

## REVENGE IS A FIRE THAT BURNS EVERYTHING DOWN

Tristan Blum may be the last Uruwashi, but neither he nor his ambiguous vampire companion, Ash, knows exactly what that means. One thing is clear though, that he's responsible for keeping the living safe from the dead. So when ancient Master vampire Yukihome comes to Tristan with news of a rogue vampire developing the dangerous gift of fire, he can't ignore it. To complicate things, the vampire they hunt is one Ash has a very intimate past with, leaving Tristan questioning her true feelings.

The tempestuous couple track their target to France where they encounter faerie, kitsune, and a vampire even older than self-proclaimed "oldest of them all" Yukihome. Not all of the new contacts are willing to help, or on the side of good. Just when he needs Ash the most, Tristan fears that she's pulling away. At his darkest hour, trapped in an abandoned dungeon and close to death, Tristan wonders who he can trust in his new obscure world and if the flames of a single vampire's wrath will destroy everything.

[www.thebeautifuldeath.com](http://www.thebeautifuldeath.com)



The Uruwashi Series Two

*Tristan  
Ash*

麗  
死

*Bête  
Noire*

*The Aruwashi Series*

CHRISTINA MOORE

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

**BÊTE NOIRE**

Copyright © 2014 by Christina Moore

Cover Photography provided by iStock

Cover Design by Christina Moore

Printed by KDP, an Amazon.com Company

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without the written permission of the Author, except where permitted by law. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Christina Moore, [beautifuldeathseries@gmail.com](mailto:beautifuldeathseries@gmail.com)

ISBN-10: 1494914875

ASIN: B00J80I0SW

## THE URUWASHI SERIES

BEAUTIFUL DEATH

BÊTE NOIRE

MOON CHILD

WHITE LIES

PRIMAL BURDENS

CRIMSON SPELL



# 1: UNDER THE GUN

FIVE golden rings, four calling birds, three French hens, two turtle doves and... a vampire in a bizarre dream? It was five days before Christmas. Tristan should have been dreaming of sugarplum fairies or some silly bullshit like that. Instead, he was dreaming of arctic wasteland.

He was standing in an endless landscape of shimmering white, cutouts of mountains to one side, obscured slightly by the forest of bamboo. Visibly, he was alone. And yet, as he stood knee deep in the snow he couldn't even feel, he had the eerie and undeniable feeling of being watched. There were eyes on him, it wasn't his imagination. And with that gut feeling he just knew he wasn't in his own dream.

A surge of anxiety rushed through him to pool in his middle where he carried a cold burn, an icy tingling sensation whenever he was in vampire's presence. So, when he opened his eyes to the real world and saw the glowing silver eyes staring at him from the end of the bed combined with the burn in his belly, he knew he was in trouble.

"Fuck me!"

Fully awake now, Tristan bolted upright, reaching for his gun. His hand slapping down onto the floor next to his sleep mat was like the

smack of thunder. The gun was gone and he cursed again, scrambling back when the vampire moved for him. Seconds before his head slammed into the wall he realized his blunder. That, sure it wasn't Ash, but he knew who this vampire was. And while she could be exceptionally dangerous, she wasn't a threat to Tristan. Not since he last checked, anyway.

"Yuki," he hissed, rubbing the back of his head where it'd made good friends with the wall. "Jesus... *fuck*. The hell are you doing here?"

The evening had only just started, but he'd had enough surprises already. It was never a good night when the first word spoken after having just woke were curses. Or, you know, Yuki was sitting on his bed.

Yuki laughed, the soft chime of tiny bells lark she had. No matter how many times she subjected him to that laugh, Tristan was never ready for the way it made him feel. He shivered under the force of her vampiric voice and shut his eyes, reveling in the sensation of fingers expertly coaxing his pleasure and wishing he could have denied it at the same time.

The bed moved and his eyes shot open again. Yuki was on her hands and knees slowly crawling up Tristan's body. Her almond shaped eyes shimmered with pleasure, thin lips curled into a disgusting smile.

"*Kon-ban-wa, Ryōshi-san,*" Yuki drawled in her sultry thick Japanese accent.

Tristan hated his new nickname "Hunter" but it was only slightly better than *danshi*—child. The crazy little shit liked her pet names.

"If it is fucks you are interested in, I am more than glad I came by."

She may have been over a thousand years old, but her body belonged to a child, a girl of fourteen at the time of her death. Her vampire transformation locked her into an eternal young woman—a child with the hunger and desires of an adult. Tristan wanted nothing to do with her, sexually or otherwise.

Yuki paused over his waist, giving him a huge grin that bared her long fangs, speeding up his pulse. “Don’t you want to play, Ryōshi-san?” She stuck her bottom lip out in an exaggerated pout. “You hurt my feelings...”

“You need a soul to have feelings,” he answered.

A shadow behind Yuki moved and then the short blade of a tantō was pressed across her delicate throat. The ancient vampire chuckled, turning her head enough to look over her shoulder. “*Asta-chan*, so nice of you to join us.”

Ash’s voice was scratchy and low when she answered, “That is enough of that, Yukihime. Do not touch him.”

“Why?” the little vampire said looking pouty again. “It’s not like you are... He’s not yours to be selfish with, you know. He’s completely unclaimed like this, a precarious thing. Perhaps I will claim him myself.”

Tristan frowned at the ancient nut-job wearing the guise of a young girl sitting on his bed.

Ash’s hand *slipped* and she nicked Yuki’s throat. She had to have been pretty fucking pissed to start with if she thought pulling a knife on Yuki was a smart thing to do. The old vampire was equally likely to be amused as furious. “No one will be claiming *anyone*, Yukihime.”

“Keep your chopsticks to yourself,” Tristan chimed in.

Yuki sat back slowly, carefully, putting her hands up in the air, showing she wasn’t a danger. Who the fuck was she kidding? Even someone as docile as Ash was a danger.

“No?” the old vampire asked sounding disappointed. “What a pity. What’s the point then, *Asta-chan*?”

Ash hissed in Greek under her breath, something Tristan had heard many times and wondered if she weren’t really cursing. Even in the dark he could see her hand trembling, fighting herself not to cut the vampire

deeper. And as much as Tristan liked the idea of no more Yuki, no it was a fight they didn't need to start.

"Ash," he said in a warning tone and she removed the blade from the Master vampire's throat with a huff.

"There are many points that do not involve fangs, Master."

Yuki put a hand to her mouth and giggled. "Asta-chan always tells the funniest jokes. Don't you think so, Ryōshi-san?"

Yuki looked to him, letting her gaze run down his body, drinking in his naked flesh from neck to waist where the sheets had piled a little too low in his lap. Her eyes moved lower. Somehow, he didn't think she was looking at his fit waistline or the shiny new scars, courtesy of Malik and his minions.

Tristan cleared his throat loudly. "Up here," he said and she returned her gaze to his face, smiling wickedly.

"You're not sleeping together." She made it a statement as if she expected to see the two in bed together, actually sleeping or something more intimate.

He frowned, making a dirty face at the ancient vampire. But he knew she meant sex and not actual sleep. And it was true, they weren't doing either. Ever since a kiss that Ash insisted never should have happened, there'd been nothing physical between them. Well, he did manage to steal a few small, closed-mouth kisses from her on impulse, but things never went further than that.

Safe sex with a vampire had nothing to do with birth control pills and condoms, and everything to do with not getting bitten and drained. And in Tristan's case, being an Uruwashi, turned into a vampire too.

Even the smallest of cuts mixed with a simple drop of vampiric saliva could be enough to turn him into something not quite human, nor wholly monster. As it was, right then, he was only human... for as far as

he could stretch the term anyway. And thanks to that fucking psychopath Malik, he was the last of whatever he was.

Okay, he was comfortable enough to call himself Uruwashi, if nothing else, only because he didn't know the full extent of what the classification "Uruwashi" really meant aside of being the Beautiful Death.

After nearly dying more times than he could count, Tristan had convinced himself the best way to live was to die—to be bitten and become a true Uruwashi in more than just title. Tristan didn't trust any other vampire but Ash to do the deed. Only, she refused. Because, if things went wrong, there was a slim chance he wouldn't survive the transformation at all.

That was the only reason he could think of that she would so adamantly refuse. She was afraid of killing the last of a clan meant to protect unsuspecting humans from the monsters of the night. Though, Tristan wasn't naive enough to believe that was the full reason.

Whatever her reasons, having her around was... complicated. He was sure she felt for him the way he felt for her, but she was constantly acting as though she didn't and looking pained for it. She was obviously doing it to help repress her physical urge for him—whether it be blood or sex. He got that, but it still aggravated, confused and hurt him.

Tristan huffed, furrowing his brow. "That is none of your goddamn business," he said, referring to their sex life. "*Princess.*"

Yuki threw back her head and laughed a full-throated, fangy laugh. For once she didn't put the power into that laugh that made him shudder and sway. Ash never did that to him. He wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing.

The ancient vampire pulled to her feet, standing over him. Looking smug, she crossed her arms over her tiny chest and looked down at him. It was just above freezing outside, but she was barefoot and dressed in

next to nothing, wearing a tiny tank top of thin silk. A matching skirt of the same soft pink silk covered in darker pink and maroon cherry blossom flowers hugged her non-existent hips. A long slit ran up each leg, stopping at her very upper thigh. And if everyone were *very* lucky, the old loon remembered her underpants this time—a tiny detail she'd forgotten more than once in the past.

“Why are you here?” Ash snapped from her place kneeling between Tristan's feet.

The old vampire climbed off the bed and stopped to face Ash, tapping the side of her nose, looking haughty. Yuki showed up often when Ash and Tristan were practicing kendo just outside of town. But never once had the old vamp been to the apartment. Tristan didn't even realize she knew where they lived. He was only in town still because he had nowhere else to go.

He canceled the lease on his Annapolis apartment when he left and he couldn't bear with the idea of living in his parent's home, the house he grew up in, again. Not with the memories of them still humming within.

Ash, ever thoughtful, offered to find them accommodations in the U.S. that would suit both their needs—whatever those were. There were land rights and blueprints involved, then some building. Until then, they were stuck with Yuki in Japan. Tristan was starting to wonder though if it would be worth it to leave now and rent something in the interim.

Ash shut her eyes and sighed as the millennia old vampire marched out of the room, nose in the air. Alone together, Tristan and Ash looked at one another. They slept in completely different ways. Tristan preferred the freedom of sleeping in the buff, sprawled out on his Japanese mat pressed into the corner of his shoebox room. Ash preferred to wrap herself up in a cocoon of layers, clothes and blankets, curled up on the floor of his closet with the doors shut and sealed from the light.

Every day the reality of their natures became even clearer: they were complete opposites.

Maybe they just weren't meant to be.

Ash, obviously having heard a glimpse of the thought, quickly turned away, movements stiff.

"Ash," Tristan called out softly and dove out of bed, grabbing her wrist. God, he hated that he couldn't express to her his thoughts in a less raw way.

Reluctantly, she turned around to face him.

"You know, I don't really feel that way." He brushed a bit of hair from her forehead, fingers trailing along her skin. "Right?"

He was just so frustrated and as honest as he was, he still had a hard time telling Ash in plain words how he really felt. But she knew all too well his feelings, read them from his mind more clearly than he'd ever be able to speak them. Even if they were harsh.

"I know," she answered gently, but still pulled away from his close proximity, from his touch, her gaze going south on Tristan's body.

Seeing where her eyes had landed, Tristan grinned and turned away to get dressed. Ash cleared her throat and went to the mirror hanging on the shower-room door to tidy her hair. Not that she ever moved, not even a twitch in her sleep, to tussle it.

"So, you don't know why she's here?"

"I cannot even make a fair guess. Honestly, I had not known she knew where to find us, or cared for that matter."

Not that it was hard to find the only semi-permanent *gaijin* in town.

He nodded, turning around as he fastened the button on his jeans. "Same."

He stopped, grinning when he saw the look on Ash's face, eyes fixed

on his half-naked body. He couldn't read her thoughts like she could him, but one thing was for damn sure without the benefit of words, she found him extremely attractive. So, what was stopping her from indulging, just a little?

Sure, they couldn't kiss too deeply, safely, but they could have fun other ways. Hell, *talking* would have been nice at this point, you know, sharing their lives n' shit. They didn't do much outside of spar these days. Granted, it was making him quick on the draw and damn near graceful with the sword, but he missed... companionship. He hated to admit it, but he was the type of person that always needed to have an significant other.

Ash looked up slowly, taking in every inch of bare flesh. She was breathing heavy and under all those layers of clothing, her nipples hardened—there was no way Tristan would miss that. Pale eyes full of heat met Tristan's dark blues and he smiled, taking a step towards her.

She could lie to him. Hell, she could lie to herself. But her body always told him the truth.

He reached out and when she didn't instinctively pull away, he lightly touched her cheek. Then smoothed his fingers across her cold skin, slipping back into her hair. Again, she didn't resist as he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her against him.

The hand in her hair trailed down until he slipped fingers into the collar of her top and traced around to caress her collarbone. Ash's eyes fluttered shut as a tremor tore its way down her back. He smiled that smile that was meant only for her. It held depth, longing and... something more. Something he didn't dare give a name to. Not when she tried so hard to deny that same something. Made it clear that maybe this was all there'd ever be between them.

Why couldn't they just find a safe middle ground? Somewhere they could be comfortable with each other that wasn't completely off, which was pretty much how they were operating now. If he couldn't touch her,

get just a little closer to her, he was going to lose his mind. Or have to leave for good.

Tristan leaned in and whispered her name across her face. He could taste her scent, the delicate flavor of sweet oranges and creamy vanilla, she was so close, mouth hovering less than an inch from his. He could stick his tongue out and lick along her lip and he was dying to do just that.

He got as close as his lips brushing over hers before she snapped her head back. She looked angry as she stepped away from him, shaking her head.

He let out a dismayed sigh and then, then he got angry. “Why?”

Ash stopped at the door and turned to look at him. “Pardon?”

“Why do you keep pushing me away like this?”

He realized, without even having to speak aloud, that on the other side of the thin paper wall, Yuki could hear them clearly. He really couldn't give a fuck. Two months of confusion were getting the best of him. He thought Ash felt something for him, but every action since moving in together said otherwise. Hell, she flirted more when Tristan still thought she was a he.

“If you cannot understand something so simple, perhaps we are better off—”

“Ash,” he snapped. “Don't. Okay? Just don't. I get it. I really do, but this isn't the way to go about it.”

“I am sure I do not know what you mean.”

Tristan made an aggravated noise, hands in his hair. “God! Why the hell are you even here? I swear, you're just—” He stopped suddenly, looking more than a little alarmed as his eyes darted behind her.

Ash frowned, flinching. “What?”

His brow furrowed, eyes going towards the other room. “What the hell is that?”

“What? I—” Ash took a step towards him, looking up at him in wonderment.

“That,” he said, pointing towards the other room. “What the fuck is that? Is there someone else here?”

Ash’s eyes widened. “You can sense her?”

It was Tristan’s turn to frown. “Why wouldn’t I be able to feel a vampire?” That’s what it had to be right? Too bad it really didn’t feel like one. The other was... more alive, warmer. Thicker, heavier.

“Not a vampire, Tristan. No.”

His frown deepened, not liking where this was going. “Well, I feel something.”

Ash licked her lips, expression guarded. “It is Lilith.”

He gave a start. “*The pythia?* Why the hell do I feel her?” He didn’t feel her the one time they met before... did he? Then again, he was on the complete opposite side of the lawn from her, half dead, and terrified.

She shook her head. “I cannot say.”

“Can’t or won’t?” he asked, narrowing his gaze on her. He trusted her, but didn’t entirely believe everything she said. She had this way with the truth and not telling it so clearly. Or omission by lies. That was just as bad as an outright lie to him.

“I truly do not know.”

He shut his eyes and groaned, thinking he didn’t like the idea of feeling the pythia. That he was changing.

“Perhaps Shishō knows why.”

“Great,” Tristan sighed. He really wasn’t having a good night and it’d

only just started. “Listen, Ash about what I said before—”

“We should go out there. I do not trust her alone.”

He screwed up his mouth for a moment before nodding. “Yeah. Yeah, okay. I’d rather she didn’t do something weird like make a hat out of what’s left of my sofa cushions anyway.” Besides, he wanted to officially meet the pythia, even if he was completely weirded out by being able to sense her.

Without saying anything more, Ash pushed open the panel separating the main living space from the bedroom. Tristan heaved a sigh, grabbed a shirt and followed after her.

The main room of the apartment was simple and way too small for four people to be in. The place was barely big enough for him, let alone two vampires, even if one was the size of a kid, and the pythia, who was a child herself. Though, despite the small city he lived in, the apartment was considered a palace at almost 320 square feet. Being a *gaijin*, foreigner, he was lucky they even rented to him. Having reliable money helped.

Back in October, the place had been trashed when Malik’s people—read: vampires—had come looking for him. They tore the place apart, wrecking just about everything he owned including his laptop and iPod. The only thing that survived was a one-cushion sofa, a small computer desk with no computer and the room divider that made it so he had a bedroom.

The rest of the furniture now consisted of a few cheap lamps he picked up to replace the ones they broke and a new bed mat. What was the point of buying more furniture if they were leaving soon? Well, he hoped it was soon. Apparently not soon enough to avoid a special visit from the thousand-year-old Master vampire, *Mizu no Yuki*hime. That’s Yuki from the House of Water, in layman’s.

The old vamp had found herself a spot lounging on the remaining

sofa cushion, arms laid out across the back like she owned the place. One thin leg was crossed over the other, exposing all of the bright white paleness of her skin from toes to hip. And Tristan could confirm that she did in fact remember her panties tonight. Hurray for everyone.

She was perfectly at home, watching him with her eerie, crystalline eyes as he entered the room behind Ash. Tristan flinched, almost stopped in his tracks when his gaze found the pythia. Lilith stood in the corner, wrapped head to toe in a thick black velvet cape. Her face was masked in the deep shadow of the hood. She was like a mini Grim Reaper lurking in the corner like that. It took everything in him not to stare and gape. Too bad he couldn't keep himself from paling.

Ash on the other hand did stop and stare. Tristan wondered what sort of history they had and wished he'd thought to ask before now.

"*Kore wa...*" Yuki started in Japanese. "...*kawayui*—charming, little place you have here. I don't understand why you two didn't take my generous offer, Tristan."

He snapped to attention on Yuki, but opted to stay quiet, ignore her bait. But Yuki wasn't playing along. She never played fairly.

"Asta-chan, you of all people... sleeping in a *closet*? On the *floor*? How... *simple* of you." Yuki spoke as if the words were dirty, like they tasted bad on her tongue.

Shortly after the pair finished off Malik, Yuki had so generously offered Tristan and Ash their very own, spacious suite in her home. They respectfully declined. While Ash had her own reasons, Tristan's was far simpler. He hated them all. Yuki, Desmond, Lucien, that chick he ended up hitting... Every single vampire in that place was on his shit list.

That place was a total freak show. Besides, just walking in set his blood on edge. He knew now that the freezer burn, tingling, near-arousal he felt when near Ash was what he felt when he was near any

vampire, a device of his kind. But, being only half, or less, Uruwashi meant that the vampire had to be practically on top of him. But with so many in such close proximity, like in Yuki's place, the feeling was exponentially stronger, always on. He'd never leave his room, trying to, ahem, *relieve the tension*. Ash wasn't about to help with that any time soon either and she was the only one he was interested being anywhere near him.

Ash made a small noise of surprise and looked to Tristan. He blinked back at her, realizing she'd heard him thinking. There was nothing he could do about it and stopped caring weeks ago what she heard. He had nothing to hide anymore. Mostly. He just wished she could understand him in a less... blunt way.

Yuki was watching the two, the corner of her lips curled up in amusement.

Ash rallied herself. "Yukihime," she started out in a harsh tone then softened it. "Shishō, what can we do for you this evening?"

Tristan sighed, hating that Ash had to refer to the child vampire as Master simply because she was older. The kid didn't deserve the respect.

He flinched. For the dozenth time, his gaze was quickly drawn to the figure in the corner. She really moved that time, didn't she?

"*Chibi-san*," Yuki said, waving her hand at the pythia. "You are making Ryōshi-san nervous. Please, come sit."

The caped figure moved, appearing to glide across the tatami. Tristan's pulse suddenly jumped. Sweat started along his hairline, though it was anything but hot in the apartment. Lilith lifted a hand slowly towards her hood. It was then that he noticed she was holding something in the other against the front of her body, a glass jar.

This was the same child Tristan remembered seeing the night he killed Malik. She was the one Desmond had been escorting around like a rock star. While she looked to be only ten, that wasn't her true form or

age. The girl was several hundred years old—the privilege of being a pythia with an arsenal of spells at her disposal, she could be whoever she wanted to be.

Her brown hair was thick and curled around her porcelain face like a doll. And her eyes, they were a brilliant blue, the color of the sky on a cloudless day. Something about those eyes haunted him, came to him in dreams. And yet, he had this overwhelming urge every time he remembered those eyes to see them again. But now, instead of getting a glimpse of blue there was only a strip of black cloth, blindfolding her.

For some reason, he felt compelled to touch Ash. He reached out, stretching his arm to her and found her hand. She didn't protest when he pulled her close, fingers still meshed together.

“What is this?” he whispered to her.

She must not have been able to read him because she frowned, shaking her head. “What is—”

“Problem, Ryōshi-san?”

Tristan licked his lips nervously, shot Ash a look and then looked back up to Yuki, trying hard to not look at the little girl now sitting on the low side of the sofa where the cushion was missing.

His breath came out shakier than he would have liked. “I... I knew there was someone here, when we were in the bedroom still, something—*someone* not human. But this is nothing like what I feel with you vampires. She's... I don't know.” He stopped, rubbing at the back of his neck nervously. He wasn't sure he should have even been saying any of this. “Warmer. I can just feel her. It's making me dizzy, nearly nauseous. I can't remember ever feeling like this in my life.”

He looked down to Ash again and whispered, “Is she really a pythia?”

Ash's face was annoyingly expressionless. She nodded once.

“You're sure?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Yuki?” he asked looking to her.

Yuki put her arm around Lilith’s shoulders. “You are an enigma in yourself, Ryōshi-san.”

“That’s not an answer,” he grumbled. He looked to the little girl even though she couldn’t see him through that blindfold. Why was she even wearing it? “Do you know, Lilith?”

The little brunette said nothing, only moving her head up and down slowly once.

“Really?” Excited, he took a step towards her, Ash heavy on his arm since he refused to let go of her hand. When Lilith said nothing more, he asked, “Well, um, do you mind telling me?”

“Sorry, Ryōshi-san,” Yuki said. “She will not speak.”

“Since when?” Ash asked a little too quickly.

Yuki tilted her head to the side, lips tight with something that might have been apprehension. “Shortly after I took her from Malik. The child spoke a cryptic message of crow, night and death. Since then, not a single word has been uttered.”

Yuki reached behind the girl’s head, untied the blindfold and let it drop away. Ash and Tristan gasped together, their clasped hands squeezing tighter.

“Two days later, I found her like this.”

“By the Goddess,” Ash whispered. She tugged on Tristan’s arm, pulling him against her side. Her free hand came up and held onto his arm a little too tightly. “She... she did this to herself?”

Yuki nodded, looking as dismayed as Tristan’d ever seen her.

The skin around Lilith’s eyes was jagged pink edges of healing flesh. Her eyes were missing. Someone had sewn the damaged skin back

together but it still looked raw and painful. Hollow.

Yuki's voice was soft and sad when she answered, "*Hai*. She tore her own eyes out with her fingers. The same day, she refused to speak again, and she will not leave my side, not even for a moment. She will not even heal the damage with a spell. She'd rather walk around like this. I had to sedate her just to sew—" Yuki looked away quickly. Tristan thought it was shame.

Ash on the other hand looked ready to burst into tears.

"Why?" Tristan asked softly. Did he sound as horrified as he felt? "Why would she rip her own eyes out?"

Yuki shook her head, her eyes shutting for a moment in remorse. "It is just something that happens to all pythia, in time."

"What—" Ash had to stop to collect herself. When she spoke again, the warble was gone but her voice was still soft. "What were her words? What did she see?"

Yuki tied the blindfold over the girl's missing eyes again and straightened, looking from Tristan, then to Ash. "The raven flies. The flower blossoms. The star falls. The earth shudders. Darkness awakens."

The room was unnervingly silent as they processed the words.

Tristan let out a long, shaky breath and whispered, "What the shit does that mean?"

"That, I don't know." Yuki smiled even as she shrugged lightly. "I don't speak pythia."

"Is this why you came, Yukihime?" Ash asked in a tiny voice. The warble was back and Tristan didn't hold it against her one damn bit.

The old vampire made a flippant gesture with her hand. "No. I thought perhaps that Lilith here could do with a change of scenery."

Tristan frowned. Change of scenery? The girl couldn't even see. And

she did that to herself.

Ash whispered something directed at Yuk in a shaking voice.

“Am I?” Yuki answered with a high lit and shrugged. “If you really want to know, why don’t you address her yourself, Asta-chan? She is still of her mind and such.”

“Dammit, Yuki,” Tristan snapped harsh enough to make Ash flinch. “Quit fucking around. Tell us what you want and then get the hell out.”

He gave up long ago on being overly polite with the Snow Princess. The night he and Ash killed Malik, Tristan flicked off the old vamp and said more than a few rude things to her and she never retaliated. It was more than clear to him that Yuki didn’t want him dead.

Besides if she did, well, there wasn’t a hell of a lot either him or Ash could do about it then, was there? He accepted whatever was going to happen to him would happen.

He wasn’t going to put up with Yuki’s bullshit. He wasn’t afraid of her.

Yuki tossed her head back and laughed. “Ryōshi-san... brave, brave Ryōshi-san. So, you don’t fear me any longer?”

Feeling confident again and able to let Yuki distract him completely from the blind pythia, Tristan took his hand from Ash and crossed his arms over his still bare chest, looking defiant. “No,” he answered plainly and honestly. She only creeped him out, that was a *very* different emotion from fear.

“*Sō ka.*”

There was a whirl of motion around him seconds before something solid made contact with his upper body. His middle flared with cold energy, warning him that a very powerful vampire was way, way too close. Tristan took in a sharp breath, feeling the air fill every inch of his lungs, and blinked up into a face he never liked seeing so close. Yuki

grimaced all fang at him, hot fingers pinching around his Adam's apple, choking him. His eyes widened as he gagged for air.

Next to him, Ash made a small, strangled sound. Tristan flinched and tried to look towards her, but the pressure on his windpipe kept him in place. Out of the corner of his vision he could see her pinned to the floor at his side, Yuki's steel grasp immobilizing her. They were both at the mercy of the fickle vampire.

"What about now? Brave, brave, Uruwashi. *Mattaku*, you smell so... *totemo oishii*." Yuki licked her lips, wetting them.

Her expression shifted from hungry to put-off again. She harrumphed, tightening her fingers so that she cut off his air completely. "Do you fear this mad, old vampire now? Is the *Uruwashi* frightened yet?"

Tristan bucked under her, straining for air, his vision fogging. He wanted to lift his arms, fling them outward and hit her, punch her right in the fucking face and deal with the repercussions later. But, for such a small person, she proved to be stronger and he couldn't lift his arms from under her legs where she'd pinned them to his sides.

He was helpless, like a butterfly to the flame against an eighty-pound girl. And she was going to kill him if she didn't let go soon. All she had to do was pinch her two little fingers together and crush his trachea, then dead Uruwashi on the rug.

"Yeeees, Ryōshi-san. You're so very right. All I have to do is squeeze and your life would be mine. Mmmm, and I bet you taste..." She shuddered hard, her eyes fluttering.

She really did want to kill him.

"Yukihime!" Ash managed to scream.

The Uruwashi blood in Tristan suddenly shifted, the way he felt was the same, yet different. Something was about to happen, he just didn't

know what. Yuki's fingers on his throat became impossibly cold, as if they were made of ice. Then, as if confirming his last thought, a thin layer of frost spread out around his neck, radiating from her hand.

Tristan tried to suck in a gasp. Instead, he kicked, bucking under the vampire, his eyes wide and wild as the ice started to enclose his entire neck all the way around. He could feel the cold through his throat and into his mouth. His chest started to burn from the inside out. Next to him, Ash's writhing doubled.

The small vampire gave a little huff. "*Tadashi...*," Yuki drawled out, looking whimsical as the ice ceased to spread, "if I were to do something as silly as kill you, I think perhaps I could find much more interesting ways of doing so." She smiled and leaned over Tristan, letting her top sag open, showing him that she wasn't wearing anything under the thin fabric. Not that there was much under there to show off.

He groaned, his eyes starting to roll back. His whole face was tingling, the pull of unconsciousness just moments from winning. Yuki huffed, pouting her lip out in an over-exaggerated display and opened both hands as she pushed to her feet.

Ash immediately reached for him, touched his face. "Are you okay?" Tristan nodded. He drew in a deep, gasping breath, the air burning all the way down his throat, pulling fire made of sharp ice into his lungs. Yuki stepped away and he coughed a few times as the fresh air filled him and rolled to his side, curling up into a ball.

"You are sure?" she asked a little more gently and he looked up, meeting her gaze. There were unspent tears lingering at the corners of her eyes. Tristan wasn't sure he'd never get used to seeing the red-tinted tears of the vampire. They literally wept blood.

"Yeah," he answered in a scratchy voice. "Thanks."

She gave him a small smile and sat up. And he said a silent thanks that she was okay, not even breathing heavy. Two months around

vampires and Tristan wasn't sure if they really needed to breathe or if it was just for show. He was starting to suspect the latter.

Tristan rubbed at his sore throat. The thin layer of ice brushed away easily, coming off in his hand. He stood, putting his back to the room and grabbed his shirt from where he'd dropped it on the empty computer desk and pulled it on. It didn't make him feel as safe as he wanted.

When he turned around again, Yuki had taken up her seat again next to Lilith, looking statuesque, albeit smug. Tristan couldn't help but glare at her as the last of the pain in his lungs dissipated. His throat throbbed with cold burn, but he wouldn't give Yuki the satisfaction of letting it show.

"Okay," Tristan said in an irritated tone. "You've made your point."

The little vampire raised a single white eyebrow at him. "*Honto ka?*" For once her normal bantering tone was replaced with something dry and sharp.

He sighed and leaned into Ash when she wrapped an arm around his waist. For her to be this touchy... yeah, the little show had shaken her too.

"Well," Yuki said, "I hope my point is perfectly clear to you both because I have a job for you."

"Pass," Tristan answered without a second's hesitation.

Yuki tilted her head. "You have yet to hear my request."

His posture shifted to stand-offish again. Yes, Yuki just owned him but he couldn't help but be indignant with her. Yuki just plain pissed him off.

"I'll listen, doesn't mean I accept." He was just lying to himself. If there was a vampire out there hurting humans, he'd feel obligated as the last Uruwashi to take care of the problem. Even if it killed him.

Yuki sat back against the couch and crossed her legs. Next to her, the pythia suddenly moved, mirroring the Master vampire's gesture. Nothing could have freaked Tristan out more than that one little motion.

Yuki smirked. "I think you will both thoroughly enjoy this hunt."

Nothing with Yuki was exactly as she said. There was always a hook and maybe even nasty teeth too. There was always a catch. Something she says they'd enjoy was more likely to mean something that she'd enjoy watching them struggle with.

Tristan heaved a deep sigh and muttered out, "Christ, I'm going to fucking regret this aren't I...?" Straightening, he asked, "Who?"

The old vampire put on a broad grin. "Lucien."

## 2: THE GRUDGE

ASH made a rude noise and snapped, “Had I not warned you?” She let go of Tristan, jumping forward in challenge. “Fifty years ago, I told you. I told you he was not to be trusted. That he was dangerous. *I told you!*”

Yuki only gave Ash a condescending smile in return. Tristan though, was pleasantly shocked. He’d never seen Ash so loose-tongued with the ancient vampire. Maybe he was rubbing off on her more than he realized—in a bad way, obviously. After that little stunt Yuki just pulled though, it probably wasn’t a good idea for either of them to keep poking at her... no matter how much Tristan couldn’t help himself.

“Lucien?” Tristan said, jumping into the conversation. “This the same asshole who barged into Ash’s home back in October and—” He stopped short. He couldn’t put it into words, because honestly he wasn’t so sure whether Lucien took from Ash or she was a willing participant in whatever happened behind those closed doors. All Tristan knew for sure was that there was the exchange of fluids, mostly Ash’s blood. Oh right, and that they’d “been lovers once”. Her words. Whatever had happened that night though, left her in tears on the floor.

“*Ee,*” Yuki confirmed, drawing out the word. And he knew by the

dirty smile that she'd just heard all of his thoughts. She knew exactly what he was thinking. She knew Tristan wanted to hurt Lucien regardless of what the vampire may have done to get himself on the shit list.

“Lucien Lefèvre.”

“Lefe...” He had a last name? It struck Tristan as really odd that a vampire would have a last name. Then again, they were, after all, once human. It stood to reason that they all had more than the single names he'd come to know them all by. Until learning Ash's real name, he just assumed they all adopted single name pseudonyms, like Cher or Madonna. He wondered what Ash's full name was, if she even remembered it after three-hundred and forty years.

Ash cleared her throat softly next to him, shifting on her feet.

Tristan sighed, knowing he was going to regret asking, “Okay, so why do you want me to kill Lucien? I don't think being a certified asshole is enough reason, not for me anyway. Otherwise, I'd off that big ape of yours too.”

In truth, he wasn't sure what his requirements were. Malik and his summons, the jikininki, and that one vampire in Ash's house where the only things he'd killed so far. He had yet to sit down and decide what was the line between one death or two for the vampire. And did his services extend past the vampire, because he was pretty sure there were a lot of “others” out there he'd yet to knowingly encounter.

“It's seems I've run into some... *issues* with the dear boy.”

“Issues?” he asked crossing his arms over his chest.

“He went rogue.”

“Define rogue.”

Yuki was starting to look agitated as she crossed one bird leg over the other, flashing the others her crotch. Tristan groaned, rolling his eyes,

but was thankful to whoever invented modern undergarments and that she'd worn them for once.

“He killed three dozen of my vampires.”

Tristan flinched back, shocked at the large number. He knew there was a lot in Yuki's home, he just never expected there to be that many.

Ash didn't seem surprised in the least.

“Okay... and tell me why I should care. They were vampires, not humans.”

Yuki's mouth screwed up in a look that was almost sorrow. Almost. “Asta-chan is right, he is dangerous. Perhaps I should start from the very beginning.” Yuki sighed, wholly unbecoming of her and sat back on the sofa. Tristan flinched when Lilith moved with her. He'd all but forgotten about the blind, mute pythia. He was unnerved all over again.

“In 1839 Malik found himself in France.”

Tristan made a rude noise through his teeth. He should have known Ash's dead maker and Master was involved somehow.

“It was the same year Lucien was made into a vampire by *Hi no* Guinevere.”

“He?” Tristan asked, pronouncing the word as he heard it.

His vampire companion next to him softly answered, “Fire.”

He frowned and looked down to Ash. There was something in her voice he couldn't place.

“Wait, just how many different types of vampires are there?” He never asked before because it wasn't relevant. It was pure luck really that no one—*no vampires* had come for him yet. Word of Malik's death had made it to the others, according to Yuki, but the validity of a real Uruwashi had yet to be made. He was still fable. And, thankfully, hadn't been forced to kill since Malik. He agreed to take the reins as an

Uruwashi, he just didn't know how far he'd go to hold onto them.

A thought hit him and he frowned at the simplicity of it. Yuki was water, Ash earth. Therefore... "Oh. There're four elements." It seemed so simple and he felt pretty stupid for not noticing it before. Then again, it wasn't like Ash was shoving the abilities of her kind in his face. He had no idea the extent of her strength, her true *vampiric* strength.

Yuki sat up straighter, stiffening her back. Next to her, Lilith did the same. "*Chigau, go.* Five, Ryōshi-san. *Five* elements."

"Uh, yeah, last time I checked there were only four." Not unless they were talking about his favorite movie. Damn, he felt like watching it now. Sounded like a hell of a lot better way to spend his evening.

"Naïve again, Ryōshi-san."

God, he hated it when she called him "Hunter", a constant reminder of what he was supposed to be. Then again it was better than calling him a flat-out murderer, which he was now.

"Ah, but I suppose the last isn't so much as an element as..." She paused, searching for the right word before coming up with, "Spiritual."

"I don't get it."

Ash gave a little sigh next to him. "Earth, water, fire, wind and void. Sometimes one refers to it as *sora*, sky."

He offered her a small smile. "Sorry, darlin', that doesn't help."

Yuki gave that sigh again, the one that just didn't fit her. In truth, this was the most docile he'd seen her since meeting her over two months ago. And that's including the attack tonight.

"In truth, I don't entirely understand the power myself. Kū is the rarest and most obscure vampire ability. In my 1090 years on this earth I have yet to meet a single kū user. I often wonder sometime if it isn't one of those... what are they called, old wives tales? Hai, like vampire folk

lore.”

Tristan’s pulse sped up with her words. One-thousand-ninety-years... He realized that she was old, very old, but something about her spelling it out down to the year was... unsettling.

“Okay, okay. We’re getting off topic here.”

“Hardly,” Ash said sounding sour.

Tristan took a step away from to look at her more clearly. She was standing near the edge of his desk, arms wrapped around her middle, hugging herself. Her expression was grim. He knew Yuki wouldn’t let anyone read her mind, so there was no way Ash knew what was going on. So, what was making her so glum?

She slowly looked up and met his eyes with her intense gaze. Those eyes alone always said so much to him, the pale crystal amethyst that they were. They were always full of emotion, words unspoken. Too bad he didn’t speak their language.

“Each element is the vampire’s base power. Such as Shisho’s power over water. She wields it as she pleases and easily turns it into ice or steam. However, in addition to that base power, three of the four known houses possess a special summons, *kōmajutsu*. You saw the House of Earth’s in the form of the jikininki.”

Tristan’s jaw tightened. He’d had enough of those stinking man-eating demons to last a lifetime. If they weren’t fed on the corpse of the recently dead, then they looked like rotting zombies. But if they’d eaten recently, within the day, then... well, then they could fool horny American’s into thinking they were real. That’s what happened to him anyway.

“Okay, so this is the part where I ask, ‘which house doesn’t have a special summons?’” Like he couldn’t figure it out now.

Yuki giggled and Ash frowned. “Very good, Tristan, you play the

game so well. I am growing so very fond of you Uruwashi folk.” She petted the pythia’s hands and lap. Her own little doll.

“Focus, Yuki.”

Yuki giggled again, but it was Ash that answered for her. “Fire.”

“Right.” The foreplay was starting to get on his nerves. “I don’t know, but it seems to me like that they are less dangerous than you water and earth users.” He looked from one vampire to the other. Ash ignored the prod, but Yuki grinned big, bearing saber-tooth fangs.

“Oh, Ryōshi-san, don’t misunderstand, I am very, *very* dangerous.” Her grin washed away and was replaced with a deep frown. “But the fire user is just that much more powerful. They are the most dangerous of us all. Fire is complete, *kiyomeru*—purifying and kills us so easily. It doesn’t take much to burn us and once we start to burn, we do not put out so easily. It is why we burn our dead.” She fluttered her hands like butterfly wings in the air. “Releases the soul.”

“To make sure they are truly dead,” Ash added, looking lost in thought.

Tristan snorted. “You just mean they are dangerous to *you*. Vampires.”

Yuki’s expression went cold. “They are not to be taken lightly.”

Okay, so the look and the tone made him think twice about the seriousness of the situation. While he hated Lucien, it wasn’t enough reason for him to kill the kid. Lucien only killed others of his kind so far as Tristan was concerned, they weren’t human—so why did it matter if they were dead? Lucien did Tristan’s job for him, really.

He looked down to Ash and frowned. No. No, it did matter. They may not have been human, but they were real. They were people with thoughts and hearts, a life.

Ash’s voice was soft and distant when she spoke again. “I remember

the night Malik returned from slaying Lucien's Master, Guinevere." She shuddered hard and he wondered what memory she was seeing again. "He was so—the burns, they went terribly deep. Some still smoldered upon his flesh, unable to put out fully." She let out a breath, something dark in her eyes as she recalled that night. "I still do not know how he survived such extensive damage."

Tristan put a hand on her shoulder in silent support. She shook her head to say it was fine.

"How did Lucien end up with you if you aren't his Master?"

"Ah well, back to the beginning—Malik was in France to kill Guinevere. She was one of the last Master fire-users. It was just her, and a single fledgling, Lucien in her home. She did have one other scion from another Master that was never found and suspected long dead—some sort of rivalry with his brother. Malik had it in his mind that being a fire user, the line needed to end for fear of retaliation against his own kind. After killing Guinevere, a gentle creature really, Lucien was offered a choice. Die or serve Malik. Truly, I think he just meant to take Lucien as his own all along, but needed help in killing Guinevere, for as gentle as she was, she was also fiercely protective of those she loved. And powerful."

"Why does everything keep going back to Malik?"

"It is the fate of our kind," Ash said softly. "We are all irrevocably bound to one another." She looked up and met his gaze. "Whether we wish it or not."

Tristan let out a long sigh. He wanted to hold her in that moment, comfort her, take away all the bad in her past. But she didn't want that. Not in front of Yuki, at least. Maybe never?

"How did you end up with Lucien then?" he asked, looking at Yuki again.

She tilted her head to the side, giving him a sly sort of glare. "I take

what I want.”

He rolled his eyes, trying to resist going across the room, grabbing the child sized vampire and shaking the shit out of her. “So where is he now?”

Yuki cracked a smile. “*Furansu.*”

“Of course he is,” Tristan muttered and then sighed. “Okay, so say I take the job, track him all the way down in France and kill him, what are you giving me in return?”

“In return?” Yuki raised an eyebrow high in amusement. “Ryōshi-san, I have already given you your reward.”

“Uh, no.”

“Knowledge.”

“You haven’t told me shit.” That wasn’t entirely true. Just half an hour ago he didn’t know that vampires had four—*five* elemental powers and that the fire line was all but extinct and the most dangerous of them all. He was a vampire hunter and yet didn’t know shit about them. He should really work on that. If only Ash weren’t so damn tightlipped. No, that wasn’t fair. She was just trying to protect him. In her own (aggravating) way.

“I will pay for all of your travel and medical expenses, of course.”

“Oh, well, in that case, how could I ever say no?”

She tossed back her head and laughed. “Hai, hai, I really am growing to like you, Ryōshi-san. Are you sure you won’t come stay with us?”

“Thanks, but no,” he said sounding a little more than snide. “I don’t want to stay with you and I won’t be taking the job.” He turned to go open the front door. “You can leave now.”

“What if I told you he killed humans?”

Tristan’s shoulders tightened as he came to a halt and he huffed. Of

course he did. “I’d say that better be true.”

He turned to face Yuki again and she nodded. “I had Desmond following him. But where my wonderful scion’s skills lie are not in tracking.”

Tristan furrowed his brow. “Then what are his skills?”

Yuki smirked in a way that Tristan just knew he wouldn’t like what was about to come out of her mouth. “Ah, what an apt question... He was serving my... *whims*.”

He looked to Ash, his mind going over a hundred different whims that someone like Yuki might have. Ash tilted her head slightly, her eyes widening as if to will him to understand the single truth. And as he looked to Yuki again, his eyes meeting hers as she rolled her shoulders back making her chest stick out, he finally understood.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, wide-eyed. His face fell and a sour look filled in as if he bit into something nasty and mumbled, “*Oh*.” Desmond was servicing his Master by way of more than just a second-hand man. “That’s fucking nasty,” he muttered, making Yuki giggle.

“Ah, you do have a charming way with words, Ryōshi-san.”

He considered Yuki for a minute, trying to decide how much of what the old bat said was true. Ash, having said so little, was silently watching him. He gave her a look in return as if to ask her opinion. She shrugged. It was his decision in the end.

Yuki stood with a flourish, very dramatic-like and went over to the kitchen to pick up an item she’d left on the counter when she came in. “Do these appease your sense of truth then?” She shoved a stack of newspapers at Tristan, of which there were several, not just from Japan but Germany and Romania as well.

“I can’t read this shit.”

The old vampire took a seat again, eyes half lidded and dangerous.

“That one on top says “Two dead, drained of blood.” That was five days ago. There were three others in Japan. Two days after that it’s Germany.”

Ash took the newspapers from him and quickly skimmed them. “I know a vampire attack when I see one...” She sighed, frowning up at Tristan. “There’s at least a dozen here.”

“And how do we know they’re all Lucien?”

She scowled. “We don’t.”

“But there’s a high chance it’s Lucien, huh?”

“Hai,” Yuki answered.

Tristan rubbed his hands over his face and let out a long sigh. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

Yuki’s face lit up with a big smile. “*Subarashii!* I knew you could not resist what it is in your blood to do.”

Tristan narrowed his eyes at her. “And what’s that?”

“Why, kill, of course.”

“Hey, get it right. I’m no murder.” Too bad he didn’t really believe that himself. God, just what was he doing with his life?

“No, no, of course not. Your victims would have to be human for it to be considered murder now, wouldn’t they?” The ancient vampire was smiling, but her eyes were crinkled and angry.

“Think what you like.”

Yuki harrumphed and stood. Lilith stood with her, completely synchronized. The pair walked past him and Tristan had the sudden, terrible urge to back up, just to get away from the pythia.

Over her shoulder, Yuki said, “I will send Desmond first thing tomorrow with your travel arrangements.”

“Joy,” Tristan answered dryly and then had a thought. “Hey.” The old vamp stopped at the door and turned to look at him. “Why don’t you just go after Lucien yourself? You’re stronger than me. You’re stronger than most vampires, being the oldest ‘n all. Someone like Lucien shouldn’t be that hard for someone like you. Fire or not.”

A dark expression filled the Master vampire’s face.

Tristan narrowed his eyes at her. “You’re scared of him, aren’t you?”

Ash sighed, shaking her head. Yeah, he never learned. Then again, if the Master vampire had wanted Tristan dead, she could have done it at any time, in the blink of an eye and he’d never have known what happened. Tonight proved just that.

Yuki considered him for a long time, running those crystal-clear eyes over his face. Finally, she sighed and turned away, looking back to the closed front door.

“*Tabun*—perhaps,” she said, surprising Tristan.

She sighed heavily and when she spoke again, her voice was soft and sorrowful. “I was there the night Guinevere was slain. I helped Malik kill her.”

Tristan jerked around to look at Ash. Her eyes were wide, her expression as shocked as he’d ever seen it. She didn’t know.

“Guinevere was a gentle person but her will to live was... *kyodai. Odorokubeki*”

Ash leaned into him to whisper the translation of “enormous” and “astonishing” as Yuki continued on as if she didn’t even remember the other’s presence.

“She nearly killed Malik and I both. I do not wish to play with fire again.”

“Jesus Christ, Yuki,” Tristan breathed. “Why the hell were you

helping Malik?”

Yuki turned and those clear vampire eyes that haunted his nightmares rolled slowly up to set upon his own. “If you live, consider it a consolation prize, me telling you why.”

“If I live,” he muttered. And then gasped, flinching back when the old vampire appeared right in front of him. She was so close the hem of her thin skirt brushed his bare feet. She had a warm hand against his chest over his pounding heard. His whole body was cold with anxiety that had nothing to do with her power.

“Oh, Ryōshi-san,” she sighed in such a non-Yuki candor. “I have faith.” And then the batty old vampire left with the pythia trailing silently behind.

When the door shut with a definitive click Tristan let out the breath he was holding. Ash gave her own sigh next him and he flinched, not even realizing she’d run to his aid when Yuki rushed him. He guessed that she was relieved to be rid of the creepy sisters too. Who wouldn’t be? Then again, they still had another fun filled night to look forward to when Desmond showed up tomorrow with the travel plans. Tristan was so excited he could faint.

### 3: GUILTY

ASH shut her eyes and let out a heavy sigh, clearly annoyed with him. Tristan had made her repeat herself several times. This was the fourth.

“As I said before, more than once if you recall the past five minutes, no, I do not know what it means.”

Arms crossed over his chest, scowling down at the small vampire, Tristan wasn't so sure that was the one-hundred percent truth. Ash just had this way with the truth that wasn't entirely... complete. The words of the pythia's vision haunted him. They terrified him in a way he couldn't even begin to explain.

“Tristan,” she said, taking a step towards him. “If I knew, I would tell you and only you. It is your foretelling and only you have the right to understand it.”

She took that last step between them that would put her just inches from touching him. Tentatively, she reached out and put a hand against his chest.

“I have always been on your side. Never doubt my loyalty.”

“Why?” he asked, throat tight with emotion.

She flinched back. “Pardon?”

“Why are you so loyal to me? What do you get from me? Out of this... arrangement. Because that’s all I see it as with the way things are now.” Maybe that was a bit harsh, but it was what he felt, goddammit. Add his form of honesty of top of the mounting frustration and bad things started to come out of his mouth. You know, more than usual.

She stepped back, looking shocked and confused. “I... I am not sure how to answer that.”

He took an angry step towards her. This wasn’t the sort of conversation he wanted to be having, but it needed to be said and now was as good of a time as any.

“It’s exactly as I said, what am I to you? Why do you feel this unwavering loyalty to me? Those were your words, just now. I want to understand them—*you*.”

She shook her head a little too frantically. “I cannot say,” she answered in a breathy voice.

Tristan made a rude noise through his teeth and pushed past her to go to the bedroom. “That’s what I thought.”

He was just about to shut the panel separating the main room from the sleeping space when Ash called out. “Why did you agree to this hunt?”

“Excuse me?” he drawled, turning around to face her. “I’m Uruwashi. It’s my job.”

She shook her head. “You and I both know that is not the real reason.”

God, he hated that she could read his mind so easily, as if he were an open book with *big* fucking print. “Stay out of my head.”

They stared at each other for a long time, both unwilling to back down. Tristan relented first and sighed. “I’m doing it for you. Lucien, I

know what he did to you that night. I know he—” He took a deep breath. He couldn’t say the word out loud, it would be too insensitive. It was the look on Ash’s face that stopped him, made him mind his mouth for once.

“I know he hurt you. He’s hurt a lot of people, vampire, human, whatever. He needs to be stopped.” Tristan wasn’t sure if he really felt sympathy for the vampires that’d fallen victim to Lucien. It wasn’t because he didn’t know them but because he’d seen what they did to each other and to innocent humans. It wasn’t hard to have zero sympathy for creatures that killed indiscriminately for the pleasure of it.

Ash made a small noise and relaxed slightly, her fisted hands opening at her side. “Yes. You are right. He has hurt many. *And* you are Uruwashi.”

Tristan took a step closer thinking that they were on the same mindset.

“But, that doesn’t make you a god.”

He stopped, going rigid. “Excuse me?”

“Who are you to decide his fate?”

“You’re kidding me, right?” She was the one who was all about him learning to defend himself, make him a stronger, faster fighter so that he could be what he was born to be. The Beautiful Death. Aside from a sense of duty, he needed this. He needed to hurt that man—that vampire—for the things he’d done to Ash.

She sneered, flashing the tip of a small fang. “We do not know his side of the story, perhaps he never did those things. Perhaps, if he did, it was not his fault.”

Tristan groaned throwing his hands up in aggravation. “Ash. Seriously, you’re giving me a fucking headache. Are you going to pull this shit every time I have a hunt or is there something else that’s

bothering you? Some reason you don't want to see Lucien die—" The second he said it, he understood. Everything made sense in a moment of shocking clarity. She didn't want Lucien to die. Oh god, he was wrong all along.

Back in October, Lucien showed up at Ash's home on the premise of relaying a message. He ended up staying for a bite to eat, definitely more. Tristan found Ash crying and spotted in blood. When asked if she was okay, she told him very plainly that she and Lucien had once been lovers.

Tristan never pressed further than that, but he was sure that while she might have slept with him in the past voluntarily, it wasn't so consensual that night. Lucien had raped her, in body and blood. But now, right here, she was questioning Tristan's duty as the last Uruwashi and he saw the truth behind her words, the things she said without speaking. She welcomed his advances, Lucien hadn't raped anything.

She cared about Lucien.

Ash heard the thought as clearly as if he'd spoke aloud and gasped, stepping back. "No," she whispered. "No, that is not..."

"I don't fucking believe this," he growled. "All you had to do was tell me the truth, Ash. Is that so fucking hard? I mean, how hard it is to say, please don't kill him, I love him? Huh? How hard is it to say, hey, I can't be with you after all?"

She only stared at him, eyes wide with shock. She had no words for him, no excuse. Just as well; he didn't either.

"I'm so done with this conversation." He couldn't even look at her any more. All this time that they spent together, the small moments they shared, as few as they were, were all for nothing. She'd been in love with someone else the entire time. God, he was so stupid.

"Wait!"

He stopped, clenching his fists tightly, but couldn't bring himself to turn around. He couldn't look at her or he might explode.

"That is not—I mean to say... sorry."

When she said nothing more Tristan tsked angrily and started to walk away again. She made a tiny noise, it might have been the beginning of a word, sorry. He flinched, thinking about stopping and turning to her for just a brief second, but decided to walk away instead.

*Sorry?* For what? Sorry she had a thing for Lucien? Sorry he had a problem with it? Sorry she didn't tell him sooner so that Tristan didn't think they were some kind of couple? Because, despite all the distance between them, he thought they were in this—whatever this was—together.

It was stupid, really, thinking an Uruwashi and a vampire could be anything more than enemies. Guess he knew the true parameters of their relationship now.

No more fucking around, he was going to go to France, whack Lucien and then go back Maryland and start over, for a third time. Alone. It would be hard but he'd move into his parent's home, go back to work, date, maybe get a dog. Do the normal shit normal people do and make a life for himself again. Live, rather than get by.

Tristan shut the shoji behind him with a huffy sigh. He couldn't believe the night he was having.

He went to turn on the hot water heater for the shower and then plopped down on his hard mat, an arm draped over his eyes. From the very beginning Ash had always been so ambiguous to him. Gender, needs, desires. He could never tell exactly what she was thinking and if what she was saying was even the full truth. But there had been one thing clear to him: that Ash wanted to be with him as much as he wanted to be with her.

After killing Malik and getting out of the hospital, Tristan found her

at the burned remains of her home, reminiscing, reflecting. They said a few things to one another about their futures, together, the actual words lost to the haze of pain and drugs, but one thing in particular stuck with him. Simple, clear cut words that Ash had spoken: “I like you. I really do like you, Tristan.” As far as he saw it, in her own way, Ash had practically said she wanted to be with him as a lover.

So, what changed?

After Malik, the two moved into Tristan’s modest apartment while Ash tried to find the perfect home in the area Tristan wanted to live in Maryland that could support a woman of her habits. Being a vampire meant a laundry list of seemingly mundane things that didn’t mean shit to him, but he was okay with waiting. They were going to live together. *Together.*

Their time in waiting had been less than exciting, nothing nearly like those few weeks he spent being inducted into the vampire life. Every day was the same as the last: wake up after dark, eat, drive out of town, train, come home, shower, do random boring shit around the apartment, go to bed a few hours after Ash, sleep through the day.

Training usually involved either kendo, target practice or sparring with small hand weapons or just hands. And the random boring shit around the apartment never involved being any closer to Ash than an arm’s length away. There were no delicate touches, longing looks or deep conversation about what the other wanted for their future. Instead there were a whole lot of awkward, quiet moments filled with thoughts of what if.

Two months and Tristan didn’t know shit about her. He did know they couldn’t share something as simple as a kiss safely, but that didn’t mean they couldn’t touch at all. That they couldn’t talk and do the other things couples did. Guess he misunderstood everything she said. He was just such an honest, forthright, blunt person that he forgot sometimes that not everyone was like him. In fact, Ash was the extreme

opposite. In every way, it seemed.

Tristan heaved a sigh, got up from the bed and started to undress. The room was cold and he shivered as he climbed uncomfortably into the shower room, a space the size of a closet. Seriously, it was the tiniest room the Japanese could ever have made. It held a small square tub that was deeper than American tubs so that the water would come up to one's chest, a small wall-hung sink and a removable shower head fixed on the wall. The entire room was lined in tiles, floor to ceiling—and the ceiling. There was a drain in the middle of the floor, the whole five square feet of it, outside of the bathtub. The tub-shower area wasn't fitted with a curtain, it was simply a closet with water.

He left the door separating the bath from the bedroom open, despite the mess it made when he did. He was too American, too tall for the room to be comfortable. He just hoped Ash didn't come into the room. He wasn't ready to face her.

The first few drops of hot water hit his skin and he sighed deeply, resting his palms on cold tile, head bowed under the water, letting it flow around his face, down his shoulders, warming and comforting him.

He wished he could stay here forever like this, let the water just wash everything away. He really didn't have time for relationship bullshit but it was all he could think about. The fact that he was about to go to France alone and hunt down Lucien didn't even bother him. It wasn't even on his mind as an issue and that was a problem.

He tensed, suddenly aware of the burn in his middle. A cool hand touched his back a second after his Uruwashi blood warned him of her presence and he snapped upright, spinning towards the presence of vampire. He had to blink the water from his lashes, but he was sure he was seeing right. Ash was standing behind him in the shower. Naked.

He didn't know what she was thinking coming in here like this. He couldn't look at her, not and be able to tell her no. If she touched him again, he would let her help him forget his anger and he wanted to be

angry. If he wasn't angry, he'd never leave. And he needed to leave, it was obvious they didn't belong together.

Tristan put his back to her, though it was no small feat. He'd seen her partially naked before, even had a chance to run his hands along her amazing body once or twice and those memories taunted him now.

"What are you doing?"

"I just... I want to, I need to apologize."

"Stop, just stop," he said, resting his forehead against the wall. "You've made your position crystal fucking clear, Ash. I was stupid for not noticing before—my bad, right? So, just... leave me alone and when I leave for this job, we won't have to see each other again after that. Okay?"

"Tristan," she said in a shaky voice. "You cannot go alone—"

"Wrong. I can and am." He shut his eyes, feeling the cool tile permeating his forehead. It killed him to say it, but I was time to call it, whatever it was they had. "Please, go away."

"Tristan," she said his name again a little more forcefully. "I only wish to fix the wrongs between us. I am trying to explain, to tell you I am sorry. Will you listen to me?"

A cold hand touched his arm and the unmistakable feel of breasts and hips pressed against his back. Uruwashi blood ignited, that cold fire lit something wild inside him. He was burning up and something in him just snapped.

He spun with a speed a little too fast to be considered human, grabbed the vampire by the wrists, and flung her around, slamming her front against the wall. He made a dangerous noise, something close to a growl, and pushed the line of his body against the back of hers, tightened his hold around her where he still gripped her wrists.

"Sorry?" he growled into her ear. "*Sorry*. Is this how you vampires say

sorry?” He pushed his hips against her backside, letting her feel him and she moaned. “You use your body instead of words? You whore yourself for forgiveness...?”

She whimpered under him, body tense with delicious energy. He could feel her fear and her complete need to give herself over to him. Whatever it was that made her what she was called to him. Like a cold wind that prickled along the aura of his soul, he felt her presence.

He knew she was hungry, a starved creature of the night. She was a renegade of her kind, her will stronger than most. But the edges were jagged and torn, easily susceptible to being snagged. She was damaged.

She was completely and utterly his.

Tristan let go of a wrist and moved his hand down, pressed his palm against her flat stomach, feeling the outline of tense muscles under smooth flesh. She was breathing heavily now, but wouldn't move—wouldn't dare. She had no fight in her. Pity. His hand slipped lower, fingering the plush hair between her legs.

“Mmm,” he hummed against her neck. “You're already wet here.”

She gasped when two fingers grazed across her opening and then slipped in smoothly. “That is because of what I am. Of who you are.” She paused a moment, suppressing a moan, before adding, “To me.”

“And what's that?” he purred across her hot, damp flesh making her shudder. “What am I? Hmm? To you?”

She whimpered, body shaking with need. “You...”

“You shouldn't make offers you don't intend to follow through on, little vampire.” He wiggled the fingers inside her making her gasp loudly and slump against the wall.

“What...” She swallowed a strangled moan. “What is it you think I am offering?”

He chuckled and then gave the curve of her neck a slow lick. “Your

delicious body, little vampire, what else?”

The breath left her in a shaky sigh. “What I have to offer, I offer no one but you. And I offer much more... So much more.”

“Hmmm,” he answered in a hum, lips pressed to her neck again as he took tiny tastes of her pale flesh. The fingers in her twitched again, making her gasp and finally collapse completely in his hold.

The little vampire was positively rank with the scent of submission. She wanted him to have her. Mixed with the perfume of her need was her blood. How he desired the sweet flavor within, the delicately aged nectar that was this Master vampire.

And Master indeed, the power she held was greater than even she was willing to accept. She feared her love of such a power and he loved her fear. Loved her power and the way it tasted on her.

He opened his mouth across the base of her neck and bit down hard, driving his teeth deep into her flesh. The little vampire cried out, tossing her head back, and writhed under him. She could get away, if she wanted to, but she allowed herself to be violated under his wanton attentions.

The falsity of her struggles only made him want to devour her more, body and blood. His fingers searched deeper, stroking with purpose as her labored breaths turned into moans.

Teeth ground harder, angry and confused as to why her skin wouldn't break, spilling forth what he longed for. Why wouldn't her skin break?

Then, the little vampire spoke. Was that a name she just whispered? What did she just call him?

“Tristan...”

*My name?*

Panic shot through Tristan and he gasped, releasing his hold on her

neck and backpedaled until he hit the opposite wall, smacking his elbows and head. Wide-eyed and puffing for air he stared at Ash through a stream of cooling water. The back of her neck bore faint teeth marks that were disappearing as he watched.

Slowly, she turned. Her face was clear of emotion, the mask she always wore to hide her true feelings. She licked her lips in a nervous gesture and she shifted to take a step towards him.

“No!” He tossed a hand up, desperate for her to stay back. “Don’t—the fuck was—Just stay away from me.”

Ash stopped and looked to him, expression still carefully neutral.

“Wha—what was that?” he whispered. “What’s happening to me?”

Ash frowned, her pale brows pinching, and reached out to him.

“Please,” he said, lifting a hand to hide his face and his shame, “go.”

The sound of bare feet against tile sounded away from him and he slipped to the floor, face in hands.

Oh god. What happened just now? He—he felt like someone else. Something inside just snapped, switched off. Or on, as it was. He wanted her blood. Vampire blood. He could smell it, *feel* it flowing through her lithe little body.

But more than that, he could feel her. The presence, life force, whatever you wanted to call it, that made her vampire. It was tangible, touchable and so fucking strong. He felt as if he could reach out to that part of him that was wholly inhuman, the Uruwashi in him, and use it to grab ahold of her essence. And she would be his as a scion was to their Master. He could make her do whatever he wanted and she wouldn’t be able to say no. He had wanted her to give herself up to him in body and blood.

That same essence he felt in Ash, he realized he felt in himself. There was no doubt about it, the Uruwashi in him tasted of vampire. Yuki had

been right, he was part vampire. But what happened to bring on this sudden change in the way he'd been for the past twenty-four years?

Only two months passed since he discovered who he was. Besides the knowledge of what he was or the possibly of what he could be if bitten, nothing had changed. Well, except for the fact that he added one more thing to the list of deplorable acts he has committed since his parents died.

He felt no regret in killing Malik. His regret was in how it made him feel—unsatisfied. Was all of this his slow transformation into becoming a monster? Or did that *princess* actually have the gall do something to him while he was sleeping?

Shit, who was he kidding, she didn't know how to not poke at things. Dammit all, he was actually going to have to talk to her again. More like, demand. He wouldn't let that little shit get away with fucking with him like this. It wasn't just Tristan she was hurting. Ash was hurt too.

Fuck!

He sighed heavily, thinking of what he was going to say as got out of the shower. He dressed quickly, barely drying off, and went out to the main room. "Ash, I'm—" He stopped and looked around. The apartment was empty.

"Shit," he sighed and went to the kitchen. There he found a note from Ash. It said simply, "Good night" and nothing more.

Angry with himself for attacking her like that, he tossed the note away and slammed a hand down on the countertop. This was the first time she'd gone out without him since moving in. Maybe, for once, she was going to fill her craving for blood by feeding from a real live person instead of those mixed drinks she got from her pythia contact. He drove her to this, he chased her away.

Maybe it was better this way.

Fuck no, it wasn't. He hurt her and she deserved an apology.

He stretched out across the counter, face pressed to the cold laminate. At least Ash going out gave them both time to cool off. They were both bombs waiting to go off and with one of them unpredictable, the other possessing immense power, injury or death was a real possibility. Now was as good a time as any for them to part ways. He knew this, but could he really do it?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A MARYLAND native, Christina lives just outside of beautiful historic downtown Annapolis. Growing up riding horses to show in dressage and cross-country, later moving on to racing Volkswagens and then finding a career in the architecture industry as a graphic artist/mother hen, she's never been a real expert in any one thing. When not writing or trying to keep up with her daughter, she loves to read, garden, cross-stitch, and play video games.

[WWW.THEBEAUTIFULDEATH.COM](http://WWW.THEBEAUTIFULDEATH.COM)