh, yes, yes, indeed he is, Shimazu-sama," the innkeeper quickly agreed.

"I still have lessons to teach," Haru said with a slight nod of his head as he turned.

"Of course, Shimazu-sama," Goro replied and bowed. "Just let us know when you'd like your celebration meal served."

Haru spun about on his toes. "Sundown. That should give us enough time."

The innkeeper bowed. "As Shimazu-sama wishes."

Kazue looked at the length of pole in his hands, a little moue of distress replacing her prior smile. "Is that for me? Isn't it awfully big, sensei-san?"

"Actually, the one you were using was a little light and about a foot too short. Let's try this one," he said as he held it out to her.

Still rather dubious, she took it and gave it an experimental spin in her hands. "I don't know about this, sensei," she murmured as one end of the pole kicked up a puff of dust.

"If it's too long I'll have it trimmed, but go on and practice with it for a while. That post over there is looking like a bandit in need of a lesson in manners to me."

"Okay, sensei-san," Kazue said and hurried over to start banging her new staff on the hapless bandit-

post.

Haruhiro faced the boy, "So how are you feeling?"

The answer he got was a non-committal shrug.

"That good, huh?" Haruhiro crouched down and touched the boy's face, expecting to find signs of a fever or chill. When he found neither, he let his hand drop and just regarded the teen warrior. "So tell me what's wrong? Is it you or me?"

When Ryu didn't answer, he reached out and gripped the boy's chin in his hand. "Ryu, talk to me."

"Is he being a moody brat again, sensei?" Kazue asked from where she was beating the post.

"Yes," Haruhiro replied hoping that sibling rivalry would rear its misshapen head and get the boy on his feet.

"I'm not a brat," Ryu replied, his big brown eyes meeting Haru's gaze.

"Ah, but you don't deny being moody."

"Hn," was the grunted reply.

"Come on, if you aren't sick, I want to see what you can do with those swords of yours."

"Fine."

Haruhiro raised an eyebrow. A bit of rudeness he could tolerate, but this was a bit much.

"All right...sensei," the boy said as he got up, dusted off the seat of his threadbare hakama and walked a few steps away.

"What do you want to see? Basic moves, or the most advanced ones I can do?"

"Start with some of the basics."

The boy bowed to him, then dropped to his knees.

Haruhiro watched, and waited while the boy got

himself focused on what he was going to do.

From a kneeling position the boy came to his feet with swords drawn and in motion, the blades flashing in the sunlight bright as captive lightning while he moved in a display of the most basic attacks and defenses that any student of the sword would know.

Kazue had stopped her assault on the post to watch her brother, and Haruhiro could see the pride in her gaze. And love.

That she adored her brother, Haruhiro had already realized. That she probably idolized him—despite her teasing—was becoming rapidly apparent. He smiled slightly.

Any man who decides he can't live without Kazue is going to find he's got big trouble trying to live up to her expectations. She's not going to settle for anyone that can't measure up to her own brother's stature in her eyes.

His gaze went back to the boy as the series of simple moves came to a stop. He eyed the boy critically, looking for signs of fatigue or strain. Ryu wasn't in great physical condition, and the few days of rest and good food hadn't cured him, but so far he appeared well enough for a few minutes of intense activity.

Brown eyes regarded him, waiting for Haruhiro to tell him what he wanted to see next. He didn't want to unduly tire Ryu, so he decided to get down to the business of finding out what the boy could really do.

"Show me your most advanced techniques and don't hold anything back."

The teen bowed, paused, moved into position and then burst into motion, the pair of swords in his

hands singing like the wind through a forest in a blur so fast even Haruhiro had difficulty following them.

He stared as the teen spun, fighting off a series of imaginary opponents that had to number well over a half dozen, which left him wondering why he'd given such a poor showing against the bandits.

But he already had an answer to that. Starvation.

The food is already helping him more than I realized. A few more days of rest and big meals and he'll be fit to travel.

As he observed the boy's speed and technique, seeing the actual Autumn Wind style in the long sweeping attacks and whirling defensive swordplay, Haruhiro's appreciation for the beauty of the moves increased. He'd seen someone that could perform the basics of the Autumn Wind style, but the boy was far beyond those more simple strikes, and his grace almost took Haru's breath away.

Then the boy leaped into the air, twisting in a move that would carry him high over the head of an enemy, the blade of his katana catching the sun as it hummed through the air in a strike that would have been devastating in battle.

Haruhiro just stared as the wind carried Ryu several feet beyond the point where he would have landed had the move been accomplished naturally – not that any part of it but the sword strike itself could be managed without supernatural assistance – amid a thick swirl of dust that almost obscured the boy's location. Ryu came out of the whirlwind that had shielded him from view, both swords in motion, the wind rising to the force of a small storm.

Damn, with so much wind protecting him, an archer wouldn't be able to hurt him. They'd have to use guns. And since the Shogun had tight control over the manufacture of gunpowder and the guns themselves, it wasn't very likely that Ryu would face an opponent who carried one of the terrible weapons.

Ryu's attack took him to the air again in a twisting, spinning attack that could have eliminated several men at once. But this time he didn't land well, and came down on his injured side with brutal force as he lost control of what he was doing.

Damn! Haru was racing forward before the boy hit the ground.

"Ryu!" Kazue shouted. Dropping her staff, she ran to where her brother lay, reaching him about the same time as Haru himself did, though he'd been farther away.

His heart was hammering so hard it roared in his ears.

Gods, if he's hurt, I'll never forgive myself.

The young samurai was lying in the dirt, struggling to get his breath as the dust storm that had surrounded him drifted to the ground, covering Ryu in a layer of the stuff.

"Oh, Ryu, why did you try that one? You know how hard it is."

The boy just stared at her from where he lay in the dirt and coughed weakly.

"Never mind, don't talk. You just rest," he told the boy as he ran his hands over him, trying to ascertain whether the boy had any broken bones. The landing had been brutally hard, and Haru fully expected to

find at least a few ribs or an arm or leg had been broken.

You should never have asked him to show you such complicated and dangerous moves. He's just not well enough for such exertion.

^Yes, much better for you to keep him flat on his back...^

Will you just shut up!

^No, not until I've felt him writhing in lust beneath us, I won't.^

I'm going to ignore you anyway, so just shut up!

^Go on, ignore me. I'm still here and I'm not going to go away.^

Haruhiro didn't find anything broken, so he picked the boy up. "I'm going to take him up to my room."

^Ooooh...yes yes yes!^

Haru gritted his teeth and mentally kicked the darker half of himself into a corner.

^Ooooh, I love it when you get rough. Try that with the boy next!^

SHUT! UP!

Ryu was making soft, choked sounds that might be protests, but Haru ignored him. "Tell Goro the Innkeeper that I'm going to need water and a washcloth to get him cleaned up."

"Yes, Sensei-san," the girl said and bolted for the inn.

"M...okay..." Ryu protested, still winded.

"Don't try to talk," Haruhiro snapped, taking his anger at himself out on the boy.

Ryu just stuck his tongue out in a childish gesture that both relieved Haruhiro and angered him. It was

very rude, but it showed Haru that Ryu was going to be just fine.

CHAPTER FIVE

TRAVELING AND FIGHTING

Two days later...

Despite the mishap that had ended Ryu's demonstration of his sword skills, the next morning Haruhiro had them up and ready to leave the inn before the last blush of dawn had faded from the sky.

He'd delayed in the execution of the Shogun's orders as long as he dared. Any further delay could well mean trouble for him and his new apprentices. If the demon he was going after got bored it might move on, and then he'd be left trying to track it to another town—if he could even find it. That was something he didn't dare chance. Not when this particular demon had a penchant for killing the rulers and all members of the military in the towns it chose to victimize.

With all opposition gone, the demon was free to terrorize the citizens of the town, killing them, laying waste to the crops and causing general destruction throughout the area where it lived.

The going was slower than he'd hoped, but he remained patient because regardless of his protests that he wasn't hurt, Ryu was sore and aching from the impact with the ground and the boy's every

movement showed signs of pain.

Fortunately it was a warm and sunny day, so they had no weather related obstacles like sticky mud or torrential rains to endure.

Slow going or not, they reached a small town and its spacious inn early the next evening. After a quick meal he sent the siblings to bed, each of them in a private room rather than making Ryu share a room with himself.

He wanted sleep and the boy needed it, and if they shared a room, he didn't think either of them would get a moment's rest. At least he knew he wouldn't. Not with a desirable body so close, and the demon half of his soul whispering in his head.

In the morning, Haruhiro planned to see about getting the young samurai and his sister some clothing that didn't look as if it had been picked out of a trash heap. He'd been terribly embarrassed—and so were his apprentices—when the innkeeper had taken one look at the pair and wanted to make them sleep outside rather than let them into his establishment. The man had mistakenly thought they were of the lowliest caste of people, the eta—untouchables who handled the dead or did other unsavory things like collecting dung and trash for disposal.

It had greatly irked Haruhiro that the man would think something like that when the boy carried the swords of a samurai, and the girl—though threadbare—carried herself with the pride of a noblewoman. Eta, by law, weren't allowed anything that resembled a weapon either, so the whole

situation had greatly annoyed Haruhiro, and Ryu had been quite indignant. Kazue had just stared at the man, looking more upset than angry.

The entire situation had left Haru deeply annoyed, especially when the innkeeper then managed to insult them further by assuming that Kazue was a whore.

Haru had lost his temper then and told the fool to shut up before he found himself minus a head over such insulting behavior.

If there'd been another inn where they could have stayed the night, Haru would have gone to it rather than be a patron there. Unfortunately it was the only inn, and much as he would have preferred to simply go elsewhere, he didn't think Ryu needed a night out in the chill air. The boy's physical condition was altogether too precarious, and he didn't want to risk illness on top of everything else.

But at least the fool innkeeper—who was such a contrast to their former host, Goro, who'd been very respectful—hadn't forced Haru to threaten him and his show of money had gone a long way to mollify the man, even if he did keep staring at the two teenagers as if they had more than one head.

He'd bought a meal and gotten them fed, then sent Ryu and his sister up to their rooms. Neither had protested his command.

With the younger two safely off in bed, Haruhiro had taken up a spot in the main room of the inn where he could relax and sip a few cups of sake in peace.

Well, more or less in peace. The darker side of his nature was still keeping him unwanted company, and

there were a pair of somewhat too boisterous samurai making fools of themselves on the other side of the room.

^It would be easy to make them shut up, you know!^

Yes, I suppose it would. But I'd rather have you shut up. Too bad that's not as easy.

^You'd get lonely without me.^

Lonely? Me? Without you pestering me? Not at all. It would be very quiet and peaceful without you yammering into my head day and night.

^Finish your sake, and then you can go sate your desires on that boy.^

Or I can finish this sake and go up to my own room to sleep, which is what I'm planning.

^You're just no fun at all.^

Sorry to spoil your entertainment.

The two drunken samurai swayed to their feet and, hanging onto one another, they made their way up the stairs, laughing and trying to sing and walk at the same time, with dubious success.

After a few moments they got to the top of the stairs, and Haruhiro looked forward to finishing his own sake in peace.

He picked up the cheap lacquer cup and downed the contents, considering if he should have the innkeeper pour him another when he heard a bloodcurdling scream that had him on his feet and halfway up the steps before the scream ended.

He reached the top of the stairs and was greeted by the sight of Ryu with both swords drawn standing between his sister—her kimono torn, dark eyes wide in terror—and the two sake-saturated men.

"What the hell are you two doing!" Haruhiro demanded.

"Just a bit of fun," one of the men slurred out as he faced Ryu with his own swords drawn.

"The innkeeper said she was probably just a whore. What do you care?"

Haruhiro gritted his teeth, angered. He was going to have a few words with the innkeeper at the first possible opportunity—like the second he no longer had to deal with the pair of idiots that he and Ryu were confronting.

"He's wrong. She's my student and so is that boy, and if you don't just walk your drunken asses away, I'm going to take you both on as my students for one blunt lesson in manners."

The pair of men eyed him. The sake was making them brave, which equated to stupid because drunken men didn't usually fight very well.

"Go to your rooms, or go back downstairs and pass out, I don't care which you do, but stay away from my sister!" Ryu snapped at them.

One of the men leaned forward and peered at the boy. "Your sister?" He nodded as if answering something. "You're pretty enough to be a girl. How about you come pleasure us instead?"

Haruhiro reached out, grabbed the nearest man and promptly shoved him down the steps.

Angered, the second man gave an enraged shout and went for Haruhiro with his katana. The corridor was a narrow one and instead of hitting Haruhiro, the blade slashed through the paper of a wall and got stuck in the wooden framework that supported it.

Haru shook his head, grabbed the man by the arm and the back of his hakama and sent him to join his companion at the bottom of the steps.

The two samurai were quiet after that.

Probably passed out, Haruhiro decided. Just to make sure, he went to the top of the stairs and looked down to find the two men sprawled out at the bottom of the steps, snoring loudly.

Satisfied, he left them where they were and turned to check on the condition of his students.

^It would be so much better if they were dead, though, don't you think so?^

No.

^You're becoming tedious. Why not have some fun? Kill some people, rape the boy...^

No.

^Then rape the girl and fight the boy,^ the demon suggested.

Speaking of tedious –

^You're boring me.^

And you annoy me, so we're even.

Haru peered into the darkened room. "Are you both all right?" he asked.

The girl nodded, and clutched the remains of her kimono around herself. "I don't have anything to wear at all now, though."

"Don't worry about it. The innkeeper's wife can just loan you a kimono in the morning."

Ryu stepped out of the room, heading for the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

"Ryu, don't try to fight those men alone!" Kazue

said, her alarm very plain to see in her expression.

"I'm going to go have a talk with the owner of this establishment."

"Don't kill him."

The boy turned anger-narrowed eyes on Haruhiro.
"I'm just going to make him wish he were dead."

"Ryu! No! Please don't do anything stupid."

The boy vanished down the stairs without acknowledging his sister's imploring call.

Haruhiro thought it over. The boy had been greatly offended by the innkeeper and those men downstairs, and while he didn't think Ryu would attack the pair of drunks the innkeeper was probably fair game, all things considered.

"Don't kill anyone!" he shouted.

He got no answer.

Haruhiro sighed. "Let him go, Kazue. He's got every right to be angry."

She abruptly sank to her knees, shoulders slumped. "Why is it always like this?"

Haru stepped into the room. "Because men can be worse than beasts."

Wide dark eyes looked up at him. "Even you?"

He frowned. "Especially me, I'm afraid."

"Oh."

There were two howls of pain and they both looked at the door as if they would be able to see what was happening downstairs.

^Such lovely music. I hope he kills them.^

He won't, and you know it.

^I can hope, can't I? And what if he does? Wouldn't that be wonderful?^

No, it wouldn't. And you know perfectly well that boy's no cold-blooded killer.

^I have my hopes.^

Kazue got to her feet and took a step toward the door before she glanced at her badly torn kimono. "Someone should stop him."

"Why?"

^Why indeed? Let him kill them, says I.^

He's not killing anyone.

"Ryu gets mad when people try to hurt me."

^Maybe you should ask her what he's doing to them.^

"Very understandable."

No.

There was another howl of pain, and a clearly audible "We're sorry!" that drifted up from below.

^Ooo, now, that sounds just delightful.^

"Umm...what do you think he'll do to them?"

The girl frowned. "Well, last time he made a ronin who tried to have his way with me crawl down the street and say, 'I'm a worthless dog' to everyone he saw."

Haruhiro nodded, "I see. So he won't kill them?"

"Oh, no..." she frowned, and glanced at the doorway. "At least I don't think he will, but he was really mad at the innkeeper."

"They didn't hurt you, did they?" He knew the drunken idiots hadn't had time to violate her, but she was a small girl and men that far gone into the sake seldom controlled their strength very well.

"No. Not really."

There was a muted crash from downstairs. One that sounded suspiciously like a few items of crockery

being broken.

Haru raised an eyebrow.

"Ryu is very angry," she explained, as she twisted a bit of torn silk between her fingers.

^Pretty bit of meat, isn't she? It's understandable that those men wanted her.^

Haru ignored the demon half of himself and asked, "At those men?"

"Them, the innkeeper...you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I think you know."

Haruhiro frowned. "Yes, I guess I do. It just surprises me that you know."

She shrugged. "I'm his sister. I know lots of things he doesn't even realize about himself."

"Such as?"

She met Haruhiro's gaze. "Such as he wants to trust you, but he's been hurt and no longer trusts anyone but me."

"Ah. Yes, well, he's apprised me of that fact."

The girl offered Haru a slight smile. "Be patient. He'll come around."

Haruhiro just stared at the girl, shocked by her nonchalant statement.

"You know he's...?"

"Of course." She pointed to her own chest. "Sister, remember? It's not every brother you can discuss cute boys with, you know."

"Ah, I see, well, that explains a lot."

She gave Haru a conspiratorial wink and added,

"He likes you, but you try too hard. Don't push him. He's really stubborn and the more you push, the harder he's going to resist."

Haru just shook his head and felt a little blush color his cheeks, which surprised him. "I, ah... umm..."

"Don't be a bully. He told me you were mean to him. You won't get him to like you by being that way. When he gets mad at someone, he stays mad for a long time."

"Oh."

Another crash was followed by the sound of a man's voice begging for mercy.

"He's really mad at the innkeeper, isn't he?"

"Very," Kazue agreed.

"Any idea what he's doing?"

"Teaching the man a lesson via economic chastisement."

Haruhiro blinked. "Economic..."

"Chastisement. It's my brother's way of saying smashing stuff to make the man be more considerate in the future."

"Very nice of him. Most samurai would just kill the man for the insults you've suffered."

"Dead men don't learn, they just stink," Kazue said. "That's what grandfather taught us."

Haruhiro couldn't help but smile at that bit of odd logic. "Practical, I suppose. Much easier than finding new people to run an inn."

"Or a farm," she agreed. "Besides, as grandfather said, if you killed everyone that made a mistake, the world would be pretty damned empty."

The samurai just stared at the girl for a moment. *Interesting way of seeing the world. Not like most samurai families who are more concerned with keeping face than forgiving idiots.*

"Very true," Haruhiro agreed as a resounding crash and an accompanying wail of misery came up from below.

"Hmmm...maybe I should go down there before the innkeeper loses everything breakable."

There was another, softer crash as if less had been broken. "That might be a good idea," Kazue agreed. "And if you could get something for me to wear, I'd appreciate it."

"Yes, that's probably a good idea too," Haruhiro admitted as he left.

If the innkeeper was lucky, he might actually arrive in time to prevent Ryu from breaking every crock, cup and bowl in the place.

^Too late, his tormenter chortled gleefully. ^You know the boy could be so deliciously violent with just a little urging.^

Haru sighed.

It was going to be a long night.

* * * * *

The next day...

After making sure the innkeeper had paid for the insult of telling the two drunken samurai that his sister was a whore, Ryu had gone to sleep on the floor outside his sister's door and nothing Kazue or Haru

had said would budge him from his appointed duty as her guard.

When dawn finally brightened the sky, he stretched, yawned and pulled his kimono straight before taking the tie out of his hair and fighting with the mess sleeping always made of it.

At least it wasn't full of leaves, twigs, mud—or ice!—which was something he had a keen appreciation of after so many nights of sleeping outside in all types of weather.

The faint sounds of people talking downstairs reached him, and he identified the voices of the innkeeper—a man far less respectful than Goro the Innkeeper had been—and two other men that he suspected might be the troublemakers from last night.

He couldn't hear what they were talking about, but being distrustful of people—especially other men—Ryu doubted they were idly chatting about the current weather and the conversation was taking much longer than needed for the men to order food.

Smoothing his hair, he wrapped the bit of string around it and quickly tied it so it would stay out of his face, just on the off chance there was trouble.

And for he and his sister, there was always some kind of trouble. It seemed to follow them the way flies swarmed around dung.

They'd both hoped that being with Shimazu-san would change that, but so far, he'd noticed no change. Trouble was still finding them.

"Hn," he grunted to himself. *If anything, Shimazu-san is just a new kind of trouble. He's sure intent on having me in his bed.* The boy's expression soured. *Just*

like all the others. He didn't take us on as his students for any reason other than lust. But at least it's me he's after, not Kazue.

The last man that had offered them help had done so while making it clear he intended to aid them for the price of Kazue's maidenhead.

Ryu had made it equally clear that any attempt to breach his sister's virtue would result in a breach of the man's guts with his sword.

They'd left that town quickly, but it hardly mattered. Everywhere they went, it was the same thing. Someone either thought Kazue could be bought, or that they'd give up their bodies for food and shelter for a night.

He supposed some people in their dire predicament might accept such an arrangement, but Ryu never would, nor would his sister be so used, even if it meant he had to kill people to protect her.

He sighed. *Not that you've done such a good job of that lately.*

He'd just gotten to his feet, intending to go wake his sister when he heard the heavy tread of a man coming up the steps. From the way the stairs creaked, it couldn't be the innkeeper. He was too skinny to make the boards groan that way. He could also hear other voices down below. More men.

Ryu's delicate face took on a very somber expression. Whatever was going on, he had a feeling it involved them and with the way their lack of luck always went, whatever was going to happen wouldn't be pleasant.

It never is....

"Kazue?"

"Come in, Ryu. I'm dressed."

He pulled her door open to find her sitting up and braiding her hair.

"Is Shimazu-san ready to leave so soon?" she asked. Their teacher had told them they'd be leaving today, but Ryu had the feeling that was going to be delayed.

"I think we're going to have more trouble. I'm going to go wake sensei."

"Okay, Ryu," she replied as she reached for her staff. It was too long to make an effective weapon indoors, but it was all she had.

Ryu went to Shimazu-san's door and tapped on the wooden framework holding the paper screen in place.

Haru's hair was a mess, and his clothing wasn't properly arranged, but he seemed awake and alert, if the piercing quality of his gaze was any indication.

"What is it, R—?" he started to ask, then frowned as the man Ryu had heard coming reached the top of the stairway.

Ryu turned to find a stocky man in the garments of a town official approaching them, a stern expression turning an already plain face into a harsh scowl.

"My name is Kuki Jiro, and I'm one of the magistrate's retainers. You three have a lot of explaining to do to the magistrate of the town," the man stated.

Ryu opened his mouth to say something, but Haruhiro's fingers touched his lips. "I'll deal with this, Ryu. Go check on your sister."

"But I..."

A stern glower was turned on him.

Ryu glared at Shimazu-sensei, but he held his anger in check and bowed to his lord instead. He's right, he admitted to himself. I'm just a retainer, his student and not responsible.

In a way, that was both a relief and an irritating fact.

"Go on," Haruhiro urged while the magistrate's man waited, his whole manner impatient.

The boy bowed to him again, but Haruhiro didn't miss the distrustful glance he gave the waiting samurai.

Haruhiro took a step toward the other man. "I'm Shimazu Haruhiro," he began. "The boy is my student, as is his sister."

The frown didn't change; if anything, the other samurai's expression grew more unfriendly. "I don't care who any of you are, you're to come with me to await the magistrate's convenience concerning destruction of property and the unlawful attack on two respected men of the town guard."

"Oh, is that who those two drunken fools are?" he asked, his tone still light and friendly.

^I don't suppose you'd consider...^

No.

^You don't even know what I was going to say!^

I don't need to, because the answer is no, regardless.

^Spoilsport.^

I don't like your sports.

^Well, since you never play, how do you know you won't like them?^

Because I know you. Now shut up.

The magistrate's retainer frowned, and Haruhiro wondered if the man had some demonic blood, because his already none too pleasantly featured face took on an even more ugly cast.

"That's enough out of you. You're to come with me. You can do so peacefully or not, it's your choice."

Haruhiro frowned. That sounded very much like a threat to him, and he didn't take being threatened very well even under the best of circumstances. After the events of last night and his ongoing battle with his darker half, the current circumstances were far from the best.

"Kuki-san—" he began, putting strong emphasis on the title of respect tacked on at the end of the man's name. It was for courtesy only. As a retainer of the Shogun, Haru was ranked far above a samurai serving a town magistrate. He was also above the magistrate when it came down to it, and Haru rather suspected it would.

But he wasn't being given any chance to talk. The man closed the distance between them and glowered up at Haruhiro. "No arguments. No excuses. You and your *students* will come with me, or the men I have waiting down below will come up to get you. And if that happens, we're not going to be so gentle about it. Understood?"

Haruhiro felt his own face take on a none too pleasant expression. "I see. Well then, by all means, we'll be coming along. I want to have a little talk with your magistrate."

"You'll go, but I don't think you'll be doing any of

the talking," the man snapped. "Now move, and get those two little curs of yours to come out."

^Sounds as if they're planning some unpleasantness for you. How perfectly charming. I told you that you should have killed those two louts. Now they've run to their boss and cried their story of being manhandled by an arrogant ronin and his two low-class whores.^

Haruhiro gritted his teeth. This time the demon side of himself probably had the right of it. *Those two probably did make some such claim, and no doubt our host made a formal complaint also.*

^No doubt,^ the darker half of himself agreed, all too amused by the ongoing events.

"A moment while I gather up my things," Haruhiro said and turned to go into his room. A room he'd paid for, no matter what the innkeeper might have claimed. Which, considering the man's nature, could be any lie he'd concocted just to make his claims of being subjected to horrible loss of profits and damage to his business all the sweeter.

"I said move, and I meant now!"

Haruhiro didn't even turn; he simply sidestepped the punch he could sense coming for him from behind. Being half-demon did have a few advantages, and that was one of them.

When he turned around he knew he had taken on a less than human aspect, face reddened, a hint of his true nature showing, because he was very angry. Only a coward would attack someone from behind, and it made him wonder exactly what sort of man the magistrate of the town was if he employed drunks and cowards.

Well, he'd find that out soon enough.

The man took a step back, piggyish eyes widening with a trace of genuine fear.

^Oooh now, that was prettily done. I so love it when you deign to remember what you are. Scare him some more.^

Haruhiro ignored the voice whispering in his head, replying to the other samurai instead, "I said I needed a moment to gather up my things. I'm sure you understand that there are *thieves* in even the best of towns, or we certainly wouldn't need town guards, would we?" He stressed the word thief, as he suspected that would prove an apt description of the magistrate. He'd seen more than a few corrupt men in charge and was never shocked to discover yet another of that sort in control in some village or town. Once such men came into power, they were terribly difficult for the citizens to be rid of, and they tended to make life true hell for everyone within their reach: travelers included.

"I...ah...no. Of course not. It's just..."

Haruhiro raised one eyebrow. "You were told to bring us immediately. I'm sure you can spare a moment, can't you?"

The magistrate's retainer nodded, but there was a glitter in his eyes that promised revenge of the worst kind.

Unfortunately for him, Haruhiro happened to be 'the worst kind' he could have sought revenge against.

"Good." He gathered up his belongings, made sure of his money and other valuables, then stepped out

into the hallway to find Ryu and his sister already waiting. They were facing the stairs, the two teens watching a pair of bushi about their own ages who'd apparently come up the steps to see what was taking their leader so long.

"We can go now," Haruhiro stated.

"Good," the magistrate's man stated and motioned gruffly for Haru to join the siblings. With his men to back him, he was once again the arrogant samurai in charge of bringing them in for questioning.

Haruhiro just smiled as the three of them followed the bushi down the steps. When they reached the bottom, there were five more bushi waiting, along with a younger samurai and the innkeeper.

The innkeeper chuckled. He had a very smug look on his face and an avaricious glitter in his eyes that reminded Haru he should be more careful who saw his string of money. *It certainly wasn't a good idea to let this son of a mangy dog see it.*

^Where's your spirit of adventure!^

Taking a holiday elsewhere.

^You're just – ^

No fun. Yes, I know, now be quiet.

The innkeeper stepped closer to them. Putting his face right into Ryu's, he said, "You're going to pay for all the damage you've done and for forcing your way into my place! The magistrate doesn't tolerate criminals here."

The boy turned his head away and Haru wondered if the man was as prone to getting drunk as the pair of samurai from last night. If the way in which the boy's nose wrinkled was any indication, he thought the

answer was probably a resounding yes.

Haru leveled a frosty look on the innkeeper. "Really? Then tell me this, how do you stay in business?"

A couple of the bushi were indiscreet enough to chuckle over that, which made Haru smile and the two samurai with them glower angrily. He'd suspected the innkeeper of being less than scrupulous in his business dealings, and apparently he'd been correct.

"You yapping cur! First you demand rooms that you didn't pay for, bring your whore into my place, eat food and drink my sake without any payment, then you assault my customers and let that misbegotten son of a dog tear my place up! The magistrate's going to take your heads for this!" the innkeeper sputtered in rage.

Haru had to grab Ryu's shoulder to keep the boy from going after the man for the insult to his sister, which made the bushi turn to threaten all three of them.

"Easy, Ryu," he murmured. "This isn't the time."

The boy's dark eyes met his. "Sorry, sensei-san. But he shouldn't talk about my sister that way."

"Just let me handle this, Ryu. I don't want you or Kazue getting hurt."

"All right, Shimazu-san," the boy agreed very reluctantly.

The young samurai appraised the trio and said, "We'll take your swords."

Ryu opened his mouth, and Haruhiro gently squeezed his shoulder and asked, "Are we under

arrest then?"

"Yes," Kuki stated firmly. "Now relinquish your weapons."

Haruhiro frowned. "I see. So you're taking the word of this man over the word of two samurai and a well-born lady?"

The bushi started to laugh and the younger samurai gave a snort of contempt.

"You're just a pair of ronin in violation of the Shogun's laws about not carrying the swords allowed to samurai, and she's hardly a lady. Look at the three of you in your ragged, worn-out clothes. You expect us to believe you're respectable?"

"Yes," Haru replied honestly. "We've done nothing not within our rights, nor given you any reason to doubt we have the right to the weapons we carry."

"That's up to the magistrate to decide," the younger samurai stated. He was looking at Kazue in a way that made Haru frown.

I don't like the way that boy is looking at her.

^You're so suspicious of people. Now why do you think he's looking at her? She's hardly more than a child. Really, you need to learn to trust people more,^ the demon side of his nature whispered, which aroused Haruhiro's distrust of the men surrounding them even more.

"Give them your swords, Ryu. We'll straighten this out once we can talk to the magistrate."

There were a few more chuckles from the bushi over this, and the boy's dark eyes narrowed, his entire body going tense.

"Ryu, do as you've been told."

Haruhiro's gaze was still on the young samurai as

Ryu turned over his swords with a sullen glare at the other teen, who simply couldn't hide the smirk that rose to twist his lips. He didn't even glance at the weapons he'd confiscated; he was too busy staring at Kazue.

Well, this situation is going to get ugly.

^Oh, yes, yes, it certainly is, isn't it?^

Be quiet.

"You too," Kuki the magistrate's man ordered Haru. His rough arrogance had returned full-force. He gestured to Haru's swords. "Surrender them, or we'll take them from you."

Haruhiro shrugged and passed his katana and wakizashi over to the man, who glanced at them and frowned. They were fine weapons, not the sort one might expect to be in the possession of a rootless ronin, and Haru suspected the man was wondering how he came to have them. "I'll expect them back, of course."

Kuki just sneered at him and motioned for them to start walking.

"I don't like this, sensei-san," Ryu stated softly and was cuffed by Kuki so hard it took the boy off his feet. "Be silent. You're under arrest, and I don't want to hear any of you talking."

Haru turned his cool gaze on the samurai, who quickly looked away. Still staring at Kuki, Haru focused his mind, reined in the demon half of his soul and put it to some use, toughening himself for what he knew was about to happen. He bent down to help Ryu to his feet.

As he expected, a foot caught him in the ribs, the

intention to hurt him when he wasn't looking—yet another cowardly attack that went a long way to confirm these men were no real samurai. Not to his way of thinking, anyway.

He barely felt the impact. "Much easier to hurt a boy than a man, isn't it?" he asked the magistrate's man softly as he lifted Ryu to his feet.

"Shut up and get moving!" the man snarled and shoved Kazue.

The girl cried out and stumbled. One of the bushi reached out and took the staff from her grip at the same time. She went sprawling to the floor, jerked off-balance by the dual attack.

"You bastards!" the boy snarled.

Haru was very glad he was near the boy, because only an arm thrown around his slender body kept him from leaping at the man.

A gust of wind slammed the inn's doors wide open and swept into the room, tugging at clothing, tossing the floor pillows around wildly and overturning all the tables.

The innkeeper bellowed in terror as he was taken completely off his feet and tossed against the wall. Bushi started to mutter and look around fearfully as the wind screamed, whipping their hair in their eyes, tearing at their clothing hard enough to rip it and make them stumble. Both samurai were being assaulted, but the frenzy of the gale was twice as strong as it fought to lift them off their feet.

It was quite an impressive display of unleashed magical power.

And it was terribly dangerous.

Haru pulled the boy close to himself. He had to stop Ryu before something happened and the wind escaped his limited ability to control it. He lowered his head and whispered in Ryu's ear, "I'll take care of this when we meet this magistrate of theirs. Be calm, Ryu. Let it go before something happens you'll regret."

"No," was the snarled reply.

"I'm not asking you. I expect obedience, Ryu."

"Yes, Shimazu-sama," the boy relented. Haru didn't miss the fact that the boy had given him the highest title of respect that was appropriate. He also didn't miss the fact that the younger samurai caught the 'sama' at the end of his family name.

The boy shuddered in his arms, and the wind instantly died.

The men were staring at the three of them as if they'd grown horns—well, at least one of them could, but they had no way of knowing that—the bushi stepping back, fear in their eyes as they regarded Ryu.

Kuki angrily pulled his garments back into place and glowered at Haru. "You'll answer to the magistrate regarding that, too!" he snapped but the fear was there, lurking in the depths of his gaze.

"Yes, I'm sure I will."

"Get up!" the younger samurai growled, reaching down to yank Kazue back to her feet. His hand froze just a finger's width from the girl's arm. The young samurai's gaze was locked on Ryu. He slowly withdrew his hand and stepped away from Kazue.

Wow, the boy must really be giving him a nasty look, Haru thought. His expression has to be damned

frightening to make that arrogant young man step away so swiftly.

And that made Haru wonder exactly how the pair had come by their magic. Very few people possessed the ability to wield any type of magic, and as far as he knew, every one of them either had some non-human blood in their veins or had been given the power by a non-human entity.

^Oh, yes, he's quite impressive when he wants to be,^ his demon half said with evident pleasure. ^He's got such potential for violence. But I've already told you that.^

Yes, you have, now sh –

^You really do repeat yourself far too much, you know.^

No one else moved to touch Kazue, who got up on her own and turned her large eyes to her brother, still in the circle of Haruhiro's embrace. She gave them a faint smile to show she wasn't hurt.

The innkeeper rose unsteadily and stared around at the mess the wind had made of the main room. Haru noted that two of the tables had been broken, and there were holes in the paper walls where anything heavy had struck.

"Look what they've done to my place!" the innkeeper whined.

"We see," Kuki stated. "Make a list of damage and bring it when you come to be a witness at their trial."

Trial, is it? So they do intend to treat us like common criminals.

^I told you.^

Shut –

The demon half of his soul sighed. ^You'll never learn,^ it told him and went silent.

"Of course, Kuki-san. Of course. When should I come?"

"You'll be sent for. Be ready," Kuki informed the innkeeper. He turned to Haru. "Move. Now."

Surrounded by the group of town guards, the three of them were taken out of the inn. They headed down the main street, going past a variety of shops, followed by the curious stares of the townsfolk—and a dose of speculation as to who they were and what they'd done to get themselves arrested.

At the corner where a clothing shop, a food vendor, a dealer in raw foods and a maker of shoes stood they were taken to the left along another street that quickly gave way to attractive red-tile-roofed homes. When they'd seen the clothing shop, Haru had peered through the raised awnings and saw a wide variety of fabrics as well as a few finished garments. There was a particularly bright and very pretty kimono fabric that he thought would be perfect for Kazue, but he wasn't given much time to look before one of the bushi pushed him along.

"As if you could afford anything in there," Kuki snapped. "The cloth in there is very expensive. It's not for the likes of you rubbish."

Haruhiro turned his cool gaze on the man, "Trash, are we? That's your final opinion?"

"Shut up," Kuki ordered and reached out to cuff the back of Haruhiro's head.

One hard stare convinced the man it wasn't a good idea.

The demon side of himself started to laugh. *^Oh that's just wonderful. I get to hear you being told to shut*

up for a change. How terribly amusing.^

And you can just shut up, too!

The homes they were passing all had beautifully sloped and tiled roofs, and the tops of green trees and the sweet fragrance of flowers marked the numerous gardens that the homes contained.

These would be the homes of the more affluent residents of the town, which was bigger than Haru had expected. He counted ten reasonably sized estates, and an additional four larger ones.

At the very end of the street—and a fair distance from the center of town—was a truly impressive estate. There were guards at the gates of all the homes they'd passed, but none of them were as impressively attired and groomed as those at the house they were approaching.

"This must be the magistrate's home," Kazue commented.

"Whore, keep silent!" the younger samurai in the guard detail ordered.

Only Haru's hand clamped on Ryu's shoulder stopped him from going after the other samurai barehanded. Ryu's mouth compressed into a tight line of anger, but he relented.

"Open up, we've got the ronin and his whore that the magistrate sent us to arrest," Kuki called to the men manning the gate.

It opened to reveal a courtyard of grey stone surrounded by neatly raked gravel. Two paths led away from the courtyard, one going toward the front of the very large house, the second going in the direction of a lush garden.

The courtyard was full of samurai and bushi. At a quick guess there were a total of twenty men here, all of them awaiting their arrival.

They were quickly ushered through the gate, the large detachment of samurai and bushi surrounding them as if they were the most dangerous of criminals.

He saw Ryu tense, ready to do the gods alone knew what and Kazue, taking her clue from her brother, also seemed ready to fight.

Haru didn't react to the very apparent intent of the men. He could see the lust for blood in the eyes of a few, and another kind of lust glittering in their dark eyes as some of them took in the beauty of his students.

^You really should just kill them all now and save yourself the trouble later.^

No, I'm going to talk to their magistrate. There's a chance he'll see reason when he finds out who I am.

The darker half of himself snorted in derision.
^Don't count on it.^

He saw the boy's fists clench, and noticed that despite the absence of a breeze in the courtyard, the boy's hair was starting to move as if touched by the wind.

"Take it easy, Ryu. Don't fight," Haru told the boy.
"You'll only be hurt."

"I don't think it matters much, Shimazu-sama. They're going to kill us."

"No, they aren't, now calm down."

But Kuki was smiling and the look was anything but friendly as he ordered, "Bind them. If they resist, subdue them by whatever means are needed."

"Ryu, do as I tell you!" Haru snapped.

He saw Ryu relax, but it didn't matter. Two of the bushi tackled him and held the boy down while another man bound his arms securely to his sides with coils of rope.

Haru was treated to the same rough handling by six of the men who pinned him to the stone pavement, grinding their knees into his back painfully even though he offered no resistance.

Kazue cried out in pain.

"Hurt her and I'll kill every last one of you," he heard Ryu snarl in anger. It was followed by mocking laughter, another sharp cry of outrage from Kazue and a burst of wind that ripped leaves off the nearest trees.

He couldn't see what was going on, not with his face painfully shoved into the gravel, but he could guess what was happening.

"Kazue!"

The wind screamed through the trees, and Haru heard a sharp thump.

The wind died instantly and he could hear Kazue crying, her sobs broken by her brother's name.

"If you've killed him, you're going to suffer!" Haru growled, finding it even harder to contain the darker half of his soul. He heard a soft moan that let him know Ryu was among the living, caught the boy's whispered, **I'm all right**, carried to him on the wind.

"You aren't in any position to threaten me," Kuki snapped. "You're going to be taken to the magistrate and charged for your crimes."

Haru was yanked to his feet and the Shogun's man

could feel blood trickling sluggishly down his cheek from a cut made by the sharp gravel. He tested the strength of the ropes binding him. It was a good job and the ropes were quite strong, so they were assured he'd be unable to escape.

^I can't believe you aren't going to just kill them for this.^

Haru looked at the limp form of Ryu and the terror-filled gaze of his sister. There was blood on the boy's head, and he was lying very still. Being hit so hard was the last thing Ryu needed, since he'd nearly died the last time someone had struck his skull so viciously.

"So you've already decided we're criminals, have you?"

Kuki regarded him with open contempt. "What else would you be? Such fine weapons as these, you must have killed someone important to get them, or stolen them. As soon as we've ascertained your crimes, you'll be suitably punished."

"I see. And what of you?"

The man just stared at him, not understanding what Haru was implying.

"Waylaying innocent travelers isn't exactly an honorable accomplishment. Don't you think you're going to be punished for such a crime?"

The man laughed. "That's a good joke. You're nothing but a thief who stole those swords. I bet you don't even know how to use them."

Haru just gave him a smile cool as the wind off of an ice-capped peak. "Give them back and I'll give you a few lessons."

Kuki glowered at him, face twisting into the same nasty nearly inhuman visage he'd turned on Haru at the inn.

^Isn't he pretty? Why, I bet he's one of us.^

Would you, now?

^He might be, you know. Don't you have to kill him if he is?^

It all depends. Haru watched his students being manhandled, the men putting their hands on Kazue in ways that made his eyes narrow in anger.

Haru held his outrage in check, forcing himself to remain calm. There would be an accounting of their treatment once he faced the magistrate. He wasn't yet ready to believe the man in charge would condone such bad treatment of travelers.

"Kuki-sama," one of the bushi hanging on to him called urgently to their leader.

"What is it?"

"I've found something here in his sleeve."

Haru frowned, because he knew what that something was: the money the Shogun had given him for his travels.

Kuki approached. "What is it?"

"I don't know."

"Well find out," the samurai snapped.

A hand intruded into his clothing and Haru stood there, calmly staring at Kuki.

"With his arms bound, I can't reach it."

"Then cut it out of his sleeve. I want it as evidence, whatever it is."

The sound of tearing cloth brought another frown to Haru's face. "You know I'm creating a list of

grievances against you and your men, Kuki."

"And who's going to care about that? I don't."

Haru turned a sour look on the man. "No, I suppose you don't."

"It's a string of coins." The man held it out to his boss. "Look at them. Where would someone like him get this much money?"

"Stolen. They must have killed a very important man."

Haru snorted. "Or maybe you've arrested someone you shouldn't have."

Kuki backhanded him hard enough to cut the inside of Haru's mouth on his teeth. "Shut up, murderer." To his men, he said, "Bring them to the Court of Judgment!" and marched off.

^Are you ready to take my advice to kill them yet?^

No, but I'm getting there.

A wave of pleasure washed through him from the other half of his soul and Haru had to fight the urge to snap free of the ropes as the power of his demonic side pulsed through his body.

Not yet. I want the magistrate to hear our side of this, then we'll see what happens.

^Don't be a fool. You already know what's going on here.^

I want to let them put the sword to their own necks.

^Ah, well, that won't be a problem. They're doing an excellent job of that already, wouldn't you agree?^

Haru grunted in reply.

The men hauled Haru roughly through the estate's surrounding gardens—Kazue and her semi-conscious brother being treated just as badly—and taken to an

area of bare white sand that was spread before a low porch at the rear of the house.

Haru was shoved to his knees in the sand. Ryu, still dazed, was dropped face down.

Kazue was also shoved down to her knees; the girl, unable to catch herself with her arms behind her, went face first into the sand.

The samurai and bushi spread out around the courtyard and stood waiting while Kuki and the younger samurai from the detail that had come to get them vanished inside the house.

Kazue huddled on the sand, half blinded, eyes stinging from the grit that had gotten in them when she'd been shoved. The flood of tears streaming them helped to clear her eyes, but they did nothing to decrease her fear. They were in trouble. Big trouble that Shimazu-san's position as a retainer to the Shogun hadn't protected them from as she'd hoped it would.

Glancing up, she could see all the men surrounding them.

Ryu's eyes were open, and he was looking at her with an expression of such sadness that it only added to her misery.

His lips moved and she felt the hair over her left ear ripple as a breath of air carried his **I'm sorry, Kazue** to her.

Don't be, she murmured in response. **It's not your fault.**

Hn. I'm the one who tore up the inn.

Do you really think that's why they brought us here?

He lay there regarding her for a few long moments.

No.

Neither do I.

This situation is a bad one, Kazue.

I know, Ryu. What are we going to do?

Nothing. Not yet. I think Shimazu-sama has a plan. At least I hope he does, because I don't have any.

I hope so too, because I don't have any idea how to get us out of this either.

She was quiet for a while, then she asked, **Do you think they're going to kill us?**

They want you alive.

And what about Shimazu-sensei?

They're going to kill him.

And you?

I don't know. But it does seem probable they intend to kill me too.

I won't let them touch me. I'll make them kill me.

Just wait, Kazue. We aren't dead yet, and I don't think Sensei-san is going to just let them kill any of us without a fight.

He let them tie us up.

Does he look worried? her brother asked her.

She studied what she could see of Shimazu-san's face. **No.**

Then we have to trust him to get us out of this.

Okay, Ryu.

She let the magic that was allowing them to talk fade and tried not to be so scared.

After a while her fear gave way to thirst and gnawing hunger, and still there was no sign of the magistrate who was to be their judge. She could feel

sweat building under her arms and down her back, the hot sun beating down on her brutally as it rose over the treetops.

Ryu?

Hn?

How long have we been here?

A few hours.

Why is he making us wait so long?

He probably expects us to confess if we're sick with the heat.

Oh.

No matter what they promise you, don't say you've done anything that's not true, Kazue.

I won't, Ryu. She thought about it a moment, then added, **And don't get mad no matter what nasty things they accuse me of. I don't want them to use that to find you guilty of anything.**

I'll stay calm to keep you safe.

Does your head hurt?

Yes, but I'll be all right

That's what you said last time.

I guess it is. But this time I really am all right. It just stings a little from the sand that's in the cut.

I'm getting really thirsty.

So am I, just don't think about it.

One of the bushi came closer and kicked her brother in the side. "Stop talking," he snapped.

They lapsed back into silence, but Kazue didn't miss the way that Shimazu-san glared at the warrior who'd just hurt her brother, nor had she missed the fact that—for an instant—his eyes were more red than their normal misty violet color.

There was something strange about their sensei. She's seen him use a kind of magic before, but she had no idea what kind it was or how he'd come by his power. Then again, he had no way of knowing how their family had come by their Autumn Wind magic, not that she knew the full story either.

It made her wonder if the secret had died with her grandfather and father, or whether Ryu knew and hadn't told her.

If he knew, he would tell me...unless Father told him not too.

The sun was growing more cruel, the glare off the sand only increasing her discomfort as the minutes dragged into hours.

It wasn't until the sun was directly overhead that the doors of the house opened to let a group of servants out. They brought a low platform on which they placed a cushion—the seat probably intended for the magistrate—along with two other cushions that they placed to the right of the raised seat. They set up a low table and then disappeared back into the house.

And the wait started again.

Ryu felt dizzy, the combination of heat and the lump on his head turning his stomach into a queasy battlefield wherein hunger and nausea waged a war.

The sun was moving toward the roof covering the porch before the door opened for the second time.

Kuki, the younger samurai who'd accompanied him at the inn, and a man in a more ornately patterned kimono exited the house.

Determined not to lie there in the dirt while these

men passed judgment, Ryu struggled to sit up. It wasn't easy, but he managed it. What he didn't do was bow his head to the men in a show of humility or respect. He felt neither humbled, nor respectful of them.

"So these are the bandits and the whore you told me about?"

He watched Shimazu-san turn a withering stare on the men who'd just exited the house. "You have an unusual way of welcoming guests to your town," he said hoarsely, his voice showing that their lord was suffering from the baking effect of sun as much as he and his sister were.

And the fact that his sensei wasn't lowering his head was a good indication that his own master held the men in contempt too.

The two samurai glared at Shimazu-san.

"We've been unable to curb this dog's barking," Kuki stated, his face and voice showing his anger.

"I'm sure it will be curbed soon enough," the man who had to be the magistrate of the town stated. His face showed disapproval, and a certain penchant for cruelty was apparent in the set of his mouth. Ryu knew the look all too well from his own past experiences.

"I don't believe we've been formally introduced," he heard Shimazu-san tell the man. "So I'll be polite enough to start first."

"Your name is of no consequence," the magistrate said dismissively.

Ryu saw his master's eyebrows lift. "Really? Now that's just very rude."

"The name of a common bandit does not interest me."

"Then you've already decided we're guilty?"

"What else could I do, considering that the swords you carried can't possibly be yours, and then there's all that money."

Ryu saw the anger in Shimazu-san's eyes, their color changing slightly, darkening. He found himself staring at that. It wasn't normal.

Then again, neither was the color of the older man's eyes.

"So you won't even give us a chance to defend ourselves?"

The magistrate just laughed.

But his laughter stopped when Shimazu-san burst free of the ropes holding him, leapt onto the porch and grabbed the town's magistrate by the throat.

"Now listen to me, you wretched little worm! I am Shimazu Haruhiro, retainer to Tokugawa Ieyasu, and I find you guilty of violating the laws as set forth by our Shogun!"

The magistrate's eyes went wide, mouth gaping like that of a fish on land for a brief instant. Then he was screaming, voice shrill with terror, "Kill him! He's a madman! Kill him!"

Swords were drawn, the pair of samurai nearest his master ready to cut him down before the magistrate's order was completed.

"If anyone moves, I'll snap his neck like a twig!"

Every one of the samurai and bushi, including those on the porch, froze.

"Help me," the magistrate begged.

Shimazu-san reached under his kimono with his free hand and pulled out his papers.

"Read!"

"Stolen. They must be..."

Their master shoved the papers into the gibbering man's face, ignoring the yellow pool forming beneath the magistrate's feet. In the heat the stink reached him and his sister quickly and Kazue coughed, trying to turn her head enough to breathe through the shoulder of her dusty kimono.

"Read!"

"C...c..."

Their master shook the man the way a dog shook a rat. "I said read!" he demanded.

"Gods, gods..." the magistrate moaned as he stared at the paper in their lord's fist.

"Who am I?"

"Shi...Shimazu...Har... Haruhiro..."

"Who am I?"

"Gods, gods, don't kill me, please don't kill me."

Haru turned his gaze on the two samurai who were still menacing him with their swords, but they were watching their own lord now rather than him, and the look in their eyes revealed their own fear.

He dropped the cowering man and watched in disgust as the magistrate prostrated himself in his own urine.

"How do we know you didn't steal those papers?" the younger samurai asked.

"Fool, it gives his iris-colored eyes as proof of his identity in the document. Do you think the countryside is full of men with violet eyes?" The

magistrate's voice quavered from terror. "Why didn't you find out who he was?"

"We were following your orders!" Kuki retorted, his sword still gripped in his hand. His eyes went to the bushi and samurai scattered around the courtyard. From what Haru could see, those erstwhile protectors—or guards—had followed the magistrate's lead and were down on their knees.

"I gave them my name, but that didn't seem to matter. I imagine since you'd already found me guilty of a whole list of crimes, my name wasn't of any consequence, was it?"

"Oh, please forgive me."

"And what reason do I have to grant *you* mercy? Would you have shown it to my students? Or me? Would you have let us live?" he demanded.

"I, umm...ah...that is..." the man's voice trailed off into a choked squeak.

"That's what I thought. You were planning to kill me and my students, weren't you?"

The man simply cringed as if he already felt the edge of a katana at his neck.

"I don't even have to guess what you planned for my students, do I?" Haruhiro asked as he leveled his disapproving stare on the pair of samurai.

The younger of the two was staring sullenly at him, his expression more suited to a child that had been caught doing something he'd been forbidden to do numerous times.

"No, I don't have to guess. I think all of us know what you had planned for them, don't we?"

"She's just a whore," Kuki muttered.

A low rumbling sound came from Haru's chest an instant before he went for the man. Easily evading his startled sword slash, he knocked the weapon from the samurai's hand and then bodily threw him off the porch. He landed in a spray of sand.

Haru didn't turn around to see what Kuki was doing; his gaze was fixed on the younger samurai now. "You'd be the magistrate's son, I imagine."

The young man nodded, wary, his katana ready. There was determination in his expression, and Haru could see a plan coming to life in the depths of his gaze.

"Not a good idea," Haruhiro told him. "Kill me, and a lot of trouble is going to come here in the form of a troop of the Shogun's men. You really don't want that, do you?"

"How will they know to come here?"

"The Shogun sent me to this province to kill a demon. Now what do you think is going to happen if I don't kill the demon and report back to Tokugawa-sama?"

"They'll think you were killed by bandits."

"Ichiro, don't be a fool!" the magistrate hissed. "He'll kill you and be within his rights."

"He's going to kill us anyway," the man's son replied harshly.

Behind him, Haru could hear Kuki getting to his feet. He heard the hiss of steel sliding through sand and knew the older samurai was picking up his katana.

The magistrate's son was watching Kuki and Haruhiro relaxed, ready for their combined attack.

The pair of men rushed Haruhiro at the same time. Unarmed as he was, they expected that killing him would be easy.

But there were a few factors they hadn't counted on.

Ryu.

Kazue.

And Haru's faster than human reflexes.

Kuki had to pass the pair of siblings to arrive at the porch.

Falling over on her side, Kazue threw her legs in front of the charging man and he went down in a failing heap. Before he could get up again, Ryu fell flat on his back and kicked the older samurai in the face. Twice, just to make sure he wouldn't be getting up any time soon.

On the porch their sensei was yet again facing an armed and dangerous opponent, but that same swordsman had counted on the aid of the older samurai for help. Help he wouldn't get.

"You cowards come help me!" the magistrate's son shouted at the bushi and other samurai groveling in the courtyard.

"Save us, you fools!" the magistrate screamed. "You'll die as criminals too, if the Shogun sends his men here looking for this lout!"

Some of the men got to their feet, but it was very apparent that they were undecided on a course of action.

Ryu and Kazue stood and faced the men. They were both still bound, helpless to all appearances.

"Don't anyone move. We aren't going to warn you again," Ryu stated in a perfectly calm, reasonable tone.

Some of the bushi who'd been at the inn paled.

"I think they're demons," one of them said just loud enough for everyone in the courtyard to hear him. "When the boy got mad, the wind came and tore the inn apart."

"It's true," another of those who'd been there agreed. I think those two might be demons and that man—you've seen his eyes—where have you ever seen eyes the color of irises before? He's probably another demon."

"Autumn Wind!" Ryu's sister cried.

A gentle breeze ruffled the sand of the courtyard.

The armed men nervously glanced at one another.

"Silence that girl!" the magistrate shouted.

"Autumn Wind, help us! Autumn Wind, save us!" Kazue chanted.

The gale rose, autumn's bitter chill striking at the men who were dressed for the unseasonably warm spring weather.

"*Kill them!*" the magistrate shrieked as he got to his feet. "*Kill them now!*"

"What do we do?" one of the samurai asked. "If they're demons, we've got no chance against them."

"Our duty to the magistrate is clear, though," one of the samurai stated. "Live or die, he's our lord and we've sworn to protect and obey him."

All the samurai and bushi in the courtyard rose to their feet and reached for their weapons.

Ryu saw the fear in the eyes of the oncoming bushi, but he knew that duty would dictate their actions, and that duty meant a battle.

And none of them were armed. They'd stand no chance against so many men, especially bound and tied as he and his sister were. He had to get them free of the ropes and to do that, he needed his weapons.

"Kazue, use the wind. Give me some time. I'm going to try something."

Ryu lowered his head, closed his eyes and whispered to the wind to help him as Kazue's chant grew louder.

"Autumn Wind, help, please help!" Kazue was speaking softly, but the gale rising in the courtyard let him hear her, their ally, the wind carrying her voice to him.

It also let him hear Shimazu-san's fight.

There were too many distractions. He had to concentrate on what he was trying to do or it was doomed to failure.

I've never done this before, so it's not going to work anyway.

But if he believed that he'd be right. Doubt was a sure guarantee of failure; belief could bring success.

He ignored everything around him and whispered to the wind, "Find my swords. Find Shimazu-sama's swords and bring them to me."

A breeze tugged at his clothing.

"Autumn Wind, help me. Find my katana. Find my wakizashi and bring them to me. Find Shimazu-sama's swords and bring them to him. These men will kill us if you don't aid us now. Protect your children,

Autumn Wind."

~You are flesh and blood, a true child of the Autumn Wind. We are here. We will protect you.~

The white sand was lifting from the ground, forming a slim column that spun like a top as the wind increased in speed.

Kazue turned her head. "Him, grab him!" she cried out, forced to guide the wind by voice alone since her arms were still bound. It was hard to do this way, but Kazue had no alternative. The whirlwind grabbed another of the bushi and knocked the man off his feet.

She was getting tired, the magical energy draining from her like tea from the bowl of a cracked cup.

Too fast, too fast. But she couldn't slow it. She could only try and keep going until it ran out.

Her gaze went to one of the samurai who'd gotten much too close. "Grab him!"

The man was surrounded by the screaming wind and tossed backward.

But he didn't go as far as the first two had.

And now there were two men, a bushi and a samurai closing in on them.

"Let's get her, she can't really hurt us!"

"Kill those two brats!" the magistrate screamed, pointing at Ryu and his sister.

Haru was aware of the things happening behind him, but he had to devote most of his attention to what was happening in front of him. He narrowly dodged a sword cut aimed for his throat and another one that would have crippled him by cutting through

the big muscle in his thigh.

He came to the conclusion that simply relying on his well-honed combat skills wouldn't be enough. Not with so many men to fight.

Yet he hesitated to call on his demon half. If he let it out completely...

^Oh, come on, it will be lots of fun. I so enjoyed shaking that miserable rat of a magistrate. You really should have let me kill him, you realize that, don't you?^

Maybe Kazue and Ryu can take care of the other men.

^Are you stupid? Two children against fifteen men?^

Good point.

^Finally, he's seeing reason.^

More likely, I'm seeing a dire emergency.

^Whatever. I don't care so long as you let me free to have fun.^ The demon actually giggled as Haru was forced to jump aside from a vicious swing of the young samurai's katana that almost made him lose his balance and fall off the porch.

The son of the magistrate was a good swordsman, but he wasn't fighting a normal man, so good wasn't quite good enough. Even without freeing his demon half to help him fight, Haru was skilled enough to face most opponents one on one and win, armed or not. Being unnaturally tall, Haru had more than the normal reach of someone who wasn't carrying a weapon in his fist. The magistrate's son Ichiro still had the benefit of reach on him, but once Haru got inside his guard, the benefit would be lost. And that was exactly what Haru did; dodging and stepping inside the younger swordsman's guard, he punched the younger man in the face. The magistrate's son

staggered, bleeding from a torn lip.

"I'll kill you!" he screamed.

"I thought that's what you were trying to do already," Haruhiro retorted with a mocking smile. His demon half was peering out through his eyes; he could tell, because the young samurai was staring at him oddly and if anything, his attacks grew more ferocious, forcing Haru to leave the narrow confines of the porch.

Ichiro followed him.

Behind him, the house troops of the magistrate were starting to close in on his unarmed and bound students, Kazue's whirlwind dancing back and forth to keep the men at bay.

I could use you about now, he told his demon half as he evaded a sword stroke that would have gutted him.

^Yes, so convenient to use me when you want to save some paltry human's life. Or when you're in trouble, like now. But do you ever let me have any fun when I want to enjoy myself? No, of course you don't.^

Have fun now! They're trying to kill us!

^Oh, so it's us now, is it? You're a hypocrite, that's what you are.^

Probably. But if I die you die with me, don't forget that.

^Yes, there is that, isn't there?^

Damn right there is. Now help me, damn you.

The demon side of himself did the mental equivalent of folding its arms over its chest and sulking. ^There you go again, using that phrase. You really do need to stop saying that, you know. Of course I'm damned. I'm a demon. So are you, for that matter, since we

are one and the same being.^

Yes, yes, fine. I admit it. We're two halves of a whole, human and demon. Now will you help me or not?

The demon half of himself sighed. ^So fickle. First you hate me, now you want me...what's a demon to think?^

How about some help here, please? Haruhiro asked as he backpedaled away from another sword stroke and spun, trying to get behind his attacker.

^Oh, all right. I suppose I'll help you. But don't expect me to just go back quietly. I'm going to want some considerations in return for helping – us.^

Haruhiro frowned, but realized he didn't have time to quibble. He let his demon half free. He could worry about the consequences later.

If there was a later.

His skin turned a deep shade of crimson, and the man he was fighting recoiled in shock.

"You – You're a demon!"

"Why, how clever of you to notice!" Haru quipped as horns erupted from his forehead and his fingernails darkened and grew into black talons. He grinned and held up one hand, wiggling the fingers at Ichiro. *"Pretty, aren't they?"*

"Gods save me. Please. I'll repent the evil that I've done," Ichiro murmured.

"I'd say it's a bit too late for that, wouldn't you?"

Behind them the wind had risen to a shrill scream as another bushi was tossed head over heels into one of his companions.

"Ahhhhhh!"

Ryu heard the scream, but it was of no importance. It was not part of his world. It would be later, but for this moment, this heartbeat, this breath, it was something alien to his world.

The only thing that mattered now was the wind that whispered to him, listened to him and promised that everything would be all right.

Bound and all but helpless in the center of a raging battle, Ryu smiled and nodded his encouragement to the wind.

Ryu's long hair started to sway in a gentle sun-warmed breeze that ran counter to the screaming tirade of frosty air his sister had under her command. It raged around them, sweeping across the courtyard and tumbling men off their feet, blinding them with the sand wrapped in its howling arms.

He didn't see the magistrate sneaking up behind them, the man scurrying past their sensei who was busy fighting the man's son in an unequal battle of sword versus bare hands.

The man pulled a dagger from inside his robes and ran at them.

Ryu didn't need to see the magistrate coming for them. The wind whispered the knowledge to him.

Stop him, or he might kill one of us, he told the wind.

"HELP ME!" the magistrate bellowed as he was picked up by a blast of wind that threw him head over heels across the courtyard and out into his garden where he landed with a splash in a pond full of water lilies and brightly colored carp.

Sputtering and struggling with his sodden robes, he floundered around in the water. "*Stop them!*" he

shouted to his men. *"Stop them before they ruin everything!"*

Haru felt the sting from the slash of the other man's katana and was glad for the thickened skin that his demon nature had given him. He lashed out with his talons and felt them strike the steel blade as Ichiro parried.

He could hear the shriek of the wind under Kazue's command, but it was weakening, and the house guards were becoming more bold.

And all Ryu did was stand there with his eyes shut.

Haru couldn't spare any attention for the boy. He had to take Ichiro down and help the girl if he could, because they were running out of time.

There were screams from inside the magistrate's house and four swords in their scabbards ripped their way through the paper walls, carried on the arms of a furious blast of wind.

Haru yanked his swords free of their scabbards, Ryu's efforts now plain for him to see, the boy's potential even greater than he'd suspected. He quickly drove Ichiro back the needed distance, spun to slash Ryu free of the bindings holding him, and then returned to his fight with the magistrate's son.

"Don't just stand there, boy, help your sister."

"Yes, sensei!" Ryu replied and grabbing his own swords from where they spun on the wind around him, he joined the fight. The wind died.

The magistrate's bushi closed with them. *"Stay behind me, Kazue,"* he told his sister. The girl nodded

and stumbled out of the way, showing just how tired she was getting from using the wind to stop the men.

He cut her free and spun to confront the men. They were angry, battered and dirty from their encounters with Kazue's magic.

A breeze rose around him, tugging on the sleeves of his kimono, whipping his hair upward like a banner.

Screaming, the men rushed him.

"*Akikaze!*" he yelled, his swords a screaming blur.

Steel clashed, a man screamed and staggered away, holding his side, blood gushing between his fingers. The other men backed away from Ryu and he stood there watching them, waiting for their next charge.

A group of people raced into the courtyard, samurai and bushi wearing the crest they'd seen over the door of a nearby house.

With so many reinforcements, there was no possible way they could survive against the magistrate and his warriors. All they could do now was what any samurai expected to do: die fighting.

The bushi and samurai drove the magistrate's men into a corner of the yard, those that still lived tossing down their weapons under threat of death.

Within moments it was all over, and the magistrate's retainers were bound and waiting to find out what fate lay in store for them.

Kuki was the only one who would not stand trial, as he'd refused to surrender and had died fighting rather than go to the execution he was sure awaited him.

Ryu, seeing all the angry stares leveled at the bushi

and samurai who had surrendered, suspected that Kuki had probably been correct.

He picked up the scabbards for his swords and sat down beside Kazue. She turned her face against his shoulder and he held her close.

She had survived. That was what mattered to him.

He stayed where he was, the two of them too tired to do much more than that.

He overheard the newcomers talking to Shimazu-sensei, heard the brief explanation of why they'd been rescued, and why the men were so sure their lives were forfeit. Kuki's decision was the better choice, since the current magistrate had come to power by having the former one murdered – and Kuki had been the killer.

The magistrate's son sat bleeding in the sand from the deep cut in his arm. He too had been bound and sat glaring sullenly at Shimazu-san as the Shogun's man dragged his father across the courtyard. The magistrate was quickly bound and forced to kneel in the sand where they'd awaited him for so many hours.

A couple of the bushi came and led Ryu and his sister to a cushion, offering them both some cool fresh water from bamboo cups.

They both drank gratefully and took seats on the cushions at the edge of the sand where witnesses would be seated to await their turn to speak during an enquiry. His sister was beside him, the girl leaning against him, totally exhausted by the day's strenuous events. He put an arm around her to help keep her upright. Without it, she might have fallen over and

gone instantly to sleep.

"They would have killed us," she murmured, too tired to cry.

'Shhh. It's all over, Kazue. Don't worry anymore."

"We aren't under arrest now?"

"No."

"Good."

He looked up as Shimazu-san shoved the still-defiant Ichiro into the sand beside his father and then joined them, sitting on the other side of Kazue where his presence could provide an additional sense of safety to his bone-weary sibling.

He gave the man a tired smile that was returned.

"You've done well," their sensei murmured as he gave Kazue's arm a gentle pat. "Both of you," he added.

"But I'm not the criminal, those people who tore my place up are!"

The innkeeper's shrill protests reached them well before the man arrived in the company of two bushi. His arms had been bound and he was brought to kneel in the sand with the others.

A young man in the armor and finery of a wellborn samurai stepped out onto the porch from inside the house. His keen onyx-black eyes scanned the area, then swept over the accused in the sand. Ryu couldn't help but notice the young man was only a few years older than he was, probably about twenty-two or three. He was also rather attractive, despite the stern set of his mouth. "I am Toshitomo Sadasane, the son of your former magistrate, Toshitomo Nobumune. I will sit in judgment on the men who murdered my

father and have brought so much misery to the people of this town. I will see that justice is done for the hapless travelers they have cold-bloodedly murdered in the five months, since they have had control of that which was never legally theirs to rule."

CHAPTER SIX

DEMON AND DEMONKILLER

Later that same day....

Ryu smiled at his sister, trying to find a bit of joy in the moment, despite knowing that it wasn't going to last.

Maybe I imagined it. I was so thirsty and hot, maybe it was just an hallucination.

Something told him that it hadn't been an illusion, and that their sensei was actually the thing he'd seen during the fight.

But he didn't want it to be true, so he refused to think about it for now. He was too tired for further speculation.

He'd have plenty of time to consider what he'd seen once they were on their way.

On their way.

Tired as he was, he wished they were staying in the town for another night, but their sensei wanted to move on, to leave this place behind and let the rightful ruler of the town restore order.

The two of them were standing outside a clothing shop waiting for Shimazu-san to join them. Kazue was idly twirling a new umbrella so the pattern of cherry blossoms printed on the paper spun into a whirl of bright color. For the first time in a long while,

she seemed happy. Genuinely happy, rather than the forced joy she'd shown him the last few months they'd been on their own.

He'd finally managed to make their lives better, even if he was still wondering what the final price of her smiles would be, since Shimazu-san was intent on being his lover.

It's all he really wants, you know, the annoying voice inside his head warned. Arguing with himself the way he always did, the optimist that wanted something positive and good to happen in their lives fighting with the cynic that more often than not was the one who had the situation right.

He wasn't planning on yielding to his own emotions, no matter how much he wanted the older man or how much Shimazu-san tempted him with his touches and stolen kisses.

He noticed that Kazue was scrutinizing him, her gaze critical.

"Well?" he asked, making conversations about his new kimono and hakama, since they appeared to be what she was studying. He'd tried to garner her opinion one time already and met with silence, and her long delay this time was making him wonder if his bland choice of clothing had been a mistake.

"Hmm...I don't know," she replied, tapping a finger to her lips the way she sometimes did when she was trying to make up her mind about something.

His smile faded. Ryu looked down at the rust-colored hakama and the lighter brown kimono he was wearing. They were as close to his older clothes as he could get them, so he didn't understand why she

might find something wrong with them. True, their family crest was absent from his kimono, as were the small maple leaves that had adorned the right side of it. But they didn't have time to wait for custom-made clothing, much less the time it would take for custom-made cloth to be cut and sewn into clothing.

"What's wrong with it?" he asked.

Kazue giggled and closed her umbrella. "Well, how do I explain it?" she asked herself.

Her own new kimono was a pale brown with delicate wisteria flowers cascading down the right side. Bright patterns were suitable for a young unmarried woman of a samurai family, and while the kimono was attractive, Ryu thought it a little too somber for her.

"Will you stop tormenting me and tell me what's wrong?" Ryu asked.

"Weeelll..." She tipped her head to one side, then the other, reminding Ryu of a cat studying a suspected mouse.

"Will you just tell me?" he asked as he looked down, wondering what she didn't like about his clothes.

She giggled.

He stared.

She twirled her closed umbrella and he finally noticed that she wasn't looking at him anymore. She was looking at something *behind* him.

He just stood there, rooted to the spot, not wanting to turn and see Shimazu-san in his new clothing, if that's who she was looking at.

But when she covered her mouth to hide her

giggling and he found he couldn't control the urge to see who was there anymore.

Hardening his resolve not to react to Shimazu-san in his new clothes, he turned and found that instead of his handsome sensei, there were two young women surreptitiously peering at him from the semi-concealment of a shop front. When they noticed he'd seen them, they dissolved into shy giggles. Embarrassed that they'd been discovered by the object of their rude staring, they both covered their mouths with their hands.

Ryu frowned.

"You're very handsome, brother of mine. You should be used to it by now," she teased. "And if you don't stop making that face, you'll get stuck wearing it one of these days."

He relented and gave her a slight smile. "Incorrigible, that's what you are."

"Me? Ha! Look at you saying that, to me of all people. You're the one that's always acting out with sensei."

"Acting out? Now you wait just one minute, Kazue. I'm not acting out, I'm just—"

"A pest?" she asked sweetly.

"No."

"Stubborn?" Kazue was enjoying herself, he could tell by the brightness of her eyes and the way she was fighting not to smile.

He thought about the way he felt for their sensei and blushed before he turned away from her. "Yeah, something like that."

"Well, I know you like him, Ryu. And he likes you

also. So I can't figure out what the problem is with you two."

The blush on his face grew even brighter. "Kazue, please. I don't want to talk about it."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Well, you're embarrassing me, for one thing."

"What? Why? You've always talked to me about the boys you thought were cute before. Now all of a sudden you can't talk to me because it embarrasses you?" She pouted, doing her best to look upset, but the sparkle in her eyes told him she was having a lot of fun teasing him. Too much fun, and there were others watching.

"That was when we were kids, Kazue. It's... He's..." Ryu's gaze dropped to the ground and his voice fell to a whisper. "It's just different now, that's all."

She stepped closer and put a hand on his arm. "Ryu, please tell me what's wrong. He..." Her expression turned to concern. "He hasn't hurt you, has he?"

Ryu shook his head. "No, nothing like that."

He did hurt me, but I'm not going to tell you that. There are just some things a man can't tell his sister.

"Ryu?"

He just shook his head, the harsh expression that she hated to see had returned.

"My poor brother. I shouldn't tease you like this. I promise I won't do it anymore. But if you need to talk, you know you can talk to me."

He nodded, and she knew that he wasn't going to

tell her anything because she'd gotten him upset over the girls and their sensei.

She sighed. "I'm sorry for teasing you."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. It was okay when we were little, but it's not okay now that you aren't a boy anymore. You're right. It's rude and inappropriate. I need to remember that. So I'm not going to do it anymore."

He looked up at her. "Not even a little?" he asked, a faint smile breaking through the frown.

"Well..." She offered him the hint of a smile in return. "Maybe a little."

"I thought so," he replied.

"Sensei said he's hunting for a demon. Do you suppose the demon is going to be dangerous?"

"What demons aren't?"

She frowned at that. "I guess you're right. Stupid question, forget I asked it."

"Forgotten," he answered and stood there with his arms folded over his chest, brows pulled tight, annoyance over something—her or the girls watching him or their sensei, maybe all three—as clear to read in his stance as it would have been if someone had painted a sign on his chest.

Kazue glanced away, saw the pair of girls giggling behind their hands were leaving the shop and heading toward them.

She scowled their way and they bowed their heads as they went by, but Kazue caught the quick looks they cast toward her brother.

"I wish Shimazu-san would get done so we could leave. It's getting late," she muttered, twirling her

umbrella between her hands.

"Hn," was Ryu's grunted reply.

A hint of breeze flitted through his hair, rippled his clothes though there wasn't any tugging at the awnings over the shops.

Even the wind was agitated, an errant flit of wind grabbing her umbrella and tugging at it before relenting and pouncing on her hair, whipping it into her face.

"I'm getting hungry," she stated. "I wonder if we're going to eat again before we leave."

"That will be up to our master."

"All right, you two, no plotting how to spend my money behind my back," Shimazu-sensei stated loudly as he exited the clothing shop.

Ryu could hear the amusement in his voice, but instead of turning around to greet their teacher, he started down the street after the pair of girls. He didn't want to look at their master, didn't want to feel the pang of want looking at the man caused. He walked down the street, not waiting for the man or Kazue.

"Ryu?" he heard the man call after him. "Where's he going?" the man questioned his sister.

"Oh, umm...well," his sister replied, obviously trying to come up with a good answer. Her tone was pleading as she said, "You know how it is, sensei-san. I said something I shouldn't have and embarrassed him."

"Ah. And what was it you said to him that has him leaving us like this?"

"Oh, it was really nothing. There were a couple of girls watching him."

She had to bring that up as the excuse. He sighed, but still didn't turn around to look at Shimazu-sensei. He didn't slow down either. Not that he was running, he wasn't, but he also didn't plan to go back. Let them catch up with him if they wanted to; he knew which gate they'd be using.

He just wasn't ready to think about what he'd seen or how he felt for Shimazu-san.

Shimazu-sama, he reminded himself. He's a lord in his own right because he's a retainer of the Shogun.

"Ryu, I said I was sorry!"

He stopped, arms crossed over his chest and waited for them. "Can we just go now?" he asked. His tone was surly, but he didn't care. He just wanted to get off the street before any other women started watching them.

Or worse, some man decided to accost Kazue.

Trouble always found them, and he just wanted to get away from the town before it could. Not that they didn't already have enough trouble to deal with already. Trouble that called itself Shimazu Haruhiro. A man who was much more than he appeared to be on the outside.

If he was even really a man.

Ryu shuddered at the memory of what he'd seen. Red skin. Horns. Thick black talons.

No, their sensei wasn't exactly human.

But he and his sister weren't entirely human either, not that he'd ever reveal their secret to anyone. He'd made a solemn promise to their grandfather that he'd

never tell anyone. Not even Kazue.

"Sure. Let's go back to the inn."

"Can't we just leave? You said you were in a hurry to find and kill the demon at the next town," he stated. He still hadn't turned to face Shimazu-san. He didn't want to see how the man looked cleaned up and nicely dressed.

Handsome, that's how he'll look. Even in old clothes and covered with dust, Shimazu-san is good to look at.

Too good.

But he couldn't get the memory of the dark red skin, horns and talons out of his mind.

Yes he was good to look at, so long as what you were seeing was the illusion that hid the demon from the eyes of unsuspecting humans. He wondered why neither of them had seen the truth.

But then again, they'd never met a demon until they'd met him.

Haruhiro frowned, then sighed. He understood perfectly well what the boy was doing. He was trying to avoid any chance they might be alone, and if they left right now rather than in the morning as he'd decided to do while he'd been buying clothes, they'd be spending the night out of doors where there were no walls between them and Kazue.

And that would mean that Haru had no opportunity to try and persuade Ryu to give into their mutual desire.

^He's deliberately trying to keep us away from him.^

Yes, I'd say so.

If Ryu got his way, there would be absolutely no

chance he could seduce him tonight.

^Why bother with seduction? Just go back to the inn and take what we want.^

No.

^I'd like to point out that you owe me for today.^

Not that, I don't.

^Well, that's what I want.^

Too bad.

^See if I help you again!^ Haru's demon half-snarled.

Just shut up! We'll get what we want soon enough.

^HA!^

"We're going to the inn."

"Can we get something to eat?" Kazue wheedled. She turned her sweetest 'little sister' smile on him, and Haru smiled back.

"Kazue!" Ryu's voice was sharp.

"Sorry, sensei-san."

"Actually a nice hot meal and a bed," he stressed the word to drive it home to Ryu, *"sound really good."* He was studying Ryu intently and couldn't miss the way the boy flinched at the word 'bed' as he'd said it.

Well, my guess was correct. He's afraid I'm going to seduce him.

^So do it.^

No. I want him to be off his guard when I finally make my move.

^It would be so much more fun to just pin him to the floor and – ^

No.

^Thrusting into – ^

No. Forget it.

His demon half sighed in exasperation. *^You're no fun.^*

I never claimed to be, did I?

^No. But you used to be lots of fun. Why not have a bit of fun? You can go back to pretending to be human later.^

Oh, no, I know what you're after and I won't ever let you have that sort of hold on me again, so forget it.

Haru's attention returned to the younger samurai. Ryu still hadn't turned around.

"I thought you were in a big hurry to go kill this demon."

"We wouldn't get there before dawn tomorrow even if we walked all night, and after our little battle today, I'm too tired to stay awake all night. And I don't want to arrive in this town so tired I can't fight if it comes for me immediately."

"They do that?" the boy asked. "Come after you?"

"Some of them."

"Oh. Well, we could stop and sleep outside, that way we're closer to start with and less tired."

Haruhiro pinched the bridge of his nose between his forefinger and thumb and took a deep breath, fighting for the patience to deal with one of the boy's moods.

*^He's stubborn. What he needs is a hard cock shoved –
^*

Forget it.

"I don't want to sleep outside, Ryu. Not in my new kimono," Kazue told her brother, adding her own objections. "I just got it, and I'd like to enjoy wearing it before I get it filthy."

"Fine. We can stay at the inn. But don't blame me if you lose that demon because it won't be my fault," the boy snapped.

I think he's getting close to breaking down and accepting how he feels.

^I say take what – ^

Shut up.

The darker side of his soul just sighed in resignation.

* * * * *

The next day...

Even if he'd wanted to, Haru couldn't have seduced the boy, since Ryu had taken up a place just outside his sister's door and nothing would budge him from that spot, not even the knowledge that the men who'd assaulted her the night before weren't alive to try.

Haru had given up trying after the boy's polite refusals of a room to himself had turned to a stone-hard stare and a clipped, "I told you no."

He'd spent a restless night, tormented by aching flesh that needed what it wasn't going to get, and a voice in his head whispering suggestions that only made things worse.

Unable to sleep, dawn found Haru still tired and in a foul mood that left him ready to actually listen to his demon half if it would mean he'd get a decent night's sleep.

They ate a quick breakfast of tea, rice and pickles and were on their way not long after full daylight.

Kazue's cheerful mood took the edge off his own irritability so that he could at least manage not to scare anyone he looked at or spoke to by the time they were ready to leave the inn. They made only one stop on the way out of town, remaining only long enough to get a generous number of rice balls and a well-filled bento box to take for their afternoon meal and a late afternoon snack if they were forced to stop and rest a second time.

They walked steadily through the day, Kazue enjoying the sun until it got too warm for her and she handed her staff over Ryu in favor of using her umbrella.

And not once the entire time had Ryu said a single word to him.

It was disheartening in one way, and encouraging in another.

On the one hand, he loved to hear the boy's melodic voice. But on the other hand, it meant that Ryu's resolve might be starting to crumble in the face of being near him so much.

And that was more than worth the boy's silence.

They stopped for lunch beside a sparkling creek that ran between the roots of a stand of pine trees. Haru had only just opened the package of rice balls when Ryu handed his sister her staff and wandered off into the trees.

Kazue raised her gaze from the food and frowned. "Where are you going?"

Ryu gave her a blank-faced stare.

"Oh. Sorry I asked."

The boy vanished into the cool shade of the trees.

Haru considered following him, but knew how mad Ryu would be if his sister was left by herself on the side of the road. He picked up one of the large balls of rice and took a bite, smiling at the flavor of the pickled plum that lay hidden inside.

Kazue picked up a rice ball and nibbled at it, but her gaze remained on the trees.

After a few minutes she got to her feet, her large eyes trying to pierce the gloom of shadows under the pines. "I don't like this, he's been gone too long."

"He's only been gone a few minutes," Haruhiro countered.

The girl sat down. "He's never gone this long when we're traveling alone."

"Some things one does in private take a bit longer," he told her.

^Masturbation, for one,^ the demon half of his soul said, sounding amused.

I doubt he's gone off to do that.

^Go find him and see.^

No. I'm not about to interrupt him.

^Suit yourself. But you won't get a better chance to make him yours until this thing with the demon is over and done.^

This isn't a chance to seduce him. He's off taking care of personal business. Now shut up.

^He's off thinking about your strong body and playing with himself.^

You've got a dirty mind.

^And you don't? I'd like to recall what you were thinking about and doing to yourself last night.^

What I was thinking about? You were the one that kept

filling my head with thoughts of what he'd look like while I made love to him.

^Pretty, wasn't it?^

Oh, shut the hell up.

The darker side of himself chuckled.

Ryu came back, slogging right through the water, which Haru thought was a little odd, since he'd previously called on the wind to carry him over the stream rather than let his new clothes get wet.

"That reminds me," he began as the boy joined them. "From now on you don't use your magical abilities unless you're practicing with me, or we're in a fight."

"Why not?" Kazue asked.

Ryu didn't even look at him; the boy simply came over, picked up a rice ball and walked away to sit in the grass well away from them.

Haru fought the frown that wanted to claim possession of his face. "Because demons can sense the use of power, and it might draw one or more of them to us."

"Isn't that what you do anyway? Kill demons?" the boy asked, his voice carrying an odd flat tone that drew Haru's attention.

"Yes, but I prefer them not to attack us on the road, or in the middle of the night when we don't even know they're coming."

"That makes perfect sense," Kazue agreed.

The boy was staring at him now, still holding the untouched rice ball.

Haru raised an eyebrow to encourage Ryu to say whatever was on his mind.

"Tell me something."

"All right. What do you want to know?"

"Do you like killing your own kind?"

The question hit Haruhiro with the force of a physical blow right to his guts.

^Did you honestly think you could grow horns and talons during that fight and he wouldn't notice?^

Well, he didn't mention it until now, so, yeah, I thought they hadn't noticed.

^Fool.^

Don't rub it in.

^ I have to have my fun somehow, since you won't let me fuck him.^

Shut u –

His demon side went silent, but he could feel it smirking at him.

What's so damned funny?

^Oh, nothing. Nothing at all.^

He couldn't help the frown that twisted his face into something verging on the not quite human. There was something going on that he wasn't able to figure out. But whatever it was had to be pretty nasty, or his other half wouldn't have been so terribly amused.

A prickling tingle went up his spine and he glanced at the trees.

Something is definitely not right here.

^You're so clever,^ the demon chortled.

The girl was just looking from him to her brother and back at him again. "What? What is he talking about?"

"Show her," the boy demanded.

"If it's all the same, I'd rather not," Haru replied.

"I'll admit that I'm half demon, if it makes you feel any better."

"Why didn't you tell us that before? Were you ashamed of your blood, or does lying appeal to you?" the boy asked, his tone more sour in Haru's ears than a green plum would be in his mouth.

^The secret is out. Bet he tries to get out of his oath to you.^

Just shut up.

*^Yeah, sure I'll shut up. You won't hear a peep from – ^
SHUT UP!*

The demon side of himself was smirking, the amusement from that half of himself as irritating a sharp stone caught in his sandal. Tired as he was, he really didn't need all the drama from either Ryu or his darker half.

"Does it matter?" Haru questioned, and this time he wasn't looking at Ryu, he was looking at Kazue.

"Weelll..." She looked away, avoiding meeting his gaze and her brother's hard stare.

"Yes," was the answer the boy gave him.

"So that's going to be the excuse you use to get out of your oath, is it? That way you can run from me like a coward rather than face the truth," Haru snarled out, his voice a rough growl. He got to his feet and took a step toward Ryu, angry and hurt by the boy's reaction.

^You should have told them both right from the start.^

Why? So they could have an immediate excuse to walk away from my offer?

^Well, you weren't being very honest with them, now, were you?^

Honest? You can use that word?

^ I didn't claim I would be honest now, did I? You're the one that's taken the higher moral ground, not me.^

Ryu got to his feet, the rice ball falling to the grass as he reached for the hilt of his katana. "Don't make me fight with you, Shimazu-san."

"Why would I do that?" Haru took a step closer to Ryu. "You're my student."

The boy shook his head. "You lied to us."

"No, I didn't. You never asked if I was part demon, and I simply didn't volunteer that information. So there was no lie."

Kazue gave a loud sigh and put her rice ball down on top of the bento box before she got up and faced her brother. "Ryu, if you draw that katana, I won't speak to you for a month."

Haru saw the boy's mouth tighten.

"I won't be bound in service to a demon," the boy stated stubbornly.

"I mean it, Ryu. I won't talk to you for a month. Now come over here and get something to eat so we can get to the town before dark. I don't want to sleep in the dirt, and I'm sure Shimazu-san would like to get this business with the demon in that town over and done with."

"Kazue, *he's* a demon! How can you want to stay with him?"

"Because we swore an oath to him, that's how!" she snapped. "And I for one intend to keep it. Now come over here and stop acting like a brat."

"What have you done to my sister?" the young samurai demanded as he stalked closer to Haru.

"Nothing," he replied.

"Ryu!" the girl shouted her brother's name and stepped between him and Haru. "I mean it, you stop acting like this right this minute!"

When he didn't listen to her, Kazue slapped him across the face.

The boy didn't even blink as he shoved her aside hard enough to send her sprawling into the dirt.

"Hey!"

Haru's eyes narrowed and he reached for his katana. "Kazue, stay out of the way. I don't think this is your brother."

"Of course it is, he's... Oh...wait..." Understanding filled her eyes. "You might be right, Ryu would never push me like that."

"Exactly," Haru said as what they'd thought was Ryu drew his katana with the hiss of steel leaving the lacquer scabbard.

"Clever," the thing that had taken Ryu's shape said. It lunged at Haru and the man had to dance back as he drew his own sword.

You knew it wasn't him, didn't you?

^Maybe^

Maybe, my ass! You knew and you didn't warn me!

^I told you, until I get that favor you promised me, you won't get any more help from me.^

You bastard! Haru snarled at his other half as he desperately tried to evade the katana that was seeking his life.

"Ryu!" Kazue shouted toward the trees. "*Help! Ryu, Help!*"

The demon that had mimicked Ryu stopped trying

to kill Haru, turning to attack the girl instead. The samurai drove his blade for its back, hoping to at least injure it so that it would keep its attention on him rather than going after the girl.

It worked, perhaps too well, as the thing spun and lashed out at him with the sword in its grip. A burning line of pain was torn through the skin of Haru's right arm. Deep enough to hurt, but not bad enough to make him drop his katana.

The thing was starting to lose control of its form, the resemblance to Ryu unraveling, a dusting of black scales appearing to mar the perfection of the boy's alabaster-pale cheeks.

Haru found himself in a battle for his own life, the very minor demon he faced powerful enough to give him trouble, since he couldn't call on his own demonic powers.

It occurred to him that he stood a real chance of dying, and if he was killed, the girl would be in mortal danger too.

^Die? Oh no, you aren't going to die. Well, not exactly. But in exchange for getting rid of you, I get to take full possession of this body. Isn't it a lovely bargain?^

Damn you!

^Of course I'm damned. Demon, remember? Of course you're well and truly damned also. You've not even come close to redeeming yourself for the things you did during the war. Not in the eyes of the gods.^

"Run, Kazue!" Haruhiro shouted at her. "Get away from here! Go!"

If she stayed and the demon half of himself did win, there was no telling what might be done to her.

"I'm sorry, sensei—" he heard her say and a sense of relief washed over him. She'd run away and be safe.

"—but I can't do that. That thing might have my brother, and it's going to give him back or else!" Kazue explained to her teacher as she raised her arms over her head. "Autumn Wind, hear me, come to my aid. Help me fight this demon who has taken my brother from me."

"Hardly," a familiar voice said from the verge of the pine forest.

She turned and found something that looked like her brother coming toward her. When she looked at the demon Shimazu-san was fighting, it no longer had the appearance of her brother. Now it was a fanged monstrosity with scaly black skin and burning red eyes.

"Ryu? Is that really you?"

"Yes."

"Prove it!" she challenged.

The new Ryu paused. "Prove it? How should I do that?"

The demon that their sensei was fighting crowed in glee and launched itself at the man, both of them going to the ground.

"Sensei!" the new Ryu shouted.

Kazue saw him sailing through the air, both of his swords drawn, the Autumn Wind blowing around him.

"That works," she muttered as her brother's sword came down on the demon's scaled torso, the blade

striking sparks off the scales before it found the demon's tender flesh.

A sickly yellow ichor flowed from the gash as it howled in agony and reached out to try and claw her brother. But Ryu wasn't within its reach, the wind carrying out of the reach of its jagged talons.

Focusing her own power, she made a shoving motion at the demon and a blast of wind struck it, knocking it head over heels off their sensei.

"You bitch!" it roared and came for her.

It didn't take two steps before Shimazu-san was on his feet. He was bleeding from a series of cuts across his face, his arm and some deep gouges on one thigh, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I don't think so!" he snarled at it as his own skin turned a deep red and horns—real black demonic horns that left Kazue staring in shock—burst forth on his forehead.

"Well, the demon was right about one thing," she said quietly into the wind. "Sensei-san is a demon too."

Yes, but he's not going to hurt us. At least I don't think he will, Ryu's voice said to her on the wind.

Ryu came to earth a few feet from where his sister was standing.

"Do you think this is the demon Shimazu-san came to kill?" his sister asked.

"I don't know," he replied as he urged her farther away from the fighting.

He frowned when she shook her head. "We should help him. That's why he took us on as his students."

"Neither of us are very good at using our magic. I'm worried we'll hit him if we try. He's really close to that demon."

"There has to be something we can do."

Ryu felt the wind drifting slowly around them both, waiting for them to direct it in either attack or defense.

"You stay right here and watch for an opening. I'll see what I can do to help sensei."

"Be careful, Ryu."

"I will."

He ran to where the demon and Shimazu-san were fighting, the wind lending him greater speed.

"*Akikaze!*" he screamed as he sent his blade shrieking through the air for the demon's already bleeding back.

"Pest!" it snarled at him.

"*Ryu, no!*" he heard his sensei shout.

Too late.

He saw the claws coming for his face, and knew he couldn't evade fast enough to avoid them. Through the wind did try to pull him out of harm's reach, he knew the claws were going to hit.

The shining blade of Shimazu-san's katana swept between his face and the demon's claws, stopping them before they could tear the flesh from his bones.

In that instant, Ryu saw two things.

Shimazu-san's guard was wide open to the demon's attack.

But the demon was also unprotected.

The katana in the demon's hand drove for his sensei's body.

He had only a split second to react. Save his sensei, or kill the demon.

He didn't hesitate.

Ryu's katana drove toward the point where the demon's neck and shoulder met.

The wind sang in their ears and the demon's head arched upward, spun through the air and landed with a thud in the dust amid a gout of vile-smelling yellow goo.

Shimazu-san staggered, frowning at the half foot of katana sticking into him.

"Shit," he murmured, eyes a bit wide, face gone a ruddy grey. "This hurts."

Ryu watched in horror as his sensei pulled the sword free and immediately sank to the ground.

"Sensei!" he heard his sister scream. The wind roared as it carried her to them, almost knocking Ryu off his feet.

"Oh, sensei!" she whispered, aghast when she saw the blood pouring from Shimazu-san's belly.

Ryu knelt down by their stricken teacher. "What...what can we do?"

But he knew the answer to that already. There was nothing that could be done to save him. Nothing at all.

"Go cut out that demon's heart and give it to me," he choked out, a trickle of blood running from his mouth. "Hurry."

Ryu nodded. He drew his wakizashi and hacked at the demon's chest until he could see a pulsating wad of flesh. Black as a starless night, the heart reeked with the foul smell of corruption. He gagged, but he

reached in, grasped the hot, pulsing organ and managed to pull it from the gaping hole he'd cut in its chest.

He carried the stinking thing to his sensei, who took it from him with a hand that shook. Whether it was weakness or the pain of his wounds, Ryu didn't know, and it didn't matter. Their sensei was mortally wounded, and he couldn't see how the heart of the foul thing could be of any use.

"Both of you, go...leave me. I'll...catch up later," the stricken man gasped out, the heart in his hand quivering in the grip of his talons.

Ryu looked at his sister, she frowned.

"No. We're going to stay with you."

^Oh, how touching. Yes, you should let them stay, so they can see what we really look like.^

Shut up!

^Well, use it then. I want some time to myself with these two little beauties.^

Haru gritted his teeth. He wanted the blood in the other demon's heart the way addicts craved opium. It was the only thing that could save his life, but he didn't dare let the siblings see what it would do to him. Worse, he didn't dare let Ryu stay near because he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't act out his own lustful desires right then and there.

^Oh, I intend to act out every lustful sexual act you've ever performed, and then I'm going to act out every depraved one I can think of. Such juicy bits of mortal flesh. I hope they last out the day.^

Damn you! Damn you! You set this up!

^Well, yes, I already admitted that.^

"Please...just go...I may...not be able...to keep myself...under control...after I use...this," he panted. The world around him dipped and spun, blood loss making him dizzy, the pain making it difficult to keep his thoughts on what he had to do.

Instead of obeying, Ryu knelt down in the dirt and touched his cut cheek, heedless of the blood.

Gentle warmth spread outward from the contact of the boy's fingers with the wound. Haruhiro blinked. How had the boy healed his cut cheek? Then he realized the demon blood covering the boy's hand had seeped into the cuts and done the job. Stolen power. He could take it from the demon's remains, but he had to do it before the thing started to evaporate. The flesh of demons was unstable on the Mortal Plane and without the thing's tainted soul to stabilize the outward form it had taken, the body would fall to corruption and quickly be gone.

His heart started to pound and Haruhiro shuddered as Ryu's fingers found the cut in his arm and touched it too.

He felt the power of Ryu's magic fleetingly touch his very soul.

Gods, gods, he is the one. He is.

His demon half muttered angrily for a moment and fought the bindings that the touch of Ryu's magic—the boy's soul—were laying over it. Preventing the demon half of his own soul from claiming Ryu there and then.

"Shimazu-san, if your salvation lies in that nasty thing, use it, but we aren't leaving you." He saw the

boy glance at his sister and she gave him a slight nod. "We aren't leaving you, no matter what."

Haruhiro stared and wondered if this was really the stubborn boy who'd fought off his every advance.

The gentle touch returned to his cheek; the soothing feel of the magic wrapping around his soul told him more with every contact.

Ryu *was* the one fated to master his darker nature, to bind the demon and make him human once and for all.

He pressed the feebly beating demon heart over the wound and hissed as the poison of its hate, the corruption of its former existence flooded him.

It hurt, and he wanted to scream.

But the pain died as the boy leaned forward and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips.

He could hear the girl giggling, and then everything went dark.

"He passed out," Ryu said as he eased their sensei to the ground.

"It must have hurt. Either that or you kissing him was such a shock he fainted."

He turned an annoyed look in her direction.

"Well, it could happen, you know. I mean, you've been pretty mean to him, Ryu."

"He should have told us he was part demon."

"And what secrets do you know about our family, I wonder?"

He flinched.

"That's what I thought."

"Not demon blood, Kazue. But more than that, I

can't tell you."

"It's okay, Ryu. I think I already know anyway, but I won't say anything so you don't have to tell me if I'm right or wrong."

"Good." He grunted out the reply as he fumbled in their pack, searching for a cloth and the bamboo container of water he knew was in there somewhere.

She knelt down beside Shimazu-san, touched the tattered remains of his kimono and hakama. "Poor sensei. He must go through a lot of clothes."

"Probably," Ryu agreed as he dampened the scrap of cloth from the water in the bamboo canteen and started to wipe at the blood covering their sensei.

"Do you think that was the demon he came here to fight?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"I hope so. I don't think he's in any condition to do any more demon killing."

"Hn. He didn't kill it, I did."

"Yes, you did, didn't you," she agreed. "But I wouldn't go around boasting about it, since sensei got hurt saving you."

"I know. He's hurt because I tried to help and just got in the way. I guess we won't be much use fighting demons until we know what we're doing."

His sister sighed. "The sun's awful hot. Let's see if we can move him into the shade."

Ryu grabbed one of Haruhiro's arms, his sister took the other and between them, they managed to drag their teacher into the shade of the nearest pine tree. Ryu sat there with him while Kazue gathered up their forgotten lunch, her staff and umbrella.

They got Shimazu-san out of his kimono and Kazue washed it in the stream with Ryu watching over both of them with his katana and wakizashi at the ready in the event any more demons arrived. But none did, and when Kazue had the blood washed out of their sensei's kimono, she hung it to dry on a tree branch.

They sat there chatting quietly while the sun made its slow progress across the sky.

Haruhiro opened his eyes. He felt better, though there was an ache in his belly that had nothing to do with the recent injury.

"Sensei, you're awake!"

The melodic tones of Ryu's voice went right to his groin and he sat up.

"Yes. And hungry."

A rice ball was pressed into his hand. "Eat."

He looked down at himself and realized he wasn't wearing his kimono. He raised an eyebrow in Ryu's direction and the boy glanced behind them.

He turned and found his kimono hanging on the branch of a pine tree.

Kazue was picking a few wild flowers not too far away. Her hair was already full of them and the man found a smile on his face before he even realized the pleasure to be taken in such a simple thing as a girl with flowers in her hair.

It was peaceful, serene.

Until you noticed the ugly, evaporating corpse of a demon lying on the road.

He sighed. "We should go soon."

"Are you strong enough yet?"

The concern in the boy's voice was touching. Heartfelt.

A chill flowed through his veins. A whisper of power.

The soothing presence of the one who could tame his demon soul.

He glanced at the boy. "I'm all right. Magic can cure a lot of ills if you're a demon."

The boy nodded. "Is that how you cured me?"

"Yes."

Another nod.

He took a bite of the rice ball, chewed and swallowed.

Kazue joined them, the girl giving him a big smile. "How are you feeling, sensei?"

"Better, thank you," he replied and finished off the rice ball. "Is there more?"

The bento box was opened and he helped himself to a few pickles.

"Was that the demon you came here to fight?"

"No."

"Oh," Kazue sighed. She sounded disappointed.

"That was just a minion of the demon we came to fight. It was a minor demon, and not very powerful as demons go."

"Minor?" Ryu frowned. "So the one you're here to fight is going to be worse?"

He nodded.

"But this one almost killed you," Kazue remarked unhappily.

"Well, I'm hoping that a certain pair of apprentices

will stay out of the way this time. I couldn't use my magic for fear I'd injure or kill one of you."

Kazue flushed with embarrassment.

So did Ryu.

"No lasting harm done." He looked at his kimono, "Well, not to me, at least."

Kazue gave him a little smile, which she instantly hid behind her hand. "We thought you'd feel better if it was clean."

"Thank you," he said as he stuffed a whole pickle in his mouth and reached for his kimono so he could dress.

He caught the boy watching him from the corner of his eye and had to fight the smile that wanted to spread across his face.

Yes, I think we're getting close to our heart's desire now.

^It's taking too long. Can't you just – ^

No.

The demon half of his soul sighed and gave up when, by all rights, it should have had full domination of him right now. But it didn't, and the nagging desire to listen, to agree to what it wanted, was gone. Completely gone.

He couldn't keep the smile off his face.

Ryu is the one that can tame the demon half of my soul. And once it's tamed and we're lovers, nothing and no one will be able to stand against us.

Not even the greater demons can fight the power that will give me.

There wasn't a demon in existence that could face the greatest power of all.

And that power was love.

He was grinning by the time he had his kimono back on.

^So optimistic, I wonder if you'll be as happy when I'm gone.^

Why wouldn't I be?

^Oh, no reason, I suppose.^

His darker self was hiding something, and that usually meant it knew something important that he was unaware of, but the way he felt he wasn't about to let that put a damper on his mood.

"Let's go. I've got a demon to kill."

"Okay, sensei," Kazue replied.

"You're sure you don't need to rest longer?" Ryu enquired in a voice little more than a whisper.

Haru turned to find that the boy wasn't looking at him anymore, but there was the faintest trace of a blush on his petal-smooth cheeks.

Haru had to fight the urge to swoop down and place a kiss on those cheeks, had to battle the desire to pull the boy into his arms and taste his mouth.

And this time it wasn't the demon side of him that was putting images into his thoughts of that slender body naked in his arms. It was his purely human side that filled his mind with erotic thoughts of him making love to Ryu.

"Tell me something, both of you."

"Sensei?"

"Hn?"

"Now that you know I'm half demon, does it scare you?"

Kazue shook her head.

"Not really," Ryu told him.

"Okay, I have to ask. Why not?"

"Let's just say we've met other supernatural things and leave it at that, okay?" Ryu replied as he got to his feet.

Haruhiro regarded his student for a moment then just nodded. "Good enough."

Kazue closed up the bento box. There was still a little food left, and he supposed she was reluctant to waste even the smallest morsel after the ordeals they'd suffered through.

"Well, there's nothing keeping us here. Let's go."

They started off down the road, and Haruhiro wondered if they'd reach the town before dark. If they didn't, they'd be spending the night outside, and he wasn't sure that would be a good idea.

Not when they'd already encountered one minion of the demon that held the town in its clawed grasp.

And that led him to wonder exactly how many minions the demon he was going to face might have.

With his mind wrapped in dismal musings, they continued on their journey.

* * * * *

Later that day....

They were in sight of the town as the fiery disk of the sun started to slip below the edge of the forest. As they got closer, their relief at arriving before dark soon changed to dismay.

Ryu stopped, his mouth twisted into a frown. "This

doesn't look good," he observed.

Kazue also stopped, her expression almost a mirror of her older brother's as she stared at the town's gate.

Shimazu-san, their sensei, was cursing softly, his voice a deep rumbling snarl of genuine anger.

They could clearly see the gate that led into the town from where they stood, and what they saw there weren't normal bushi or samurai guarding the entrance. They were demons. Four of them, with the same ugly black scales and fanged faces of the one they'd faced earlier in the day.

"What are we going to do now?" Kazue questioned, the worry very clear in her voice and in the way she kept staring at the gate and then looking back at their sensei.

"We aren't going to do anything," Shimazu-san answered. "I am going to go fight the demons and the two of you are going to—"

Ryu was already shaking his head in an emphatic denial. "One of those things almost killed you earlier today. There are four of them that we can see, and who knows how many more we can't see. What if there are more of them, and they attack you?"

Shimazu-san turned his uncanny eyes on him. "If there are more, my suggestion to you both is to run."

"We can't do that," Ryu argued, "and you know it. We both swore an oath to you—"

Their sensei cut him off with a sharp look. "The oath you swore was to obey me, not die at my side, so yes, you can leave me, since that's my order to you and you *have* to obey me." Their lord stated it with such firmness that Ryu knew there was no point in

arguing.

Their sensei took the money string out of his pocket and handed it to Ryu. "If I'm killed, I'm making it your duty to travel to Edo and let the Shogun know what happened to me."

Before either of them could offer any kind of protest, Shimazu-san strode away from them, heading for the gate and the awaiting demons.

"Ryu, I don't like this. What happens if he's killed?"

Ryu watched the man as he walked calmly away from them. Shimazu-san's skin was turning the deep red that showed he was calling on this own demonic heritage for the upcoming battle. "We do what we were told to do, Kazue."

"I don't think this is right, Ryu."

"Kazue, what happened when I tried to help him before?"

She sighed. "You got in the way and almost got him killed."

"Yes, and I'm not really fool enough to think either of us can do much better than that. So he's right, we should do what he wants and stay here."

"And if those demons come after us if Shimazu-san is killed?"

"We'll fight and kill them, or die trying," Ryu replied.

"He told us to run."

"Yes, but do you think running will save us, even with the help of the wind?"

"No," she admitted.

Shimazu-san reached the gates and had stopped.

He was talking to the demons guarding the gate, but the only part of it that Ryu heard clearly were the words 'Shogun's command'.

The laughter that followed was very audible, however, and Ryu's frown deepened. They weren't in the least afraid of their sensei, which didn't bode well for the outcome of the fight.

A light breeze rose around them and both teens went perfectly still. Ryu glanced at his sister from the corner of his eye to find her gazing back with wide-eyed uneasiness.

~Behind you,~ the wind whispered to them.

Ryu dodged right, Kazue went left and something whooshed through the air where they'd just been standing.

They found themselves facing one of the black-scaled demons.

It grinned. "Hello, pretty meat," it said to them as it slowly spun the naginata in its grasp. The blade glittered brightly in the sun.

"We're not meat," Ryu snarled as he drew both of his swords.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Kazue toss her umbrella aside so she'd have both hands free for her staff.

"The meat intends to fight," the demon said, amused. Fanged mouth gaping in a wider grin, the thing laughed at them, the blade of the naginata in its fists as black as the scales covering its body.

"Actually, we intend to kill you," Ryu told it as he lunged forward, the wind rising instantly to carry him over the demon's head.

He landed lightly on the opposite side, the demon coming for him with a sweep of the naginata.

He used both of his blades to stop the weapon, and felt the demon's strength jolt through both his arms with enough power to rattle his teeth.

He's strong, so be careful, he whispered the warning into the wind.

I'll be careful, Ryu, came Kazue's wind-delivered acknowledgement.

Let's work together and see if we can't beat him, Ryu told his sister.

Tell me what I should do, she asked as the demon lunged for Ryu.

Distract it so I have an opening.

"Autumn Wind!" Kazue shouted and the demon turned to face her.

The wind answered the motion of her right hand, a gust staggering the demon and driving it backward toward Ryu. The overhand blow of the naginata missed Kazue by several feet, the blade coming down in the dirt instead of through the girl.

Ryu's katana swept for the demon, a shower of sparks scattering like fireworks as the steel met its black scales.

The demon roared, yellow muck spilling into the dirt.

"You'll pay for that, human!"

Ryu gave the demon a tight, hard-edged smile. "Who said I was human?" he retorted and brought his katana to high guard, his wakazashi held low.

Snarling, the demon rushed at him.

He let the wind carry him away from the demon,

the tip of the naginata narrowly missing his belly as he came to the ground the first time. He had to go backward in a quick series of windborne jumps to avoid a series of sweeping cuts and slashes as the demon focused entirely on him, forgetting about Kazue or not seeing her as threat, since she carried no edged weapon.

The demon was snarling as it came for him with what Ryu knew would be the start of another series of vicious attacks. Ryu dodged the swing of the naginata and saw the whirlwind coming toward them. He whispered to the wind and it lifted him above the demon, which turned at the sound of the rushing wind.

A column of raging wind bore down on the black-scaled fiend. Snarling, the demon tried to get away from the whirlwind, but Kazue motioned with her free hand and the cyclone swept toward the demon.

Distracted by his sister's magic, Ryu rode the wind downward. His paired blades flashed, the katana sweeping down as he came to earth from on high, the wakizashi going in a low sweep.

Screeching, the demon stumbled, one arm hanging nearly severed at the shoulder, a leg beginning to buckle. Crippled by Ryu's attack, it couldn't move fast enough to escape Kazue's spinning wind. Then the full force of the twister struck the demon, lifting it high in the air and then reversing direction to slam it to the ground with such force it was driven a finger's breadth into the hard-packed dirt of the roadway.

The haft of the naginata snapped at the impact.

So did some of the demon's bones.

"Akikaze!" Ryu shouted as the wind carried him to the wounded demon. He landed beside the stricken monster and his katana followed through with the motion, slicing through unnatural flesh, severing its spine and cutting halfway through the thing's torso.

The demon shuddered, claws scrabbling at the dirt of the roadway.

A second sweep of the katana beheaded the thing.

"My master will have you body and soul for this," the severed head snarled as it rolled to a stop. The last glimmering of unnatural life left its eyes and it was dead, noxious vapors trailing away from the remains. Coughing, Ryu backed away, the sleeve of his kimono covering his face.

Panting from the exertion, Ryu looked up to find his sister staring toward the town gate.

The fighting was over, the slowly melting bodies of four demons lying in the road. The unguarded gate stood open, but there was no sign of Shimazu-san anywhere.

"Where did he go?" Kazue wanted to know.

"Inside. He's gone to face their master alone." Ryu whipped his swords through the air to get the sticky yellow stuff that was the demon's blood off the steel. Done, he sheathed them and picked up the bladed end of the broken naginata. There was still a good six feet of the shaft left attached to the blade.

Whatever evil aura had turned the blade black while the demon held it was gone. All he now held was normal steel, a normal weapon. Seeing that, he passed it to his sister. *"If we work together, we can help him,"* he stated.

"Right!" She took the naginata, nodded grimly, dropped her staff and tilted her head to look up at him. "Together, then."

He nodded and they headed for the gate in defiance of their master's order.

A prosperous town at one time, the place looked neglected. Dust covered the porches in front of the businesses, and many hadn't raised their awnings, the places shuttered, closed.

There wasn't a child to be seen anywhere.

No samurai strutted along the streets; no arrogant young men loitered at the intersections of the main road.

Haruhiro went deeper into the town, seeing a few people going about their activities, but their movements were listless, their eyes dull. And not one of them offered any sort of greeting. The thing that struck him as odd was their silence. Most of the people he saw didn't speak, and those that had spoken did so in hushed whispers. He also noticed that they seemed fearful of him, recoiling away or darting into storefronts or dropping into the dirt to give obeisance as if he were the Shogun himself.

He frowned, then remembered that he had retained his demonic outward form in expectation of being assaulted.

He'd reached the biggest business area of the town and far he'd encountered no more demons, nor had he seen any other armed men. And he'd seen not one woman or child.

He approached one of the groveling people. A

merchant by his dress, though Haruhiro would have been unable to say what profession the man called his own. "Where can I find the demon who's ruining your village?"

"I...I...I..." the man stammered.

"Well?"

"I...I..."

Haruhiro sighed. It was apparent the man was unable to speak, so he tried another of the cowering villagers and met with similar results.

"It's a curse," a voice told him from a nearby porch.

Haruhiro looked to find an elderly woman seated on the steps of a storefront. He walked to her and saw that she was indeed very old, her face creased by deep furrows that were worse than those of a badly plowed field.

"A curse?" he questioned.

"Yes. The demon put a curse on us so we can't tell anyone what's happened here. We can talk to one another, but not to anyone from outside the village."

"But you're talking to me."

She smiled to reveal a mouthful of blackened and broken teeth. "Of course."

"So you're a demon?"

She shrugged.

Haruhiro reached for his sword. Laughing, the old woman vanished in a stinking mass of roiling blackness. He coughed and stepped away, struggling to get a breath of air that wasn't fouled, but the cloud followed him, wrapping around him, burning his lungs like fire.

Blinded and unable to breathe or see, the impact of something hitting him came as a total shock that knocked the breath out of him. It also hurled him free of the choking miasma. Vision filled with points of light—very like the fireworks set off at festivals—blazed across his vision.

Neither condition was conducive to self-preservation.

Gasping for breath, Haruhiro struggled to regain his feet. Something hit him and he heard a breaking sound, which was accompanied by pain and a shower of wood slamming into him, their very size hurting him even through the toughened demon hide covering his body.

Dazed, he tried to figure out where he was, noticed a ceiling overhead and the remains of a wall though which he could see a sunset-bathed sky.

And, of course, the demon.

It was bigger than a man, with sharp fangs and talons—no surprise there—its body encased in armor suited to a samurai. An *odachi*—the blade much longer than that of even Haru's longer than usual katana—was gripped in its fist. The blade appeared large enough to cut a horse in two.

Or Haruhiro himself, for that matter.

He staggered to his feet, pieces of the wall he'd gone through falling to the floor, on which he could see blood.

I think I'm injured.

^*What a surprise, since we just went through a wall.*^

"Are you surrendering?" the demon asked him. It was just standing there outside the remains of what

he could now see had been a teahouse prior to him coming through the wall. Broken cups crunched under his feet as he took an unsteady step toward the demonic entity he was supposed to kill.

^This one is stronger than any you've fought. Why not just surrender?^

You can't be serious. If we surrender to this thing, we'll just be a puppet under its control. Is that what you want?

^Well, really it's all the same to me. All things considering, I'm not really in control of much now, am I?^

"I'm waiting for an answer, little half-mortal."

Haruhiro stepped out onto the remains of the teahouse's porch, his violet eyes raised to regard the much taller demon.

"Here's your answer, then," he said and drew both of his swords as he leapt to the attack.

Another round of fireworks exploded in his sight and for an instant, the starry lights were falling through a night-shrouded sky.

When he came to, he was lying amid the broken timbers of a building and from the smell this time it was a dealer in pickled vegetables and spices. Haru didn't even need to look at himself to know he was covered in the merchant's wares.

And more blood.

I guess there's no alternative.

^Surrendering now? Wonderful! I'm so happy for us.^

I'm not going to surrender.

^What a pity. I really wish you would and get this over with and submit to him. You're taking a beating, and it really hurts.^

You don't say?

Haru groaned and got to his feet, the remains of several crocks of pickles falling from his shoulders. He shook himself to be rid of the rest of the vegetables and realized he'd dropped his wakizashi somewhere.

"Surely you aren't intending to fight me still."

Haruhiro stumbled, grabbed a beam that had come down from the ceiling and steadied himself. He was dizzy and he hurt, but the wounds were already starting to heal thanks to the lingering essence of the demonic heart's blood he'd absorbed earlier.

He managed to stumble out onto the porch of the pickle dealer.

"We can do this the easy way, or the hard way. Take your pick," he told the demon.

Its mouth parted and it roared with laughter.

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of," Haruhiro sighed. He shrugged. "The hard way it is."

The demon's fist was coming for him, but this time he was ready. Haruhiro made a fast one-handed gesture that ended with his fingers making a circle in front of him. "Demonshield!"

A soft glow filled the air and at the last instant, Haruhiro covered his eyes with his arm. A flash brighter than lightning and a rolling boom told Haru of its success.

The demon shrieked its pain in a voice that shook the buildings and brought the damaged teahouse down in a splintering scream of shattering wood and tearing paper.

Haruhiro dropped his arm and charged at the demon.

"Damn you!" it shrieked as it stepped back. The hand that had struck the protective shield was as smoking and charred as if the demon had inserted it into the belly of a smith's forge.

"I told you that it was your choice to take the easy way or the hard way. You chose the hard way," Haruhiro explained as he drove his katana at the demon's armored belly.

"You will *die* for causing me pain!" it snarled and swept its blade into an arc that stopped Haruhiro's own katana, the impact showering sparks across the ground.

Quick as Haruhiro was, he couldn't match the powerful demon's own speed by natural means alone, and he found himself flying through the air for a third time.

This is getting annoying, he thought an instant before he slammed through the wall of yet another building.

^You were the one that made the 'easy way or the hard way' speech, so don't blame me if he tears us limb from limb. You've made him quite angry with that pathetic shield of yours.^

So I've gathered, Haruhiro replied as he sat up amid the wreckage of a sake shop. He reached out and grabbed a leaking bottle, took a few swallows and then got back to his feet.

The demon was waiting for him, and there wasn't any trace of damage to its hand.

This might be harder than I'd anticipated.

^Really? I'm shocked. We've been doing so well.^

Oh, shut –

^You really are tiring. Can't you think of something more original to say?^

How about go to hell?

His demonic half sighed.

"Last chance," he told the thing he was fighting. "Go back to your own realm, or die in this one."

It laughed. "Do you really think you can kill me?"

"Yes."

"Stupid and overconfident. Hasn't anyone told you that's a lethal mix?"

"Yes. Several demons have told me that. But I'm still alive all the same. They aren't, however."

The fist came for him again and this time Haruhiro's hand gesture sent a blaze of flame into the creature's face. It moved aside, a snarl of fury contorting its features into something so horrid even Haru—who was used to seeing such horrific beings—wasn't able to look directly at it. "I think I'll kill you slowly for my own amusement."

"And I'll kill you quick, because I'm getting bored."

^Very courageous words for someone getting the shit beaten out of them.^

Anger causes mistakes.

^Well, so far getting it angry has only gotten us hurt.^

Haru managed to dodge the demon's fist, and he blocked the odachi that would have cut him in half with another of his demonshield, but he couldn't quite match the bigger demon's speed. He felt sluggish, the toxic fumes he'd inhaled affecting his reflexes. He was desperately attempting to evade another sword slash when the hand knocked him off

his feet. The blow sent him sliding down the street in a cloud of thick dust that darkened into another of the same poisonous clouds that the demon had used to choke and stun him earlier.

"Sensei!"

Why don't they ever listen to me?

^Well, they're worried about you. ^

They're going to get themselves killed.

^You're the one that wanted students, so don't complain to me about them. All I wanted to do was – ^

Never mind. I already know what you wanted.

The vapor was suffocating him, but all he could think about was the terrible danger the pair of siblings were in because of him.

He'd been a fool to take them on as his students, and now he was going to be responsible for them dying, and he wouldn't even be able to tell them how sorry he was for getting them into this mess.

He should have left them at the last town under the protection of its rightful magistrate.

Hindsight was always the clearest sight.

A gust of strong wind hit him, sweeping away the deadly cloud. He sucked a clean breath of air into his aching lungs and blinked, trying to clear the burning stuff from his eyes.

The first thing he saw was the demon. It was standing with its back to him as it tried to smash Ryu with its fist. The boy was moving fast, carried by the wind as he led the demon away from Haru.

The second thing he saw was Kazue running toward him. Her face was white with fear and she came to a skidding stop near where he sat, weak and

feeling sick. He tried to stand and discovered to his horror that his legs weren't responding. The fumes were stronger than he'd suspected. Or maybe the exposures were cumulative, each one having a greater effect.

He didn't know, and it didn't matter. What mattered was getting preventing Ryu from being killed by the demon.

A demon of greater power than he'd expected from the letter he'd received from the Shogun.

"Sensei-san, please forgive us, but we were worried about you."

"I told you not to come here," he muttered through a throat that felt raw.

"I know, and we really *are* sorry, but we were so worried about you."

Haruhiro got slowly to his feet and Kazue put a hand out to steady him.

"Your brother is going to get himself killed," he croaked out.

"I hope not. But when we saw that demon slap you down the street, and then that nasty black stuff covered you—" She bowed her head. "We could see you were in trouble and as your retainers and students, we're honor bound to help you."

"You're also honor bound to obey me," he began, but an enraged shout from the demon reached them. "*Come back here!*"

"I don't think Ryu can actually hurt it, but he sure is making it mad," she told him.

"So I gather," Haruhiro agreed. He took a few deep breaths, feeling his strength returning, but the process

was too slow. The stolen energy he'd taken from the other demon was fading away already under the power of the foul miasma that had engulfed him.

He caught a glimpse of Ryu running swiftly across a rooftop. A huge fist smashed into the tiles of the roof, shattering them and sending chips in all directions. The whole roof collapsed in the boy's wake, but he was already gone, jumping to the next roof. The demon followed, its sword going for the boy and missing as Ryu's flight took him past a big pine tree.

The severed tree started to topple.

Beside him Kazue threw her hands out, and the wind roared away from her to strike the falling tree, which went down on the demon, if the furious roar was to be believed.

"Not bad," Haruhiro admitted and patted the girl on the shoulder. "But I want you to stay out of the fight. I'll go take care of the demon."

"Hn," she snorted, sounding much like her older brother. "You weren't doing such a good job of it when we got here, sensei-san."

"No, I guess I wasn't, but I also don't like to use the magic I know. It tends to level towns." He offered her a rueful smile as the demon shattered another building trying to crush Ryu. "I guess it's moot this time, since the demon is tearing the place up already."

"Stay here," he ordered and made a jump for the nearest roof.

A gust of wind lifted him and set him down gently.

He glanced back down at Kazue, an annoyed frown turning his face even more demonic than it had

already been.

She just shrugged, and he came to the conclusion that once this was over, he'd really need to get serious about their training, because they weren't likely to let him fight alone. Especially after today.

The demon was a lot more powerful than he'd been led to believe. Then again, no one had said anything about him having demonic minions either.

Shit, is this even the same demon I was coming here to fight?

^Well that took you long enough to figure out. You must be getting old.^

Haru muttered a few curses as he took up the pursuit of the demon who was chasing Ryu. He quickly caught up with them, not because of his own skills, but because the wind kept grabbing him and tossing him from roof to roof.

A glance back showed him that Kazue had moved to the roof of one of the tallest buildings: the roof of the Shinto shrine at the heart of the town.

He sighed.

Don't worry about me, sensei. You just keep my brother from getting killed and make that demon go away.

^Stubborn girl. I wonder where she gets it.^

A parent, I suspect. They're both terribly stubborn, so they had to inherit that trait from somewhere.

^Of course we don't know anyone else that has a stubborn streak, do we?^ his demon side enquired.

Oh, shut up.

Ryu made a sudden change in direction and Haruhiro's heart almost stopped as the demon's hand opened with the intent of grabbing Ryu rather than

smashing the boy. The fingers were starting to close around the boy, and the demon was grinning in anticipation of the kill.

Haru jumped, and felt the wind lift him in a gale-fast rush of air that carried him right to Ryu and the demon.

"You again?" the demon muttered.

"Afraid so," Haruhiro agreed as he drove the point of his katana into the demon's hand.

It snarled and the demon's sword whistled through the air in his direction as Ryu rode the wind to a nearby roof. Haru threw up a shield, but instead of the soft glow of the prior shields, this one flickered like captive flame.

Shield met sword. The demon screamed shrilly, its dark eyes going wide, mouth gaping as it staggered backward.

Before it had a chance to recover, Haruhiro raised his own katana high into the air. "Light to kill the darkness!" he shouted.

The katana in his hand glowed; the shimmering light flowed down his arm, filled his body. He made a hurling motion with his left hand and a ball of light brighter than the fading daylight leapt from his hand to slam into the demon's open maw.

There was a boom louder than the most ferocious blast of thunder that took Haruhiro off his feet and would have pitched him to the street at his back but for the wind, which grabbed him and kept him from falling so that he wound up kneeling amid shattered tiles.

Haruhiro picked himself up and looked around for

the demon. He found it lying on the street, in a considerably smaller form. In fact, it was back to resembling the old woman he'd first seen. The odachi it had been using lay shattered in the dirt at its side.

He jumped down from the roof and approached it at a cautious walk.

The demon was grinning at him.

The thing sat up to regard him, the grin never wavering. "I'd heard you were tough, but if it weren't for those two brats, I'd have killed you," it said.

Haru just shook his head. "No, you're mistaken. It was my own reluctance to call on my full abilities that would have been my downfall. I won't make that mistake anymore."

Ryu drifted to the street, the wind swirling the dust upward as he landed. "Sensei?"

He leveled his gaze on the boy. Too thin, but so damned beautiful standing there amid the destruction like the child of some kami come to live among men.

Kami.

The demon living in his mind snickered.

He could see the bright aura of magic surrounding Ryu when he focused his eyes in order to detect such magical emanations. Strong and clear, the wind spirits spinning around him like half seen dancers.

But was it the blood of a wind kami or a demon that flowed in Ryu's veins? Haru didn't know, and he suspected that Ryu wouldn't tell him if he asked.

He took a step toward Ryu, the motion taking him within striking distance of the downed demon. A frown contorted his features. "Didn't I tell you both to stay away from the town?"

"Yes, sensei."

Just that. No argument, no apology. Just a simple agreement.

"We'll just have to talk about your disobedience later."

Ryu bowed, but there was nothing apologetic in his stance. "Yes, Shimazu-sama."

The demon in the form of the old woman reached for the hilt of the broken sword. "This isn't over," it snapped.

"Yes, it is." Haruhiro's katana burned with blue flame as it took the demon's head off its neck.

The head was still screaming as it fell and rolled to a stop in the dust at Ryu's feet.

"A curse on you. A curse on you all," the dying head mumbled.

"We're already cursed," the boy replied and drove his katana into the top of the demon's skull. The eyes bulged and the mouth worked in a silent scream. The eyes slowly lost their unholy gleam until the head lay as still and motionless as the body.

Haru stood there regarding Ryu, wondering what the boy had meant by that.

Of course in Haru's case, it was true. He *was* damned for the things he'd done during the war. For all the killing he'd done, and still did.

It left him even more curious about what the pair of siblings had gone through if the boy considered himself damned.

And he didn't think it was because he'd killed other men.

This was something that went deeper, if the

haunted look in the boy's dark eyes was any indication.

Motion from the corner of his eye caught his attention and Haruhiro turned around to find Kazue riding the wind over the rooftops. The girl floated to the ground near her brother. "Are you both all right?"

The boy nodded and they both looked at Haru.

"How bad are you hurt, sensei?" the boy asked.

He thought about it. "I'll be bruised for a few days, but I'll live."

People were starting to come out onto the street. They looked dazed, confused and uncertain. People coming out of the grip of enchantment often had such a look, and Haru had seen it all too often in the last few months.

"Oh, my shop, my poor shop," a merchant wailed from one street over.

"I guess the people will be okay too," Kazue said.

"Look! Look everyone, the demon is dead!" a man who'd just come out of one of the buildings near them cried.

In moments the street was filled with laughing, crying, joyful people.

Haru smiled. "I think you might be right, Kazue."

ÉPILOGUE

Late that same evening...

Bathed, dressed in fine silk, Haruhiro felt good despite the lingering aches that even the hot bath hadn't fully cured. The sound of revelry came in through the open window of the inn's room as another banging rattle of firecrackers filled the air with the acrid smell of black powder.

Ryu was looking out the window of the room they were sharing, watching the celebration that threatened to go on the whole night. Or at least they were supposed to be sharing the room. The boy had already made it clear he'd be sleeping in front of Kazue's door, not in the room with Haruhiro.

The man sighed. He wasn't surprised at the declaration, just disappointed. After the things that had happened today he'd hoped Ryu would be more willing to give himself over to pleasure, but Ryu still wasn't making it easy on either of them.

Ryu turned away from the sight of all the colorful lamps that had been put out in celebration of the demon's demise.

"I should go."

"You should stay." Haruhiro countered as he stepped closer to Ryu. He gazed down into the boy's deep brown eyes and Haruhiro found that he couldn't help himself. He had to touch, had to see if the skin

was as soft as he remembered it from that day back at the inn, where he taken the boy's fealty.

Where you nearly did things you would have regretted the rest of your life.

^You and your damned morals.^

Will you please shut up!

^Will you please end this torture and just fuck him?^

No.

^Then don't expect me to shut up!^

Ignoring his more annoying side, Haruhiro reached up to brush his fingertips across a smooth cheek and watched as color flamed over the pale skin.

Like sunrise in the morning. So beautiful.

^If you start with that poetry crap I'm leaving.^

So go.

^Just think how beautiful it would be covered in blood.^

That's it! Haruhiro mentally clamped down on the other half of his nature, trying to silence its whispering.

^Forget it. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere.^

Haruhiro chose to ignore it in favor of exploring the feel of Ryu's cheek with his fingers. The texture of his skin was just as he remembered it. Perfect as the petals of a peony, soft and tender.

A tingle of magic passed between them.

He didn't try to stop Ryu when he backed away, eyes widened in a shocked stare. Haru watched as a Ryu's own fingers touched where his had been a moment before. He could see the mixture of confused emotions boiling up in the boy's expression. They were emotions mirrored in his own heart.

Desire. Yes that was there. And the deep pull of

pure lust.

But it went deeper. Much deeper.

Haru felt the pull, felt the call of the boy's soul to the demon half of himself.

Two halves of a whole.

The missing piece that would forever heal his sundered soul. He was half human, half demon and neither one of them in the end.

Unwanted everywhere he went. Unwanted by anyone but the Shogun, who saw in him a means to an end, someone to utilize but never truly call his friend.

But he didn't have to remain alone.

That was the promise of the magic the boy held.

The samurai closed the distance again, and this time there was nowhere for Ryu to run; his back was to a wall. If the boy shoved, he'd relent, but if not, he wanted a sample of what those soft lips seemed to promise. They looked sweet as festival cakes, and Haru just had to know if they were.

"Why? Why won't you leave me alone?"

"Don't you know?" Haru asked, voice a soft rumble like distant thunder on a mountain, or the tolling of the largest temple bells.

There was panic in the boy's gaze as he stared up at the samurai. "No," he replied, and turned his head aside.

It was a lie. They both knew it. Haru chose to ignore it this time, because Ryu needed something to hide behind. He realized that now.

"Oh, but I think you do. Maybe not here," Haru replied, stroking a hand along the boy's hair. He

slipped an arm around Ryu and drew him close, a hand resting on his firm behind. "But I think part of you knows perfectly well why I won't stop asking for what we both want." And as proof of what they both wanted, Haru pressed a thigh between the boy's legs. He grinned when he felt the hardness there, finding the proof that the boy really did want this, regardless whether he wanted to admit it or not.

He leaned down, intending to kiss Ryu but quick as the wind itself, the boy bolted amid a gust of air that tugged at Haruhiro's clothing. Ryu barely managed to push the paper door aside before he raced out of the room scared as a hare pursued by a pack of dogs.

Unable to help himself, Haru started to laugh, a deep, rolling sound that carried to everyone at the inn.

Everyone, including a confused boy whose heart was racing, the blood pounding through his body and filling one very sensitive place. A boy who couldn't help wondering why the man had such a powerful effect on him. An effect that seemed to be gaining in strength with every passing day.

He leaned against the support beam in the room he shared with his sister and tried not to feel the ache filling his body. An ache that thrummed into his brain from the eager flesh between his legs.

I want him so much, but he scares me more than fighting that demon did.

But that was half of the attraction he felt for the man. The fear adding to the desire burning through

him hot as a festival bonfire.

Oh, gods, what am I going to do? What am I going to do?

END OF WIND OF CHANGE

Watch for the next book in the Legend of the Autumn Wind series, *Jade Fox*, from Mojocastle Press.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Because the typical mode of travel in Japan during this time period was walking most towns, or at least inns, were spaced on the roads in such a way that travelers could reach one before dark. Few people would risk sleeping outside at night, especially in remote areas, because they feared the demons that were known to prowl around after the sun set.

As an additional note, only certain people of very high station, samurai and nobles were permitted to ride horses and horses themselves were terribly expensive.

GLOSSARY

Amadera: convent for Buddhist nuns.

Bento box: A compartmented box containing a selection of foods that you can eat on the go. They are an equivalent of 'fast food' since they were often—and still are for that matter—made up in advance for a customer in a hurry. It's like a lunch box made of bamboo—modern ones come in a lot of shapes and materials—that comes with the food ready to eat inside. During the Edo period—which is technically when this story takes place—it was common for those going to work or on journeys to carry them along. It was also fashionable for wealthy theater patrons to bring their own bento boxes with them so they didn't miss anything by leaving for a meal. Pretty cool if you ask me.

Chan: An informal honorific used to refer to girls or young children.

Daimyo: Powerful clans that ruled Japan, the title was often used to refer to the head of such a clan rather than to the clan itself.

Eta: Social outcasts, the eta traditionally held jobs that dealt with killing, such as executioners, leather workers, butchers and those who handled corpses on a regular basis. They typically lived in small settlements segregated from the rest of the population

and were often considered barely human.

Hime: Princess, an honorific given the daughters of noblemen before they are married.

Katana: the longer of two swords carried by samurai. Ronin could carry a katana, but only samurai were allowed to carry both the katana and wakizashi.

Koi: Japanese carp, they can grow up to a foot in length and are quite prized by the Japanese as a status symbol even today. Koi is also used as a term of endearment between lovers because koi are loved and pampered creatures.

Misoshiru: Soup made of miso mixed into a soupbase—dashi—that often has things like tofu or scallions added. Yum!

Naginata: A short sword blade on the end of a long staff. It is a very deadly weapon in the hands of someone trained in its use. Women of samurai families were often taught its use, and they served as a last line of defense of their households in times of war.

Odachi: A sword of greater length than a typical katana. The difference between an odachi and a katana is that odachi had blades in excess of thirty-seven inches.

Okama: A kettle or pot, slang for a gay man that

goes back to the Edo period and is still in use today.

Ronin: A masterless samurai. They often turned bandit rather than starve.

Samurai: A warrior of the noble class, they were permitted to carry two swords to show their status and had a specific way of cutting their hair. Haruhiro doesn't bother to keep his hair properly cut and styled.

San: A title of respect given to someone of greater station than the speaker. Applies to both men and women.

Sama: At this time equivalent to Lord/Lady, an honorific reserved for people of high birth or rank among the noble houses during this time period. Used for any samurai by lower class people like merchants and other commoners.

Sensei: It means 'teacher', but carries a great deal of respect in the Japanese culture. A teacher in Japan had to be among the best at what they did.

Seppuku: Literally 'belly cutting', a ritual form of suicide used by samurai to erase mistakes they'd made or if they were defeated in battle to prevent their capture.

Shinto: The original religion of Japan, it involves worship of spirits and, according to tradition, everything contains a kami, and over each of these

lesser kami is the greater kami of that thing. The Autumn Wind that Ryu and Kazue call upon is a kami who protects their family.

Shudo: 'The Beautiful Way'. Homosexuality. There was classically no stigma attached to such love between men and it was often considered the more 'pure' form of love among warriors in many ancient cultures. Not until the rise of Christianity in Japan was any stigma attached to such relationships.

Tanto: A single or double edged dagger or shortsword ranging in blade length from six inches to twelve inches and were often carried by samurai. Women sometimes carried them for self-defense purposes.

Tatami: Mats of woven rice straw laid out on the floor the way Westerners would use carpets. Even to this day in Japan room dimensions are given by the number of tatami mats that it would take to cover the floor rather than square meter.

Tsuba: the hand guard on a katana or wakizashi. Usually round, they could also be slightly squared. Intended to protect the hand during war, the tsubas of the pre Edo periods were made of iron or steel. During the Edo period they were often made of gold or silver to show off wealth and status.

Wakizashi: the shorter of two swords carried by samurai. Merchants were also allowed to carry wakizashi for protection.

You can further explore any of these terms at:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page

MICHAEL BARNETTE

Michael Barnette grew up in the wilds of Miami, Florida where he enjoyed the nightlife and wide variety of cultures, but not the late night driveby shootings. Deciding on a change of pace, Michael moved to Athens, Georgia where he's lived for several years. He misses the ethnic food in Miami, he doesn't miss the driveby shootings.

The last two years he was in Miami, Michael went from being a poet to writing short stories. One of the short stories he wrote, *Zoner*, was also the first gay erotica he'd ever written. Set in his cyberpunk world setting—which takes place in a future variant of Miami—and using characters established from an unfinished novel he was working on, he submitted the story to Circlet Press. The story was published and has been well received in the gay community, garnering a Spectrum Award nomination in 2003, while the anthology, *Wired Hard #3*, was a finalist for the Lambda Literary award that same year.

Seeing the popularity of erotica – and finding it much easier to sell than poetry – Michael changed his writing focus in 2003 and started researching the types of erotica popular with readers.

The rest, as they say, is history.

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Translation.

The boy grinned, his strong fingers gathering up the silk of Jessman's shirt. The man's body was jerked upward slightly amid the sound of tearing fabric.

Cool air caressed Jessman's bare skin where his shirt had been. The man's nipples tightened, his heartbeat taking up a newer, faster pace. Jessman turned his head in time to see the newly made rag flutter to the floor amid the dual optical ghosts of Bells ripping the shirt off his body, then leaping off the bed and crossing the room to a cabinet that Jessman hadn't noticed before in the darkness of the room.

When he came back toward Jessman, it was with that slow, swaggering step.

The sway of the boy's gun-weighted hips sent a thrill of desire through Jessman. *He's so damned beautiful and perfect that this just has to be a simvideo.*

Then Jessman realized what it was the boy carried in his hands. A short riding crop of braided leather that he caressed while he stared at Jessman, the smile never leaving his face.

Jessman broke out in a cold sweat. "Wha...? What are you going to do?"

The boy said nothing, but his smile chilled Jessman's blood.

Fear lanced through Jessman, driving a cold steel

spike of terror into his guts. "This isn't what I want. I paid you for this, you should do what *I* want."

Bells' sensual mouth curved into a slight smile of amusement. "But Mr. Jessman, you told the broker that you wanted the real thing. A FreeZone gunwhore. You got what you paid for, now I'm going to teach you a few things about life in the FreeZone. I'm going to teach you about the Sweet Sisters, Mr. Jessman."

"The Sweet Sisters?" he asked, worried about the way Bells kept running the length of the crop through his hands.

"Yes, Mr. Jessman. I'm going to teach you all about the Sisters, Pleasure and Pain." As he spoke, Bells had come closer to the bed until he was standing beside it. He ran the tip of the riding crop over Jessman's bare chest, lightly flicked his right nipple, then the left one.

"This isn't...." Jessman began, then bit his lip as the end of the leather crop slid slowly down his body, scratching gently, lower and lower until the sensation of its touch left his skin and flowed over the silk of his trousers. He found himself getting hard, much to his own surprise.

Bells' smile widened. "Ah, so you *do* like this. Good."