

Slayer 2 - Dragon's Blood

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It all started with the party. Which was ironic when he thought about it. He hated parties. Many things had changed in his life, but that was one thing that had remained true despite it all. He hated the inane small talk and the posturing, the clink of the Waterford crystal and the clank of the gold-plated dinnerware, the diamonds and brooches and cufflinks and the insistence on propriety when he didn't know what that meant to these people. These people. They were not his people. They were show mannequins, models, cartoon characters in gaudy attire, caricatures of themselves.

But more than that--they were human and he felt terribly out of place among them.

It had never been like this before, but since things had changed he was acutely aware of the meridian that existed between himself and this creature that called itself a human being. It was a warm, rosy thing, short-lived, bad-tempered, and yet infinitely precious. Now it seemed to him almost an alien species. He had dwelt in the dark for so long, the proverbial light hurt his eyes.

Alek drank some of the rosy champagne and wandered among them. They were pretty in their own way. Like pictures.

I'll bet they taste pretty, too.

Stop it, he told Debra. Behave yourself.

Or?

Or I'll leave. Simple.

You don't want to leave. You came to see her.

That was true enough, though he was loathed to admit it. Frowning, he moved to the opposite end of gallery rather than continue the argument with his symbiotic sister--as if that were an escape!--and innocently took in the art. There were sixteen pieces on double-facing boards. Each work was set under shatterproof glass. Each had a plaque in gold with some caption on it. Each was accompanied by a short history. Daydreams, this one read. It was a farm girl in a meadow, tilling the ground. So simple. Yet when Alek looked at it from the corner of his eye he saw an imposed image: a ballet dancer in the vast clouds of the sky behind the girl.

"Ms. Keith redefines brilliance," a small pot-bellied man said beside him.

Alek looked over. The pink ribbon on his suit coat said he was with the American Cancer Association. Presumably, he was the man who would accept the donations from the sponsors dedicating this wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to Katherine Keith's work. The question was why he had chosen to approach Alek and why he was staring at him so intently now. True, in some circles Alek was a bit of a celebrity. A number of years ago he had had an exhibit like this. Well not exactly like this, not this grand, but he had sold all of his work for enough money to keep him until...well, a very long time. That made him famous, sort of. But people did not usually recognize his face. And if they did, it was in

response to the work he'd done away from the easel and because they intended to stick some long, sharp implement into one of his vital organs.

"I have yet to see her match," Alek warily agreed.

He had been here a while now, maybe a whole ten minutes. Surely that was enough?

The man continued to watch his face.

"Do we know each other?" Alek asked.

The little man shook his head no. "Not at all. I just recognized you as are her inspiration."

"Excuse me?"

The little man pointed back over his shoulder at one of the pieces Alek had passed without noticing.

Alek slipped on his glasses. No, he was dreaming this. He approached the opposing painting. It was fairly new according to the caption. And quite dark for Kat. A tall, lean man stood wearily amid the rush of a New York crowd, and yet oddly apart from it, his shoulder resting against a lamppost, his face turned down and half shrouded by webs of blue-black hair. Behind him lay his shadow, thrown like blood across the ground, but it was a deformed thing, the shadow, implying much, the hair almost sentient. The name of the piece was Serpent Boy.

Alek looked away.

Katherine Keith was arriving to the illustrious symphony of babbling excitement and flashing cameras. It happened suddenly, shock followed by shock so he felt like the world had conspired to fall in on him all at once. He stood stock-still beside the Serpent Boy painting as they led her in and the fawning of the press and patrons began. It might have seemed a false fawning--except the heat and adrenaline in the room had jumped up a good ten notches with her arrival. You couldn't fake those smiles, those glittering eyes. They loved Kat. And for good reason. Kat shone. There was a force about her that seemed to push ahead of her as she entered the room in her ocean-blue satin gown. Her hair was a swirl of crimson light, her skin white and painted like a porcelain doll given just a kiss of life. Her eyes were warm and brown and wry. She was well into her fifties and yet she carried herself like a starlet. She put the younger women to shame. For a moment he could not believe the stories he had read in the paper, the rumors he had heard. They seemed like cruel falsehoods fabricated by jealous wannabes.

He had practically convinced himself of the fact when he spotted the out-of-uniform nurse walking a few steps behind Kat. She was young, yet she gave off an unmistakable aura of authority. Alek had escaped Kat's initial perusal of the room, but now the nurse touched Kat's elbow compulsively and Kat turned to shoosh the girl away and the contact was made then. Alek dropped his eyes as Kandy Kat's gaze flicked over her admirers and then came to rest on him. He felt the demand of her attention, how her eyes slowed the room and deafened him to the crowd. He looked up again. Her eyes had gone big like those of a startled animal. For a moment she hesitated in her step. The nurse read it wrongly and gripped her upper arm. Kat pulled away, yet her eyes never strayed from him, not for a moment. In the endless bubbling talk of the room, he saw her mouth form his name.

Alek's mind swirled. And then he was alone with Kandy Kat, here in this crowded room. She had long red hair, swept high and cascading down and adorned with ribbons of white roses. Her eyes glimmered

cheekily with her smile, like a young girl with secrets. The corsage on her wrist was white. White roses, because she loved them. Her dress was blue satin. Blue satin, white roses. She would be married in blue satin, she said. She swore it. One day...

She shone like a dazzling summer day, all light and life.

And then Alek turned away, Kat's brilliance burning against his darker eyes.

2

Can we go now? Debra asked.

Alek patted his face down with cold water from the tap of the men's washroom, and then reached for a paper towel from the dispenser on the wall. His face still felt hot and his eyes still burned from the florescent lighting, but otherwise he felt all right. He hadn't fallen apart, at least. "We'll go when I'm finished."

Well you're certainly finished.

"Debra..." He looked up into the mirror over the vanity. It was a nice washroom, very posh and new, and the mirror was framed by milk-glass morning glories. Yet Debra was dressed as she usually was: a skimpy red silk dress and a black wolf coat, her hair pulled high into a long ebony ponytail that just brushed the small of her back. Her eyes and mouth were dusky, smirking, evil, and, as always, alluring.

He hated it when she made him feel this way.

"How do you do that?" he asked.

Do what?

"Stay here. How can you be here?"

Why does the sun come up in the morning?

"That's not an answer," he said.

Debra gave him a pouty look and put her hands on her hips.

I'm still not used to this. How did you get used to things like this? Debra was dead. She had been gone since he was thirteen years old. Yet here she was, a grown woman that existed in this enchanted glass. There she was, taunting him. Plying him with her charms. She was voracious, jealous, and completely infuriating. And yet...he loved her. At times the need for her was so great he thought he should die of it.

She put her hand on the glass and smiled at his thoughts.

"So you see...no reason to be jealous," he said.

I'm not jealous! Debra shouted, her voice rebounding in his mind. She crossed her arms across her glittering fur coat. I just don't know what you see in her. She's so...human.

Alek smirked.

Oh please! she sniffed. Dhampiri have better things to do with their time than chase after these pathetic mortals.

"Maybe you do..."

A tall, grey-headed older gent stepped into the washroom and looked his way as Alek continued to banter with his reflection. Alek shut up and turned off the taps.

Can we go home now? Debra asked.

Alek swept his ponytail off his shoulder. We can go home now, he thought back at her.

3

Traffic on Fifth Avenue was heavy tonight. Friday night. What was he thinking? For a while Alek was afraid he would not be able to hail a cab and started doing what he usually did in these situations--he began contemplating hiring a personal driver. He had been thinking about it for some time. Maybe it was time to act on it. He certainly had the money. Just no luck at the moment. It took him a half dozen attempts before a canary finally slowed and drew to the curb of the walk. Chill tonight. He pulled his coat closer about him as he stalked past the meters, telephone poles and hookers on street corners on his way to the curb.

Back in his college days--good Lord that was a loong time ago--he had been the proud owner of a vintage 1958 Thunderbird, a shining white shark with a candy-apple-red interior. He missed that car sometimes. Hell, he missed it most of the time, especially on cold nights like this. But cars and New York City did not mix well. One day I will leave this city, live in a big Victorian house down by the sea somewhere on Coney Island, and drive a Thunderbird everywhere I go. That or get a personal driver.

Debra chuckled. Dreamer.

He smirked.

"Hi there, Mister."

He lost the smirk as he stopped to look over his shoulder. He saw one of the hookers had

broken away from the pack and was trailing him. Well this was just grand.

Yes, it certainly is, Debra whispered intimately.

Alek ignored the implications of that sly voice in his head and kept walking. Hopefully the young lady would take a hint from his hostile reaction and look for work elsewhere.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

"Mister...hey...!"

Alek stopped just as he was about to step off the curb and into the street.

The girl had caught up with him. She was quite a little thing--then again, at his tall, lanky height, everyone seemed "little" to him. Yet she was more than merely small; she was petite, like a young doe. She had mussed blonde hair screwed into a semblance of a modern hairdo and rain-smear mascaraed eyes. She was trying to look worldly and sophisticated, yet all of it only made her seem more vulnerable somehow. She had lovely eyes, like aquamarines. Her mouth wasn't bad either. In fact, none of her was. Well...he couldn't help but look her up and down, her flimsy black dress and lacy red shawl left little to the imagination. Red. God, he loved red...

He shook himself out of it. He was ogling a little girl, for Chrissakes. A naïve little girl, on top of it. A professional would not solicit someone like himself, fresh from the steps of the Metro. A professional would know someone dressed as he was in evening wear would have arranged for an uptown escort in advance. The little girl was young and new and stupid to the work.

The idea made him sad somehow.

"You want some company?" she asked, a classic pickup line. As he watched, her eyes flicked sideways, then centered on his face again.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Maybe go for some coffee?"

"I don't think so."

"I know a little soda shop down the avenue, all old-fashioned like. You'd like it."

"No," he said.

Her childlike eyes frowned as she searched for something else to ply him with. He was tempted to give her a wad of cash if it got her off the streets for tonight. A girl like this was too sweet and young to survive on her own. She was something in need of protection from this filthy, voracious city and all the monsters lurking in it. He continued to watch her face, waiting for her next line. He knew he should have brushed her off from the start, but still...

Sweet and young...I'll bet she tastes like a candy-apple, Debra whispered.

"Stop it," he muttered.

The girls' eyes snapped back to his face. "What?"

"Nothing...I'm sorry..."

Her eyes clouded over, so he knew he had finally made the point with her. He only wished he didn't feel like a bastard for turning her down. He reached into his pocket for his wallet, but by the time he looked up again she had rejoined the other working girls on the corner.

He thought about going back to her and shoving some money into her hand but he was distracted by an all-too-familiar feeling insinuating itself between his shoulders and down his back, a feeling like someone was vibrating a wire down his spine. "Fuck," he whispered and let out his breath in a long, useless sigh. The girl, assuming the oath was directed toward her, looked his way. Yet nothing could be further from the truth.

Alek turned to study the museum. All day he had been brushing the edges of this infuriating feeling. And now he saw the source of it: there in the parking lot stood a tall figure draped in black. It was leaning against a Jaguar, watching him. A smile ticked one corner of the man's mouth when Alek's eyes alighted on him. With his face otherwise completely impassive, he turned and shrieked his fingernails across the hood of the Jag as he started walking around the lot towards Central Park West, where the fir trees were the thickest and where many of the swamp maples had not yet lost their foliage. There in that dark place, uninhabited except by rats, drunks and the children of the night, was where he wanted it.

So much for my quite night out, Alek thought and turned back to the cab.

It was already gone.

So much the better, he supposed, since there was business to attend to.

4

He followed the slayer into the thicket of the park. Here the trees would muffle the sounds they made as well as hide them from prying eyes. And anything that spilled over would be murdered by the raucous traffic forever passing on the avenue opposite the park.

Funny how the slayer would choose to take the path that led down to the children's carousel. Alek followed, his ears, eyes and every other one of his six senses pricked and turned out over the whole park like radar. There were no other creatures like him in the immediate vicinity. None that he could feel, anyway. Only this one. And there were no other humans, either. If there were, he would smell them.

Not a setup then. Just an old fashioned vendetta.

Alek stopped when they reached the carousel. He drew his sword.

The man turned around and stuffed his hands casually into the pockets of his full-length motorcycle coat. He was larger than Alek, which was saying a lot. He stood at least a head taller and

had the broad-shouldered, well-muscled body of a comic book character. He trained. His skin was near ebony in color and shone like wet silk. His shoulder-length hair was done up in earthenware beads, a look recently popular with many African-American slayers. He had the cold, effective look of a born killer. His eyes were completely focused. Completely dead. So young...and yet so ready to die for his Coven.

Again a pang of sadness sank through Alek's heart, this time for other reasons. "It's such a nice rainy night. You don't really want to die here tonight," Alek whispered as he slipped the Double Serpent Katana up under his arm. He affected a light, almost casual, stance, when in fact he was terrified, as always. As always, he stuck the fear down an endless black hole along with all the other things he preferred not to deal with. Fear got you nowhere. Fear got you dead.

"You're the Slayer?" the slayer said.

"I am." There was no point in denying it, playing games.

"You made an enemy of me when you killed the Master."

The Master. Amadeus the First Father. Covenmaster. Yes, well, he had made an enemy of about 3,000 other slayers when he did that. And a tragic number of them seemed to be standing in line to claim his head for it. So far, none had succeeded. Fewer still lived to tell the tale of how they had lost.

"And you are...?" Alek asked it of all the slayers who challenged him. He tried to keep a running list of the names because you never knew when someone else would show up trying to avenge a fallen friend or relation. It seemed an endless loop somehow.

"The name's Samson," said the great black slayer, sliding his hands out of his pockets and folding them a bit too casually across his massive chest.

A belt of knives across his chest, said Debra. A tachi on his left side. A tanto for backup on his right. Magnum in the small of his back, full of hollow-point iron bullets. I think our boy doesn't trust his sword arm too well.

Alek nodded. Samson looked just the type--all bluff and no stuff, as his best friend and chosen brother Booker used to say. But as always, he was grateful nonetheless for Debra's observations. He checked the sky overhead. She seemed nearer to him somehow, but whether that was because of the situation or because of the Hunter's Moon just beginning to rise, he didn't know. Nearer and somehow sweeter and much more human. He smelled her silken skin, felt her presence wrap itself protectively about him. I don't want you hurt, she said. Be careful.

He nodded while keeping an ever-watchful eye on Samson. "Now that we've had formal introductions, let's get down to it, shall we?"

Samson let his hands dropped. There were throwing knives in each hand. Alek knew. He could smell the steel. As Samson let fly the twin daggers, Alek was already in the air, tumbling like an acrobat over Samson and landing with catlike agility behind him. It took Samson a whole second to realize his knives had found tree trunks and not his target. A whole second more to realize where his target had gone. Alek waited patiently as the slayer figured it all out and turned around. He could have taken the slayer's head at any point during that two-second interval, but that didn't seem too sporting. The fear was distant now as the war lust began to overtake him and make him playful and more

dangerous. Alek hesitated. If there was any way they could just settle this like human beings instead of like animals...?

Samson narrowed his seething black eyes.

No, I guess not.

"Last chance to walk away," Alek said.

Samson drew his tachi and tanto. The tachi was a good piece of work, forty-six inches of priceless jade and polished stainless steel. The tanto was the companion piece to the tachi, at a quarter of the length. Nice, both of them. Alek only wondered if Samson had the kata training necessary to brandish them as more than pretty ornaments.

Alek made an underarm slash at the tanto with his sword, knocking it from Samson's grip.

Guess not, again.

Samson looked momentarily confused, torn between diving for his fallen weapon and retreating so he could prepare a new assault with his tachi alone.

"Don't pick up the tanto. I'll give you a penalty," Alek warned him.

Samson backed up, transferring the tachi into a two-handed grip.

"It's not a broadsword," Alek said. "You use one hand."

"Whatta you? The fucking expert?" Samson spat and dove at him with the sword.

Alek winged the weapon aside, metal ringing on metal, and let the motion take him clockwise around Samson and into his enemy's second assault. Metal skreeked. Alek shoved at the other slayer. Samson fell back, almost dropping his sword.

Samson recovered at the last moment and made a blurring series of butterfly cuts that send Alek stumbling back a half dozen steps. Samson grinned. When Alek sensed the nearness of the carousel at his back, he dropped to the ground and rolled out of the way. Samson followed through with the move, trying to stab Alek through the heart with the tachi.

Alek rolled over and used his coat to deflect Samson's blade, giving him an opportunity to leap to the top of the stage. "Yes," Alek answered as he sat down on the edge of the carousel, his hair settling against his cheeks, his coat closing about the rest of him like a pair of settling wings. He drew the sword back into its ready position. "I am."

Samson stared angrily at Alek's show of casual disregard for his skill. Angry and confused. He was a fear-eater, as Alek had suspected. A bully. If his victim was not intimidated by his outward appearance then he had no advantage in the fight. Samson showed his teeth and cut the air menacingly in front of him as he reassured his grip on the tachi. Pretty Kung Fu movie display there.

Alek rested the hilt of the katana on his thigh.

"You think you're so tough," Samson growled.

"Tough enough. Go home, whelp, and learn your craft first."

You're so clever, Debra said.

He smirked. She knew what affect it would have on Samson as much as he did.

Samson roared and sprang at Alek, his tachi fully extended and ready to take Alek's head.

Alek rolled up onto the stage again, his sentient coat snagging Samson's legs and jerking them out from under him so the bigger man tripped to the muddy ground in a rolling, clattering bundle of leather and steel. Samson slammed into the side of the carousel, his bulk rattling the structure to its foundations. He was raging when he realized how he had been tricked but recovered faster than Alek anticipated.

By the time Alek had found his footing on the carousel, Samson was up and leaping to the top of the stage and swinging at him with the tachi. Alek met the slayer stroke for stroke, their blades clashing like cymbals and kicking up sparks that lit the darkness of the night like firebugs. When the battle of the blades wasn't getting Samson anywhere, he changed tactics and tried to swipe at Alek's legs. Tried to hack at them, really, which was poor form. One of Amadeus's first and most important lessons was to never, ever, attack in anger. Anger was a Wild Emotion...and a liability in a fight. Alek sidestepped the blade and kicked Samson in the face.

Samson flew off the carousel and crashed to the ground under a vast, sprawling elm several yards away. He looked to be out cold.

Alek hesitated a moment, then stepped down off the stage and started stalking the slayer.

Samson suddenly came awake and tossed two more knives at him.

Alek avoided the one, knocked aside the other with his sword.

He was ten feet away.

Two more knives came flying at his face. Alek knocked those aside. "Boring."

Five feet.

Samson stood up, and gritting his savage white teeth, pulled his magnum loose, cocked it, aimed. Iron bullets, Debra had said. Deadly venom. The only metal fatal to what he was. Fatal to all of his kind.

Well that's not fair at all! Debra said.

No, not at all, Alek agreed as he felt his--their--blood boil. The first bullet whistled past his shoulder. The second pinked! off the blade of his sword. He kept making his way toward Samson.

Samson looked frightened. He squeezed off two more rounds. Alek slipped in-between the two bullets

Two bullets left.

Two feet left.

Samson made a valiant attempt to aim for Alek's head.

Alek bit down on the blade of his sword and leaped, easily clearing the last two bullets and gripping the low-hanging branches of the oak overhead like an athlete's training bar. His legs came up automatically, hooking around the biggest limb of the tree so his hands were free to handle the sword. And there he hung, looking at a petrified and very upside down Samson like a great winged bat hanging from its perch.

"Penalty," Alek said in the last moment before he took Samson's head.

5

He wondered if he would make it home in time for Jay Leno. Considering all things, the thought seemed somehow ridiculous, yet it was thinking like that that kept him sane throughout all the bloodshed.

Near Fifth Avenue Alek stopped to make certain none of Samson's blood remained on any noticeable part of himself. His hair, which had been bound into a tight braid for his supposedly quiet evening out, had come undone but had otherwise been spared. His face was likewise clean. His coat was never dirtied by bloodshed for very long; instead it seemed to somehow absorb any blood that touched it. The fact that it did so might have made him nervous, except he was used to dealing with things that were...well, less than normal.

He had almost made it to the curb where he hoped he would be able to hail another cab when he heard the cries for the first time. They were distant. Another human being would not have been aware of them at all, especially this close to the neverending roar of the busiest avenue in New York, but he was wired from the fight. He stopped to tilt his head and listen to them. Coming from three blocks away, in one of the back alley niches no sane person had any business crawling around in. Probably some punk trying to feed the monkey by working over a drunk.

No...not a drunk. It was a female in trouble. Probably a working girl in a lousy situation.

He glanced around the Avenue, but as always, never a cop when you needed one.

It's not my problem, he reasoned. It's been a long night already.

A cab pulled to the curb. He couldn't believe his luck.

The girl made a pained, animalistic noise that rang in his ears and in his bones.

"Fuck," he whispered as he waved the cab on. I will get a personal driver, he promised himself as he turned down the first alley he came to and leaped to the fire escape. He scaled it to the lowest window available. From there on it was an easy enough task to pull himself hand over hand over the face of the building. It was an old brownstone, plenty of windows and fancy cornices to use as a makeshift ladder. When he reached the roof he hurried to the opposite end, jumped the ten-foot crevice between

this building and the next, and landed in a crouching lope atop the second rooftop. He repeated the action a second and then a third time, until he found himself looking down into a filthy alleyway cluttered with garbage and an overturned Dumpster. A Caddy was parked at the end of the dead end space, preventing anybody from driving into the throat of the alley. The building he was crouched atop was derelict, the opposite one a thrash club so loud it was unlikely anyone would ever hear a cry for help.

There were three of them. Asian kids with ying-yang bandanas and cheap juvie hall tattoos. Yakuza wannabes. Runners and students of the street arts. And they were doing over one of the working girls.

One of his girls.

Turf warfare was none of his business. In most cases, he ignored the violence when drunks and dust heads fell prey to the bigger, the fitter, the nastier. The city had a method of survival you didn't tamper with. But the working girls were his. Well not his in the sense that they belonged to him. They weren't his personal harem or anything. It was just instinct. In the underworld of the vampire, as savage as it was, the males protected their mates, something the humans had seemed to have forgotten, or perhaps never learned. Where were the males to protect the human females? Where was this one's mate to protect her? She was alone, threatened, and that pissed him off. He didn't like cutthroat kids tampering with his females.

He dropped the six stories and landed atop the overturned Dumpster with an impressive and attention-getting whomp, his coat fluttering down around him like a pair of folding blackbird wings. The boys, clustered around the girl pinned like a bug against the graffiti-splattered wall, turned to look his way.

Show off, Debra said.

Alek smiled at the cretins holding the girl, except it wasn't a smile at all.

"Motherfucker, where you come from?" one of the endearingly articulate youths said. His red bandana was inscribed with black ideograms that labeled him as the leader.

Alek wondered what the Yakuza were doing so far west of their home turf. They were primarily Lower East Side and Chinatown. The young ones specialized in arson, minor piracy and basic havoc, but only under the auspicious iron hand of the elders; they weren't major operators, just little pups who ran errands and begged for bones from the House of the Ryuujuin. As the leader jaunted forward Alek caught a glance of the frightened, flushed face of the girl, the red shawl and black little dress, and had to do a double take. Then he shoved such detail aside and concentrated on the chump approaching him.

The leader pulled a switchblade from his back pocket. One of his associates--a very young boy with a lean and angry face--moved to bring up his rear with a pair of nunchaku, while the third one, a boy with a ponytail held back in an ivory clip, continued to hold the little blonde girl against the wall.

The girl whimpered and the sound of her cry triggered something inside of Alek. He stared at the three hoods for a long moment, then jumped down off the Dumpster and drew his katana for the second time that night.

"Why don't you take a walk?" Nunchaku said.

"He can't," said the leader. "He's a banpaia--they can't leave fuckin' nothing alone."

Banpaia. Vampire.

Well now, this was getting very interesting.

"If I was a banpaia you would all be dead by now," Alek said.

The leader stopped and narrowed his eyes.

"Let the girl go," Alek told him reasonably.

"Shit," said the leader. "Your kind fuckin' piss me off. Get lost."

"Let her go and I will," Alek said.

"Fuck you," the leader said and tossed a handful of miniature shuriken in Alek's face.

This human kid was good. Better in many ways than Samson. More training. More control. More desire to please the Powers That Be. Alek deflected all but a few of the razor-keen stainless steel stars with his coat. As an errand shuriken tore a strip of flesh from his cheek he leaped out of the way and tried to find an advantage atop a fire escape.

In a truly admirable choreography of battle, Nunchaku caught him in mid-air, numbing his knee in passing with his weapon so he missed the fire escape completely and landed with a grunt on hands and knees at the back of the alley, his sword spinning off into the dark. Another shot of shuriken. Alek took the brunt of it before rolling out of the way. The rest sank like steel darts into the brownstone wall. His face burned and his blood pounded. He tried to rise but his numbed leg wouldn't give him the leverage he needed.

"He's down!" said the leader. He went to replace Ponytail where the boy had been holding the girl against the bricks. "Take his head!"

Nunchaku and Ponytail were on him in moments. Nunchaku wound his chain around Alek's neck while Ponytail drew a black shirasaya embossed with golden butterflies. The rod clicked apart to reveal a well cared for antique blade that looked sharp enough to split a hair--or a slayer. Alek didn't wait to discover if that was true, so he put out his hand and felt the katana skreek across the broken concrete and into his palm. He gripped it securely and jammed the handle into Nunchaku's mouth. Nunchaku grunted bloodily and the chain of the nunchaku lost its tension a moment before Ponytail's blade would have found a home in his throat. Alek flattened himself against the concrete and felt the swish of the blade overhead, then dived at Ponytail's middle, knocking him into the wall.

Beloved--behind you!

Kock! Nunchaku's weapon landed hard on Alek's forearm, numbing his arm up and down.

Nunchaku grinned his blood-slimed, broken-mouthed grin.

That was enough from this one. Alek turned with a feral snarl, sending Nunchaku back a step with a single look. The boy's indecision was all he needed. Reaching out, he grabbed the weapon by the chain and forcefully yanked both boy and weapon into the wall behind him to join his companion in a pile.

Now all that was left was the leader. Alek climbed to his feet. He suddenly felt tired and very cranky. Slayers, punks...all he wanted were a warm bed, a mug of cappuccino with cream and an old book. This was not his definition of a good Friday night. He touched his face, felt the blood there from the shurikens that had found their mark.

He licked his fingers before he was even aware of what he was doing. And the taste of the blood--dark and bittersweet and hot as cinnamon on his tongue--made the thing within him, that thing that he feared more than any slayer, uncurl and stretch and put its claws into his belly. Pain. A low groan--more of an animal whine than anything human--caught in his throat like a knife. He dropped down on the cement with nearly spasmodic speed, fingers snagged in the bloody cracks, seeking. He licked at the blood on the floor of the alley, sponging it up like a cat. And something in his eyes must have gotten to the leader, because all at once the hood released his hold on the girl and turned to face Alek with his guard completely up.

The leader had no weapons. He was a street fighter, then. An animal.

An animal...

Like me, Alek thought when he realized just what he was doing, how degrading and whorish it all was. He sat back on his heels. Jesus. What the fuck was wrong with him? Where the hell was his training? His discipline? He thought about what he must look like, crouched here amidst the blood, his posture like that of wolves and other large predators, guarding...what? The girl? The fucking blood that had spilt during the battle? Even now the stink of it made him crave like some kind of stupid beast...

Whimpering, he slammed his fists against the spattering of blood on the cement in front of him, breaking his knuckles, breaking the cement. But the pain was good...the pain made the craving lessen.

"Fucking stupid banpaia," the leader said, afraid.

Alek eyed the youth and waited for him to go in for a hit; instead, he shifted uncertainly. His smell changed from the deep musky man-odor of battle to one of raw, primal animal fear. He met Alek's eyes evenly, but whatever he saw there was instigating a flight, not a fight, response. As if disgusted by his own cowardice, the youth spat on the concrete. "You want the bitch? She's yours."

Alek watched the boy edge around him. Only when he had cleared Alek's circumference completely did he go to shake his companions awake. Neither of them looked terribly wounded. A little groggy but otherwise all right. The leader barked some orders to them both in Japanese, something about them getting their lazy asses in the car. After that, as the three hoods started back toward the entrance of the alleyway, the leader turned to face Alek one last time.

Alek stood up. He didn't expect another assault, but it never hurt to be prepared.

Instead of attacking him, the leader only gave him a slit-eyed, sidelong look that said, We'll have it out another time, shithead, don't worry. Then all three of them piled into the Caddy, slammed their doors and screeched out of the alley, the car lumbering into traffic like a charging elephant, the leader blaring his horn at a taxi with the right of way.

Alek waited until he was sure they were gone, and then he waited some more and shivered and felt the last of the craving leave him like a fever burning off. Only then, feeling tired and shaky and very old, did he turn back to the semi-conscious woman crouched small against the wall.

The young one. The one who had solicited him earlier.

He watched her a moment, waiting until she came around. And he wondered if this was a portent of some kind and what it might mean to him.

6

Charlie Wing was smart enough to let things be when he had to. It didn't happen often. Usually, he could handle anything that came his way, which was the reason Mr. Ashikawa had him in charge of Rich and Xav. They were great fun, the two of them, but they had maybe half a brain between them. On the other hand, Charlie was smart, a survivalist. Not like his father who had been nothing, a big Nothing that drove a garbage truck back in Osaka. He wasn't his father. He was a warrior. Mr. Ashikawa said so. Now all that was left was to convince Mr. Ashikawa that he'd done the right thing in walking away from a fight.

He chewed his tongue and drove the Caddy down Lincoln Avenue with Rich and Xav. Rich was in the passenger seat beside him, Xav in the backseat. Fuck but Rich should have been busy trying to stanch the flow of blood running like a bitch from his nose and Xav should have been working on repairing his busted nunchaku. Instead the two of them just sat there like retarded kindergarten kids, watching him. Waiting for him to say something. Jesus, but they knew about the banpaia, even if they had never actually seen one in action before. What did they expect him to do?

"Tk neva seen anyfing like tha," Rich muttered through his mush-mouth.

"Wipe your fucking blood up, you're getting it everywhere!" Charlie barked.

Rich sniffed. "Awkay...Sheezus...what the hell was that?" He found some fast food paper napkins lurking under the seat and used them to mop up some of the spillage. He did it mechanically, as if he were still in shock from the fight.

Yeah, some fight.

"I don't know what the fuck that was," Xav admitted meekly from the back seat.

Charlie thumped his hands against the steering wheel. "It was fucking the Easter Bunny. Didja see the pointy ears?" Christ, he so wanted to haul out and bang Rich in the face, except that would make him bleed more over his good leather interior.

"Yeah, he had pointy ears all right," Xav said. "Pointy teeth too."

"And a great big pointy sword I'm gonna shove up your asses if you don't shut the hell up!"

They were his soldiers. They shut up. But the driving-silence made everything worse, because now, as Charlie glided up the white gravel driveway of the Ryuujuu, the House of the Dragon Lord, he had to think about what he would say to Mr. Ashikawa. He played out a half dozen scenarios in his head--hell, his crew would back up anything he said--but what was the point when they were arriving

empty-handed? Mr. Ashikawa just wouldn't buy it, whatever he said. He wouldn't care. He would only see that they had failed. They had gotten into it, almost gotten the bitch, and then got the shit beat out of them by a stranger from out of fucking nowhere! By a goddamn banpaia, no less! Shit, he knew plenty were out there--Mr. Ashikawa had warned him of that and Charlie had been around Kage long enough for it not to bother him too much--but what was the chance of him and the troops running into one of the motherfuckers in that blind alley?

The suits that worked for Mr. Ashikawa took the Caddy from them and left Charlie and his crew to creep into the mansion like criminals. He couldn't tell if the suits were passing looks between themselves--too many pairs of shades stared back at him--but he could imagine. Dark suits, pressed shirts and ties, shined shoes, and combed hair. Like good little choirboys, all of them, except they all moved like natural-born killers. In the foyer, his boys gave him a look like a farewell--or maybe the look you give a dead relative during a wake--just before he detached himself from the safety of their numbers and went to pay the proverbial piper.

Charlie chewed his tongue until he tasted blood. It wasn't a good day all around, his fung-shui totally blown to hell, and he knew it the moment he ran into Kage in the hallway outside Mr. Ashikawa's office. Christ, but he hated these banpaia.

It was like being in the alley again with the other one, except Kage was vastly different--and yet, not. He was much smaller than most other men, but that wasn't something you noticed. Instead of disappearing in a room like a lot of small men do, Kage seemed to fill it. Right now he was doing his usual Kage-thing, which was doing nothing at all--just standing there outside the door of Mr. Ashikawa's office. A human being would look sloppy and bored. Not Kage. Kage didn't wear human that well. Instead he stood at complete attention, his hands in the pockets of his long leather coat and his head canted to one side, eyes seemingly trained on the pattern of the red and gold wallpaper. He too wore dark shades, but for a much better reason. It was said if you looked into the eyes of the banpaia Kage you would fall into the black sleep and never again be awakened. It was ridiculous, stupid Japanese legend shit. Charlie only wished he would convince himself of that fact one of these days.

Kage made no indication that he was aware of Charlie's approach, yet he said in a low, whispery voice that rode Charlie's hackles like an electrical storm: "The Ryuujin is taking a meeting."

"Yeah...okay, fine..." Yeah, he could come back tomorrow. That was not a problem.

Kage looked at him. Kage looked through him. "Do you have the woman?"

"Had the woman. Lost her." Charlie was about to say more, to start the process of weaving together the story that might or might not save his ass, but a single look from Kage silenced him.

"The Ryuujin will not be pleased."

No shit.

The fear, the tension in the air, the banpaia, and the fact that things existed that had no right existing--all these things suddenly seemed too much and Charlie had to make a conscious effort right then and there not to bolt for the nearest door. "Hey, man," he said, raising his hands in a kind of hopeless defense, "No one fucking warned me about tall, dark and dangerous."

Kage's eyebrows bobbed up. He looked generally interested--a first for him. He looked about to ask something more of Charlie but opted to knock politely on the door of the office instead.

"Come," Mr. Ashikawa called in Japanese.

Kage opened the door, waited as Charlie skirted past him without touching, and then proceeded to follow Charlie inside the office. Only when Charlie had found the courage to approach Mr. Ashikawa's desk--he was indeed in a meeting, albeit of the Net variety--did Kage close and discreetly lock the inner office, sealing everyone in like victims in a tomb. This time, unlike others, Kage did not wait outside but chose to listen to the flow of conversation between Charlie and the Ryuujin. That was odd.

Edward Ashikawa looked up from his laptop, took in Charlie's disheveled, battleworn appearance, and seemed to come to some instantaneous conclusion. He then looked past them to where his loyal pet banpaia stood near the door. Kage shook his head. Ashikawa nodded and looked again at Charlie.

"How did she escape?"

It was as if he somehow knew what had happened. On more than one occasion Charlie was sure things passed between Mr. Ashikawa and Kage that he was unaware of. Odd things. Things not like talk but like feelings. He thought about Rich and Xav and wished he was with them, cruising in the Caddy and looking for a drugstore or deli to knock over or babes to pick up. He wished he were anywhere but here right now. But because he was not, and because he knew he had to say something, he shrugged and said, "Seems there's more than one Kage out there."

Now Ashikawa looked generally interested.

Kage spoke up. "There was interference, Ryuujin. A slayer appeared to protect the woman."

How the hell did Kage know it was a slayer?

"Oh. I see." Mr. Ashikawa took off his glasses and closed down his laptop.

Charlie felt his heart sink. But it wasn't fear; it was much worse than that. Mr. Ashikawa was his tether here in America, his fucking sensei. And Mr. Ashikawa taught that when you fail your sensei you fail yourself. You have no honor. And a man with no honor is a man with no life.

"Tell me about this other banpaia," Mr. Ashikawa said.

Charlie chewed some more on his tongue. Now was not the time to fall apart. In solitude and silence, yes, but not here. "I have never seen him before, Ryuujin. He was tall and very lean. Black hair to his waist. Dark eyes. He moved like an animal, Ryuujin. And he had an unusual sword."

"Tell me about the sword."

Charlie shivered at the memory. The banpaia lost in its personal rage...like a machine. "It was a katana with a white jade hilt like two asps."

Again Mr. Ashikawa looked past him. Again he sought something from Kage.

Kage nodded. "Two asps. The sword of the Slayer."

"Tell me about the Slayer," The Ryuujin said when he had dismissed the boy.

Kage went to the wet bar in the office and poured the Ryuujin a scotch. After decades of service to the Dragon Lord of the Yakuza it was entirely unnecessary that the Ryuujin speak his needs verbally. Kage could read them. More, they were his own needs. It was like the scotch. The desire for the drink was Kage's own, though logically it could not be.

Kage served the Ryuujin his drink on a silver serving dish.

It was similarly unnecessary that the Ryuujin ask about the Slayer. Kage knew of his interest because the Ryuujin's interest was his own, though in reality the being whom the streets called the Slayer was of reluctant interest to Kage. The Ryuujin simply chose to verbalize many of his needs. As a human, such things were a comfort to him. As a comforting thing to the Ryuujin, such things became important to Kage.

They were bound, after all--in blood, in life, and possibly even in death.

"The Slayer," said Kage. They spoke English now, but they also spoke on a much deeper level of understanding. "His name is Alek Knight, and he was the first acolyte of Amadeus and heir to the seat of Covenmaster of New York City. Two years ago he suffered the sins of what he became and betrayed his Coven. He slew several prominent slayers, among them Robot, Aristotle and Takara. His master was his last victim."

"That is the basic analysis," the Ryuujin said as he sipped his scotch. "What is your personal opinion?"

Kage thought about that a moment. "He is a twin, therefore he is dangerous and unpredictable."

The Ryuujin went to look through his great picture window at the deceptively serene night city lurking under the dark. "Tell me about this."

"His sister crossed over to the other side of the Web, yet she can speak to him still and direct his actions. Because of her death, he believes all slayers are his enemy."

"And all other banpaia?"

"He is not a banpaia, my Ryuujin, but something wholly new and different. He is...a dhampir."

The Ryuujin looked over his shoulder. "I am not familiar with that word."

"It is a rough Bulgarian word to describe a creature which is the result of a banpaia coupling with a human female."

"I did not know that was possible."

"Under the right circumstances...yes."

"Kage..."

"No, Ryuujin. I am of pure breeding."

The Ryuujin shook his head. "I find it odd we never spoke of this."

"It was...unnecessary information, until now."

"I agree." The Ryuujin turned around, still cradling the untouched drink in the center of his palm. He was a small man, like Kage, but much more muscular. Well into his sixties and he had the face and body of a man in his early 50s. Many believed Kage to be the son, Ashikawa the young father, when in fact Kage had lived his master's life many times over. Some of the Ryuujin's seemingly endless vibrancy was due to the strict fitness regiment he kept, but most of it was the work of Kage's alien blood on his master's mortal cells. Still, even Kage's age-defying blood could not remove the worry and years from the Ryuujin's eyes.

Kage felt that worry burrow a smoldering hole through his heart. He loved the great Dragon Lord, loved him in too many ways to count, in ways scarcely explored by most mortals--and even fewer immortals. It was a love of common blood, love of self-preservation and survival, and yet love of something else, something greater, vaster, and more perfect than himself. The love one had, perhaps, of a god. "You look unwell, my Ryuujin. Perhaps I could persuade you to partake of my life?"

The Ryuujin swirled his glass of scotch but did not drink of it. "Too many years, Kage," he said. He looked up. "Kage, tell me, what does time mean to you?"

As always, Kage was tempted to lie if it meant comforting his Ryuujin. As always, he chose to be truthful instead. "Very little, I'm afraid." After a moment's hesitation, he chose to take the initiative and approach the great Ryuujin without invite. When they stood with only the glass to separate them, Kage unsheathed his katana. The Ryuujin made no move to discipline him in any way for his actions, so Kage offered his master his sword.

After a moment, the Ryuujin took it.

Kage knelt down and turned his head aside. A moment later his master discreetly nicked the underside of Kage's chin with the painlessly sharp edge of the katana. When the black blood began to well up--it did not take long--Kage felt his master's hand on his chin, felt his master's mouth on the wound, taking. In most cases such exchanges caused a particularly powerful and sometimes dangerous sexual throb in one of Kage's kind, except that Kage had learned the discipline to curb such awry emotions. He had done so for years. He was not an animal because he chose not to be.

He waited until the Ryuujin had taken what he wanted, what he felt he needed, and then, when his master's mouth was gone, Kage rubbed a bit of his own saliva into the wound to speed along the healing. The Ryuujin told him to stand up. He did so. The Ryuujin gave him back the katana and Kage sheathed it under his long leather greatcoat.

"This dhampir disturbs me," the Ryuujin said.

Kage had seen his master fight in Seoul. He had seen Edward Ashikawa tear the face off of another man with a fistful of ground glass. He had seen Edward Ashikawa break the necks of two of his own hired men when they had sold out to Tong in Chinatown. Once, when he was younger and working for his father, he opened fire on a church to show a group of black gangbangers that had taken refuge in it that there was no part of this city that he did not own. He was a savage. He was a warrior. He feared nothing, outwardly. He only spoke so openly now about his fears because he knew he would not be able to disguise his worry from Kage. And he was correct. "I should not have sent the boys for the girl," he said.

"They were the only ones capable of finding her in this city. You did what you had to. In any event, the more experienced men would have had no better luck with the Slayer than they. If anything, the Slayer might have killed them all."

The Ryuujin frowned. "Doesn't matter anymore. I want you on the job now."

"I will do it," said Kage.

"But you don't want to. I can feel it."

Kage hesitated. And then, with head bowed: "I would prefer not to."

"I sense no fear from you, yet you are reluctant. Should I ask why?"

"You know I will answer any question of yours put to me, my Ryuujin."

There was a moment of indecision on the Ryuujin's part. Then he said, "Find the girl and get from her what I need. When you have it, kill her. If the Slayer intervenes, kill him as well. If he gives her up willingly, then you and he can work out whatever arrangement makes you both happy, according to the rules of engagement of your kind."

"Your will is, as always, my own," Kage answered.

The Ryuujin narrowed his eyes. Again he sensed the untruth in Kage's response, but this time he said nothing more about it.

8

Her name was Robin Wright and she was a nineteen-year-old runaway from Lodi, New Jersey. She had arrived in the city five years ago, but it seemed much longer, somehow. As if she had always been here, doing this. The streets had a way of educating you in a hurry, and Robin took a crash course. She came to escape a religiously fanatical father and the undying memories of a dead mother. Like most young runaways, Robin found herself at a dead end, penniless, homeless, hopeless, with nothing to offer the city for barter for her survival but her body. She slept in a churchyard the first night and sold herself the second night in order to get up enough money for a loaf of bread, a bottle of whiskey to stay warm, and a room in a dilapidated motel.

She wasn't stupid or oblivious to what she was doing. Her father had taught her all about the wages of sin and all that. But how could she go home after what she had done? Her father had locked her in a closet once for two whole days after she used a spew of profanity on him. She was afraid. He would know she had ruined herself. He would check. And he would probably kill her.

All she had left was to tough things out, try to make a life for herself, so all this was a dark memory one day. Anyway, she was used to her father's hands on her. This was no different. She would simply lie back on a bed somewhere and pretend she was elsewhere until it was over. It wasn't so hard. Not really. It was survival. Survival of the fittest. The only difference between the slag of degradation her endless stream of faceless men inflicted on her body and her father was that she wasn't judged and punished as a sinner afterward.

Well, most of the time she wasn't.

Some did try to punish her. Some got downright nasty and slapped her around or pulled out a knife and threatened to cut her apart like the deserving whore she was. After one such encounter too many--she still had the scars on her arms to prove it--she decided to get protection.

By then she had worked the streets long enough to become familiar with some of the other girls. They told her she was crazy to work freelance, that it was too dangerous, that sooner or later she would wind up dead. Not even the tough young transvestites on Tenth Avenue worked by themselves. They told her she'd be wise to choose her own pimp, that something so sweet and young as herself wouldn't go unnoticed for long and she could end up the slave of some sadistic freak. Not that all pimps weren't sons-of-bitches who treated their women like shit, but some were decidedly worse than others. A girl needed protection. Sure, she'd be another man's property, but the upside to that was that your owner protected you. One of the older girls, a veteran of the streets at eighteen, generously offered to set her up with the "master" as she jokingly called her pimp.

Alek sipped the over strong college-coffeehouse espresso and linked his hands together atop the Formica table separating him from the blonde. Robin had dreamy eyes for a prostitute. Eyes like the kids sitting in this coffee house and chatting on emphatically about what college they would attend, what guy they would marry. Robin should have been with this crowd, he thought, not out on the streets.

Robin lit a cigarette. "That's how I came to know Edward Ashikawa."

Alek bowed his head, looked up at the girl from under his tangle of undone hair. "Edward Ashikawa...the head of the Yakuza here in the city?"

Robin nodded. "Actually, it was a small bit pimp working for him that took me in, but I caught Edward's eye and things just...happened. He brought me into his inner circle and I met his people." For a moment her storm-blue eyes seemed to darken. "Some were nice."

"Nice people like those boys who attacked you," he said.

"And people like Kage."

Alek jerked his head up, surprised to hear the sound of the name of a master vampire on such an innocent little mortal's lips. More, to hear the name at all...which he had prayed would never, ever, happen.

Robin read his reaction incorrectly as fatherly concern instead of the deep-hearted terror it had invoked. "Kage's okay," she said. "He'll give you what you want. He watchdogs us at night."

Alek felt his lips chap under his tongue. His stomach churned with the bittersweet coffee. "Kage."

"Yeah. He makes people. He also unmakes them."

Cryptic words. Did he want to pursue this? No. But now, having done what he did, having involved himself with Edward Ashikawa's property this way, he realized he had little choice in the matter. "Why does Ashikawa want you? Did you take something from him?"

Robin's eyes crept sideways across the cafe over all the students in their army surplus jackets and French berets and Doc Martens as if she expected the Grand Dragon of the Yakuza--or maybe Kage himself--to materialize any moment and damn her for her sins, whatever they were. "One morning a few weeks ago I woke up and realized I was done with this city. I only wanted to go home," she said. "About that time someone approached me...a narc, I think. He wanted to get wires on Ashikawa but he couldn't get into his home office. He said he would get me out, keep me safe, if I planted them. So I did. Kage found out about them and traced them back to the narc." She took a long sip of coffee and pulled her shawl closer about her shoulders. "The guy called me...said someone was closing in on him and told me where he'd hidden the tapes he'd made. A few days later I came home and found a body on the kitchen table, all messed up..." She closed her eyes and her face froze like a statue. "I didn't know what to do, so I ran."

"Your agent must have had backup...someone you can go to...?"

Robin shook her head. "He never told me their names. And I can't go to the police; Ashikawa owns them. He owns everyone. Everyone is just a thrall to him."

Again Alek started. You didn't hear the word 'thrall' too often unless you were dealing with a hive of vampires. He wondered where she had come across the terminology. Then again, if the rumors were true, Ashikawa, though not one himself, had several vampire heavies on his payroll.

Vampires like Kage, Debra whispered.

I know.

Ashikawa's immortal warrior army was one of the reasons he was such a force to be reckoned with in this city. But Alek didn't want to think about that right now. Didn't want to think about Kage. Instead he said, "What do you know about his...thralls?"

Robin dropped her eyes. She knew...something. She snubbed out the cigarette and stared at the murky depths of her coffee cup. She ran a hand through her short, mussed hair. "They're not...normal. The ones like Kage...I can't explain it to you."

Silence pushed in between them. Suddenly the outside sounds of clattering dishes and chatting teenagers that he had nearly forgotten about began to intercede on their private world. And he welcomed them. "Fair enough," he said.

"You're a cop, aren't you?" Robin said.

Alek shook his head no.

Robin studied him a long, hard moment, an unlit cigarette dangling from between her first and second fingers. "You fight like one...or something."

"Do you know what Kage is?"

Robin nodded. "Banpaia. A vampire."

"I hunt them."

The slightest surprise fluttered across Robin's face. "You're a slayer?"

"Sometimes."

"That's why you want to know about Kage. You want to kill him?" She sounded hopeful.

"I don't want to kill anyone. But since he's servant to Edward Ashikawa, that means he's made me his enemy for interfering with Ashikawa's boys."

You made an enemy of him a long time ago, Debra began.

Hush...

Robin looked glum. "That was my fault."

"Don't worry about it," he said.

Oh please, Debra huffed. Don't be such a crusader.

Robin looked around. "I shouldn't fucking be here."

"How's your ankle?"

The one boy, Ponytail, had done a good job on her as she struggled. She had a minor fracture in her left ankle. He could tell by the swelling and by the pain in her face.

"I'll live." She got up, balancing against the table as if to prove it.

"You won't get very far on that ankle," he said.

She looked up from beneath her heavy bangs. "I don't suppose you're a slayer for hire, then?"

He carried her up the last flight of steps to her apartment. It might not have been necessary--she seemed capable of walking on her own, albeit very slowly--but the sooner she got off that swollen ankle the better. He set her down on the landing outside the door and waited for her to unlock the half dozen deadbolts on the door.

The building was your usual run-of-the-mill firetrap. The halls were trash-littered, the walls septic, the doors lining the halls up and down covered in layers of graffiti that passed in some slum lord's opinion for paint. A typical Lower East Side dream palace. Ever since Alek had bought the Covenhouse and made it his home he had forgotten what some of the really wonderful places in New York looked like.

Like where we grew up, Debra said.

"Yes."

"What's that?" Robin asked as she turned the last bolt.

"Sorry," Alek said. "Just thinking aloud."

Robin smiled. A pretty smile. "I do that too. Ever notice how people look at you odd when you do that, even though they do it themselves?"

"Human beings are odd," he whispered.

"Yeah. We are."

He wondered what they meant, but he hadn't the courage to ask.

So this was home. A three room flat in a nearly derelict project. Exposed copper pipes a hundred years old. Brick interior walls. Naked light bulbs. Threadbare carpet. More threadbare sofa--it didn't look safe, but he was about to ask Robin to sit down on it anyway so he could take a look at her ankle when he was distracted by the shuffle of a sneakered foot from the opposite side of the bedroom door.

He drew his katana--there was no point in hiding it from Robin; she'd been privy to it in the alley earlier--and moved on silent feet to the door.

Robin said, "Wait...no..."

He ignored her. All he cared about right now was who was lurking in the bedroom.

The light peeking out from under the badly hung door was obliterated momentarily as the person moved back a step. Oh no you don't, he thought. You aren't getting away that easily. Taking the doorknob in one hand, he pulled open the door while moving deftly to one side. He expected someone at any moment to come barreling out--and he wasn't disappointed.

But what came out did surprise him.

"Mom!" cried the boy as he charged out of the bedroom and threw himself into Robin's arms, almost toppling her over where she stood. She caught her balance at the last moment and then returned the child's strangle-like hug. Robin was so small she didn't seem capable of lifting the child's full weight into her arms, but lift him she did--and, in fact, swung him around once before setting him down on his feet.

"Hey...how's my big tiger today?"

"Made this for you," the boy said emphatically, holding up a crumpled piece of construction paper with a splattering of watercolors on it.

"A red sun?" Robin said, looking at it as if observing a grand piece of treasured art.

The boy nodded. "Had the dream again."

Something flitted across Robin's face, but it came and went too quickly for Alek to determine what it was. Then she looked again at the boy and smiled.

The boy was not looking at her, however. He was staring at Alek standing in the corner of the room, his hands folded across his sword.

Alek caught a glance of the paper in Robin's hand. There was something there...a man in black with black hair, drawn in a childish scribble but still clearly recognizable. Alek might have dismissed it then and there, except the man was holding a long stick in his right hand.

A stick or a sword.

"Danny," Robin said to the boy as she broke eye contact with Alek, "This is a friend. He's going to stay with us tonight."

I am?

You are? Debra.

Alek opened his mouth to say...what? He closed it again and only looked at the boy, this little carbon copy of Robin, but with dark glistening eyes and black tousled, too-long hair.

Robin said, "This is Danny...my son."

Alek tried on a wan smile, then thought about what he must look like--a man in a long black coat holding a sword like some kind of jonin Samurai about to go into battle--and he put the katana away as discreetly as possible. Somehow he still didn't think he looked harmless, but it would have to do. The boy looked at him as if expecting something. Shit. He never knew what to say or how to act around children, having never had any of his own.

He crossed his arms and tried to smile. "Hi, Danny."

Danny smiled at him. A wondrous, brilliant smile. "You're the dream man," he said. "Hi."

"Does Danny have those dreams often?" Alek asked as he finished bandaging Robin's ankle. The swelling was still bad and, frankly, he had no idea how she would cope in the next few days without some kind of medical attention, but she would not listen to him about seeing a doctor.

"What dreams would that be?" Robin asked innocently as she grimaced from the tightness of the bandage. She glanced briefly at the kitchenette where Danny sat busily scrawling on whatever he could find-old fliers, fallen bits of wallpaper. Anything, it seemed.

He reminded Alek of himself as a child.

"The prophetic kind," he said.

"He's only four. He has all kinds of dreams," Robin answered, but the strain in her voice said much more. Please don't ask me about Danny's dreams. Please let's change the subject.

"You should get this looked at," Alek said as he fixed the bandage. "I don't see how you'll be able to work tomorrow night."

At least his attempt at hitting her with that logic worked. Robin suddenly looked worried. "I'll manage."

"I really wish you'd see a doctor."

"Doctors ask questions."

"I know one who won't. He works out of St Vincent's. We grew up together."

Robin bit her lip. "We'll talk about it tomorrow."

Alek gently moved her ankle out of his lap and onto the sofa cushion. "I really can't stay, Robin."

Suddenly the look of pain in her eyes was replaced by the daunting look of complete panic. Had she not been injured, Alek was afraid she might have sprung right into his lap. A thousand thoughts seem to flit across her eyes, as if she were desperately seeking something that would hold him, something...anything that would make him stay, anything at all. Then she settled down and lowered her eyes. "Look...I'm asking you to stay for Danny's sake, not mine. I can take care of myself. It's just...I can't protect him from Kage. I can't fight something like that, you know?"

"And you think I can."

Her watery eyes opened. "You're a slayer." She seemed to gather her courage. Then she said, "I don't have very much...but I'll give you anything you want as payment. Anything you need. Whatever it is..."

He knew what she meant.

"I'm not like Kage," he said.

"Charlie called you a banpaia. A vampire."

"I'm not a vampire."

For a moment she frowned, and then her face softened and a look of surprising relief filled it up. "But

you are a slayer."

"Yes. Not all vampire slayers are vampires."

Robin smiled. "Please stay? Just for tonight?"

Alek watched her face a moment. Then he got up off the sofa and wandered to the window. It looked out over a dead end alley. Secluded. Fire escape several floors below. Cornices here. Even gargoyles, which were perfect for purchase. It was like welcoming Kage right into her apartment. After hesitating a moment more, he said, "Just for tonight."

11

It was the shuffling sound that woke him. He sat up in the antique rocking chair--seemingly the only decent piece of furniture in the whole seedy flat--and blinked at the bright blue light of the silent television. He looked toward the door of the bedroom where Robin and Danny slept. It was sensibly closed as it had been when Robin went to bed. A few hours earlier she had put Danny to bed, then stood in the living room as if expecting Alek to pounce on her the moment Danny was out of sight. When he wished her a good night and sat down in the rocker and turned the archaic television on to an old movie channel, she almost seemed relieved. Relieved and maybe a touch disappointed.

No...he didn't believe that.

The sound again. From outside the window.

The fire escape, Beloved.

I hear it.

He drew his sword and moved silently to the window. He stayed to one side and discreetly lifted the tattered curtain. Someone was indeed standing on the fire escape. He could see their shadow reflected against the bricks. Then the someone seemed to sense his presence. A moment later the shadow escaped under the eaves.

Alek climbed out onto the rusted grill of the fire escape. He scraped the blade of his sword shrilly against the iron and saw the shadow shiver in response. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the quag-like darkness under the overhanging eaves, but very shortly thereafter he realized what it was. Not a slayer, thank God.

Instead, a very slight--and very unthreatening--little figure crouched against the bricks.

"Danny..."

"You gonna tell Mom?" the boy asked.

Alek climbed out over the cornice of the building and under the eaves and crouched down, resting the sword on his thigh. "Not if you come back inside."

Danny looked at him with his big boyish tear-stained eyes but didn't make any move. That left Alek at a loss for what to do. A part of him wanted to fetch Robin and let her deal with the boy--but she was sound asleep. And anyway, he could handle this. It was just a boy, after all, not some bloodthirsty night warrior he was facing.

A scared little boy.

"You shouldn't cry," Alek said. "Your mother needs you strong."

"You sound like Dad. I miss him. He says warriors don't cry. Ever."

Alek thought about that, then pointed to his chest. "They do. But only here."

Danny smiled and sniffed, the tears suddenly vanishing. "You're cool. But your face is weird. Like a mask."

Alek smiled in return. And then Danny touched his face as if to confirm that it was indeed real and not a mask. He watched the boy's face, the odd contentment there, and wondered about him. What he saw. What could he possibly think "cool" about his wan white face?

But then he saw the fear return...the hard, undying fear...the child-fear of monsters and the dark. And his heart jumped in his chest a moment before he felt the vampiric presence wrapped him in panic and the shadow fell swiftly over them both. Danger! He jerked backward off the ledge of the building in a swan dive. Wind hit him like knives, tearing through his clothes and hair until he managed to somehow grab the ledge of the fire escape in mid-fall. Metal ripped into his hands. The jar of his body arrested in free fall was nearly enough to make him lose his lunch. His shoulder muscles tore and instantly mended themselves, making his arms and chest feel as if they were constructed of overstretched taffy. His entire body felt as though it were on fire. He bit his lip to keep from crying out.

A black ninja sword cracked the cornice where he had been standing only moments before, its ebony single edge wickedly sharp--sharp enough to chop loose a chunk of the stonework and flick chips of it into Alek's face. The fact that it had so narrowly missed Alek's head only made his heart clock that much faster in his chest. His blood drummed in tangent with his runaway heart so that he was sure his ribs should burst from it all "Danny!" he rasped through a wind-scorched throat. "Danny...run!"

He was too late. He saw his assailant standing on the edge of the fire escape. He was a small man, dressed all in black silk like a kengo assassin, his face hidden by a chain mail mask. He held Danny with practically no effort at all. And then, with one deft motion of his free hand, he tore away the mask. His face was Kabuki white and devoid of human life, his eyes burning black slits as they opened wide like collapsed stars and began to devour Alek one piece at a time. The vampire was perfect and inhuman and the moment Alek saw those eyes he felt such a despair it was as if he were falling already. All of his strength suddenly wanted to leave his body. All of his life seemed a waste. He closed his eyes against the vampire's power but the haunted, hopeless, completely fated look was imbedded in his memory for all time.

And then it spoke. It. Because it could be nothing else. "The Slayer," it said. "What a find."

Alek grunted as he reassured his grip on the fire escape. As much as he tried, he could not find a toehold

anywhere on the building. He was dangling and in danger and he did not want to see those tragic eyes again, but he was more afraid of not seeing what the vampire had planned next, so he looked. This time the shock of those alien eyes burning against his more mundane ones was lessened because Alek knew what to expect, but the horror of them was still there. And the horror still ate at him like a cancer. "Kage," he managed.

Kage smiled but it was not an evil smile. Evil one could talk to, even reason with to some extent. This was something else. Something worse. Something too old and broken to ever be called Evil. "I'm glad we've been introduced. Now you can die," he suggested.

"No."

"Let go," Kage said conversationally.

For a split second Kage's suggestion made perfect sense to Alek and he nearly did so. He nearly let go, because letting go was what had to be done. Letting go was what knocked on his brain like something important he had forgotten to do. Then he remembered the fall would most likely kill him and he chose to hang on instead.

"Fall." Kage's voice was like a hammer.

"No," Alek whimpered.

Kage stepped on Alek's hands where they gripped the ledge like a pair of vices.

Alek grimaced as he felt his finger bones grate under Kage's heel. Agony zagged in random patterns up his arms and made the sweat break out all over his skin. He was going to fall now for sure, whether he did it himself or not. He was going to fall...unless he could distract Kage long enough to escape. And that meant going straight for the heart. "Like Takara, Kage," Alek whispered, "...all tricks and no skill..."

Rage turned Kage's eyes blood red. He kicked Alek in the chin.

Alek's head snapped back and he nearly lost his hold on the fire escape. But the kick had the advantage that it cleared his mind as well and it was sheer stubborn will alone that kept his hands from spasming and letting go of the edge. He wish he knew how far down was; he wished he knew what was done there so he wasn't liable to land on anything that would permanently damage him...

Kage, frustrated beyond words, beyond all control, threw the boy down so he could grip the black ninja sword in both hands. He roared as he prepared to swing the sword.

Of course he wanted Alek to hang on now. Hang on...so he would lose his head.

Alek let go instead. A scream of wind rushed up around him as he dropped the ten or more stories to the alley floor below. He heard and felt Debra cry out inside his head. She didn't like what she saw down there--and now, neither did he, and he regretted every letting go of the fire escape in the first place, until...

...until his coat caught on the head of a gargoyle waterspout. The leather held only a moment before shredding but it did its job nonetheless: his momentum was temporarily halted and he twisted like a cat in midair and tumble down onto his hands and knees just to the lee side of a wrought iron spoke fence at the base of the building.

Iron. One foot in the wrong direction and he would have had nothing to worry about. Ever again.

But there wasn't time to contemplate that. Kage was still on the ledge.

And Kage still had Danny.

Drawing his sword, Alek threw it like a javelin at the dark figure standing at the top of the fire escape. Vampires and their kin had no special strength that he had ever known about or experienced. But one did not need strength where this sword was concerned. The Double Serpent Katana did as he wanted it to: impaling Kage through the middle and pinning him to the outside wall of the building like a bug on a board.

Kage roared and released his hold on Danny. For a moment Danny looked bewildered by it all, but in mere seconds his good city-wrought survival instincts kicked in and he bolted for the open window into the apartment. Kage continued to struggle like an impaled insect, but his cries had fallen into low animal-like whimpers by then. His rage and pain were almost palpable on the dirty city wind. He gripped the sword in both hands, trying to pull it from the wall and from himself, but the sword was anchored solid by a force far greater than his own. It would not let him go until Alek willed it.

It took painfully long time for Alek to climb the face of the building--by now he was getting very tired of all this endless excitement--but climb it he did, until he was over the ledge of the fire escape and facing Kage eye to eye.

"You haven't won," Kage said, panted, strings of blood frothing from his mouth.

Alek took the hilt of the sword in his hand. "If I let you go, you'll go away?"

Kage's black eyes narrowed, bleeding. He knew he was defeated for the moment. Even a creature such as he was, with his terrible strength, would not be able to continue fighting with a sword wound as great as this through his belly. He would need to feed. He would need to recover. He said, "You have no idea what you have become involved in. You had better finish me off now because next time we meet, Slayer, I shall tear you apart for what you have done."

Alek eyed the vampire. "What I've done to Ashikawa...or what I've done to you?"

For a moment Kage held Alek's eyes. Despite what had happened two years ago, despite the bitter blood between them, he really did not want to kill Kage. And he knew why. Kage's power, his influence, was legendary even among the masters. But it was more than that. Alek had accidentally started this conflict. This was not like fighting Samson or the hordes of other glory-seekers. He did not want Kage dead and Kage knew it, which was why he used his influence so sparingly. Vampires didn't lie and manipulate. That was a fallacy. They did not make you do anything you didn't already want to do--or anything you did not.

Alek sighed. "Go home, Kage. I'm protecting Robin from your master."

And with that, he wrenched the sword free. Kage dropped forward onto his knees, doubled over in pain, perhaps waiting--maybe hoping?--for the coup de grace to fall upon him. Alek slipped back inside the apartment instead and locked the window. They would have their inevitable conflict but it would not be here and it would not be now.

Several hours had passed since dawn peaked. Kage was usually long asleep by now. It was not that he feared the sun necessarily, as his kind was reputed to do. It was not that he feared some kind of spectacular horror-movie death--but being what he was did have its disadvantages. His kind of people were extraordinarily sensitive to sunlight. Their skin cooked in it. But it was worse on the eyes. Sunlight could cause irreparable damage to their overlarge irises. Cataracts. Blindness, temporary or permanent, depending on the exposure. It had not been like that centuries ago. There had been a time once spoken of when his kind walked freely in the light. No more. The humans had harmed the earth too badly for that to ever happen again. But through the goodness of his masters--how many had there been? Countless, surely--Kage had never had to worry about the sun. In the homeland, the Shoguns had allotted him massive underground apartments where he was shielded by stone and earth from the killing rays of daylight.

Back then. When he had served them.

Now he served the new Monarchy, the Yakuza here in America.

But the Ryuujin was no different, no less good to him. He had built an enormous complex right under his own manor and annexed it to a long-dead sub line for Kage's sake. Kage lived safely in a catacomb of cool, perpetually dark rooms full of the most luxuriant things the master could find. The master spared no expense on his behalf. He was given luxury, honor, and a plethora of men and women he could love, kill, eat or fuck according to his needs.

Everything he could desire or wish for...and still he had failed the master. Which was why he could not now sleep. Instead he sat and stared at the walls. There were no rice-paper shoji screens here to separate the rooms as there were above. There were no tatami mats covering the floor. There were scented candles, but these Kage used for illumination rather than ceremony. He had electric lights, even modern conveniences, but he avoided such things with a religious paranoia he had never himself completely understood. Nothing of the homeland lurked here. Instead, he had decorated it in the Victorian style--an extravagant glory of heavy crimson drapes, brass furnishings, divans, and even a samovar, though it was of Middle-Eastern origin, not Asian. And, oh, how the Ryuujin found that perpetually amusing about him.

Except now, as the master stepped into Kage's quarters. He seldom encroached on Kage's private domain, so Kage could feel the weight of his master's urgency and worry. He looked up but did not rise to stand before the master. For one thing, the master did not enjoy that. For another, he had little strength to do so. "You do me no honor, Kage," the master said. "Hiding here. You make me think of Charlie."

"I have no honor. I failed you. I am nothing."

The Ryuujin sighed and it was the most terrible sound Kage had ever heard. The sound of his own soldiers falling in battle could not compare to it.

"The Slayer is a worthy adversary, nothing more," said the Ryuujin as he glanced at the portrait over the mantel and the bookshelves on the walls and the other big duffy Victorian things he couldn't understand Kage's affection for. "You will have another chance."

"He let me live," Kage said. "You know what that means."

"This is America. It doesn't mean anything." The Ryuujin looked again at the portrait set above the mantel, as if drawn to it. It was set in an oval frame and surrounded by a pair of tachis, Japanese ceremonial long swords. It was the portrait of a young Asian woman on horseback, clearly an antique as the rest of the flat was. The woman was in a riding habit, proud, powerful, and eternal. Yet Kage sensed what the Ryuujin saw in it because it was his own sensation: grief, remembrance. Loss. Failure of the worse kind. Failure that had started with that woman. He turned to look at Kage, a question at the tip of his tongue. But the moment their eyes met, the master let the question drop. He must look a fright indeed for that to have happened, Kage reflected. His master had always been curious about the portrait.

"Well, then," said the Ryuujin. He lit a cigarette. He never did that unless his concentration was very deep. He was so American in his own way, even though Americanism repulsed him when he faced it in other Japanese. "Let me know when you are done feeling sorry for yourself. We have much to prepare for, and I need both you and Kurayami prepared for the coming war."

War. How many wars? How much loss? He almost felt compelled to ask the portrait.

How many wars, Takara? How many masters before my honor is returned to me? How much will you demand of me?

What a relief when the master left the flat at last. It was like a part of the failure leaving his miserable self alone. Touching his stomach to make certain the wound was healed enough for him to move, Kage made his sluggish way to the mantel. He had fed heavily in the last few hours--two women and a man, over six gallons of blood, so he felt much more himself, if not a little drunk. He hesitated a moment, then fell down upon his knees and stared long and hard at the portrait of the young woman.

How many?

"Will you not just forgive me?" he whispered with tears in his eyes.

13

"Kage is right," Debra said, her expression dark and pensive in Robin's hand mirror. "You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into. You certainly have no taste in women."

"Oh really?" Alek asked.

Debra pouted. She had changed clothing somehow--Alek had yet to discover how someone who was dead could do that, never mind how someone who was dead could communicate with him from across the Web--and now she wore a sheer black negligee with puffed sleeves and a long lace bodice

that revealed more than it hid. Her black hair was down, a wild tangle that made her seem young and innocent despite the scandalous gown. The Debra he remembered. She smirked as his thoughts touched her. Her eyes were a fiery brown tonight as always they were on nights of the Hunter's Moon. Somehow or other--he didn't understand it anymore than he did much else of it--she seemed more powerful on these nights. More real. In fact, on the second night of the Hunter's Moon, when it was brightest and its power the most revealed, he dreamt of strange worlds and awoke in sweats with the insinuating feeling that he was being touched everywhere.

Debra. Her games.

Once he threatened to play them on her, but that did nothing but make her more mischievous. He had since given up. Nothing he had ever said had daunted her rapacious spirit in life, and the same was true now.

He felt an invisible hand brush past his face and shush his hair back.

"Debra," he said, "stop."

Debra gave him her innocent-alluring look.

Alek shook his head. "I'm just protecting her. No need to be jealous."

"Jealous?" Debra cried. This time her touch was hot and whispery, a sharp breath down the front of his shirt. He stood up, dropping the hand mirror to the sofa.

Just in time. Robin was coming back into the living room with a small First Aid kit. She looked at him with some curiosity but said nothing about his somewhat besieged look. "I found some things in the bathroom. Let me see your hands."

"They're fine," he said.

"Sit down," Robin demanded. "I'm in Mommy mode. Let me see your hands."

Alek sat down and obediently showed her his hands. The skin on his palms had been scraped raw, but otherwise he had come away from his tussle with Kage with nothing but a few bruises and scrapes.

"Anyway, this is the least I can do for the man who saved my son," Robin said as she wiped his hands with antiseptic. It wasn't necessary, this nursing, but if it made her feel better, then so be it. He watched Robin attend to him, fascinated by how her hands worked over him, how much care she took. Absently, he wondered if her touch now was similar to the one she would use with one of her clients. He watched her face, her perpetual little frown of concentration. When she caught him watching her he was not even aware of it.

"You have nice hands," she said, her fingers tracing the rough surface of one of them. "I like calloused hands. You must do a lot of...work."

He dropped his eyes.

"You know," she said, "in all the excitement I've completely forgotten to ask you what your name is."

"Alek," he said. "With a 'K'."

Robin smiled. "I like that. I guess I should tell you, it's Robin with a 'Y'."

"Robyn. Oh."

Her hands skated carefully over his palm, and then turned his hand over. "You look all right. I think you'll live. Alek."

"Probably."

She smiled at him. Meekly. From beneath her lashes. Then she spotted the damp spot under his coat. Her eyes frowned that much more in concern.

"It's nothing," he insisted, "Just a little scrape."

"Take off your coat. I want to make sure."

"I don't think..."

"Please."

He was about to protest further, and then realized it would probably not get him very far. He took off his coat. His silk dress shirt was torn and bloodied. But it all looked worse than it actually felt.

"And the shirt."

He gave her a look.

She said, "This is your Mommy speaking. Take off the shirt."

He unbuttoned the shirt without looking at her. Several of the buttons had popped, and one button was caught in the unraveling threads. He wound up ripping that one off too. Then he slid the fabric off his shoulders.

For a moment she simply stared at him and he wondered if that was good or bad. If she liked or was repelled by what she saw. "It looks pretty ugly," she said as she applied antiseptic to the scrape. It was a series of broad abrasions that criss-crossed his rib cage on the left side where he had made contact with the building in his ungainly fall from the fire escape. He hadn't felt them until now...and now, well, he didn't really feel them much anyway.

"Looks can be deceiving," he whispered.

"I know." She stared with rapt attention at his bare chest as she mopped up the threads of blood. No hair grew on his chest or stomach and never had. The only thing to shield him from her was the raven-black hair tangled across his shoulders and down over his skin like see-through lace. He blushed and surely she noticed the blood rising against his white skin. He felt very naked suddenly. Not like a Mommy was attending to him.

"You should get some sleep," he said.

She wore an almost reluctant expression on her face when she stopped and crumpled up the wad of cotton she had used. "Danny has the bed," she said.

He didn't know what that meant, what she was asking, but the smell of the blood in the room, both his and hers, made him crave. After a moment he slipped on his shirt and got up and moved to his rocker in the corner. He sat down and ran his hands over the armrests, feeling the history of the wood while Robyn made up the sofa for sleep. She probably would have just crawled into bed beside Danny, but now she had made that statement about Danny having the bed, and what else could she do to avoid embarrassment?

What else could he do?

Sleep. He was not hurting anymore and with the distance between them the craving began to lose its power, but he was quite tired, and the sight of Robyn lying stretched out on the cushion did make him sleepy just to see it. It was morning and he knew Kage would not return until nightfall. For one thing, it was bright daylight out. For another, Alek had bled here, thereby marking the place and protecting it from entry by most creatures. Kage would not be able to enter here without considerable trouble. Alek didn't know if Edward Ashikawa would send anyone else--maybe someone more human--after Robyn, but he hoped the Dragon King of the Yakuza was too surprised and troubled by Alek's presence and reputation to try anything like that.

In any event, he would be keeping his senses attuned to the whole area, just in case.

Until nightfall. When he had his own plans.

14

It was kind of her to let him use her bedroom to meditate. It helped before a particularly difficult mission. Despite the fact that he still hated Amadeus with all his heart, Alek had to admit that the old Covenmaster had excellent techniques for controlling the craving. Breath. See the energy all about you. Concentrate on the energy. Alek frowned, his eyes sealed tight, teeth locked together. And sealed up in the darkness the way he was he imagined the energy all about his body like a fine white mist. He felt it pour from him and surround him and the sword he knelt in front of. He felt the energy swirl and mate with itself and in time increase in strength and density until it was like an invisible armor through which nothing could penetrate his inner peace.

"What you doing?" Danny asked.

Meditation was a wonderful thing. The only problem with it was that in time he had to return to the ordinary world. He opened his eyes. He might have been annoyed by the interruption...but really, how could such a small, curious creature like Danny annoy him? Always asking why. Wanting to be a warrior.

Alek said, "I was meditating."

He expected the boy to ask what that was, but instead Danny surprised him by nodding. His dark eyes were grave, he said, "Daddy showed me that once. Did your daddy show you?"

"I don't have a daddy."

"No way!" insisted the boy. "Everyone has a daddy."

"I didn't know him," Alek said.

"Oh." The boy seemed to think about that for a moment. Then he nodded as if he understood completely. "Is that why you're always sad?"

Alek smiled. "Who says I'm sad?"

Danny reached out and traced the line of his mouth. Alek didn't quite understand what the boy's fascination with him was, but it was amusing in its way. "This does," he said.

The look of absolute conviction on Danny's face was almost comical.

On a whim, Alek said, "Tell me about your daddy."

Danny brightened. "He's cool. But he and Mommy fought a lot--"

"Danny."

The boy turned to look at Robyn looking tall and scary and Mommy-ish standing in the open door of the bedroom. "Are you disturbing Alek?"

"We were having grown-up talk."

"Oh?" Robyn arched a brow. "Well, I want you to come pick up your toys."

Danny hesitated. "But I want to talk to Uncle Alek s'more."

"Alek doesn't want to talk to you, Danny."

"Yeah he does...so there." Danny blew her a raspberry.

Robyn frowned. "Danny..."

Danny turned to Alek as if seeking support to his claims.

Alek said, "Do as your mother says, Danny."

"I hafta?"

Alek gave him a look. "Please?"

With an exaggerated sigh, Danny huffed off to do as his mother insisted.

When the boy had gone, Alek got up and slipped on his coat.

"You have a good way with Danny," Robyn said. "Do you have kids?"

Alek bit back a smile. "No. No kids."

"Do you want them? I mean, someday?"

He sheathed his sword under the voluminous folds of his long leather greatcoat. "I can't have kids."

"Oh." She looked dumbstruck. "I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "Don't be. It doesn't really bother me." He held her eyes. She seemed ready to ask something more on the subject, so he decided it was time the subject changed. "What happened to Danny's father?"

Robyn went to straighten up the bed. "Oh...I don't know who he was."

"Was Ashikawa good to Danny when you knew him?"

"You ask a lot of useless questions."

"Maybe."

She turned around. For a moment her eyes went everywhere in the room before centering on him. She seemed to decide herself it was time the subject changed. Looking him up and down, she said, "You look like you're going somewhere."

"I am. I want you to take a taxi to this address and stay there with Danny until I rejoin you." He gave her a slip of paper and his house key. He couldn't think of what else to do. The Covenhouse, at least, was safe. Well...safer than here. Since moving into his childhood home the Covenhouse was becoming increasingly his. His house. His lair. Everything in it was a part of him, and that made it difficult for a vampire to approach it. Maybe impossible. That didn't mean Ashikawa couldn't send human agents to take Robyn and her son, but considering the reputation of the house, Alek doubted he would. And bar that, there was Debra, whom he had asked to watch Robyn and her son. Her power was strongest in the house. Debra had huffed and made quite a scene of the imposition, of course, but he knew she would do the job for him. Even if she did believe he had bad taste in women.

Robyn stared at the address. "Edward might have me tailed."

It would take too long to tell the whole truth. And he didn't think Robyn needed the whole truth anyway. So he told her only a part of it. "Edward Ashikawa is who I'm going to see."

Robyn bit her lip. "I wish you wouldn't."

"Just get to the house before nightfall, lock yourself and Danny in, and don't let anyone but myself in."

Robyn only looked at him.

Alek tilted his head. "I will protect you, but you have to let me do this my way. Robyn."

He didn't immediately ride off the Ashikawa manor like a storybook knight-errant on a mission. He was impetuous at times, but not stupid. There were things to do. People to see.

People like the Parisian. He and Jean Paul, the owner and proprietor of the biggest hive of vampires in the Lower East Side, went back a number of years. They were not friends, but Alek counted Jean Paul as one of the few beings in the city of New York who had never actively sought his death. That counted for something. In his years with the Coven, Alek had overlooked many things for Jean Paul's sake. Tonight he intended to call in some of his proverbial markers.

A shadow tagged him within minutes of entering Jean Paul's territory. Alek had detected the vampire's presence long before the creature became aware of him, but Alek was in no hurry. Let it look and feel. By playing their little game of cat and mouse, he was able to hone in on its location like a bat bouncing a sonic signal off a moving victim.

He was annoyed but not really surprised when a razor-edged, stainless steel boomerang shot out at him from the dead end alley he was crossing. He caught the glimmer out of the corner of his eyes, drew his sword and spun all in one smooth steel-and-leather motion, using the flat of the blade to knick the boomerang back to its owner. The shadow slammed itself into a trashcan avoiding the returning weapon. The boomerang sank into the wall of a derelict warehouse and proceeded to drill its way halfway through the two-foot-thick brick outer surface.

"Mako," Alek said, recognizing the Moorish warrior-turned-street-tough almost immediately, if not by appearance, then by weapon. Mako climbed loosely to his feet, whitish eyes flashing like porcelain in his dark, primal face--a look of pain, defiance and malicious discontent that changed to one of all-over animal-surprise when he realized who it was he had just assaulted.

"Shit," he whispered.

"Sacrebleu!" came a harsh male voice from somewhere up-alley. "Mako, my pet, is this how we treat our guests?" The Parisian strolled toward them. He was dressed in his usual immaculate white suit and pressed red tie. His hair was swept away from a cruel and perpetually amused face and glinting grey eyes. His rings glittered and crackled garishly in the spare back alley light, not unlike the brass head of his walking stick.

"I'm sorry if I broke him, JP," Alek said, leaning against the wall, his sword butting his thigh.

"Je m'excuse, monsieur, the help never know their place." Jean Paul gave his thrall one long hard unsmiling look. Mako lost much of his inborn toughness in that instant. Interesting enough, Alek had yet to see a vampire, thrall or enemy, brave enough to challenge Jean Paul to an open fight.

Jean Paul Dae. There were stories. Besides being connected with virtually every important underworld organization in the city, it was said his slight, almost childish figure concealed a psi power so great it could

crack the earth in half like a china plate if he was pushed to it. Alek had never discovered if the rumor was true and had no interest in finding out. After Mako pulled himself together sufficiently to resume his patrol of the outer rim of Jean Paul's territory, Jean Paul proceeded to go about his usual preening session, brushing off invisible lint on his sleeves, straightening creases that never existed anyway in his perfectly tailored clothing. He knew why the Slayer had chosen to visit him and was only waiting for the cue to begin.

Alek got to the point. "I need to find out everything I can about Edward Ashikawa."

"The Dragon Lord of the Yakuza?" Jean Paul sounded surprised. "What is there to say? Boring histoire. Human affairs. Why would you think I would know much about that?" Jean Paul tapped his cane and turned smartly on his heels. "Come."

"I don't," Alek said as they strolled together down the alley. "I only expect you to know about the vampire Kage."

"Un desastre," Jean Paul whispered with wonder. "You speak of a disgusting creature indeed."

"How so?"

Jean Paul paused at the back of the alley and spun his cane in his hands. He narrowed his eyes. "Kage is quite old and has been blood bound to the mortals since his birth, about 1200 AD or so, if the stories are true. Throughout history, he served most of the Shoguns and their clans. After the dynasties were wiped out he proceeded to join himself to the Yakuza. He arrived on the shores of our new country maybe...a hundred years ago? That seems about right. He and Kurayami arrived as escorts of the Ashikawa war clan. Le monstre despicable. To think of his power and how he has wasted it on the pitiful humans he has served all this time. I recall he and Kurayami are often found together in the records."

"Kurayami?"

"Oui. Kage and Kurayami. The Shadow and the Darkness. I bid you take care with those two, monsieur. They are like...la chienne to Ashikawa. Like a pet. Bound to him in all ways. They will protect him even unto their own deaths. And there is a rumor that Kurayami, at least, is...more than Vampire."

"More than Vampire. What does that mean?"

"I do not know, monsieur. The last soul to hunt her never returned to tell his tale." Jean Paul tapped the bricks at his back with the head of his cane. "I can tell you nothing more. Quelle tragedie."

"Thank you, JP," Alek said, even as a certain line of thinking involving Robyn and her son began to take root deep inside of him. .

As the bricks began to slide back to reveal a narrow fissure in the wall, Jean Paul said, "Can I not tempt you into even the smallest visit into the private desmonde?" He made a gesture toward the entrance. The scent of freshly spilt blood and willing flesh was strong and pulsing in the smoky, reddish atmosphere of the club. Even from out here Alek could feel its penetration. Its heat.

The craving returned with a vengeance.

"Perhaps another time," he said politely.

"Be assured I will hold you to that promise," Jean Paul said.

"But I never promised..." Alek began. He was aware that he had started breathing automatically through his mouth as the taste of the club reached him like fingers, caressing. Eden in a single breath, as Amadeus once warned him. And Eden had the serpent.

Jean Paul smiled demurely. "Please remember: the Pit is always open to you, monsieur," said the master of the hive. Maybe it was meant to sound like a harmless invitation, innocent even. Yet the splinter of mischief in Jean Paul's bloodshot eyes said worlds more.

16

It was nightfall when Alek arrived at the Ashikawa mansion. It didn't look like a fortress, not to the untrained eye. It looked like a ridiculously expensive country club. It just happened to have a twelve-foot-tall rock wall around it and a black iron automatic gate and a gatekeeper's booth. Hidden along the walls, where you could clearly see them if you were looking, were electric wires, electric lights, and penetration sensors. A ridiculously expensive fortress, then. As the taxi let him off at the curb, he noticed the heavy in the booth was looking around pensively as if the gentleman were expecting a meteor to hit the house at any point. Alek didn't recognize this one or any of the others mulling about the grounds with their hands in their coats from the night before. These were all older, professional barbarians. Alek hesitated a moment, feeling, smelling. Human. All of them.

Human...but still waiting for his arrival. He felt exposed, unclothed somehow. The desire to rush home was almost oppressive but he pushed it down into the abyss where he kept his usual fears and cravings and all his serpentine emotions. He reminded himself that he and Edward Ashikawa staying in their respective corners would do nothing for the situation at hand. Nothing but intensify it.

The gatekeeper spotted him and started talking into a discreet cell phone-type-thing as his eyes followed Alek's long-coated approach.

He reached the gate.

"You have business here?" the man asked.

Alek paused. "I do."

"Is someone expecting you?"

"Edward Ashikawa. Kage."

For a moment the gatekeeper seemed surprised that Alek should know his hosts by name. He seemed confused by the whole thing. Then he said, clearly, into the phone. "He's here."

"I see I'm expected."

The gatekeeper ignored Alek's rib and waited for a response in the ear bud he wore. Yet his eyes kept jumping back to Alek as he received his instructions, like a kid in a zoo watching an exotic animal from behind bars.

Alek decided to be helpful. "Not banpaia...dhampir," he informed the man. "Ask Kage all the details."

The iron gate slid open and the man stood back. Far back.

Alek stepped onto the brick path that led to the house. The other heavies had disappeared inside the house but the feeling of a thousand eyes on him remained. As if to prove the theory true, the grand front door opened moments before Alek reached it and a professional butler--or was he a henchmen in a really nice suit?--let him into a foyer the size of a dance hall. The house was many times larger than the Covenhouse, and looked and smelled newer in that white plaster-and-brass pre-fabricated way. The foyer was outfitted with divans, statues and a working fountain. Stairways of blocked glass swept up and away to secret upper floors. Hallways led off in an impressive and confusing warren to other places.

The butler/henchman politely asked that Alek remove any firearms he had.

Alek showed the man the inside of his coat.

"I need to take that," the butler/henchman said.

"You do and I'll rip your face off."

The man blanched but made no move take it.

Good.

The man indicated a pair of cut glass French doors that led to a sea of muted, glossy lights. Alek headed that way and soon found himself in a vast courtyard. Multileveled terraces sprawled throughout the sculptured gardens and running brooks. Peahens moved here and about among the beds of flowers or nested in the trees growing around small ponds laden with floating orchids. And yet, all of it seemed to be a mere frame for the massive marble fountain that was practically an epic unto itself--a sculpted young Asian girl mourning by a brook while a great fish leaped from the water, the girl's two jealous sisters looking on. It was a story Alek had encountered once, a Cinderella tale from the Orient he couldn't quite place the name of anymore...

"The fish's name was Goldeneyes," said Edward Ashikawa as he emerged into the artificial lights of the courtyard. "The young maid's sister were jealous of her friendship with the mystical fish and served him up to her."

Alek looked closely at the fountain. "Family."

With a wry smile, Ashikawa led the way to a gazebo where a traditional Japanese tea arrangement was set. Alek had been dimly aware of a presence here since the beginning, but since it was not the presence of a vampire, he had dismissed it as imminently dangerous. Now he was not so sure. He studied his host. Edward Ashikawa was tall, modern, young-old, of mixed Japanese-Caucasian decent, magnetic and seemingly genial. Yet Alek could feel his presence with every nerve reaching.

"I suppose it doesn't matter," Alek said as he accepted the Dragon Lord's invitation to join him

in tea. It was rice tea, traditionally used to seal friendships--or served during great assassinations. Alek sipped the tea the butler/henchman served. He decided he wasn't much worried about poisons or such. Edward Ashikawa seemed more sporting than that.

"Family," Ashikawa stated. "I tend to believe in it. Perhaps you should too."

Alek tilted his head, his eyes tracking the movements of the peahens out of the corner of his eyes.

"You keep expecting an attack," Ashikawa said. "Interesting."

"The circumstances of our meeting are a little odd, Ryuujin."

Ashikawa placed his white silk napkin in his lap. "Are you Japanese?"

Alek looked at the man. "I don't know. I don't think so."

"You're my first dhampir," Ashikawa said judiciously.

Don't trust him, Debra said.

I'm not.

"We're known to be unpredictable," Alek admitted. "Unlike Kage."

As Alek had anticipated, the declaration surprised Ashikawa. He had not expected Alek would draw Kage into their conversation so quickly or that Alek would be so direct. Ashikawa's mouth ticked up at one corner but there was little humor in the expression. "No one has given Kage a challenge in over a hundred years."

Alek had been trying to sense whether the vampire was near since entering the manor, but so far he had come up with nothing. "Unfortunately."

"You know," Ashikawa said, setting his tea cup back on the saucer, "if we are both alive when this is through, I will certainly be tempted to try and take you into my employment."

This time Alek was surprised. Raising his eyebrows, he asked, "And what makes you think I'm 'unemployed'?"

"You don't have a master anymore. The slayers want you dead. The Vatican wishes you never existed at all."

"I don't want a master," Alek said, losing his temper. He fixed Ashikawa with a look. "In any event, I'm a rogue. You don't want me around. It's not healthy."

Ashikawa's eyes narrowed. "That could be conceived as a threat, you realize."

"I don't make threats," Alek said. "I make promises. And I promise you the only way you'll be rid of me is to leave Robyn and her son alone."

"And then...?"

"And then I can stay in my world and you can stay in yours."

"I am afraid, dhampir, that our worlds overlap at the moment." He raised his own eyebrows as if mocking Alek. "In fact, I'm afraid to say our worlds, yours and mine, are more similar than dissimilar. We both live by the sword, do we not?"

"Robyn does not. She has no part in this."

"She has something that belongs to me. I want it back. She gives it back and she can go free."

Alek smiled humorlessly. "We are men of action, Mr. Ashikawa. Lies do not become us."

"Empathy?"

"Among other things."

"Oh yes. I'd nearly forgotten about your voice from beyond the Web."

Alek frowned. "How much do you know about me?"

"Enough."

"Then you know what I'll do if you don't give Robyn up."

"Start a war?"

"I have in the past."

"Is she truly worth it?"

Alek set his teacup clattering down on the saucer and stood up.

"I do admire your courage," Ashikawa said. "Other men are mute before me."

Alek looked at him. "I'm not a man."

"And so again I ask you: Is Robyn worth this? She is not like you. She is not part of your world. In fact, you haven't the slightest idea of who or what she is. She may not be what you think, dhampir."

Alek thought about that. "She doesn't belong in your world, either." He hesitated, and then told the truth. "You're right about one thing. Men like us live by the sword, and in time we all go down. But that doesn't give us the right to take innocents with us."

Ashikawa's face was a stone. "I only want what's mine."

"If I get the tapes and hand deliver them to you, will you let Robyn go then?"

Edward Ashikawa, Grand Dragon of the Yakuza, frowned and for a moment he looked almost puzzled. Then he smiled and gave Alek an almost imperceptible nod. "Well...I think that's fair."

Alek drew his coat close and turned to leave the garden.

That was when he spotted the mist seeping across the ground. It covered at least half of the courtyard and obliterated the lights. Before he knew what was happening he was standing knee-deep in it. And it was cold. Unnatural. He could feel no vampire-threat from it, yet this was wrong, this mist. He backed up but found the mist would not give. He might as well be slogged in quicksand. He turned to look at Ashikawa.

The Dragon Lord was on his feet, still holding his teacup in hand. He said, casually. "You were expecting Kage, and that I was expecting. But Kage is a barbarian. Kurayami is much more subtle, don't you agree?"

Kurayami.

Ashikawa saw the question in Alek's eyes. "She is a gaki. A mist vampire that once guarded the temples and gardens of ancient Tibet. The Shao-Lin monks called her The Floating Dragon. Do you see why?"

Alek spun around just in time to see the mist lift. He unsheathed his sword, but the moment he had it in hand it was wrenched from his grip by powerful invisible hands and he saw it disappear into the dark. What the...? He tried to reach for the sword with his mind, but this time, for the first time ever, it was as if something blocked him from it. He could not feel it.

Slowly, cunningly, the mist began building a wall around him.

Alek backed away from it.

Beloved, behind you!

Again Alek spun around only to spot two great silvery disembodied eyes opening like the irises of the most beautiful and deadly flowers he had ever encountered. He retreated from them, but it was more than fear of the unknown. The longer he looked at those eyes the quicker all the many years of discipline that controlled his fears and hungers came undone by that voracious gaze. He wanted--needed--to run, somewhere, anywhere, but there was nowhere to go, as trapped as he was in the eye of the storm. Kurayami had him fenced in on all sides. He couldn't see a thing through the mist-and he did not want to charge ahead and touch the misty walls the creature had erected around him. There was something so cold and alone about those eyes. Tears like rain. Hunger unfulfilled. Immortal. It was like Kage's power, but more so, because the sorrow came from within himself, called forth by a voice he could not resist.

Kurayami's great unblinking eyes smiled sorrowfully and her suffering hunger drove him to his knees.

"Ashikawa!" Alek cried.

He can hear you not, dhampir, came a voice. It was not Debra's, yet it was every bit as strong and sensual in his head. This one was much younger, the lilting voice of a little girl distorted by the echoes of time and seduction. Only Kurayami can hear you. Now there is nothing.

No, he told her. There is me!

Kurayami laughed as if that meant nothing to her and her laughter was like the sound of evening rain and mourning doves. The sound beat him down. And before Alek had a chance to answer, to even react, the Floating Dragon had swept him up in her iron grasp.

17

Robyn Wright was awakened by a sound outside the subway car, a screeking noise. Beside her slept her little boy, Danny. For a while she couldn't understand why the sound had awakened her. It wasn't loud. But it was peculiar, even in a city as peculiar as New York. The sound of nails scraping on a blade. She looked around the car, at all the other passengers. The train had an odd mixture of homeless drunks, hip young executive types with portfolios, and teens with drunken, dangerous eyes. When she looked at them they looked back at her with their usual city-reserve of angst. She turned around, simultaneously finding the brass knuckles in her purse and looking through the hand-smeary window.

But all she saw was the dizzy blur of the tunnel, the dirty steam, the stations and the people with their coats blown by the passing line. Maybe she was dreaming. Nightmaring. Maybe she should have taken a cab and stayed out of the underground. But it wasn't night and the city belonged to the humans. Still...she had an uneasy feeling. Oh what difference did it make? At least she wasn't alone. And the vampires wouldn't attack her during the day. She had thought to take a cab, really she did, but then she remembered a lot of horror movies where the cabbie turned out to be a human familiar or whatever it was and had decided to go this route instead.

For a long time she sat there, watching the line, reasoning, and yet expecting to see someone. But no one was there. Everything was so goddamn normal. She wondered briefly where Alek was, what he was doing. She thought about Edward Ashikawa and she shuddered. Finally, she returned back in her seat.

Kage was standing there in his black coat and vampire-white skin, standing amidst the other passengers. He had been there the whole time, she supposed, Charlie behind him. It was only now that he chose that she see them. And that was terrifically horrible to see. But what worse was that he had her sleeping son in his arms, Danny's head cushioned against his inhuman heart. She expected it. She was appalled to see her son lying so still in the vampire's arms and sucking his thumb as if he were safe at home in bed, a victim of Kage's iron will, but she was not afraid. She had seen too much, gone too far, to ever be afraid again.

"You bastard...let Danny go!" she cried as she jumped to her feet, surprised by her own rage. The other passengers looked her way like she was crazy. Like she was talking to herself. And she probably was, in their perspective. She was crazy, but she was crazy with rage.

Kage stared blankly at her through his black glasses. She saw herself in them, her own pale, incoherent anger that was nothing but a mask to hide the primal, underlying fear all her kind had for monsters. After a moment he seemed to come to a decision, and without warning he turned in his long coat and grabbed and missed one of a pair of homeless men huddled together on the seat behind him. At least...Robyn thought he missed. Then she saw one of the homeless men seem to fold in on himself, his eyes big and angry and mystified as his head dropped into his hands like a toppling stone. He died clutching it while the other passengers jumped away from the spillage of blood like a flock of frightened

animals scenting an unseen predator in their midst.

Robyn was numb. Somebody's elbow slammed into her shoulder, knocking her back into her seat. She tried to move, but the press of bodies was too great.

Eruption.

Kage turned back, his black glasses ribbed with droplets of crimson. He smiled. Smiled and showed her his tiny yellow cattish teeth.

Robyn screamed, her whole body agonized with the noise. She screamed and twisted against the frightened flock of passengers until arms--Charlie's arms--suddenly took her from behind and she folded but was unable to slump to the floor like the dead man. Dead man. She looked again at Kage--really she had never stopped--and the site of him tore a new scream her throat and she began to thrash but the arms around her were too strong and all she managed to do was bash her skull repeatedly against Charlie's chin until he grunted and the rapid impacts began to make darkness leak into her eyes like ink.

"Robyn," said Kage with that cattish smile.

Robyn stopped and tried to kick out, twisting in Charlie's arms, the need to survive so strong she could do nothing to stop herself. Charlie was human. Charlie could be harmed. She thought about that and decided she desperately needed to land the brass knuckles in a vulnerable spot. SING, she thought. Solo plexus, instep, nose or groin. The streets had taught her well. Yet right now she simply could not think, could not stop twisting and trying to escape.

Still holding her son with practically no effort at all, Kage stepped over the headless dead man and reached for someone in a business suit who had clambered against the sub wall to escape the chaos. Kage grabbed the man by the cheek, racking the man's skull against the wall over and over until the spattered shatterproof glass broke and the man's head crumpled apart like a relic in Kage's hand. "Robyn," he growled as he continued to pound the remainder of the skull, even as the rest of the body broke away against the dented tin can wall.

Robyn stopped fighting, yet her body continued to vibrate and sweat and heave with the fear and the endless nightmare.

Kage dropped what he held--crushed bone, red tissue, little more than that--and turned his attention fully on her. Shaking the gore off his hands, he peeled off his glasses. The naked black burning eyes on her were worse than the sight of the mashed head and body of the second man. I won't look, she promised herself, I...will...not...look, goddamnit!

And yet she did, drawn as if by a wire to Kage's face, those holes through eternity that passed for eyes. She felt the room constrict around her to the size of those eyes, those immortal, utterly alien eyes.

Kage blinked as his concentration was broken by the whimpers ringing out. Robyn had been spared being sucked down that damned black hole by a woman trying to crawl between them to the far side of the train on her hands and knees. She was sloshing through the blood and bodies scattered across the floor. What does she expect to do? Robyn thought numbly. Escape? She wanted to laugh at the woman and tell her what a damned fool she was.

But then Kage, her Danny still balanced expertly on his shoulder, reached down and grabbed the

woman by the spine as if she had a handle, lifted her up, and slammed her down into the muck of the dead men. The woman stopped trying to escape but she didn't stop the whimpering. Again Kage wrenched her up by the cord of her spin. But this time, instead of slamming her into the floor again, he bit through the crazed flay of the woman's hair and into the back of her neck. Robyn heard two things at once: an audible crunch that echoed about the small space like a thunderclap and a muffled "Jesus," in her ear from Charlie. And then the body of the woman dropped lifelessly to the floor at Kage's feet.

Kage looked up, all bloody smiles and hypnotic gaze, but his feral charms were useless against her this time.

Robyn laughed as she felt the room spin out of control and all feeling left her body at once. She heard rather than felt the brass knuckles clunk to the floor at her feet. She knew Charlie's hands were on her, constricting her, but she couldn't feel them. She couldn't feel anything. It was as if she were being suspended in the dark from some great far point, unable to touch the ground.

Kage growled as he approached her, his spittle full of blood and bones.

And then Robyn's world turned black as she escaped Kage for another place.

18

She came to very slowly. She was lying on a strange bed in a strange room. There were elephants painted on silk shoji screens and she remembered that was a sign of good luck. Except she had an enormous headache beating at all sides of her skull, as if the elephants had been trotting through her head. Or rather--as if she had had one too many vodkas before going to bed. Except she had not. She had not worked tonight. She had not drunk. She had not slept. She had been on the subway with Danny...and then...

She suddenly sat bolt upright and the motion was too much for her aching head and a wave of nausea overcame her. Robyn turned her head and vomited all over the side of the bed she was lying on. Then she choked and wiped her mouth on the silk spread. The vomiting was terrible but at least it cleared her head somewhat. She could think and she could remember.

She always threw up when Kage turned his will on her like that.

Kage...

Then she recalled everything, the nightmare onboard the subway, the blood-slathered nightmare that walked like a man. She shuddered uncontrollably when she thought about the thing. Thing. It didn't deserve to be called a man, an animal or anything else. It wasn't even a he. Just a thing. An It.

Kage the It. The horrible, immortal It.

She nearly laughed at that musing, then wondered what the fuck was so funny about death and vampires. She looked around the room, trying to anchor herself in the now, but for a moment she barely

recognized her surroundings. She was in a vast bedchamber of the Ryuujuu, the palace of the Dragon King of the Yakuza. She recognized too much of Edward in the furnishings of the place, even in the dark, even in this room she had never slept in before. She studied it, the silk and sapphire bedclothes, the rice paper screens and decorative wall fans and the fragile and heavily veined marble pottery with its assembly of peacock feathers. So much beauty, she reflected, to hide so much ugliness beneath.

She tested herself on her feet. She still felt drunk or sick, like how she felt just before she got a bad case of the flu. Adjoining the room was an elaborate brass and marble bathroom and--more importantly--a big bottle of painkillers. She took six, then slumped down against the soaking tub, her cheek numbing against the cold bone-white porcelain. And she wondered. She wondered where Danny was. She wondered if Alek would come for her, trapped as she was in the enemy's camp. She wondered what time it was and how long she had been out. Finally, the wondering was too much and that got her going and creeping to the door to discover what had become of everyone.

The door was unlocked and no one appeared to be in the hall outside. But Robyn knew she was being watched. Edward was always watching. He and Kage. They trusted no one. She wandered down a hall. Now she recognized the wing of the house she had been deposited in. Taking a connecting hallway down to a flight of stairs, she wound her way to the ground floor and headed for the study. Along the way she passed the foyer and checked the front door. Locked. Unsurprised by that, she went on into Edward's study.

He was alone. He was dressed in a flowing black kimono embroidered with gold lotus. He had a razor-sharp katana long sword tucked into his red sash. She remembered he always wore the katana, even around the house. He looked ready for battle, as always. Yet he was sitting very quietly on the window seat, his attention fixed on the courtyard beyond. He had a glass of scotch in one hand but it looked untouched. For a moment Robyn looked around, certain she would see Kage here somewhere, lurking in some corner--Kage had surely been the one to pour his master the scotch, after all--yet he was conspicuously absent.

"Where's Danny?" Robyn whispered. She was so scared, yet so tired too.

Edward never looked away from the window. "Safe. Kage is looking after him."

"I want to see my son, Edward."

Edward sighed. "Do you honestly think I would harm Danny?"

Tears welled up in Robyn's eyes, yet they were not tears of worry. No, she seriously doubted Edward would harm Danny. Nevertheless, she was helpless, as helpless as Danny was. The fatigue was suddenly too much. The horror. There was no escape from Edward Ashikawa. No escape from this fucking city at all. "Goddamn you," she said, hoarse. "I don't know what you're capable of anymore. I don't know who you are. You're as alien to me as Kage."

Edward turned to her, stunned. "How dare you damn me after what you have done," he whispered. "After how you betrayed me."

She almost laughed. She wanted to dash that Waterford crystal out of Edward's hand, wanted to grind the glass to shards and stab it through that empty place in his chest that passed for a heart. The place where once a heart had beat, a very long time ago. She sank bonelessly into a chair and lit a cigarette to keep from shaking. Funny, but Edward had never smoked until she came into his life. They had shared so much of themselves with each other. It had beat for her once in that same long ago time, his heart. It had.

But that was what the men told you, she reminded herself. They said I love you just before they hurt you. That was their way. That was the way of the world.

And she had been a fool to forget that.

The cigarette would not light. The pack had been too dampened by her tears.

"I only want to be free of you, you bastard!" she wept suddenly, almost hysterical. She dashed the cigarettes and lighter to the floor. "How dare you hold me against my will!"

Edward's eyes halved and his glass seemed to sing with some unspent power. "You love him."

Robyn ran her hands through her hair. "Who?" she spat.

"Your beautiful lover, your knight in shining armor," Edward whispered savagely. "I mean your dhampir."

Robyn shook her head, mystified.

"You don't know."

"Know what?" she demanded, standing up.

Edward flashed his cold eyes at her, and then turned back to the window. After a moment, he signaled her to join him. Robyn was completely reluctant. It was a trick. It had to be. Men were good at that, tricking. Tricking and hurting. But after a few passing minutes she realized there really was something out there, something going on in the courtyard interesting enough to capture his attention. No small feat where Edward Ashikawa was concerned. He had seen it all. There was little that interested him anymore.

The curiosity and the silence pressed in and forced her forward. Robyn crossed the room until she was a safe distance from Edward--what distance would that be? her cynical mind chided--but was still able to peer through the grand bay window. Down there was Edward's magnificent courtyard, the trees and fountains she knew so well. The peahens. But there was also a powerful mist blanketing the earth. As Robyn watched it twist and flow, she thought she saw creatures moving at the edges of it, flickering like lightning, yet she could only see them clearly out of the corners of her eyes.

So it was no normal mist.

It was Kurayami, the Floating Dragon.

And she had a victim tonight. Two to be exact.

The one victim was human. Robyn could tell by the ghastly site of him, how his emaciated figure hung like a coat on a rack within the mist, his face white and lifeless, his limbs mere sticks, his skin as brittle as old leather as the gaki sucked the life and juices slowly and painfully from his once-young body. Soon it would drop to the ground, a body no longer, a mere crispy husk, his life, his very soul, stolen to feed Edward's ravenous mist vampire. Robyn did not know the man personally who had become Kurayami's latest victim, but she thought she recognized him from one of Edward's offices as someone who had worked for him. Someone who had done some menial tasks for him or something. Someone who had betrayed him, she supposed.

But the other one...the leather greatcoat, the long lacy-black hair, the face and hands so perfect like rare white jade...

"Jesus," Robyn whispered. "Let him go, Edward," she said. "Let him fucking go, Goddamn you!" She nearly grabbed Edward's arm, then changed her mind at the last moment and grabbed a hold of the window seat instead. There were tears in her eyes, despite her will--her wanting--to halt them, and they turned the whole scene into an eerie, dreamlike mosaic.

"You truly love him," Edward said, his voice dead like his eyes.

"Please don't kill him," Robyn said, hating the childlike, pleading quality of her voice, hating it. "Please...I'll stay with you and do what you want, but don't harm him."

"Robyn," Edward said with enormous patience, "does he look harmed to you?" He indicated the whole lurid scene with his upraised glass. "You've slept a whole day, my dear. In fact, that other unfortunate young man has been here for only a fourth of the time your valiant knight has. Kurayami has had the dhampir for almost twenty hours now."

Dhampir again.

Robyn frowned and dismissed the word. Twenty hours--but that wasn't impossible. It took Kurayami no more than four or five hours to emaciate and kill a full-grown man. If what Edward said was true...that meant the gaki had been feeding off Alek for four times as long as the dead man. It just wasn't possible. Except for his apparent lack of consciousness, he looked perfectly normal, no aging, no decay at all. She racked her brain for an answer, trying to remember all the folklore she knew or had learned about mist vampires, about slayers. The only way he could possibly survive Kurayami...well, that was if he had her power--or a power similar to it.

Robyn felt her heart sink and her breath catch like a claw in her throat. She didn't want to ask, didn't want to know, but she had to. "What's a dhampir?" she said.

Edward sipped his drink. "You might say," he said, "that it is the folly of a vampire's passion and a human woman's stupidity."

Again Robyn looked at Alek. Really looked at him. He didn't look real. He looked like an automaton or a great beautiful doll, something not human and only painted to look human. Something that missed being human by a hair's breadth. Something far too perfect to pass for human. Dhampir. He had felt human when she touched his hands. His downcast, perpetually hurting eyes were human. He was human, and yet not. Dhampir. No. He wasn't Kage. He wasn't an It. He was strong and perfect, and capable of protecting her from an imperfect world...

"Poor Robyn. You still don't understand."

"He isn't..."

"He is," Edward said. "He is human, in his way, I suppose. Yet he has their hunger. He plays their games. And if you stay with him, Robyn my love, he will rip you apart in time."

Robyn stepped back, away from the window.

Edward saw her horror. And then he turned the last screw. "You might as well be in love with

Kage," he whispered.

"You fucking liar!" This time Robyn did strike the glass from Edward's hand. The glass shattered against the vast picture window, the amber liquid running down the glass like the tears on her face that she could no longer hold back. Turning away from the window and the endless nightmare she called life, Robyn raced from the room.

19

Kage watched the girl flee from the Ryuujin's study. He was crouched on a ledge halfway up the tall eastern wall of the foyer, the bleeding light of the stained glass window washing over his leather greatcoat like a spillage of blood. The girl never noticed him. Few ever did, and only if he chose so.

The sun was coming up and he felt wearied by it. It had been a very long night, a lot of activity, and he had not had much time for nourishment. Not even to feed on the humans he had killed. He had thought about the blood in those bodies, two gallons apiece--how he hated to waste such things--but there was Charlie to think of. Feeding was like...well, it was a lot like sex. So he had done nothing about the blood. He had washed the incident from the other passengers' memories and replaced it with the details of some terrorist incident, which was easy in a city as terror-stricken as New York. And then he had taken Danny and Charlie had taken the girl and both of them had returned home. But Kage could sense that the master was still not happy. The moment he arrived the Ryuujin had asked that he watch over the boy, a task he found increasingly difficult to perform--even more difficult than reweaving that clot of passenger's memories--when all he could think about was the warm, glowing human bodies all about him. The life-giving juices in them...

Kage shook himself back to the present. The girl had retreated upstairs to hide in her room, and so Kage leapt down off his perch and headed for the study. The room faced west over the courtyard, sparing him the apocalypse of morning light. Yet the daylight was no less painful to endure. The brightness of the window made Kage squint and sent a worm of reluctance crawling down his spine. He hung undecidedly in the doorway until the Ryuujin sensed his presence and turned his way.

"Danny?" the Ryuujin asked.

"I left him with the men, my Ryuujin. Forgive me."

"I..." The Ryuujin went to retrieve his fallen glass, but his eyes were pinned on Kage's face. "I suppose it's my turn to say you look unwell."

"Not unwell, my Ryuujin."

"Ah." The Ryuujin looked at his empty glass. "Come here."

Kage did, despite the glaring agony of the window.

"You did well, Kage," the Ryuujin said with quiet affection as he tuned to pull the drawstring

and the heavy velvet drapes shushed closed over the window, blocking out the light and the courtyard and the dhampir still suffering Kurayami's power. "Your plan worked exactly. But tell me...how did you know the dhampir would come here?"

Kage bowed his head. "You honor me." He thought about telling the truth, that he had planted the suggestion in the dhampir's mind and that the creature was only reacting to Kage's will by coming here, as everyone who stood in his way did--but Kage found himself hesitant to reveal that. He had never been comfortable with explaining his power, even to his Ryuujin. It was worse than trying to explain the different subspecies of immortal to a human being. Worse than feeding in front of one, the sexual frenzy witnessed. There was something about his power that made him feel terribly odd, as if he were an alien creature with no right to exist in this world. So in the end he opted to say, "I knew his mind well enough to know he would choose a forward confrontation." It wasn't a lie, really. In time the dhampir would choose the offense. Kage knew that innately upon meeting the whelp the first time--he was young, passionate, unbroken by the years like most of their kind were. Kage simply did not have the patience to wait around for all of it to come to pass, so he had pushed the dhampir to make the inevitable decision earlier than expected.

The Ryuujin nodded, and Kage used that moment of beaming silent approval to take his master's empty glass and courier it over to the wet bar. He should feel exonerated. Rewarded. Happy. Yet he just wanted to sleep. Sleep and be done with this all. As he poured fresh ice and scotch into the glass he heard the great Ryuujin say, "I would honor you further, if you will allow me to."

Kage looked at the stainless steel decanter on the bar. Yes, he could use to be honored, and very soon, too, before the craving overwhelmed him completely.

"No, Kage. I would honor you."

Kage turned at that, the ice in the glass clinking together. He was stunned. It was rare he was offered such a gift as this. The Ryuujin himself. His blood. Rarer still, that the Ryuujin offered it to him with the option of refusing. It was Kage's duty to serve the Ryuujin, not to be served by him. But this was a gift he was being offered, and no Japanese man with any self-respect turned down a gift, or a gift-giver.

The Ryuujin unbuttoned the two top buttons of his white dress shirt and bared his throat.

Kage stopped breathing and the drink he was preparing for his master was completely forgotten. Dragon's blood, he thought, and from the throat of the Dragon himself. His mouth was suddenly deep with teeth and saliva, his body wracked with a desire so powerful he heard an animal-like whimper catch in his own throat at the sight. The Ryuujin should not see him like this, Kage thought, not like this. Not with his eyes like this. Not as if he were something alien to this world.

Alien and unknown to it. And then the sorrow was there inside Kage like a sob and Kage closed his eyes.

"Don't hide yourself from me," the Ryuujin whispered sagely. "Come to me."

Kage did. He touched his master, the backs of his fingernails grazing the sacred flesh, amazed with it, with the Ryuujin himself. That a man should want him like this. That a man should tolerate his presence.

Yet he hesitated. He remembered the passenger in the subway, the snap of bones and juices as he bit deep into her spinal column. He should not touch the Ryuujin with such a mouth...and yet, savage that he was, he did. He was offered a gift as a man and he took it, knowing he was only an

animal. How great you are, my lord, he thought, to offer such kindness to such a beast as I! He leaned forward and kissed the sacred skin as if it were the fragile white flesh of a lily, or a fruit waiting to be opened to the senses, and in that kiss he tasted the sweet nectar of the Dragon Lord's blood, nearly swooning in the sensation of it burning on his tongue and at the back of his throat.

How great Man was.

20

He felt her lips on him. Everywhere. He was well aware that she was feeding on him, taking him in fluttery little kisses, her killing sweet and slow and seductive, yet he was unable to react. It was like a whisper in the dark, her killing him. A whisper on his skin. Except it echoed everywhere within him and without him and all around him. At first it was like the tickle of a tongue, an arousing and uneasy feeling. Now he felt the pain of it as she drank deep of his strength, leaving behind only her own yawning emptiness. The emptiness that was becoming him. The emptiness that he was filling moment by moment.

Her felt her gnashing teeth, her undying years...

Kurayami!

She did not hear his voice, or chose not too. She seemed too enthralled by her power over him.

The pain intensified. Now it was less like a hungry woman's mouth and more like the jagged cuts of a blade. Like tearing. Like bleeding from within...

Alek shivered and felt a gnawing ache grow inside his belly and loins. He knew that ache all too well; it had a sister ache in the back of his mouth. He sucked back a breath as new pain ripped mercilessly through him. He tasted his own blood from the tongue slashed in his mouth by his own teeth. The blood was like water on a fire, like wine. He needed it. Needed it so badly. Needed more. So much more...

Kurayami...

The gaki crooned in response, her voice lilting and mischievous. She had begun to sing, such was her passion--a long wordless dirge that spoke only of primal desire met, hunger sated. She twisted, first this way and then that, like a lover in the throes of climax. And then, suddenly, the body of the young man she had turned her attention on some time ago dropped lifelessly to the ground far below. Alek saw it there, crumpled and finished. Like an insect. The boy had held on a long time, or so it seemed. It was impossible to tell. Time no longer had any meaning. After the first few hours Alek had lost his grasp of time. He wondered how long he had been here, lost in Kurayami's pain and years and endless hunger, if it could be measured in hours or days, or something longer still.

No...the boy proved that it had not been long. Not long at all. A few hours. He wasn't lost yet, he decided. Just trapped. For what seemed the hundredth time he tried to focus all his remaining strength and psi power on finding his fallen sword...but the pain--he grimaced--the pain was too great, too distracting. He was drowning in the tearing--

KURAYAMI!

The cry cut like a blade through the veil of mist. Yet it was not his cry, he suddenly realized.

Something stirred in the mist, something there with them, yet something he had not noticed until now. Something there but apart from them in shape and form.

Kurayami's great silvery eyes blinked open. And for the very first time he saw them half and a childlike shadow of fear come alive in them.

Kurayami not afraid! the gaki insisted. What have Kurayami to fear?

Me.

Someone was there beside him, between himself and the gaki. Alek saw the woman, her writhing black hair and gown, her eyes as dark and seething as blood rubies in the dark. She looked at Alek and Alek recognized the predatory gleam in her face, the stubborn concentration there, the love and the power. Where would I be without you, beloved? he wondered.

Debra smiled but it was not a smile of happiness. Instead, it was one of pure, unadulterated greed. Wantonness. She had no intention of allowing Kurayami to harm him. She loved him, but she also possessed him. He was her toy, her tormented captor, her greatest passion. And Debra had never been one to share her toys.

Kurayami reacted to the affront at once and tried to snatch up her new foe as she had snatched up countless other victims, but failed because Debra existed beyond life--and certainly beyond even Kurayami's powerful grip. The realization hit Kurayami the same time it did Alek: the gaki had no power over Debra because Debra was dead, and the gaki, though unnatural, was still very much bound to the rules of the living world. The gaki growled like a storm, her eyes cruel with childish fury. Then her mist-like substance reshaped itself into a fearsome reptilian creature full of teeth and horns, an only dreamt-of nightmare out of fable and folklore. Her powerful jaws agape, the mist dragon leapt forward, roaring like a lioness at Debra.

Debra snarled in response and threw out her arms and the vast web work of her hair. And each strand of her ebony hair reshaped itself into a serpent with a great pair of rapacious fangs that sank deep into Kurayami's mist-flesh. Kurayami roared anew, but this time in pain and anguish. She threw back her head, trying to loosen the medusan tangles of Debra's hair. Debra's hair only unfurled farther and wound like unbreakable silken cords around the girth of Kurayami's body. Moments passed as the dreamlike struggle between the two vampiresses went on and on, and soon it became nearly impossible to tell where Debra ended and Kurayami began. The two seemed to merge, black on white, and tangle like threads with no beginning and no end. The earth growled and the air became charged like the sky before lightning was about to strike.

Alek smelled the ozone, felt the tear in the damp cold cocoon all about him. For a moment there almost seemed to be a pocket...he reached through it with all of his mind and power and sought and found the sword lying on the ground not far from the body of Kurayami's last victim. Come to me? he thought, and

scarcely before he had even completed the thought he felt the smooth hilt of the sword slide into the palm of his left hand. He clenched it and felt the power that was himself and Debra and the Double Serpent Katana--that power that was them and was not them, that was more than them--couple and expand like a seething nuclear explosion--

Stars fell. Time passed.

Alek opened his eyes and found himself on the ground, his hot cheek cooling against the flat of the blade. Someone was shaking him. Rising slowly, feeling drained and weary and hungry, so hungry, he glanced upward. He expected to see Debra's mischievous smile...but was he dreaming? No. The Floating Dragon was there, hovering over him like an angry storm cloud, her eyes and her great carnivorous canines glittering like steel. It was she who had shaken him, as if to gain his attention. Shaken him...or tried to take him back into herself when she had no strength left.

As he watched, she bared those teeth in a hungry catlike hiss. Dhampir mine! she said in his mind.

"Think again, bitch."

Kurayami roared, her voice tearing through his clothing and flesh like knives. Then she dived at his head.

Alek rolled out of the way, took the hilt of the sword in a two-handed grip, and brought it up in an arch that cut through her belly as if it were flesh and not mist. The sword, as was its nature, hungrily sucked up whatever it encountered. Kurayami screamed as the sword laid her open and ate her out. Alek gasped as the sword grew first warm and then hot, scorching, in his hand. He grimaced and willed his hands to open, but he couldn't let go of the hilt; it felt welded to the palms of his hands. Hissing, the pain almost more than he could bare, he dropped to the ground on his knees, the sword cooking the flesh of his hands even as it absorbed the last of the gaki's spilt power and sent veins of it spitting along his arm and down his back like a loosened electrical charge.

With a cry, Alek heaved the sword to the ground. Finally, it deemed to let him go and Alek released the hilt. He was trembling so badly from the bolts of wild energy in the sword that he doubted he had the concentration to lift it again had he needed to, had he dared. Instead, he rolled onto his back, his entire body aflutter with power, his hair and clothing hot and sentient around him, fingernails clawing the earth for purchase as the power made his body arch with agony. His back and skull slammed into the ground over and over, compulsively, until the power waned and finally gave him up.

He dropped like a rock. Exhausted, he watched through a veil of tears as Kurayami's mist unraveled in the sky above him. For a moment she was limned like a shadow in the purplish glow of the new morning light, and then the light overcame her outline and she simply vanished with a long low groan of anguish and a sob that seemed almost human.

For a very long time Alek did nothing but simply lay there, shivering ever so often as the overabundance of power drained out of him in sweating trembles. He felt exhausted through and through. Finished. He'd never rise again, never move again...

Beloved...really?

Someone touched him again, but this time a someone he knew. He felt a woman's soft, coaxing lips on his own, then on his throat, over the pulse, then lower, the touch of them fluttery and cool over the sweating flesh of his chest and stomach, then lower still. Alek sat up and the sensation vanished

as the sword slid effortlessly and with no pain into his palm. The feeling was only a shadow but it left behind the echoes of the mischievous laughter of the woman he knew too well, the one he was beholden too in this world as much as the next.

21

Kage stopped drinking the precious blood of his master the moment he spied the flare of light from beyond the drapes. For a moment even the heavy black fabric could not block the sunburst of bleeding vermilion light that turned the study a lurid shade of red. Then the light vanished and he heard Kurayami scream in agony and defeat.

The Dragon King forced Kage back and went to the window. The skin of his throat was scraped raw by Kage's teeth, yet he did not seem to notice. The drapes parted and he swore violently at the sight of the Slayer. The sun was up, but Kage had fed well enough for the light to affect him no worse than a bad sunburn. He blinked against the piercing day and focused through the tears in his eyes on the figure of the man in the courtyard, the one in the flowing, sentient black coat and hair.

The dhampir. The Slayer.

Kage was speechless. The danger was upon them and Kage felt the war fever rise in him like the hunger had risen earlier: urgent and volcanic. Yet when the Ryuujin turned to him, Kage resisted the urge to throw himself through the glass at the dhampir and instead concentrated all his attention on the master in front of him.

"So he's free," The Ryuujin's voice was uncommonly sedate. His eyes moved as he spoke, but otherwise he was still. "Take Danny down to your quarters and guard him with your life, Kage. I will keep the Slayer at bay here."

Kage was torn. He had two first duties in his life and they were to both obey and protect the master at any and all costs to himself, and right now the order he had been given was an enormous conflict. He must obey the Ryuujin's every order, but to do so would be to leave him to deal with the Slayer alone, with not so much as even Kurayami to protect him. That could not be. Could not.

"My Ryuujin..." Kage began. "I will not--I cannot--leave you."

The Ryuujin looked at him. His eyes were solemn. "Kage...Danny is your master now. Go to him." Then he turned to the window and drew his katana from the red silk sash of his kimono.

The Ryuujin, in his great wisdom and goodness, knew exactly what Kage was suffering and how to resolve it. With those words he had passed the mantle of master onto the boy. No, Kage's mind amended, he had passed the mantle down to the new master. Kage felt as if he were falling, such was his sudden fear. He knew that one day that mantle would indeed be passed on--but it would be in a long and very complex ceremony, a drinking of tea and blood, his hands bound with black silk to those of the young man who would succeed the Ryuujin as master of the vampire Kage.

Danny now was the master. And Danny was with the other human men. Unprotected.

Unprotected.

The word beat at Kage's thoughts like a windblown bird against a windowpane.

Unprotected.

The terror was suddenly too great. Too great, even, for his loathing of the dhampir. Putting the old Ryuujin out of his mind as if the man no longer existed, Kage virtually flew to Danny's side.

22

It took several moments for Alek to orient himself. For a moment as his head cleared and his senses returned to him he found himself staring at the rising sun, the way it touched the length of stainless steel in his hand with fire. The sun did not disturb him and never had. He was too human. But too wickedly tired to care one way or the other. Tired and...hungry.

He turned to stare up at the big bay window where Ashikawa and Kage had been having their little tête-à-tête only a moment ago. Now only Ashikawa remained, his sword drawn, his eyes pinning Alek like the eyes of a bird of prey, cold and unforgiving...

Alek groaned as a pang of need hit him so hard it nearly doubled him over. It was pain like in the alley last night, but pain of the worse kind because he could not resist it this time. So hard he had worked at not allowing this to happen, so fucking hard! So much control and meditation was used to curb the hunger, and now all that work had been wasted. He seethed as another and much greater hunger cramp clutched him in iron claws. Instead of letting it drop him to the ground, Alek harnessed the pain and used its momentum to leap at the bay window a good two stories above him. The impact shattered glass in every direction. Glass blew in like daggers upon the Ryuujin even as the man took several hasty steps backwards. Glass rained down on them both as Alek vaulted through the window and landed in a writhing crouch on the window seat.

The Ryuujin of the Yakuza stood his ground, the sword resting against his outer thigh. Alek had to give the man credit for his courage. To face down and control a vampire like Kage was an astonishing feat. But for a human man to face down Hunger itself was incredible. But there, just beneath the courage in his eyes, was the fear. Primal. Natural. Alek felt for him. He wanted this no more than the man, but fate and chance had put enmity between them. He knew Ashikawa would never let him go without a fight, especially now that he felt threatened on his own ground. Alek showed the man his teeth, knowing that as long as Edward Ashikawa had that inborn fear of predation he would not make any bold moves that Alek might or might not be able to fend off in his present state of weakness.

The man almost seemed to read his mind. He stepped forward, his eyes locked on Alek's in blatant challenge, and said, "Kurayami has drained you, dhampir, even as you drained her...so what harm can you bring to me?"

That was true enough, but Alek couldn't let that show. Instead, he started climbing like a great black cat down off the window seat and onto the floor. Unfortunately, another hunger pang cramped his stomach to the point of agony and he dropped to the floor instead of climbing gracefully down. His sword clanked against the hardwood and for a moment afterward he was aware of himself scrabbling among the broken glass for a grip to push himself back onto his knees. Edward Ashikawa made no move to rush him while he did so. He still seemed afraid, even now, at Alek's weakest point. His eyes kept flicking this way and that about the room as if expecting an unseen ambush at any moment.

"Her name is Debra," Alek whispered through hair and teeth and the pain like a fist in his gut.

"Ah. Should we be expecting her, dhampir?"

"I think I can handle you."

"Are you so sure?" Ashikawa asked a moment before he attacked, his sword fully extended. Alek had no choice but to try and avoid the falling sword. He rolled out of the way and used his coat as a buffer. The sword slipped harmlessly past his shoulder as he avoided Ashikawa's frontal assault. After a moment he returned the assault with a savage swipe of his hand that was more animal than warrior. Ashikawa, either seeing it or sensing it in some way, changed the sword's trajectory in mid-strike and sliced Alek's palm open.

Gasping in shock and pain, Alek dropped his sword and grasped his wounded hand, shuffling sideways to avoid a second cut of the blade. This time the sword landed with a solid thunk into the window seat, splitting wood. Desperate, Alek kicked at Ashikawa's hand and the sword slipped sideways out of the man's grip.

Ashikawa let the sword go and side-kicked Alek in the face. The force of the blow snapped Alek's head around and slammed him like a boneless doll into a tall antique bookcase, making it rock and dump its load of books and porcelain atop him in a pelting, shattering rain. But Alek recovered quickly from the blow, as severe as it was. Too severe, Debra whispered. Alek nodded and moved sideways again to avoid the shelf as it crashed down against the floor with a massive breezy whomp, scattering books and manuscripts everywhere across the study.

Again Ashikawa came at him, relentless, his eyes fixed on his intended prey. This time Alek saw the man diving at him in the midst of a Gung Fu swan dive and he narrowed his eyes and snarled in response. And the sight must have been enough of a distraction because Ashikawa seemed to lose his concentration long enough for Alek to grab his ankle in mid-air and twist him over onto his back on the floor. Ashikawa let out a grunt as Alek snapped his anklebone, but the man made no other indication that he was severely hurt. In fact, even as Alek threw himself over the man and tried to get Ashikawa in a submission hold, he felt the man react--not out of fear or pain, but out of perfect discipline. As if in slow motion, Alek saw the man's hand snap out for his throat. He tried to pull back but at the same moment yet another hunger cramp seized him and made him helpless to react.

And then Ashikawa had him by the throat, the ring and index finger of his left hand on the pulse points on both sides under Alek's ears. Alek tried to jerk backward but Ashikawa applied warning pressure, halting his momentum in dead stride. He needed to move but dared not; a bit more pressure and Edward Ashikawa could yank two gaping holes in the most vulnerable place on his entire body.

The Ryuujin of the Yakuza smiled. "You see, dhampir, I know more about your kind than most other humans. One move and you die as easily as anyone else I ever killed." His eyes burned. "Now yield."

Alek's hands twitched on the floor, but he dared not move even them. He dared not breathe in that moment.

"Yield!" An inch more pressure.

"Yield," he whispered.

Edward Ashikawa let him go.

And Alek palm-heelled him under the nose, snapping Ashikawa's head back against the floor. The blow should have knocked the man out cold; instead, Ashikawa came back roaring, all street fighter now, the gauntlet thrown. Both of his fists slammed into Alek's shoulders with bone-grating power, knocking the breath out of Alek's lungs. As Alek staggered to his feet, struggling to recover, Ashikawa followed through by leaping effortlessly to his feet and simultaneously jabbing both palm heels into Alek's breastbone. The force of the blow lifted Alek up off the ground for the smallest fraction of a second and then hurled him back into the desk at the far side of the room. The desk did not simply crumble but exploded into tinder under Alek's weight. For one dizzying moment Alek found himself moored in the remnants of it. Then he shook himself around to full consciousness and crawled out of the jagged remains, his coat in virtual tatters. Ashikawa...he was so goddamn strong. It wasn't natural...

A moment later he collapsed to the floor as the greatest pang of all hit him and turned his whole world red. The pain was like steel claws in his belly, scraping him open and spilling his empty guts to the floor. He almost expected to see himself lying inside out.

A foot landed close to his head, then another. Ashikawa.

Alek flipped over onto his side and clenched himself down like a vice around the craving. Sweating through the pain and the need, he gritted his teeth and whispered, "If you value your life...leave me...alone." Alek's eyes squeezed out tear after tear as the pain waxed and waned inside of him like a silent hungry howl.

"You are warning me?" Ashikawa asked as if it were all a joke. Or some kind of new deception

"You live with a vampire...you know what's happening," Alek gasped out from between his clenched teeth, fighting back the cancer eating him alive from the inside out. Nothing he did seemed to fight it, nothing at all. It was an invisible enemy. Something unharmed by teeth or claws or a sword. Something he simply could not fight. "Touch me now..." Alek whispered as his body shivered feverishly, "...and you die."

Something clanked down beside Alek's head. A stainless steel decanter? He didn't understand it, but the aromatic scent of what it contained commanded him. He snatched it up and brought it to his lips...yes...sucking up the viscous black substance in the container...oh yes. Cold and very old--at least by a day or more--but still good. Still enough to stop the pain. He gulped it down like an animal, mouth and tongue and teeth, much of it going up his nose and over his chin in his greed. Yet his famished body absorbed the blood in any way it could, his mouth and nose, the very pores of his face where they made contact with the substance. He was drinking it in every way possible, not unlike how his sword drank whatever power or substance it encountered. He drank and drank, letting it quell the disaster inside of him...

Yet the moment the pain subsided, the moment the pain let him go, he dashed away the decanter still a quarter full. Blood spattered the floor like a massacre. He had discipline, damnit, and the last thing he

needed was to go all the way. Others did that. And those others never came back. Not ever. He snuffled and pushed himself back onto his hands and knees and wiped at his face with the heels of his hands. He was conscious of being watched by his enemy, and that Edward Ashikawa was doing it with a disturbing mixture of revulsion and pity. This was like the alley again...how like a wheel was life. Alek watched him back from under the unruly tangles of his hair, glad for it because he face burned and he felt no less human than now, to be seen like this, drinking like an animal...

How he hated that look. As if Ashikawa were better than him, if only because he was more human.

"How incredible you are," Ashikawa said with something like admiration.

"You did this to me," Alek snarled. He wiped the remaining blood off his mouth with his fingers and dashed the droplets away. "Why help me?"

Ashikawa said, "As you say--I did it to you." He sighed. "Actually, it's a matter of honor. Something you know remarkably little about." He looked disappointed.

"I don't understand." Alek could stand now, and so he did, even weak and wavering the way he was. Better he stand than kneel here before Ashikawa like a servant.

I must look a sight, he thought to himself.

You look delicious, beloved, Debra answered.

She would think so.

"You are so American," Ashikawa said. He went to retrieve his fallen sword. He seemed to be walking very well, as if the broken ankle had mended already, even though that should have been impossible for a human. But for Edward Ashikawa? "You shame your human heritage. Let me explain, dhampir: You warned me off at the moment of your greatest danger to me. I was simply returning the favor, lest I stay beholden to you forever."

Alek pulled his coat close over his ruined shirt. The coat too had absorbed the blood, and its tears were reweaving themselves at a phenomenal speed, like stop-action photography. As if that too was alive. "Good to know we can kill each other like civilized men," he said warily.

Ashikawa smirked. "Something like that. Now yield, Slayer," he said, extending the sword's point at Alek. "Yield for good and I will let you walk out of here today. Fight me and you will never again know another Hunter's Moon."

"I'll yield when you let Robyn and Danny go."

Again Ashikawa sighed. He looked about to pontificate further on that when the door of the study suddenly crashed open and several of his men poured in. Alek recognized them as the ones who had been patrolling the grounds when he arrived at the house. Professional muscle. He put out his hand and the Double Serpent Katana skipped forward over the debris of the study and slid effortlessly into his palm. More foes. He didn't need this now. Not just now, when he was at less than half his strength.

I'm here, beloved, Debra whispered wetly into his ear.

He had forgotten. Tonight was the night of the greatest moon, the Hunter's Moon, and because of that,

her power would be at its peak. She would be most able to affect his world. Still, he wondered what she was capable of affecting...

Watch.

Ashikawa's men clustered in and looked to him for a signal. The Dragon Lord of the Yakuza simply nodded in response and said, "Kill it," to them.

And then the men as one turned on Alek with their Brownings, Magnums and Desert Eagles--weapons that could tear apart even his immortal flesh. Alek held stock-still, undecided about what to do. But almost from the moment the heavies focused their attention on him, Alek felt it. The men felt it too, because instead of firing, they hesitated, looking around the room for the source of the disturbance.

It was like an electrical charge, subtle and dangerous, a silent growl on the air as if lightning were about to strike. And then, through the broken bay window gusted a sudden black wind and on that wind the angelic, mist-like form of a great bird, a dark phoenix or some kind of giant raven. As indistinct as a dream it wafted in, tendrils of its misty form drifting like loose black flames on the open air. And then it truly did catch fire like a phoenix, the darkness consumed by a whoosh! of heatless flames that sent the men scrambling back through the door or behind furniture, terrified of the fearsome creature because they seemed to assume it was the gaki Kurayami.

You are so smart, Alek thought to the fire bird. Have I told you enough times how wonderful you are?

No, Debra answered with a sensual laugh, but keep trying, she said as she kept her Glamour in place long enough for him to make a discreet exit out the door.

In the vacant hall outside the study he paused to sheathe his sword and get his bearings. He did not know how long Debra could keep the Ryujin and his men busy, but he hoped it was long enough for him to find a way out of this place. Shaking off the last of the weakness, he followed the hallway down to a further branch of intersecting and identical hallways. Now he felt like a rat in a maze--or at least a man lost in a large and very posh hotel. He tried to guess where he was, but everything looked alike. He doubted he would find his way out simply by wandering around. For one thing, this place was enormous and he was almost certain to be trapped by Ashikawa's men when they realized Debra's phoenix was only an illusion.

The best he could do was to make an educated guess. The study faced west and the front of the house was east, so if he kept moving in his present direction...

A cry of anguish rose up from somewhere below. It was faint, a very long way off, and only his oversensitive ears picked up on the sound. But it was very familiar. He moved quickly toward the source of the cries and sought and found a set of curving glass stairways that led in their winding way to the vast foyer he had first seen on entering the Ashikawa manor. By the time he reached it he discovered the source of the struggle: Robyn was on the stairs at the opposite end of the foyer, being manhandled by the young Asian punk from the evening before. As before, his two hopalongs were there, Nunchaku and Ponytail, but all three of them seemed to be having difficulty this time holding the girl.

The moment Robyn spied Alek she exploded into a fighting tigress, slamming her elbows into the two boys who had her and simultaneously kicking their leader in the stomach. With a yelp of surprise, the leader flew backward, tumbled over once, and landed at the foot of the stairs. He stared upside

down at Alek.

"Motherfucking shit!" the boy growled and twisted around, trying to grab at Alek's ankles and take him down. Alek sidestepped him and the boy grabbed at nothing but air. Again the boy swore and threw himself over, scrambling to his feet with impressive speed and stamina for someone who had just taken a header down a full flight of steps. He looked shaken and there was an ugly bruise on his forehead, but otherwise he looked no worse off than last night as he assumed a light battle stance and flipped out a six-inch switchblade with rust pitting at the guard.

Iron.

The boy smiled savagely, knowingly, at him.

Alek backed up.

"That's right, asshole. What's the matter, you not an iron man?"

Alek glanced up at the stairs where the boy's lackeys now had Robyn in a submission hold. Then he looked at the punk and that damned iron knife. "Let her go, you," Alek told the boy.

"The name's Charlie Wing," the boy spat back venomously. "Didn't you know I'd get you back? Split your banpaia guts wide open with this motherfucker." With a twinkle in his eye, he tried to follow through with his promise.

Alek leapt backward, missing the blade of the knife by inches, and grabbed Charlie's arm at the elbow, breaking it with a simple twist. Charlie gasped with pain. Alek slammed him around into a wall, making him drop the knife. Alek stepped back. Charlie spun around, his one arm hanging uselessly at his side, and eyed him through his haze of pain of hate. Then, spitting out a battle cry, he executed a hook kick intended to swipe Alek's legs out from under him.

Alek saw it coming as if in slow motion and caught Charlie's leg in mid-swing and threw him over onto the stairs.

Charlie slammed onto the stairs on his back, grunting on impact. Again, he looked angry, his eyes burning with war, but he wasn't out for the count. Not just yet. "Fucking banpaia," he whispered through a bloodied mouth and reached under his coat for his infamous shurikens.

"Don't," said Alek.

Charlie drew one out anyway.

Alek kicked him in the side of the head. It was a controlled kick, not meant to kill, and it did its job effectively enough, turning Charlie's lights out without actually killing the youth. Watching, Alek saw the shurikens drop harmlessly out of Charlie's limp hand and scatter across the carpet. There they glittered like big fallen quarters.

"Dhampir, asshole," Alek amended.

There was a truncated yelp of surprise, and then Nanchaku joined his leader at the foot of the steps, the two of them mingling in a large, rowdy lump of bruised flesh and crumpled clothing. Alek looked up. Robyn had one arm free and a great pair of shining brass knuckles on her hand. But Ponytail

was in the process of pinning her arms against her back and this time she wasn't able to swing at him.

Alek started up the stairs.

Someone grabbed his ankle. Charlie Wing. Tenacious fucker. Alek kicked back, mashing the child's nose against his face with the heel of his boot. Charlie finally lay still.

"Stay where you are."

Alek looked up the stairs and saw Ponytail had his ornate shirasaya at Robyn's throat.

Alek stopped and tilted his head. "What's your name, little boy?" he asked.

Ponytail looked confused for a moment. Then he said, "It's Rich. And that fine gentleman the bitch did is Xav."

"Charlie, Rich, and Xav," Alek said in a low rumble. "I'll have to remember you three." He took another step up the stairs, his eyes never leaving Rich's strained, frightened face. The boy looked as undecided as a puppy that's lost its master and its direction.

"Stop right here. I'm warning you..."

Alek was almost within reaching distance of Robyn when Rich raised the blade of the shir so it rested against the underside of Robyn's chin. Robyn stared ahead defiantly.

"Stop!" Rich commanded.

Alek took another step, his eyes now permanently fixed on Rich's lemur-large eyes.

"You're killing her!" Rich said. His hand trembled and made the shir nick Robyn's throat. A trickle of blood began to flow there.

Alek stopped. "You're going to kill her? Would Ashikawa appreciate that? Rich?"

"You ain't getting me, you fucking monster!"

Fucking monster. Fucking monster...

Alek felt the rage build. "All my fucking life I've had to deal with your kind. You were the reason I was afraid to go to school."

Rich laughed nervously. "Fuck you."

Alek narrowed his eyes. "Give me the girl."

Rich began to shake all over.

Alek took a deep breath and stuck the rage down the mental hole he had dug for everything unpleasant in his life. If he did not get Robyn away from the boy very soon, Rich was going to kill her by accident with that shirasaya. He lowered his voice, making it, not menacing, but persuasive. Seductive. "Let. Her. Go. Rich."

Something flitted across the boy's face, a decision...and then he did just that. He let Robyn go, dropped his weapon, and took off up the stairs like the proverbial bat out of hell, his feet thumping like a tattoo on the carpeted steps.

The moment he was gone, Robyn flagged against Alek as if all her strength were gone.

"Oh my God, I'm so happy to see you!" She threw her arms around his neck, her face in his throat, her breasts mashed against his chest so he was all-too-aware of her entire body pressed shoulder-to-shoulder and hip-to-hip to his own with nothing to separate them but their clothes. His held her back--sort of. His own body responded accordingly, of course. There was no helping that. He was in need of yet more blood. What Edward Ashikawa had given him had been enough to stanch the pain for the moment, but it had done nothing if not stirred the greedy need within. Even now he could feel his eyes burning as if he had a fever and his teeth felt as hard in his mouth as chips of broken bone. He smelled the blood in her. He smelled the blood in everything. Unwinding her arms, Alek pushed her gently back and averted his gaze, lest she notice the subtle changes in him.

She looked relieved and tired and unwell. But there was also understanding in her eyes. She knew what she had done to him. Hell, she had felt the results. "I'm sorry," she said.

He forced a smile. "What happened? What are you doing here?"

"Kage happened. I wanted to get away but I couldn't. The things he did..." Something like a commingling of curiosity and fear darkened her eyes. She shook her head. "I thought Kurayami had you."

"She seemed to prefer the other one." It wasn't exactly the truth, but explanations would have to wait. Right now the most important thing was getting the hell out of the house. He finally felt his old self again enough to meet Robyn's eyes evenly. They were so miserable, her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Kage...he has Danny."

Alek nodded. "I think we should just leave for now," he reasoned. Far off--but too far--he could just hear the men assembling. What Debra had done for him was nothing more than a parlor trick. Already it was gone. It would be mere moments and then Ashikawa's henchmen would be pouring out of every doorway of this place. He had to think fast. "I think we can barter for Danny's safety for the tapes. From what I've seen, I don't believe Ashikawa would harm the boy."

"I can't leave Danny!" Robyn insisted.

"We have to get out of here," Alek said as patiently as he could. "I can't fight everyone off right at this minute."

"Then don't. But I'm not leaving without Danny!"

Alek sighed. Of course that meant he wasn't leaving, either.

I'm sorry...I couldn't any more....

I know, he answered Debra.

"Do you know where Danny is?" Alek asked the girl.

"With Kage, I'm guessing. In the catacombs."

Alek raised his eyebrows. "Catacombs?"

Robyn said, her eyes averted to the hallway where even she could hear the men approaching now, "It's down below. I know them...sort of."

"Then you had better take me there," Alek said, "And now."

Nodding, Robyn took him by the arm and led him on.

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Charlie Wing came around the second time someone kicked him. He was vaguely aware of the impact in his ribs, but he couldn't react until several moments later when the second gut-wrenching blow came, nearly crushing in his rib cage. Charlie groaned and curled himself around the new pain.

"Charlie."

"Humph," was all Charlie could manage at first. He felt like every bone in his body had been broken and stuffed back into a skin two sizes too small for them all. Jesus. What hit him? A fucking bus?

"Charlie!"

Again Charlie groaned through his swollen, bloody mouth and made himself turn over, lest more pain be heaped upon his already broken body. Edward Ashikawa was standing over him. He had that look he usually reserved for enemies and betrayers--as if, even being a man as Mr. Ashikawa was, he could rip the very essence of reality apart to get at whatever he wanted. His black kimono was tattered and bloodstained and gaping at the front, showing the magnificent mosaic of tats wound like serpents about his entire body. His red sash was gone, as well as the katana he usually wore, even around the house. His eyes held a peculiar bloodlust Charlie was not accustomed to seeing outside of the banpaia. Jesus, it was as if Mr. Ashikawa was as bad off as Kage, or that other fucking thing that had beat the shit out of him moments ago.

The thought made the pain drain out of Charlie's body. That pretty-faced, long-haired motherfucker had it coming, oh yes. Give him a sword...hell, give him a stake of iron and he was going to shove the damned thing up the fucker's ass the moment he found him...

"Where is the dhampir?" Ashikawa demanded to know.

"Dhampir?"

"Tall man. Big sword. Pointy teeth."

Charlie shook himself. "I don't know. I think he got Robyn."

Edward Ashikawa seethed like a tsunami. Oh Jesus God, thought Charlie, he's going to kill me! Suddenly he wished he had stayed in Osaka to be a Nothing like his old man. A Nothing was better than this. Better a Nothing than a nothing at all. It wasn't fair! The world had conspired to throw him up against an enemy he had no defense against! He had lost honor and face in Mr. Ashikawa's eyes. And a man with no honor was a man with no--

Mr. Ashikawa's foot came down hard on Charlie's throat. For a moment Charlie thought it was a warning. He thought Mr. Ashikawa meant to beat the remaining shit out of him and prove a lesson to him and good, and then he would drag Charlie up and dust him off as he always had in the past, and tell him to take his boys and hunt down the creature that had caused all this fucking trouble. But then Charlie heard the crackle and snap of his own neck bones breaking under the pressure of the Ryuuji's foot and Charlie understood. Underneath the sound, as vast as a volcanic explosion in Charlie's ears, was Mr. Ashikawa's voice.

Before Charlie died he could have sworn he said, I'm sorry.

24

Robyn took him down several more of those twisting flights of glass stairs. At the bottom she took a right bend and led him down a hallway with identical doors to either sides. At the end was a vast window that faced out over the courtyard at ground level, the morning sun slicing through the colored glass and turning the hallway and the grandfather clock standing against one wall a weird shade of crimson. At the foot of the clock Robyn stopped, reached for the face, and toyed with something.

"Edward doesn't know I know about this. I found it by accident one day." And then she did something and the whole body of the clock swung open like a door. Inside was a roughly hewn stone stairway that led down into an impregnable darkness. Robyn turned to look at him with somber eyes. "Ready?"

"I think so. How far does this go?"

Robyn led the way down the stairs, pausing only long enough to close the passage behind them and put her ear to the door for a moment. "I'm not sure, actually. The tunnels are really just an extension of a portion of the old L Line that was condemned about twenty years ago. Kage claimed them as his own and now he uses them to move between the house and some haunts he has in the inner city. That way he can get around without being caught out by the sun." She frowned. "I'm guessing that's how he managed to trap me and Danny. I just had no idea his network was so big."

"So Kage could have taken Danny almost anywhere in the city," Alek said without much hope.

"Not anywhere. It's morning so he has to stay underground, somewhere in the tunnels. If we wait until nightfall, then he's sure to take Danny anywhere in the city."

They had reached the bottom of the stairs. Ahead loomed a warren of rooms that looked as if they had been decorated by a deranged Victorian Englishman. Alek almost would have thought they were in the wrong place, but the lair, as peculiar as it was, felt like Kage--cool, animalistic. The chambers, daisy-chained together with seemingly no pattern to their arrangement, pushed out at him, not physically but with an underlying threat of absolute menace. Robyn went ahead of him, unaffected by the Glamour of the place. Were he a vampire, Alek would not have been able to enter this place at all. He would have been paralyzed by fear. He was not paralyzed, but he still found it hard to move against the fear.

"Are you all right?" Robin asked, her voice a mere whisper as if they were exploring an ancient tomb.

Alek nodded and moved tentatively forward, following the girl's lead with mincing steps.

"Over here." She held back a heavy Medieval tapestry with unicorns on it. A hole had been chopped through the cement wall, just large enough for an adult to squeeze through.

They clambered through it.

Beyond the human-sized mouse hole an old brick-and-bedrock sub tunnel yawned ahead, black and full of mystery. Debris was scattered everywhere, rags and rotting shoes and broken bottles of booze, what Alek could only guess were the remnants of homeless people who had been unfortunate enough to wander drunkenly into a vampire's lair. His boot came down on something long and brittle. He picked it up, discovering it was a shattered femur bone. The unreasonable fear had returned and he quickly dashed the bone away. He turned his attention on the tunnel instead. There were ancient emergency lights strung along the top of the tunnel, an antique carbide lantern lying on its side, and a scattering of miners' helmets, but Alek doubted anything had the juice necessary to work. Kage would not need such mundane human things to see in the dark.

"It's dark," Robyn said. "I wish we had a flashlight or something."

"Try shaking that lantern," he said.

"I can't find it in the dark. Can you...?"

"Lanterns are made of iron."

"Oh." Robyn toyed around in the dark until she found it. But shaking it revealed it was bone dry. "Nothing," she said. She opened up the tank but all that remained was a black sludge. "All the kerosene is gone."

"Wait a moment." Alek picked around in the darkness until he found an unbroken flask of whiskey. He twisted the top off and the powerful vapors assaulted his senses and made him grimace. Perfect. He told Robyn to pour some of the whiskey in. Then had her swing the lantern to slosh the whiskey around. After a minute he had her add more whiskey. The acrid smell of the kerosene was suddenly stronger. The whiskey was doing its job. He had her continue adding whiskey and shaking the fuel tank until it was two-thirds full. Then he had her wet the wick with the new substance.

"You're so clever," she said as she used her cigarette lighter to tend the whiskey-soaked wick. After a few moments more of grueling work the wick gave off a lurid black smoke, but it did in fact catch, giving

them a source of light in the tunnels.

Robyn's face looked so sallow and unwell in the lantern light he could almost wish they were still stranded in the dark. He had to wonder what he looked like. "Are you sure you don't want to try and reason with Ashikawa?" Alek asked as he watched her replace the glass globe. "I'm positive he'd give Danny up if you just handed over the tapes."

"You don't know Edward." Robyn sounded strained and weary. She stood up, holding the lantern at chin level so he plainly saw her ghastly look of determination. Her open, plain-faced hatred. "He'll never let me go. Not ever. Because of what he is."

"Yakuza...?"

"No. A man."

And with that she started forward into the tunnel, brushing aside cobwebs as she went along, the lantern out in front of her like a talisman that might ward off all evil things. And those evil things must have a form, Alek thought. Only now he thought he knew what it was. What form it took. Not monstrous, but clearly human.

He'll never let me go. Not ever. Because of what he is. A man.

Robyn brushed the walls with her hand as she passed to keep from walking into anything. The darkness must still be terrible for her, he thought. His eyes, evolved for motion rather than detail, would spot even the smallest creature lurking in the tunnel with them, with or without the lantern light. He stepped into the tunnel after Robyn, his eyes going everywhere, watching for any ambush that might come. He felt with his other senses as well, but there were no vampires in the local vicinity. That was both good and bad. Good because it meant he didn't have to worry that Kage would materialize out of nowhere and attack them both; bad because it meant they had to go in search of the vampire before a confrontation could be initiated.

The tunnel wound along for a thousand feet, and then took a steep downward direction. Part of the tunnel had collapsed from some unknown subterranean disaster, but much of the sub track remained--a thirty-foot drop into a fatal chasm full of broken concrete, jagged bones and twisted, teathy metal that they had to be careful not to slip into it as they made their way around the heaps of debris in their path. At one point, Alek had to climb atop a mountain of fallen bricks and then pull Robyn over it by the wrists. Robyn made a nervous laugh when she landed on the other side. "Reminds me of my old college days when my friends and I used to role-play in the subway. I was never here though." She stared white-faced at the human remains tossed into the sub line like so much garbage. "And I never saw anything like this."

"Kage's discard," Alek whispered as he watched a pair of rats wrestling over a rib bone with some dangling meat still on it. "He must feed on whatever wanders into his domain."

"How many fucking people has he killed?" she wondered. But she was really wondering the same thing he was: Will this be out final resting place too, down in this undiscovered bone yard?

Alek studied the seemingly endless collection of human scrap. A sleek fat rat scabbled up the side of the line and tried to take a bite out of his boot. Alek kicked it back into the line.

"Jesus," said Robyn.

And right then Alek noticed boot prints in the dust, smaller than his own, but with a heavier tread, as if the owner were burdened by weight. He almost cautioned Robyn to be quiet, then realized it was probably unnecessary. Kage was not near enough for Alek to feel him, so it made sense that the vampire couldn't hear them and know they were hot on his heels just yet. And if talking made Robyn feel better about being in this filthy pit and knowing her son was the captive of a man-eating monster, then he would not deny her that small, cold comfort.

They moved on and the tunnel began to twist and turn dangerously, following the winding path of the sub. But Alek consoled himself in that at least the dust was deep enough to indicate which forks Kage had taken, giving them a useful map to follow. After a good half hour of travel in this rank darkness with nothing but an ancient lantern to guide the way and their breathing and the skritch of unseen rats to indicate that they had not fallen into the deepest hole in the earth, Alek began to wonder if Robyn was getting worn down. She seemed all right and hadn't made any complaints, but it was probably only the fear for her son driving her on. Fear was a good source of energy, but not inexhaustible. Finally, after climbing over yet another enormous barrier of debris, she began to sound winded. Her footing became uncertain and that made him wonder about her abused ankle.

He was almost ready to suggest they take a rest period so he could check on her fracture when his nerves suddenly felt as if they had been lit from within. All at once the familiar tingle was shooting all through his body, not bad--the perpetrator of the feeling was still a ways off--but certainly noticeable. If he could trust his feelings, and he knew he could, then Kage was less than a couple thousand feet away.

Robyn frowned. "I'm beginning to believe what you said. We're just wandering around down here with no direction. Kage could be anywhere at this point..."

"Shhh," he said, and immediately Robyn snapped to attention and looked at him. Motioning Robyn to remain where she was, Alek drew his sword and went on ahead, following the tunnel for a dozen yards down a steep embankment. The ground here was rougher and bad to the step and he soon learned why: they had reached the end of the line. Ahead, no more than a thousand feet, the entire tunnel had collapsed, creating a dead end space and a spew of rocky debris. Luckily, there was an abandoned sub platform off to the left. From the way it made him feel, Kage the vampire was most certainly there. Hiding in the dark with his captive prey.

Hiding...and infinitely dangerous, because he was a captive by the tunnels and the killer daylight.

Alek doubled back.

"You see him?" Robyn whispered. She was huddled against a wall, the lantern on the ground beside her and her arms hugging her shoulders against the cold and the fear.

Alek moved to block her in case Kage knew they were close and had planned an ambush attack. "I feel him. He's at the end of the tunnel," he said, pointing, "just beyond the platform."

Robyn took him by the arm. "Is Danny with him?"

"I don't know. I can't feel Danny."

"Because Danny's human," she reasoned.

He nodded, then realized she could barely see him in the dark and said, "Yes."

"But you can feel Kage," Robyn said. "Is this why you became a vampire slayer?"

Instead of answering, he said, "I want you to flatten yourself against the wall and try not to let Kage see you."

"He's a vampire, Alek. He'll see me. He'll fucking smell me."

"Not if he's occupied." Alek looked around the tunnel. On the opposite side, separated by that murderous rift, was another pedestrian walkway. Over there the supports had not completely collapsed yet and there was an exit to the stairwell that led to the outside world and the sun Kage so abhorred. Well, it was worth a try, he supposed. He didn't think he would be able to get Kage above ground where the light would blind him, or bring the light down here where it could still do damage, but the door was double-gauge construction steel, capable of withstanding a hurricane wind. Maybe, if he couldn't kill Kage, he could at least lock him in the stairwell. He certainly had no better ideas.

He said, "When you see Kage cross the line, I want you to get to the platform and find Danny."

She looked at him and gnawed her lower lip. She looked scared and he felt his heart break at the sight. She and Danny shouldn't be in the middle of this nightmare. Robyn and her human kind should never have to see the things they did. "How are you going to get him to cross the line?" she whispered.

"He will," Alek said, slipping his sword under one arm and turning to face the end of the line. Kage was beholden to Edward Ashikawa, servant to his human master as many of the oldest of his kind chose to be servant to the humans, but he was also a vampire and therefore a victim of his own nature. And Alek knew from too much experience how petty and proud and often very stupid a vampire could be when the right buttons were pushed.

He just had to figure out which buttons were the right ones.

Motioning Robyn to shrink as far back into the shadows as she could, Alek stepped out boldly into clear view of the platform. It was dark, the only muted illumination coming from the network of cracks in the tunnel walls, but it was enough for night eyes to see by. The raised platform had a flight of stairs that took passengers up to the substation overhead once upon a time. Alek waited a moment to see if anything would move. Nothing did, so he reached down and screeked his sword in a line across the broken bedrock at his feet.

He waited. Unless Kage had been following their progress through the subway all along, which was possible but not likely--he would have to be using some kind of surveillance equipment capable of surviving this environment, and that seemed a bit too high-tech for Kage--he shouldn't be aware of Alek's presence until now. The blessing of the dhampir. Vampires could not read their presences any more than they could read the humans they preyed upon. The dangerous tingling that existed in Alek's bones increased, proving that Kage was indeed now fully aware of his presence, was on the move, and was closing the distance between them.

Alek followed it like an open circuit. He could feel the emanation strongest from directly above him. He looked around, found a narrow fissure in the ceiling, and saw a shadow drop through and land lightly, with catlike agility, on his side of the chasm.

As with the first time they had met, Alek had the impression of indefinable power and age. Kage was so ancient and so withdrawn from human civilization he did not even attempt to appear human as most

vampires did. Instead he stayed crouched down where he had landed, alien beauty shining, his arms resting on his knees, his head tipped down and eyes upturned enough to show most of the whites and only a fraction of the black slit-like pupils. Body language. It was a gesture that was wholly aggressive. Reptilian. It was a clear and easily readable message: back off or die.

Kage. He was lithe and petite, beautiful, irresistible. Much of his glistening blue-black hair was chopped and feathered into quills with a long narrow braid bound with a length of chain, a studded stainless steel ball tied to the end. His clothing was surprisingly current--snug black jeans, knee-boots, and a grey wife beater that revealed powerful catlike muscles in his chest and shoulders. Everything about him was sweating and revealed by the open leather greatcoat that pooled around his crouched figure. Beautiful, yes--beautiful and as dangerous as a man-eating tiger.

"Where is the boy?" Alek asked. He wanted to ask Kage if the boy was well, but he was afraid of the answer. Anything Kage said right now might drive Robyn out of her hiding place in a panic of frenzied grief.

"Where you cannot harm him, Slayer," Kage said. He did not move from his position. Did not assume any kind of fighting position at all. So Kage had no intention of fighting like a man, or even like an assassin. Instead, this was going to be all primal power and war. Alek idly wondered if he should be flattered, if Kage adopted this method often or if he was just a special case. And then his musing was answered when Kage's eyes flared with war lust and he said, his voice an inhuman snarl through his great catlike teeth, "You will never harm Danny. Not like you harmed Takara."

The way he said it made it sound as if his sister had died two hours ago instead of over two years. Like all great ancients, his past was yesterday.

"I didn't choose to harm her, Kage. Takara made her own decision to fight me," Alek said, choosing his words carefully. "Every man and woman makes their own decision. She chose to fight me and she lost." It was important to him that Kage not regress into the past at the moment. Something like that might turn his already wildly unstable emotions the wrong way. And if that happened, it was just possible Kage would harm them all, including Danny. He might bring the whole tunnel down on them in his unforgivable, undying wrath.

"She died in a subway tunnel like this one," Kage said, looking around. His eyes gleamed dreamily. "I heard the story, though I did not see it with my own eyes. I was with the master in Tokyo at the time." His eyes focused on some vast invisible point. "Takara...I felt her die by your hands..."

The words hit Alek like a fist, almost staggering him: I felt her die by your hands. Kage felt her die? Felt her? He knew how Takara and Kage were related, he had the cold, impersonal facts. He knew they were siblings, but he had had no idea, none whatsoever...

"She was your twin?" Alek said, appalled.

Kage's face was a stone.

"You were mates." Jesus. All the understanding and the pity fell in on Alek at once like a hammer blow. He could almost have turned away, such was the look of anguish on Kage's face, the hopelessness, the ever-wandering loss. A lost sibling was terrible. A lost mate was terrible. But a lost sibling mate was hell on earth. Hell inescapable. He knew that. He knew it all too fucking well.

Kage rose to his feet. When he spoke his voice was unusually calm and measured, like a mantra. "You

took my honor, Slayer, and that I can live with." He drew his sword. "But you also took Takara, and that I cannot."

And then he pounced. Seamlessly. Seemingly without moving.

Only Alek's battle-trained eye caught the motion as Kage came at him. Alek sidestepped, countering the blow so the swords clanked together, hissing with sparks and heat. The blow was terrifically powerful, knocking both warriors almost to the ground with the sheer, bone-breaking force of it. Alek was on one knee, the bones and muscles of his broken wrists mending themselves with supernatural speed. Despite the absurdity of the situation, he felt an overwhelming sense of pity.

And then a moment later he was up, meeting Kage's newest assault, sword edge to sword edge. "I had no choice, Kage," he grunted as the two warriors pushed at each other in an attempt to gain an advantage. Kage whipped his head around and the steel ball in his hair cracked against Alek's cheek. Snarling, Alek relented and the swords unlocked. Then the two began to circle each other, looking for an opening again.

Alek licked the blood on his mouth. "She would have killed me for the Coven. I chose not to die for it." Jesus, he thought, what a very cruel Catherine Wheel was life.

For a moment Kage looked confused and seemed to sway off balance. Then he threw aside his katana and put a hand to his face, dirty jagged claws gripping. "Time passes," Kage said, "and time changes all things." He shook his head and looked up. He was changed. His eyes, which had been an obelisk black, had gone blood red. The teeth, already venomous hooks of ivory, seemed to descend further until they reached Kage's chin and pricked streams of crimson that flowed like tears down his white throat. He was a beast, a demon. "Yet time has no bearing on sorrow or on vengeance. Those are immortal," he said, his words slaughtered by the sorrow in his throat. "And I am in hell!"

Alek started to move in a clockwise motion. Kage mimicked the move so that they circled each other again like a pair of reptiles locked in battle. He wanted to stay moving more than anything else. Standing there, watching Kage mourn, watching it twist him...it was unnerving. "Takara was my enemy, Kage. She challenged me and she died for that challenge. But I have no such intentions toward Danny." He took a deep breath and said in a soft, reasonable voice, "I only want to take him back to his mother."

The mention of Danny seemed to do what his reasoning could not, dampening Kage's rage. His eyes darkened and his teeth lifted. "His mother is dead in our eyes," he said. "I protect the master and you will not pass."

The master? Alek stopped and lowered his sword. "Danny is the master?"

But Danny could not be the master. Edward Ashikawa was the master. The only way Danny could be the master was if Ashikawa passed on the gift of the vampire to him. And why would he do that? Why would Ashikawa give that up?

And then he knew. The pieces all fell together and all at once, Alek understood. Or thought he did. Danny and his dreams, his pictures. Danny and his gift. Danny and Kage.

Danny the master.

Danny was the master. Danny was the master and everything else was a lie, a mistake. Everything was wrong. Everything. What he was doing here was wrong. Trying to take Danny away from Kage was

wrong. As wrong as wrong got.

Kage would never harm Danny. Never. Kage would give his life for the boy.

"I didn't know," Alek said. He sheathed his sword and backed away. Kage tracked his progress but neither said nor did anything. What war had been on Kage's face was gone. He was now no longer the demon, just the watchdog. He was dedicated to one purpose, and one purpose only. The only purpose that meant anything to him anymore: protecting the master.

Danny.

Danny the master.

And as much as Robyn wanted to deny it, Danny and Kage belonged together...

"Kage?"

The little, frightened voice caught Alek unaware. He turned to find the source of it and saw Danny's face in the crevice of the ceiling, dark and backlit from some spare source of lighting in the sub station beyond. Because of the light his features were indistinguishable, but the fear in his voice pulled at Alek nonetheless. So too did it pull at Kage, but with such tremendous power as to make the vampire forget his environment completely and spin in a circle as he sought to find the danger to the boy.

"Danny, what is it?" Kage demanded to know. "What's wrong?"

"It's dark here," cried the boy.

"Yes, Danny. I know. We're going home soon..."

Alek heard the warning crack in the ceiling in the same moment Kage did, but Kage's ears virtually pricked in response to it. Kage said, "Get away from the hole, Danny...get away!" He pushed at thin air as if he could force the boy away from danger.

The boy did so, but it was already too late. A portion of the ceiling, weakened by the quake that had demolished the line, lurched and dropped dust and with a grinding growl began to collapse into the tunnel on top of them all. Danny screamed and grabbed at the sides of the crevice as the floor gave way beneath him, the ceiling slanting him down into the rolling slate of debris that filled the tunnel with thunder and an unbreathable cloud of dust. Helpless, he went with it.

It all happened too fast.

Alek moved sideways, narrowly avoiding the falling mountain of rubble, and grabbed Robyn who had suddenly appeared beside him. She began to scream, her voice melding with the roar of the settling ceiling and the cries of her young son. The blindness was like the chaos all about them. Unending and nerve splitting. He pulled his coat over them both and felt the slamming weight of the ceiling as it crushed them both to the floor, he on top of her. Some of the collapse struck him across the shoulders and for a moment he saw a kaleidoscope of lights and found he was floating in a quiet, distant nothing. Then reality began to intrude, and with it the heat and the coughing dust and the remembrance of what had occurred.

He was buried alive and his ribs were on fire. He tried to rise, but he was pinned to the floor. He ran his hands over the space beneath him, but Robyn was gone. Gone. He began to crawl, heading toward the

only source of light directly ahead of him. By the time he managed to crawl out from under the debris some several moments later, he saw Robyn had wormed her way out ahead of him. She was on her feet, stunned and disheveled but otherwise okay. She was standing atop the fallen debris and trying to reach Danny where the boy dangled from the ceiling, wrapped like a monkey around a tangle of electrical cords. There he hung, a frightened little monkey dangling over the fifty-foot plunge into the sub line. Kage had not been so lucky. Standing directly beneath the collapse and unwilling to take his eyes off his new master, the whole brunt of the debris had buried him completely.

"Alek!" Robyn made a valiant leap to reach her son, falling short by at least twenty-five feet. "Help me, Alek! Please!"

Alek shook his half-shattered sense back into his head and judged the distance. Even with the collapsed floor, he was looking at no less than a thirty-foot jump to reach the boy. And even if he managed to snag the cords that Danny clung so desperately to, he might bring the rest of the ceiling down on them all with his weight. He stared dumbly at the sight of the shocked, shuddering little body. Think, damnit! There had to be some way. He looked at the boy, then looked at the ravine, that deadly ravine. He thought he knew the only way out of this as bad and dangerous and crazy as it was. But if he failed...

The ceiling gave another warning growl and Alek made the decision, for better or for worse.

"Robyn," he said, patiently, "tell Danny to let go on three."

"What?" Robyn turned to stare at him with glassy big-eyed horror. "Are you crazy? That line doesn't have a bottom!" she said, pointing to the ravine.

"On three," Alek said, shucking off his coat and taking several steps back. "Do it!"

Robyn shook her head helplessly, shooting tears off in every direction.

Danny cried out and Robyn looked ready to explode from the tension.

"Trust me," Alek said.

Robyn considered that. For a moment he thought she would continue to defy him. Then she turned back to stare up at Danny's dangling figure and said, hesitantly, "Tiger...I want you to let go on three. Uncle Alek is going to catch you."

Danny wailed plaintively, filling the tunnel with his terror and his misery.

"Oh three, honey," Robyn said, keeping her voice calm. "One...two..."

Again it happened too fast, too fast.

Danny lost his grip on the wires, making Alek leap the cavity much too soon. It was all automatic: one moment Alek was standing on solid ground, the next he was sky bound. It was an awkward jump at best. Alek saw the boy fall...felt the cords brush his cheek...caught a handful of the back of the boy's windbreaker...but the far side of the chasm looked too hopelessly far away for them to make it. So Alek wound himself like a snake around the boy, somersaulting over once--just enough to give him the spurt of distance he thought he needed, that he prayed he needed--and felt them crash down against the opposite side of the line. He gripped something as they began to slide down the side of the chasm, hoping it would hold their collective weight...hoping...and there!...their momentum was stalled. Then he hoped the

something he gripped was secure and waited to see if they would fall anyway. Nothing happened. But pain lanced all the way up both his arm and into his shoulders. His body felt like a lead weight waiting to fall into that dead place for man and train. Yet he couldn't let go of either the top of the chasm nor Danny, hanging suspended over the line the way they were.

It hurt like hell, but the alternative was too horrible to even think about.

Mustering his courage, Alek looked down. The bottom of the rift was a tangle of steel railroad shards, iron rebar and shivs of shattered bones, all of it covered with a moving coat of filthy, voracious sewer rats. If they fell...no, don't think of that. You won't fall if you believe you will not fall. Alek closed his eyes and concentrated on his grip overhead. "Danny?" he said. His voice sounded hoarse. "How are you?"

Danny whined like a pained, frightened little animal. "I want Kage."

"I know." Slowly, methodically, Alek pulled against his grip, feeling himself and Danny raise a few inches, then a few more. The muscles of his arm and shoulder began to scream from the effort of pulling them both up by one arm, but he grit his teeth and tried to ignore the burn and the unyielding fatigue and concentrated instead on the work of their survival. Robyn was crying his name, nearly hysterical with terror, and he concentrated on that as well, how very pretty she was and how much he didn't want to see her in tears, all that pretty ruined. The upper portion of his body was over the edge of the line now. Alek sagged against the side, letting his weight anchor him and swinging Danny over the top. When Danny was secure, he then scabbled like one of the rats over the edge. When he had made it he crouched against the ledge under the broken Exit sign, the boy cradled in his arms.

He was exhausted. He felt beaten, inside and out.

"You made it!" Robyn shouted.

Alek nodded and sagged against the wall. As he recovered his strength, he examined Danny for injuries. The boy looked shaken and pale but not really harmed. He lifted Danny's head with two fingers and looked for wounds, just to make certain Kage had not been indulging himself in any way. But just as he had suspected, there wasn't a single mark on Danny anywhere.

"How you holding up?" he asked the child.

"Okay." Danny gave Alek a bit of smile. "Your sword is way cool."

He really was something. A tough little thing. The boy touched Alek's face, brushed his fingers over Alek's cheeks and traced his mouth as if he were the most interesting thing in the world to him. "You're like Kage, aren't you?"

"Shh," Alek whispered and Danny smile grew. "Don't tell anyone."

Danny nodded solemnly. "Promise."

"Alek!" Robyn called.

Alek set Danny down and climbed to his feet. "We're all right," he called. "Danny is fine."

Robyn smiled; she looked relieved.

But not a moment later she lost her smile as a mountain of debris began to move under her feet. It shifted sideways, making Robyn scream and roll off the platform and slam into a wall.

Alek watched helplessly as loose rocks and I-beams were thrust up and away like a child throwing stones and sticks. And then something, no child but a monster of frightening physical strength, emerged from its grave of debris, coated in blood and dust and darkness. For a moment it looked around as if disoriented; then its eyes fixed on Alek and Danny and its entire being seemed to grow darker and heavier and full of clacking claws and saber teeth. Kage looked ready to leap the chasm to their side, something he could probably have done easily in his present state, but as blinded by rage as he was, he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings.

And when Robyn came up behind him with an iron railroad spike in her hand and brought it down with both hands, sinking the metal deep into the sucking cavity between his shoulder blades, driving it in, screaming it in the way she did, Kage never so much as even looked around. The vampire simply stiffened where it crouched at the edge of the chasm, let out a gurgling, blood-clotted sound, and rocked forward into the track, its arms outstretched and useless as it smashed through the debris and its weight caused it to punch through the stakes of steel and bone at the bottom. Rats scattered like a skreeking tidal wave of silky black fur as the body lodged itself at the bottom of the line. But no sooner than it landed, the rats swarmed together again like a sewn seam, blocking the body from view.

Robyn dropped the spike and covered her face with her blood-blackened hands. She swayed, and then collapsed into a lotus on the floor, her hands over her mouth to stifle the illness and the shock and the waning terror.

The voices of the feasting rats filled the tunnel with their rank triumph.

Alek kept Danny's face averted as he peered down into the chasm. What little he could see of Kage's body looked pulpy and broken, like doll parts. The rats continued to swarm, a warm living mass of them, furry vultures with only one prerogative in life.

Alek felt sick.

There was another platform on this side of the rail a little ways further down. After checking one last time to make certain nothing down there moved but rats, Alek picked Danny up and shambled down the walk until he reached it. The sub station it led to took a roundabout route through a series of interconnecting corridors, but eventually he found his way to Robyn's side of the line.

Robyn wept and clung to Danny when she finally had him back in her arms, but Danny was oddly calm, even emotionless. He simply stood there like a rag doll as his mother rubbed his shoulders and checked him all over for scrapes and bruises. "How is my big tiger?" she asked over and over again like a litany. In time Danny nodded and that seemed to put Robyn at ease. Taking his little hand in hers, she turned to Alek. "Can we get out of here now?"

"I can't think of a better idea," Alek told her as he started up the stairs of the sub platform. "There's an exit up here. Come on."

Robyn followed him, but Danny slowed her progress. The boy didn't seem motivated to move at all. By the time they reached the Exit door Robyn was fighting to make him walk, pulling at his hand, fighting to get him every inch of the way. Alek put his hand on her arm. "You want me to take him?"

"I don't understand..."

Danny detached himself from Robyn's hand and jumped into Alek's arms.

Robyn looked surprised by it but didn't say very much as Alek settled Danny's slight weight into the crook of his arm.

He was tired and aching and he felt like an entire building had fallen on him, but at least it was over. The boy played with Alek's hair for a few moments, but very quickly his grim adventure caught up with him and he put his head down on Alek's shoulder. He was fast asleep in minutes, and so he missed all the festival. They emerged in Chinatown, one of his favorite places in the whole city, but this time the familiarity of the colorful Hunan restaurants and antique emporiums and herbal remedy shoppes and the vendors with their carts full of jade and bells and the parade passing by with its lighted paper lanterns and dancing dragon brought no amusement to Alek as it had so often in the past.

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It had taken some persuasion on his part to convince her that he was not seriously injured. He was touched. She seemed genuinely concerned for him. But Alek told her he was perfectly fine. After a while, Robyn seemed to believe him.

She went to Danny, running her hands through his hair, and glanced around the foyer of the big antique house. She looked lost. Alek hung his coat on the rack by the door, and then looked around the house himself. It was cool, dim and silent, as always. No one had been here that he wasn't aware of--vampire, dhampir or otherwise. He would know. The Covenhouse was as much a part of him now as the coat he wore was or the sword he carried. He just wasn't much of a homebody. Somehow or other he always seemed to have business to attend to, and the living space reflected that fact. It wasn't unkempt or anything like that; it just looked un-inhabited. The spaces were too large, the furniture too sparse, the motif a bit too old-fashioned. It looked like a museum, or the cover of a Victorian-style magazine. He didn't have much to offer Robyn and Danny, just this big creaky house full of shadows, but what he had was theirs and he told her so.

At least they were safe here. Protected. "You can have whatever you find in the kitchen," he told them at length. "The bathroom is upstairs and down the hall." They could have the run of the house. The only places they were forbidden to go were downstairs to the Great Abbey, and the dojo with its collection of razor-sharp weapons. But he didn't say that outwardly. In fact, he didn't say it at all. Those places were locked electronically against invasion and he had no fears of strangers wandering into them. "The master bedroom is yours too, if you like," he said.

"Where will you sleep?" Robyn asked.

He shrugged. "I don't sleep much, and I won't sleep at all until this is over."

Robyn dropped her eyes. She was wondering the same thing he was: When and how would all this end--if indeed, it ended at all? On the way home she had made mention of an aunt in Milwaukee that she hadn't seen in ten years. Alek's mind had already turned over the idea that if he could somehow

convince Edward Ashikawa that enough blood had been spilt in his insane crusade, he might be willing to let the girl and her boy go. Robyn could go to Wisconsin. That seemed far enough away from this city. And if that failed...well, he still had connections with the Coven, as tenacious as they were, and he knew the Vatican would not be pleased to learn Edward Ashikawa had been stabling vampires among his cotillion of soldiers. Somehow or other he doubted even the Yakuza was willing to take the Papal bull by the horns.

Robyn took Danny by the hand and started to lead him up the narrow Victorian stairs. Halfway up, she turned around and seemed to take in the wainscoting and the old tintypes on the walls and the glistening antique wallpaper all at once. "Is this house yours?" she asked with some wonder.

Alek said, "I inherited it from my father."

"Oh. He must have been something."

"He was." Then without waiting for an answer from her he went into the kitchen to make a pot of strong coffee. It did little to quench his remaining need, but it took the edge off some. He was so tired. He listened to the sound of activity from upstairs and felt very old and lost.

I should not live in this tomb, he thought for the hundredth time since buying the Covenhouse. He didn't understand why he had done that, only that the fear of the Coven taking his home, living in it, desecrating it further with their bloody purpose, was more than he could bear. He had to protect the house. And he had. And now the house protected him. Jean Paul said it was his hive; in affect, his personal lair. None that entered it could escape his influence. In fact, no one he called enemy could enter it at all. It was all part of the mythology of the vampire, some of it truth, some lies, some half-truths.

He, having lived more than half a century as a dhampir, was still learning the ins and outs, so to speak. In fact, he had begun to keep a journal about it, wondering if anyone else ever had. He wasn't undead, nor was any vampire. He had never died. Garlic, running water, silver, wooden stakes and religious paraphernalia could do nothing to harm him. Only profoundly strong and long direct exposure to sunlight could do him damage. Only the severance of his head or a stake or shard of iron--or indeed, any instrument of iron stuck in a vital organ--could kill him. As far as he could tell, he was immortal. At least, he looked half his age, which was pushing fifty-five these days. He had a hunger, but it wasn't usually bad, except on the full moon--what the vampires called the Hunter's Moon. Like Debra, and like all vampires, his power as well as his need was redoubled on those nights. Nights like tonight.

I'm a vampire living in a crypt, he thought and almost laughed aloud. He hated this house and he loved it. It was his passion and his sin. What else could he do with it?

He changed into his lay-around clothes--black silk slacks, silk slippers and a kimono--and went to the library and stood in it, feeling the house close about him. The years and books and learning and blood. All his. Every scrap. Every memory. He was so tired. Tired and in need. Not for the first time he wondered if visiting Jean Paul's private pleasure club would help. If it wouldn't at least ease the discomfort.

No. All he needed to do was fall once, and he would keep falling.

Instead, he lay down on the divan, setting aside Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, and slept. The toll on his body was so great he did not dream and he did not awaken until almost nightfall. The Hunter's Moon had risen. He got up and went to the window and watched it laze across the sky like a weapon. But the sight of it made him anxious and in time he returned to the divan and picked up the Wharton

book and read a page, not really seeing the words. After a few moments he became aware of a presence in the room with him, subtle, like perfume. He looked up and glimpsed a familiar figure in the gilt oval mirror on the wall between two bookcases.

"Thank you," he said.

Debra smiled and the tie of his kimono loosened.

He secured it. "Stop it...I can't play with you tonight," he said patiently.

"Why? Because of her?" she asked in her plaintive little girl's voice.

He tried to find something to say, some wisdom or reason, but Debra pouted and simply faded from the glass. He was just wondering what that meant when he heard light footfalls from the hallway. He turned and found himself staring at the subject of their controversy. Robyn--her face was pale and makeupless, her eyes big and demure. She must have misinterpreted his interest because she plucked at the oversized robe she wore and said, "Do you mind? I didn't have any clothes..."

"No," he said. "I don't mind."

"Danny's asleep," she said. Then she stepped into the study, looking around. "I didn't have a chance to thank you for what you did." She watched him for some moments from beneath her long blonde lashes. "You wear glasses?"

He closed the book and took off the wire rims.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I just didn't expect...someone like you would."

"Someone like me?"

She toyed with the ties of the robe, eyes downcast. "Edward told me what you are. He said you're just like Kage."

"Not exactly."

She looked up at that and something alighted in her eyes. Something suspiciously like hope. When she approached the divan and picked up his glasses, he was mystified. Then she placed them back on his face. "They become you," she said as she sat down beside him.

He had never examined her this closely before. Her skin had a particular scent to it. He had noticed that about all the women in his life; every one had her own individual scent. Debra had the subtle, cloying scent of a carnivore. Kat had always reminded him of lavender and rain. Robyn was different from all that. She made him think of vanilla, something soft and fragile and infinitely feminine.

He touched her face, fascinated, almost expecting her flesh to give like silk beneath his touch. Soft. When her lips sought his, he did not immediately kiss back. Instead, he put out his tongue and licked the petal-soft pinkness there. Ah yes, here too was the scent. He licked some more. He heard a barely audible moan rise up in Robyn's throat. Then he accepted the gift of her mouth. To his senses she tasted like cream, but because it was not in his nature to kiss with the lips alone, he soon found himself dipping his tongue into all that honeyed sweetness, running it along the rim of the silken lips and then the chin and throat, all of it as delicious as if she had been daubed with the sweetest nectar known to mankind.

She whispered something in his ear, something sweet and obscene, and touched his bare chest with her fingertips. His whole being responded to her invitation. After a moment she slid her hands across his ribs and used her weight to pull him over her on the divan, the book caught between them. She kissed him again, bumping her nose on the glasses that had fallen to the end of his nose. Instead of removing them, she turned her head, slanting her mouth against his, her hands in his hair, on him, everywhere suddenly, her ministrations so aggressive and complete he felt compelled to return the tasks one for another. It was like a dance or a war. A delicious confrontation.

Finally, emboldened by his response, she touched his teeth with her tongue and kissed and explored his mouth, exciting him all the more. He was afraid he tasted of blood, but if he did so, it no longer frightened her. Good. The heart-pounding desire within was almost more than he could bear. Almost more than he could control. Almost more than he wanted to control. As the moon came out in all its powerful white brilliance and touched off his black hair with a spell of silver-blue light, he lowered his head and nipped playfully at her chin, then wetted a path from her throat to the cleave in the robe and nuzzled against the comforting clocking of her heartbeat. She was so sweet...as sweet as tea or coffee...her soft, warm woman flesh so intoxicating he was scarcely aware of the change in his face until it was almost too late.

He stopped. With his face down he could hide it at least, until it passed.

"Alek?"

He hid his face in her lap, his reams of long hair falling like a curtain between them. "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

"It's all right." She tried to hold him and smooth his hair but now there was little comfort to be had in the feel of a woman's touch. She was so human, so alien to what he knew. She wasn't Debra. There would be no blood sport. He couldn't do the things he wanted to do. The things he dreamt of. "I'm not afraid of you," she said.

"I am like Kage," he whispered.

"No, you're not," she insisted. "Kage was a killer."

A killer. A slayer.

"Jesus."

"What? What is it?" Robyn asked.

He shook his head. The burn in his face had passed so he chanced looking up at her. She didn't flinch so he took that as a good sign that he was over the craving. She touched his cheek with the palm of her hand and tried to kiss him but he drew back away from her and stood up, moving discreetly away from the divan.

"What's the matter?"

He went to the empty mirror, trying to decide what to do. He wanted to think about something other than the craving. Needed to. "Why did you lie to me?" he asked.

The reflected Robyn looked surprised. "I didn't lie to you."

"Edward Ashikawa is your husband, not your pimp. Danny is his son."

Robyn closed her eyes. For a moment he almost thought she would continue in the lie. Then she said, "How long have you known?"

"A while. There are no tapes. It's Danny he wants, just Danny."

"Edward told you...?"

"Danny's dreams. He has premonitions because Edward Ashikawa and Kage shared each others' blood." Alek looked aside. "Vampire blood sometimes creates such bonds...and such abilities."

Robyn stood up. "What I told you about my past was true, most of it. I did run away. And my father...my mother died when I was born and that son of a bitch held me responsible." There was a terrible lilt in her voice. The sound of raw anguish. Then it was gone, just like that, replaced by raw anger. "But there are no tapes, no." She looked away. "I just wanted you to help me get free of Edward. You looked like someone who would help me."

Alek turned around and considered the girl. "Ask him for a divorce."

Robyn made a short, derisive laugh. "The Ryuujin of the Yakuza? Do you honestly think he'll give me one? And even so, I would still lose Danny."

"Stealing Danny away from his father isn't the way--"

"He's my son!" she spat vehemently. "I don't want him growing up to be some criminal like Edward! You've seen what he does...what he nearly did to you!" She stopped short, looking about the library as if she were not quite sure where she was or how she had gotten here. Her eyes flickered everywhere, and then seemed to travel to other places, other times. She folded her arms about herself like a cocoon and said, her eyes downcast, "My daddy hurt me, Alek."

He was numb. "So did mine. You live past it."

"You son of a bitch." She looked up. There were tears in her eyes but he would not be moved by them.

He said, "You live past things and you live on. You have to become your own person or your past will own you forever. That's the only way."

Her eyes still held unshed tears, but she seemed to understand something of what he said. "Look," she said, sniffing, "I'm sorry I lied to you, but I didn't have a choice. Everything I did, I did for Danny. I know you can't understand what it's like to be responsible for someone, but there are things you just do sometimes."

The glass shivered at Alek's back and he was glad he was blocking its view from Robyn. He said, "I do know. But running isn't the answer, Robyn. Believe me. All you are going to do is wind up hurting yourself in the end. You can't run away. It isn't that easy."

"I'm not going back to Edward," Robyn stated. "And neither is Danny. He'll have to kill me first."

And what could he say to that? Edward would kill her if she ran, if she didn't run. Circles in circles.

Wheels turning, but taking their victim nowhere.

She held his eyes a moment, and then she said: "I'd better go. You've done enough already and I've fucked up your life enough."

"It's nightfall."

"Kage is dead."

"Maybe. It depends on how he fell, how badly he was injured, and how powerful he is."

"You mean he could still be alive?" She sounded incredulous. Worse--convinced and frightened.

"I don't know," Alek answered truthfully. "But if he is, he won't rest until he has Danny, you can be assured of that."

Robyn sank down onto the cushions of the divan. Her face white, hands wringing, she said, "Come away with me?"

"What?"

"Let's get out of this city, Alek. Please. Come with me."

Alek shook his head. "That's impossible."

"Why?" Again she stood up, but smoothly this time, like a graceful little animal. "There's nothing here for you, is there?" she asked in a lilting voice. And then, quite suddenly, she undid the tie of her robe. "You're right. We both live in the past, Alek...and we both need each other." When the robe was open she approached him, eyes seeking an answer in his face. He tried not to notice her generous charms, the full, inviting breasts, the pale, kissable skin and the treasure further down, all of her as silken and aromatic as vanilla cream. He concentrated on her eyes instead, the storm there. "I love you...and I know you care for me," she said. "You wouldn't have kissed me if you didn't." She trailed her finger from her lips down to the places still damp from his kisses.

He looked away, his face flushed with shame.

"Why do you have to turn away?" she asked. "Do you hate me so much? Do you hate yourself?"

And then she was there, and he turned to look at her as she began to slide the robe off her shoulders. He reached for the fabric, to cover her again, but instead his hands fell lightly upon her shoulders and traced the smooth skin of her arms down to the crooks of her elbows, wondering at her, at how such a beautiful animal could be put together with such perfection and grace. She shifted slightly so that his hands fell instead upon her breasts. He cupped them, the calloused pads of his thumbs brushing lightly against the pert pink nipples, wondering about her, wondering if she had nourished Danny with her precious mother's milk. The thought sent an erotic shiver all throughout his body.

He stared at her as if his rampant thoughts could really touch her, wondering what Edward must feel--having her and then losing her. Her and Danny both. His family. He wondered what it felt like, to have a mate. To have a child born from that mating. She and Danny seemed to fill the empty space in this dead old house with life and humming energy, vanquishing the void that forever lived here, the past that never let go. And the fantasy entertained him for some moments--he and Robyn and Danny together, a

family--before reality gradually began to bleed in through the many cracks along with the futility of Robyn's generous offer. Finally, he moved his hands to the edges of the robe and drew them up, covering Robyn completely.

She stared at him a long hard moment, mystified.

"You don't know me," Alek whispered. "If I was with you, you would be no happier than you were with Edward."

"I was afraid of Edward. I'm not afraid of you," she said, her hands alighting on his chest.

"You should be. I've done things I can never talk about. Things I can barely live with..." And then he groaned as her hands dropped further down and found his most sensitive place, stroked him. The flush of heat and animal was back in his face and eyes and this time he could not help himself. He twisted in her hold, his glasses lost, shivering with the horrific lust shooting like lightning through every nerve and starved vein in his body. He made a sound too much like an animal-snarl in his throat. And with the onrush of the lust came also the rage--rage against her and the moon and nature and all the darkness and wanting he could hold back no longer. But more than that--rage against himself, because he was reaching for her and it seemed perfectly normal that he should have her in any way he wanted. He could have her and make her whimper, and he knew he could enjoy making her enjoy it.

And he hit her, a smart smack against the cheek, not hard but as sharp as a blade, not cutting her but separating her nonetheless from him. It was a necessary evil, a barrier between herself and the monster that would crush her if let off its leash even a moment. And having struck her, he simultaneously backed away until his shoulders hit the mirror on the wall and he could go no farther.

For a moment the mystery remained on Robyn's face like the slight red mark of his hand. Then it changed as if someone had hit a switch, and she went from absolute wonder to absolute understanding. She touched her face and frowned like a little girl being punished for a transgression she was entirely unaware of. She shook her head but there was no denying what had happened. For a moment Alek felt a powerful desire to apologize...then realized he could not. He was not sorry. He had hit her to save her life.

She didn't understand. Still clutching her cheek, she took a step back, the painful, hateful fear burning in her eyes. And it was a shivering natural human fear--a woman fear--and that at last was too much. Alek closed his eyes and said nothing in the end and only listened to the terrible sound of her retreating footsteps.

26

For a moment, after locking the bedroom door behind her, Robyn could do nothing but stand in silence in the middle of this vast Victorian suite and look around, lost, bewildered. Danny lay asleep on the duvet that seemed from another century, his thumb in his mouth. Danny was four and he had not done that in months...but now things were going backwards, it seemed.

How had this happened? She had run from Edward and Kage, had run so far, and yet she had not gone far at all. She loved Alek, loved him with the same fierce wanting she had once felt for Edward, sitting so proud and fierce among his warriors--they both had such a presence, such barely-restrained power--but he did not love her. Or at least, did not want her, which was worse in its way. He could love her if he chose to, but he had chosen otherwise. His heart was strong but his will was stronger.

And why? Wasn't she pretty enough? Desirable enough? Robyn will be a model and her face will be her power, her Aunt Claire used to say when she was a little girl and would pose in the pretty dresses Daddy bought for her. But it would seem all that was a lie. None of it was meant to be. And Alek was wrong. He may not be exactly like Kage but he was just like Edward. Both of them wanted her but wanted to not want her. Like it was their weakness. Like it was her fault. Like Daddy, who had wanted her but did not want to want her and had punished her with the closet when he could no longer control the wanting. Like that.

Robyn began to shake with sobs, feeling like a fool, to shake and sob until she felt wrung out and finished and too tired to stand up anymore. Then she climbed into bed next to Danny. Danny did not stir. If only she could be like that--to not dream, to not have to remember. Alek said you got past things, that you got over them. But what would he know? He'd never been hurt so badly he couldn't live with the pain. He wasn't human. He couldn't feel human pain.

He was a thing. An It. Like Kage.

The sheets were black satin under the duvet. Somehow Robyn wasn't surprised by that. But they also smelled like Alek--leather and musk with the cloying, undercutting taste of metal--which made her feel as if she had somehow fallen into him with no escape in sight. She touched her face and then closed her eyes. She did not sleep, only dozed and tossed as night began to come down. Finally, after an hour or so, she climbed out of bed and went to the bundle of clothes lying on the floor, filthy and bloodstained from the sub tunnel, and dug through them until she found the brass knuckles. Useless. What defense were they against an enemy who could invade your mind? She threw them aside and continued to dig until she found the iron railroad spike she had used to send Kage to hell where Daddy was. Clutching it like a crucifix to her heart, she returned to bed and lay down on the black sheets and closed her eyes.

In time she slept and dreamt her father came into the room, spewing Scripture and curses, and started pounding a large iron cross into her heart. She tried to move but her body just lay there like the immovable curse it was. But because she was human and not a vampire, she would not die for Daddy's pleasure and he started to get angry with her and slap her and the sting in her teeth was horrible and she awoke some time later, grinding her teeth until her jaw hurt. She sat up, afraid suddenly. Of the dark. Of the night lurking beyond the window. Danny was still asleep and so angelic she felt her heart break inside her. He was so innocent and she could not protect him. She wept but found she had no more tears to spill. Daddy, Edward, and now Alek had taken them all from her. Taken even that. Even her sorrow.

The last of the departed dream, the pounding and the anger, was as cloying as the scent of Alek--no, no the dhampir--in the bedclothes and she got up and moved away from them. She stood at the window for some time, watching the sky and the scuttle of the night-clouds. There was blood on the moon tonight and that meant something. She frowned and again she touched her face. It didn't hurt. It hadn't, really, even from the start. Rather, the wounding was in her soul.

She held the spike against her heart, feeling its coolness burn against her skin. And then suddenly she knew what she had to do. She knew what escape was. At last. And sliding the spike into the waistband of her underwear under the robe, the spike that was her only savior, her only hope, she crept to the door and began to open it.

It was a blood red Hunter's Moon tonight and he knew that that meant. The rules would bend, the rules that governed his world. Tonight thralls would turn on their masters. Females would turn on their blood-bound mates. There might even be a war, two hives invading each other's sacred ground and soiling it with blood. Alek stood at the great bay window of the Parlour--not the parlor, but the Parlour, the cozy turn-of-the-century sitting room that faced east over the city--and tried to feel the change in the environment. But the city was silent. Not the city the humans saw--that bustled and pushed and lived and breathed as usual--but the city beneath the city. The society under Society. So silent it was. Maybe because the vampires had lost interest. Maybe because his feelings were too complex right now to pick up on anything. He didn't know.

The craving was back, gnawing at him like a rainy-day ache. But he was grateful for Robyn's presence in the house despite the conflict she aroused in him. It gave him purpose and a mission when otherwise he might give in and see what Jean Paul could do for him.

Yes--the house needed that humanity. He made the decision. When this was over he would seek out a maid or butler or chauffeur service. Something human that could fill this house. Robyn? No. It had to be human but know nothing of his world. It would serve this house, but it would also live in danger from the very beings that sought his downfall. The Coven. The hives he had harmed in all his years as an agent of the Coven. That was the only way he could focus on something other than the craving. He would be using the poor unfortunate individual, yes, but better than the alternative.

Become a predator of men. Lose himself.

Even if one soul fell, that was better than a legion of them. Wasn't it?

"Hi."

He turned his head when he heard the high sweet voice of the girl. There she stood in the Parlour, still dressed in his robe. "Hi," he said uncertainly.

She ventured forward. "I'm sorry for before."

He shrugged. He ought to be the one apologizing, but he still wasn't sorry. He had done what he did to save her. To save himself. "Things happen."

"You're very forgiving," she said. "Alek."

He had a sudden urge to run away from her. He didn't know why, only that something was wrong somewhere. He tried to pinpoint the exact feeling but it eluded him.

She reached for the front of his kimono and traced the embossed tigers there. The kimono had once belonged to Akisha. Precious, eternal Akisha. And it bore her insignia. The Tiger. Power in battle

and adversity. Now Robyn touched the robe she wore with curious wonder and familiarity, and he wondered if she would make another play for him and sighed inwardly at the coming battle. Their arrangement would not work. Not in any way. He wished he could make her understand that.

But instead of trying to divest herself of the fabric, she reached into the waistband of her underpants and withdrew the railroad spike she had used on Kage. He was surprised she had kept it. She showed it to him. Its tip was rusty with age and discolored with the vampire's blood, but still very sharp. And it was iron. Deadly iron. He looked at it. What did she mean by showing it to him?

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I love you."

Amadeus had professed such love himself, once. Alek thought about that in the second before Robyn rammed the sharpened tip of the iron stake into his heart. And then he had another thought. He thought about how everyone who ever said they loved him did so just before they tried to kill him.

28

The dhampir glanced up at her with curiosity. He was confused and in that instant Robyn struck, spearing the tip of the spike at the creature's heart. She should have known better. Inhuman reflexes enabled the thing to shift to the left to evade the stab even as its hand closed around Robyn's wrist and squeezed. Exquisite agony shot up Robyn's arm and shoulder and she automatically dropped the spike. She tried to wrench loose, but the dhampir shoved, sending her to the floor on her knees and close to where the spike had landed. Her left hand wrapped around it as the dhampir twisted her right arm in an attempt to make her drop the spike. Gritting her teeth against the anguish, Robyn lanced the spike in her left hand up and in, the point cutting deep into the dhampir's stomach.

It was not its vulnerable heart, but it was close enough.

As if jolted by a stun gun, the dhampir stiffened, pushed her away, and tottered backward, his shoulders smashing into the window and cracking it like an eggshell. Knocked onto her back, Robyn saw the dhampir double over and fall to his knees, his cloak of long hair mercifully hiding his wan, tormented features from Robyn's view. It would not be like last time, Robyn reflected; it would not be like with Daddy or with Kage. She would not have to see the monster's eyes as he begged for life and then began to die for her.

Robyn rose into a crouch. By all rights the push the dhampir had dealt her should have cracked her skull open or at least stunned her. Yet it had been no worse than the slaps she had gotten from Daddy when he wanted her and didn't want to want her--which meant the creature was weak. Maybe it was dying.

There would never be a better opportunity for escape. Scrambling up, she made for the bedroom and for Danny. Not thinking. Fleeing.

Of course she should have known better. She should have known Kage was not dead. Things like Kage and like Alek and like Edward and like Kurayami and like Daddy never died. They just lived

on and on, hovering at the edges of dreams and nightmares. She stopped in the doorway, just looking at Kage, or what remained of Kage, crouched in the open window.

The vampire was in pieces. Not merely his clothing but himself as well, his skin and in some places even his bones, as if the flesh had been separated and worried and scraped bleeding off his body, the bones broken, tendons torn and frayed like hemp. There was a gaping hole in his chest where Robyn had put the railroad spike in, and from out of that hole bubbled a seemingly endless supply of fetid black juice shot through with the poison of iron and a colony of writhing grey maggots. Kage breathed, a rattling sound that made Robyn think of snakes and the chains on wolf traps. And then black stuff, as black as leather, as black as his inhuman, hungering eyes, coughed past Kage's torn lips and shattered teeth. .

Kage grinned but it was not a grin of pleasure, nor even one of menace.

It was hunger. Pure, animalistic hunger. Bestial. Unbound.

He was like a god of hunger.

Hunger for her...hunger at her...

"Do you know," Kage grated like his mouth was full of blood and dirt, "what it is like...to be eaten alive?"

Robyn shook her head. She needed to back out of the room and slam the door between them, but the site of the half-eaten, ravaged creature paralyzed her. The suffering in his eyes.

Have to leave, she thought frantically, have to--

Stay.

No!

Stay, said his eyes.

Stay...

He still had that power.

Kage leapt at her and it was over in seconds. She could not have reacted. She could not have resisted. She could not have uttered even a single cry of alarm. In seconds she found she was inches from his ruined face, his black, pupilless eyes. She tried to cry out, to pull away, but she was held fast in an unbreakable vise. His hands, his godlike, alien eyes...

Kage smiled.

Robyn saw the creature's sharp, bonelike teeth and smelled its meaty breath, the ghost of the things it must have consumed in the tunnel pit to get him this far. The rats. The rats he--It--had eaten, the rats that had eaten it. She nearly gagged. Eyes wide, she beheld its tongue slithering out of its mouth--a narrow, black, forked tongue. A dragon's tongue. Nausea welled up within her as the tip touched her mouth. She pressed her lips tightly shut, yet Kage rammed its tongue into her, filling her with the taste of raw iron and spoiled meat, entwining with her own, making her shudder with nausea.

Sobbing, Robyn finally began to fight for her life, scratching and clawing at Kage's face. Yet nothing she did seemed to hurt him. She peeled off strips of dripping red flesh and still he grinned his hungry grin. Kage struck her and she fell roughly back onto the bed to within inches of Danny's still, stunned form. His slap was not like Alek's, nor even like Daddy's. She saw the room dance this time. She tried to rise but she was too weak. And then Kage was there, burying under her robe, touching her everywhere, tasting her everywhere, its tongue flaying at her flesh. Rage flooded through her when the creature's tongue darted out and licked at her navel. "Leave me alone!" she screamed, squirming uselessly, pounding him with her fists and her voice and her rage. "Goddamn you all to hell!"

"Hell," Kage said, though it was little more than a rattle forced through his bloody-caked mouth and reptilian teeth.

It was the last word Robyn heard before the creature's broken shark like teeth sliced through her throat and ended her pain forever.

29

Alek opened his eyes and saw the demon directly overhead, backlit by the milky light of the city and the Hunter's Moon. He blinked in confusion and tried to rise. Dizziness and a rending pain in the deepest part of himself convinced him otherwise.

"No," spoke the demon in a scathing, rattling voice. "Just lie still."

He waited, watching the attentive face of the demon. After a while he realized the demon was not a demon, after all. It was a vampire, but he took cold comfort in that fact. It was a horrendous vampire, a fiendish being covered in blood and wounds and strips of black fabric that passed for clothing. It was something from a pit. Something from its own grave. Something unto death. As he watched, the vampire disappeared for a moment, and then stepped back into his line of vision with its hands cupped. Something splashed down on top of him, making him bite his tongue at the agony that zagged through him like a steel knife. He clamped his teeth shut, yet he could not prevent the mournful sound of anguish that rose up and up in his throat.

"It hurts," said the vampire. It canted its head to one side and Alek saw its ragged mane of hair was bound with chain and a steel ball. Kage. "That's good. If you could not feel at all, that would mean you were dying." More blood was dribbled into his wound, and with the blood, more pain. The heels of his boots beat arhythmically against the floor. He thought he would explode from the pain, the immortal pain. Finally, mercifully, after some minutes Kage stopped tormenting him and knelt down. He smelled like death and Alek began to breath out of his mouth by reflex to cut the odor of the grave.

"You don't smell so well yourself, brother," Kage said. His grey, caustic face showed no emotion, as always, yet there was purpose in his gestures. He reached down and took hold of the stake of iron in one of his hands. The other hovered over Alek's face a moment before clamping down over the bridge of his nose, the heel sinking under his palate, his upper canine teeth sinking deep into the hand.

Alek choked, but it was a momentary discomfort. And then there was a sensation to which his entire body responded--a white-hot flash of fire from within that ripped a gushing hole loose and actually lifted his body several inches off the floor. Alek screamed through his teeth, biting against the hand preventing him from snapping his tongue loose, and it was like the roar of a lion or the cry of a wolf, something elemental and inhuman, a sound so strange it did not seem possible it came from his own throat. He tasted blood, rotten, and he began to gag in earnest this time. To gag and writhe.

Be still, said Kage's eyes.

And Alek was. And he lay as still as a corpse and felt the hissing heat of his own immortal blood filling the hole the iron stake had left in his stomach. His fingernails tore strips of the blood-soaked carpet from the floor. He was in hell. He must be dying. He was...

"Alive," Kage whispered as he released his hold on Alek's face, the palm of his frayed hand smearing the blood across Alek's cheek like war paint. "Alive and immortal and cursed to walk this world forever, a plague unto yourself."

Damned.

"Yes."

Alek felt the pain recede...not fast, not fast enough for his liking...but at least he could breathe now and he had stopped roaring in anguish. He tasted his shed tears and blood. He felt his heart--it was running like a clock in his chest, but at least it was running. He sagged back against the floor, unable to move, unable to do more than shake his head at Kage and utter silently the only word he was capable of:

"Why?"

Kage threw down the railroad spike. "It was what the master wanted, nothing more. Don't read too much into it. The next time we meet, Slayer, things will be very different."

The master...

And then Alek remembered. Through the pain he remembered it all. Danny, Robyn, Kage. Everything.

And then it was obliterated again by a waxing cramp of hunger. Craving. The wanting that never, never seemed to leave him, damned and immortal as he was. He curled himself around the pain, almost weeping in the clutch of its power, as helpless as a child. As helpless as Danny, his Danny...

Kage seemed to regard him with something like curiosity. "You saved Danny. I can't tell you what that means to me, and so I will show you instead." Again he touched Alek, but this time he took great care in it, unwinding him, his fingers on Alek's face, under his chin. With a force that was gentle, yet firm, Kage tilted Alek's head back. The sensation of having his throat exposed panicked him and he started to whimper and struggle. Again Kage commended him to be still, and he was. He had no strength to fight the vampire's will. No desire.

Kage held him fast and leaned down, his tongue finding Alek's mouth in something like an exploratory kiss. Kage's tongue entered Alek's mouth like a snake in a hole, stealthy, and twined with Alek's own for a moment before raking against his canines. The barest touch...and it set his entire body on fire with the need. The endless craving. And when Kage convulsed and offered Alek the gift of life Alek could no more deny it than a dying man in the desert could deny a drink of life-giving water.

Alek drank it all. His body drank it all, his hurting, starved body cleaving to the nourishment. He groaned as his body returned to life, pain fluttering away--not gone but now lurking at a distance--wounds netting at almost preternatural speed. He found Kage's hair, the chain, his fingers tangling in it, his mouth and tongue seeking and begging yet more and more life from Kage's mouth. Kage responded. He must have fed heavily for he seemed to give in an endless, frenzied passion before the giving became too much for his own recovering body and he broke the kiss and forcefully pushed Alek's body down.

Alek's mind was spinning, body humming with energy. "More?"

"No more for you, Slayer. You've had enough."

Enough. No, there could never be enough...

But too much and he would suffer for it.

"That's right," Kage said.

You can know my thoughts?

"For a short time," Kage said. "Until our bond weakens."

Our bond...

Alek looked on Kage and he looked inside of him. All that terror, all those years. The loss and the sorrow...and yet there was love, too. He thought it could not be possible, yet it was. Kage was not merely devoted to Danny. He did not mindlessly serve the boy any more than he had any of his great human masters. There was love there as well. The love he cleaved to, because it subjugated the monster. He loved Danny, was in love with Danny. And that love was a wonderful, overwhelming feeling of happiness to be so near someone so special. To be so complete in the presence of another. To be loved. To serve. To be precious.

To feel human...

Alek's jealousy was like a river.

"He loves you too. You have become a part of us both." Kage stood up.

Alek knew he was leaving for good, and that they would not face each other again, except as enemies. Perhaps the love would remain, but it would not exist between the two of them. It was love of common blood, Alek realized. Dragon's blood. A strange elixir.

They shared Danny. That was all.

Alek sat up. He was still weak, but he would live. Not a foot from where he lay was the iron railroad spike that nearly ended his life. He picked it up.

Robyn?

Dead in our eyes, as I have said, Kage said as he hovered in the window. Beneath the tatters

of his coat was a little figure with large shimmering eyes.

Alek smiled.

Uncle Alek, said Danny.

Had he really heard that? Had he?

And then they were gone, both of them. Just gone.

Alek was confused. He went to look out the broken window, but there was nothing to see but night. And then went upstairs to the bedroom. There were bloodstains on his sheets and duvet, but that wasn't so unusual. There was always blood somewhere.

He stood in the room, the stake in his hand, and wondered about Robyn.

She was gone.

And he never saw her again.

30

One week to the date, Alek went to see Edward Ashikawa at his house. It was a common day. The men at the gate let him in--somewhat reluctantly as usual--and he was looked over suspiciously and asked to unload any firearms, again, as usual. But he had none of those and had never owned any anyway, so it made no difference to him. He was allowed to keep the sword, and that was the only thing that counted.

The butler-henchmen said Mr. Ashikawa was in the courtyard taking tea and would Alek be joining him this afternoon? Alek said he would.

Outside in the courtyard, at the top of the stairs to the gazebo, sat the Dragon Lord of the Yakuza. He was sipping green tea and reading the New York Times in the beautiful light of day. He folded down the newspaper and regarded Alek with some surprise before saying, "I admire you. You have an enormous amount of courage coming here."

Alek regarded the man overtop the round black shades he was wearing against the fierceness of the light. "Well, the way I see it, you haven't tried to kill me in the last week and I have no interest in killing you at all, so I'm hoping this is a truce."

Edward Ashikawa considered that, but before he could respond, a little voice interrupted them both.

"Uncle Alek!" And then there was Danny running around the side of the great fountain and throwing himself forward into Alek's arms. Alek dropped down and caught him and Danny locked his arms

around Alek's neck and started to squeeze like a vice with an iron grip. Alek noted that little Danny certainly had his father's strength. "You sure took a long time in coming," Danny said. "What took you so long?"

Alek looked past the child to his father. "I've been fighting the bad guys."

"Cool." Danny finally let go long enough to study his face. "Where's your mask?"

Alek tilted his head. "No masks for you, Danny-boy."

"I missed you, Uncle Alek," the boy said and gave him another squeeze. "I was scared, but Daddy said you would be back. Daddy was right."

Alek smiled. "I missed you too."

"Danny," said Edward Ashikawa, patiently, "Why don't you go inside so Uncle Alek and I can talk?"

Danny stared up at his father. "Have to?"

"I would wish it, son."

Danny made a face. "Grown-up talk?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Yuck." He turned back to Alek and grabbed a hold of his arm, shaking it emphatically. "Can I show you the dojo later?" Again he glanced at his father. "Daddy gave me a sword. I can't lift it though. Will you help me? It's cool but not like yours. Daddy says you have the coolest sword ever."

"Sure."

"Will you show me your sword? I want to hold it."

"Of course," Alek said. "Now listen to your father and go inside. Okay?"

"Kay." Grinning, the boy ran off. But at the door of the house he turned and waved frantically one more time.

Alek waved back and the boy ran off.

"Kage was right...Danny loves you," Edward said.

"Where is Kage?" Alek sat down on the stairs of the gazebo.

"Around."

Alek nodded. "You lost him when you sent him to protect Danny."

Ashikawa sipped his tea. "Yes. But I did gain you, didn't I?"

Alek smirked. "I'm not a vampire, Mr. Ashikawa. I don't serve."

"All your kind serve," Ashikawa answered with a mirrored smirk. "It is your nature to do so. And you cannot deny your nature, now can you? Nor more than Kage can. No more than I can."

Alek shook his head. "I was passing by the house and wanted to know how Danny was. He had an experience last week."

"Danny is well. Danny is with Kage. That's all that's important to me. I have everything I need, you see." Ashikawa hesitated and glanced sidelong at Alek. "Well...nearly so."

Alek stood up as the power of the Dragon seemed to reach for him, to push at him, to keep him sitting on the stairs. At Edward's feet. "You never give up, do you?" Alek said. The anger kindled a fire from within. He would have to leave soon or chance going a second round with the Dragon Lord of the Yakuza, something he didn't want, not when he was on an important mission today. He buttoned up his coat. "You won't win, Mr. Ashikawa. I won't belong to you. Ever."

But Edward Ashikawa never lost his smile. "Time passes, Slayer," he said, "and time changes all things."

31

He stepped into the hospital lobby just before the end of visiting hours. The receptionist looked up at him with a bored expression that changed dramatically when she got a good look at him. He waited for some snide comment from Debra, but none was forthcoming surprisingly, so he approached the young woman and asked which room Candace Katherine Keith was in.

"1141, sir, but her visitor list is highly-restricted. May I have your name?"

He gave it, wondering if Kat's family, or Kat herself, had thought to include him on the list. He was mildly surprised to learn she had. He made his way to her room, ignoring the interest of the receptionist. He pushed open her door, expecting to find her in a sad, vacant room, but the room was not like that. It was a veritable garden of delights, flowers and gifts everywhere he looked. Like the grand finale of a stage play, he thought. Like a funeral.

She has changed, he thought. And it had been no more than a week. Her skin was brown and dry, and she had lost so much weight it hung slack on her bones. Her muscle tone and strength were gone. How much weight had she lost in only one week? Twenty pounds? More? He had no way of telling, but he could see the terrible toll it had taken on her body. Even her hair looked lifeless, draped in dry, brittle strands across the pillow, all the curl gone, as if that were too much effort for her body to make.

It took him a moment to recognize the emotion welling up within him. Rage. He no longer wondered why he had loved her once so long ago. She had been worth loving. But this was sacrilege.

His rage gave him power and he cried out silently, trying to touch Kandy Kat's mind. His hand stroked hers, and then moved to smooth her cheek between the tangles of the tubes and machines that kept her alive these days. He might even have kissed her since princes were reputedly able to bring back fair sickly maidens with such kisses, but the machines would not allow that. And anyway, everything he touched, everything he loved, died.

Kat opened her eyes. They were still bright. They still held mirth.

"Hi there," she whispered. "I saw you...at the exhibit...so beautiful..."

"You shouldn't try to talk too much," Alek told her as he took the chair by her bed.

"Don't tell me...what to do."

He smiled sadly.

She returned the smile with one just as sad. And then her smile was wiped away by curiosity. She shook her head. "Can't be...must be...Alek's son? Are you?"

Alek tilted his head.

"Are you?" she repeated in earnest.

He thought about it. It would be so easy to lie now, to tell Kandy Kat that that was true, that Alek was gone and he was the son she had never known existed in this world. But somehow...he just didn't want to. The hour was getting late. Lies would gain him nothing.

"It's me, Kat," he said. "Serpent Boy."

"Can't..." Again a shake of her head. Her hand went up, her skinny hand, and touched his face, a face that had not aged a single day since his thirty-third birthday. The thought send a shard of anger so deep through his heart he thought it should stop beating immediately. Immortality for him, but none for her. In some evil twist of fate, the gods had seen fit to take a bit of brilliance like Kat and leave a worthless shadow behind.

It wasn't fair. And the unfairness gave him strength through the anger and he began to speak, and he talked about the night of the senior prom and how Kat's blue dress had caught on the door of his Thunderbird--that 1958 great white shark she loved so much--and how they had gone to a dress-fitters up in Ithaca, the only one they could find at that late hour, to mend the tear. And while there, the dress-fitter, feeling sorry for Kat's plight, had given her a whiskey sour with a cherry, and Kat broke her front tooth on the pit of the cherry and he talked about how, by the time they were done at the dentist, the prom was half over and how they chose to drive out to an overlook near the Hudson and how Kat wasn't angry and how Alek said he felt like Lil' Abner and how things like this always seemed to happen to him and would she forgive him? And she kissed him, though carefully with that swollen mouth of hers, and told him she wished she could spend the rest of their lives together like this. That everything was perfect, the night and the full moon, and so was he, and would he make love to her tonight? She was ready, so ready, and happy to have waited for him.

And by the time he had completed the story, Kat had fallen asleep.

He held her hand and watched her and thought about all that he had lost and all he would

never get back, and after a half hour--fifteen minutes or so past visiting hours, yet no one came to get him--Kat opened her eyes again. "Alek," she whispered. "Why didn't you?"

"I couldn't," he answered.

"Because...of this?" Again she touched his face.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

He thought about that. "Something I have to live with for a very long time."

"Tell me about it?"

He nodded. And he did. And he told other stories. He talked about the night and what it was like to see in it with eyes unlike those of others. He talked about history and what role his people had played in it. He talked about growing up different from other boys and not understanding why. He talked about the craving and how he lived with it and how it kept him apart from everyone else.

Kat turned her head and closed her eyes.

Time passed, how much he did not know. Time suddenly meant very little.

She was awake.

"My mouth is so dry." Kat looked at the beside table, unwilling to ask for any help. Alek set her hand down and reached for the Styrofoam pitcher and the plastic glass with the bent straw. He helped Kat drink, his eyes burning with unshed tears. He wondered why a husband was not here. He wondered where her children were. He wondered at last where all the fans were, the ones who had given her these gifts. He wondered how anyone could be loved and then abandoned so. And maybe the two of them had touched on some deeper level at last, because Kat said, in time, "Tired of lies, Serpent Boy. All of them...all the fans, the fame-givers...why aren't they here? I'm so scared and they're not even here to say goodbye. I don't want to die."

Alek moved to the head of the bed and gently cradled the crying woman. He shivered at the touch of her. Her first breath left him sick to his stomach; the smell was prolonged death, a fetid miasma of decaying flesh. Alek lifted the birdlike weight against his shoulder, careful of the needles and tubes. He wanted so much to help, to end this.

"You're not alone now," he said.

Kat didn't have much to say. She spoke in frantic spurts, wandering somewhere between the pain and the medicine, the past and the present. Her life, her loves, the children she wished she had had. She even laughed once when she talked about how she had almost gotten married some time after Alek left her.

Then she slept and Alek waited.

It took a long time. Near morning she opened her eyes again, for the last time. She was painfully lucid. Before she died she said, "What does it feel like?" Then the room turned cold and Alek

realized Kat had gone elsewhere.

He sat for a long time, still holding her.

She had gone elsewhere because this world never deserved her. And because his world could not endure such a light. She had not belonged to him anymore than Robyn had belonged to Edward. Like Edward, like Kage, he did not belong to anyone. He was trembling when he gently laid the body out straight. He closed Kat's eyes and smoothed her hair and straightened her gown before he got up and prepared to leave.

What does it feel like?

He told the truth.

"Alone," he said.