

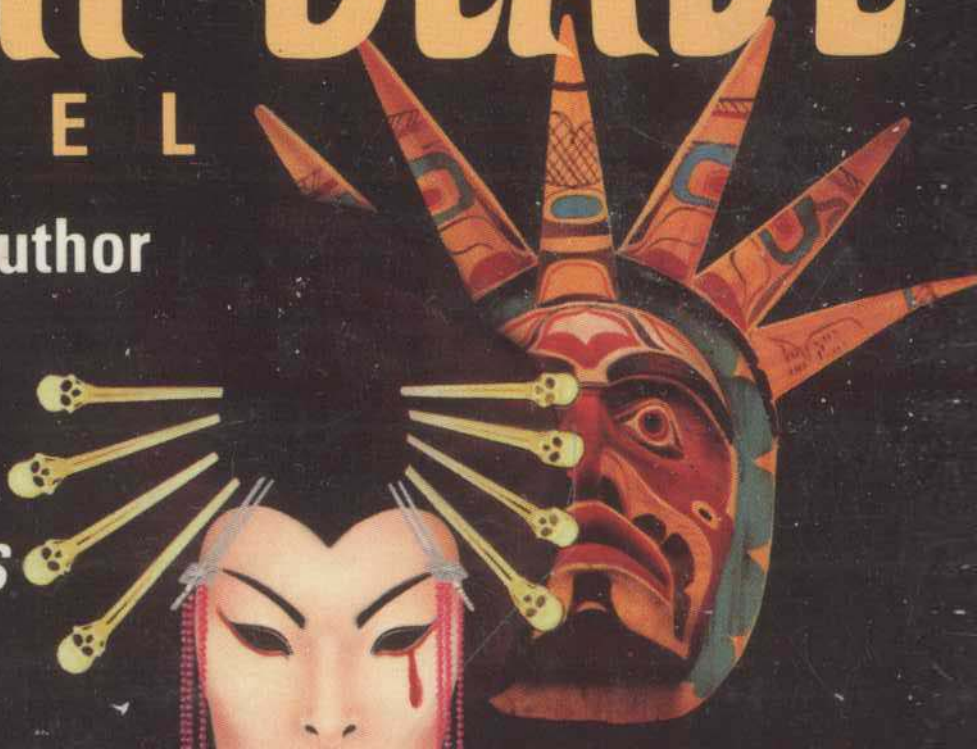
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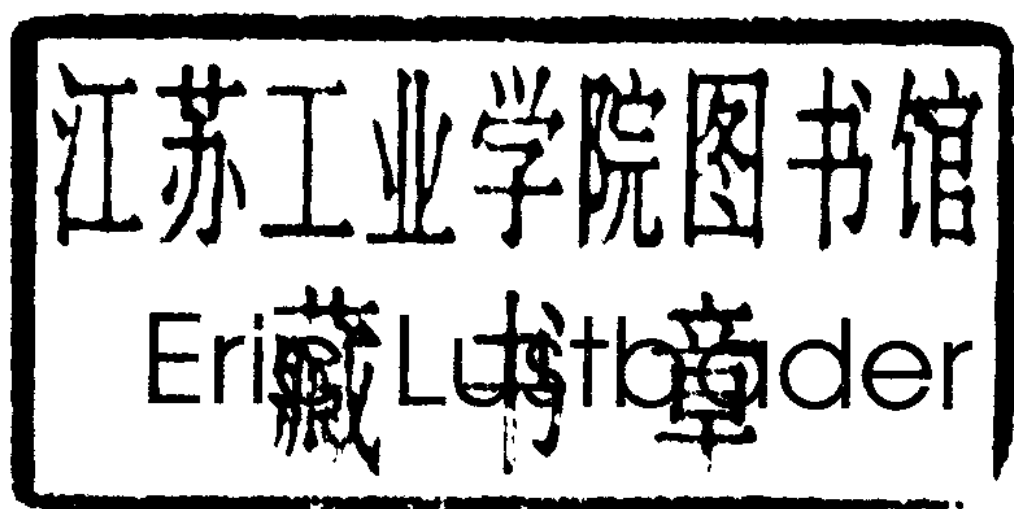
A NOVEL

Lustbader is an author
who gets better
with every book
he writes."

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BLACK BLADE



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*A shrine: here, keeping
far from the garden lights,
float wild birds, sleeping.*

—SHIKI

*The strongest poison ever known
came from Caesar's laurel crown.*

—WILLIAM BLAKE

THE SHRINE

TOKYO/NEW YORK

The Water-spider traversed the small, still pond, moving from rock to rock without a sound or even a sensation of motion. The emergence of the Water-spider from out of the blue winter shadows on the far side of the pond was beautiful to behold—and quite terrible.

The flat, gray rocks were covered in moss, brown and crunchy at this time of the year, but the Water-spider seemed to disturb the living nap not at all.

The pond was in a small but exquisitely composed garden around which, on all sides, the steel sky-rises of Tokyo loomed like a futuristic forest. There were two people in the garden, a man dressed in a dark gray chalk-stripe suit, black loafers, thin gold wristwatch and a woman in silk kimono. The man stood near the side of a muscular boulder, at the crest of a small knoll covered with sleeping azalea. Behind him, and to the right, the woman in the silk kimono knelt, head bowed, snow-white hands folded obediently in her lap, her eyes closed as if in the same hibernal slumber that gripped the azalea. Before her sat a black lacquer tray with the ingredients for the *chado*, the formal tea ceremony. The kimono that wrapped her in lush comfort was a silver that smoldered in the wan sunlight. It was

embroidered with phoenixes, their red and black plumage quivering whenever she stirred.

Leave it to Nishitsu to have a beautiful woman at his side at all times, the Water-spider thought.

Naoharu Nishitsu was a trim, well-muscled man in his early sixties with a neat moustache, shaggy eyebrows, and an iron disposition. The iris of his right eye was entirely white; not milky-white, as one sometimes saw in blind people, but a lustrous hue similar to that of a pearl.

Beyond Nishitsu and his female companion, in the tatami room that looked out on this improbable urban glade, dark-suited, sunglassed men prowled, no doubt illegally armed, with the glowering faces of all professional goons. Nishitsu was never without a set of bodyguards, even here at Forbidden Dreams, where his word was law.

It was said that this man never raised his voice, but then again he had no need to; his anger could manifest itself in such a palpably physical way. While it was true that this was part of Nishitsu's frightening mien, it was also true that he possessed an intensity that was best equated to a gathering of gravity around the energy of a black hole.

"You summoned me, and I have come," the Water-spider said as he came to rest in front of Nishitsu. His name was Mizusumashi Kafu, his given name meaning "water-spider," but he was known to his friends and enemies as Suma. He had the face of a predatory raptor, a creature beyond the bounds of gravity, whose scars came from wind and salt and sun. His hatchet face was crowned by salt-and-pepper hair, and below that, heavy brows, eyes that seemed more like holes in his flesh because they never appeared to move. And yet they took in everything in his immediate environment.

Suma was dressed in black slacks, shoes with paper-thin soles, a black form-fitting T-shirt that displayed his sculpted torso. The extraordinary thing about him was how well he masked the sense of menace that was, at times, so tangible as to be painful. Perhaps this had something to do with his size, so small, even for a Japanese. In all ways he had used his lack of size as an advantage, and it was Nishitsu's opinion that the Water-spider embraced his smallness because it had about it a vaguely feminine cast. The Water-spider had that rare confluence of *koha*—an eagerness to experience the spiritual tests of

manhood—and *ninkyō*—a personal code of honor. *Ninkyō* was wholly unlike the Western definition of justice, which was impersonal, objective; rather, it depended solely on his relationships within the Black Blade Society.

Tea was forthcoming, the ritual long, complex, and relaxing for the two men because it acknowledged more profoundly than any words the respect they had for one another. Though the Water-spider was not a man comfortable with social amenities, nevertheless he, like Nishitsu, relished the ceremonies of respect. Too, he could appreciate the deft, precise manner in which the woman made the tea, served it, folded herself like a stunning origami, silent, waiting for their cups to empty so she, unbidden, could refill them. He envied Nishitsu this woman; her there/not there attitude rare in these modern times.

“The Toshin Kuro Kosai—the Black Blade Society—welcomes you back to its bosom, Suma-san.” Nishitsu put down his cup.

Suma inclined his head just a fraction lower than Nishitsu’s, all that was required to show his obeisance. “You summoned me,” he said. “Something has happened.”

“Something, indeed,” Nishitsu said.

What outsider would believe the power secreted within this shrine like the ghost of a whisper? Nishitsu thought. The Toshin Kuro Kosai, hidden away from the world at large, was protected, as we gifted people at its hub, busily spinning our webs of power, schemed in shadows the conquest of the world.

No one would believe it, of course, which is our ultimate strength. No interference, and none to oppose us.

But even for us, it seems, times change. Once, we had so much time—far more than a mere human lifetime—to formulate the perfect plan to stretch the wings of our influence to the ultimate, unimaginable to minds more limited than ours.

But now Time—a finite boundary whose leash we had traditionally slipped—has become a factor, a hideous specter stalking us as if we are mere mortals. The implications are appalling. All our dreams, built in darkness for decades, will crumble to so much dust as Time’s great scythe cuts us down.

None of this, of course, was told to Suma. What Nishitsu said was, “Suma-san, it appears as if we need the benefit of your skills in America.”

There was a humming in the air, as of cicadas, but this was

wintertime and there were no insects. In a moment Nishitsu became aware that the humming was emanating from Suma.

"You have only to ask," the Water-spider said.

"The task is complex," Nishitsu said, "and may take several months."

"All the better," Suma said. He looked as if he were licking his chops.

"There is one caveat," Nishitsu said. "You will need to coordinate with an agent already in place."

Suma frowned. "This is not my agreed-upon methodology."

"Different times dictate different methodologies," Nishitsu said firmly. "It is our duty to adapt as the willow adapts to the changing weather."

"*Hai!*" Suma bowed. "I understand."

"I truly hope so," Nishitsu said, "because the storm is upon us. Circumstances beyond our control have dictated that we enter into our final stage, and every step we make now is critical."

"I will not fail you, Nishitsu-san."

"No," Nishitsu said, looking at the Water-spider's bowed head. "I do not think you will."

Lawrence Moravia was lying on carpet that cost more than many people's yearly salary. That was okay with him, because he saw it as a symbol, one of many he collected like a legion of personal guards. A billionaire, he felt strongly that he had a duty to help keep in business the shrinking number of true artisans and artists left in the world.

As a self-made billionaire he had learned that having so much money forced you out of the mainstream of everyday life. People, unattractive and venal, beautiful and predatory, were attracted to the scent of money the way a bear is to honey. He supposed they couldn't help it; like Pavlov's dogs, they were highly programmed, hooked on the junk of wealth.

He had dealt effectively with these sharks, just as he had dealt with the changing face of his business, which was commercial real estate development. Of all of New York's superdevelopers, Lawrence Moravia alone had had the foresight in the runaway eighties to salt away huge contingency funds for what he foresaw would be lean times in the beginning of the nineties. No party ever lasts, was the first and only rule drummed into him

by the man who had taught him the urban real estate business.

While every other developer was either living on a shoestring or testing the waters of bankruptcy court, Moravia continued to make money.

Money. It was so easy to say money didn't matter when you had so much you couldn't possibly spend it all in this lifetime, or, the way it continued to amass, possibly even the next. But several years ago it had become clear to him that what he was doing no longer lit a fire under him.

In the end, that was what had made the proposal so intriguing, because he could see right away that what he would be involved in would deliver the excitement he craved. And he could see their point: he was the perfect man for the job they had in mind. He was a man with an innocuous business, who had spent many years in Japan, spoke the language fluently, had made many contacts and friends over here, had used Japanese production and marketing techniques, and so was fully versed in the Japanese mind. He was also rich enough to attract the attention of the right people in Tokyo and, thus, gain an invitation to Forbidden Dreams.

And, of course, the kicker was that he already knew Naoharu Nishitsu, the leader of Japan's all-powerful and incredibly wealthy Liberal Democratic Party. The two had had a number of business dealings that had helped make Moravia rich and which had given Nishitsu access to certain contacts in New York, where these days he often found it difficult to conduct business.

Nishitsu was apparently more than he seemed, was, in fact, the key into the world Moravia was meant to investigate clandestinely. It was proposed that he become a spy, an offer he found utterly irresistible.

Besides, he felt no compunction about conspiring to bring Nishitsu down. Nishitsu had destroyed so many people, it no longer was possible to keep a body count. And, beyond that, through his control of the political climate of the country, he had warped the lives of countless others without their ever becoming aware of it.

Nishitsu had a secret life, just as Moravia himself did, and now Moravia had been charged with unearthing those secrets. Dangerous work, undoubtedly, but all the more exhilarating because of it.

Moravia watched now as a beautiful Japanese woman, almost a girl, yes, but not quite, brought over a refill of his drink. She had done this without him asking. That was the Japanese way, one of the reasons why he had been so drawn to Japan as a young man.

As she sat, naked, beside him in the tiny, windowless room, she became another piece of art with which this room was furnished. She was smiling that sincere but empty smile that was the symbol of modern-day Japan; he considered in what ways she reminded him of that first Japanese girl he had met in New York, when he was a young man. She had been so fresh-faced and, in the arena of sex, so willing to do anything he wished. She had beguiled him, luring him back to Japan, and had almost convinced him to marry her. But just in time he had backed out, and since then he had never considered marriage again.

Once, he had imagined it was his great wealth that was an impediment to a lasting relationship with a woman. Now he knew better. It was his secret life, the one that opened up for him at night like a poppy, whose kiss could bring all his delicious dreams alive. And there was no better place than Tokyo for him to indulge his appetite for sexual excess.

He picked up the red silk cord, wound it around his hand. He tugged gently at it, and the woman, the other end of the cord tied around her ankle, was pulled closer to him. He got up and, stepping away from the comfort of the sofa, brought her over to the restraint of a hard, armless, ladder-back chair. He jerked on the silk cord, and she straddled the chair, facing the back.

He knelt, tied first one ankle, then the other, to the chair legs. Now he began the most enjoyable work, using other lengths of silk cord. When he was finished, she was bound around neck, wrists, waist, breasts, across eyes and open mouth, in a kind of complex puzzle of tight loops and knots that, in concert with her smooth, firm flesh, created a kind of artwork, a living sculpture that was as aesthetically pleasing as it was sexually arousing.

Her helplessness—and her enjoyment of that helplessness—was an irresistible erotic magnet to Moravia. He stood, naked himself, with his hands on her shoulders, knowing that she could not move even if she wanted to. Of course, she did not want to.

His hands slid down her bound back, caressing her flanks, then gripping her pelvis. His knees bent until he was at the correct height, then, pulling on the tightly bound cords, he entered her.

She gasped through the silk, her head falling back onto his chest, sightless and therefore feeling him all the more deeply. But this kind of heightened pleasure could not last long, and it was over for both of them too quickly. Well, he thought, gripping her hard-nippled breasts, there would be more to come after his requisite interval of rest and recovery—he knew that she was ready to go on now.

Moravia, just returned from his latest trip to Tokyo, was assaulted by memories of his last night there, spent with a girl named Evan. In all ways, he realized, he had just now attempted to duplicate his inchoate coupling with the extraordinary Evan. Together they had celebrated his newfound endurance well into the small hours of the morning. It was only when he had finally been sated that a discreet knock at the *fusuma* had announced the arrival of Naoharu Nishitsu.

Moravia had noticed that, as Nishitsu passed her, Evan bowed so low her forehead touched the tatami, just as if Nishitsu had been the shogun of feudal Japan. When she raised her head, Moravia signed to her to close the *fusuma*. Much to his annoyance, she had looked to Nishitsu for confirmation of this command. A minute incline of his head, and she shut the sliding door.

The incongruity of the situation had not been lost on Moravia: Nishitsu, the traditionalist, in neat Western suit and tie, and he, a Westerner, in traditional silk kimono.

Nishitsu had turned that eerie opaline eye on Moravia and they went through the ritual of a formal greeting. Evan brought tea. Though it was not green tea and had not been hand-whisked to a froth, Nishitsu nevertheless gracefully accepted a cup.

“Moravia-san, my friend,” he said, when the tea had been drained and Evan had refilled their cups, “my apologies for disturbing your relaxation, but it has been put to me that in a few days it will be your birthday.”

“This is true, Nishitsu-san,” Moravia said, using the most respectful syntax. “But I am amazed that such an insignificant event would be of interest to you.”

Nishitsu had sat as still and erect as a toy soldier. The teacup was lost in the palms of his callused hands. Hands that, if one were any kind of a student of Japan, it was apparent had been assiduously exercised for years on karate's wood, stone, metal, and hot sand practice stations.

"As you must be aware," Nishitsu had said, "markers of time passing have great significance for us. And what more important marker is there than the day of one's birth? We will have a night of celebration."

Moravia bowed, very pleased, indeed. "Thank you, Nishitsu-san."

Nishitsu gave the smallest of bows, then rose and exited the room, leaving the atmosphere charged with the residue of his presence.

And what a celebration his last night in Tokyo had been! Evan had only been the appetizer. He had been wined and dined by Nishitsu and some of the inner circle of Forbidden Dreams. Then, when the sky was turning from pink-black to nacre, the other members of their party either departed or in a dead drunk, Nishitsu had pulled him to his feet, saying, "The celebration is not yet over, Moravia-san."

He and Nishitsu had wrapped themselves in overcoats and had gone out into Tokyo proper. A taxi was waiting, its automatic doors opening for him, and he climbed in. Half drunk, he had turned to see Nishitsu standing at the curb.

"Aren't you coming?"

"Not this time." Nishitsu had given him a rare smile. "Enjoy yourself, Moravia-san. Happy birthday!"

The doors closed and they took off. The wind, whipping in through the partially opened windows, began to revive him, so that by the time they slid to a stop he felt more himself.

He exited the taxi, saw he was in a warehouse district near the Sumida. The smell of fish was very strong, great lights burnishing the newly colored sky just beyond the warehouse rooftops, and he assumed he was near Tsukiji, Tokyo's mammoth fish market.

There was a woman waiting for him at the entrance to a warehouse. One lone bare bulb dropped gold light at her feet.

"Lawrence-san."

He walked toward the woman, recognizing her now. "Minako-san." She was a beautiful woman of indeterminate

age, whom Nishitsu had introduced him to one night perhaps a year ago at a glittering restaurant high above the Ginza. She seemed unattached and curious about getting to know an American firsthand. He had been flattered, and, in the manner of the Japanese, they had become friends. There had been no sex, but rather, the comfort of trust far from home.

Minako laughed when she saw his bewildered face. "Poor Lawrence-san," she said, "being led from temple pillar to gatehouse post." She took his arm companionably, led him into the warehouse. "How has your birthday celebration been?"

"Memorable," he had murmured.

"Good. Then we mustn't disappoint you now."

They went up in a gigantic steel and chrome elevator, the servos almost silent. He could smell oil and disinfectant, and wondered where he was.

The elevator deposited them on the third floor, and Minako took him down a hallway smelling of sawdust and hot machinery.

In a room rather smaller than he had expected in such a structure, he saw a matte-black cube on a dolly. Unaccountably, he was reminded of an illustration he had once seen of Humpty Dumpty sitting on his wall.

The cube was set with all manner of interfaces and a kind of LED panel in front.

"Lawrence-san," Minako said, "I would like you to meet the Oracle." With that, she pressed a miniature remote in her hand, and, as if at the unseen behest of a prestidigitator, the Oracle came to life.

"GREETINGS, MORAVIA-SAN," came a voice that undoubtedly emanated from the matte-black cube. "I HAVE AWAITED THIS MOMENT FOR SOME TIME."

Moravia had tried not to look startled. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a tiny smile curl Minako's pressed-together lips. Then he grunted, annoyed at his momentary discomfort. "It's some kind of recorded tape."

"I MUST CORRECT THAT SURMISE," the Oracle said. "ALTHOUGH I *AM* EQUIPPED TO TAPE CONVERSATIONS AND PLAY THEM BACK ON REQUEST."

Moravia stared at the thing, trying to fathom it. But, in truth, he was struggling to understand the unknowable.