

DEFY NOT THE HEART

THE GUARDIAN HEART CRYSTAL SERIES



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The Guardian Heart Crystal Series Book 2

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English Edition Published by Amy Blankenship

Second Edition Published by TekTime

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The Legend of the Heart of Time

The worlds may change, but true legends never fade.

Darkness and light have constantly battled since the beginning of time. Worlds are formed and crushed beneath the feet of their creators, yet the ongoing need for good and evil have never been in question. However, sometimes a new element is thrown into the mix, the one thing that both sides want but only one can have.

Paradoxical in nature, the Guardian Heart Crystal is the one constant that both sides have always striven to attain. The crystalline stone has the power to create and destroy the known universe, yet can end all suffering and strife in the same breath. Some say the crystal has a mind of its own, others say the gods are behind it all.

Each time the crystal has appeared, its guardians have always been ready to defend it from all who would use it selfishly. The identities of these guardians remain unchanged and they love with the same ferocity regardless of the world or time.

One girl stands in the center of these ancient guardians and is

the object of their affections. She holds within her the power of the crystal itself. This is the bearer of the crystal and the source of its power. The lines often blur, and guarding the crystal slowly changes into guarding the priestess from the other guardians.

This is the wine from which the heart of darkness drinks. It is the opportunity to make the guardians of the crystal weak and susceptible to attack. The darkness craves the power of the crystal and also the girl as a man would crave a woman.

Within every one of these dimensions and realities, you will find a secret garden known as the Heart of Time. There, a statue of a young human priestess kneels. She is surrounded by an age-old magic that keeps her secret treasure hidden and well preserved. The maiden's hands are outstretched as if waiting for something precious to be placed in them.

Legend says that she is waiting for the powerful stone known as The Guardian Heart Crystal to return to her.

Only the Guardians know of the true secrets behind the statue and how it came into existence. Before the five brothers drew their first breath their ancestors, Tadamichi, and his twin brother, Hyakuhei, protected the heart of time during its darkest history. For several eras, the twins protected the seal that kept the human world from overlapping within the demon realm. This task was sacred and the lives of the humans as well as demons had to be kept safe and secret from the other.

Unexpectedly, during their reign, a small band of humans accidentally crossed over into the demon world because of the

sacred crystal. During a time of turmoil, its powers caused a rip in the seal that had separated the dimensions. Seeing the dangers, the leader of the human group and Tadamichi had quickly become allies, making a pact to close the rip in the seal and keep the two worlds locked away from each other forever.

But during that time, Hyakuhei and Tadamichi had both fallen in love with the daughter of the human leader.

Against Hyakuhei's wishes, the rip had been repaired by Tadamichi and the girl's father. The strength of the seal had been increased tenfold, separating the dangerous love triangle forever. Hyakuhei's heart was shattered. Even his own blood brother, Tadamichi had betrayed him by making sure he and the priestess were separated by eternity.

Love can turn into the most wicked of things once it is lost. Hyakuhei's broken heart turned to malicious anger and jealousy causing a battle between the twin brothers, ending Tadamichi's life and splitting their immortal souls. Those slivers of immortality created five new guardians to take guardianship over the seal and protect it from Hyakuhei, who had joined the demons within the evil realm.

Imprisoned within the darkness he had become, Hyakuhei cast out all thought of protecting the heart of time; instead, he turned his energy toward banishing the seal completely. His long midnight locks, reaching past his knees and a face belonging only to the most seductive, belied the true evil hidden within his angelic appearance.

As the war begins between the forces of light and dark, a blinding blue light is emitted from the sanctified statue signaling that the young priestess has been reborn and the crystal has resurfaced on the other side.

As the guardians are drawn to her and become her protectors, the battle between good and evil truly begins. Hence the entrance into another world where darkness is dominant within the world of light.

This is one of their many epic adventuresâ€

Chapter 1 "Secret Love"

Hyakuhei stood gazing at the heart of time knowing the priestess was still on the other side, in her world. His midnight hair flowed down his body like a dark shroud as his wings opened wide, creating a breeze across the soft grass. His perfect lips curved slightly into a knowing smile. A tainted glow formed across the ground surrounding the shrine, giving it an eerie appearance.

As if pulled by some unknown force, he glided closer to the maiden statue that stood with hands outstretched, as if asking him for something. His eyes became soft for only a moment, in memory of the young priestess the statue mimicked. So the guardians thought they could combine their powers and keep her from him?

With one angry wave of his hand, the glowing grass seemed to hiss as it shimmered with an ominous aura, and then hid the deception of the spell deep within its blades.

"Damn it! Where the hell is Kyoko? She was supposed to have been back hours ago," Toya growled for the tenth time in the last thirty minutes. He ran an agitated hand through the silver highlights that mingled with his midnight hair as he looked out the open window in the direction of the shrine. Facing where no one could see, he let worry slip into his golden gaze.

Suki looked up from polishing her bayonet, one eyebrow twitching. "Toya, Kyoko is obviously not coming back tonight. Something must've come up so just give it up and give us a break." She turned back to Kamui who was sitting beside her, "Gees, does he ever shut up?"

Kamui smiled knowing better than to say anything out loud. His stardust eyes hid the truth behind Toya's complaining. Being the youngest guardian didn't make him naive. In human years, he was ageless, as was his brothers. He knew Toya only acted mad to cover up the fact that he was worried. Even he was starting to get worried. It wasn't like Kyoko to keep them waiting. The purple highlights in Kamui's hair shimmered as he raised his face to the window seeing the darkened sky.

"Kyoko had better be back in the morning, or I swear I'll go into her world and drag her back myself." Toya continued pacing. He couldn't stand it when Kyoko was away for this long. It had been days now, and he was getting angrier by the minute and worried. "Stupid girl," he clamped his mouth shut again when Suki cocked a warning eyebrow at him.

Shinbe's tall silent form stood against the wall where he'd been for the last hour. His bluish-gray trench coat gave a slight twitch with an agitated movement that he tried to hide. He'd had enough of Toya's rant about Kyoko being late. His amethyst eyes closed in an attempt to keep himself from telling Toya to simply shut up. Knowing Toya probably wouldn't let anyone have any peace until Kyoko returned, Shinbe bit his tongue to keep from making his brother's temper worse.

The amethyst guardian tried to stay tranquil as always by meditating, following his monk-like teachings. The truth was his nerves were so raw that at the moment, even meditating wasn't working. Right now, Shinbe felt like he could strangle Toya and still smile about it while doing so. The plains of his calm face tightened and he lowered his head so his midnight blue hair would hide the evidence.

When Toya and the others started getting ready to sleep, Shinbe took a thick blanket from the pile in the corner of their little shelter and headed for solitude. He really just needed to get away from everyone, especially Toya. Shinbe hid well his jealousy for Toya, and the love Kyoko held for his sibling. Day after day, he stayed with the group, only to be near her, to protect her, even though her eyes were always on Toya.

Shinbe ground his teeth together painfully. He should be like his other two brothers, Kyou and Kotaro, and separate from the group to fight Hyakuhei on his own. But he knew he had to stay with the group to keep her safe. He was one of her guardians and

she needed him. Even Kyou and Kotaro protected her from afar.

Yes, Shinbe knew he played the game well by hiding his attraction to Kyoko. He had practiced it for a long time, even groping other girls especially if Kyoko was within earshot or watching, so she would never find out his secret. They thought he loved all women, little did they know his heart belonged to only one, his priestess.

Usually he would pick Suki to grope, knowing she would hit him, and the pain would help steady his thoughts. He was such a coward when it came to telling Kyoko his true feelings.

Lately, it had been getting worse for him, harder for him to hide. Kyoko trusted him, smiled at him. She talked to him, often confiding her feelings to him when he caught her upset over Toya's immature ways. It all shattered him, little by little.

Without realizing where he'd walked to, Shinbe glanced up and sighed. He was in the gardens of the maiden shrine. Without even realizing it, he'd wanted to be closer to her. Kyoko would not come back through the time portal this late at night so why had he come?

Staring at the maiden shrine, his amethyst eyes glowed in the reflection of the moon. Shinbe decided this was as safe a place as any in a world full of demons anyway.

Spreading the blanket out in the soft grass, he paid no attention to the eerie glow of the area, subconsciously blaming the illumination on the moon light. Laying down he closed his eyes, waiting for the dreams he knew would soon come, just like

they always did. They haunted him, making him want her to see him, not as a guardian or ally but as a man.

Kyoko groaned, resisting the urge to smack her forehead into a brick wall. Her conscience started flipping out in her head, and she was just high enough to argue back with it. She hadn't meant to get drunk with Tasuki and his college friends. It had all been a big mistake, and all her fault. She'd gone to the Halloween party like she'd promised, knowing she would never drink anything. NEVER! She never did.

She growled at herself, rolling her eyes. How was she to know that the huge bowl of fruit cocktail sitting beside the punch bowl had been soaking in alcohol for days? She'd thought it was supposed to taste like grapefruit and had eaten a lot of it before she felt the effects of the alcohol hit her.

Kyoko stumbled over her own feet, righting herself quickly before she had a chance to fall. "This sucks!" she yelled knowing no one could hear her. Now she was late and she knew she was going to be in a lot of trouble with Toya. Just thinking of him yelling at her was already giving her a headache.

Welcome to hell, population one, Kyoko mumbled to herself as she kicked a pebble.

Desperately, she hoped Toya would just wait until morning before coming to get her. Or better yet, see if she would show up with the daylight. As drunk as she was, she could hardly see straight, and she didn't want to fight with him. She didn't want

to go home either. She silently groaned to herself. Her mother would lecture her for a week if she found out she was drunk, even if it had been an accident.

Kyoko tried hard to stay in a straight line as she walked. Finally, she spotted the maiden shrine in the clearing behind her house. Closing one eye so the maiden statue would come into better focus, she giggled, and then thought to herself, 'Oh God, now I know I'm drunk.' With a swaying shrug, she did the only thing she knew to do.

She walked into the shrine house, straight up to the maiden statue, and leaned against it, hoping to make it safely through to the other dimension in time to pass out.

Shinbe was once again having a very erotic dream of Kyoko writhing under him, crying out his name over and over, screaming it as he pounded into her, staring down into her face and driving all thoughts of Toya from her.

He jerked awake; his body broke out in a sweat. Breathing hard, he could still feel her under him, letting him love her and she had loved him back. Her cries were still ringing in his ears. His heart was still beating so fast, slamming against his ribs the same way he had been slamming into her.

Shinbe sat up. Clutching his hands, he raised them to cover his face. Unable to stop it from escaping him, he cried out into the silence, full of pain and hidden rage at the unfairness of it all. All he ever wanted was to love her, and it was slowly eating

him alive.

Hearing a twig snap, Shinbe quickly pulled his hands down. His amethyst gaze scanned the area and came to rest on Kyoko's shocked features. His mind seemed to instantly go into slow motion.

'No, it couldn't be! not now, not here.' Her eyes were wide at hearing his cry, and her hand was over her mouth. 'No! go away, please,' he mentally begged. 'You can't be here, not right now, it's too dangerous! I'm dangerous.'

Shinbe watched as she lowered her hand from her lips, a look of worry crossing her face. Then, he saw her sway as she made her way towards him. He wondered if she was even real, or if he was still dreaming.

Kyoko was still trying to make sure she was going in the right direction to get to the hut when she heard an almost inhuman cry coming from somewhere close to her. Her eyes focused as she tried to find the source of the sound. Her heart was still racing from the fright it had given her. Then she noticed Shinbe lying there on a blanket in the grass, all alone. The haunted cry had to have come from him.

She wanted to know what was wrong. Had someone been killed? That had to be it for such a sound to come from the always calm, cool, and friendly guardian. She tried to steady her legs as she made her way over to him.

Shinbe groaned as he watched Kyoko do the stupidest thing he had ever seen her do. She walked straight over to him and knelt

down, reaching her hand out to touch his.

"Shinbe, what is it? Is someone hurt?"

He could hear the fear in her voice. She thought something was wrong. He almost laughed at the truth in that question, but thought better of it. She didn't know his secret. He was still safe, could still hide his heart from her.

Another wave of dizziness caught Kyoko unaware, and she couldn't keep her balance while kneeling beside him. She accidentally leaned too far forward and fell right into his lap. Stifling a giggle, she remembered something was wrong with him and opened her eyes again trying to concentrate. All this felt so much like a dream.

Kyoko suddenly noticed Shinbe's chest was bare. Corded muscles were tensing, rippling, and stretching under her palms. She had never seen him with his shirt off before and was amazed. She blushed, knowing she shouldn't be thinking of him this way. He was her guardian and friend.

Trying to sober up, Kyoko shook her head, which didn't really help matters. She slowly lifted her gaze to his. He hadn't moved an inch and still hadn't told her what was wrong. Now she wished he would, because the look on his face was starting to alarm her.

Shinbe's body was shaking as he restrained himself from touching her. Something with more power than him seemed to be pushing him, demanding he reach out and take what he wanted more than breath. He would have been fine, but now she was here in his lap, staring into his eyes. Eyes he knew had to be full

of pain, and she wanted to know what was wrong.

Something was definitely wrong with him and he couldn't stop what seemed to be spinning quickly out of his control.

"I can't take it anymore," his voice was ragged with the force of his emotion riding so high. With those words he was trying to warn her, trying to tell her to get away, to go back to the other side of the time portal where she would be safe. Not to come back until he could keep his secret in control, hiding it once again. All his senses screamed that something was wrong, but his mind couldn't fight this intense hunger.

Kyoko gasped, hearing his words laced with so much pain, and it saddened her. Everybody counted on him to be level headed, the glue that held the group together. Even she looked up to him and loved it when he was close and she could feel his calmness, his humor, and concern. But now it was the other way around. He was the one who needed comfort.

It must be all the fighting against demons, Hyakuhei's curse. Oh God, his curse, the dimensional void that would be an early death for him. The ultimate power Hyakuhei had given him, knowing it would one day destroy him. She hadn't forgotten. She just tried really hard not to think about it, but she knew what would happen if they didn't stop Hyakuhei.

Kyoko reached out to him, trying to make it better and to ease his mind. "It's alright, Shinbe. I'm here." The second her hand touched his face, he came to life.

All logic had ceased and Shinbe's ironclad control

snapped. He grabbed her shoulders, and rolled until she was pinned underneath him. Leaning over her body, he had everything heâ##d ever wantedâ##! Kyoko. Without another coherent thought, his lips crashed down swiftly, claiming hers possessively, blocking everything else out of his mind. Heâ##d held this feeling in check for far too long.

Shinbe acknowledged that he might have lost control of the situation a few exits back. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the thought crept in that she tasted like some kind of alcohol, and she smelled like it too. Controlling himself enough to raise up an inch, he gazed down at her, trying to tell if it was true. Searching her face, her eyes, and her flushed cheeks he jealously wondered who had gotten her drunk.

Kyoko knew that this wasn't really happening. No way was she staring up into the amethyst eyes of the very handsome Shinbe. No way was he staring down at her like he wanted her. Kyoko reasoned with herself that she was probably lying in the grass with her head still propped up on the maiden statue. Somewhere in this dream, she could even hear Hyakuhei laughing at her.

She could have sworn she remembered sliding down the maiden statue and falling asleep. She was probably right now passed out having a dream, and her drunken mind had picked Shinbe to join her, instead of Toya.

Kyoko barely shook her head, feeling giddy, and sighed the words, "Crazy dreams," as she stared into the passion-glazed eyes of Shinbe. Her lips still tingling from the force of the dream kiss.

Shinbe lowered his lips to hers again. He'd heard enough. Kyoko thought she was dreaming. Shinbe only hoped she was right. But either way, he was unable to stop. He couldn't stop even if he tried and he licked at her lips. She parted them with a tiny whimper, a sound that only hardened him even more, if that was possible.

He broke out in a sweat trying to restrain himself as his guardian blood surfaced. He wanted to go slowly as he deepened the kiss, invading her, taking and giving within the heat of the kiss. He had always wanted to kiss her like this, forever it seemed.

The muscles in his arms flexed as he held himself above her, making love to her lips and beyond. His hands were impatient as they worked on ridding her of her clothes. Within only a few short minutes, she lay under him, completely naked. She hadn't fought it as he took her clothes from her. Why would she? It was a dream, right?

Shinbe's breath stilled as he gazed down at her just as she'd appeared within his dream only a few short minutes ago. She was his priestess, his secret, his love. He slid his body against hers, loving the feel of her silky skin, sharpening his pain and his need to have her, to make love to her.

It has to be a dream, he tried to convince himself.

He dipped his head to nuzzle her neck, licking and kissing her skin, tasting her gently and forcibly. He showed her how much he loved her as he made his way down her body. This would be the only time he would see and taste all of her. Sharp heat shot

through him as she arched against him, moaning when he drew her breast into his mouth, licking at it with his tongue, bringing her body to life.

More of his wishes were fulfilled as Shinbe trailed kisses down her taut belly and she writhed beneath him. His muscles jumped as she clutched him to her, trying to get even closer. Shinbe was as close to heaven as he would ever get, with her essence surrounding him. Inch by slow inch, he crawled back up and over her.

Settling between her legs, he shuddered with need when the heat of her opening warmed the throbbing head of his swollen manhood. He wanted her to see him as he drove inside her, even if this was a dream. His body hardened, tightened around hers.

"Open your eyes," he whispered. His voice was mesmerizing, a deliberate seduction, and as soon as she opened those amazing emerald eyes he thrust forward, swiftly burying himself to the hilt within her heat, wanting to save her the pain of her first time. An anguished cry tore from his throat as he felt her blood bond give way to him.

Her tightness grasped him hard within her silken heat, drawing him in even deeper. If it weren't for his stubborn self-control, he would have come out of his skin right then. He gritted his teeth in an effort to hold still, breathing hard as he watched her toss her head from side to side, lips soundlessly parting. Quickly, he claimed her lips before the cry could escape her.

Once he felt her calm down, he eased off of the kiss. Giving

into the first slow, but hard, deep thrust, he was rewarded with her hips coming up to meet his as her own passion started to blaze. He inhaled her moans of ecstasy, savoring them as the cherished memories he knew they would become. Giving into the feeling of her wrapped around him, he let go of his restraint. He wanted to make love to her with all of him, holding nothing back.

Lacing his fingers through hers, he pulled her hands above her head and held them down against the soft blanket. Shinbe raised himself above her so he could watch her passionate expressions as he started a rhythm that quickly drove them both over the edge. Deep and fast strokes turned in to hard slow thrusts before pausing to strain against her, only to swiftly retreat then slam back into her again.

Shinbe could feel the many times that she reached her peak as spasms racked her body. He could feel them as she squeezed him even tighter. His whole body glistened in the moonlight from holding back his own release. It was killing him, until finally, he couldn't take it anymore, and knowing she was reaching her peak again, he set a pace that rocked them both.

Taking them both over the edge, he gave one final thrust, as deep as he could and held it, throwing back his head. The sound that was ripped from him was neither human nor immortal. It was pain and pleasure, the pentacle of both, as his seed shot into her body—deep, hot, and steady with his heartbeat.

Once the world was again standing still, Shinbe looked down

at Kyoko just as a passion glazed smile appeared across her kiss swollen lips and her eyes slowly closed.

Already feeling the heartbreak of what heâ##d just done, Shinbe lowered his lips to hers and whispered the truth against them, "I love you."

Sometime later, deep into the night, Shinbe awoke to find Kyoko dressed, but asleep next to him on the blanket within the shimmering grass.

Not wanting to wake her and face his sins just yet, he soundlessly carried the sleeping priestess, along with the pack she carried, within the walls of the hut where the rest of the group still slept.

Once he had her tucked into her usual spot between the wall and Suki, he slowly slid down the opposite wall, drawing his knees up to his chest, happier and more afraid than he had ever been in his life. But if he were going to die within the next couple hours, then he would die happy.

Shinbe closed his eyes wondering which would be worse, Kyoko remembering, or her not remembering. He knew he would never love another, for one had to have a heart in order to love, and he didn't have a heart. Heâ##d already given it away. Kyoko had carried his heart since the first day heâ##d laid eyes on her.

If he didn't die by Toya's daggers in the morning, he knew he would stay right where he was, secretly loving her, and hoping

she would notice.

Chapter 2 "Morning Frights"

Shinbe jerked awake with a start when he heard Toya shout. He felt all the muscles in his body cringe at the thought of becoming shish-kabob on Toya's twin daggers. Morbid fascination had him slowly opening his amethyst eyes to see what was going on.

"Shut up!" Kyoko yelled, throwing her hand up and casting the taming spell, then instantly grabbed her head in panic as the pain rocketed through her brain.

"What was that for?" Toya growled as he glared up at her from the floor.

"Oww," her mouth made a little "o" as she cringed again. "Shhh," She added hoping he would get the message.

Shinbe sighed, knowing Kyoko most likely had a hangover, and Toya wasn't helping the matter by being so loud. He was glad she could paralyze him, even if he did find it strange that the taming spell only worked on Toya. Sometimes he found himself jealous that she could put a spell on Toya at all. It also didn't help that Toya was the only one who could leap back and forward through time, following her into her home world. In Shinbe's mind, it only brought those two even closer.

He silently wondered if she remembered last night considering how intoxicated she was. Shinbe closed his eyes, feeling his insides clench when Toya snapped at Kyoko for using the spell. So far, everything seemed normal. He reflected back again,

trying to remember everything clearly. He found it strange that even for him, last night seemed almost like a dream.

He remembered just before bringing her into the hut, he used a shield spell on them to cover up any scent of their love making, if it had been noticeable. He opened his eyes again, knowing hiding wouldn't help if she remembered what happened. Then Shinbe forgot to breathe as he watched Toya lean close to Kyoko, sniffing her.

Toya crinkled his nose up at her, "Kyoko, do I smell alcohol on you?" He sat down in front of her when he heard her pained but guilty sigh. Her hands were still covering her face. "What the hell, Kyoko? Did you get drunk?" Toya couldn't keep his voice from going a little too high, and he clamped his mouth shut when she jerked her hands down and gave him a death glare.

"Toya, I'm sorry. But if you don't get out of my face right now, I'm gonna do something to me and you are both going to regret," Kyoko's eyes narrowed. She raised her hand as if to cast the Taming spell on him again, causing Toya to scoot back quickly and growl in annoyance.

Shinbe couldn't help but smirk as Kyoko put Toya in his place. He hid it behind a quick cough. Sometimes those two could be so entertaining. Another cough caught his attention. Leaning over to look around Toya, he could see Kamui having the same problem of trying to hide his laughter.

'Damn, she can be really, really scary, sometimes,' Toya thought as he put his hands in his loose sleeves and turned his face

to the side. "Fine, you can tell me later!" he peeked at her from the corner of his golden eyes, knowing he had said that a little too loud. Jumping up, he took off out the door, not wanting to stick around if she tried to tame him again. It was a good thing that stupid spell didn't last long or he would be hurting.

Suki hadn't said a word as she watched Kyoko in wonder. When Toya finally left, she padded softly over to Kyoko. Bending down, she whispered, "Kyoko, I'm going to go get you some fresh water, okay? You just lie back down and I'll be right back." She placed her hand lightly on Kyoko's shoulder shaking her head, wondering how their innocent Kyoko could have gotten drunk. Deciding she'd wait to ask, she turned and left the hut to get her friend some water.

Kamui couldn't pass up the opportunity and grinned from ear to ear. "Kyoko, I can't believe you went out drinking and didn't invite me." His smile widened even more when Kyoko gave him a cross-eyed look. Sensing Kaen outside waiting on him, he left the hut to join his fiery friend.

Kyoko groaned as her head pounded. She should have asked Suki for help to look through her backpack. She knew she would have something in there for pain, and if she could just find it right now, she would probably take all of it. She saw a shadow fall across her and turned to see Shinbe's amethyst gaze watching her.

Suddenly, images of him above her, making love to her lips and body coursed through her mind. It was a dream, right? A

drunken dream, yeah! she remembered now. Hangover or not, she couldn't help what she was thinking and felt the hot blush rise up to stain her cheeks. She was instantly thankful one of his guardian powers wasn't being able to read minds, like Kyou could.

"Kyoko, are you all right? Is there something I can do for you?" Shinbe felt guilty knowing she thought it was a dream, as she'd said last night. But he needed to know if she remembered anything. By the blush that spread across her face, he thought maybe she did. When she finally spoke, he sighed in relief, and misery. Somewhere deep inside, he had hoped she would remember, and put an end to it all.

Kyoko gave him a weak smile. Damn dreams! Why did she have to dream of him, of all people? It wasn't bad enough she'd dreamt of him before in that manner, but she'd never dreamt of him and woke up only to be so close to him that she could feel his body heat.

She suddenly leaned back, away from that closeness, her emerald eyes wide. There was something in the way he was looking at her, as if he were searching into her very soul. Or getting ready to grope her! with Shinbe one could never be sure. She mentally shook her head, "No. Don't wanna go there, Kyoko, girl, not right now! Think, what was the question?" "Ummm!"

"Shinbe, would you mind looking through my bag, and find the box I keep herbs in?" she put her hands to her head again,

trying to stifle the thumping. Note to self! never, ever, go to a party with Tasuki and his frat buddies ever again.

Shinbe dug around in her bag looking for the herb box. Pulling it out, he handed it to her. Kyoko accidentally brushed her hand across his and Shinbe had a sudden bolt of heat course through his body causing a certain part of him to harden.

Oh, how vulnerable she was right now, he could just NO! What was he thinking? Gods! they were right when they called him a perv.

Trying to quickly back away to a safer distance, he accidentally brushed his arm against her thigh.

Kyoko inwardly cringed at the contact. Why did he have to be the one helping her right now? Why couldn't Toya still be here glaring and yelling at her. Those lips, those eyes, I have to stop staring at him like that! She turned her gaze back to the herb box as she fumbled through it, looking for the aspirin she normally kept inside. Finding them, she held up the tiny pills.

Shinbe stared at her, mesmerized. She hadn't tried to castrate him yet, so she must not remember. Why couldn't she have remembered, he silently sighed.

She looked back up at him making eye contact that almost rendered her brain dead for a moment. "Water? Please? You have no idea how gross these are without it."

Shinbe got completely flustered as he watched her mouth the words. Her lips were just so inviting! he could just! he bent down! he looked at the aspirin she held in her hand. Focus.

"Yes, they do look like nasty little things," he said, eyeing them, even though he had no idea what they were. The door suddenly opened and he guiltily jerked his head around to see Suki and Kamui coming in with the water jug.

Suki eyed Shinbe wearily, "What are you up to, guardian?"

Shinbe backed away wondering if Suki could secretly read his mind or something. She had an uncanny knack for knowing just when he was misbehaving or at least thinking about it.

"Oh Suki, please pour me some water quickly. The sooner I take this medicine, the sooner I'll feel better," Kyoko offered knowing Shinbe hadn't been doing anything wrong.

Kyoko to the rescue! Shinbe kept the cheer to himself.

Suki poured some water in her cup and started to chatter on about how Toya was having a tantrum about her not returning early yesterday afternoon.

Shinbe leaned against the wall, watching Kyoko, and half listening to the conversation. "If he screamed at me one more time, I thought I was going to!" Take you in my arms and kiss you senseless. "He's such an arrogant bully!" I want you so bad, Kyoko. "And the way he treats!" Shinbe fidgeted, wondering how long he could keep his secret, now that he had claimed her. "Isn't that right, Shinbe?"

Huh? Did someone ask him a question? Shinbe glanced from Suki to Kyoko as they both stared at him waiting for his response.

Having no clue what they were talking about, he took the safe

way out, "Why, yes. I think you're absolutely right, Suki. If you will excuse me, I have to go speak with Toya." With that, he quickly escaped out the door.

Suki and Kyoko watched the door close after him, and both girls giggled.

Shinbe made it to the outside of the small structure and quickly leaned forward against the wall. He placed his hands against the cool wood on each side of his head, and then thumped his forehead against the wooden planks. The pain always seemed to help him clear his mind. It was just slow this morning. After last night, he couldn't get the feelings back under his control. It was worse now than it had ever been.

He really didn't want to grope Suki so she would hit him, it just didn't feel right to do so after touching Kyoko's body. He feared he would never be able to touch another but her again, without wanting to rip his own hand off. He had chosen his mate and she didn't even know it.

Toya stood about five feet away, watching his brother and feeling waves of guilt wash from him. One of the perks about being a guardian was that you could sense things about those around you like a lie detector from Kyoko's world.

He cocked a dark eyebrow, "What did you do, grope Suki again?" Toya frowned at his brother, seeing him flinch at his voice.

Shinbe flashed startled, dark violet eyes at Toya and pushed back from the wall, righting himself. "NO! I well, you see!"

Shinbe frowned at his own stuttering. He quickly forced himself to become calm, once again gaining composure. "I was just staying out here so I wouldn't make any noise and bother Kyoko's hangover," he said with a wise edge to his voice, hoping Toya would take the same advice.

Toya growled in the back of his throat, "I still want to know how the hell she wound up drunk. I think I'll go find out right now." He started to angrily pass him, then stopped when Shinbe reached out and grabbed his arm in a firm grip. Toya scowled down at the opposing hand, wondering what his brother thought he was doing.

Shinbe watched silver highlights leap into Toya's golden eyes and quickly let go of his arm. In a steady voice he ventured, "If I were you, I wouldn't do that yet, unless you like the taste of floor." He hid his smirk when he sensed Toya's remembrance of the taming spell.

Toya gave his brother a brooding look before turning his back to the door mumbling, "She should know better than to get in that shape to start out with." He suddenly cringed holding his head where Suki had just brained him with her slayers weapon as she stepped out the door behind him.

"Ouch, what the hell was that for?" Toya glared at her.

Suki stood, giving him a "You know what that was for" look. "Don't be so over protective," she glared at him, knowing he would never hurt her. "Kyoko told me what happened last night."

Shinbe felt his life begin to pass before his eyes. He quit breathing, waiting for Toya to kill him.

Suki continued, "Her friends, on the other side of the heart of time, took her to a gathering where there was alcohol, she paused for effect, she did not drink anything. Instead, she ate a lot of fruit, only to then find out it had been soaked in very strong alcohol," her lips twitched. "But by then, she was already drunk."

Toya growled and turned, starting to go in and yell at her for her stupidity, but again received a numbing blow from Suki.

"Leave her alone, she just went back to sleep. And I don't think she will be able to go anywhere today. So I suggest we leave her here to rest. We can search for the crystal talisman without her for one day."

She turned to look at Shinbe, wondering why he was acting so strange. He'd usually tried to grope her at least ten times before noon. "Shinbe, are you all right this morning?" she stepped closer and stared up into his pale face seeing his eyes were a touch overly bright.

Shinbe came back to life when he noticed Suki was close to his face. He quickly took a step back, then it dawned on him what she'd said. He gave a soft sigh, shaking his head, "Actually Suki, no, I'm not feeling too good myself." He didn't have to fake it either, because as disturbed as he had been since last night, he really felt like he was losing his mind.

Toya scrunched up his nose at his brother, "Yeah, you really

do look like crap. Maybe we should leave you here to watch after Kyoko." He then narrowed his eyes on the amethyst guardian. "But if you touch her, she'll tell me." Knowing his warning had been heard loud and clear, Toya turned back to Suki. "Do you want to go get Kamui, or should I?" he questioned, not really wanting to feel her weapon upside his head again.

Suki shrugged, "I'll get him. You," She shoved her finger into his chest, "Stay out here."

Shinbe choked on his laugh trying to keep in mind he was sick. How did he ever pull this one off? As a guardian himself, Toya should know guardians do not get sick at least he'd never known one to do so. Still the idea of staying with Kyoko, of being alone with her all day well, that temptation was just too much.

Shinbe watched Toya glare at Suki's back as she went to get Kamui, but he stayed outside. Within a couple of minutes, Kaen joined them, peeking in the door at Kyoko. Shinbe knew Kaen would watch after Kamui if they ran into any trouble. A guardian for a guardian, he had often teased his younger brother.

Shinbe watched the group until they were out of sight. He felt his body and mind relax for the first time all morning. With a sigh, he turned and went back into the hut where Kyoko was sleeping.

Kyoko stirred in her semi-sleep, her mind drifting to the night before. Back to the party, trying to spend what little time she had in her world with Tasuki. She really missed him because this

world took up so much of her time. Sheâ##d been so focused on him that she hadnâ##t even realized the fruit was tainted until it was too late. She pouted, wondering if Tasuki had known the whole time.

She didnâ##t remember much about making it back to the maiden shrine, or back here to the hut for that matter. She did remember some of the dream sheâ##d had thoughâ##; Shinbe. Kyoko slid in and out of sleep, her thoughts continued as if they didnâ##t care whether she was awake or not.

Sheâ##d always liked Shinbe because out of their small little group, he was the most fun of the guardians to be around. And he could always make her laugh without even trying. He was not the type of guy who would settle on just one woman though. Obviously he had issues. But lately she had started seeing him in a different light.

Kyoko tossed in her sleep. It just wasnâ##t fair. She loved Toya deeply, but he seldom gave her a glimmer of feelings back. Now Shinbe, on the other hand, was a different story. When Toya would yell at her for little things, Shinbe always seemed to try to make her feel better.

It was almost as if the worse Toya acted, the sweeter Shinbe would become, but he acted as if it was nothing but friendship. Sometimes she wondered about him, and that was probably what had led to the dreams sheâ##d started having of him. Up until last night, her dreams had stayed within the limits of sanity. Last nightâ##s dream had gone way out of control.

She knew Toya loved her in his own way, and would probably even die for her, but he refused to show her his true feelings. She knew him getting angry so easily, and bossing her around was just his way of hiding the fact that he cared about her. Sometimes, he hid his feelings so well, that she almost believed him. Still, she found herself comparing the two men. She was always around Shinbe and Toya, and both guardians had their good and bad points.

When dreaming of Toya kissing her, it was always soft and sweet, only sometimes turning heated. With Shinbe, it was always different. Way different. She thought of herself as a woman when dreaming of Shinbe. In those dreams, he kissed her in places unimaginable, and did things to her body that she never thought could feel so good.

She sighed in her sleep. But they were only dreams. Kyoko curled up into a ball and shivered at the memory of last night's dream. Her body trembling beneath his as he made mad passionate love to her; she whimpered at the memory. Dreaming of Shinbe like that, almost made her feel like she was cheating on Toya.

'No!' she told her mind, 'Toya has never been my boyfriend. Therefore I do not have one, and so long as it's in my mind, I can think anything I want!' including in my dreams.'

The dream had been so stimulating that when she awoke, she felt like she would just melt. When she saw him sitting there against the wall, as if nothing had happened, that alone

confirmed it being only a dream. What was going on in her head? She had to get a grip. Shinbe could never love some inexperienced, little girl like herself. He was obviously a man of the world, who had probably conquered more women in one night than she could count on both hands. She squeezed her eyes shut refusing to think anything else.

Shinbe had come back into the hut relaxed and calm until his eyes fell on her sleeping form. His whole body stilled and he stood there, just watching her for a few minutes. He saw her shivering, lying on the thin mat. Why didn't she still have the cover he'd placed across her last night? He glanced over to where she had shoved the cover out of the way while dealing with Toya.

He silently crept over and covered her with the thick blanket and stayed beside her as she continued her restless sleep. Why did he have to feel this way? he sighed as he sat down, leaning against the wall, watching her. He knew the answer to that. Shinbe, the guy that everyone took as a joke when it came to women, had fallen in love with a girl from another time.

He stared at her longingly and then pressed his lips together. She was going to kill him when she realized it wasn't a dream. Toya was going to kill him too. Could he die twice for such a crime?

Slumping his shoulders Shinbe sighed again, Yeah about Toya. Kyoko was in love with his hot tempered brother. He could feel the guilt creeping up his spine. Why did she

have to fall for the one who would never treat her right? He would love her with everything he had. So what if he had a little curse on himself. That shouldn't be too weird. After all, Kyoko had told them about her grandfather and his belief in curses, and demons. Damn, Toya.

Kyoko murmured in her sleep. He glanced up to see she rolled over with her back to him. The blanket he had placed around her had slipped off. The skimpy skirt she wore had flipped up, exposing her most precious asset. A shiver coursed through his body. So freakin tempting.

His hand reached out to caress the silky white material that obstructed his view further. He gritted his teeth, pulling his hand back before his fingers made contact. Ah, so close. But so is death, and I'd like to live a little longer. he gave a snort of laughter as he tucked his hands inside his coat. He had to watch what he did from here on out, or his life could end a little sooner than he anticipated.

He would tell her the truth in a minute, if she weren't in love with his brother. He knew he wasn't alone in his feelings for her. She was their priestess, and they protected her with their life. All of his brothers loved her dearly, each in their own way. But Toya was different. Toya never liked anyone. Shinbe had seen it. Toya was deeply in love with Kyoko, even if he wouldn't acknowledge it.

Shinbe closed his eyes, feeling them start to burn. He had no right to love Kyoko, or anyone else for that matter. He had the

ability to save them all in battle. All he had to do was cast the spell of time, and he could create a void that sucked up everything in its path. It was his greatest power, and his worst enemy. Every time he used the dangerous spell, he could feel it getting stronger.

Everyone had warned him not to use it unless he had no other choice because one day it would become too strong for him to handle, and turn on him. The spell had been a gift from his uncle, the same uncle that was the enemy. At first he had thought it was a grand gift, but now he realized it wasn't a gift at all. It was a curse. One he would use to destroy the very one who had given it to him, even if he lost his own life in the process.

Shinbe yawned. He had gotten almost no sleep last night, before, nor after Kyoko had come back. He'd spent most of the evening listening to Toya rant because she hadn't come back through the heart of time before dark like she promised.

At first, Shinbe had worried that she was still mad at Toya when she hadn't come back. She'd screamed at Toya before leaving because he'd tried to keep her from going back to her time. Toya had even stood in front of her, blocking her from the maiden shrine. In the end, she wound up putting that spell on him numerous times, more times than Shinbe was able to keep count of. But she'd promised to come back before dark the next day.

Shinbe smirked remembering how Toya had fought the spell, cursing all the while about what he was going to do to Kyoko

when he was able to move again.

His gaze roamed over Kyoko's form. This is why he found her so irresistible. She could be angry with Toya one minute, and love him the next. She held no grudge, no matter how much he hurt her.

When Toya had first met her, he'd tried to kill her. Now things had changed, everyone knew that Toya loved her to death, would even die for her. But still he pretended he couldn't stand her and it often hurt her feelings. It was just Toya's way of hiding his heart.

Shinbe placed his fingers over the bridge of his nose, trying to ease his mind. Honestly, he felt bad for Toya, and didn't really intend on thinking bad things about him. It's just that Toya had a chance with Kyoko and ignored it.

He would have died for a chance like that. He'd treat her like a queen, if only she would let him. That's the reason he lost it last night. The truth was, last night he'd just snapped. Now, after last night... Shinbe squeezed his eyes shut. Maybe she was better off with Toya, after the way he had betrayed her innocence.

Shinbe jerked as Kyoko shifted once more in her sleep, exposing more of her thigh. He stared at her creamy skin, his hands twitching beneath his coat. Why did she have to have such beautiful skin? He felt himself getting sleepier as he watched Kyoko's restless slumber and slowly crawled across the floor, never taking his eyes off the back of her head. He knew if

he got any closer, she was going to wake up, roll over, and slap him.

So far, so good. He leaned over her still form to gaze down at her face. Shinbe grinned. She still smelled of alcohol.

“Didn’t bother me last night,” he smirked.

A stray auburn tress clung to her shoulder. He gently reached down and slid it to the side with a soft sigh before laying down behind her, nuzzling into her silky locks. He dared not get any closer for fear of death but while she slept, he could at least offer her comfort. He reasoned with himself.

If she were to wake up and find him there, he would just explain how tired he was, and that this was the only place to lie while keeping an eye on her that is. He’d gladly take the slap he’d get for this. It would be worth it, just to lie beside her for a few hours and rest. He was too exhausted to worry about the consequences as his eyes drifted closed. He was right where he wanted to be and damn the consequences.

Kyoko whimpered sleepily and rolled over feeling a pocket of warmth. She pulled her hands up under her chin and nuzzled into it. When she tilted her head and it stopped against something solid she sighed deciding she was probably just dreaming again. Testing the theory, she placed one of her hands against the warmth.

Yup, very solid. She snuggled closer in her dream, and in her dream, the warmth wrapped around her waist. She smelled the scent of jasmine tea and a woody, earthy scent.

Why can't I get him off my mind? He smelled so good.

She remembered the first time he had held her in his arms. He thought he was saving her. She smiled in her sleep, he was so strong, and his concern for her welfare was truly sweet, even if his reasons were not quite legit. That was the first time she'd noticed how nice he smelled.

She shivered at the memory, and the warm object around her waist tightened. She slowly wrapped her arm around the warmth, and froze when she heard the distinct rustle of material.

What? Rustle of material? Did dreams rustle like robes?

Kyoko was suddenly wide-awake. Slowly, she barely opened one eye to stare in confusion at the bluish-gray trench coat her hands were entwined with. And she shot up like a rocket, knocking his arm away with a thud. And he, he moaned and rolled over onto his back.

Kyoko was panic stricken, looking around from side to side. No one else was here and this most definitely was not a dream. Shinbe was sleeping on her mat. She had to think. What, what was going on? She stared at him frozen to the spot.

It was just a dream, right? Get a hold of yourself Kyoko. She thought frantically. Where was Toya? Suki? Kamui? Kaen? Where had everyone gone?

She nearly jumped out of her skin when Shinbe moaned in his sleep and tucked his hands inside his trench coat. When she'd

jumped up, she had taken the blanket with her. Kyoko blinked, and then blushed guiltily. "He was cold." She was cold too now that she was standing. She remembered feeling like she was freezing off and on while trying to sleep.

Is that why he'd lain down beside her? To keep her warm? Her blush deepened. "Aww, that was so sweet," she shook her head from side to side. "No, no, no! What am I thinking? Not sweet, not sweet," she sighed, smiling softly at him. "I give up."

She slowly, cautiously bent down, gripping the blanket, and froze when he suddenly moved in his sleep. She stood back, waiting to see if he would wake up. He didn't. So, she quickly threw the blanket over his sleeping form, grabbed her bag, and then made a mad dash for the door.

Shinbe opened one eye as he watched her retreat. Once she was out of sight, he laughed inwardly, 'Another lucky save.' Then he frowned wondering why he didn't have a handprint on his cheek or a crack in his skull. He slowly stood up and counted to ten, then followed to see where Kyoko had gone.

Once outside, Kyoko leaned against a nearby tree realizing she should have probably stayed in bed. Her heart was pounding and her body was sore all over. She bent down massaging her legs. She remembered dancing with Tasuki last night after she'd ate the tainted fruit but it felt more like she'd been hit by a truck. A nice hot soak in the hot springs would ease the muscle cramps.

She once again made a mental note to never eat fruit at a party

again. Then a thought struck her. Toya will pick up Shinbe's scent on her clothes. Ahh! The last thing she wanted to do was get Shinbe in trouble when he didn't even do anything. She stumbled away from the hut, groaning at the lingering hangover but determined to wash not only her pain away but her clothing too.

Toya growled deep in the back of his throat as he surveyed the village they had come to. He gritted his teeth knowing they were too late. The village was in shambles. It seemed that no matter what they did lately, they were always one step behind Hyakuhei and his demons. He scowled, searching the village for survivors.

"There must have been a piece of the talisman hidden here for him to have bothered destroying the whole village." Toya's golden eyes grew dim with worry.

"We need to help them," Suki said softly as she walked into the village with Kamui by her side. She bent down to check on a crying child that seemed to be sitting there lost and alone.

For a moment, Toya closed his eyes to the familiar scene as his blood boiled. He knew Hyakuhei had almost every piece of the talisman in his possession and didn't care whom he hurt to get the rest of it. After all, Hyakuhei had even killed his own brother. Now the guardians were trying to protect Kyoko from the same murderer.

If Hyakuhei succeeded in collecting all the pieces of the crystal, he would be able to break into Kyoko's world and take

many demons with him. They couldn't let that happen. He felt a cold chill crawl up his spine and knew something was wrong.

Kyoko, the word echoed within his mind like a warning.

"You two, stay here and help. I have to go check on Kyoko, now!" Toya shouted, tearing off in the direction they'd come from. He knew something was not right; he could feel it clear down to his soul. He should have never left her without his protection, not with Hyakuhei's demon spawns so close. He couldn't shake the fear of losing the other half of his heart.

"I won't let him touch you," Toya vowed in his headlong race to reach Kyoko, before danger did.

Chapter 3 "Kiss of Jealousy"

Kyoko set off in the direction of the hot spring. She was tired, sore, and couldn't wait to just be able to relax in steamy water. She stumbled on a rock and wondered if it was going to take weeks to get her balance back after getting drunk only one time.

"Damn it! Geez, now I sound just like Toya," she said to herself with a giggle.

Shinbe followed quietly, peeking out from behind trees ever so often. He had to stifle the laugh that threatened to escape him when he heard the comment about her sounding like Toya. It was great to find out he wasn't the only one in the group that held complete conversations with their self. If he was crazy, then they made a great couple. He stayed back long enough to let her gain some distance between them.

Finally getting to the secluded hot spring, Kyoko rummaged through her bag. Finding what she needed, she arranged her bathing supplies by the side of the water. She quickly undressed, easing her aching body into the steaming water. "Umm, this feels so good." She closed her eyes and rubbed her legs, trying to ease the tightness that were slow in leaving. Finally satisfied, she lay back in the water and completely relaxed.

Shinbe leaned against a tree as he watched in fascination of her daily ritual. She was graceful and pure; he suddenly felt guilty again for his actions. He turned his back to the scene and placed a hand over his heart where the pain seemed to tighten.

He shouldn't be here; he was not a good man. She was going to hate him when she realized what he'd done to her. He frowned as the weight on his chest became that much heavier. But still, he couldn't resist the urge to turn around and stare longingly. He sighed longingly as he watched her sink into the water.

"This is so much better than the small bathtub at home in the modern world," Kyoko broke the silence as she glanced around. It was more like a hidden swimming pool really. This spot was so peaceful and secluded. Trees and small shrubs surrounded the hot spring, giving her absolute privacy. "The stone ledge on one side would be nice for sunbathing." she thought randomly with a smile. She hummed in contentment as she floated on top of the water.

After floating in the water for a moment, she decided she'd

better get on with the cleansing part. She lathered her hair then ducked under the water to rinse, coming up with a splash, only to put more stuff on her hair and do it again. Then before getting out, she took time to scrub her clothes clean, hoping the sun would dry them quickly.

Sneaking closer, Shinbe watched intently from the security of a bush about ten feet away. He took in the curves of her body. Gods, she was beautiful! like a goddess emerging from the spring. She tied a cloth around her upper torso before wrapping one around her hair then ever so slowly she dried her body.

He'd watched her bathe in secret many times before, but never been able to stick around long enough to enjoy this part. Usually someone came looking for him before she had time to finish. He sighed as she slowly ran the cloth down her long legs. Pain found him causing him to grit his teeth as she put on those small pieces of clothing that covered her most precious places. It was all he could do not to take the few steps that would put her within reaching distance.

A crunching sound suddenly came from the opposite side of the hot springs. Shinbe heard it, and so had Kyoko because she stood frozen in place. They both listened intently for more sounds. Another twig snapped but this time it came from a bush closer to Kyoko. He watched in horror as Kyoko walked straight up to a large shrub, holding her towel in front of her like a shield, and called out.

“Okay, Shinbe! I know it's you! Come out! so I can

slap you! Kyoko waited, eyeing the shrub wearily. Shinbe was a known peeping tom. She cocked an eyebrow in annoyance, and he was the only one around so. The bush shook gently. I know you're there, and when Toya finds out your spying on me, he's probably gonna kill you. Not to mention, I'm sure Suki won't mind beating on you either.

The shrub shook again and a long black pointy leg came out from behind the tangled limbs.

What the! Kyoko turned to run just as a very large demonic scorpion climbed out from behind the vegetation. She ran towards her clothes where she had left her crossbow inside the pack.

Kyoko! Get down! Shinbe came running out of the opposite bushes with a big stick raised in his hand like a spear. He threw it at the demon. The red eyed scorpion saw it coming and swung one leg around, blocking the pointed weapon, and sent it sailing through the air. It landed at Kyoko's feet, just as she bent down to pick up her crossbow. Her brow twitched as she realized just how close that had come to hitting her.

Shinbe ran towards her, bending down to pick up the stick. With a quirk of an eyebrow, he looked at Kyoko and grinned crookedly. Why Kyoko, I do believe you are just a little under dressed for killing a demon. His grin grew wider at the look on her face. Then her look turned to pure horror.

Feeling a foreboding chill race up his back, Shinbe turned around, swinging his makeshift staff wildly as the scorpion

demon lunged at them. He was able to hit one hairy leg, but the other struck him in the side, throwing him away from Kyoko. Shinbe's blood froze as the deadly scorpion stalked closer to the priestess.

He knew the demon possessed creature could sense the power within her. Knowing he had to do something fast, he used his telekinetic powers to lift a good sized rock, and flung it as hard as he could, smirking as it struck the scorpion on the head.

The demon screeched and swung its head around to pin a glare at the wounded guardian. Shinbe lay on the ground struggling to get back up as the demon came after him again. He rolled just in time to point the sharp end of the stick up as the demon came crashing down on him. Shinbe's amethyst eyes glowed as he whispered a spell to soften the monsters hard flesh.

Kyoko screamed Shinbe's name in panic as she watched the demon descend on him. Everything happened so quickly that she didn't have time to even blink. One moment the demon was jumping on him, and the next, the end of that same stick was sticking out its back as black blood oozed to the ground. She watched as the possessed scorpion twitched before becoming limp and falling heavily on top of Shinbe.

Shinbe! Kyoko screamed in panic. She ran to him seeing the blood pooling on the dirt around them at an alarmingly fast pace. She gave a mental cringe hoping none of that blood was coming from her guardian but it was hard to tell with the oversize spawn covering everything except one side of Shinbe's face.

His eyes were closed and for a moment her heart stopped as fear washed across her.

Shinbe could sense it, Kyoko was still terrified and whatever it was making her feel that way, he had to destroy. With a shudder to fight the pain, he opened his eyes to find her staring down at him, pale as a ghost. His heart thudded hard as he realized she was frightened for him. He could feel warmth in his veins as her fear eased from seeing that he was alive.

Shinbe spoke in a raspy voice, "Kyoko, please. Help me get it off." He strained to shove the dead beast off, but his arms were trapped between it and his body. Even possessed, the mindless demon should not weigh as much as it did, and should not have put up such a fight. His eyes narrowed sensing a shattered piece of the crystal so close to him, "Kyoko, it's riding the power of a talisman! find it."

Kyoko quit pushing at the gigantic creature for a moment, trying to focus her power to scan its body. When the guardian heart crystal had shattered and rained down across the demon realm, it had sent demons of all sizes into a frenzy to find the powerful shards. This must have been a small scorpion at one time! until it was lucky enough to be possessed by a demon then come across one of the missing pieces and get one hell of a power boost.

"There!" she gasped as she noticed a small electric blue glow coming from its neck. Stifling the urge to retch, Kyoko looked into its still open mouth. Making a face, she

reached in and grabbed the crystal, watching as the scorpions size automatically began to shrink. Quickly, she pushed and it slid to the side enough that Shinbe was able to push it the rest of the way off before it shriveled up smaller than the size of her hand.

Kyoko looked down at him, his long midnight blue hair obscuring his face, but from its movement she could see he was trying to catch his breath. Her gaze traveled his body looking for wounds. His side was bleeding profusely where the demon had hit him hard with its pointed leg. She looked around blindly for something to stop the bleeding. Then she ran to her towel, knowing it would be good to press against the wound.

Shinbe sat up giving a disgusted glare at the dead little bug. With his hand over the slice in his side, he turned his attention back to Kyoko and silently watched her run to get the towel she'd discarded in her haste. His gaze roamed her body, completely forgetting about the pain he was in.

'She has forgotten she is still unclothed,' he thought, 'Well, I'm not going to remind her.' He tried to keep his expression calm as she came back with the towel.

Kyoko sat down beside Shinbe, tugging on his trench coat, trying to see the wound. "Shinbe, do you think you can remove this," she fingered the cloth. "I need to see where all of this blood is coming from."

Her voice was still breathless and soft to his ears, almost seductive sounding. He was so mystified about how much she really cared that he forgot to fantasize about her asking him to

take off his clothes.

Shinbe removed his robe-like coat, and undid the icy-blue shirt underneath. It fell off his shoulders and slid down his arms to lie in a pool around him, baring his chest and taunt stomach muscles to her, along with the gash on his hip. He reached down and pushed that side of the loose pants down a couple inches, so she could better see, but left his arm across his lap to hide the evidence of his erection.

Kyoko swallowed as she tried to stay focused on the wound, instead of what surrounded it. Placing a hand across his exposed skin to steady herself, she pressed firmly with the white cloth, watching it turn crimson. She felt his muscles jerk under her palm and it sent heat shooting up her arm. Her startled emerald eyes went quickly to his, locking with his amethyst gaze.

He noticed the blush spread across her cheeks as their eyes met and wondered at it, feeling his own flesh heat where her soft hand was touching him. "Kyoko, are you all right?" He watched her nod weakly as she looked back down at the towel, removing it gently to see if the bleeding had stopped. Seeing it had, she went to wet the rag so she could clean the rest of the blood off him.

Shinbe looked down, thinking to himself, 'No wonder it quit bleeding, all the blood has rushed to another destination.## He sighed, quickly clearing the thought away as she came back and kneeled over him, giving him another view of her bra-clad breast. His darkening amethyst gaze darted back to her face. He knew she had to put some clothes on if he was to keep his dignity.

Kyoko was slowly wiping the blood from his skin, making sure to be very, very gentle when she heard him say her name in a husky strained voice. She stopped her movements and lifted her face towards his. But the way she was leaning, she found herself only mere inches from his face. His eyes almost glowed and he seemed so much larger than life at that moment. Her focus slowly lowered to his lips as neither of them said a word.

Shinbe watched her lips part, and his body moved with a will of its own as he closed the distance between them. He brushed his lips across hers in a feather-light kiss that was only the calm before the storm; his breath heated across her cheek. Then a roaring blur of red and black slammed into him as pain shot through his wound that his guardian powers had just started healing.

Shinbe was hauled backward and slammed into the ground by a very enraged Toya, who now stood above him, pointing one of his twin daggers directly at his throat.

"What the hell do you think you are doing kissing Kyoko, you bastard?" Toya screamed, shaking with rage. The sight of Shinbe kissing Kyoko was forever burned into his retinas. "I left her in your care and you decide to molest her?" he yelled, infuriated.

Shinbe's amethyst eyes darkened to a deep purple.

Kyoko shoved her way between them, her back to Shinbe as if protecting him. Glaring at Toya, she demanded, "Don't you dare!" She threw out her hands in a shielding gesture. "It's not what you think, Toya."

Toya lowered his dagger with a snarl, "Oh yeah, then why the hell are you naked?" His silver eyes lowered on her bare skin to make his point.

Kyoko's world came crashing down on her, and she just knew the gods were laughing about it as she froze in place. All of a sudden, she felt the breeze across her bare skin, and could feel Toya's eyes heating her skin just as fast. Dropping her arms back to her sides, her gaze sought out her clothing, seeing they were now dry and laying on the rock not far away.

Snapping her eyes back to Toya's, she hissed, "I was attacked and Shinbe saved my life. I was helping him because he was wounded protecting me, and so what? I kissed him, big deal. It was a thank you!" She tried to ease her way out from between them and toward her clothes, but changed her mind when Toya again pointed the dagger at Shinbe's throat.

"You asked her for a kiss as a reward for saving her? You damned pervert!" Toya growled out, now even more furious with the guardian. Then with one quick jerk, he grabbed Kyoko's arm, pulling her behind him and out of his brother's sight.

Shinbe's eyes flashed with anger at Toya's treatment of Kyoko. "Put the blade away, Toya," Shinbe's words began to ice as he stood up brushing his pants off, his chest still bare. He towered over Toya menacingly, being the taller of the two, getting ready to fly into him. After all, no one had ever called him a coward.

Kyoko hurried back around and slipped between the brothers once again. Her breast accidentally brushed Toya's chest at the

same time that her back grazed Shinbe's hot skin because they were in the middle of taking a threatening step closer to each other. Her eyebrow began to twitch.

"I kissed him. He didn't ask for it. Now, both of you go away so I can get dressed." She looked up, searching Toya's silver gaze and softened her voice almost pleadingly, "This is bad enough without making it worse."

She felt Shinbe back away and without turning to look, she knew he was getting dressed. She could hear the rustle of the material as he slid it on with jerking motions. Knowing better than to turn and look, she kept her eyes glued to Toya waiting to see if he had any more tendencies to injure Shinbe. She almost sighed in relief as she heard Shinbe's retreating footsteps as he left the side of the spring.

Toya didn't pay attention to Shinbe's departure. At the moment, he was still staring into Kyoko's eyes in confusion. "She kissed Shinbe? Why?" She reached out to touch his arm, but he quickly turned around and took one step away, keeping his back to her.

"Get dressed, but I'm not leaving you alone again. I'll stay until you're ready to leave," the tone in his voice still held anger.

Kyoko huffed and quickly went to her clothes, hurrying into them. Once finally dressed, she turned back around seeing his stiff back and walked past him, ready to return to the hut when he reached out and grabbed her arm, swinging her around to face

him.

Toya just wanted to know why. Why would she kiss Shinbe like that? His dark bangs fell forward, shielding his golden eyes from her. "Why did you kiss him?" he whispered. His hair swayed in the steady breeze, causing the silver highlights to shimmer attractively.

Kyoko frowned not knowing how to respond. In truth, maybe she'd just simply wanted to, but she couldn't say that to him.

She sighed, "I didn't think, so I really don't know why." She lowered her eyes. That was the truth anyway.

Toya felt fear creep into his heart with her answer. He snapped his head back up and looked directly at her, drawing her gaze to his. "Kyoko, you have never tried to kiss me like that," he growled without thinking.

Kyoko's eyes blazed up at him for putting her on the spot, and she yelled back at him, "You never act like you want me to! Besides, I don't have a boyfriend so I'm free to kiss anyone I want too, right?" She jerked her arm from his hold, ignoring his growl at her answer and she stalked past him wondering why all of a sudden he even cared.

Kyoko glared at the ground as she made her way towards the hut. Toya infuriated her. How dare he get angry with her or Shinbe for kissing? What was it to him anyway? He didn't care about her. He loved no one, so what did it matter who she kissed? She threw open the door to the hut and plopped down on

her sleeping bag, deep in thought.

Toya stomped in after her. "I better never see you kiss Shinbe again!" he growled as he sat down across the room from her and leaned back against the wall.

Kyoko glared at him as her mind took in exactly what he just said, or more like ordered. "How dare him," her emerald eyes began shooting sparks.

"I will kiss, Whomever I please, Whenever I please!" with that, Kyoko angrily stood up, rolled up her sleeping bag, picked up her backpack, and headed for the door.

Toya jumped up to follow her with a stricken look. "Where do you think you're going, damn it?" He hadn't meant to make her angry enough to leave. He just didn't like the fact that Shinbe had so much as touched her.

Kyoko stopped with her hand on the doorframe, her back to him. "Toya," she turned slightly, held her hand up toward him, and then with an angry smirk, she used the Taming spell on him, knowing how much he hated it. "Shut up!"

Toya hit the ground with a string of curses. Kyoko stomped out the door, past Shinbe and walked off towards the maiden shrine with every intention of going back home.

Shinbe stood with his back to the hut, a slight grin upon his face. He heard what Kyoko had said, and his grin widened as he heard Toya hit the floor. Kyoko hadn't seen him standing there when she came out, so he followed after her as she walked into the forest.

Chapter 4 "Don't Go"

Coming to the heart of time gardens, Kyoko slowly sat down in the grass in front of the maiden statue, looking up into the maiden's face. She focused on the face that she knew mirrored her own looks. That image belonged to her ancestor that the statue was made in memory of. If living at the same time, they could have been twins.

Kyoko shook the thought away, remembering why she was now sitting in the grass in the first place. Her thoughts began to battle amongst themselves as if she wasn't even there to listen.

“Toya is such a jerk!” She had just come back and all he could do was yell at her. Sometimes she just hated him. OK, maybe that was a lie. Kyoko sighed, 'I can't lie to myself. I do love Toya and when no one is around to witness it, he often proves that he loves me back.' Kyoko narrowed her eyes in thought. “But then he has to go and blow it.”

She was going home and maybe she'd never come back. She jumped up with every intention of laying her hands in the maiden's hands, knowing it would take her home.

“But then you'd never see Shinbe again.” Her eyes widened and her mind screamed, “You have feelings for him! This is ridiculous,” she argued with herself, “I only have lingering feelings because I dreamt about him, that doesn't mean anything.” She backed away from the statue, lowering her hand hesitantly and sat back down, leaning against a cool stone.

But what if he has feelings for you too? Had the kiss gone further, then would he have kissed you back? Who was it that did the kissing again? But he's a player! he'd kiss any woman. And he stuck up for you with Toya. Only because he felt threatened and besides, that's just the way Shinbe is. A deep voice brought her from her scrambled thoughts.

Kyoko, Shinbe's husky voice called out to her. Kyoko's head shot up and she blushed, feeling as if he had heard her thoughts.

Um, hi, she looked away from him, in hopes he didn't see the blush she knew was there.

Are you going home? he took a couple slow steps as he talked, I can't really blame you, after the way Toya acted. Shinbe kneeled in front of her with his hand out stretched to help her up. She took the offered hand and stood up, patting the dust off her skirt.

I just can't stand to be around him sometimes, Shinbe... I'm really sorry about all the trouble I've caused you, she took a step toward the shrine.

Shinbe didn't want Kyoko to leave, but he knew there would be no stopping her once she had her mind made up. He was well aware of how much she hated it when Toya demanded she not leave, and he didn't want her to resent him for the same reasons. But in truth, he felt the same as Toya! he didn't want her to go.

Withholding his true feelings, he tried to cheer her up. "It's okay, Kyoko. You can cause me trouble anytime," he grinned at her pretending to slowly reach for her.

Kyoko didn't miss his hand as it inched its way towards her. She giggled, flashing him a smile. Then she was gone.

Shinbe stood there staring at the statue as his smile faltered. He wanted to tell her not to go. He'd no compulsion to grope her well, maybe a little. He made the action so she would feel at ease about leaving and know nothing had changed between them. He could tell she was upset and all he wanted was to see her smile, or show some other emotions besides sadness and anger. His plan worked better than he thought when she had laughed at him.

Shinbe's haunted amethyst gaze jerked away from the maiden shrine. He hated the time portal's ability to take her away from him and wished he could follow her into her world just once. His eyes darkened attractively, then narrowed with the jealous thought of Toya being able to follow her through the heart of time. Why had the time portal picked the silver guardian and only him? It just wasn't fair. Toya wasn't her only guardian.

When Kyoko found herself on the other side of the maiden shrine, she laid down inside the privacy of the shrine house, resting her head against her backpack and closing her eyes. She didn't want to have to face anyone right now.

Thoughts of Shinbe making love to her kept sneaking their

way back into her mind. Why did she have to dream about him like that? It just made her wish... What am I thinking? she asked herself. She had to stop thinking about it.

Shinbe and Suki obviously liked each other, even if they wouldn't admit it. Plus, he hits on all women. It's just the way Shinbe was.

Kyoko slowly stood up and walked out of the shrine house that protected the maiden statue. I'll just go to my room and study. Yeah, then I'll go to school tomorrow, and everything will be fine. I'll maybe even call my friends and go hang out with them for a little while. Kyoko stopped in her tracks and nearly crossed her eyes thinking aloud, New rule, no eating fruit around her friends.

Toya was still fighting his jealous mood as he slowly walked to the shrine. He had every intention of following Kyoko and straightening this out. He couldn't stand thinking she was mad at him.

His senses spiked, telling him he wasn't alone. He glanced up to find Shinbe leaning back against one of the surrounding boulders left over from some forgotten castle that used to stand here. His hands were neatly tucked into his trench coat with his staff lying across his lap. He was leaning his head back with his eyes closed, as if sleeping.

Wake up, you stupid leech! Toya yelled at him, now more annoyed than ever.

Shinbe cracked open one sleepy eye, then closed it again, "What do you want, Toya?"

Toya fumed, "What do I want? I want to know what the hell you're doing sitting here."

Shinbe opened his eyes and quirked an eyebrow at his sibling, "Am I not allowed to rest?"

Toya narrowed his gaze at him, "Since when do you come to the heart of time to rest?"

Shinbe slowly stood up, readying himself, just in case. He knew Toya was a hell of a lot stronger. But he also knew he wasn't as weak as Toya thought him to be. Their powers were just different.

"I came to say goodbye to Kyoko. After the way you treated her, we'll be lucky if she ever comes back. Just what is going on in that pea brain of yours anyway?" Shinbe's calm voice held a hint of the agitation he'd been hiding.

Toya gave a soft growl, knowing what Shinbe said was true. Maybe, just maybe he did overreact, but still, he saw them kiss. Kyoko kissed that lecherous guardian. The scene played in Toya's mind again and his soul screamed, "No, it was Shinbe kissing Kyoko, not the other way around."

He turned his back to Shinbe, "I don't know what you're up to guardian, but if you ever lay a hand on Kyoko again, I'll kill you." With that, Toya took off into the air, leaving only a single silver feather fluttering in the breeze.

Shinbe sighed and sat back down, leaning against the stone

when he heard Kamui's playful laughter in the distance. A few moments later, Sennin, Kamui, and Suki came into the clearing, holding baskets of herbs and vegetables the old man had been foraging for.

They must have met him on the way back to the hut, Shinbe reasoned.

Sennin was the old man whom they owned the hut they stayed in when they were near the shrine. Sennin had raised Suki and her brother all by himself when his wife, their mother, had been killed by demons during an attack on the village. Suki was too little to remember the mother she favored but she'd been the best human demon slayer within the realm.

To the village, Sennin was a medicine man, but the guardians knew the truth. He was a master at casting spells, and knew way more than most humans within their realm. Shinbe smiled sadly as he watched the old man come closer.

Why do ye look so glum, Shinbe? Sennin asked as he approached. He squinted at him with his ageing sight. The amethyst guardian had been acting a bit odd lately, and that was saying a lot because in his opinion, all the guardians were naturally a bit odd.

Shinbe stood up just as they approached, as if he'd been waiting on them, instead of almost getting into a fight with Toya.

Suki looked behind him at the maiden shrine, Did Kyoko go back home already?

Shinbe stared blankly at her before responding, Yes, yes

she did.##

Kamui stopped searching through the basket for something to eat and looked intently at Shinbe, his smile disappearing and turning to worry. ##Why##d she leave?## Then as if the thought just dawned on him, his eyes narrowed, ##What did Toya do this time?##

Shinbe reached his hand out and put it on Kamui's shoulder to calm him down. He knew Kamui hated it when Kyoko went back to her time, just as much as he did. ##It##s okay Kamui. She##ll be back soon,## or at least he hoped so. He inwardly groaned.

Suki looked troubled. Kyoko had come back sometime during the night. She hadn't even had a chance to talk to her except for a few moments this morning. ##So, did she have to Tame him?##

Shinbe glanced over at the girl and smirked, ##I##m afraid so. Toya is not in a very good mood.##

##I imagine he is not. Do ye know what they disagreed upon this time?## Sennin squinted at him as he shifted his basket and began to walk towards the hut. Suki followed behind with Kamui, who was once again dipping into the basket for food to snack on. Shinbe followed behind trying to think of how to respond to the question.

##Does Toya think he needs a reason to yell at her?## Shinbe shrugged his shoulders, as if he didn't have a clue, all the while hoping no one could sense his guilt.

Toya sat in a tree next to Sennin's hut and listened to their banter as they approached. He heard Shinbe's comment and wanted to beat him to a pulp. But after he thought about it, it was best not to tell them what he'd seen. His eyes glowed with silver sparks as he thought about the kiss. Deciding to hold it in for now, Toya leaned back in the tree and closed his eyes, pretending to be asleep.

"Are ye awake, Toya?" Sennin called up to him.

Toya continued to ignore the old man. It wasn't like he owed him anything.

Sennin paused wanting to make his point anyway, "Ye sure did it this time. Ye couldn't wait until she was back for a while longer?"

Toya leaned forward and glared at Sennin, "Shut up, you old man. You don't even know what you're talking about." He jumped down and headed towards the forest.

Shinbe sighed with relief. He was worried that Toya would tell them about the innocent kiss, and he'd have to explain. "Did I think innocent?" he thought to himself feeling something heavy settle in the pit of his stomach. If it was so innocent, why did he keep thinking about how soft her lips were when they pressed against his? At that thought, he groaned and went into the hut.

Kaen, an ally to the guardians, better described as a fire sprite, appeared before Kamui with a grin. He often helped train Kamui and was very protective of him during battle. It helped that Kaen

could change from human form into a dragon! it made the training that much more intense. They practiced sparring outside the hut as Sennin and Suki glanced at each other.

Suki shrugged her shoulders and they entered the hut. Shinbe was lying on a mat, propped up on his elbow with his back to them. They watched him, but neither said anything about his depressed mood. Suki started the cooking fire, while Sennin prepared the food for dinner, both glancing over at him as he sighed.

Toya stayed away from the hut all day, until the sun began to sink low in the sky. He approached silently as he heard Sennin and Suki talking quietly. His enhanced guardian hearing picked up every word whispered from their lips.

Do you think he's sick, Sennin? Suki asked worriedly as she stared at Shinbe, who was still lying on his blanket, sound asleep.

Ai, he ate not a bite, the old man answered as he cleaned the dinner bowls.

I sure hope he's not coming down with something. Without Kyoko's help, we're really going to need him tomorrow when we go looking for the missing talisman, Suki shrugged as she unrolled her sleeping mat.

Ai, I will make him some herbal tea when he awakens. Sennin didn't think the guardian was sick because they had such high immunity to human illnesses. Truth was! he had

never known one to become ill. It had to be something much deeper than that.

His old brown eyes sharpened as he thought of the missing talisman. Since the guardian heart crystal had been shattered, the small slivers talisman had been popping up everywhere, and usually in the wrong hands. Any weak demon that held a talisman became strong and very dangerous. Hyakuhei's evil army seemed to be growing every day. Lately, he had felt the evil getting closer.

Toya stood outside the hut debating whether or not to go in, when he heard his name mentioned.

"I wonder what Toya was so upset about that it made Kyoko want to go home," Suki stifled a yawn.

Sennin nodded, "Ye would think he'd have learned his lessons by now. We need her just as much as we need the guardians."

Suki sat down on her mat, brushing aside some imaginary dirt, "Well it didn't take him long to make her angry. I bet he said something about her smelling like alcohol." She turned to glare at Kamui when she heard muffled laughter coming from him. Picking up a comb Kyoko had given her, she threw it at him, hitting him on the head, "I thought you were asleep!"

Sennin laughed at the two as he walked to the door, "Goodnight Suki! Kamui."

Toya stood outside the hut. He'd forgotten about Kyoko smelling like alcohol. So, he didn't have to tell them what

really happened, although it would be nice to get Shinbe in trouble with Suki. He grinned. Sheâ##d be so angry with him sheâ##d beat him into the next century.

Jumping into the tree, Toya let out a laugh at the thought of Suki smacking Shinbe, knowing his brother would never lift a finger to stop her.

Chapter 5 "Dangerous Jealousy"

Kyoko was miserable. All she could think about was Shinbe and Toya and that stupid kiss. She lay under the soft covers wide-awake, pondering how she could possibly want to be kissed by either of them. One was Shinbe, the lecherous guardian that flirted with every woman he came in contact with. Heâ##d probably had more women than she could count on her hands, yet just the thought of his kiss sent her swooning.

The other was Toya, who yelled at her for little things and tried to always be the boss of every move she made. Still, sometimes he could be so sweet. They both could. She thumped her head back against the pillow and sighed. It was strange how she used to think of only Toya before she went to sleep, but for a while now, the thoughts had been slowly changing to Shinbe. Shinbeâ##! She drifted off to sleep dreaming about him yet again.

Shinbe awoke in the middle of the night covered in sweat, another dream. He whimpered as he stood up. Why did he have to keep thinking about her? She was driving him over the edge. He looked around making sure Suki and Kamui still slept.

Slipping through the room like a ghost, he exited the hut, and took a deep breath looking up at the sky. That's when he noticed Toya staring down at him from the lower branches of the tree right in front of the hut.

What? Shinbe didn't want another confrontation right now, but the way Toya was glaring at him was just irritating.

Toya sniffed the air and growled, sensing Shinbe's arousal, What are you doing, guardian?

Shinbe bowed his head and placed his fingers against his temple as if he were getting a headache, though that was impossible for an immortal. I am going for a midnight stroll, not that it is any concern of yours.

Toya growled again, jumping down from his perch above Sennin's hut. He walked around Shinbe as if stalking his prey. I'm sure you are, Toya continued circling him.

Shinbe watched him out of the corner of his eye, a bored expression on his face, but mentally ready for Toya to strike. I don't know what you are implying, Toya. But if you don't mind, I really don't need you to hold my hand.

Toya stopped his intimidating circling, and appeared directly in front of Shinbe so fast it caused a breeze. Stay away from Kyoko, you hear me? If I think for one minute, you touched her! He jerked his arm down by his side and let one of the twin daggers form in his palm as he narrowed his gaze on the other guardian, I won't think twice about killing you, brother or not.

Shinbe couldn't stand Toya's heavy-handedness, "Yes, I understand. Now, if you don't mind."

Toya moved to the side, letting Shinbe pass. "I don't trust that guardian," Toya thought to himself.

Shinbe walked into the forest. He didn't care where he was going. He just wanted to get as far away as possible from Toya's knowing eyes. Yes, he knew Toya would kill him when he found out what he did, but at least he'd die a happy man. He sighed looking up into the star filled night, "Aw, Kyoko. Why did you have to leave? Damn Toya." He swung his staff out in front of him and growled. "Damn you."

Shinbe kept on walking with no intention of going near the shrine, but that's where he wound up anyway. He stood at the edge of the clearing, knowing he shouldn't be there. Toya was probably following. He glanced around self-consciously for any signs of his hot-tempered brother. When he didn't sense him anywhere, he slowly made his way towards the maiden statue.

He stood in front of the statue, looking at the image of Kyoko from the past, daydreaming, and never hearing the footsteps that came up behind him.

"What the hell do you think you're doing here, guardian?" Toya called in a low tone from behind. He startled Shinbe so much that he lost his balance and almost fell into the arms of the maiden, had Toya not grabbed him by the arm.

"Toya, you really have to stop sneaking up on people like this," Shinbe said with a growl as he shook off Toya's hand.

I told you to stay away from Kyoko. I don't know what's going on in that head of yours, but if I have to knock some sense into you, I will," Toya's eyes sparked madly in anger at the thought of his brother, harboring feelings for Kyoko. Not in this lifetime, not if he had anything to do about it.

Shinbe had had enough of Toya's threats. He just snapped. "What the hell!" he swung his staff at Toya, who jumped back out of the way. "You've had a million chances with Kyoko, but you always chose to close your eyes to it. Now you want to tell her whom she can be with? Whom she can kiss?" he laughed but it sounded angry. "It isn't going to happen, Toya. You lose." Shinbe shook his head and steadied his staff, ready for the oncoming rampage. He knew just what Toya was capable of but he was tired of backing down.

Toya stared at Shinbe in shock. He couldn't move. He knew he couldn't use the twin daggers; if he did, he would kill his brother. His eyes began to bleed molten silver as they narrowed on his sibling, "What did you just say? Are you telling me you want Kyoko?" Toya growled as he added, "You are nothing but a lecherous guardian. Kyoko would never have you!" He lunged at Shinbe.

Shinbe dodged Toya's swing and stood his ground, "Do you think she'd still want you, when all you do is try to control her and act like you don't give a damn about her feelings?" He dodged another of Toya's blows and laughed. "Getting slow" his voice darkened, "or did I touch a nerve?"

Toya stood staring at Shinbe. Why he didn't call the twin daggers out, he didn't know. But he wanted to spill Shinbe's blood, desperately. He didn't need blades to do that. "You have no right to talk about what I do," Toya's tone was deadly as he lowered his head, his bangs shadowing the red tint that was creeping in with the silver that had already taken over his irises.

Shinbe quirked an eyebrow at Toya. "Ha, so I did hit a nerve. How interesting. The silver guardian does have feelings! he feels for his priestess. But you have no right to tell Kyoko whom she can kiss. After all, like she said, she doesn't have a boyfriend. So, the way I see it, she's fair game." Shinbe shrugged, turning around and glancing at the shrine.

Toya took that moment to lunge at Shinbe, "Damn you, don't turn your back on me!" He hit Shinbe hard, sending him tumbling, his staff sailing across the clearing.

Shinbe was quick on his feet and rolled, standing up to face Toya. His long, midnight blue hair swayed in the breeze as his amethyst eyes glowed dangerously. Both guardians were silent for a moment as they faced each other in anger. The grass around them and the maiden statue shimmered with an unnoticed aura left over by the enemy.

Weaponless and at a disadvantage Shinbe placed his hand in front of him, palm up as he called on his guardian powers. The boulders around them started to break loose from the ground they had been trapped in for so long. He knew he didn't have

time to complete the spell when Toya charged at him again. He tried to move out of the way, but felt his legs buckle as he hit the side of the maiden statue.

The heavy rocks plummeted back to the ground as Toya crashed into him, grabbing him by the throat. Shinbe grabbed the front of Toya's shirt as they both tumbled into a sea of warm blue mist.

Instead of landing with a thud as Shinbe expected, he felt himself wrapped in a soft blue light. His first thought was that he must have been dying, since Toya had been strangling him just before they fell. Coming out of the slow motion, the mysterious mist disappeared and they did land hard. Toya's hands were still around his neck.

As his senses came back to him in a rush, Shinbe reached his hands up between Toya's arms and was able to pry the guardian's hands off him.

Toya landed on his back as Shinbe pushed him away. That's when he realized where they were. "What the..?" Toya stared up into the darkness, seeing the roof above his head. They had slipped into Kyoko's time? Shinbe was in Kyoko's fucking time? "No!" Toya growled as he pushed himself off the wooden floor and glared at Shinbe. None of the guardians had ever made it through the heart of time, except him. He was the only guardian allowed here. Jealousy sizzled in Toya's blood.

"Now I'm really gonna kill you!" Toya charged

Shinbe again, getting a blow in to the side of his head.

Shinbe wasn't as weak as he looked though. He shook his head as he reached a leg out, quickly fell and kicked Toya in the side, and sent him tumbling.

Toya growled as he landed sideways against the shrine wall.

Shinbe leaned against the wooden wall panting hard, trying to catch his breath. His coat was torn in places, and his head was throbbing from Toya's blow. He glanced over at Toya, who looked none the worse for wear; his only expression was mad as hell.

Toya crouched down and yelled, "You are not allowed here!" He shot toward Shinbe again, but hit the wall with a thump when Shinbe moved out of the way at the last second.

Toya may have been stronger, but Shinbe was faster. As he dodged, Shinbe turned and fired a life force blast that would have hurt a god.

Toya slammed backwards but his anger kept him from feeling a thing. He wiped the blood from his lip as he glared at Shinbe with mercury eyes. He needed to calm down, but even as the thought entered his mind, rage pushed it back out. What he wanted was to hurt Shinbe, real bad. He watched as Shinbe leaned, with his palms on his legs panting and took that opportunity to grab him by his coat, tossing Shinbe out the shrine house door.

Guardians couldn't be killed; least that was the theory; it was a lie. Hyakuhei had killed their father and no one was

immortal. Shinbe slid across the gravel before rolling to a stop then stood up, wiping blood and grime out of his eyes.

Kyoko lay in her bed wondering what had startled her awake. She could hear thumps and muffled growls so she just assumed grandpa was up late watching TV. She nearly jumped out of her skin when Tama burst into her room.

“Kyoko!” Tama pointed towards the window. “Somebody’s fighting in the courtyard,” he barely stuttered the words out as Kyoko ran to the window to look out. She couldn’t really see anything because they had obviously taken out the light post that stood near the edge of the yard.

Tama stood next to her, staring out into the courtyard, just as a flash of red and black appeared closer to the house where the light was coming from the porch.

He pointed, “Its, its!”

“Toya!” Kyoko yelled as she felt panic grip her. What was he fighting a demon in her world? She watched as he was suddenly lifted up in the air and thrown backwards into the huge tree she used to climb as a child. Problem was she didn’t see anything throw him unless he was fighting a ghost.

“Tama, go wake grandfather. I have to help Toya.” She quickly grabbed her spirit bow and took off out the door as Tama stood there in shock.

She ran barefoot into the courtyard, a spirit dart already

notched in the bow. Trying to see her target before she released the spirit dart, she was shocked to find not one guardian, but two. That stopped her dead in her tracks.

“Shinbe,” Kyoko whispered as she watched him crumble against the outside wall of the shrine house. It felt like she could feel the impact the same as him except it left a huge dent in her heart. She caught movement coming from the side and flashed her emerald eyes toward it. It was Toya, and he was about to charge Shinbe again.

Tossing down her bow, she threw up her hand to cast the Taming spell that only worked on the silver guardian.

“Toya! No!” Kyoko screamed.

Toya had been in mid-flight when he suddenly plummeted to the ground like a ton of bricks, burying his face into the hard earth.

Kyoko ran to Shinbe, skidding across the grass in her rush. Falling to her knees beside him, her lips parted knowing he was in bad shape. “Shinbe, are you all right?”

Shinbe cracked one eye open and peered over at Toya. “That’s gotta hurt,” he tried to smirk, but passed out before he could manage it.

Toya looked up at Kyoko from his prone position and growled at the way her lip trembled. How dare she take the leech’s side, after what Shinbe had said?

Kyoko turned on him, tears welling in her eyes. “What have you done?”

He had no chance to reply as her brother and grandfather came running out into the courtyard. Grandfather with his demon scrolls in his hand, ready to flatten anything that dared hurt his granddaughter.

Kyoko began to sob, not knowing what to do, "Help me get Shinbe into the house."

Tama and grandfather didn't ask any questions as they picked Shinbe up to carry him into the house. Grandpa simply narrowed his eyes toward Toya while Tama refused to look at him at all. They walked off leaving Toya still lying on the ground.

Toya didn't bother to move. He knew Kyoko was so angry with him that she would probably use the damn spell on him over and over again if he dared go into the house. It wasn't fair. Didn't she understand he was only protecting her?

The light of the moon reflected off the silver highlights within his dark hair as he turned over with a heavy heart. Pushing off the ground he went back through the heart of time.

When the sun rose above the maiden shrine Toya was still pacing back and forth in the clearing, trying to figure out what the hell happened. How was Shinbe able to pass through the heart of time? It simply wasn't allowed. The question rolled over and over in his mind driving him crazy.

Suki came into the clearing with Kamui and Kaen, looking for Toya and Shinbe. She spotted Toya and waved to him.

"Damn, this is all I need," Toya cursed inwardly as he

watched Suki approach. She stopped and stared at him for a long moment before she spoke and the worried look in her eyes caught him off guard.

“Toya, are you okay? What happened?” She reached a hand out to touch his face, and he flinched. She stared at the healing wounds that adorned his face, and the dry blood on his clothing and hands. She looked at his hands again. Toya never let blood dry on his fingers like that. What was going on?

“Toya, whose blood is that?” When he didn’t answer, but turned his face away from her, she glanced around looking for Shinbe knowing he’d tell her what was going on. When she didn’t see him, panic filtered into her voice as her eyes widened, “Where’s Shinbe?”

Kamui had been standing at the edge of the clearing with Kaen when he sensed Toya’s agitation and closed the distance between them. He’d heard the question and he prayed he was wrong about the answer. Hoping to calm them both down, he tried to make a joke by asking, “Toya, don’t tell me you killed Shinbe?”

Toya gritted his teeth, “I didn’t kill anybody, you little runt, so shut up!” He turned away from them glancing down at his bloody fingernails; he hadn’t even noticed them.

“Did I?” Toya thought to himself. That last hit to Shinbe had to of caused some serious damage. He remembered his claws digging into the flesh of Shinbe’s side as he flung him into the tree. Toya knew his claws could be deadly when they grew longer

during battle to not just demons but all immortals, including guardians.

He should not have fought his brother but he'd been in such a rage that he hadn't been able to stop himself. Why had he lost his temper like that knowing his demon blood would be in danger of surfacing? He usually had more control than that. Damn it. Had Kyoko not come out when she did, he didn't know what he would've done to him. He'd never fought with Shinbe before! what the hell was going on here?

That panicked feeling came over him again when he felt the stares of Suki and Kamui on his back. Shinbe was his brother! a guardian. What had he done? Not looking at them, Toya balled his hands into fist and suddenly yelled, "I didn't do anything!" Needing an escape, he darted off across the clearing, towards the woods.

Kaen and Kamui looked at each other sharing the same ominous feeling.

Kyoko sat at her desk, needle and thread in hand. She decided to sew Shinbe's trench coat since it was shredded in some spots. She had to keep herself busy, because with Toya gone and Shinbe passed out! she couldn't even ask anyone what the hell had happened. She had a feeling it was her fault they were fighting.

"It was just a stupid kiss," she mumbled guiltily.

After her grandfather had stripped Shinbe of his garments,

she'd taken them and washed the blood out of them while Tama helped grandfather treat the wounds that were already healing. If it wasn't for the fact that Shinbe was a guardian and had the extra advantage of quick healing, he would have bled to death within minutes. As she looked at one of the rips in the fabric, she envisioned Toya's claws there and shivered.

He was pretty beat up, but the bump on his head was the worst of it. Her grandfather said he'd probably be out for a while from that. He had also informed her that when two guardians fight each other, it's a little more dangerous than when two humans go at it. Grandpa and his legends she didn't need a legend to tell her this was bad. She just hoped Shinbe didn't have brain damage. For him to be unconscious for so long was not a good sign. She prayed he'd wake up soon and tell her everything was okay.

Kyoko had sat by his side since her grandfather had bandaged and tucked him neatly into her bed. She hadn't slept since it happened in fear that he'd wake up without her knowing.

Shinbe slowly opened his eyes to the dim light of the room. Where was he? He stared up at the white ceiling in confusion. His head, boy did it hurt. He tried to look around the room, but that hurt too. There was pink everywhere. Where was he?

Ouch! Kyoko pricked herself with the needle and put her finger in her mouth, sucking on it. She had turned slightly in the chair and Shinbe saw her, the light from the desk lamp shining on her face.

“I must be in heaven,” Shinbe whispered through his dry lips. He watched as Kyoko’s eyes went wide, and she slowly turned to look at him. He tried to smile but his head hurt too much so he closed his eyes again.

Kyoko nearly toppled the chair over trying to get to his side so quickly. “Shinbe no, please don’t go back to sleep yet,” she pleaded with a tremble in her voice. She was rapidly on her way to tears. Shinbe opened his eyes smelling the salt in the air. Was she crying? He tried to sit up, only to have a searing pain course through his temple.

Kyoko put her hand on his shoulder, “Don’t try to sit up. You were hurt really bad.” She wiped the back of her hand across her wet cheek and smiled when he opened his eyes again.

“You think so?” He tried to smile, but his head just didn’t feel right. He raised his hand to the back of his head cradling it in his palm. “Hmm, big lump,” he looked at Kyoko questioningly.

Kyoko couldn’t stop herself, “You big jerk, you could have gotten yourself killed.” She burst into tears, bringing her hands to her face, she sobbed.

Shinbe reached his hand out and ran the back of his finger down her cheek, “I’m sorry Kyoko, I hope Toya looks as bad as I feel.”

Kyoko uncovered her face and stared at him, “I wouldn’t know.” She turned from him and walked over to the desk, picking up a pitcher of water and pouring some into a glass. All

of a sudden, she felt mad at both of them. They were supposed to be hunting the talisman together, not fighting each other.

“You don’t know?” Shinbe tried to quirk his brow, but realized there was nothing on his body that didn’t hurt. He decided right then, that the next time he fought Toya, he would do more than just defend himself; next time he would fight back.

Kyoko came across the room and helped him sip the water. She smiled down at him, a glint in her eyes, “I haven’t seen Toya since I put the taming spell on him near the shrine house. Somehow, she knew that would cheer Shinbe up.

He attempted to laugh, but wound up coughing. “Taming spell?” Putting his hand to his bandaged chest, he groaned, “Please don’t make me laugh. It hurts.”

Kyoko got a pained look on her face, “I’m so sorry, Shinbe. We couldn’t take you to a human doctor without well, you know. Grandfather tried to patch you up as best as he could and most of the seeable wounds have healed.”

Shinbe blinked at her, rather than try to nod his head, “I understand. Thank you for caring for me.” Curiosity got the better of him, “But you haven’t gone to see Toya?”

Kyoko stood up, turning her back to him. “No, I’ve been here with you, waiting for you to wake up,” she walked to the desk, picking up the bottle of aspirin but set it back down knowing it wouldn’t help a guardian. “What were you two fighting about?” she whispered, not wanting to hear the answer. She picked the bottle back up figuring it couldn’t hurt.

“Just how long have I been asleep?” Shinbe whispered, trying to keep the pain to a minimum. He had heard her question but that was best left between him and Toya.

She turned, walking back to him, “Several hours.” Kyoko put the aspirin to his lips and picked the glass of water back up, “Here, take these.”

He did as she said, thinking, “She’s been by my side all night?” He closed his eyes, contemplating this. Then he felt her cool hand on his forehead and opened his eyes back to her.

Kyoko smiled, “I can’t believe you’re here!” on my side of the heart of time. She shrugged as if it didn’t matter, but it did. “Well, now that I know you’re going to be okay, I guess I should go back and tell the others that we won’t be back for a while. You rest and I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Shinbe stared at her, dumbfounded. His gaze flew around the room realizing just what he’d been missing. He was in her world! He must have really hit his head pretty hard for that to have just slipped past him.

Wait. He trained his amethyst eyes back on her. What was she talking about, “him not going back with her?” What if Toya didn’t let her come back? What if something happened to her? He was supposed to go look for the talisman with them. He was supposed to be there to protect her from Hyakuhei.

Shinbe tried to sit up to tell her, but the pain seared through his brain and he fell back against the bed with a groan.

Kyoko stopped in mid-stride, turning back to give him a pleading look. "Please, Shinbe. Don't try to get up. There is no telling if your healed on the inside yet and I wouldn't want you to bleed to death while I'm gone," she said it almost jokingly, but he was still in pain and that meant he could do some damage if he didn't stay still.

"Kyoko, I can't stay here. I don't even know where here is," he was beginning to panic at the thought of her leaving him. She must have sensed his fear because she spoke quietly as she opened the door to leave.

"Don't worry, Shinbe. I'll send grandfather to keep you company," she closed the door before he had a chance to protest.

Chapter 6 "Misunderstandings"

After finding grandfather and telling him that Shinbe was awake, Kyoko got her backpack and loaded it down with all the things she knew her friends would like. She packed beef jerky for Toya, chocolate bars for Kamui, and of course everyone's favorite, chewing gum.

As an afterthought, she put in some bottles of soda and chocolate covered almonds for Suki and Sennin. Kyoko grinned, feeling better now that she knew Shinbe would be well again soon. Still, she would have to have a heart to heart with Toya about fighting and the fact he could have killed his own brother. She silently wondered how Shinbe could have come through the heart of time. The shrine would not have let him pass without

a reason.

“Probably so I could break up the fight,” Kyoko mumbled under her breath.

She also added the typical supplies she would bring them, like bandages and aspirin. Looking around the kitchen, she wondered if she should check on Shinbe one last time but decided not to. It was hard enough already to leave him. She could still see the pleading look in his amethyst eyes, as if he was begging her not to leave, but she’d only be gone for a few hours. He’d be fine with grandfather and Tama. Zipping up her backpack, she headed for the shrine house.

The small group had spent the last couple hours trying to find Shinbe. They couldn’t even pick up his trail so they had no idea where to begin looking for him. They could only assume the worst, even though they couldn’t find evidence of any wrong doing. It was literally driving them crazy with worry. To make matters worse, Toya had never returned to the hut that evening and it left them thinking that maybe he was behind the disappearance.

When he hadn’t returned after several hours, Suki was positive it was the latter. With Kyoko still gone, it made it all seem that much worse. “I swear if Toya ever comes back, I will kill him myself,” Suki sobbed into her hands as Sennin comforted her.

Kamui sat beside her silent as thoughts of Shinbe lying dead

coursed through his mind. But he would know if Shinbe had diedâ#; wouldnâ##t he? He and Kaen had known something was untold as soon as they had stepped foot in the clearingâ#; something about the vibes in the area reeked of anger and something else he couldnâ##t quite put a name to.

Another piece of evidence was the fact that some of the boulders around the maiden statue had been unearthed. â##And where was Kyoko?â## This thought caused Kamui to wonder just what exactly had happenedâ#; was Kyoko hurt too? She hadnâ##t come back yet, and he was starting to worry. He sighed knowing Kaen was still out looking.

â##Hello, anybody home?â## Kyoko said in a cheery voice as she opened the door to the hut. She immediately saw how distressed Suki was. Shedding her backpack at the door, she ran to Suki. â##Whatâ##s wrong? Whatâ##s happened?â## she dropped to the floor next to her friend because Suki never criedâ#; she was too tough for that girly stuff.

Suki sniffled and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. Her lips parted and she tried to speak, â##Oh, Kyoko.â## She turned away from her and sobbed again, unable to tell her friend her fears.

Sennin put his hand on Kyokoâ##s shoulder, looking at his daughter, then spoke in a quiet voice, â##Kyoko, can I talk to ye outside.â##

Kyoko looked from Sennin, back to Suki, then stood up slowly. â##Something must be seriously wrong,â## Kyoko

mused worriedly. "Had something bad happened to Toya, or did they hear some news about the disappearance of Suki's brother Hikaru?" she had a very, very bad feeling creeping across her spine.

She followed Sennin outside. "What is it Sennin? What happened?" Kyoko never thought for a second that they were concerned about Shinbe. She thought Toya would have told them where to find him.

Sennin turned his back to Kyoko, knowing that he was going to have to deal with yet another heart breaking scene. It was too much for him. It was going to break Kyoko's heart to find out Toya may have killed Shinbe. He decided to just tell her their fear.

"Kyoko, we believe Toya has hurt Shinbe and we cannot find either of them," his voice sounded even more aged than normal, and laced with sadness and a touch of defeat. He waited to hear the shrieks of pain that were soon to come from his young friend. When they didn't come, he turned, just in time to see Kyoko going back into the hut.

Kyoko sat on the floor next to Suki and put her arms around her friend, "It's okay, Suki. Shinbe is fine." She rocked her friend, somehow he came through the heart of time with Toya. He's injured, but he's going to be okay.

Suki stopped breathing for a moment, then with a gasp she pushed away, glaring at Kyoko as she wiped a hand across her eyes. "Shinbe is not dead?" she continued to stare at

Kyoko.

Kyoko frowned, "No, he has a lot of injuries, but he's not dead. I came back to let you know he is recovering." She silently wondered why Toya hadn't told them what happened.

Kamui listened to Kyoko's words and wondered at them. Now he knew why he couldn't sense Shinbei; he wasn't even in this world. He left the hut to find Kaen so they could call off the hunt. He wished his other brothers, Kotaro and Kyou, would show up and somehow help him fix whatever was going on. His thoughts turned back to Kyoko.

"As long as they are only hurting each other and not her," Kamui whispered but the tightness in his chest still didn't ease. If he had to, he would protect her all by himself.

Suki stood up. "He's been with you all night, Kyoko? We, we saw Toya with blood on his hands," she stuttered and paused, anger building within and directed at Kyoko for keeping it a secret.

Kyoko stood up, "Where is Toya anyway? When I get my hands on him, I'm going to—" Suki cut her off mid-sentence.

"He's been with you all this time? Shinbei has been with you in your time?" Suki's voice held a note of accusation, and Kyoko was dumbfounded. "You waited this long to come tell us. Didn't you think we'd be worried about him?"

Kyoko shook her head, "I'm sorry, Suki. I didn't want to leave him until I knew he was—" She saw Suki's face

getting red and backed up.

“All night? Most of the morning we searched for him, fearing he was dead or lying injured somewhere! Now you come back all happy, telling me he’s with you!” She pointed an accusing finger at her friend. “You should have come sooner. You should have!” She broke off, a sob leaving her body, relieved that Shinbe was okay.

Kyoko put her arm around the girl to comfort her. “I’m sorry, Suki. I didn’t think. His injuries were pretty bad. I was afraid of leaving him until he woke up. I was so worried I was going to lose him.”

Suki pushed away from Kyoko, her anger peaking once again at Kyoko’s words. “You thought you were going to lose him?” she stared at Kyoko blinking back her tears. “Just what were they fighting about, Kyoko? Were they fighting over you?”

Kyoko was startled by the question. She didn’t know how to answer. She couldn’t tell Suki that she had kissed Shinbe, and that Toya saw them. This was Suki, her friend who was secretly in love with Shinbe. Guilt washed over her. Was she betraying her friend? She looked down at the wooden floor, suddenly finding it very interesting.

She wasn’t in love with Shinbe but she! “Geez, what am I thinking?” She balled her hands into fists, getting aggravated at herself for thinking about Shinbe that way, when the one that truly loved him was standing right in front of her.

She had to know how Suki really felt.

“Suki, are you in love with Shinbe?” she asked quickly, not meaning to evade the subject of why the two guardians had fought.

Suki turned her back, her cheeks turning red at the question. Was she in love with him? She wondered. Yes, she had feelings for him. But in love, the way Kyoko had proposed? She shook her head. She would never love any man. Especially not Shinbe. That was just out of the question. Maybe she could love him if they were successful at killing Hyakuhei, and erasing Shinbe’s curse. But no, she just couldn’t fall in love with him. She couldn’t deal with any more heartache.

Confused by her own feelings, she turned back to Kyoko, “You’re avoiding the question, Kyoko! I asked if they were fighting over you?” Now she was the one avoiding a question, but it was one she honestly didn’t want to answer, or think about.

Kyoko sighed, shrugging her shoulders, “I don’t know. Didn’t Toya tell you what happened?” She glanced toward the door wondering why he wasn’t there. “Where is Toya anyway? Is he alright?” Kyoko got a sudden chill, realizing Toya’s absence was what had kept them from not knowing what happened.

Suki exploded, “What?!! Toya took off after we found him. His claws were covered in blood, Kyoko! He was!” Suki was cut off as Sennin came into the hut.

Will ye stop your hollering, Suki? he sat down on the mat and picked up a stick, poking at the fire in front of him. Kyoko, come sit. And tell us what ye know.

Kyoko looked to Suki. She didn't like her friend being angry with her. Why were they all fighting amongst each other all of a sudden? They had always stuck together and defended each other something just wasn't right. She sat down and began telling them what happened, from the time at the spring, to Shinbe's appearance in her time.

Of course, she didn't tell them about the kiss, just that Toya was angry because she was in her underwear.

Well, that's it really. He finally woke up right before I came here. He's in really bad shape though. she shook her head, looking down at her hands. Grandfather says it's going to take at least a couple days before he can get up and start moving around again.

Suki's head snapped up, What? He can't stay in your time! She instantly lowered her eyes, feeling strange again. Where had this jealousy come from all of a sudden?

Sennin put his hand on Suki's arm, Calm down, ye wouldn't want him to travel back if he is still injured.

Suki sighed, But that's too long. We can take care of him just as well here. She didn't like the fact that the group was split up.

Sennin chuckled, Ai, but to get him here, he would have to travel through the heart of time. The stress of doing something

not allowed might be too much for his injuries.â##

Kyoko stood up, â##I really hate to leave, but I only came back to let you know heâ##s okay. I better get back there before grandfather and Tama drive him crazy.â## She picked up her backpack and smiled nervously as Kamui came back in the hut, their eyes locking.

Kamui couldnâ##t help it as he pulled Kyoko into his arms and hugged her tight. He was in much better spirits now that he knew Toya hadnâ##t seriously hurt Shinbe. When Kyoko hadnâ##t come back, he had thought the worst.

â##Iâ##ll keep my eyes on them from this side. You go bring our Shinbe back,â## he smiled, love dancing in his multihued eyes. He had wanted to let her know that he wasnâ##t mad at her like Suki was.

Kyoko smiled up at him as she handed him a box of chocolates, â##Now donâ##t eat it all too fast. I donâ##t want you to get a tummy ache.â## She ran her hand through the silky purple highlights in his hair and hugged him back. She was thankful at least one of them wasnâ##t holding this against her. Kamui had always had the softest heart.

She whispered close to his ear so Suki wouldnâ##t hear, â##If Toya comes back, tell him I need to see him.â##

Kamui nodded his head.

Suki sat with her back to Kyoko. â##Tell Shinbe he better get well fast.â## She sniffled and Kyoko suddenly felt really guilty. Letting go of Kamui, she set the stuff she had brought for the

others by the door, not wanting to bother Suki again right now. She knew she would find the supplies and goodies later. She said goodbye, then headed back to the shrine alone, wondering where Toya was.

On the other side of the time portal, Shinbe lay in bed with his eyes closed, trying to drown out grandfather's senseless babble with his own thoughts. When was Kyoko going to return to rescue him? he laughed like a madman in his mind. Yup, she was the only one who could save him now.

Even with his injuries, he couldn't stop thinking about her. This must be God's way of paying him back for his sins. He was well aware that if Toya had known the whole truth, he would not be breathing right now.

The others, including Toya, had always assumed that he wanted Suki only because that was exactly what he'd wanted them to think. Suki wanted nothing to do with romance and that had made her safe; unknowingly playing a huge part in his lie. He started to drift back to sleep as visions of Kyoko in his arms flashed through his mind.

Kyoko walked slowly back toward the maiden shrine with mixed feelings. Why had Toya run off? And now she felt selfish for making the others worry for so long. It's just that she'd thought Toya would have told them what had happened. This whole thing was starting to get out of control. They still

had to find the scattered talisman and Hyakuhei was out there somewhere probably plotting all their deaths. At the moment, the whole gang seemed to be splitting up.

Toya watched Kyoko as she made her way back to the shrine. He'd smelled her arrival and sought her out when he'd noticed Shinbe was not with her. So the amethyst guardian was still in Kyoko's time and now it looked like she was going back to him.

Since returning, Toya had held up in a cave not too far away. He wasn't sorry for the fight with Shinbe, but he hadn't meant to hurt him as bad as he had. But would Kyoko believe him? His golden orbs watched her from the darkened tops of the trees. He knew he would have to talk to her before she went back to Shinbe.

Kyoko looked up, realizing she was already at the heart of time. She'd been so lost in thought that she hadn't even been paying attention. She sighed, then raised her chin drawing courage and decided she would have to have a talk with Shinbe when she got back.

Kyoko stopped in her tracks when she saw a flash of movement from the corner of her eye. Before she could blink, Toya was standing between her and the shrine. He was looking at her hauntingly through the stray bangs that had fallen down to shield his eyes, his hair and clothes still fluttering from the quick landing.

Why was it that he could do the strangest things and her whole

body would light up like an electrical shock wave was passing through it. The handful of butterflies fluttering around in her stomach seemed to go on a mating frenzy. She didn't know what to say or do so she stood still trying to read his expression. She could see all kinds of emotions, everything from guilt, to anger, even a hint of depression.

Finally finding her voice, though it sounded scared even to her own ears, she spoke, "Iâ€¦ Toy-ya?" Her eyes widened when his face snapped up into view and his eyes locked on hers. Kyoko didn't mean to take a step back but she'd done it without thought. When she noticed his eyes narrow at seeing her retreat from him, she steadied herself to face him. Timidly, she took a step forward to let him know she wasn't afraid of him.

Toya watched her silently, sensing fear in her. When she backed away from him, it made him angry enough that he actually felt his blood start to heat up. He waited to see what she would do and calmed when she again stepped closer, taking back the distance she'd created. He didn't want her to fear him.

"Kyoko," his voice was steady and stern, "you know I would never hurt you." His hands fisted at his sides. "I know you know it," his voice was demanding.

Kyoko bit her bottom lip hearing the strain in his voice. Yeah, she knew he wouldn't purposely hurt her, but she also remembered the fact that Hyakuhei had done something to his blood that made him extremely dangerous when angered. Drawing a steady breath, she started slowly walking toward him.

"Where have you been?"

Toya could hear worry in her voice and his eyes widened, wondering at it. Had she been worried about him? He thought she would only hate him after what he had done. He driven himself sick just thinking about it.

"How is Shinbe?" he gritted his teeth against the name.

Kyoko frowned, "I'll live. But it's gonna take a while for him to be well enough to come back. I haven't even had a chance to ask him what happened, so why don't you tell me. Why did you do that?" Her voice trailed off for a moment and then she whispered, "Suki and the others thought he was dead." Her voice raised a couple notches becoming accusing, "You could have at least told them where he was."

She looked behind him at the maiden statue, avoiding his gaze. The rawness of his eyes was too much for her to take right now.

Toya felt cold and hot at the same time. The feeling itself was disturbing. All he could think about was that she would hate him, and that was the one thing he couldn't handle. And the thought of her being alone with Shinbe in her time, was also too much for him to swallow. Especially after the things his brother had said. It was the same thing as threatening her.

Kyoko watched the emotions changing in his golden eyes, now darkening with thought. He was deadly calm, which was starting to creep her out. She took a couple steps, as if to go around him to the shrine, but he moved to block her and that rattled her even more.

"Look, if you're not going to say anything, then I'm going back to check on the damage you did to your brother Shinbe," she yelled at him.

Toya couldn't take it. In the blink of an eye, he had her, holding her trapped within his arms, his every instinct telling him not to let her go into the heart of time back to the untrusted guardian.

"Kyoko, wait," his voice was still a little harsh and he tried to soften it as he felt her stiffen against him. "Kyoko, you don't know why we fought. You don't know what he said. You can't trust him. I don't trust him. He has changed, and I don't like it."

Kyoko felt his arms tighten around her and she knew he was serious. Toya had never lied to her but it just didn't make sense. She tried to lean back in his arms to see his eyes. "What do you mean? He is the same as always."

Toya growled low in his throat, "No, Kyoko, he has hidden it from you. There's something going on with him and I don't know what it is, but I can feel it. He's hiding something." Toya hoped she would hear his words and not just think he was making an excuse for beating him up.

Kyoko frowned. She had noticed little things about Shinbe. But to her, the changes had not been bad, but she knew Toya had very good instincts so she wouldn't just dismiss it completely. Just to make sure she sighed, "You're not just saying that because of the kiss, are you?" She felt Toya's chest vibrate against

her.

"That kiss,â## Toya growled and reached up to grasp her chin in his hand, bringing her face to his. There was one question that had been eating at him. "Kyoko, why would you kiss him for saving you, and not me? I donâ##t understand." His eyes lowered to her pouting lips and before she could reject him, he slashed his lips across hers, feeling for the first time her silky lips against his.

When she gasped at the sudden attack on her senses, Toya deepened the kiss, searching her reaction. He could hear her heartbeat speed up, and he could also feel her body heating up.

Kyoko was getting the kiss she had always wanted, but somewhere in the back of her mind, she couldnâ##t help but think it was for all the wrong reasons. Was he kissing her because Shinbe had? â##No, this was wrong.â## She pressed against his chest for more reason than just lack of air.

"Wait Toya," she gasped. "Stop, I can't think."

Toya smirked, relaxing his arms but not releasing her, "Thatâ##s a good thing, Kyoko." Heâ##d felt something with the kiss, and it made him feel better knowing she did too. Maybe he wouldnâ##t lose her to Shinbe after all. He remembered the threat Shinbe had taunted him with.

"Shinbe should not be fully trusted. Iâ##d rather you stay here with me and just let your family take care of him for now," his eyes drew hers in a silent plea.

Kyoko frowned, "No, I have to go back. He only woke up a few minutes before I came here to let you guys know he was

going to be okay." Guilt crept up on her, "Besides, I feel like it's my fault you guys fought, so I'm going to take care of him until he gets better, then I'll bring him back." Her eyes narrowed, "And we have to get along if we are going to find the rest of the talisman."

She poked a finger into his chest and finally took a step back, out of the circle of his arms. "That means no more fighting. Do you understand? You almost killed him." Her eyes searched his for the truth.

"Then I'll go back with you," Toya said tightly, folding his arms inside his sleeves and standing at his full height. "Shinbe reeks of guilt, and I don't know why." Secretly, he was glad she hadn't yet spent time alone with him, considering he'd just woken up. "I don't trust him alone with you."

Kyoko blinked, "There is no way you're coming anywhere near Shinbe right now. He's still in a lot of pain, and you are the one that made him that way." She wasn't trying to be mean; she just wanted to keep them separated for now. "I'll make you a deal. I'll come back tomorrow and give everyone an update, if you promise me that you will go back to the group."

Seeing the stubbornness enter his eyes she looked down at the ground for a moment then whispered heavily in the air, "We are still a group, aren't we? We still need to find the talisman before Hyakuhei does."

Toya's eyes glittered dangerously. "If he does something, and I'm not there, I can't protect you and," His voice

raised a couple notches, "Iâ€™m your protector, not him!"

Kyoko's head snapped up at his words. It wasn't often that Toya let his heart show but she could see it so clearly in the rare moments that his defenses fell.

She smiled, trying to calm him down, "Look, Shinbe is way too weak to try anything, so don't worry. I'll be back tomorrow." She took a couple steps toward the heart of time and saw him move to stop her.

"Toya!" she yelled, holding up her hand and casting the Taming spell.

Kyoko softened her voice, "Look, I know you don't trust Shinbe, but at least trust me. I'll be back tomorrow night. Everything will be fine; you'll see." With that, she touched the hand of the maiden and vanished. She could still hear his string of curses as the heart of time took her to the other side.

Kyoko frowned thoughtfully as she found herself within the shrine house. She could still see the damage that had been done during their fight. As she turned around, she placed a locking seal over the maiden's hands, deciding it was better to be safe than sorry.

Chapter 7 "Questions"

Kyoko made her way back through her darkened house to find Shinbe fast asleep. She silently wondered if she should tell him about her meeting with Toya. Sitting back at her desk, she set about to finish sewing the torn robes, but thoughts of Toya slowed her fingers.

Heâ##d surprised her when he kissed her. She used to dream about him kissing herâ#| she used to wish for it. She had to admit that kiss was exactly what sheâ##d always imaginedâ#| it was the timing that had made it confusing. Maybe it was just Toya trying to distract her anger. Heâ##d never tried to kiss her before, so why else would he do so now?

She thought about his lips on hers, and on instinct, she raised her fingers to her lips wondering at itâ#| then another kiss invaded her mind. When she had casually brushed her lips against Shinbeâ##s, it was like an electrical shock ran through her. Had Toya not shown up when he didâ#| sheâ##d of liked to of experimented with that kiss a little more.

Shaking her head, she bit her bottom lip. Where on earth had that thought come from? She glanced over at Shinbe. How could she ever forgive herself for causing this to happen? She hadnâ##t meant for anyone to get hurt. She slowly walked over to the bed, watching him as she sat at the edge and reached her hand out to smooth the ebony-blue hair from his eyes. At least he was sleeping peacefully.

Her gaze roamed over his face, lingering on his lips. They were so soft in her dream, thatâ##s what had caused her to try to kiss him when Toya had caught them. She had just wanted to know if they were as soft in real-life as in her dreamâ#| and they were.

Kyoko looked down at the blanket that had fallen, exposing his shoulders and chest just below his arms. He still had a bruise on one shoulder and she unconsciously reached her hand out to

run a finger over it. Shinbe moaned in his sleep and she jumped, pulling her hand back and putting it to her lips. She guiltily turned, looking away.

Shinbe cracked an eye open, a smirk forming on his lips. He'd felt her weight on the edge of the bed and pretended to be asleep, but he'd secretly been watching her through his eyelashes, witnessing the emotions cross her face as she studied him. As much as his body hurt, he couldn't help feeling aroused by her presence; it had always been that way for him. He hoped she didn't look any lower, as he was sure a tent had formed in the lower regions.

When she touched his shoulder, he involuntarily moaned. As soon as she turned away, he sucked in his breath. Slowly releasing it, his lips parted as he inched his hand toward her. Before he could say anything, she stood up, and he let out a disappointed sigh.

Kyoko quickly turned around to see him looking at her, and his flexing hand didn't go unnoticed. "Shinbe, what are you doing?" she stared at his hand, her head tilting to one side curiously.

Shinbe attempted to hide his hand back under the blanket letting out a groan of pain. Kyoko was immediately by his side, running her hand over his arm, trying to ease his pain, not realizing that wasn't the kind of pain he was in.

"Please be careful, Shinbe. I want you to get better, not hurt yourself even more," she looked down at him with sympathy

in her eyes.

He smiled up at her, cherishing every moment of her tenderness, "It's okay, Kyoko. I'm fine. Serves me right for my shameful thoughts," He attempted a smile, and she frowned at him.

He just admitted to it? Her mind was in turmoil as she sat back down on the bed next to him. The memory of what Toya had said to her in the clearing coming back to haunt her.

"Shinbe, we really need to talk about what you and Toya fought about. He thinks that you are hiding something, and he says I shouldn't trust you." She felt uncomfortable asking him this, but he was the one asleep in her bed, so she felt like she had the right to at least ask. "Are you hiding something?"

Shinbe's thoughts went back to the night Kyoko came through the heart of time, drunk. What a predicament he'd gotten himself into. Not only would Toya kill him, but Kyoko would probably let him.

He sighed, looking away from her as his cheeks flushed, "No, I'm not hiding anything."

Kyoko continued to study him. He wouldn't make eye contact with her and she was convinced he was indeed hiding something. "You know I'm your friend, Shinbe. You can talk to me about anything," she smiled and brushed her hand across his, causing him to shiver. She pulled the blanket up across his shoulders thinking he had gotten a chill.

He watched her as she continued to stare down at him, her hands still on the edge of the blanket, lightly touching his shoulders.

He whispered her name in a hoarse voice, "Kyoko."

She glanced up to his face, blushing when she realized where her hands were. She turned her back to him feeling her cheeks began to heat. She'd been staring at his neck, daydreaming about her dream, and feeling the urge to lean down and kiss him there.

"Shinbe, remember when I came back after the party? Where were you when I came through the time portal?" she asked timidly, not wanting to sound silly, but that dream was starting to affect her in ways that worried her.

Shinbe was taken aback by the question. Did she remember what happened and just hadn't said anything? He stared at her back, "Kyoko, why are you asking? Did something happen?"

Kyoko blushed. Standing up, she walked to the window and looked out, "No, I just was curious where you were when I returned." She swung around, smiling, hiding what was on her mind. "I just seem to remember you helping me from the shrine and back to Sennin's hut," she lied. She didn't remember how she got there at all.

Shinbe sighed, closing his eyes. He had to digest this information. So she remembered something! what else did she remember? Now he was beginning to feel sick to his stomach.

If she remembered that, she probably remembered what he did too. Or was she starting to suspect that maybe it wasn't a dream. He needed to be careful for now.

He wanted to get up and fix the mess he'd caused but the pain in his head had slowly been getting worse instead of better and right now it was blinding. He felt himself sinking further away no matter how hard he tried to fight the oncoming darkness.

Kyoko glanced back at him. His eyes were closed and his breathing seemed to even out. He'd fallen asleep, she whispered softly then sighed. No more questions for now, he needed to rest. She turned back to her desk and sat down, picking up his clothes to finish sewing it but her eyes were burning because she'd been awake for so long. She laid her head down on the desk, his long trench coat still gripped in her hands on her lap, and she fell asleep.

Toya stood in front of the maiden statue, cursing Kyoko. She'd sealed the heart of time, and he was unable to break the spell. Why the hell did she do that? She needed protecting from that damn leech. Didn't she understand that?

Damn it Kyoko! he yelled as if she could hear him on the other side. Toya tensed as he sensed a presence and prepared himself. Kyou? What the hell did he want? He waited for his brother to appear.

Kyou stood at the far end of the clearing, his clothing billowing in the breeze. Tucking a loose strand of silver hair

behind his ear, he approached Toya. "You call to the priestess?"

Toya's hand flexed as one of the twin daggers slipped into existence due to his agitation. "Yeah, what about it?" he wasn't in the mood to be bullied by his older brother.

Kyou looked past Toya, towards the shrine. "Am I not allowed to be concerned about my brother's fate?" his expression was emotionless as he continued to stare at the maiden statue suspiciously. He sensed old blood on Toya and identified it as Shinbei's. He was also sensing Kyoko's scent, mingled with the guardians.

"Since when do you care?" Toya took a step toward Kyou.

Kyou sniffed the air, narrowing his eyes at Toya. "You failed to claim the priestess as your mate?" His eyes glinted with undisclosed laughter, "How foolish of you to allow our brother to try and claim what is yours."

Toya growled low in his throat, "What are you talking about, Kyou?"

Kyou could sense the grass was tainted, even if he could not see its evil aura. "Being a guardian, your senses are weak," he turned his back on Toya and began to walk back towards the woods as his golden wings appeared across his back.

"Come back here, Kyou! What are you talking about?" Toya yelled behind him as Kyou took off towards the sky.

He smirked down at Toya, "You are foolish, little brother."

You should never underestimate the enemy.

Toya turned to glare at the shrine, angry that he could not pass through it. Kyoko's scent still hung thick in the air. He took off towards the cave he'd been staying in since his return from Kyoko's time. He didn't want to face anyone right now. He only hoped that when Kyoko returned, she'd be able to smooth things over within the group.

But for now, he wanted to be alone to ponder what Kyou had said. He knew Kyoko would never be with that lecherous guardian through her own will. But if Kyou was right and Shinbe dared to touch her, the next time, he'd be dead.

Kyoko was startled awake by Shinbe's moans. She rushed to his bedside, placing her hand on his forehead. He was sweating profusely and burning up with a fever at the same time. "Not good! oh this is so not good," She whispered as she grabbed the bottle of aspirin and poured some water in a glass. Her hand was slightly shaking at the fact he was, for some reason, getting worse.

"Shinbe," she gently shook his shoulder, attempting to wake him long enough to get the aspirin in him. "Damn," she mumbled the word softly then she placed the glass back on the table when he wouldn't wake up and ran from the room, now beginning to panic.

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