

Land of the Rising Sun

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“Nani o siteru n da???!!!” Slam!

“Oh, shit,” thought Craig. “What the hell have I gotten myself into!” His Japanese had improved by leaps and bounds in the last few months and he took a little psychotic delight in the fact that he understood the words. Psychotic, because at the moment, he had more important concerns - even if he didn’t understand that the small statured Japanese vampire wanted to know exactly what the hell he was doing - the fact that he had Craig pinned to the wall by his throat would have made the meaning clear.

Craig struggled momentarily, panic suddenly gripping at him. But as usual Craig’s “control freak” nature refused to relinquish control and practised calm washed over him. He carefully assessed the small man in front of him. Clearly, whoever introduced this vampire into the “world of night” wasn’t concerned with beauty! Craig faced a rat-faced man, complete with gnarled and yellowing teeth and a receding hair line. He was dressed in a business suit and looked as if he had been about 35 when he was turned. On behalf of the whole Toreador clan, Craig was revolted.

“I’ll be damned if this little weasel’s going to be the end of me!” A surge of anger rose up in his mind. Then it occurred to Craig that this vampire’s actions were still too awkward - his cheeks a little too pink. “I doubt he’s even as old as I am!” The thought provided the catalyst that brought Craig to action. His arms came up in one fluid motion and snapped his attacker’s arm. The vampire cried out in pain and nearly fell to the floor. Craig latched onto the back of the smaller man’s jacket and slammed his head into the wall until he stopped moving. Obviously, he wasn’t dead, but he was at least unconscious. Suddenly, the adrenaline drained from his body and Craig slumped to the floor, the other vampire’s body falling loosely beside him. He realized with

shock that despite all the violence he had seen in the two years since the “dark gift” had been bestowed on him this was the first time he had brought another kindred to torpor. The enormity of the violation of his former self and his former beliefs touched him somewhere deep inside. He pushed the thought away - that person was dead. Such moments still plagued him, but gradually as his preternatural blood affected his personality they became more and more infrequent.

He forced himself to stand, leaving the body where it lay. He was coated in blood as was the floor and the wall where he pounded the other man’s head to a bloody pulp. A wave of nausea was pushed away in acceptance of reality. He glanced at his watch - 2:45. It was a long time to wait before dawn and he had to be on the other side of city safely hidden before then. What was he going to do with this body? It was crucial that this be covered up as well as possible - Craig reminded himself who he had just taken to the edge of death. He would be missed. Shit, shit, shit.

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He had found a relatively secluded air duct on the roof of the building that conveniently curved towards the east. By the time there was enough light for anyone to notice, there body would be long disintegrated and the out-blowing air current would scatter any trace of the remaining ash.

Craig presently sat contemplating his stupidity and his next move in the seclusion of his one room apartment in the Ueno district of Tokyo. It was a convenient location - relatively central to the rest of the city, and close to Ueno Park a convenient feeding ground. The park was usually overrun by the homeless.

Why had he assumed that the Yakuza wasn’t knee-deep in the undead? It only made sense - a powerful underground organization that had existed as long as

anyone could remember? Stupid, stupid, stupid! His plan had seemed sensible enough at the time, and better yet, it had been working! He had needed some access to funds, and of course power and influence didn't hurt either. He figured that if he could locate one Yakuza member he could gradually move up the ladder progressively ghouling superiors until he got to the top. It certainly hadn't been difficult to locate the first one - four criteria: black caddy, black suit, black perm, missing digits. And since Tokyo's nightlife was basically run by the Yakuza... From number one, you could find out the whereabouts of his superior and then his superior and then his superior. And when you found out what you wanted from one, you made him forget about you and let the blood bond wear off. As you moved steadily upwards, so did the number of people at your immediate disposal - and with almost blood-like control. Why hadn't it even occurred to him that the organization was already controlled by Kindred? But fortunately, the strict hierarchical structure of the Yakuza worked to his advantage in that by slowly moving up the ladder, the first vampire he encountered was still within his abilities to deal with. But now what was he going to do? The full force of the Yakuza itself would have been terrifying to deal with - but to also know it was lead by Kindred? And with age of this city, and the age of this group he could only imagine the age of it's leaders! It was good Craig was sitting, because his knees wouldn't have held him as the wave of foreboding passed through his body.

"Well, no time to think about it now. Almost dawn." And with that thought Craig allowed himself to be drawn in the sleep of the dead, restless as it may have been.

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With his gnawing hunger taken care of, Craig returned to his apartment to assess his situation. He thought it was best he stay low.

The first question that occurred to him was, "Why the hell haven't I seen any other kindred around the city? You'd think a metropolis like Tokyo would draw innumerable kindred of every kind to it. But it's true, I haven't run into a single blood-sucker in the last 9 months!" The answer hit him like a brick. "The Yakuza *are* the only kindred! They hold a such a tight rein on so many other aspects of Japanese society - if their influence is as strong as the most people believe, they would have no trouble toppling, for example, a national bank (of course assuming they don't control the banks already). There are already suspicions that they are responsible for the constant shifts in Japanese politics. Corruption after corruption exposed, scandal, mayhem. They certainly wouldn't have trouble eradicating rival clans trying to establish themselves in the country. Come to think of it, I didn't recognize that vampire's clan off-hand... I wouldn't be surprised if they are so "inbred" as to have a clan of their own!"

Craig blanched. "If they have so much control over the kindred in the country, why am I still around? Do they know about me?" Panic spread across his mind but again it was pushed aside. Craig's cold, hard, calculating, "control freak" side was one of the only things to survive his transition to the dead intact. It was what made him pursue pure physical science as a career as a university student before he was so unexpectedly transformed. The rigid belief that the universe was ruled by elegant laws that could be elegantly stated in formulas on paper by those clever enough to capture them was nearly fatally challenged when he discovered that the childhood myth of "vampire" was all too real. The fact that his sire was Toreador - imbuing him with a strong sense of aesthetic, a love for art, and more fashion sense than any physics student ever had before - created a personality conflict that had threatened to drive him insane. The two sides had battled it out and now maintained an uneasy truce by alternately relinquishing control to the other when it seemed appropriate. Craig

tended to feel rather schizophrenic when he observed and personified these internal conflicts, perfectly aware of the transitions that occurred in his own mind. Layer upon layer upon layer of observation happening all within the confines of a single mind. The scientist was fascinated; the artist had a headache.

He analysed his own questions carefully... why hadn't he been approached or attacked, or anything if it was true that the Yakuza controlled Japan's vampire world? Again, the answer became apparent to him. He was insignificant. Of course, they wouldn't be able to completely control the comings and goings of all the kindred through the country - especially since Tokyo would obviously draw large numbers. They only needed to concern themselves with those that started to look like they were putting down roots and trying to establish themselves. Ninety-nine percent of those that came to the city were likely only "tourists" or loners like himself that had no intention of staying. Certainly his current feeding habits weren't going to raise any attention - he had only been feeding on the homeless, most of whom are barely conscious to begin with, and he hadn't killed any of them.

It occurred to Craig that his unique plan, had afforded him the best cover from the very ones that might have been looking out for new comers to the city anyway! He had been leaching off the bottom layers of the Yakuza, taking the few resources he needed from people already extremely skilled in hiding their finances from prying eyes. And surely, they wouldn't be looking within themselves for an infiltrator! Who would be so bold? The irony caused Craig to smirk unexpectedly. He was suddenly inspired, "Can I continue to use this? Can I use it to my advantage?" The smirk disappeared, when he suddenly recalled that he had just murdered one of their own. Surely, that would tip them off that something was wrong. But he had some time; they wouldn't assume the underling was dead right away - there was no body after all. And there was nothing to associate

Craig with the murder anyway. But still, he didn't think he should underestimate their abilities or their resources.

"I wonder how far up this might go?" Craig mused. He let his imagination run wild. Certainly the upper levels of business were under the Yakuza's control. That was almost taken for granted these days. What about the even larger pyramid-like super-corporations, the Keiretsu? It was a well known fact that all of Japan's companies could ultimately be linked with one of a handful of Keiretsu that had formed out of the ashes of the samurai era during the Meiji period when Japan rapidly began to catch up to the West. It was certainly plausible. A race of ancient super-beings probably wouldn't have much trouble wresting control of those companies during such a time of turmoil. What about the country? The government? By the same argument, that was also plausible. Many people, (paranoid though they may be) suspected it anyway. The Emperor? That thought suddenly sent Craig's mind reeling with the possibilities. Japanese tradition held that the Emperor was a direct descendent of the first Emperor of Japan who in turn was the son of the sun goddess Amaterasu. Could it be true? Or at least in a sense true? But of course, the Emperor made regular appearances in broad daylight! And Craig suddenly realized the paradox of his own line of thinking - a line of vampiric emperors coming from a goddess of the sun! He laughed despite himself. But still...

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Hair ruffled by the speed, scarf flailing behind him, Craig revelled in the exhilaration of racing Tokyo's elevated highways, looking over the districts of lights and people. The red aircraft warning lights on the larger skyscrapers faded on and off in near perfect unison creating a slow pulse - the heart beat of the city. At times like this, Craig could feel his own preternatural heart shift its beat into synch, becoming one with the city. Anyone that stayed very long in

Tokyo realized that it was more than a monstrous metropolis - it was an entity unto itself. In the same way that the spark of human and kindred life emerges from primitive elements - neurons and cells and DNA, so too does life emerge from complex patterns of people, cars... people. So many people here... Craig could almost feel the pounding of their collective blood rising through the ground, through the motorcycle beneath him, pushing him ever forward. But forward to what? He didn't know. Just moving, moving. He'd know when he got there.

For tonight, at least he had a goal. Towards the center of the city and the metaphoric center of Japan. He felt as if he *were* a cell hurtling towards its "creator" in a desperate attempt to understand its role in the larger entity to which it belonged. He headed for the Imperial Palace.

Despite the absurdity of his musings the night before, he was at a loss for anything else to do. But even if he didn't find what he was looking for, he reasoned, it wouldn't be a complete waste. He'd at least get a chance to see the nearly-fabled Imperial gardens.

Security wasn't really difficult to breach. There were very few guards and they certainly weren't expecting an intruder that could scale the walls without tools and using unnatural speed. Nor were they able to penetrate Craig's ability to mask his own presence from those he didn't want to find him. Typical Japanese style. Craig was discovering that the fabled Japanese efficiency wasn't exactly true. Nor was the fabled Japanese lack of crime, nor the fabled Japanese politeness. Truly, the only thing that was important in Japanese society was the outer image. If the outer image was what they thought it should be, nothing else matter. Subsequently, the government was corrupt, sexual impropriety was rampant, and the Imperial Palace's security wasn't what it should be!

The grounds were quiet. There wasn't much action at this time of night anywhere, but in the huge "party" sections

of Tokyo - Roppongi and the like. Craig was struck by the quiet - amazingly, despite the eight lanes of traffic that was just on the other side of the wall, he could hear none of the usual sounds of the city. Just the soft breeze in the air and the occasional call of an insect or two. Despite himself, he relaxed a little and began to wander around.

He passed through a huge wooden gate, easily two storeys high, that lead through one of the concentric stone walls. He stared at the stone above him, marvelling at the size of the accomplishment of this building. During Japan's warring past, this fortress would have been very easily defensible. In this new light he took note of points in the wall that he assumed were used for archers and others from which hot oil might have been poured.

"I wonder if it ever succumbed to an attack," he mused. Admittedly, history had not been one of his priorities since his arrival.

Suddenly he found himself in a garden of unparalleled beauty. Not only were there the traditional Japanese bonsai that he had expected to find, but a multitude of flowering plants almost none of which he recognized. The variety of colours ranged incredibly and Craig found himself wishing he could see them in the daylight. They would have been that much more spectacular! Circling the garden and scattered in and about he did recognize Sakura trees - unfortunately, the cherry blossom season that Japan was so famous for had long ended, but he could imagine what this garden looked like when they were in full bloom. He knees grew weak. Next year, next year.

Slowly he passed between the flowers and bushes taking his time - smelling each variety and carefully examining the contents of the garden. He had never been one for plants when he was alive, but his clan nature took over when presented with such exquisite beauty.

Time passed, and Craig was hardly aware of it. He was completely captivated by the intense power of the

garden and became slightly euphoric. Eventually, he came across a small altar erected between two Sakura trees. The lingering scent of incense indicated that it had been used earlier that day; Craig, captured by the moment, knelt down before it in uncharacteristic piety and meditated on the ecstasy he felt.

He heard a soft voice behind him speak in formal, and slightly archaic Japanese.

“I don’t believe that we’ve met.”

Craig suppressed the sudden rise of adrenaline - only another kindred would have perceived the shudder of surprised that shook his body. He rose slowly and turned around.

There was a young Japanese man, perhaps twenty-five or twenty-six years old. Emphatically human. He was dressed in a short *yukata*, a sort of simple robe, of dark blue. The Imperial crest was clearly emblazoned on the breast. Craig almost instantly recognized him as the heir to the throne, Hirohito Yutaro. Clearly, he had been in bed and decided to go for a walk in the gardens - his hair was slightly dishevelled and his eyes drooped slightly from fatigue. Perhaps he couldn’t sleep.

“Of course I know you Hirohito-sama,” Craig replied and bowed deeply. If he was going to get out of this with his skin, he’d have to do his best to make the heir believe he belonged. And this encounter was certainly going to test Craig’s ability with the formal Japanese that he struggle so much with!

“Let me introduce myself - my name is Craig Johnson. I am a guest of one of your father’s aids. I’m sorry that I have interrupted your evening constitutional. I will remove myself immediately,” and Craig bowed again.

“Don’t be ridiculous - it is I that have interrupted you. It is rare to see a foreigner so overcome by the Japanese spirit as to be moved to meditation. I’m afraid my curiosity got the better of me.” There was absolutely no sign of suspicion in the young man’s amiable tone. Apparently

finding strangers wandering the imperial gardens wasn’t such a rare occurrence! “Won’t you join me for a cup of tea, Johnson-san?” The heir’s smile demonstrated that the invitation was sincere. Craig was taken with the young man’s affable nature and agreed before it occurred to him what he was getting into. Well, perhaps there was nothing to worry about. Clearly, Craig’s suppositions were incorrect - this man at least was entirely human. Craig followed as the man started toward a small ritual teahouse about a hundred yards away.

“Please call me Yutaro,” the heir said when Craig came up beside him. “And there’s no real need for the formalities. It’s the middle of the night; there are no witnesses. We can let ourselves lapse!” He broke into a broad smile. Craig smiled back - he was definitely not expecting this kind of behaviour from Japan’s most conservative family!

“Of course, Yutaro. And you must call me Craig.” He smiled again.

They entered the small tea house, and Yutaro motioned Craig to sit on the floor. The room was traditional - paper walls and straw, tatami, flooring - entirely bare except for the traditional Japanese tea-service in one corner. Yutaro turned on flame that would boil the water in the large iron pot. Apparently, gas was piped in through floor - nothing remains entirely as it used to be. Yutaro went silently about preparing the tea in the traditional manner, although the complex motions came as naturally to him as if he were simply placing a tea bag in a pot. Clearly, he had practised the ceremony since he was a child it came to him with such ease that it was second nature. Craig watched in raptured fascination until the tea had been made and Yutaro had brought over two cups of the bright green liquid and sat down with a sigh. Craig immediately recognized the workmanship in the cups - one of the things that he had become obsessed with upon his arrival in Japan was traditional pottery. The cup he was drinking from could only

be the work of a handful of artists and was worth several hundred thousand yen.

With an easy manner Yutaro asked, "So Craig, what is it that brings you to Japan? Canadian would be my guess from your accent. Am I right? Anglophone, I suppose."

Craig was surprised! "Quite right! Is my Japanese that transparent?"

"No, no. Of course not! Your Japanese is quite good! If it wasn't, I would have switched to English long ago." He smiled. "Phonetics is a bit of a hobby of mine. You know, Henry Higgins and all."

Craig laughed out loud.

"What? In this day and age, you think that western culture doesn't reach the upper echelons of society? I'm a big Audrey Hepburn fan!"

Craig only smiled for a moment and assessed the figure before him. He liked this heir! There was something of a playful nature about him. Finally he spoke. "I'm afraid that I've only been lulled into a false sense of history, by the gardens and the tea ceremony. Here, it's easy to forget that North America exists! But, I stand corrected."

"So, you still haven't answered my question." He smiled again, pressing Craig with his curious gaze.

"What am I doing in Japan? Well, you see, my family has been interested in acquiring some pieces of Japanese art - nothing modern - various pieces dating from the Jomon to Edo period. And so my parents became quite good friends with a broker in Toronto who in turn is a friend of a friend of one of your father's ministers. I haven't met him yet, I only arrived tonight." He didn't know if the lie would stand up, but he might as well stick to things he knew... he would be safe if he had to talk about art.

"Oh, so your family must be in a rather high position in Canada."

"I suppose you could say that," Craig lowered his eyes and took a sip of tea trying to feign humility and embarrassment at being asked such a direct question about

his family's wealth. Yutaro's curious gaze burned through him.

"That must be Iwazaki-sensei, I suppose? He's the only one of father's ministers that has any dealings in art."

Craig was suddenly alert. This wasn't an innocent question, it was a test. Shit. He lowered the cup of tea and look Yutaro in the eyes.

"To be honest, I'm not sure of his name. The invitation was in Japanese of course, and I wasn't familiar with the Kanji." Oh, good bluff. Craig wasn't even sure where it came from. When all else fails, play the ignorant *gaijin*.

Yutaro laughed, the momentary tension broken. His eyes were bright and playful. "Yes, I suppose the characters he uses aren't so common."

"So, it's my turn, Yutaro. Why is it you're wide awake at this time of night?"

"I haven't slept much lately. There is much on my mind, but I don't want to think about that now! How old are you? You seem very young!"

"I'm 23."

"Really! I wouldn't have said you were older than two." He suddenly looked at his tea and took a long sip, mercifully allowing Craig to wipe the look of shock from his face unnoticed. He looked back up at Craig, his smile reduced to the slight grin of one who knows the prey is trapped. Craig said nothing, he just stared at Yutaro.

"You weren't really invited here were you Craig?"

"No." There was no point in trying to hide the fact any longer. Craig broke his gaze and took another sip of tea.

"And your name isn't really Craig Johnson, is it?"

"Craig, yes. Johnson, no."

"But you ARE Canadian. And it has only been about two years since you were turned hasn't it?"

"Yes." Fortunately, Craig's early evening meal had been processed enough that the blood didn't show in his cheeks as he felt it should be.

“Don’t worry, Craig. I’m not about to turn you in.”

Yutaro smiled again.

“Why not?”

“You’re interesting! I know it’s a bit of a cliché nowadays, but the life of royalty truly is an isolated one. I’ve never met a foreign member of the ‘family’ before. It’d be very interesting to gain your perspective. Why are you here?”

“I heard a lot about the gardens and wanted to see them for myself.” Yutaro seemed to accept this.

“Yes, they are quite spectacular, aren’t they. I often spend time wandering them at night when I can’t sleep.”

“So, how is it you can recognize kindred so easily and judge their age?” Craig asked with sincerity, but a slight tone of amusement.

“Haven’t you guessed? The Imperial Family is a clan unto themselves.” There was no tea left to sip.

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It was nearing dawn and Craig was speeding towards home - his thoughts a jumble of ideas and fascinations and fears. He was feeling slightly out of control of the future, but intrigued none-the-less. Yutaro and Craig had talked for the remains of the night and it had become clear that they were becoming close friends. Craig found Yutaro to be an intensely intelligent individual; he could speak with authority on everyone of Craig’s loves - art, physics, philosophy - and a great deal more. Morning brought an abrupt end to their excitement with half a dozen conversations unfinished and more questions than answers. Craig felt elated at having found this new friend, and at Yutaro’s prompting he promised to return again the next night.

As Craig laid his head upon his pillow - the predawn beginning to show in the eastern sky - he felt strangely safe. The first time in oh so long.

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As twilight encroached the next evening, Craig’s comfortable feeling’s had vanished and he was trapped in nightmare - unable to wake before the sun had completely set. As the last rays dropped below the horizon, he sat bolt upright in his bed - he could never bring himself to use a coffin - breathless and wide awake. He had been dreaming about David. David had been Craig’s first child and he had been murdered by Craig’s surrogate sire, Rook, within minutes of his being turned. Craig felt dismayed by his previous naivety - he had learned so much since then. But he had never been able to eradicate the hole in his spirit that David had once filled.

Inevitably, Craig’s mind drew a comparison between David and Yutaro. No they were not at all the same. Craig’s relationship with David had been entirely emotional and intuitive. They had barely even talked! But with Yutaro, it was entirely intellectual. Intriguing, yes, and compelling. And the intensity of the relationship was nearly the same, but completely different. Craig wanted to be with Yutaro because they could learn from each other and understood each other’s motivations.

He shrugged off the dis-ease left by the nightmare and hurried to get himself ready. He’d have to feed before he arrived at the palace where they’d meet again at the tea house. He’d have to be more careful this time as it’s still be early evening and he and Yutaro had agreed that is was in his best interests to sneak in - away from the prying and protective eyes of those charged with Yutaro’s care and who would undoubtedly recognize Craig for what he was. But Yutaro had shown Craig some better places to cross the walls, where there was even less chance for capture. Yutaro was aware that palace security wasn’t what it should be, but often used that fact to his advantage and wasn’t about to complain about it!

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Over the next month, Yutaro and Craig had spent a great deal of time with each other. Always at night. The strain of being awake all day and all night was beginning to show in Yutaro's face, but with the stamina of a Japanese salaryman he managed to get by on the couple of hours that remained in morning after Craig left. Living on nearly no sleep was fast becoming a Japanese form of art! It was clear that Craig and Yutaro were "kindred" spirits and that the interests and philosophies they shared drew them together in a strong bond.

But, by far the most interesting thing that Craig had learned was the story of how kindred had become the ruling class of Japan.

In ancient Japanese myth, there exists a figure, Amaterasu-Omikami - the Sun Goddess - that gave birth to the first Emperor of Japan. The story, in fact, was not fictitious. Amaterasu was the first kindred to enter Japan and completely captivated the natives with her "Sun-cult". She was obsessed with the sun because of the obvious power it held over her, and her inability to witness it directly. Apparently, she, herself became entranced with the ideas she expounded and came to have great faith in them. After she had selected and turned the first Emperor of Japan, in an act of ritual suicide she remained exposed in the morning light and was finally united with her "God" - the sun. The sun-cult had conquered all of Japan, and although it no longer existed in its original form, the effects clearly remained. The significance of Japan as being "the Land of the Rising Sun" is unmistakable.

The ritual had been carried down over unchanged since Amaterasu and continued to the present. After the current heir had fathered his own heir to the throne, he was turned and the current emperor, joined the sun in an act of ritual suicide.

Craig's suspicion that the Imperial family controlled

the Yakuza was true as well. It was clear that the emperor wielded a great deal more power than was thought in Japan, but at the same time, he was forced to give up a great deal of his liberty in the face of duty.

The tea house became a second home to Craig as he spent nearly every night there and the two of them seldom left it other than to stroll the gardens in the early hours of the morning. But one night, Yutaro jumped up and announced,

"I have something to show you!" He hurried from the tea house and motioned Craig to follow. Craig silently followed, only hesitating briefly as they entered one of the main buildings. The rooms that lay before Craig were incredible! He could have spent hours in any one of them - admiring that vase, or this screen - but he was compelled to keep up with Yutaro as he led Craig through the building. Finally, they reached what was clearly one of the oldest parts of the palace. The walls were unadorned, bare stone. They passed through a heavy wooden door that led to stairs that went forever downward. Finally, about three floors below ground level it led to a large stone chamber that extended several metres in each direction. Yutaro lit a gas lamp near the door and the darkness was driven back. The walls were lined with urns piled high on top of each other on shelf after shelf. There must have been over a thousand, but incredibly, two entire walls remained empty.

Craig examined some of those closest to him. The characters were unintelligible to him, although he recognized them the style from the days when writing had just been introduced to Japan. The writing on other urns bore absolutely no resemblance, but intuitively, he knew that they were ancient beyond anything he had ever known.

"What are these?"

"The Emperors of Japan. The ashes are always collected and kept. They're all here - right back to Amaterasu-Omikami." He pointed to an urn, larger than the others, and placed clearly in a place of honour high above the door through which they had entered.

Craig blanched. He was looking at an entire family reaching back nearly 4000 years. It was awe inspiring.

“Tell me though... if each generation is created by the father before, at about the same rate as a normal family, the lower generations must be incredibly weak!”

“Well certainly, there are vampires in the Yakuza clan that are far older, and FAR more powerful. The first Emperors weren’t restricted to only turning their children. They also turned others to become servants and what not. Eventually, two clans developed side-by-side in a sort of symbiotic relationship. In a way, I suppose that the Yakuza have no less of a claim at having come from ‘divine’ origins, but traditionally, they have remained in the role of the servant.”

“And they’ve been happy with that? I’m surprised that if they’re more powerful, they didn’t take over!”

“But, that’s the thing... they ARE older, and so the old ways, traditions, etc. are even more deeply ingrained in their way of thinking. They remain utterly and completely faithful.”

“What about the Emperor’s line becoming weak?”

“Oh, right. Every few generations or so, one of the older generations of Yakuza - not the really old ones, mind you - offer themselves to be drained by the current emperor to keep the blood strong.”

Craig was somewhat appalled at the practice. But it certainly was amazing that the system had lasted so long.

There was a long thoughtful pause. Finally Yutaro broke it.

“We should go.”

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“I’ll be turned soon.” Yutaro suddenly stated matter-of-factly when they returned to the tea house.

“What? You’ve already got a son? Come to think of it, I forgot that you were married! Where’s your wife been

for the last month? Hasn’t she missed you since you’ve been spending nearly every night with me?”

“She’s been in Kyoto for the last month and a half at a special retreat. She’s pregnant and very near giving birth. The doctors have confirmed that it is a boy. It’s not likely that there will be any complications. And so when the baby is finally born, I’ll be turned.”

Craig was a little shocked, although he couldn’t say why. Surely nothing would change afterwards. There was nothing inherent in their friendship that said it must remain kindred / human. After a long thoughtful moment, Craig finally, quietly said, “Tell me more about the ceremony.”

“There’s not much to tell really.” The gregariousness that Craig was familiar with began to emerge in Yutaro’s voice. “Mostly, it involves my father. I will, of course, go through some ritual preparations; purification, dressing, etc. And then I will wait on a platform with an assemblage of the Yakuza in front. My father, largely prepares himself alone. He will be in seclusion for four days, starving himself to weakness and meditating. Finally, when he emerges, he will descend upon me like an animal and make me a vampire. Then he returns to seclusion, once more meditating until, just before dawn, he must plunge a ritual stake into his heart and greet the morning sun.”

“How do you feel about it.” Craig was in awe of Yutaro’s composure. Craig was not given a choice when he was born into darkness, and neither was Yutaro. But there couldn’t have been more disparate situations. Yutaro had grown up knowing that this day would come.

“I have to admit that I am apprehensive, but,” he paused momentarily, “I can’t help feeling excited too. You only have to be in that chamber a moment to feel the power of the place and to know that I’m going to become a part of a tradition that has lasted so long - across countless generations of my own family. You can only feel uplifted. What’s it like? The process?”

“Hm?” Craig had been lost in thought. “Oh.” He

continued distracted. "It's the most intimate experience that two individuals can share. For a while you are very nearly the same person. But for me it was terrifying. I didn't know what was coming, and I didn't have a choice. I never even knew my sire. He abandoned me to figure out what I had become on my own."

"That's... terrible? I'm not sure what to say."

"It doesn't matter now. I am what I am and nothing will change that. I've moved past it."

"It's just too bad that it has to be my father."

"Why's that?"

"We've never been close. If you hadn't realized, I'm not exactly the picture of traditional Japan. Western culture is encroaching here, more and more, and the younger generations are beginning to shun the traditional way of life. I think he fears that by the time, my son becomes emperor, tradition will have been completely removed from the imperial line. He doesn't understand that I have a respect for both."

The two of them lapsed into silence.

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Yutaro's child was born without complications and the day of the ceremony was finally set. In Craig's mind, increasingly it weighed upon him as though it were some sort of deadline - like... like.... Yutaro was on death row, awaiting the execution of his sentence. He laughed aloud. "I guess he is!" As time grew shorter, so did his meetings with Yutaro. The commotion surrounding the young heir was accordingly increasing and he couldn't break away. In addition, his wife had returned with his son, and of course he needed to spend time with them. Craig didn't begrudge him that. In fact, Craig was a little thankful for the time alone to analyse his thoughts. Why did this have such an effect on him? He didn't know.

The time they did spend together were filled

inevitably with details of the upcoming ritual, Yutaro's hopes and misgivings, and his opinions of the various men that were in the running to become his political double, for obviously, he would never again be seen in public - least of all during the day!

The week before the ritual, Craig was not to see Yutaro at all and he became anxious. Finally his weeks of brooding and deep contemplation brought forth a nugget of an idea - an idea that he began to nurture and develop in the hopes the complex series events that it would entail might come to fruition.

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The Emperor's hunger burned down to every cell in his body. He wasn't of the lowest generation, but it had been two generations since the last "embolstering" of the Imperial blood line. Yes, the hunger certainly made itself known, but this was the moment his entire life culminated to and not for any reason was it going to be spoiled. The control he had been trained with his whole life certainly helped. His thoughts turned to his coming reunion with the world of light and he became lost in meditation.

He sat alone in a small traditional Japanese room whose only entrance looked out onto a small Zen garden of rock, sand, water, and bonsai surrounded completely by high stone walls. The room only had one purpose - that which he was fulfilling, that his father before him fulfilled years before on that fateful day that was forever locked in his mind as his first preternatural memory. The room had been sealed completely and aside from the garden that was itself sealed, it was completely devoid of entrance or exit. The thin wooden walls, of course, would not have been a match for his vampiric strength - it was a symbolic seclusion - one that would end at the correct time.

The Emperor had sat in the room for four days and

was coming upon his fourth night - the night of the ritual. Each night he had sat completely still surveying the garden from sunset to sunrise wearing nothing but a black *furoshiki* that covered his groin somewhat like a loincloth. His ceremonial garb was arrayed out on the floor near him, having been layed out in preparation. He sat now with his back to the garden, performing the final purification at the small alter erected for that purpose, completely unaware of the small movements behind the garden's pond.

Craig had lain in wait in his subterranean hiding place a day longer than the Emperor and the hunger had taken a far greater toll. He had infiltrated the ceremonial room the night before the Emperor was sealed inside and buried himself beneath the sand before it was raked into it's characteristic Zen patterns. Craig had never starved himself more than a few hours before and was unaccustomed to the lust that was growing in his body. Fortunately, while the Emperor had to bring his thoughts and spirit to perfect harmony with the universe in battling his hunger, Craig only had to stay put - a relatively simple task in comparison.

Gradually, his mind had narrowed and narrowed focussing on his single plan until, it seemed the plan itself became Craig's consciousness with the occasional schizophrenic personality commenting in the background. He had very nearly been moved to frenzy during the wait, but the time had finally come, and Craig knew it. Someone in Craig's mind marvelled at the masterpiece that is the preternatural internal clock. Slowly, but surely, Craig raised himself from his grave, marring the patterned perfection that had been incised in the sand above him (another personality agonized over the action!) Finally, his head reached the surface and the humid night air. His gaunt, desiccated face gave the impression that his overly-large eyes were protruding unnaturally from his face. His eyes were the only betrayers that life still coursed through his pale body, and as soon as he was disinterred enough to sit upright, his they locked onto the near naked figure in peaceful contemplation

in the room beyond.

The Plan took action through Craig's body and in one powerful movement freed itself completely from the sand and bounded clean across the pond that separated The Plan from its prey. The hunger was so great now that even most of The Plan was forgotten - only one single thought remained - Blood. Blood, Blood BLOOD. Without conscious effort, Craig's near-corpse pushed itself to the very limit of its celerity and in a burst of speed that might even have astonished kindred, Craig had descended upon the unsuspecting figure and plunging the stake that he had been clutching for five days directly through the figure's heart.

Immediately, Craig's mouth was attached to the figure's neck and in three long draughts, Craig completely drained the already depleted vampire. Unsatisfied, and still unconscious, Craig's tongue began to lap at the wound where the stake had pierced the Emperor's heart and finally the drops that spilled to the floor. Finally, the necessary moments had passed for the blood to enter Craig's system and he collapsed in sudden exhaustion. Still not satiated, the hunger had abated to the point where he was again in conscious control of his actions. He sat up and looked at the lifeless corpse in front of him. Someone in the back of his mind was mortified at this, his second kindred kill, and diablery too! The someone was quickly admonished and Craig forced himself into action - he wasn't sure how much time he had before he would be called for. He quickly moved the body outside, hiding it from view from within the room and began to don the ceremonial robes layed out on the floor.

He surveyed himself in the mirror hanging on the wall. He looked much like a white ninja garbed from head to foot in white material, although there was a great deal more superfluous material. He picked up the mask and looked at it closely. It was a traditional design that he recognized as being symbolic of Ameterasu, the sun goddess. Someone

leapt when he realized that it was several hundred years old and had been used in this ritual numerous times. It was at this moment that Craig first felt the effect the Emperor's blood had had on his system. Suddenly, he had a very *deja-vu*-like feeling of having actually performed this ritual many a time. It was a memory - almost - very clear and indistinct, like the last fleeting vestiges of the memory of a dream. It also then occurred to him that despite his hunger he was able to exert a great deal more control over his thoughts, body, and emotions. He realized there was added strength there as well and marvelled at the Blood's ability to effect such dramatic changes almost instantaneously.

Broken from his reverie by the sound of someone approaching outside the room's walls and he quickly placed the mask over his face and assumed a position of silent repose. The high-pitched squeal of iron wrenching apart wood met his ears and he turned as a portion of the wall fell to reveal a similarly clad - but in black - individual holding a long ceremonial tool that although was intricately carved and gilded was effectively a crowbar. He motioned towards Craig that he should leave the room.

Craig stepped outside into the hallway - a very long, relatively low ceilinged passage, entirely covered in gold leaf and intricate paintings ("Kano style!" someone delightedly noted.) It sloped slightly downward and all he could see at the opening far-away was a wooden floor. But he knew what he would find - Yutaro dressed only in a black *furoshiki*, bound, and prone on his back on a large sort of couch awaiting the arrival of his father and his rebirth.

Some unknown signal prompted the first, slow, beats from a Taiko drum, clearly coming from the room below. The deep, resonant sounds echoed up the narrow passage and seemed to reach in and grasp Craig by the spine. Gradually, they began to increase in speed, and Craig's heart beat came quickly to match it. The pounding strangely intensified his hunger and he could feel the blood-lust returning. Then, as if on cue, he began his decent down the

corridor - the sound of the drum beating in time with his heart compelling him to move. He was nearly in a state of absolute euphoria when he finally emerged from the tunnel and almost beyond seeing what was before him. But the sudden realization of what was before him sobered him to the point that he could take in his surroundings in detail. Before him lay Yutaro just as he had expected - eyes closed apparently feeling a similar state of ecstasy. He turned his head and took note of the huge Taiko - nearly 2 metres in diameter - that stood at the back of the room and the black-clad man that was furiously beating out the rhythm that had so captured his being. It was only then that he noted the hundreds of similarly black clad kindred arrayed in prostrated rows before the raised stage on which he was standing and Yutaro was lain. The thought sobered him. If anything should go wrong at this point, he surely would be dead. No, more. He'd be locked up forever to starve in unending agony. At the thought his hunger pierced him like an arrow, reminding him of his task.

The drummer was now beating upon the drum like a madman and Craig's heart raced to match the pace. His breathing was becoming laboured - as though he had been running a marathon. From the look of Yutaro, he was experiencing the same racing heart beat. Despite the pace of the drums, Craig moved forward slowly - certainly with the beat but at greatly cut intervals. Soon, however, he was standing above Yutaro and he could no longer tell whether it was the drum or the blood pounding in his ears. Yutaro - eyes still closed - sensed the presence of another and rolled his head invitingly to the side to allow access to his neck. The simple action began a small ripple of air and when finally the scent of Blood breached the mask he wore, Craig slid the mask slightly upwards to free his mouth and dropped onto Yutaro like an animal falling to a meal. Yutaro gasped at the suddenness of the attack and the sharp pain that he felt. He began to relax, and then suddenly gasped again at the realization that it was not his father consuming

him. Craig felt Yutaro's body tense beneath him - Yutaro even began to push against him in a futile attempt to free himself. But Craig reached out to Yutaro through the Blood - he touched the vital, living, spirit on the other side of the connection and eased the surprise it felt. Wasn't this the way Yutaro had hoped to be turned? By a friend closer than his estranged father? And the frightened spirit realized the truth it and relented, relaxing into the experience with a new found delight.

Craig felt renewed beyond belief - his new found strength robbed from the Emperor came to full power as it was being fed but he could feel Yutaro's strength diminishing quickly. The time had come to complete the circuit and Craig, placing his hand behind Yutaro's head, forced Yutaro's mouth to his own neck. The blood that was beginning to lightly trickle out of Craig's body in the form of sweat, touched Yutaro's tongue and acted like a catalyst, sparking the hunger in his depleted body. He latched on to the Craig, biting into his flesh with dull teeth.

The drum had become a dull hum in comparison to the blood that flowed between them and through it they shared. Shared everything they had experienced and known and re-shared the times they had already spent together. Their beings began to intertwine in an ecstasy completely unknown in the mortal world and they lost themselves to the experience.

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Craig looked down at the city from his high-rise apartment window. An uncharacteristic maturity had crept into his countenance since the day his life had irrevocably changed and he had introduced the Emperor of Japan into the world of the undead.

The rest of the ceremony was completed without much incident. When the turning was complete, Craig was resealed into the ceremonial room. The Emperor was

expected to stake himself at sunrise and when they opened the room the next night, they found the ashes of the body they expected to find. The ashes were collected and interred in the "family vault" where they belonged. Craig simply scaled the garden walls and disappeared into the night. And in some respect, the blood line wasn't even broken really - it just had a little hiccup was all. No one had been the wiser about the true sire of the new Emperor.

Since then, of course, he had been able to meet with the Emperor, and on much more open terms. Craig was now well known by all kindred in the city - as a personal friend to the Emperor. The two had only become closer because of the incident. Craig now held a great deal of power over the Emperor, and in turn the Emperor held sway over the entirety of a country. But he didn't intend to use it for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, was safety - if the Yakuza ever discovered the truth, the whole plan would back-fire in his face. He held no direct control over them and if they ever suspected the blatant violation of their millennia-old tradition there would be no stopping their wrath. And the more the power was abused, the more likely they would be to suspect that their Emperor was under the influence of another. Secondly, there wasn't really need. Craig never desired phenomenal far reaching power. He only craved comfort and security which he had obtained with a small neatly secreted expense account and the reputation to command respect among the kindred of the city. And if there was anything more he ever needed, Yutaro'd be happy to help him of his own accord just as Craig'd be happy to do the same in the reverse situation.

"It's strange that the blood that in the turning, has such an equalizing effect, leaves such a hierarchy of power in its wake," mused Craig. "In some ways, I think, friendship still holds more power and allure than the Blood." The city moved ever onward beneath him as he gazed. "And I'll be damned if I'll ever violate it."