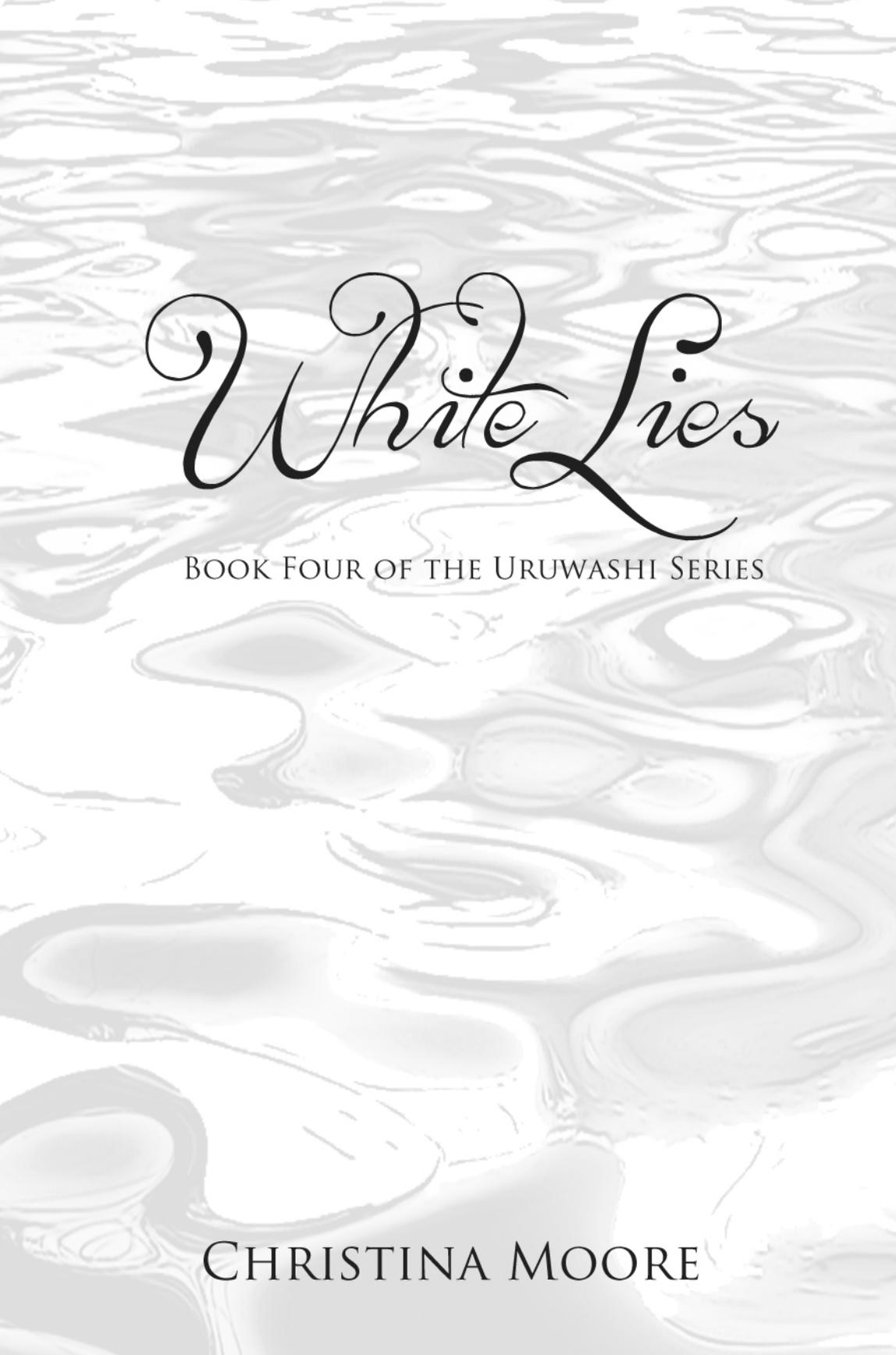




White
The Urubashi Series
Lies

CHRISTINA MOORE



White Lies

BOOK FOUR OF THE URUWASHI 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.

White Lies

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1: SWIMMING HOME

MOTHER *fucker!*” Tristan shouted as he got a good look at the man on his sofa. A man that should have been dead.

And he should have fucking known it was going to be one of those days after the dream Tristan had and then waking up to fresh snow as if to rub it in his face that Yuki was pining for him. But, determined to move at his own pace and needing solid food, Tristan slogged out to the store on foot. He was tired and soaked through to the skin by the time he trudged back home with his groceries.

Being after dark, Ash would naturally be awake, so he was expecting to find her sitting in the living room, reading as she often did when they didn't have plans to go out. Only, it wasn't his lovely vampire companion on the sofa when he walked in. Instead, it was a man Tristan watched die more than three months ago under Ash's fangs.

The moment the harsh curse left Tristan, he dropped the bags in his arms and dove for the kitchen. After having his apartment violated by Malik's minions, he got smart and planted a few key weapons around the place. Besides the normal kitchen knives and such, there was also a finely honed Japanese steel tantō tucked between a cabinet and the

fridge. He was more of a gun person, but the foot-long blade worked to keep neighbors from being too nosy. He had the weapon within seconds and was on his feet again, moving towards the frightened man. No, not a man, a teen—he was just a kid, this Sebastian look-alike.

“Who the fuck are you?” Tristan demanded of the boy, now pinned under him on the floor with the knife to his neck and a knee in his back.

“Uh, uh...I’m, uh...” At least the kid’s voice didn’t crack even if he did squeak a little.

“Who are you? Tristan demanded again. “Why are you here?”

“I, I don’t—I’m Simon!”

There was no shuffling of clothing or feet on the worn tatami to announce her arrival to the room, so when Ash’s voice cut in it was like thunder. “What in the Goddess—Tristan!”

He flinched but refused to take his eyes off the boy. “Some vampire you are,” he said with a dark smile and finally glanced at her, his smile going more crooked at her obvious and barely concealed amusement. She wore only a light robe and he let it distract him for more than a few seconds. “You know there’s a fucking faerie in the apartment, right?”

Ash scowled but her eyes shone with laughter. “What sort of vampire do you take me for?” She tilted her head, frowning at the men. “Simon is a guest.”

“You know this kid?”

The boy looked less frightened and scowled. “I’m not a kid.”

Tristan sneered at him.

“Tristan,” Ash chided in a tone he was fully familiar with and he cringed. “This is Simon. Simon, Tristan. Now, will you please let him up?”

Tristan grumbled but let the Sebastian clone get up. Didn’t mean he

had to put his weapon away. Simon stood, looking stiff and on guard as he smoothed out his clothes—his *really* bad 80's clothes. To be honest, all 80's clothes were bad, but this was like the culmination of every bad part of eighties-wear one could possibly find. He was bright and shiny and oh so deco. It was fucking disgusting.

Aside from the loud clothes, the kid really did look a younger Sebastian. Simon's hair was the same black dyed over natural crayon red, though Sebastian's was longer and less spikey. Same spring grass green eyes, same soft features and small build. Even the pointy fae ears which stood out starkly without the hair to hide them.

Ash sighed and went to shut the front door, ignoring the food exploded all over the floor that Tristan'd dropped on his way in. "Yukihime sent Simon for us."

Tristan took a moment to process that and then smiled cynically, making the young fae step back in surprise. "Fucking took her long enough."

Ash's smile was soft and tired as she shrugged. "I think she was actually waiting for us to come to her."

Tristan snorted, shaking his head. He was just about to, actually. Today was his last self-imposed lazy day and then tomorrow he was going to go see Yuki one last time. He needed to build up a mental tolerance to the old vampire. It was nice not having her around the past few months. It was great having no one around. Just him and Ash. No shinwa, no heikō, no bullshit.

A look crossed the fae's face like he'd made a decision and then he was launching off into this fast paced monologue. "Yeah so Master Yukihime sent me, said she wants to send you on a hunt and that I should come get you and um, bring you to her so she can tell you about it and you'd go out and get the shinwa but I don't actually know which one since she never tells me anything because no one tells me anything."

The others just stared at Simon, Tristan in wide-eyed surprise, Ash in tired acceptance like she'd been through it already and learned to just deal.

“Okay...,” Tristan drawled, eyeing the fae. Hyper. Way too hyper.

Simon smiled brightly. “Master said you were a hunter, an Uruwashi but I don’t know if I believe in the Uruwashi, I mean they aren’t really even shinwa like me and the vampire n’ all or even heikō but big sis and brother said they existed once and did you know my sister died last year and um—”

“Okay. Stop.” Holy-fucking-hell. Tristan didn’t think the kid even took a breath in there. “Yuki told *you* specifically to come for me?”

“Ah-huh, she said—”

He put his hand up. “No, I know. She said for you to get us.” Tristan got that. He also understood why she sent Simon of all the “people” in her service. She was fucking with them.

Tristan glanced at Ash and then at her tiny nod, sighed. “We’ll go but I need to clean this shit up first—”

“I’ll help!” the fae chirped way too cheerily.

Ash smirked at Tristan over her shoulder as she retreated back into the bedroom to finish getting dressed.

“No, I got it,” Tristan grumbled.

“No, no, it’s okay really, I don’t mind!”

“Okay, first off... Slow. Down.” Tristan made eye contact with the kid. That seemed to make Simon uneasy and made the kid’s mouth clamp shut. “And two, volume. I’m not deaf, okay? Inside voices.”

The fae blinked at him a moment before putting on a big, cheesy smile. “Kay!”

Tristan wondered if the need to be useful was a fae thing. Even

though Sebastian was really a bad guy, a spy, the man did more work than he needed to. Sure, it was his job to blend in and not be suspected, but Tristan always got the impression that the man actually enjoyed being useful like that. Like that first night in Paris when the fae ordered a whole goddamn buffet of food when Tristan mentioned he was hungry.

A few minutes later Ash was dressed in a skirt outfit with knee-high boots and a suede jacket lined in shearling. Murasaki Kaeru, her favorite katana, finally recovered from its long trip of being lost in shipping from France, was resting happily in a new over-the-shoulder sheath that put the draw directly over her left shoulder. Tristan swore she almost cried when she'd heard word that her blade might be lost forever. He'd only just found out that it'd been an heirloom in Haruka's family, a treasure Ash claimed the night she saved Haruka. It meant a lot to her before Haruka died and now that the girl was gone, the sword was beyond priceless. It was a precious memory and probably the only material item Ash gave a damn about. Tristan's eyes fell to her chest and the locket there that he'd given her in France. Okay, make that two things she gave a damn about.

"Ready?" she asked, looking eager. Tristan related; he'd been waiting a long time to tell ole-crazy-pants off. A little earlier than planned, but he'd go with it. Winging it was totally his thing anyway.

He smiled and took the knives she held out. Guns were illegal in Japan, but that didn't keep him from carrying one in a concealed shoulder holster. He wouldn't have it any other way. Especially now that he knew about all the frightening things there were out in the world, the shinwa and heikō. And the vampire were only one of thirteen.

He frowned as he thought of the other apex predator, his own kind, the Uruwashi. He'd always been led to believe he was the last alive, but found that wasn't true when he met an honest-to-bitten Uruwashi in Greece. Mamoru was his friend, and would have become his mentor if that fucking elf, Silas, hadn't accidentally killed him.

WHITE LIES

While Simon blathered on about something or another to Ash, Tristan dipped into the bedroom to put on dry pants and add a spare clip to his person. One could never be too prepared when it came to Yuki... or Desmond for that matter. Both were just as liable to kiss him as draw a weapon on him. Or rub dirt in his hair—it was always so hard to judge their moods.

When he came out of the room, Simon was *still* yammering away. Tristan rolled his eyes, eliciting a soft chuckle from Ash as she put an arm around his waist for a quick hug. “Ready?”

He nodded and went to the kitchen for his car keys. Fifteen fucking minutes later Ash found them in the corner between the desk and patio slider. The look she gave Tristan as she handed him the keys was full of apprehension. They all saw him put the keys on the kitchen counter before he changed and their displacement could only be a few, highly inconvenient, things.

Tristan held the door for the others, which his landlady had fixed in the time they were gone. Maybe he’d force Desmond to pay for it out of principal. It wasn’t like he was hurting for money, not with Ash’s deep pockets. She had single handedly paid for their new home. Tristan was weary to ask how.

“After you.”

The young fae smiled brightly and went outside, practically skipping like it was the happiest day of his life. Who knew, maybe it was.

“Where does Yuki find them?” Tristan mumbled as he followed the kid out.

“Sometimes I wonder,” Ash said softly.

Tristan chuckled.

Ash slowed her pace to fall in next to Tristan and whispered, “He is the younger sibling to Sybille and Sebastian.”

He nodded, watching the fae prance off ahead of them through the snow on the upper landing. “Yeah, figured as much. He looks just like Sebastian.” Not to mention the whole fae naming convention: faerie given names started with the last letter in the mother’s given name. It wasn’t hard-fast, but usually a good guess if you met more than one faerie with an “S” name in the same region that they were all siblings and there could be a shitton of them too with the way faerie reproduced.

“Do you... do you think he’s like Sebastian?”

“A deceiver?”

“Yeah,” he answered in a whisper. The memory of being betrayed by the man was still very fresh. His death even more so. Ash kept Sebastian alive for nearly a week before draining him and dumping him overboard the cruise ship just before reaching Greece. If it weren’t so justified, Tristan would have had to dispense Uruwashi justice on Ash. Not that he ever could.

“No. His mind is fully open, he has nothing to hide. He thinks only of serving Yukihime... and making new friends.”

Tristan had to chuckle.

“He is not a deceitful person.”

“Do you think he knows, you know, about what we did to his brother?” He looked down and met Ash’s gaze.

She shook her head. “He does not look at you as a man who has killed someone he cares for.”

That was true enough.

“Besides, no one knows what happened to Sebastian.”

Well, that was true too.

Ash seemed tense all the sudden and Tristan frowned, meaning to ask but then he was distracted. Down the stairs and halfway across the car

park already, Simon suddenly stopped and turned to face them with his arms behind his head, looking carefree and full of vibrant youth. “Hey, are you *really* an Uruwashi?”

Ash smirked, nudging Tristan in the side when he groaned.

“It’s supposed to be a secret,” he grumbled to her before saying louder to Simon, “Yes. Yes, I am.”

“No way! That’s so awesome,” Simon practically shouted. “What can you do? Do you have powers? I read they have powers and stuff, like um...”

“Thought you didn’t believe in the Uruwashi?” Tristan said as he frowned at his snow covered car. He wasn’t looking forward to cleaning it off. There was already half a foot or so and more falling. It was a good day to stay in.

“Well, not entirely, they’re like, um only fairytales to us now...”

“Says the faerie,” Tristan mumbled to Ash as Simon kept on talking.

The couple had caught up to Simon who’d stopped to gaze up at Tristan in awe.

“What?” he snapped feeling self-conscious all the sudden.

Simon blinked those spring grass eyes up at him, so big and full of childlike wonder. “Tall... you’re so tall.” Simon was even shorter than Sebastian, topping a small four-ten, max. The fae grinned suddenly. “You’re so awesome!”

Ash laughed and Tristan gave her a little shove away from him. “Yes, Tristan is awesome. But he has a bit of an ill temper, dear faerie. Mind yourself.”

He scowled down at her. *Temper?* Aw hell, guess it was true enough. He wasn’t always like this. He used to be pretty damn cheery and nice, but could still rip your fucking head off if you deserved it. Nowadays though, it seemed like all he did was frown and mouth off.

Simon started to walk backwards again, having no trouble navigating the snow. “Oh! What vampire bit you, was it earth? Wind? Oh, oh water? Can’t be fire, they’re all dead n’ all—oh my god, do you have *fangs*? Can I see?”

Tristan sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Christ, it’s like twenty questions...”

The fae gave him a big grin, shrugged and turned to face forward only to prance off towards the line of parked cars buried under snow.

Simon was a constant buzz in Tristan’s ear as they cleaned off his car enough for him and Ash to get in. Tristan rolled his eyes at Ash, making her chuckle and went around to open the door for her. His girlfriend before last would have called him sexist for it—there was a reason they didn’t last—but Ash only smiled warmly and gave him a soft pat on the chest. In the background the fae was *still* talking. Tristan couldn’t believe anyone had so much to say. Not that he was really saying anything at all.

When Tristan turned to go around to his side of the car he stopped with a surprised noise. The fae was right behind, like all up in his shit right behind him.

“I know, I know! It was the were-house. The *were*-house, like warehouse. You know the lycanthropes? Get it? *Get it?*”

“I don’t have a clue what the fuck you’re talking about, kid.”

Simon looked crushed as he muttered, “It was a joke—”

“Listen,” Tristan interrupted before the kid could get lost in another monologue. “You seem nice, but you’re hard to follow, okay? Just... relax.”

Simon nodded but still had the kicked puppy look. “Okay.”

The two stood there, staring at each other.

“So... you drove here...?”

WHITE LIES

Simon stared up at him for a long time. The kid looked like he was really thinking. And it was an effort on his part. “Oh yeah! I drove here.” He slumped, letting his arms hang lifeless at his sides. “Can’t I ride with you? I get lonely when I drive alone there’s no one to talk to and Master wouldn’t let me bring Jennifer or Sacha along and I don’t care about my car. Can I?”

“Sure can’t.”

“All right,” he answered and it was the first real frown of the night he’d put on.

Hell, the expression looked so wrong on him that Tristan felt bad for the kid. But then he remembered the constant chatter they’d have to endure for the long ride to Yuki’s place. Tristan was sure his brain would leak out of his ears if he had to spend that much time in a confined space with the kid. Then again, that might still happen, they were off to see Yukihome, Master of Water and all things crazy, after all.

Ash startled him when she took his hand, still standing in the open car door. She offered him a half smile and then, when she seemed to notice his little frown, went on her toes to kiss his cheek. Without a word she teased the keys from Tristan’s hand and went around to the other side. He sighed, knowing that look on her face and got in the car, accidentally dropping snow into his lap when his hair brushed the side of the roof.

Ash maneuvered the car through the snow, not bothering to wait on the exuberant fae. The silence was cold, but not uncomfortable despite Tristan’s focused awareness on Ash and her unspoken thoughts. He could just tell there was something on her mind but knew better than to push. She was as hardheaded as him and would hold onto her musings until she was ready.

“I have something to tell you.”

Tristan stiffened at her sudden words. For Ash, of all people, to come

out and say *I have something to tell you*... well, it couldn't be good.

"You..." She glanced at him with an apprehensive look. "You are not going to like it."

He turned in his seat and fixed his attention on her face, ready to pick up the tiniest of clues as to what this was about. "Okay...?"

"It's about Sebastian."

His hands tightened into fists where they rested on his lap. "Ahuh."

She let out a sigh as if preparing herself. "There is a chance he isn't dead."

"Um... *what?*" He was there. He had forced himself to watch Ash take the fae's last blood before helping her dump him over the side of the cruise ship.

Ash sighed again, slumping down in her seat. "I have killed a great many people in my life. But the only kind I have ever killed on purpose, of my own will has been vampires, wrong vampires... and a few dozen lycanthrope, out of pity. Sebastian, he—He deserved to die for what he did to you—*us*. But even knowing that, I just, I could not."

"But then—"

"I drained him near death. When he went over the side, he was not conscious but he was alive." She stopped and the silence pecked at Tristan's mind. He was looking out the window again, unable to meet her eyes.

When he said nothing, she added, "He had a fifteen percent chance of surviving, actually."

His attention snapped around to her again. "And that qualifies as you not killing him?"

She pouted a little. "For me, yes."

Tristan took in a deep breath and let it out, forcing the tension away.

“Yeah... okay. I guess I accept that. But, Jesus, what if he *did* make it? I already have to sleep with one eye open for the vampires, I don’t want to have to worry about all the others too.”

“I know,” she said sadly. “Which is why I thought you should know.”

He nodded.

“I am sorry.”

He looked at her, confused.

“For not killing him.” She glanced away from the road long enough to see his frown. “I know you wanted me to.”

He groaned and took her hand off the steering wheel, giving it a soft squeeze. “No, actually, I’m a little relieved.”

Ash squeezed his hand in return. “It was weighing on your conscious.”

“Yeah.” Along with Audric’s fledglings. He wanted to believe there was no other way, but he just couldn’t. He wasn’t a good enough liar to tell himself otherwise.

When he glanced at her, Ash was looking at him with a sort of “do you want to talk about it” kind of look. But it was not something she’d normally say aloud. Tristan either. They both tended to bottle shit up until it exploded—more frequently for Tristan. In fact, he was sure he was due for his next epic meltdown soon. He just hoped Ash had it in her to pick his broken self up when he inevitably failed to help himself.

Shit, for all he knew, he had one in France and just didn’t remember it. Dammit, he was going to cave and ask her to tell him what happened after all. He just knew it. And knowing himself, he’d do it at the worst possible moment too. Fuck, he was a detriment to himself and everyone around him.

“I will be sure to find a moment to tell Simon.”

“Seriously?”

She glanced at him with a confused frown.

“Just like that, you’re going to tell him the truth?”

Her attention went back to the road. “He knows the world he lives in. He understands the nature of his fellow shinwa. Don’t you think he deserves to know my sin against him?”

“Yeah but... I mean, Sebastian was a traitor. And a monster. Do you really want to be the one to tell *that* boy that? Simon seems like a good kid.”

Ash slumped. “Simon will understand.”

Tristan wasn’t so sure about that but he let it slide for the moment. He had to get his head on right before walking into Yuki’s home. Too bad it was impossible to do in the next thirty minutes what he’d been struggling to do for the past year and half.

2: PASSIVE

Ash caught herself chewing on her lip, much like Tristan did when he was irritated and struggled to find his words. Well, words that weren't interrupted every other by a curse. Sometimes something resembling eloquent came out.

She smiled to herself and then sighed, glancing over at her love. His mind was open, for once, and he'd been thinking about the whole Simon-Sebastian situation since they stopped talking a few minutes ago.

Glancing at Tristan she caught the image of herself in the rearview mirror, and like she had for the past two months, gave a little start. For over two hundred years she'd been pale, white everywhere but her soft lilac eyes and all the sudden, she was dark again. She looked human with her Greek complexion, brown hair and bright blue eyes. But it wasn't seeing her human self again that always made her hesitate, it was that every single time she saw herself her first thought was "Eva", her deceased twin.

Not for the first time, she silently relished Malik's deserved end. And that was the absolute only way she thought of her Master now.

Ash reached across the car and touched Tristan's hand. He was always

so warm, a brightness in the dark—a flame and every vampire who crossed his path were moths. The simple truth had yet to occur to him and Ash was happy to keep it to herself for now. He has so much on his mind these last months and while he was strong, she was starting to notice the toll adding up.

When she met him, he was already a mess and it seemed that he was getting better after finding the truth behind his parent's deaths and then killing the vampire who murdered them with his own hands, but really he was only trading one mystery for another and as more and more found their way to him, the deeper into his mind Tristan seemed to retreat.

He was a mouthy man with a whole lot to say but as of late he'd fallen into long bouts of lip-chewing silence in which he usually had his mind locked up tight. The few times he hadn't Ash had heard his dark ruminations and it made her soul ache. She learned after the second time of trying to talk to him about his thoughts that it only made him angry to the point of shutting her out for hours on end. Sometimes, days. And she wanted nothing more than to be closer to him, in all ways possible.

“You didn't sleep well, again.”

Tristan sighed, lowering his head. And with that little sigh, his thoughts changed. He was thinking about his parents and the dreams that haunted him up to and after killing Malik. Suddenly he was thinking about France and Ash cringed, realizing that he'd been dreaming a lot more lately about their time in that dungeon.

Hopelessness, fear and anguish—all the feelings that were overwhelming him. He was starting to come to terms with the idea that the bits of dreams he remembered were actually real.

He was starting to remember. Or more accurately, and it gave Ash a chill, he was breaking down Yukihome's blockade that hid those memories. Did he even know he was doing it?

WHITE LIES

Ash struggled to swallow and opened her mouth, unsure of what to say. But then Tristan sighed again and his mind filled with the image of Yukihome herself.

She flinched. “You dreamt of Yukihome last night?”

“Mhm,” he hummed softly, his chin resting on his hand while he stared out the window at the grey and white landscape.

Without asking, Tristan focused his thoughts on the dream, recalled it in detail. Yukihome stood knee deep in snow dressed in a white cape with a fur hood that covered everything but her lips and chin. Even not being able to see the small girl’s face, Tristan was hyper aware of her, knew it was the Snow Princess without a doubt.

They were in the field outside of town, the one Ash and Tristan went to spar. But Ash wasn’t with him, it was only him and Yukihome. Her lips moved, but he couldn’t hear the words. He tried to move close to hear, but he was trapped by the snow, yet not cold. Just confused.

“I can’t hear you,” he called out, agitated.

Still, those thin lips moved, flashing long fangs as invisible words were lost to the wind.

“What? I—I can’t hear you,” he said again, frustrated and she raised a single hand, palm up, asking him to come to her.

It wasn’t like him to go to her, but he did. The snow seemed to part way for him and he marched over with no effort. The moment their fingers met her voice found solidity and filled his ears with the boom of a single hissed word. “*Lies...*”

Ash let out a shaky breath. “Was it...”

“No,” he mumbled into his hand, shaking his head, still looking out into the dark. “No dreamshare.”

While the House of Water wasn’t particularly adept at dreamsharing, Yukihome was certainly capable. And Ash wouldn’t have put it past her

to hide herself nearby their apartment just to toy with Tristan. But it wasn't childish enough of a dream for Yukihome.

Tristan said a little louder, "It was nothing, just forget it."

Ash took in a breath as if she meant to say something and ended with letting it out in a small huff. She really didn't know what to say. For all she'd seen in life, the horrors—and beauty—she never did know quite what to say to make him feel better and that's all she ever wanted. For Tristan to be happy.

"What?" Tristan groaned having caught her cut-off words.

"As you said, it's nothing."

He sighed again, slumping.

A minute later, frowning and despondent, Ash was parking in front of Yukihome's home.

"Holy shit..." Tristan whispered.

"Oh my," Ash answered softly in reverence. "I suppose I should have expected this. Lucien did go rogue after all."

"Yeah, but look at it."

"Hmm," she hummed. "Indeed."

Lucien was the last of a very rare sect of vampire, the House of Fire. His Master was killed by Malik with Yukihome's help nearly one hundred seventy years ago. Since then, Lucien bided his time, waiting for the powers he knew he'd come into to manifest. Sure enough, when they did, he finally enacted the start of his plan to ruin the vampire community, and the rest of the shinwa while he was at it.

Yukihome's home was the first cog in his plan. He couldn't kill her himself, but he could kill those lesser than him. And so he did. He used his gift of fire to kill those Yukihome allowed into her home. The building had once been a sprawling single story traditional Japanese

home kept clean and pristine. There'd always been soft lights on behind grass paper curtains and despite being out in the middle of nowhere and infested with vampires, the home always had a comfortable feeling to it from the outside.

From the looks of it now, there wasn't much of inside left. The entire left side of the house was gone, nothing but a pile of ash that gave way to a blackened skeleton. Most of the right side was still intact but felt... dead. There were no lights warming the windows, there was no life. Or the walking dead.

On their last visit to the home there was more than two dozen various super cars parked out front. Now there were only three. From here, Ash could only sense half a dozen inhabitants and only two of those were vampire.

"I can't believe she's still living here," Tristan said more as a thought than a conversation piece.

Ash sighed. "It is only Yukihime and a few of her subordinates here..." That Lilith wasn't among them worried her but she didn't want to bring it up right then, not when Tristan was groaning at frustration.

Ash followed his line of sight to Desmond and gave into a sigh as well. The vampire always seemed to bring out the worse in Tristan—and Ash, if she were being honest. The man just rubbed people the very wrong way. Mostly on purpose, too.

Ash was reaching for the door when Tristan stopped her with a hand on her arm. "I don't want to spend a lot of time here fucking around, playing stupid fucking games. Let's go in, tell Yuki to fuck off, get your book and get out. We'll get on the first flight out of this country tomorrow night and worry about connections after that. I'm so done with this place."

She was trying not to smirk when she nodded, thinking that his mouth was getting better. There was only two F-words in that

statement. Just a few months ago Tristan would have at least said three times that. It wasn't that she minded the cursing, it was just... tiresome and unnecessary except for when it was wholly necessary. Desmond usually did warrant a necessity in foul language though. "Agreed."

Simon pulled into the driveway and Ash saw the way Tristan stiffened when he noticed.

"Good." He smiled and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek that surprised her.

Since she'd taught him to block his thoughts, he'd been able to surprise her more than once with ninja kisses or little grabs. Maybe she just let her guard down too much when it came to him. But then, she wanted nothing more than to be free with him in all aspects. Like in Greece, in that Gytheio hotel.

Ash stifled a dejected sigh as the couple climbed out of the car together. Simon was still sitting in his car, on a cell phone from the looks of it. Moving slowly, Tristan made a big show of adjusting the new gun holster around his shoulders before slipping on his jacket. He never said so, but she knew he felt formidable wearing it. The saunter it inspired in him made her smile.

Ash's attention went on Desmond. He was watching with a smirk around the hand rolled cigarette between his lips as the pair approached. Despite the cold, and the snow, the vampire was barefoot and wearing just a pair of jeans and a white tee so thin they could see his pale nipples through the cloth. The mask propped on the top of his head was a noh mask Ash was all too familiar with and it made her anxious.

Tristan stopped short and crinkled his nose. Ash took a few steps past him to be more socially appropriate. Tristan always had this way of stopping very far out of Desmond's reach and she thought that maybe he didn't even realize it. Then again, the two had gotten into it enough times that Tristan had every right to be wary of the imposing vampire.

“Evenin’,” Desmond drawled in his heavy Scots brogue. “Yew is looking rather lovely, Asta. Playing human tonight then?”

Ash exchanged a look with Tristan, one of those *what the hell?* looks. In Greece Ash was given an unprecedented spell that made her, for lack of a better word, human. Somewhere between splitting up with Tristan and company, and reuniting with them again while looking for the antediluvian pythia, Agamemnon, she’d been given the counter spell by a man Tristan said claimed to be his father. Tristan was the only one who remembered him. Who the man really was, no one could begin to guess, there were just too many unknowns.

At any rate, since being spelled human, Ash had taken on the pallor of her human self with dark brown hair and sky blue eyes. She still had her full motonō and seikonō abilities but *looked* like a fledgling. And with the extensive ancient knowledge her great, great Grand-sire had graciously passed onto her, she could even project her presence as a fledgling—a powerful bluff if any.

But she was not projecting as a fledgling and Desmond knew everything that had happened in Greece. He’d been there for it all. Instead of pressing the issue, Ash jumped right to the thing that was really bothering her.

“The mask?” she asked as she let imagines of her past experiences with the mask flow freely from her for the other vampire’s consumption.

Desmond made a noise through his teeth, a cringe as he caught the images and offered his own in return. He flicked his spent cigarette over Tristan’s head. “Aye, she be of a *mood* today.”

Ash returned his frown.

“Nothing to worry ‘bout, wee lass. Just...” He sighed. “Be what it be, is’ all.”

“I see.”

“Something wrong?” Tristan asked as he stepped closer to the others and then tensed when he heard the crunch of snow and gravel behind him.

Desmond flicked a glance behind them and then smiled sadly at Ash, “Com’n then.”

A flash of jealousy hit Ash and she turned to Tristan. His mind was locked up tight, but his emotions, they always leaked off him in waves of tickling fingers that groped at her psyche. And every other vampire within reach.

Desmond thought he loved Ash and Tristan was very aware of those feelings. But Ash saw Desmond’s love, of what he considered love, just a burden to them both. He was fixated on her in the unhealthiest of ways but she understood the why and pitied him for it.

Inside, the same corridor that they’d travelled down just a mere week before Lucien’s rampage was now a wholly different place than it used to be. The dark stained wood pillars butted with massive fusama and oil lamps were all still there, but now they all seemed dead. There was no fire lit in the lamps to give life to the lewd carvings. Everything was cold and empty.

A sudden rush of excitement washed over Ash a moment before Simon burst into the hall behind them, panting and rosy cheeked. He was smiling brightly as he worked off his shoes, hopping on each foot for balance. And when Tristan glanced back to smile at the fae, a tendril of regret flowed out of him.

Anticipating the worst from the ancient Master and not wanting to upset her just yet, Ash slipped her knee-high boots off to leave with Simon’s—Tristan declined, despite her warning. Desmond only rolled his eyes.

Ash fell in next to Tristan and took his hand. She squeezed lightly to tell him she was there for him and the turmoil he was shifting through in

his locked-up mind. He squeezed back, a little smile curling his lips. Off to the side, Desmond noticed the silent words between them and snorted in aversion, getting the bird from Tristan in turn.

Ash smiled to herself. Behind them, Simon was talking and no one tried to join in on his single breath monologue in which he was trying to persuade Desmond into going into town tonight for fun.

When the group stopped at the back of the house, Desmond turned and shot Tristan a harried look. Something passed between them with that simple look, a touch of understanding that surprised Ash. Tristan was fighting not to smirk as he shrugged. Desmond scoffed again, only to hide his own smirk, and pushed the panel open, filling in the doorway so that the others had to brush past him to get by.

Simon moved to follow, mouth still going, but Desmond stopped him with a big hand that nearly swallowed up the fae's chest. Simon's voice cut off with a sudden abruptness that left everyone in deaf silence. Tristan let out a long breath and lowered his head to smile at Ash, making her warm with that one small gesture.

"Oi, Jennifer was lookin' for yew."

Simon blinked up at the large Scotsman. Suddenly he broke out into a grin, all teeth, and grabbed for Desmond, beating his palms against the big man's chest in excitement. "Really?"

Desmond nodded. "Go'n now, sod off wit yew."

Simon's face lit up and he spun, disappearing down the hallway back the way they came within seconds.

"Thanks," Tristan mumbled, surprising both vampires. "Kid's got a serious case of verbal diarrhea."

Desmond snorted a laugh before he could stop himself and snapped the shoji shut behind the group. Being paper, they could still hear Simon's loud voice as he ran through the house, calling out to Jennifer.

When his voice dissipated to nothing the whole group gave a collective sigh of relief again.

Yukihime's private room. There were many memories tied to this place, this room in particular. Ash's jaw tightened as she looked over the dark space, illuminated only by fire pit set into the floor feet from the bed and the strings of mini Christmas lights strung across the ceiling inside sheer fabrics that gave the room a warm, comfortable glow.

Tristan flinched next to her and when she looked at him, he was staring at the ceiling. "Why don't they melt?" he whispered, pointing to the tiny ice sculpture cranes built around the bulbs.

"Because she does not wish them to," Ash said softly her attention shifting to the center point of the room, the Master's bed. It was "vampire sized", as Ash had come to think of the excessively huge beds that were hardly ever used for sleep, found in vampire domiciles. Round and big enough for five to lie on very comfortably, the sight of the bed made Ash immediately regret allowing Desmond to lead them here. She'd been in that bed before—and not for sleeping.

Ash took a moment to scan Yukihime's library, stuffed to the ceiling with books, most old and unreadable, ready to crumble to dust at a single touch. She recognized many of the books, but didn't see the one she was looking for.

Yukihime's ornate, delicate desk was messier than normal, covered in papers, notebooks and leather bound books that didn't appear to be part of the old library. Yukihime was up to something, searching for something. If Ash wanted to find out what that something was, however, she'd have to play her cards very carefully.

The outside wall panels were all open, letting in cold air but not the snow as Yukihime seemed to be playing with the falling flakes, swirling them about to make intricate patterns and designs in the air. The Master herself was on the deck, kneeling in the snow, wearing her white kitsune noh mask with its red and gold accents. There was a big red velvet bag in

her lap resting under her hands. Ash wasn't sure exactly what was inside but she smelled decay.

"You sent for us?" Ash prompted sounding more as if she were a knight called in by her ruling Lord for battle than a vampire seeing another vampire for the purpose of, well, telling her to back off.

They all exchanged little looks when the Master vampire ignored Ash's words. Desmond only shrugged and went off to make himself comfortable on the bed.

Ash knelt next to Yukihome and said softly, "Shishō?" though she felt the Master didn't deserve the respected title any longer. Not after all she'd done. Ash wasn't the grudge sort but Yukihome, Master of Water, had gone too far.

The old vampire looked up slowly, turned her head to look at Ash. The eyes staring through the mask were cold and empty, and Tristan shifted nervously from foot to foot behind her.

"Shishō?" Ash repeated softly and reached out towards the Master vampire, though she was forcing herself to do it. Those empty eyes followed her hand but the owner of them did nothing as Ash gently pushed the mask up to rest on top of Yukihome's head.

The expression hidden within the mask was sad and tired. Yukihome's face was that of an eternal youth but after a millennia she'd learned how to express herself well with even the smallest of nuances. And this particular nuance told Ash, who was well versed in Yukihome, that the ancient woman was confused. Ash'd only ever seen the look thrice before, but she understood Yukihome's condition and actually felt sorry for her. Their relationship may have been complicated, but Ash still loved the Master—in a way—even if she was angry with her.

"Moriakos-san?" she muttered and Ash stiffened. "What are you doing here?" she asked in Japanese.

Ash's expression fell despite herself. She didn't like her surname used.

“Yukihime, are you well?”

“Where are we?” The old vampire blinked at her before shifting her gaze behind Ash. “Graham-san? Is James here too? I want James.”

Ash frowned hard. It’d been a *very* long time since she’d been called Moriakos-san, and as for James... Behind her she heard Desmond’s angry thoughts boil up and he made a rude noise, scrambling off the bed in a flurry. Tristan jumped out of the big vampire’s way as he stormed from the room. The sliding screen smacked shut behind him, leaving behind a confused Tristan and a dismayed Ash.

“Shishō...?” she tried again, putting infliction into her voice she usually didn’t bother with. Ash needed the woman to come to her senses and Ash not looking like herself didn’t help anything. Her appearance startled her whenever she caught a glimpse in the mirror, she could only imagine how it affected Yuki. Maybe she should have put up an aura to look like her Master self again. Hindsight and all—something she’d been lacking lately in her distraction.

“Shishō...?” Ash said again, this time with demand.

Yukihime’s expression suddenly lit up with a smile as recognition filed them. “Asta-chan! Good evening. So good to see you... *Yare, yare*, look at you, are you well?”

Tristan’s thoughts suddenly bombarded her. He was wondering if it was wrong that a normal Yuki worried him more than a crazy Yuki?

Ash smiled, more at Tristan than the vampire before her. “Very well.”

Tristan’s loud thoughts hit her again and both women looked up at the same time, making Tristan stiffen. He’d been thinking that she seemed too normal, that she was like the proverbial nice old lady at the bus stop that liked to talk to everyone.

Something passed over Yukihime’s face, her mind always locked up tightly, and her expression changed completely. This was the Yukihime

they all knew—the not-so-serious girl who liked to play games.

“Ryōshi-san! Come in, come in, no need to linger so far from me. I don’t bite much.”

When his expression screwed up, Yuki laughed, that sensual creamy laugh that covered his skin and gave way to tingles, made his ardor unwillingly stir.

The infliction did nothing for Ash and she cleared her throat in warning.

Yukihime feigned an innocent look. “I will not bite, Ryōshi-san.” She held her hand out. “I promise. Please.”

He groaned and went to stand close behind Ash.

“I’m so very pleased you two have come.” The ancient vampire paused, tilting her head to the side in thought. “Where have you been? I sent for you months ago.”

“I’m not your fucking pet to call home,” Tristan retorted.

Ash chuckled and stood, shifting to stand next to him in a united front. “That’s right,” she said, smirking down at Yukihime. “We’ve only come to you today to tell you that we are leaving Japan.”

Yukihime’s crystalline eyes lit up. “Yare yare...”

“That’s all you have to say after all the shit you’ve put us through?”

Yukihime stood, still smiling in that secretive Yukihime way, and went across the room towards the overflowing desk, cradling the big bag to her chest. She placed the red bag down on the desk with a heavy thunk. “What else do you expect—” Yukihime stopped short, her eyes widening in delight as her attention jerked down to the bag under her hands.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Tristan’s confusion but Ash, she knew exactly what Yukihime was reacting to. She heard it all too clear,

the deep, angry voice that she'd once loved as much as she hated. And he was talking directly to Ash.

She let a high pitched yelp that rose out of nowhere and before she could decide to move, she had, plastering herself against the far wall, panting and wide-eyed.

"Uh..." Tristan turned to her looked confused and a little spooked.

"You didn't burn him?!" Ash screamed, voice shaking and cracking with fear despite herself.

Yukihime's expression slowly slipped into a dark smirk. "I thought it a fitting enough punishment. Don't you agree?"

"No!" she yelped. She was borderline hysterical and hated that she couldn't control the fear, the revulsion and horror she felt.

"Hey, what the fuck's going on?" Tristan took a few steps towards her, his uncertainty staining the air around her, stinging her skin. "Ash?"

"Head," she whispered through trembling lips as he came to a stop close to her. She looked up, her whole body shaking ever so slightly. "It's his head. She kept his fucking head!"

The outburst surprised herself just as much as Tristan. It was as if putting the truth to words made it suddenly real.

It took Tristan a moment of contemplation before he spun to the ancient Master, a look for pure disgust on his face. "Holy Christ. *Why?*"

"Like I said, to punish him. Don't you think Malik deserves to be punished?"

The night they killed Malik, Ash and Tristan took off his head. Ash burned his body herself but had lost track of the head during Yukihime's dance with it and tending to Tristan. She'd always assumed it'd been burned but now she knew the truth of it. Yukihime kept Malik's head to punish the vampire.

“He,” Ash started in a warbled voice. “Did you hear what he said too?”

“*Mochiron*,” Yukihome answered with a nod. *Of course.*

Ash hissed some words she knew Tristan wouldn’t understand under her breath but she wasn’t talking to him. “He is so very angry.” Malik had been talking to her, all his anger, the stain of death and being trapped threatening to consume Ash too. Malik blamed her, of course, but more than that he was disappointed that she took the “dirty Uruwashi’s” side. Her Master had always been delusional, but for him to believe that she would pick him over Tristan, it just didn’t compute in Ash’s mind. Tristan was it, her one, her all.

“Of course he is!” Yukihome chirped about Malik’s disposition. “He’s trapped in his head. And it’s your fault. Both of your faults.”

To kill a vampire for good, one had to take their head off their body. But it didn’t completely kill older vampires unless they were also burned, unless their brain was fully destroyed. Even then, there was a slim chance that their spirit, their soul, could still be trapped in their ashes if they weren’t properly dissipated. It was why burning and scattering a vampire’s ashes had been standard protocol, no matter the age—one of those old folk tales that had actually been true.

“What—*fuck*.” Tristan had to stop for a second to get his breath and swallow back the nausea Ash felt building in him. “He, uh... can he hear us?”

“*Mochiron*,” Yuki answered sassily.

Tristan shook his head in disgust. “And what happens when the head rots out?”

“Then Malik’s being will leave his fleshy prison,” Ash whispered. “Until then, he’s trapped in his own rotting hell.”

Tristan gave her his full attention. “And how long will that be?”

Yukihime shrugged, the sly little smile on her lips not so subtle. “For someone as old as him? Who can say, really...”

“Guess,” he snapped, shooting her a dirty sneer.

She shrugged again. “A few decades, perhaps.”

Tristan blinked, processing. “Jesus,” he hissed and then turned back to Ash.

She met his eyes, feeling more collected on the outside even if she still shook down to her soul with anxiety. “I used to starve myself as a fledgling, unwilling to kill... but I always ended up fed, one way or another. But Malik, he was angry with me once, for trying to escape after I’d been made a prisoner. He starved me, not a single drop of blood, for over a year. Around fourteen months I realized I was starting to rot.”

“Holy fuck,” Tristan whispered.

“I might have lived like that for another year if he had permitted it.” She looked away, sorrow pushing out the fear. “I was saved from a slow slip into insanity and death but I had witnessed the decay of many others who angered Master. It was...” She took in a shuddering breath. “A terrible way to die.”

Tristan reached out and put a hand on Ash’s cheek, gently swiping his thumb along her cheekbone. She let out a shaky sigh and straightened. With a soft nod and her hands on his hips she said she was fine and he smiled, stepping back to free her.

Yukihime smiled big, showing off her long fangs before sitting down carefully in the chair behind her desk as if it were as ancient as she. “Should we discuss business now?”

“Excuse me?” Tristan snapped, whirling around.

Yuki giggled, waving her hand in the air in his direction. “You’re always so entertaining.”

Tristan sighed, looking at Ash. “You know, now that I’m here, all I want to do is leave.” He glanced at the bag holding Malik’s head. “It’s not like she’s going to listen to a thing we have to say. She does whatever she wants, damn the consequences.”

Ash nodded her agreement, rolling her eyes. But just because she agreed didn’t mean she was ready to walk away though. She had one very important thing to do while she was here and would not fail. She had to get her mother’s spell book back. It meant more to her than the fact that it was a priceless family heirloom, it could very well be the key to the door that separated Ash from Tristan physically. Thoughts of Greece suddenly flooded her and she jerked them back and locked them up tight before Yukihome could taste them. By the look on the other vampire’s face though, Ash wasn’t fast enough.

Smiling slyly at Ash, Yukihome said, “Oh, you hurt my feelings, Ryōshi-san.” Her attention shifted to Tristan. “And I was anticipating employing you again.”

Tristan’s mouth fell open. “Now I really know you’ve totally lost your shit—You actually expect us to work for you again? After France?”

“You did so well.”

“We nearly died, no thanks to you.”

No, some of that blame was on Ash. They both knew it but it was easier to just give it all to Yukihome. Ash would have to face her follies with Tristan soon enough.

There was that sly Yukihome smile again that made Tristan groan and Ash sigh. “What if I said the task wasn’t for me though?”

Tristan snorted. “The answer is the same for any friend of yours.”

“Ah!” Yukihome popped up from her seat and moved around towards the others. “It’s lucky for the leader of the local kitsune, then that we’re not friends.”

3: THE MISSION

WHO?” Tristan demanding, having a pretty good idea already.

Yuki’s smile confirmed it before her actual answer. “Akane.”

Tristan shut his eyes and counted under his breath before opening his eyes again and fixing his attention on Yuki. Nope, not another bad dream.

“The answer’s still no, Yuki,” Tristan said sounding tired. “I’m not doing it again. I’m not putting my neck out there under false pretenses and lies.” Especially not for the skulk leader who attacked him under Lucien’s command. Granted, they left him alone of their own accord, once they heard he was Uruwashi, but it wasn’t something Tristan could forget. That Sebastian was the one who called them off was suspicious too.

“Mattaku! *Usō ja nai*—I never *lied*.”

“Yeah, you did. You flat out told us you didn’t know why Lucien went rogue.”

“Did I?” The vampire gave a sheepish shrug that wasn’t fooling anyone.

“And don’t think that I don’t know what you did to me. I know about—”

“I,” Ash said suddenly and everyone focused on her. “I would like to hear Akane out, actually.”

Tristan frowned, but nodded, trusting Ash. She was there when Akane and her fellow kitsune attacked. But, damn, he really wanted to rip into Yuki right then too, call all her shit out and lay it on the table for final inspection.

“Desmond!” Yuki screeched. “Bring our guest in!”

Ash and Tristan shifted on their feet as they waited for Desmond to bring in the kitsune woman. Yuki watched them with a stupid grin.

“What?” Tristan snapped at her. “Why are you looking at me like that? You thinkin’ about digging around in my head again?”

“Oh!” Yuki’s nearly clear eyes widened, lighting up. “So you know?” She stuck her lip out in an over exaggerated fake pout. “Asta-chan couldn’t stand to keep the secret, *ne?*”

The couple exchanged a look and Ash answered, “He knew on his own.”

“Hmm,” Yuki hummed, not looking so convinced.

“That’s all you have to say? *Hmm?* You took something that made me, me. I don’t care how horrible it was or what I did... I deserved to live with that guilt or any other emotion it might elicit. You had no fucking right.”

Ash took a step back, looking up at him surprised. His guess, she read the emotions between the words and knew that he was still angry with her too.

Yuki held her hands out dramatically. “Then come. I’ll give them back.”

Tristan flinched. “Wh—what?”

“I rather enjoyed rooting through your dark memories, but I will gladly give them back, if you want them so badly.”

He glanced at Ash who was carefully stoic before frowning at Yuki. “What’s the catch?”

Yuki burst into laughter. “*Mattaku*, am I that transparent?”

The door opened behind the others, but Tristan was too focused to turn and look. Ash didn’t have to look to know who it was and he trusted her to watch his back.

“The catch, Ryōshi-san, is that you must feed from me. I’m willing to open my vein this very moment, for you and only you.”

Tristan bristled, taking a step back. Beside him, Desmond looked just as disgusted, but maybe for different reasons.

“Uh...” He looked to Ash for guidance. She gave him nothing, her expression stoic. “Not happening. I—Jesus...” He felt sick just thinking about her blood in his mouth, seeping into his body, filling his stomach. Maybe it would be different if he was already awakened. “*No*.”

“Very well,” Yuki answered before waving Tristan off. “Ah, Akane-san, come in.”

The Scotsman gave Tristan a snarl when they met gazes, which Tristan replied with an automatic frown and dropped his mental wall long enough to growl back at the bulky vampire. *What’s your fucking problem?*

Ash scowled at him for it but didn’t say anything. Neither did Desmond.

If Tristan hadn’t known that the fox-woman before them was supposed to be Akane, he wouldn’t have been able to tell himself. Her hair style was slightly different than it had been in France but that was

all that'd changed—oh right, and she was dressed this time.

In her human form, she looked just like the other members of her skulk. As it turned out, the kitsune were more immaterial than corporeal. And once they joined a skulk under an older kitsune, they all took on their leader's appearance. It was just their way. Akane's skulk consisted of three others, all five-four in height, Japanese features, white-tipped bright auburn hair and fox ears where human ears should have been. Small, petite and soft.

And fucking vicious when cornered. Tristan had the scars to prove it.

"Thank you for seeing me," Akane said in her high pitched Japanese accent and bowed. "It's an honor to be taken into your service, Uruwashi-sama."

From the bed, nearly hidden by the lengths of curtains, came Desmond's sarcastic snort.

Tristan considered her a moment. That's right, Akane had that tiny scar on her cheek. He'd seen it in her fox form too, back in France. "What do you want?"

Akane frowned at him, looking childlike with her youthful appearance. Guess he never really noticed before, but yeah, Akane didn't look a day over twenty. Not bad for a being that was over five-hundred years old.

"I'm sorry... You don't remember me."

"No," Tristan said, taking a step back so that Ash was next to him. He didn't reach for his gun, but nearly had. "I remember you well enough. I remember you attacking us."

Out of his peripheral, he could see Ash nodding. And he couldn't be sure, because he didn't want to take his full attention off the kitsune, but he thought Yuki was grinning at him in that fucking stupid way that said she was getting her way and liking it too much.

“Yes, we did. And I’ve apologized for that. It wasn’t our intention to harm an Uruwashi. We had no idea until the fae told us. How is he, your valet? I would like to speak with him again, it’s not often we find others who can speak to us in our language.”

Ash and Tristan exchanged a nervous look.

“Akane-san, what is it we can do for you?” Ash asked in a soft but commanding tone. Polite too, considering the honorific she didn’t have to attach to Akane’s name.

The kitsune smiled with a child’s innocence and folded her hands before her. “My skulk is having trouble with a troll.”

Tristan blinked at her a moment, processing that. Mamoru had told him about all of the shinwa, but he never expected to meet a troll. Not only were they reclusive, but there weren’t all that many around. Apparently they had low birth rates. “A troll, seriously?”

Akane smiled. She was either really good at pretending she didn’t sense Tristan’s less than charitable mood, or she was genuinely that innocent. She did have a sweetness about her that Tristan couldn’t deny. If she hadn’t tried to kill him in the past, he might have actually fawned over her a little.

“Hai. We returned from Paris to find a troll had moved into our temple. You see, the temple is our home, our place of power. This troll, it comes out every evening shortly after dusk. At first it only disrupted the temple, overturning statues, cutting the bell free.” She sighed and shifted her weight. “Then its deviance escalated. It started killing the animals around the temple and dropping them at the entrance, a sort of blood offering. A desecration,” she hissed.

“A week ago it attacked Kohaku, injured her severely. She lost her tail and a leg. The beast ate them in front of us.”

A warning bell went off in Tristan’s head. *Severely* injured? Couldn’t the kitsune regenerate? They were, after all, less than corporeal, yet not

entirely ethereal. Anyway, that's what Mamoru had told him and it helped ease his mind from having hurt the skulk members back in that French hotel room. The one he thought he'd killed wasn't dead.

Ash shot him a look. Even not being able to read her mind, he knew they were thinking the same thing.

Bullshit.

Maybe it wasn't common knowledge, kitsune healing. So what was her game in lying?

Akane frowned, looking to the floor and crossing her arms across her stomach. "Then, two nights ago, when it attacked again, it ate Sango. There is only injured Kohaku and I left now, since we lost Kyō in France."

That got the couple exchanging glances again. Something was off. The kitsune were undying. Tristan was being set up and they all knew it. He glanced at Yuki to see what her expression was and was met with an empty stare.

Akane looked up suddenly, her expression twisted in sorrow. "Oh, please, do not think I mean to take this order from you as payment for Kyō's death. On the contrary we will owe you for the job once it is completed."

Tristan crossed his arms over his chest. Did he call bullshit on this now or wait and see what happened? He tried to give Ash the time to speak up but she didn't and he sighed.

"You know, I only hunt vampires. I'm not like this all around shinwa assassin. Vampires. Only." Besides, a troll? A real honest to giant troll with acidic blood and Hulk-like strength? No fucking thanks.

"Perhaps," Ash said softly, coming closer to him to put her cold hands on his arm. "You can help drive him away? You would not have to kill him, just relocate him."

Tristan frowned down at her. Was she trying to get him to agree? She knew Akane was lying as much as he did.

“Ash?” he questioned cautiously, keeping his mind locked up tight to protect himself from Yuki and Desmond’s unwanted intrusions.

She turned slowly, looking stiff but her eyes were sparkling with mischief. She was definitely up to something.

He sighed, knowing he would regret this. “Fine then. I’ll go.”

Yuki’s enthusiastic response confirmed his fears. The old bat was in on it. “*Subarashii!*”

“Let me make this clear,” Tristan said, stomping up to Yuki. “I’m working for Akane. Not Yukihime, princess pain in my ass. Got it?”

Yuki’s saber tooth fangs seemed enormous up close when she smiled. “*Wakatta.*”

“Right,” Tristan said, turning back to Akane, watching the whole exchange with horror and awe. The more time he spent with Yuki, the less respectful he was with her. Stupid? Maybe, but she annoyed the ever living hell out of him. And she knew it. She was utterly mad, but not walk on eggshells sort of mad. More like... mad professor. She was stronger, wiser and far more keen than most made her out to be. He wondered sometimes if her “malady” was all an act to hide the true horrors within. If they all knew her, the real her, they’d all be terrified.

He motioned to Ash. “Let’s get going, before it’s late. Daylight restrictions n’ all.”

“Actually,” she said and Tristan stopped to turn and look at her. “I will remain here, with Yukihime.”

He raised a curious brow at her. “Really?”

“Yes,” she answered, her smile turning sly. Her bright blue eyes darkened with a barely contained emotion. “It will do us good to catch up, Yukihime and I.”

So that's how it is? Fine, he'd play decoy for Ash so long as it didn't get him killed. "Well, you girls play nice, okay?"

"Wakatta," she whispered, mimicking Yuki's sassy affirmation from just moments before, and kissed him.

Off to the side somewhere Desmond was moving around and grunting in disgust at the show of affection. Akane and Yuki were openly staring, the same fascinated expression on their faces. Tristan only rolled his eyes, not giving a shit that he was being watched.

Ash's attention shifted across the room, her eyes narrowing in a shrewd mien. "Take Desmond with you."

"What?" Both Tristan and Desmond said as one and then looked at each other in revulsion.

Yuki chirped out a loud laugh, garnering everyone's attention as she clapped. Of course, she commanded it so. "Subarashii! *Dōkan desu.*"

Ash smirked.

Tristan sneered. Of course Yuki would agree.

"Ash?" he asked in a cautious tone.

"You trust me, yes?"

He frowned. "Well, yeah..."

"Then take Desmond with you. He is good with trolls. Simon too. That will leave just us girls."

His frown deepened as he looked around the room to the others. He didn't know what she was thinking and being stuck with those two was the last thing he wanted but Ash had something in mind and he was going to trust it. He nodded, face screwed up like he'd bitten into a lemon. He leaned in close and whispered, "You'll owe me."

Ash gifted him with a sly smile and a wink. "It's settled then."

The Aruwashi Series

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WHITE LIES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SOMETIMES known as Stinna (pronounced Steena), Christina Moore just so happens to be her real name. Her writing career started under a pseudonym in the romance genre. But her true love has always been the paranormal. Vampires, werewolves, demons, faerie and everything in between, she loves them all—the allure of the unknown. The birth of the Uruwashi series started many years ago with a daydream sparked by the special voice of a certain badass vampire in her favorite anime. Little did she know then that the story of the Uruwashi would morph into what it is today.

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 toddler, she loves to read, garden, cross-stitch, and play video games.

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