

PURITY 2:  
*Defiance*

SUERIC



Mel 05

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*Defiance is dedicated to Laura a.k.a. chichiwvu  
The original Toga fangirl!*

*Toga fanart courtesy of [Melzilla](#)*

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*I do offer my thanks to her for creating such vivid characters for me to terrorize.*

*~Sue~*

# Purity 2: Defiance

## ~ ~ Prologue ~ ~

The whisper of the spray, the rushing of water, the ebb and flow of the cascade on the rocks in the small cistern hit him with the rising mist. He saw none of it. Inu-youkai ears were sharp, pervasive. He could hear the music as clearly as if he was still in the midst of it; as if he was still inside the ballroom. It filled his head with panic. It filled his heart with a nameless dread.

Inutaisho Toga gave away nothing in his expression. He'd learned his lessons well from his 'great and terrible' father. Inutaisho Sesshoumaru was calculated, cold, stoic but he had always been fair and lenient, as well. At least, he had been until lately. Nowadays Toga was more likely to be the recipient of his father's formidable ire than he was to be praised for seeing the assimilation of several of Sesshoumaru's primary competitors in the computer software industry. To say that he wasn't seeing eye-to-eye with the tai-youkai was being a little too indulgent.

Shifting his gaze, he caught sight of his cousins—Ryomaru and Kichiro—as the whelps did what they did best. Clowning around with their puppy-ish antics to the delight of most of the females in attendance, Toga had wondered more than once if those two would actually follow the youkai dictate and mate for life. As he watched Kichiro lean in to whisper into his dance-partner's ear, he shook his head. *'What the hell is Uncle Yasha thinking? He'd be better off to leash that one.'*

"What are you doing out here, pup? That girlfriend of yours is looking for you."

He didn't sigh though he was hard pressed not to as he turned to face the one member of the family that might understand. A testament to the youkai within him, even if he was only half-youkai: hanyou—Izayoi InuYasha turned his shocking golden gaze on his nephew. "And she'll still be looking when I go back inside."

InuYasha didn't comment on his cryptic observation. "Sesshoumaru says you're heading out to Germany in the morning. You wouldn't be trying to run away, would you?"

"From my father, Uncle Yasha?" He turned and stared down into the fountain again. "Wouldn't dream of it."

InuYasha flicked his long silver ponytail over his shoulder. "So the rumor's true, then?"

Toga didn't take the bait. "What rumor would that be?"

"Don't bullshit me, Toga. Maybe you can do it to your mama and father. You never could do it to me."

Toga sighed and shook his head. His hair—as black as his mother's—rippled in the gentle breeze. It hung past his waist in the mark of the inu-youkai, and he hadn't bothered to tie it back, mostly because he knew it irked his father. He turned a just enough to glance at his uncle out of the corner of his eye. Leaning against the stone railing that surrounded the generous patio, InuYasha absently fingered the bluish-black prayer beads and fang necklace that he'd worn as long as Toga could remember and waited for his nephew to speak.

"I remember the day you married Aunt Gome," Toga commented, using the name that he'd used for Kagome since she'd married into the family. Lifting his chin to stare at the waning moon, Toga heard InuYasha sigh. "You told me then that I'd find my own Kagome. Do you remember?"

"Yeah."

Toga suddenly turned, dragging his hand out of the pocket of his custom fitted Armani suit and flicked his wrist toward the inu-youkai bitch that wandered aimlessly through the crowd inside. "She's nothing like Kagome."

InuYasha grinned ruefully. "Hate to tell you, pup. You ain't never gonna find another woman like Kagome."

"I heard my name."

Toga didn't miss the way his uncle's eyes seemed to take on a whole different kind of light as Kagome stepped outside onto the patio. She kissed Toga's cheek—he had to bend down to allow it since he towered over her—before she wrapped her arms around InuYasha's waist. His uncle had no qualms about putting a protective arm around her. Kagome grinned at her nephew. "Why do you look so sad, Toga?"

He schooled his features blank and blinked innocently. "Sad?"

"Give up, pup," InuYasha remarked. "Kagome's a miko, remember? Lie to her, and she'll know it. Lie about lying, and she'll blast your ass to kingdom come."

Kagome toyed with the prayer beads. "I could put the curse back on these, InuYasha. Don't tempt me."

InuYasha made a face then straightened up suddenly as he stared over Kagome's head through the windows. The playful grin was gone, a vicious snarl left in its wake. "I told him to stay the hell away from her!" he growled. Toga turned to look in the direction his uncle was glaring. One of Sesshoumaru's business associate's sons was getting a little *too* close to InuYasha's pride and joy, his daughter Gin. Kagome caught his arm. He shook her off gently but firmly. "See how the little bastard likes having Tetsusaiga shoved up his ass," he snarled as he stalked back into the building.

"Oh for the love of heaven," Kagome sighed. Before InuYasha could get anywhere near the young people, Gin's no less protective older brothers were towering over the young man, arms crossed over their chests and basically looking every bit as menacing as InuYasha, who stopped between his sons and managed to look even fiercer than both of his sons combined. "The poor girl is never going to have a date," his aunt mused.

Toga was inclined to agree. Gin's face was as scarlet as her dress, and he winced in commiseration with his young cousin even if he could understand both her father as well as her brothers' points. "It's because inu-youkai mate for life,"

Toga remarked. "Any man who can manage to live through the beating he'll get for pursuing Gin will have earned the right."

He could feel Kagome's too-discerning gaze on him, and he tried not to fidget under her scrutiny. At twenty-six there were only two things in the world that he still feared. One was his mother. The other? His Aunt Gome. "You're starting to sound more like your father every day, Toga. Why is that?"

Toga shot her a quick glance. Dark brown eyes shining softly in the mixed moonlight and the light spilling from the mansion, Kagome didn't look a day older than she had the first time he'd met her. As a child of six, Toga had thought that Kagome was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, other than his mother, of course. He'd only met one girl since who had the presence to upset his mind, scatter his thoughts with her scent, but he had been too young, still in school, and her military father had moved them away before Toga had spent more than a week or so with her. '*Lily*,' he thought with a vague smile. He hadn't thought about her in a long time. The flash of her violet eyes . . . he could see them in the darkness, in his sleep, in his dreams. "Am I? Well, I am my father's son."

"Kagura says Sesshoumaru wouldn't be averse to seeing you marry her," Kagome went on, nodding at the reason that Toga was outside instead of mingling with his father's associates and clientele. "But I get the feeling that it's something you would mind."

Perhaps Kagome didn't see his reaction. She'd nailed down the problem exactly. Okasawa Fujiko was every bit the lady, absolutely perfect for him in every way that mattered. She was from a long line of inu-youkai. Her father was one of Sesshoumaru's generals from the old days. Quiet, regal, reserved . . . Toga sighed then grimaced inwardly. Aloof, unapproachable, unruffleable . . .

Sesshoumaru had said that he blamed InuYasha's influence for Toga's flat-out refusal to bend. As if being around Uncle Yasha would somehow absorb into him? Toga narrowed his eyes. '*Keh!*'

Yet it had been InuYasha, in a round about way, who had made Toga realize what he *did* want in a mate. He'd seen too often, how affectionate both InuYasha and Kagome were with one another. Casual touching, loving looks, the absolute desire to be near each other. It was something that Toga wanted, too. There

wasn't a doubt in his mind that his parents loved each other. They just never *showed* it in the way that InuYasha and Kagome did.

"I want more," he mumbled. "Is that wrong?"

Kagome shook her head and hugged Toga. She hadn't done that in years. He hugged her back. "I'm not saying you should dishonor your father, Toga, but don't let him dishonor you, either."

She hugged him again then went back inside.

Toga stared through the windows for a long time.

What he wanted wasn't what his father would have for him. On the one hand, he knew what sparked Sesshoumaru's views. As the future tai-youkai, there were certain things that were expected of Toga, and, in his father's unwavering opinion, one of those things should be that he marry a full youkai. Unfortunately, Toga had yet to meet any youkai that did more than strike a passing interest from him. Ethereal and unapproachable, the youkai bitches were a breed unto themselves. Stately, demure, unwavering, it was easy to see why they advanced higher in the echelons of power. Amazing, really, how many of them became actresses or models, with beauty that could be unmatched, an aloof cool that appealed to the harsh lights of the cameras.

The trouble was, that same beauty, that same aloof quality, that same cool demeanor . . . it wasn't something that Toga had ever really wanted, and if he were to be completely honest with himself, he'd have to admit that the things he wanted were the very things that he'd never find in another youkai. That he had been surrounded by humans and hanyous much of his life didn't really help the cause. Shippou, the kitsune youkai that had married his human sister, Rin, was rare, exceptional, and probably only existed in such a state because of his early contact with Kagome.

*'And the worst of it?'* Toga thought as he wrinkled his nose. Aiko, his sister, could come home tomorrow with a human that she wished to take as her mate, and their father would bless that union. All because he was to be tai-youkai . . . It was an honor he didn't want. It was a curse that he couldn't escape.

Turning his attention back to the mingling guests inside the house, Toga grimaced. Sesshoumaru was looking around, obviously trying to locate him.



# ~ ~ *Chapter 1* ~ ~

## ~ *Berlin* ~

Staring down from the penthouse window over the congestion of the city below with a vague smile turning up the corner of his lips, he tried to brush off the over-taxation of his keen senses. Kami, he hated traveling. Expression devoid of any real humor as his amber eyes swept over the cityscape, the only sound in the unbroken silence was a soft clink of ice in the glass he held in his long-fingered hand. *'How long this time, Father? How long will you wait before you summon me home?'*

Last year it was Nepal, and a beautiful human girl named Amira. Sesshoumaru had caught wind of her and had ordered Toga home before he had been able to ask her on a date. Then it was London and the lovely Lyssia. Same thing. Madrid had been Pilar, and of course, the edict had come in shortly thereafter. This time, however . . .

In fact, for as long as Toga could remember, it seemed as though he hadn't had any real interactions with suitable females, except one: Lily. He smiled as the fleeting image of her face, of those amazing violet eyes of hers, flashed through her head. Something about that girl . . . Why was he thinking about her now? It had been years since she so unceremoniously walked out of his life. He sighed and shook his head. "Good, Toga . . . must be jetlag."

The intrusive trill of his cell phone cut through the silence like a knife. Wincing as he dug around in the pockets of his tailored Armani suit, Inutaisho Toga finally located the offending electronic device and grinned just a little when he read the name on the caller ID. "Hello, Mother," he greeted after he clicked the button and brought the phone to his ear.

"Darling, how was your flight?" Kagura asked, her rich voice as soothing to him now as it had been when he was a child.

"In a word? Tedious. Is there something you needed?"

Kagura chuckled. "Needed? No . . . do I need a reason to call my favorite son?"

He made a face but smiled as he stared out the window. "And your *only* son," he reminded her.

"That, too."

Toga sighed and shrugged off his jacket. "I'm here, at the penthouse," he remarked casually, waiting for her to mention the real reason she had called. It didn't take long.

"Toga . . . your father wanted me to call. He said to remember your promise."

Toga made a face, not that his mother would see it. "How could I forget? When the Great and Powerful Inutaisho Sesshoumaru speaks, the world quivers in fear."

"Toga . . ."

"I won't forget, Mother."

Kagura sighed. "I wish you two could come to terms on this."

Toga rolled his amber eyes, raking his claws through his raven-black locks. "We will, as soon as he admits that he's being stubborn and archaic for no good reason."

"He *has* his reasons."

"And so do I."

"Aiko misses you," Kagura tried again.

Toga winced at the mention of his younger sister. It was her fault this whole thing had come up, in the first place. "I'm sure."

Kagura sighed this time. "Will you be home for her wedding?"

"I'll try. No guarantees."

“Toga . . .”

“I’ve got to run, Mother. I have reservations for dinner in half an hour, and I don’t have a *thing* to wear.”

Kagura groaned at her son’s joke. He’d never cared for clothes or convention, never gave a damn for the things that were expected of him, and that was the crux of the problem. Never quite so happy as he was when he had spent time with his aunt and uncle and cousins, Toga, it seemed, much preferred the laid-back lifestyle of his hanyou uncle, InuYasha, to spending time with his real family.

Hanging up, Toga dropped the cell phone onto the sofa before wrinkling his nose in abject disgust. Growing up the only son and thus heir to his tai-youkai father, Sesshoumaru, Toga had been taught responsibility early on, and much to his own chagrin. Not that his childhood had been a terrible experience. It was far from that. There used to be a time when he had believed that his father was the greatest being on earth, and in a way, he still did.

Stepping over to the closet where the butler had hung his clothing, Toga retrieved the black linen evening suit and a forest green silk banded neck shirt. Tugging off the necktie he loathed, he started changing his clothes for the dinner meeting he couldn’t get out of.

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Toga’s thoughts returned to his father, to the events that couldn’t be undone now. It wasn’t until he’d reached twenty-five that his relationship with his father had started to really deteriorate. Toga still remembered that day last summer. He’d known then, that everything was about to change.

*“Aiko tells me she wishes to take a mate,” Sesshoumaru remarked casually enough as he sank down behind the desk in his spacious study at their estate just outside Tokyo.*

*Toga flopped back in the thick leather chair across from his father, legs stretched out before him, crossed at the ankles, as Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow at his son’s perceived lack of manners. “Just a matter of time, I thought,” Toga remarked.*

*“Perhaps. Tell me, Toga . . . Are you not pleased with Fujiko? I thought you cared for her.”*

Toga slunk down a little lower in his chair as his cheeks gave away his discernable reticence to have this discussion. "Sure . . . as much as someone can care for a block of marble."

"I'll pretend not to have heard that."

"Do I need to say it louder?"

Sesshoumaru's eyes narrowed. "Far too much time with your uncle."

Toga rolled his eyes. "Uncle Yasha has nothing to do with it."

"What is it you want, Toga?"

Toga's smile belied his age, a tainted smile that spoke more experience than he ought to have had. "Passion."

Sesshoumaru pondered that answer for a moment before he broke into the vaguest hint of a smile. "Passion? That's a fleeting emotion. Don't you know that?"

Toga shrugged. "So you don't desire Mother anymore?"

"Don't be flip."

"Then don't be simplistic!" Toga countered as he sat up straight, daring to counter his father as no one else would ever think to, with the exception of Uncle Yasha. "It's easy for you to say; Mother has always been your heartmate, your equal . . ."

"And you don't feel Fujiko is yours?"

"No, Father, I know she isn't."

"Then keep looking, Toga, just bear in mind, she cannot be human."

Toga shook his head. "The youkai are all the same, Father, and you know it. They're all like Fujiko. They're all cold and aloof . . . untouchable . . . I don't want it."

"It is not a matter of wanting, Toga. It is what I require of you."

*"Try again, Father. I'll not take a youkai mate if she doesn't please me."*

*"Then by all means, find one who pleases you, but she'd better be youkai."*

*Shaking his head slowly, Toga rose from his chair. Staring Sesshoumaru in the eye, amber gazes locking, neither man was willing to give an inch. "I don't care if she has three heads and spits fire. If there is no passion, I will not take her to mate . . . and if the one I find is human . . . then you'll have to live with that, too."*

*"Toga, in this, you will honor me."*

*Toga shook his head before he strode toward the door. "I'll honor you, Father, when you honor me, as well."*

He sighed and shook his head as he drained the water from his glass and set it aside. The last thing he wanted to do was suffer through an overly long business dinner tonight. Having taken over most of the responsibilities for acquisitions for the family business, Inutaisho Industries International, Toga also didn't have much of a choice, either. They were trying to buy out Stellesaft, and, if he were careful, he might be able to close the deal tonight.

Grabbing his jacket as he grabbed his cell phone to call a cab, Toga told the girl at the courtesy desk that he needed a ride to the Vau restaurant on Jägerstrasse as he hit the button on the elevator and waited. Checking his watch as after he donned the jacket and tapped his foot impatiently, he couldn't help but feel restless, as though something unexpected was about to happen. If only he could figure out what that could possibly be.

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*"Guten Abend! Welcome! Do you have a reservation?"*

Toga nodded at the young hostess that greeted him. "Abend," he answered. "I'm supposed to meet Herr Stelle."

*"Ah, Herr Stelle . . . this way."*

Following along behind the small woman, Toga squinted as he dug into his inner breast pocket for his glasses. Damn clumsy things, but necessary . . .

Still fumbling around with his glasses as they approached the table, he was welcomed before he could rightly see the squat middle aged man rise and offer his hand in greeting. Jamming his glasses into place as he accepted the friendly greeting, Toga pasted on his best business smile as he sat down in the chair opposite the man. "Pleased to meet you! I'm Wildemar Stelle. My wife is . . . how do you say? Powdering her nose."

Toga nodded as a waitress approached. He could smell her before he turned to look at her. The perfume she wore was much too strong, masking whatever scent lay below the surface as she offered him a tepid smile. Leaning away as far as he dared without appearing offensive, Toga returned the expression and dragged his gaze off the woman's obscenely red lipstick. "Wine? Beer?"

"Water," he answered, bringing his hand to his nose without realizing. Being inu-youkai sometimes held distinct disadvantages. In places such as this, when the scent of the overwhelming perfumes and powders made his head spin, he was all-too aware of the drawbacks of his uncanny senses.

"Wasser!" Stelle laughed, waving his hand as though Toga had made some sort of joke. Toga blinked as he stared at the German. "You drink nothing?" Stelle shook his head and waved at the waitress. "You drink no liquor?"

Toga nearly smiled. Recalling the time his father and Uncle Yasha had gotten drunk on sake and basically made complete and utter fools of themselves in a swordfight, Toga had sworn early on—mostly after listening to his mother's yelling—that he wouldn't be drinking, ever. The two had ended up sleeping it off at Uncle Yasha's house, and only because Aunt Gome was damn near a saint . . .

"No, I never touch the stuff."

"You will have beer, *ja*?"

Toga smiled politely and waved his hand. "No, thanks. Water's fine."



# ~ ~ Chapter 2 ~ ~

## ~ Lily ~

The summer night was balmy, tainted. Settling on his skin like a misty fog, rising all around him like a vaporous veil, the damp air plastered the emerald green silk shirt against his chest.

Toga sighed as he wandered down the sidewalk from the Vau restaurant. Opting not to catch a cab, he'd been drifting aimlessly for hours. The last time he checked his watch, it was well after one in the morning. He had no idea what time it was now nor did he care. Hands jammed deep in his trouser pockets, shoulders slumped forward as his hair fell around him like a cloak, lost in thought as he let his senses guide him, questions kept forming in his head, and none of them had any real answers at all.

*'Lily . . .'*

A sardonic smile surfaced on his face as he meandered through the streets of downtown Berlin. He hadn't expected to see her. Relegated to more of a passing thought, a vague memory that had faded in his mind to mere legend, he had half-hoped that he had been wrong all these years, that she hadn't been as beautiful as he remembered. Glossed by the passage of time, the memory he had of the school girl had haunted him for what seemed like an eternity. To have seen her again, and to have realized that he hadn't dreamt her up at all, and that she really was just as gorgeous as he remembered . . . *'Sometimes,'* he thought as his smile turned into a grimace, *'life really sucks wind.'*

In the years since she'd moved away, he had thought that she was just gone, he supposed. What happened to those who faded out of his life? He made a face. *'Just because they aren't there any more doesn't mean that their lives stop . . . and maybe that sort of arrogance is another gift from my father . . .'* To see her now, though . . . to know that she was well and married . . .

What had he truly expected? Surely he hadn't really thought that everything would remain the same? Toga shuffled along the sidewalk. No, maybe he hadn't really thought much about it, at all . . .

*'Water under the bridge, Toga . . . Thinking about her won't come to any good ends. She was another life, a different dream, before you figured out that dreams were made to be broken . . . before you figured out that it didn't really matter, what you might want. It's all about duty and honor . . . and if you lose yourself in the end? It really won't matter then, so long as you don't disgrace your father.'*

He scowled at the sidewalk under his feet. *'Is that right?'*

As if Father had any room to cast his judgments. Toga's older sister Rin, adopted though she was, was human. Sesshoumaru's granddaughters were hanyou, and he doted on them, just the same. Uncle Yasha, himself, was a hanyou. So far as Toga could tell, Aiko, his younger sister, could have brought home a human or a hanyou, and Father wouldn't have batted an eye. That he held Toga to such a double standard was, in his opinion, hypocritical at best, an outright dishonor to him, at worst.

*"It's only because he wants to continue the line of the tai-youkai," Kagura had tried to explain to him.*

*Toga stared at his mother with an incredulous eye, an unwavering steadiness in his amber gaze. "Are Father's wishes so important that what I might want doesn't seem to mean a damn thing?"*

*"You know your father, Toga. He values tradition. He only wants what's best for you, for the family. You know this."*

*"What's best for me? Shouldn't that include my happiness? What does it matter if the woman I find is human, hanyou, or youkai? Mother . . . you don't know what he's asking of me."*

*Kagura's smile was gentle, pleading. Toga looked away. "Try to understand, Toga. The families of the pure youkai are few and far between . . . That's why it's so important to your father, that you take a youkai mate."*

*Toga shook his head, staring across the expansive back yard of the Inutaisho estate. "Mother . . . I know you love Father, and I know he loves you. Father says I spend too*

*much time with Uncle Yasha and Aunt Gome . . . maybe I do, because given the two examples . . . I want what they have. I want a mate who isn't afraid to touch my arm, to sit beside me . . . to yell at me, when I piss her off. I know what I am, and I know what Father wants, but I also know what I want, and it is my life, isn't it?"*

The cell phone in his pocket whirred to life, breaking him out of his memories. He briefly considered ignoring it then grimaced. The caller ID registered 'private number', and he hesitated. Two people he knew would show up that way. One was Uncle Yasha. The other? He sighed. His father.

"Hello?"

Sniffing greeted his ear. Toga frowned. Female, certainly, but who would call him crying?

"Toga? I'm sorry if I woke you . . . I found your number in Wildemar's attaché case . . . Are you . . . busy?"

". . . Lily."

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"I almost told Wildemar that I wasn't feeling well tonight," Lily said as Toga closed the penthouse door behind her. "He drags me to these hopelessly boring dinner meetings all the time, you see . . . but you don't care about that, do you?"

"Can I offer you something to drink?" Toga asked, ignoring Lily's obvious nervousness, her inane chatter. Stepping over to the wetbar, Toga poured himself a glass of water and stared pointedly at the woman as he tried to hide his slight smile behind a mask of indifference. Clad in a pair of black slacks and a billowing black silk blouse with her hair hidden beneath a generous black scarf, he figured all she needed were a pair of oversized black sunglasses to complete the conspicuous ensemble. In fact, he might even have a pair of them, somewhere around . . . perhaps he ought to lend them to her . . . *'How very Marilyn . . .'*

"Vodka," she requested. Toga hid his surprise as he dragged out another glass and sloshed the preferred drink into it. "Thanks," she said as he handed her the

glass. He watched as she swallowed half of it before she heaved a heavy sigh. At least her hands had stopped shaking as she untied the kerchief and dropped it on the coffee table. "I can't believe it's you."

Sinking into the armchair furthest away from the sofa, Toga offered her a small smile. "Was there something you wished to see me about?"

Her smile faltered just a little, and she shook her head quickly as she grabbed her things and stood. "Maybe this was a mistake."

"No, stay. I'm sorry. I just . . . it's been a long day."

She didn't look convinced but she did sit back down. "I've wondered how you were, where you were . . . I just never expected . . . You look good."

"You look better."

Her smile was shy as she ducked her head and giggled softly. "How long are you staying? In Berlin?"

He shrugged, reining in the desire to kick off his shoes. "Only until the contract is signed."

Lily drained the last of her vodka and smiled sadly. "Do you ever wonder what would have happened if I hadn't had to move? That's a stupid question, isn't it? You can't live in the past, right?"

Her sadness touched him, tore through his youki with a vicious abandon. The girl he had known so briefly had somehow changed into such a sad creature hiding behind brilliant smiles and designer clothes. The sorrow in those violet eyes unsettled him, and Toga sighed. "Why did you call me?"

"I wanted to see you. I wanted . . ." trailing off as she blinked quickly and looked away, Toga could smell the salt in her tears, could hear the pain in her voice. "I had to convince myself that there are still beautiful things in this world. I think I might have forgotten."

"Is it so bad?"

She sniffled and dug into her purse for a tissue, waving away the fine white linen handkerchief Toga offered. "Not bad so much as . . . pointless. I married Wildemar because my dad said he'd take care of me." She managed a terse laugh, harsh, incredulous. "Stupid, isn't it? I mean, you buy a car because it gets good gas mileage, or you look for a house in a good neighborhood so you'll be safe . . . you invest in the markets and open retirement accounts so you'll have security. You don't get married to be taken care of, right?"

Trying not to show her how closely her words hit home, Toga shook his head and stood, reaching for her glass to refill it as he turned away to hide his own wince. "I wondered . . . a lot."

"I don't know if that was the right answer or not . . . I think I'd have been better off to have stayed home tonight. I think I'd feel like less of a fool."

Handing her the refilled glass, Toga caught her chin with his index finger. "You've never been a fool."

Setting her glass on the table untouched, Lily stood and forced a smile. "I think I should go."

Letting his hand drop away from her face, Toga nodded once and stepped back as she retrieved her things. "I'm glad you called."

Lily dug into her purse again and pulled out a yellowed old envelope. "I wrote this to you a long time ago. I never had the nerve to mail it. Maybe if I had . . . I was sure you had forgotten me."

Toga leaned down to kiss her cheek, closing his eyes against the sweet intoxication of her, wildflowers and sandalwood . . . marked by a pathetic human man. His lips brushed over the soft hollow of her cheek as the smell of her tears cut through him again. "Lily," he whispered as she turned her head, mouth turning up to touch his.

Unable to think as she pressed closer to him, coherent thought skittering out of his control, her lips tugged at his with a softness, an underlying urgency, a tenacious hold as she wrapped her arms around his neck. She clung to him with a lethargy that belied the passion in her kiss. Lips opening to his exploration, a surging desperation broke wide. Her breathing came as sighs against him, the florid blossoming of a swelling burn.

She relaxed against him as he wrapped his arms around her. He ignored the tiny voice that whispered in his mind, the voice of reason when everything else faded. *'You're inu-youkai! You cannot do this! She is claimed, and you . . .'*

But her lips were soft as velvet, her breath a silky balm. Her body felt so alive in his arms, so aware. Her tongue pressed against his, stroked his as she sought to deepen the kiss. Lost in a wildfire haze, Toga couldn't think, could only feel, could only react. Her hands rubbed against his shirt, he growled in answer to her sighs.

Her desperation seared him; the stroke of her lips against his both comforting and torturing. He'd dreamed about her for so long, wondering where she was; what she was doing . . . the whimsy of fantasy felt off-kilter, askew. The nagging thought in the back of his mind just wouldn't let go. *'It's . . . wrong . . .'*

Still he couldn't bring himself to push her away. The scent of her tears mingled with the deepening scent of her essence. Her hands tugged at his hair, the pressure of her lips strong, hot, demanding. She pressed her body against his, seeking a closeness that she seemed to crave. "Just tonight, Toga?" Lily murmured between kisses.

Toga's back stiffened and he stepped back. Shaking his head slowly, hand shaking as he straightened his collar, he cleared his throat before he could trust his voice. "I can't, Lily. There's no such thing as 'just tonight', not for me."

He watched her go without another word. She paused in the open doorway and looked as though she wanted to say something. In the end, she nodded and left, pulling the door closed behind herself.

Toga stared at after her for long minutes as he tried to tell himself that he'd done the right thing. *'There's no such thing as 'one night', not to an inu-youkai.'* Through the years, he'd been told countless times by both his father as well as his uncle, and his mother and aunt, as well. *'Inu-youkai mate for life, Toga, so you'd better be sure . . .'*

He sighed as he kicked off his shoes, unbuttoned his shirt. Physical intimacy was one thing. That he could handle without laying a claim, without inadvertently marking a bitch. Oral sex was an option. Physical satisfaction without the risk of

accidental repercussions . . . Something about Lily, though . . . Toga closed his eyes, let his head fall back. He'd be better off to never lay eyes on her again.

Letting his head fall forward, Toga rubbed his neck with a grimace. Eyes falling on the old envelope Lily had given him, he frowned as he picked it up off the floor, turning it over in his nimble fingers.

Sealed so long ago that the glue gave with a soft snap, Toga pulled the piece of paper out and carefully unfolded it.

Dear Toga.

I'll bet I'm the last one you thought you'd hear from again, huh? I wanted to let you know a few things. I didn't find out about part of it until recently even though I always suspected something. My father died a few weeks ago, and he admitted to me, right before he did, that the reason we had to move away so quickly was because your father paid him to do so. He didn't think I was good enough for you, and maybe he was right.

I don't tell you this to cause any trouble. I just thought you ought to know. On the plus side, by the time you get this, I'll have been married. We delayed the wedding three weeks after my father's heart attack. Our wedding is tomorrow.

I waited for a long time, Toga, thinking and hoping that maybe somehow, someday . . . well, you know what I mean. I guess some things aren't meant to be even though there are many times that I wish, just for a moment, that those things didn't include us.

Good luck, Toga. You're such a wonderful man, and there will always be a special place in my heart for you, my very first kiss, my very first love.

Always in my heart,  
Lily.

Toga crumpled the letter and tossed it onto the coffee table as anger darkened his eyes to a deeper amber, an irate hue.

Grabbing the cell phone before he could think about it, Toga hit speed dial and let the phone ring. "Inutaisho."

"Father."

"Toga. I trust you closed the deal?"

"What the fuck did you do?"

"Come again?"

"You *paid* Lily's family to move away? Who the hell do you think you are?"

Sesshoumaru didn't answer right away. The fading voices in the background told Toga that his father was very likely heading toward his study to have this conversation in private. Toga cracked his knuckles. "I am your father, Toga. I owe you no explanations."

"The hell you don't. What the . . . do me a favor and stay the fuck out of my life."

"Toga, we'll discuss this when you come home."

"Keh. I don't think we will."

Hanging up on Sesshoumaru, Toga had to tamp down the desire to rip something to shreds. He drew a deep breath. It didn't help. '*Home,*' he thought with a decisive snort. '*Home? The hell . . .*'

He couldn't go home. He couldn't face his father, and he couldn't stomach the idea of biting back his irritation with Sesshoumaru's heavy-handedness. Toga hit another number in his speed dial, prowling the floor as he fought to calm his nerves.

"Hello? Yes, I'd like to book a flight . . . New York City."

Toga rubbed his forehead as he tried to make the pounding in his skull go away. "Yes, fine . . . No, I'll pay for it when I get there. Name? To—Thomas. Thomas Masume. Thank you."

One last call before he had to go . . . Toga hit the first number on his speed-dial.

"Izayoi."

“Uncle Yasha?”

“Toga?”

Toga grinned despite his irritation. “Who else calls you Uncle Yasha?”

“Don’t be a smart ass. Aren’t you supposed to be in Germany trying to evade that bastard of a brother of mine?”

“Yeah, well . . . I wanted to ask a favor of you . . .”

“All right, pup.”

Toga made a face. He supposed it didn’t matter how old he was, to some people in his life, he’d still be tiny Toga . . . “Could you tell my mother that I’m fine, and that I’ll call her?”

InuYasha didn’t answer right away. Toga could fairly see his uncle, standing in the kitchen of his house in the forest, arms crossed over his chest as he frowned at the receiver, trying to figure out just what Toga was up to. “Something happen I should know about?”

Toga winced. “Not really . . . just sick of certain people thinking they can meddle in my life . . . You’ll tell Mother?”

InuYasha sighed. “This is really gonna piss your father off, pup.”

“Good, I won’t be the only one, then.”

“Promise me you’ll call if you need anything—and I mean anything, Toga.”

“I will. Thanks, Uncle Yasha. Give my love to Aunt Gome.”

“You bet.”

The phone went dead, and Toga stifled a sigh. Hanging up the phone, he stared at it for a moment before dropping it onto the table. He had an hour before he had to be at the airport, and that device . . . he wouldn’t need it anymore. Every number on that could be traced, and why not? It all went back to his father’s



# ~ ~ Chapter 3 ~ ~

## ~ Starting Over ~

The incessant buzz of the alarm clock rattled Toga out of a dreamless slumber. With a frustrated growl, he swung his arm at the offending electronic, knocking it across the room with a satisfying thud as it hit the wall and clattered to the floor.

Yawning wide as he sat up, scratching his chest in the shallow vale over his heart, he opened his groggy eyes and blinked. *'Damn . . . another one bites the dust,'* he thought with a grimace as he stumbled toward the bathroom, kicking the remnants of the clock out of the way.

He'd never been a morning person. Even as a pup he'd been inconsolable when roused before he was ready. His mother loved to tell the stories about Toga's famous temper. He grimaced as he turned on the shower taps and stepped into the tub.

Three blissful months free of the constraints of his overbearing father . . . Toga smiled vaguely as he reached for the bar of Ivory soap. As close to unscented as he could find in the States, the smell still bothered him though not nearly as badly as it could have.

He sighed. True enough, he had plenty of money in his bank accounts to live off of indefinitely. Trouble was he refused to use it, if he didn't have to. He was also sure that his father—meddler that he was—was probably having each and every one of those accounts monitored for activity. It wasn't difficult to find a job, anyway. If nothing else, he had gained a plethora of experience to make finding employment easy enough. If only he didn't have to get up at the blessed crack of dawn . . .

Finding a job hadn't taken much effort. Opting not to stay in New York City, Toga had moved on to Chicago. He didn't have a doubt in his mind that Sesshoumaru was trying to find him. Toga made a face. He was the precious

heir, wasn't he? It would have been wishful thinking to believe that his father would just let him alone.

Against his better judgment, he had called Kagome last night. Having never really been so far away from real family for so long without contact, Toga had found himself a little melancholy, and he missed his aunt and uncle more than he cared to admit.

*"Toga? Oh, kami! Toga, where in heaven's name are you?" Kagome demanded when she answered the phone.*

*He could see her, in his mind, standing in the kitchen with the phone gripped so tightly that her fingers turned white. "I can't tell you where I am, but I'm fine. I just wanted to call and see if everyone was all right."*

*Toga heard his uncle's voice in the background. "Give me the phone, wench." Toga smiled.*

*"Back off, dog-boy!" Kagome said, her voice muffled as she obviously covered the receiver to growl at her mate. "Toga, Kagura is worried sick over you, and Aiko—"*

*"Has Father promised to stop screwing around in my life?"*

*"Umm . . ."*

*"I didn't think so."*

*Kagome sighed. "I wish you'd come home and just talk to him. Sesshoumaru's been so quiet, and—"*

*"I'm finished talking to him when he refuses to listen." Toga rubbed a tired hand over his face. "Tell Mother that I'm sorry, and that I'm fine, and tell Aiko I wish her the best for her wedding. I've got to go. Don't be too tough on Uncle Yasha."*

*"All right, Toga. I love you."*

*"You, too."*

Toga sighed, shaking himself out of his reverie as he rinsed the rest of the soap off his body. No, Sesshoumaru had meddled for the very last time. This time, Toga wasn't going to roll over and play dead . . .

Making quick work of the rest of his shower, Toga finished dressing and left the small apartment, heading for the parking garage as he dug his keys out of his pocket. With a sigh, he shook his head slowly. Hating the stench of the city, loathing the constraints of this place, he brushed aside his dislike and steeled himself for another day of the same thing.

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Toga turned onto the quiet street on the outskirts of Chicago. Glancing at the open laptop computer beside him to double check the address, he reached over to tilt the screen so he could better read the text. *'Midwest Financial, North Ridge Avenue . . .'*

Fumbling around for his glasses, Toga wasn't paying nearly as much attention as he should have been. A huge thump rocked the Jeep Cherokee, and he slammed on his brakes with a wince and a muttered curse as he pulled over and stumbled out of the driver side door in time to hear the female screech.

"Oh, my God! My dog! You hit my dog!"

Toga grimaced as he knelt down to pull the dog's body out from under his vehicle. The distraught girl shoved him back as she gently lifted the large animal's head. From where he was, Toga could tell it was dead. "I'm sorry," he said, wincing at the lame sound of his own voice.

Peridot green eyes stared incredulously at him, as though she couldn't believe he'd had the absolute nerve to apologize to her. Cheeks reddening with indignant anger to match the dusty rose of her full lips, Toga blinked and retreated a step. "Why don't you watch where you're going? Where'd you get your license? Out of a Cracker Jack box? You idiot! *You killed my dog!*"

Jamming his glasses up his nose, Toga took off his jacket and gently wrapped the animal in it. Upset over the taking of a life warred with the confusion at the desire to appease this unknown girl. "Can I take him somewhere? I'm sorry . . ."

His actions seemed to give her pause, and the girl sat back, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand as she blinked in amazement and finally turned to look at Toga. "Oh, your jacket," she said quietly, the anger suddenly draining from her voice as she stared mournfully at her beloved dog, wrapped in the tailored suit jacket. "It's ruined . . ."

"Don't worry about it," Toga muttered. Those creamy light green eyes flicked over his face again, more curious than wary, longest brown eyelashes fluttering over her cheeks as she blinked at him in surprise. Unaccountably flustered by her simple expression, Toga forced his gaze away as he fought down the rising flush. "I-I-I didn't see him . . . I'm really sorry."

"What were you doing?" she asked, her tone pleading, as though she were trying to make sense of the accident. "You couldn't see him? He's *huge!* How could you not have seen him?"

Toga reddened as he easily lifted the dog's weight. The Great Dane *was* a huge dog. Toga held him like he weighed nothing at all. "I was checking an address . . . Can I take you somewhere? I don't want to leave him here."

She sighed, running her slender fingers through her long hair. Blonde with just a hint of red in the otherwise golden curls, Toga noticed with a vague grimace that she smelled like apple blossoms. Dressed in faded blue jeans and a short sleeved tee shirt that hugged her curves a little too well, the girl was a mystery to him. Standing beside him, she barely reached his shoulders, so why could this tiny slip of a human girl intimidate him? And why did she captivate him?

Tears gathered in those incredible eyes of hers, and Toga flinched. "My car's in the shop," she explained as she furiously wiped her cheeks again. "If I call, they'll just take him and . . ." Trailing off as though the idea of what 'they' would do with the dog's corpse was unbearable, the girl shook her head miserably and blinked back a few more tears. "My mom has a farm where I could bury him, but . . ."

Nearly whining at the smell of her tears, Toga sighed. "I'll take you," he offered.

Sniffing as she blinked, staring at him as though she couldn't believe her ears, she shook her head slowly. "I couldn't . . . I don't know you, and—"

"And I hit your dog," he finished quietly. "Please."

"All right," she finally agreed, staring him up and down as though she were trying to size him up. "But I warn you, I have a cell phone, and I have pepper spray . . . and I'll knee you where it hurts if you try *anything*." She relented as she opened the back door of his SUV so that he could put the dog inside. "And I guess you can't be *all* bad. You gave up your Armani jacket for Dennis."

"Dennis?"

She sighed as he closed the door. "My dog."

Toga winced yet again. "You have no idea how sorry I am."

She nodded as he followed her around to the passenger side and let him open the door. Snapping the laptop closed and clearing off the seat, he headed around the vehicle and climbed back inside. The girl was already on her cell phone, he supposed, telling her mother that she was on her way.

"My name's Toga," he offered when she clicked her phone closed. Glancing out of the corner of his eye, he cringed inwardly when she pulled out the aforementioned pepper spray.

"Turn up here and take it straight out," she informed him. "I'm Sierra." He could feel her gaze on him again and he concentrated on not hitting anything else as he gripped the steering wheel tightly in his hands. "You're not from around here, are you? You've got a little bit of an accent . . ."

"Uh, no . . . I just moved here a few months ago."

"Where are you from, Toga?"

Deliberately ignoring the ease with which she said his name, the sudden tumbling sensation in his stomach as his name rolled off her tongue, Toga kept his eyes on the road. "The last place I was? Berlin."

"You don't sound German," she mused, "and you don't *look* German, either."

"Isn't everyone in America from somewhere else?"

She sighed. "I suppose." Staring out the car window with the can of pepper spray still clenched firmly in her fist, Sierra shook her head. The smell of her hair spiked with the movement. Toga tried to block it out. "It's very decent of you, to do this."

"Yeah, well, it was the least I could do. Where I come from, you don't go around killing your own kind."

"Your own kind?" she echoed with a raised eyebrow.

Toga winced inwardly. "Sure . . . don't you women all think men are dogs?" he joked, hoping that his cover-up worked.

"Maybe not *all* men," she allowed with a small smile. "Would you mind if I . . . ?" she asked, gesturing at the radio console.

"Oh, no . . . go ahead," he told her as he prayed that she wasn't into loud music. As badly as his nerves were already strained, being surrounded by too much noise just might send him teetering off the brink.

Luck was on his side this time. Flicking through the channels until she found one that played soft classical music, Toga couldn't help but sigh in relief as she lowered the speakers to just a gentle hum before settling back in her seat again. "Is this okay?"

"Yeah, fine."

"So you just moved here?"

"A few months ago," he answered, relaxing just enough that he wasn't a complete bundle of nerves. Why was it that every single nerve in his body seemed to be listening to her? He shook his head. Stupid thought, that.

"Me, too . . . I mean, into the city . . . Better jobs than on the farm. Better hours, too, come to think of it . . ."

"I'm not much of a morning person, myself," he admitted.

"Turn here," she instructed. Toga did. "Can I ask what you do for a living?"

Toga shot her a quick glance, an apologetic smile. "I broker corporate mergers."

She blinked in surprise. "Really? I guess that would explain your Armani . . . You just don't look like a business shark."

"Why's that?"

"Your hair . . . your smile . . . You don't look old enough to be in that line of work . . . and you're running me out to the country to bury my dog."

Cheeks heating at her appraisal, Toga cleared his throat and tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "What do you do?"

She smiled. Her eyes twinkled when she did, he noticed before shifting his gaze back to the road. "Well, right now I work in the press room at the *Tribune*. One day, though, I hope to have my own byline."

"Cover anything good lately?"

She shrugged. "At the moment, we're doing a story on Sesshoumaru Inutaisho. You ever heard of him? He owns Inutaisho Industries International. I'm so jealous. The girl who's going to Japan as the assistant to the reporter on the story was hired in just before me . . ."

Toga didn't answer. Eyes locked on the road, carefully schooling his features blank, the very mention of his father was enough to set his teeth to grinding.

"That's it, up there," Sierra said as she leaned forward and pointed to a large farmhouse on the right. He pulled into the driveway and killed the engine before getting out and carefully retrieving the animal from the back seat.

She sighed as she led the way to the back of the sprawling yard. Her mother was already at the back of the property with a shovel. A small, frail woman doing a man's task . . . Toga hurriedly lay the dog down and gently took the shovel.

"Mom, this is Toga."

"The dog murderer?" Sierra's mother commented as she let Toga take over with the manual labor.

Toga flinched. "I'm really, really sorry," he assured them both.

"Mom, he didn't mean it."

"How could you *not* see that tank of a dog?" Sierra's mother persisted.

"I was, uh, double checking an address . . . and trying to find my glasses."

Sierra's mother sighed then chuckled. "City boy, do you know how to use that shovel?"

Toga could feel himself flush again. He'd dug enough holes in his youth to argue that claim. Somehow, though, the idea of digging the hole with his bare hands didn't seem like such a good one, at the moment.

"Stay away from that one, Sierra," her mother warned her in a loud whisper. "He's got the look of a devil . . . the pretty ones always do."

"*Mother!*" Sierra hissed, hand hurriedly covering her mouth as Toga pretended not to have heard the exchange—difficult to do when his face was blazing . . .

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*'In the realm of ignorance, Toga . . . you are absolutely an idiot savant . . .'*

Lying in his bed, staring at the darkened ceiling as lights from passing cars danced across the walls, Toga heaved another sigh and blinked as sleep eluded him.

It wasn't bad enough that he had inadvertently killed a dog. It wasn't bad enough that he felt so bad about it that he had offered to take Sierra to her mother's farm. It wasn't bad enough that Sierra worked for the freaking *Chicago Tribune* and obviously knew the Inutaisho name. It wasn't bad enough that the girl had managed to twist his mind and body in knots. Nope, oh, *hell*, no.

The worst of it? In classic stupid-Toga fashion, he hadn't even thought to ask her last name, her phone number . . . not a damn thing . . . just knew the building where she'd asked to be dropped off at 'a friend's' apartment . . .



## ~ ~ Chapter 4 ~ ~

# ~ Strengths and Weakness ~

"Any word?"

Sesshoumaru dragged his wire-rimmed glasses off his face and dropped them onto the desk with a loud sigh as he sank back in his chair and lifted his gaze to meet that of his mate. "Nothing."

"Can't you bend on this?"

Golden gaze taking on a stubborn light, Sesshoumaru stubbornly shook his head. "No, I cannot."

"I know why you feel the way you do, but Toga doesn't. He never has, and you really can't blame him, can you? He's been surrounded by humans and hanyous his entire life. Can you expect him to understand the significance you place on this, as cynical as it may be?"

"I blame this on that baka brother of mine," Sesshoumaru complained. "If InuYasha had behaved in a more natural fashion—"

"You're grasping at straws, Sesshoumaru. InuYasha and Kagome aren't to blame for it. Look at what the boy's lived! Doted upon, cosseted . . . and then to find that female youkai are nothing like what he's come to know . . . Let me remind you, I told you *not* to do that with that girl's father. I warned you that Toga would find out one day . . ."

"I did what was necessary to do," he maintained mulishly.

Kagura sighed and crossed her arms over her chest, glaring at her mate as though she thought he might be losing his mind. "Sesshoumaru, Toga has always done the right thing. He's always been your son, your pride . . . did you honestly expect him to roll over and take this indignity from you, of all people?"

"Whose side are you on?"

"Do I have to take sides?" she countered, magenta eyes flashing with irritation. "I see your point. You wish to uphold the family, the tradition, the youkai lineage. I also see his side. He wants what anyone his age wants. He wants love. Sesshoumaru . . . some things are more important than tradition, than heritage. Try to see his point. He feels as though you've betrayed him, and honestly . . . I can't blame him for feeling that way."

Sesshoumaru sighed and slowly shook his head. "I cannot bend on this, Kagura. I cannot yield to his whims. Toga must know his place, his duty. He will *be* tai-youkai. It cannot be avoided."

Kagura sighed in complete exasperation and strode toward the door. "Well, perhaps being right will make you happy when your son chooses not to come back. In case you forgot, Sesshoumaru, your son is a grown man. He doesn't have to listen to you, and he doesn't have to do what you say."

She left him alone then, lost in silent contemplation in the quiet of the study.

Kagura shook her head and headed for the kitchen. *'Be safe, Toga, and come home soon . . .'*

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Setting aside the manila folder with a heavy sigh, Toga stood up and stretched. Not enough that he had five merger propositions to look over before Monday morning's meeting, but he had somehow managed to get suckered into a benefit gala tomorrow evening, as well. Instead of researching the pros and cons of the submitted offers, he'd be bored out of his mind at a stupid, stuffy soiree that would probably make his father's stoic gatherings of business acquaintances look like slap-happy great times . . .

*'Pathetic,'* he thought with a grimace as he stared out his apartment window. *'Home with work on a Friday night . . .'*

Checking his watch, Toga figured he could at least get something to eat. Boring as it seemed, his life was just not nearly as glamorous as he had thought it would

be . . . At home, he'd probably be beating on his brainless cousins or even finding new and different ways to pick at his sister . . . Or he'd be taking Fujiko to the movies or dinner and the theatre . . . He made a face, thinking about the youkai bitch. *'All right. So maybe this is preferable to that . . .'*

Heading out the door before he could talk himself out of it, Toga paused long enough to lock his apartment before loping down the three flights of stairs to the street below. Wrinkling his nose at the smoggy air as he stepped onto the sidewalk, hands jammed into his jeans pockets as he slumped his shoulders forward, head down as he wandered down the street.

*'Three days,'* he thought as he shuffled along the pavement. It'd been three days since he'd met Sierra. As much as he didn't want to think about her, he couldn't seem to help himself, either.

It was all her fault, really. Beautiful and entirely too approachable, why couldn't he get her out of his mind? Those eyes of hers, he decided. He'd always been a pushover for eyes. That had to be it, he decided. It certainly wasn't that unusual hair color—was it as soft as it had looked? Couldn't have been the way her skin seemed to glow—it, too, had seemed much too soft. Surely it wasn't the stunning effect of her smile—that really had seemed to light up her entire face in an unreal glow . . .

*'Good, Toga . . . daydreaming about her . . . baka.'*

Stopping at the corner as he waited for the light to change, Toga wasn't paying attention to the congestion around him until he heard the female voice yell, "Watch out!"

Glancing up just in time to see the overstuffed floral print chair that was crashing down the building's stairs straight at him, Toga caught it just before it knocked him down.

"Oh, I'm so sorry! It slip—it's you . . .!"

Unable to do more than blink in shock as he stared at the object of his daydreams standing on the sidewalk in front of him, Toga let go of the chair and opened his mouth, willing something to come out of his suddenly parched throat.

"Toga, right?" she asked, wincing at the chair that had nearly barreled him down.

“Uh?”

She grinned. “You hit my dog? Remember?”

He managed a quick nod. “Uh huh.”

Her smile faded as a look of concern filtered over her features. “You didn't hit your head, did you?”

“What? Oh, no . . . Sorry.” He winced inwardly. *‘Nice, Toga . . . Smooth . . .’*

“Sierra! Come on! We've got plans tonight, remember?”

Startled out of his reverie by the man standing on the stairs with his arms crossed over his chest glaring at him, Toga couldn't help the territorial growl that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside him.

Sierra rolled her eyes and waved at the man. “In a minute!” Turning back to Toga, she grinned and gestured at the chair. “Well, I guess I should finish with my moving before the guys decide to take off. It was nice seeing you again.”

“Do you need more help?” Toga blurted as she started to walk away. It registered in his mind that the guy on the stairs had mentioned that ‘they’ had plans for tonight . . . Toga growled again.

She stopped and grinned at him. “If you're sure . . . I *did* almost run you down with my furniture.”

“This?” he said, waving at the chair. “Keh. This is nothing.” Hefting the chair off the ground and heading for the building without a sign of strain, he caught her drop-mouthed surprise as he brushed past the man on the stoop and carried the furniture into the building.

Sierra grabbed one of the last boxes out of the back of the van and hurried into the building to show Toga where to put the chair. “This way . . .” she said as she hurried past Toga in the wide hallway.

“Sierra, where do you want this?” another guy asked as he carried a box through the apartment.

"Uh, anywhere . . ." she said absently as she set her box down and barely scooted out of the way as the first guy returned with a large rattling box.

"Here's the last of it. I dropped it on accident . . ."

"No . . ." she gasped. "Those are my dishes!"

The guy made a face. "So get new ones."

Sierra rolled her eyes. "Thanks, guys."

Toga waited, still holding the chair. Sierra finally seemed to notice and with a soft gasp, she pointed to an empty spot near the matching sofa. "I'm sorry! I totally forgot . . . You didn't strain anything, did you?"

Toga set down the chair where she'd pointed and shot her a confused look. "No . . . why?"

"Gawd, Sie. Can you go ten minutes without picking up some poor guy?" a third man complained as he came down the hallway.

Sierra's cheeks pinked as she studiously avoided Toga's gaze. "For your information, I met him a few days ago."

"A few days ago?" guy number two asked suspiciously. "Are you the one who hit Dennis?"

"Uh, yeah," Toga admitted.

"Oh, man . . . you got balls, coming back around here. I'm surprised Sierra didn't rip you a new one . . . Dennis was her *baby!*" guy-number-three said with a groan.

"He was very sorry. You'd think *he'd* lost a relative or something," Sierra grumbled as her face flushed sweetly.

"All right, it was nice meeting you. I'm outta here. Carol's going to kill me if I'm late," Number One said. "You'd better like it here because I'm not moving you again," he grouched but kissed Sierra's cheek before he left.

"Me, too," Number Three said as he echoed the sentiment of the first guy. Toga clenched his fists, hidden in his jeans pockets again. "You said you'd pay us in beer, you know. You'll go to hell for lying."

"Go on," Sierra joked as she shoved him toward the door. "Bye." Turning to stare at the remaining guy, she sighed. "Et tu, Mike?"

"Absolutely. Can't miss the big game." Number Two shot Toga a quick glance and winced. "Hide the body in the basement and don't call the cops," he joked.

Sierra rolled her eyes and watched as he left, too, before turning back to smile at Toga. "Want to get some pizza?"

He frowned. "I thought they said you had plans."

She giggled. "Nah, *they* all had plans. I'm free . . . unless you have plans."

"Me? Oh, no . . . I was just going to get something to eat when your chair attacked."

"I'm sorry about that," she apologized again as she headed down the hallway. "Let me change out of my moving clothes, and we can go . . ."

"Who . . . uh . . . who were they?"

"Brothers."

"Brothers?" Toga echoed, frown deepening. "They can't be your brothers. You don't smell anything like them."

Sierra stopped and shot Toga a puzzled stare. "I *hope* not," she remarked dryly. "Anyway, I'm adopted. After four boys, Mom and Dad wanted to make sure they got a girl."

"Oh," he remarked slowly, unable to hide his relieved smile as she disappeared from view. '*Brothers . . . I can deal with brothers . . .*'

"Is that your natural hair color?"

"Yes. Is that your natural hair length or do you have extensions."

Toga shook his head. "Extensions? This Toga would not need hair extensions."

She grinned. "Are you sure you're not really bald under all that hair?"

Accepting her teasing for what it was, Toga shrugged and grinned. "Absolutely. Hideous, really. Completely bald."

"All right, my turn," Sierra said as she wiped her hands on a napkin. "Where are you from? Really?"

Toga sat back and sighed. "Tokyo."

"Really? You don't look Japanese. So what are you doing in Chicago?"

"Working, working . . . and more working . . ." He shook his head slowly. "My boss pulled some strings to get my work visa, or so he says. A real slave driver."

She winced as she sipped her soda. "Wow . . . all work and no play? That's got to be tough."

Toga shrugged. "Tell me about it. I have this black tie benefit tomorrow night, and I really ought to be looking over a few of the merger files instead . . ." Sitting back, Toga regarded Sierra thoughtfully as she played with her straw. "Would you . . . you wouldn't . . . go with me?"

"Black tie?" she asked dubiously, "I don't know . . ."

"It is sudden, isn't it? Forget I said anything. Stupid idea."

"No," she assured him, leaning forward and placing a hand on his arm. He stared at her. "Are you sure? I've never really been to anything like that . . . I might embarrass you."

"I doubt you could."

"I don't have anything to wear."

"Wear that."

She laughed. Wearing a pair of white jean shorts and a little blue tee shirt, considering he'd just told her it was 'black tie' he supposed she was entitled to her amusement. He didn't care. Would it matter what she wore? She'd still look beautiful . . .

"Maybe I can find something."

"I'm sure you can."

"Then you have a lot more faith in me than I do, sometimes."

"Why is that?" Toga asked, leaning back in his chair and dropping his napkin on the table beside the empty plate.

She shrugged. "Do you always ask girls out after running down their dogs?"

He grimaced. "Only if they return the favor by trying to run me down with their furniture. I guess we're even now . . ."

"Even, huh?" She giggled, blushing as fiddled with her straw a little more. "You're different, you know? I don't think I've ever met anybody like you before."

Toga's smile was full of irony as he stared at the glow of the fake candle in the middle of the table. "Yeah . . . I'm different, all right."

"I don't mean that in a bad way . . ."

His smile faded a little as he stared into her eyes. "I didn't think you did."

She tilted her head to the side, narrowing her gaze on him as though she were trying to see into his mind. Finally, she smiled, her eyes glowing in the dimly lit restaurant. "Your eyes," she murmured, her voice so quiet that he had to wonder if she realized that she was speaking out loud."



# ~ ~ Chapter 5 ~ ~

## ~ Waterfalls ~

Sierra turned to the side and eyed herself critically in the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door. *'For as much as this stupid dress cost,'* she mused as she smoothed the dress over her stomach, *'it better at least look decent . . .'* The Oriental style black silk dress was simple yet elegant enough for this and would be practical later, too. The cap sleeves contoured her upper arms without being too tight, and the dress itself, while form fitting, certainly wasn't skimpy . . . With shaking fingers, she fastened the pearl buttons that ran from the middle of the mandarin collar to the edge of the left shoulder. Wondering for the hundredth time what Toga would think, she tried to be unbiased as she slipped on her black pumps.

Biting her bottom lip, she frowned as she stared at her reflection. She'd left her hair down but now she was second-guessing herself. Shoving her hands into her hair to finger comb it back, she pulled it up and sighed. She had considered splurging and having her hair done professionally, but since the dress cost nearly four hundred dollars more than she had wanted to spend, she just couldn't quite bring herself to do that, too.

*'What am I doing? I'm a farm girl, not a glamour queen,'* Sierra thought with a sigh. Remembering the hopeful expression in Toga's amazing amber eyes though . . . *'Come on, Sie. You can do this . . . or you can die trying . . .'*

Rifling through her drawers, she dug out her brush and some bobby pins. A few minutes later, her hair was piled atop her head with the reddish golden curls spilling down her back. *'Better,'* she decided.

At least she managed her makeup with little incident. Her hands were shaking so badly that she was afraid she'd end up poking herself in the eye. Opting for a soft reddish lip-gloss, Sierra stared at herself and shook her head. Unused to applying a 'night face' she'd used the normal lighter tones she used during the

day. For some reason, she felt like she was going to look completely stupid at this affair, and that terrified her. *'I just met him . . . why do I care?'*

The memory of his obviously distressed expression when he'd so gently wrapped Dennis in his suit jacket flashed through her mind. His eyes had seemed so sad . . . She sighed. *'Puppy eyes,'* she thought with a wry smile then shook her head as a soft giggle escaped her. Why on earth had she thought that?

She almost decided to wash it off and start over when the muted knock sounded on the door. With a groan, she snatched her tiny pearl earrings off the countertop and hurried down the hallway as quickly as she could in her heels.

Taking a deep breath before she opened the door, Sierra's voice died before her greeting ever came out. Hands jammed into his pockets as he shuffled his feet in an entirely endearing, wholly nervous way, Toga offered her a bashful smile as he ducked his head just a little to hide his rapidly pinkening cheeks. "You look . . . nice," he said, his tone oddly choked.

Sierra nodded and stepped back, lost in bemusement as she couldn't help but stare at him. Impossibly glossy black hair that hung lower than his waist was smooth and silky. It was hard to tell the difference between his hair and the tailored tuxedo he wore, and she couldn't help but notice how well the ensemble fit him. The black of the suit made the golden hue of his eyes even more startling, and as he looked at her, his gaze took on a soft glow.

"I'm almost ready," she murmured, cheeks unaccountably hot as she tried to remember to breathe. Tilting her head to the side as she fastened her earrings and willing her heart to slow down, Sierra tried to smile at Toga.

He cleared his throat and straightened his bowtie.

Grabbing her evening purse off the table near the door, Sierra led the way out of the apartment and locked the door behind them. "I wasn't sure if this was fancy enough," she said as he escorted her out of the building.

"It wouldn't really have mattered what you wore," he assured. "I don't think you can look bad."

"And I think you're just being nice."

He chuckled as he opened the passenger side door for her.

Taking a moment to draw a deep breath, Sierra couldn't help but stare as Toga strode around the SUV. Something about the way he moved with such fluidity entranced her. A subtle grace that seemed completely unpretentious, a quiet confidence . . . She smiled as she remembered how easily he caught the huge chair then frowned. *'Come to think of it,'* she mused, *'for his build, he is deceptively strong, too.'* Recalling the way he'd lifted Dennis and later that same chair that had nearly run him down, Sierra stared at his profile as he started the vehicle and merged into traffic.

Tall and lanky, Toga wasn't exactly body builder material, and though she'd never actually seen him without a shirt on, she had to wonder just how toned he really was. Dennis easily weighed a hundred-and-fifty pounds or more, and that chair was quite heavy, too. She shrugged inwardly. Maybe he worked out or something . . .

"I hate these things," Toga admitted with a sigh.

"Fancy parties, you mean?"

He cringed. "Yeah, more like torture."

"You sound like you've been to quite a few."

"Unfortunately. Who knows? Maybe you'll enjoy it."

She couldn't help but smile at the hint of resignation in his tone. "Why don't you like them?"

Toga shrugged as he kept his eyes on the road. The light from the streetlamps reflected in his golden gaze, and she blinked in surprise. He seemed almost predatory, the way his eyes kept shifting when he never moved his head. "Lots of reasons . . . too crowded, too pretentious, too loud . . . I ended up with a week-long headache after the first one I was suckered into attending . . ."

"Loud?" she echoed with a soft giggle. "You make it sound like a rock concert, not a black tie affair."

He winced. "Kami, I'd never live through one of those."

Struck by his odd choice of words until she remembered that he had said he was originally from Japan, Sierra shook her head, struck yet again by the mystery he presented. She laughed. "I don't know . . . I've lived my entire life on the farm, until I went to college. The closest to one of these I've ever been is my high school prom. I'll try not to embarrass you, though."

"As if you ever could."

She blushed at his words, more because they seemed so off the cuff than forced. Pretension was something she didn't think Toga really had in him. Or maybe he was just a little *too* sly because a man who looked like him couldn't possibly be as naïve and vulnerable as he appeared . . .

Yet remembering his absolute upset when he'd hit her dog, remembering his sudden fluster the second time they'd met . . . that couldn't have been an act unless he was really, really, *really* good.

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Sierra dug in her evening purse for her lip-gloss as she stood before the huge sheet mirrors over the counter in the bathroom. Needing a few moments to compose herself before she rejoined her date in the thick of things, she had to admit to herself that Toga hadn't been mistaken at all. The Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers was impressive enough. Add to that the stately splendor of the architecture as well as the ambient feel, the intricate ice sculptures, and the illusion of the 'beautiful people', and Sierra had to wonder once more just what she was doing in a place like this.

Women wandered in and out of the ladies' room as Sierra toyed with her lip-gloss. Two women around her age stepped up beside her to check their makeup, too. "This might be an interesting night, after all."

The tall brunette leaned toward the mirror to wipe the contours of her lips with her fingertip. "Oh, yeah? Why?"

The blonde turned her head from side to side as she checked her hair. "My mother said that she heard that Sesshoumaru Inutaisho's son is going to be here."

The brunette's interest was perked. "You don't say? What does he look like?"

The blonde pulled out a compact mirror and turned around to use it in her inspection. "I don't know . . . I've seen pictures of his father in magazines, but I've never actually seen him . . . though with that much money, does it matter what he looks like? He's heir to a fortune."

Sierra's cheeks tinged in outrage. It didn't matter that she had no idea what the man they were discussing looked like, either. How bad would it be to be sought after simply because your daddy was rich?

"Well, if he looks anything like his father, then he's got to be hot," the blonde went on to say. "I've heard that he's shy, though, and that he hates having his picture taken . . . Must mean he's a little on the homely side, not that that really matters, right?"

The brunette giggled. "What did you say his name is?"

Sierra snapped her purse closed and hurried out of the bathroom. Adopted into a family of men, she had learned early on to speak her mind or else. That habit normally led to trouble, and she figured it would be in her own best interests to put some distance between herself and those opportunistic women before she gave them a good old fashioned piece of her mind. With a sigh, Sierra tried to brush aside her odd feelings of inadequacy. Something about those women in the bathroom made her feel like a country rube. Their highly polished, high gloss appearances and their top of the line designer clothes intimidated her, even if she was loath to admit as much out loud . . .

She spotted Toga right away as she emerged from the bathroom. Leaning back against the wall in a casual slouch with his hands jammed into his trouser pockets and his head down, Toga seemed almost nervous despite the ease of his stance. She couldn't help the little smile as it occurred to her again, just how shy he really seemed.

"Sorry I took so long," she apologized as she stopped beside him.

He straightened up quickly, cheeks pinking as though he were embarrassed at his own casual demeanor. "It's fine." Staring into her face for a few moments, Toga frowned and leaned his head to the side. "Something bothering you?"

She shook her head quickly and sighed. "Just some girls in the bathroom, talking about some rich boy who's supposed to be here. They don't even know what the poor guy looks like, and they're ready to jump all over him. Disgusting."

He blinked in surprise and then smiled. "You sound like my mother."

She grimaced. "Sorry . . . it just seems wrong."

"Don't be sorry. Does the rich boy have a name?" he questioned as he led her toward the open doors of the immense ballroom.

"I didn't stick around long enough to hear, but they did say he's Sesshoumaru Inutaisho's son."

He stopped abruptly. Sierra glanced up at him and frowned as her gaze stuck. Staring straight ahead of himself with an almost angry glint in his eyes, Sierra had to wonder exactly what had brought that on. "Toga?"

"What do you know of him?"

Sierra shook her head slowly. "Nothing, really. They said he was heir to a fortune, and that's probably true. I've never actually seen a picture of him or anything . . . Why?"

Toga's smile was downright cynical. "Gold digger's dream."

"Probably. It must be pretty awful, really."

Staring at her as though he were trying to read her mind, Toga frowned, eyebrows drawing together over his troubled gaze. "How would you know?"

"I wouldn't. I just don't think I'd enjoy not knowing if someone was there because of who you are instead of what you are."

"Really."

"You sound like you don't believe me."

"It's not that. I just never thought of it that way. Thanks for pointing that out," he said with a grimace.

She frowned. "You sound like you know something about this guy. Do you?" she asked in a carefully controlled tone. Why did she feel as though she didn't want to find out where this conversation was headed?

Taking her by the elbow as he heaved a sigh, Toga steered her toward a small alcove just outside the ballroom. "I need to tell you something," he began.

"Toga, my boy!"

Both turned to see the approach of a middle aged man and his wife. The man was smiling broadly as Toga sighed again. "Mr. Sampson, how are you?"

Mr. Sampson waved his hand dismissively. "If I've told you once, Inutaisho, I've told you a hundred times. Mike will do just fine, and this is my wife, Lorraine, but everyone calls her Lolly."

Sierra gasped and stepped back. Toga's face reddened as he shot her an apologetic look. "You?" she managed, her voice choked with confusion and maybe a little anger.

"Is this your date?" Mr. Sampson went on as though he couldn't sense the instant tension between Toga and her.

"Yeah, uh . . . this is Sierra."

"What a lovely girl!" Lorraine said with a friendly smile.

Sierra couldn't return the gesture. Retreating another step, she shook her head. "I need to go. Goodbye, Toga."

Before he could answer, she turned and ran, jamming the buttons on the elevator. When she glanced back, Toga was still talking to the couple though he looked like he was trying to get away to follow her. Mercifully the doors opened before he could manage it, and she was safely ensconced in the elevator with the doors closing as he strode toward her.

*'Oh, Sierra, how could you be so stupid?'*

Unsure if she was more confused that he hadn't told her or angry that she hadn't asked before, Sierra bit her lip as the elevator stopped on the ground floor. Silently cursing the stupid heels that slowed her down, she managed decent time as she ran for the front doors, ignoring the strange looks she received for the faux pas.

*'I hate him; I hate him . . . He's probably having a really good laugh right now; laugh at the stupid farm girl . . . He's just like him . . .'*

Stumbling down the street to the corner of North Water Street and Columbus Drive, Sierra darted across as soon as the pedestrian sign lit up.

*'Was that why he never asked your last name? Was that the reason he never told you his? A big joke? Make his buddies laugh when they talked about this later? Why didn't I see it? He's just like Allan, and I never . . . I let him . . .'*

Memories best left forgotten surged through her mind. Allan, with his seemingly shy smiles, his lopsided grins . . . convincing her that she was special, only to find out that he was nothing but a jerk, and somehow she had ended up being the one left feeling inadequate, like a fool while he laughed in her face—the silly farm girl, the naïve college junior who hadn't understood how the world really worked. Now Toga, with that timid smile, that quiet reserve . . . *'How could I be so stupid?'*

A small sob welled up in her throat, and Sierra stopped suddenly, leaning against a building as she bent over to whip her shoes off before she continued wandering down the street though she did stop running.

"Sierra? Wait!"

Smothering a gasp as Toga called out behind her, she quickened her pace as she tried to ignore him.

"Go away, Toga. Leave me alone!"

A hand reached out, grabbed her arm. She tried to pull away but his grip was too strong to break. "I'm sorry. I should have told you," he admitted when she finally stopped struggling. He sighed. "At least let me take you home."

She shook her head. "I can catch a cab."

"No . . . please . . . let me explain . . ."

Finally turning to glare at him, she was caught off-guard by the absolute turmoil in the depths of his gaze. He looked as upset as she was, and that, alone, made her sigh as she waited.

"I should have told you, but I didn't . . . it wasn't that important, to me . . . I didn't realize it would be to you."

Why did he have to look so sincere when he said that? As lame as it could have sounded from any other man, from him . . . it just didn't.

She shook her head slowly. "I thought you were different, Toga . . . I really . . . I liked you."

He couldn't hide his wince at her use of the past tense fast enough. "I see. I'm . . . I'm sorry, Sierra . . . Let me call you a cab. For what it's worth, I've never met anyone like you before."

She watched as he stepped to the curb to hail a cab. *'He's not like the others, not like Allan,'* she thought suddenly. He'd rather let her go than upset her any further, and that was something, wasn't it? "Toga . . ."

"Don't worry," he answered, his voice oddly raspy though he didn't turn to face her. "I'll . . . I'll pay for it."

"No . . . I still like you."

His back stiffened, arm dropping slowly as a cab pulled to a stop beside him. "Where to, mister?" the driver asked as he rolled down the window.

Turning his head to peek over his shoulder at her, Sierra flinched at the cautious hope in Toga's eyes. "I'm sorry," she called out, eyes locked on his. "I think I'll stay."

Fumbling in his pocket, Toga dropped a wad of bills through the window for the cab driver's trouble. "Thanks," he muttered before he turned back to stare at her, hands in his pockets, a very slight, very bashful, very endearing smile on his face as the cab driver pulled away.

She couldn't help but return his smile as he slowly came toward her. Glancing back at the brightness of the hotel, she shook her head slowly. "Would you mind if we didn't go back there?"

The instant relief that flooded over his expression was enough to make her smile widen. "I think I've had enough of it for one night, myself. Told you I hated these things, right?"

She frowned suddenly as she gazed at him. "Toga, did you run after me?"

His blush said it all. Her eyes clouded over. "You must be in really great shape then . . . you weren't even winded at all."

"My uncle trained me for years," he explained. "Classical fighting techniques. He used his sword, passed down from my grandfather. I had more of an affinity for staves and halberds."

"Weapons? As in, real weapons?"

He nodded, his confusion evident. She laughed softly. "It's not every day someone tells you that they fight with real weapons," she pointed out.

"No, I don't suppose it is."

She smiled as she fell in step beside him. "You don't like the attention, do you?" she asked quietly. "Is that why you moved here?"

He shook his head. "No. My father has a penchant for trying to run my life. I guess I'd had enough of it. I'm not hiding from him. I just . . . It's probably just as well if we don't talk to one another for awhile."

"That's so sad," she commented softly. "I'm sorry . . ."

He shrugged. "Don't be."

She stopped short and gasped softly as they neared the intersection of Congress Parkway and Columbus Drive. "Wow . . ." she murmured, staring at the majesty of the Buckingham Fountain. "I've seen it a million times, during the day . . . It looks so different at night . . ."

Toga followed the direction of her gaze with an expression of wide-eyed wonder. The fountain was illuminated in golden light, shooting streams of water high into the air. The bronze sculpture of the imposing structure gave him pause as he took it in. She felt his eyes on her just before he slipped his hand under her elbow to guide her toward the fountain.

Cradling her shoes against her chest as she leaned her head back to stare at the jetting streams of water, a sudden chill raced up her spine, and she shivered just a little. She turned her head when the warmth of Toga's jacket fell over her shoulders. He was staring at the fountain, too, looking as though he hadn't done a thing. "September nights are colder here," he murmured as a hint of a flush crept up his cheeks.

She held the jacket closed with one hand as she shifted her flustered gaze away again. "Thanks."

He sighed, rocking back on his heels as he stuffed his hands into his pockets. He chuckled softly.

"What's funny?" she asked when it became apparent that he wasn't going to tell her voluntarily.

He shook his head, his smile still in place. "I was just thinking. Strange . . . the most beautiful things I've seen in my life are things that money can't buy."

Sierra smiled as she gazed at the fountain. "You're right."

". . . Yeah."

Sensing his eyes on her again, Sierra turned her face again. Staring at him, she had the distinct feeling that he wasn't talking about the fountain at all. An eruption of butterflies in her belly made it difficult for her to breathe, and she pressed her shoes against her stomach under the shelter of the jacket.



# ~ ~ Chapter 6 ~ ~

## ~ U ninvited Guests ~

The ringing phone broke through the quiet stillness with the finesse of a sledgehammer inside Toga's head. "Hell," he muttered as he reached for the phone. *'One of these days I'm going to remember to unhook that damn thing,'* he thought as he blindly hit buttons in search of the one that would connect the call. "What?" he growled as he brought the receiver to his ear.

"Toga! What are you doing?"

"Kami," he groaned as he flopped back on his pillows. "Where the hell did you get my number?"

The male voice chuckled. "Mother, of course. Now stop ignoring the damn question, baka."

Toga made a face. He knew he'd regret giving Aunt Gome his phone number . . . "I was sleeping, Ryomaru. You ought to try it sometime."

"Keh, you're tighter-assed than Uncle Sesshoumaru. Why don't you answer your door?"

"My door?" Toga echoed, deliberately ignoring the comparison to his father. "There's no one at my—" A loud knock reverberated through the apartment. Toga frowned and sat up straight. "How did you know someone was at my door?" he asked, suspicion creeping into his voice.

"I'm psychic."

Rolling off the bed and shuffling down the hallway toward the living room and his door, Toga groaned before he ever got close. "Oh, hell," he mumbled, hanging up the phone and tossing it toward the sofa in passing. He didn't have to open the door to know who was on the other side of it. "Psychic, my butt," he

grumbled as he unlocked the door and was immediately shoved backward as his two biggest sources for annoyance grinned at him.

Inviting themselves inside, the twin inu-hanyous made themselves at home. Ryomaru—the devil of the two—flopped over the back of the sofa and hissed as he caught the phone in a place that wouldn't have been comfortable. Kichiro scratched his silvery head and yawned. "International flights suck wind," he commented as he sank down on the floor, completely ignoring the other furniture in the room.

"Why are you two here?" Toga demanded as he closed the door and crossed his arms over his chest.

"We could ask you the same thing. Last we knew, you were heading to Germany for a meeting. Next thing, Uncle Sesshoumaru called to bellow at the old man for giving you bad ideas or some such shit," Ryo remarked.

"Anyway, Mother was all worried that her precious Toga was in trouble, and she talked him into sending us over to check up on you," Kichiro added.

Ryomaru sat up and narrowed his golden gaze on Toga, the beginnings of an amused grin surfacing on his face. "Nice. Always sleep in your skivvies?"

Toga glanced down at his black silk boxers and shrugged. "Unlike you two, I prefer to wear something to bed, yes," he countered.

Kichiro grinned. "I wear something to bed," he argued.

"Course he does . . . whatever girl is handy, normally."

"Oh, kami . . . Aunt Gome should have had the both of you neutered at birth."

"It's the curse of the silver hair," Kichiro lamented.

"You dogs," Toga snorted as he stalked out of the living room toward his bedroom.

"You ought to try it sometime, tight-ass. Debauchery is a beautiful thing," Ryomaru called out in his wake.

"Until you wake up mated to some bitch and don't even know her name, baka," Toga hollered back as he tugged on a pair of jeans and a button down shirt.

"Can't help myself," Kichiro added. "We're hanyou, remember? We have deeper passion than you stuffy youkai."

"I'll stuff something, right up your—" The phone rang. Toga realized too late that the receiver was out in the living room—probably still under his cousin's ass. "Answer that!"

"Got it!" Ryomaru yelled back. Toga hurriedly buttoned his shirt. "Oi, bastard! It's your bitch!"

"Oh, kami," Toga muttered as he darted out of his room and back down the hallway to rip the phone out of his cousin's hand, praying that if it really was Sierra that she hadn't actually heard his baka cousin.

Conveniently using the phone to thump Ryomaru upside the head, Toga brought the receiver to his ear and winced. "Hello?"

"Toga?"

The wince blossomed into a panic. "Sierra . . . hi."

"Your bitch, Toga?" she asked in an overly bright tone.

"Uh . . . excuse my cousin. He's a stupid mutt."

"Who you callin' a mutt, son of a sheepdog?"

Toga dealt another smack upside Ryo's head. The baka grinned happily.

"Something I can do for you?" Toga asked, trying to ignore the two intruders in his home.

"If this is a bad time . . ."

"No, it's fine."

"If you're sure . . ."

"Positive."

"In that case, I thought maybe, if you weren't busy . . . I could make breakfast for you? But if you've got plans . . ."

"Sounds great," he told her.

"If you want to bring your cousin along—"

"Cousin-S!" Ryo hollered, earning him another scalp slap. "We're both here!"

"No, they were just leaving," Toga argued.

"Nope . . . we're all yours for the next week," Kichiro supplied happily.

'*What'd I do to piss off Uncle Yasha?*' Toga asked himself with a long-suffering sigh.

"Bring them along. I'd love to meet your cousins," Sienna assured him.

'*Damn it . . .*' Toga squeezed his eyes closed, rubbing furiously at his temple. "All right," he finally agreed. "Be right over."

Hanging up the phone before tossing it onto the table behind him, Toga paused to glare at his cousins before he made his ultimatum.

"I like this girl," he started slowly. "I mean, I *really* like her. If either of you screw this up for me, I'll beat the living shit out of you both."

Kichiro sighed as he got to his feet. "Now, that hurts, Toga . . . would we do something like that?"

"Have you licked her yet?" Ryo asked, draping himself over the back of the sofa and ducking Toga's next swipe. "Look, Kich . . . Toga matches Mother's fire rat clothes."

"Damn, that looks painful, Toga."

Toga yanked on his shoes and grabbed his keys off the table. "Forget it. Stay here. Don't move. Don't touch anything, and don't lick anyone, or else . . ."

The brothers got up to follow. "She invited us, too," Ryomaru pointed out reasonably.

"Absolutely," Kichiro agreed.

Toga clamped his teeth together as he stomped out of the apartment and waited for his cousins to follow. Why did he have the feeling that this breakfast was going to be a disaster?

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"Will you marry me?"

Toga kicked Kichiro under the table.

Sierra giggled and blushed. "Well, I think I'd like to know my potential husband longer than twenty minutes," she replied lightly as she dropped her napkin onto her plate and pushed it back on the tabletop.

"Baka! Like she'd marry you when she could just come home with me for awhile . . . I promise you'd enjoy yourself . . . multiple times."

That earned Ryo a kick as well as a menacing glower from Toga. Sierra laughed harder as Toga wondered just how mad Aunt Gome would be if the boys mysteriously disappeared.

"So how did you meet Stoic-Junior?" Kichiro asked as he nodded toward Toga without taking his gaze off Sierra.

"Oh . . . he ran over my dog."

Dead silence surrounded the table. The twins' heads swiveled to stare at Toga in complete shock. Ryomaru was the first to recover. "You ran over her *what?*"

"It wasn't on purpose," he grumbled, cheeks pinking at not only the reminder but also at his cousins' apparent outrage.

"Uncle Sesshoumaru won't like that," Kichiro remarked with a wince.

Sierra waved her hand quickly. "He really didn't mean to, and he was very nice about it afterward," she defended.

Ryomaru was serious at last. "Damn, Toga . . . that's bad."

"Your father likes dogs?" Sierra asked as she drained her glass of orange juice.

"You could say that," Toga answered, carefully staring at his plate.

"But Toga's mom likes them more," Kichiro supplied. "How many does Aunt Kagura have?"

Ryomaru squinted one eye closed as he turned his gaze toward the ceiling in mock concentration. "Three . . . ? Yes, three."

"What kinds?"

"A sheepdog, a cute little silver dog, and one that looks amazingly like Toga."

Toga coughed into his napkin as he glared at his demented cousin. "They pull bodies out of the river every day," Toga remarked tightly. "I'm pretty sure that Aunt Gome won't miss you two that much. She's still got Gin, after all . . ."

"And take us away from the ladies?" Ryo asked in mock horror. "They'd be awfully upset about that . . . right, Sierra?"

Sierra giggled. "I don't know . . ."

Kichiro got up and strolled over to the window, staring below at the pedestrians passing on the street. "Ryo! Oh, wow . . . Come see!"

Ryo shot out of his chair and strode over beside his brother. The two were quickly absorbed in what they termed as 'window shopping'. Toga rolled his eyes.

"They're interesting," Sierra said quietly, her smile still in place.

Toga winced. "They figured out too early that the girls in Tokyo find their looks unique. I swear, they behave much better when their mother is around."

"They're harmless."

Toga sighed. "Not as harmless as they look."

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Toga trudged up the stairs to his apartment. After Sunday's disastrous breakfast date with Sierra and his baka cousins, he had almost looked forward to a quiet work day only to discover that it wasn't meant to be. Late to four of his six meetings of the day, two clients backed out at the merger signings, one was convinced that Toga was trying to mastermind a hostile takeover, and the last one . . .

He grimaced. The last thing he wanted at the time was to take a trip down memory lane with the old proprietor of a local restaurant that was being bought out. The man had brought along three photo albums of his business through the years . . .

All he wanted was a nice, quiet evening without a sound that he didn't make.

It wasn't until he realized that his apartment door was unlocked that Toga remembered that his cousins were still here. Bracing himself for whatever sort of devilment the two had found to get into during his absence, Toga took a deep breath and opened the door.

Stepping back at the scene that greeted him, Toga's face felt as though it might explode. His cousins were relaxing in the living room with a couple of girls that he'd never seen before. One of the twins—he wasn't sure which since they looked so much alike that it normally wasn't until they spoke that he could tell them apart at first glance—was nuzzling a blonde girl's neck while the other twin was busy being nuzzled. None of them seemed to notice Toga at all, which was just as well since one girl had her hand down his cousin's unfastened pants,

and from where he stood, he could plainly see that the other girl was lacking panties.

Shaking his head and sighing inwardly, Toga pulled the door closed again and headed back toward the stairs. The early October air was cool and dry as he stepped back out onto the sidewalk again. Staring at the sidewalk, he headed down the street toward the small pizzeria where he had first eaten with Sierra.

The place was packed and noisy, filled with convoluted scents and a wash of bright colors. Staring around with a little disorientation, Toga frowned and turned to leave.

“Toga!”

Head turning at the sound of that voice, he smiled despite his bad mood. Why did just the sight of Sierra’s face dispel the memory of a rotten day?

Sitting in a booth with two other girls, Toga headed toward her as she scooted over to make room. “Want to join us?”

“Uh, I don’t want to intrude.”

She waved off his concern and patted the bench beside her. Ignoring the curious gazes of Sierra’s friends, he sat down.

“Toga, these are a couple of girls from work: Brenda, Teri, this is Toga.”

“The fancy party guy, right?” one of the girls asked with a smile.

“Oh, I love your hair! It looks so soft!” the other squealed. She started to rise, leaning forward with her hand extended. “Ohh! Feel it, Brenda! His hair is unbelievable!”

“Girls, you’re embarrassing him,” Sierra protested, noticing the way his back stiffened, the slight blush that dusted his cheeks.

Brenda picked up her purse and sighed. “Sorry to greet and run, but I’ve got to get that proof ready for the morning press run,” she apologized as she scooted out of the booth. Toga quickly stood. The women stopped and stared in varying degrees of open appreciation.

"Me, too," Teri remarked as she followed suite. "Nice manners, Sie. Nab him while you can," she whispered with an accompanying wink.

"Night, girls," Sierra called after them as her cheeks pinked to match his. Turning to stare at him, her eyes clouded with concern. "You don't look so good . . . are you all right?"

"Long day . . . and those damn cousins of mine are desecrating my apartment."

"Is that the only thing bothering you? You look like . . . you look like you're hurting."

He flinched. "That obvious?"

She nodded and pushed at him. "Come on. You can lie down at my place."

"I don't want to put you to any trouble."

She smiled and grabbed his hand to lead the way out of the crowded restaurant and out onto the street. Her apartment was about midway between his apartment and the restaurant. Toga made a face as he tried not to think about exactly what his brat cousins were doing in his home. "You're no trouble, Toga. It's kind of nice having you underfoot."

The quiet of her apartment soothed him. The tranquility was total and complete. With a grateful smile, Toga slipped off his suit jacket and draped it over a dining room chair. She frowned as she tilted her head to the side and gazed at him with worry evident in the light of her eyes. "Toga, you're awfully pale. Why don't you go lie down on the sofa, and I'll get you some Tylenol."

He shook his head. "I can't take that," he explained.

"Allergies?"

"Something like that." He sighed. In actuality, the side effects of the medicine were worse than the ailment. He'd rather suffer in silence than have his senses completely dulled.

"Well, lay down. I'll get you a glass of water."

He did as he was told. Truthfully, she wasn't far off. It wouldn't surprise him if he really was pale. His head was thumping from too much noise, his eyes hurt because he'd forgotten his glasses, his sinuses were killing him because of the fall weather, the smell of the dying earth that twisted together with the fabricated odors from cars, industry, and far too many humans in a single place. Ordinarily it wouldn't get to him so badly. He'd coped with such things all his life. Every once in awhile, however, the precarious balance would tip, and he'd end up feeling absolutely vile . . .

"Here," Sierra said as she set a glass of water on the coffee table. "I'm going to go change."

"Would you mind if I take off my tie?"

The glance she shot him over her shoulder seemed startled and a little bemused. "No . . . go ahead. I'll be right back."

He didn't remove it completely. He tugged it open and let the ends drag and managed to unbutton the top button without incident. There were moments when he found his claws to be a complete and utter nuisance. Normally those moments only came when struggling with his clothing. Fastenings weren't made for those with claws, he had found early on.

He did wonder, though, how it was that humans never seemed to realize when they talked to youkai. The only human he'd ever known who could discern between them was Kagome, and that was only because she was one of the last living mikos. He knew that the concealment charm placed on him at birth hid his youkai crests from human eyes—at least, from those who had never seen them before. He, himself, had never had to use the spell though it was something he'd learned early on. He sighed, draping his arm over his eyes. The light, as faint as it was from the softly glowing lamp, still hurt . . .

Sierra patted back into the living room. "Here." Pulling his arm away enough to look at her, Toga blinked in surprise to see her holding a fluffy pillow. "That sofa arm puts a crick in my neck if I lay on it too long."

He leaned up and let her fuss with arranging the pillow under his head. When he lay back, the unadulterated scent of apple blossoms—of Sierra—wrapped around him, and he smiled.



# ~ ~ Chapter 7 ~ ~

## ~ Dishonor ~

Toga read through the merger proposal with a thoughtful frown. Pushing his glasses up his nose with distracted fingers, he drummed his pen against the desk calendar with his other hand.

At least his life was free of pesky cousins. Having left just a few days before, Toga had to admit now that they were back in Tokyo half way around the world, that he did miss them. At least life was never boring with them around. Of course, he'd had to all but beat the snot out of them to gain their compliance in not telling anyone about Sierra. It wasn't as though he was embarrassed or ashamed of her. No, he just didn't want his father to think that he could interfere yet again . . .

He shook his head to clear his thoughts as he tried to focus his attention on one plastic manufacturer's proposed offer to take over a competing business. He made a face. Come to think of it, Toga hadn't ever wanted to be in this sort of business, either. Funny, the things that he'd done, just to please his father. From his occupation that had blossomed from Sesshoumaru's desire to see Toga learn the ropes of Inutaisho Industries to the youkai he'd dated for years after Lily had been forced out of his life, it seemed that everything he'd ever done had been with the sole purpose of honoring the father that didn't seem to give a damn what it might be that Toga, himself, might want.

Dropping the pen and yanking off his glasses as he gave up the pretense that he was actually working, Toga sat back and uttered a frustrated sigh.

*'Father,'* Toga thought suddenly, his head lifting as he narrowed his gaze at the closed door. Sesshoumaru's scent was unmistakable. Toga crossed his arms and waited.

"So, this is where you ran off to hide, Toga . . . and you didn't think I would learn your whereabouts?"

"On the contrary, Father. I knew you would. You're addicted to trying to run my life, aren't you?" Toga countered softly.

His immediate answer was a narrowing of his amber gaze as he deliberately closed the door and stared at his son in silence. "So you still refuse to see your responsibilities?"

"Of course not. I know what my responsibilities are. I simply don't think you're being realistic."

Sesshoumaru stalked across the small office, refusing to sit as he shook his head slightly. "You are my son, Toga."

Toga nodded. "I am your son," he agreed. "Maybe that's why I refuse to give in. When have you ever admitted to being wrong, Father? When have you ever admitted to making a mistake? What makes you think that I'll bend to your will because you said so?" Standing slowly, eye to eye with his father, Toga didn't back down, didn't look away. "I *am* my father's son."

"You would dishonor me in this?" Sesshoumaru demanded quietly.

"Would you?"

"Make this not about me, Toga. You must do what is expected, just as I had to, just as every son must do."

Toga shook his head. "Did you love Mother when you mated her?"

"Ask not such foolish questions," Sesshoumaru scoffed.

"And you expect me to settle for less?"

"You can learn to love a youkai."

He choked out an incredulous laugh. "*Learn* to love a youkai? What does that mean? I don't think I can, and I don't think that you can dictate to me what manner of choice I make."

"You are my only son, Toga. Tradition must be honored."

"Then have another son, because I will not play your game."

"I did not raise my son to speak to me thus."

Toga stalked forward, closed the distance between the two, stood his ground without faltering. "Perhaps you didn't, but you did raise your son not to take shit off anyone . . . and I suppose that ought to include you, *Father*."

"And your mother?"

"Don't bring Mother into this. She may see your side of things, but she sees mine, too."

"She misses you. She worries over you. Will you be selfish enough to keep yourself here?"

"This isn't about Mother, and she knows it." Toga crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. "Did you travel all the way here just to argue this?"

"Someday, Toga, when you have a son of your own, you will understand why things must be so."

Toga shook his head. "I don't think I'll ever understand your reasons, Father, and I sure as hell will never pay someone to move just to keep them away from my son."

"You think that was something I wished to do? If you had more sense, you'd—"

"Still be pissed off. If this is the only reason you came, you might as well leave. You can't run my life, and you can't make me do your bidding."

Sesshoumaru stared hard at his son. Toga's back straightened proudly as he stared back. Unwavering, unrelenting, the two inu-youkai waged their battle of wills until a soft knock sounded on the office door. "Toga, are you busy? Oh . . . sorry . . . Sesshoumaru! I didn't know you'd be in town," Mike Sampson said as he poked his head into the office.

Sesshoumaru finally turned to regard Toga's middle-aged boss. "I can't stay. I needed to speak with my son." Shifting his gaze back to Toga once more,

Sesshoumaru's eyes narrowed just a little. "Think about what I said, Toga. Do not dishonor me."

Toga didn't respond as he watched his father stalk out of the office.

"Did I interrupt something?" Mike asked quizzically.

Shaking his head, Toga turned to stare out the window. "Nothing important."

*'Nothing important? Yeah . . .'*

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"What's bothering you?"

Toga blinked quickly and sighed as he lifted his gaze to meet Sierra's troubled eyes. Forcing a wry grin for her benefit, he shook his head. "Nothing really."

Setting aside the laptop computer to focus all her attention on him, Sierra brushed her bangs back off her face and arched her eyebrows. "And you expect me to believe that?"

He made a face. "I've got to work on my poker face," he grumbled.

"Oh, I don't know . . . it's kind of nice to be able to read you like that . . ."

"Keh."

She giggled. "That's a funny noise."

Eyebrows disappearing under his shaggy bangs, Toga shook his head slowly. "You have no idea . . . and my father hates it."

"Oh?"

He shrugged. "Yeah. When I do that, he normally tells me I spent a little too much time with Uncle Yasha."

"Judging by his sons, I'd say your Uncle Yasha is an interesting character."

Toga chuckled. "Interesting . . . yep." Leaning back against the sofa, he sighed. "You'd never know those two bakas are his sons. Uncle Yasha is completely devoted to his mate. Those two . . . they should have been neutered."

Her giggle escalated like the sound of tiny silver bells. "Sometimes," she said between rounds of laughter, "the way you say things . . . You make it sound like your family is a bunch of animals."

Toga winced. *'You have no idea . . .'* He stood and headed toward the kitchen to retrieve a bottle of water. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No, thanks . . ."

The phone rang. Toga wondered if Sierra would think it was odd if he didn't answer it. Deciding that she probably would, he reached for the cordless handset and peeked at the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"Toga, darling! How are you?"

He made a face. "Mother . . . fine . . . and you?"

Kagura sighed. "We're well . . . we miss you . . . and since your father knows where you are now, you cannot avoid coming home for your sister's wedding. This is not negotiable, Toga . . ."

Sierra stepped around him, bracing her hands on his waist as she scooted past into the kitchen. She'd brought over the things to make dinner for him. "Excuse me," she whispered in a loud hiss.

"Toga?"

He winced inwardly, hoping against hope that his dearly beloved youkai mother did not hear Sierra's voice. "Yes, ma'am?"

Kagura was silent a few moments. "Was that a . . . girl?"

He stifled a sigh. "Yes, ma'am."

Kagura was quiet again before commenting. "A *human* girl?"

The sigh escaped. "Yes, ma'am."

". . . I see."

"Mother—"

"Your father isn't going to be happy about this . . . did you look for a human just to spite him?"

"Yes, yes, that's *exactly* what I did . . ."

"Don't take that tone with me, young man."

Toga rubbed his temple. "I apologize. No, that wasn't the intention at all."

Kagura sighed. "I want you to be happy, you know that . . . but I wish you'd at least try to do things your father's way, first. At least then you could say that you tried."

"I did try," he remarked stiffly, hurrying out of the kitchen and into the living room in an effort to keep Sierra from discerning too much. "Didn't I try things his way for years? And might I remind you how that turned out?"

Kagura cleared her throat. "It wasn't that bad, was it? Fujiko was a lovely girl."

"Fujiko was a lovely girl," he agreed. "She was lovely, she was cold . . ." he sighed again. "Do you know that I don't think I ever heard her laugh? Ever? Come now, Mother . . . I tried things Father's way. Now I'm going to do things my own way."

"Nevertheless, I still expect you to attend your sister's wedding. Am I making myself clear?"

"I'm not a pup, Mother . . . and I'll try."

"Stop pouting, Toga. I can hear it in your voice. *Just* like your father."

"Kami save me."

"Toga . . ."

He shook his head. "Bye, Mother."

"I mean it, Toga . . . and I love you."

"You, too."

Hanging up with a sigh of relief, Toga was caught off-guard when he turned to see Sierra lounging against the doorway. "Your mother?"

He nodded as he tossed the phone onto the sofa. "She wanted to remind me of my sister's wedding."

"Are you going to it?"

He shrugged. "I was hoping I could avoid it."

She frowned. "You're not close to your sister?"

"It's not that . . ."

She nodded slowly. "Who's Fujiko?"

Toga blinked in surprise. "Fujiko?"

Sierra blushed slightly and turned away. "Forget it . . . I'm not trying to be nosey."

He followed her into the kitchen and leaned back on the counter as she chopped some scallions. "She's an ex-girlfriend."

"How long did you date her?"

"A few years . . ."

"She was a serious girlfriend."

“Not really. Her father is one of my father’s associates. I guess I . . . was expected to date her.”

Sierra nodded and used the blade of the butcher’s knife to scoop up the onions and throw them into the heated pan. “And before her?”

He shook his head. “Girlfriends? None . . . well, one . . . One date.”

“Not good?”

He sighed. Why was he telling Sierra all this? “No . . . it was fine . . . she, uh . . . moved right after. Her father was in the military . . .”

Sierra suddenly laughed as she set the knife beside the sink and turned to face Toga. “You’re telling me that you’ve only dated two girls? And you expect me to believe that?”

He could feel his face heating in an embarrassed flush. “Well, yeah, I am.”

She shook her head but kept giggling. “I almost believe you.”

“What about you?” he countered, desperate to shift the subject off his dating life. “How many guys have you dated?”

Her giggling died down, and she sighed. “Just one. He was . . . sort of a jerk though.”

“How?”

She shrugged. He could sense her discomfort in discussing the nameless ex-boyfriend, and for some reason, he couldn’t leave it alone. “I thought . . . I thought he was a nice guy, and it turned he wasn’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

She smiled and waved a hand dismissively as she grabbed a wooden spoon out of the crockery jar that held all Toga’s never-used cooking utensils. “Don’t be. I learned my lesson . . . I guess that’s sort of the reason I was so shocked, when I figured out who you were.”



# ~ ~ Chapter 8 ~ ~

## ~ H alloween ~

"Explain this holiday to me again?"

Sierra giggled and smoothed her dress. Turned out in a filmy black dress that looked like nothing more than a configuration of hundreds of handkerchiefs than an actual gown, Toga's first thought, when she'd removed her coat, had been, *'Oh, hell, no.'* Upon closer inspection, though, he had realized there was a slip dress of sorts underneath it . . . He sighed as he tried to figure out a good way to ruin the dress before she got out the door in it. Short of spilling something on her, which would only make him look like a fool, or rending it to scraps, which it already was, there wasn't a damn thing he could do . . .

"It's mostly for kids," she admitted as she gently tugged a lock of his hair as she passed. "They go door to door and basically extort candy from you."

Toga shook his head. "American holidays are strange."

She wrinkled her nose. "You're supposed to be dressed up."

"I'm dressed up."

"Oh, yeah? What are you?"

He shrugged. "I'm a corporate landshark," he remarked, using her description of his occupation.

She giggled again. "No, I mean a real costume . . . please?"

Toga grinned. "I don't have one . . . sorry."

She grinned a very big, very happy grin . . . one that struck immediate and intense foreboding in his heart. "As luck would have it . . . I just happen to have one for you."

"Oh, kami . . ." Digging into the bag she'd brought with her, Toga winced as she dragged out a long black brocade cape. "What's that?" he asked slowly.

"Dracula," she informed him with a happy smile.

"Dracula?" he echoed. "Oh, I don't think so . . ."

"Look!" she said as she shoved the cape into his arms. "I even brought you fake teeth. Fangs . . . Guys with fangs are hot."

Toga blinked suddenly, fighting down the rapid flush that crept up his skin at her teasing claim. "I don't think so," he said, dropping the cape over the back of the sofa. "I can't wear fake teeth, anyway," he grumbled.

"But everyone is going to be dressed up at the party, Toga . . . You'll stand out like a sore thumb if you don't dress up too . . ."

"Nice try, wench. No."

She sighed and shook her head. "All right, I didn't want to have to resort to this . . . but you've left me no choice."

Toga crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"Those fake teeth cost a lot . . . it'd be horrible if I bought them for nothing . . ."

Toga shook his head slowly. "That's not fair . . ."

She narrowed her gaze at him. "Does that mean you'll wear it?"

Toga rolled his eyes and snatched the teeth out of her hand as he grabbed the cape off the sofa and stalked off toward his room. '*Baka . . . you fell right for it! She's laughing, do you hear?*' He winced. She *was* laughing, and her laughter made him feel a little too warm inside which must have been the real reason that he'd agreed to any such thing. Staring at the fake teeth in his hand, he made a

face. They certainly looked real enough. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that they looked painful . . .

Yet he still donned his tuxedo, figuring that it was probably the best match for the ugly cape though he opted instead for a black silk shirt instead of his normal white one. Staring at the teeth, however, Toga made a face. He tried putting them in. After thirty seconds, he spit them out again. With a grimace, he stared at the mirror on the back of his door. Those things hurt, and he wasn't about to wear them.

*'Fangs? Baka . . . you have fangs . . .'*

Frowning at his reflection, Toga shook his head slowly. The alternative was those nasty fake teeth, and he just couldn't wear those . . .

Mumbling the incantation that removed the concealment, Toga sighed. This wasn't exactly how he wanted to show her his real face, his crests that marked him an inu-youkai. Still, might as well use the real things than to suffer with the fake ones. With that thought in mind, Toga tossed the fake teeth into one of his bureau drawers and slammed it closed before heading out of his room.

"Wow," Sierra commented as she glanced up from the newspaper she was leafing through. She smiled. "What's with the blue stripes on your cheeks?"

Toga shrugged. "Vampires in Japan always have them," he lied.

"Oh . . . I like them. They make you look a little more . . . dangerous." She set the paper aside and stood. "Let's see the fangs."

Toga rolled his eyes but grinned. Sierra clapped her hands. "Nice . . . those look real . . ."

Toga didn't answer as he helped her with her coat. *'Father would have a fit if he knew,'* he thought as he led the way out of the apartment and closed the door. So worried that the secret of the youkai would be exposed, Sesshoumaru had always told Toga that he must always keep his concealment charm in place even though most youkai removed it in the privacy of their own homes. Toga had always just followed his father's orders. Surely, though, just one night wouldn't hurt anything . . .

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“Good God, Sierra . . . he’s absolutely sinful, isn’t he?”

Startled out of her reverie, Sierra blinked in surprise as she dragged her eyes off Toga, who was standing nearby discussing work with a couple of guys he apparently knew. Brenda giggled, taking in Sierra’s obvious preoccupation. “Is he?”

“Oh, come on! Like you haven’t noticed . . .”

Sierra blushed and drained her glass of champagne. “He’s a nice guy.”

“Nice? He’s hotter than Satan, and you say he’s *nice*?” Brenda’s gaze turned calculating as she twirled a strand of kinky auburn hair around her finger. “Are you telling me that you haven’t even kissed him yet?” When Sierra refused to answer, Brenda sighed melodramatically. “Oh, Sierra . . . what will I do with you?”

“It’s not like that . . . we’re just friends.”

“Just friends?” Brenda echoed. “Hell, woman, why?”

Sierra’s blush intensified. “We’ve only known each other a month or so . . .”

“Sierra, if I was seeing a guy that looked like him? I’d have kissed him on the first date.”

“He’s shy,” she said.

“Oh, that’s not good . . . that means the two of you will never kiss . . .”

Sierra shoved her friend playfully. “That’s so not funny.”

“But it’s the truth . . . have you even kissed any other guys? Other than Allan, and he certainly doesn’t count.”

Sierra made a face. “Can we *not* talk about this?”

Brenda sighed. "Sierra, you make it sound like there's something wrong with you. There isn't. Not a thing. I'll bet Toga would love to kiss you. I could go ask, if you'd like."

"No . . .!"

Sierra stifled a groan. The trouble was, being raised with four older brothers, she'd always been more of a tomboy than anything else. Until her senior year of high school, she hadn't worn a dress in years. Always considered 'one of the guys' because of her brothers, it had taken awhile before she'd grown more comfortable in her own skin, and sometimes she still felt a little---or a lot---awkward . . .

"Just kiss him, I dare you."

"Dare all you want, Brenda. I'm not falling for it."

Brenda wrinkled her nose. "You're hopeless, Sierra. You'll end up all buddy-buddy with him and then he'll break your heart when he finds someone who will kiss him."

Sierra winced at the truth behind Brenda's words. It had happened to her in the past, and that, coupled with her four football-playing brothers had accounted for the main reason why she hadn't dated anyone seriously until Allan . . .

Toga turned his head, catching her eye. His shy smile was enough to make her heart flop over in her chest, and she couldn't even summon the strength to smile back. Brenda giggled. "All right . . . maybe he'll get around to doing the kissing . . . then you won't have to do anything but let him."

Sierra reached for another glass of champagne. Her parched throat was so constricted that she felt as though she were dehydrating. Toga's gaze came back to her again. Sierra pressed her hand against her stomach. When she glanced over at Brenda, her friend laughed. "What's so funny?"

"Him . . . you . . ."

"What do you mean?"

Brenda waved away Sierra's question. "I can't tell which one of you is more smitten . . ."

Sierra grinned. "You're nuts."

"Mark my words, Sierra . . . he's rich, he's handsome, and he's only got eyes for you . . . you don't stand a chance."

Sierra watched as Brenda moved off to mingle with her other guests. '*I don't stand a chance?*' Draining that glass of champagne, she shook her head slowly. '*A chance against what?*'

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Sierra laughed as Toga led her through the park. While she normally avoided it in the darkness, she felt a lot more daring with him beside her. Closing in on two in the morning, they'd opted to walk home instead of catching a cab since they didn't want to add to traffic with so many children out for the evening. The party had been at her friend, Brenda's townhouse, and Sierra was feeling pleasantly 'happy' after indulging in a few glasses of champagne---and indulgence she didn't often allow.

"You enjoyed yourself, right?"

He nodded. "Of course . . ."

"Are those fangs uncomfortable?"

"Hmm?"

"The fake teeth . . ."

He shrugged. "Oh . . . no . . . forgot I had them in."

"You look good with fangs, like you could just bite into my neck, and---" she giggled then suddenly frowned. "Wait . . . I didn't mean it that way . . ."

He chuckled. "I didn't think you did."

"Toga . . . can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

". . . Why haven't you kissed me?"

In the dim light of the small lamps along the path, Sierra could discern the slight blush on his face. It registered in her mind that she wouldn't ever have asked that if she hadn't had that champagne . . . for some reason, though, she really wanted to know.

He didn't answer right away. Reaching out with gentle fingers, he brushed her hair out of her face. *'Claws?'* she thought vaguely. *'And those same blue lines on his wrists . . .'*

"I like you . . . a lot . . . I can wait, for you."

For some reason, Toga's answer brought tears to her eyes, and she blinked them back. He smiled shyly and jammed his hands into his pockets as he started walking once more. Sierra fell in step beside him, a small smile widening over her face.

"Tell me more about your family," she prodded. "You have a sister . . . any others?"

"I have a much older sister. She was adopted."

"How much older?"

Toga shrugged. "Quite a few years," he hedged.

"Your sister that's getting married . . . how old is she?"

"Twenty-three . . ."

"How old are you?"

He grinned. "Almost twenty-seven."

She stared up at him, eyes bright and luminous in the night. "Are you going to your sister's wedding?"

Toga paused a moment. It was barely noticeable. "Yeah. Father already knows where I am. It doesn't matter now."

"Why is it that you don't have your picture all over the place? I mean, you might as well be a celebrity. Why hide your face?"

Toga winced. "I never really cared, I guess. I spent much of my time with Uncle Yasha and his family, especially when it came time for publicity shots. It's never really interested me." He laughed softly as he stared up at the balding trees. "Whenever we did anything as a family, Ryomaru and Kichiro were more often mistaken as Father's sons than I was. It became a bit of a game, to pass off one of the twins as me."

"And what did your father think of that?"

Toga's nostalgic smile faded. "Back then . . . Father was a little more tolerant."

"He hurt you, didn't he? Whatever he did?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I just realized that my father wasn't always right."

Sierra's gaze took on a grayish light, a concerned lilt to her eyebrows, a sadness in the dark. "What happened?"

"We disagreed on the kind of woman I should look for . . . on the kind of life I wanted to live."

"Maybe he only wants what's best for you?"

Toga shook his head slowly. "No . . . he wants what's best for our kind."

"Your kind?"

"I come from a very old family."

"Sometimes you sound so mysterious . . . what are you hiding?"

The startled look on Toga's face faded quickly as he untied the cape and draped it over his arm. "Right now? Not a thing."

She laughed. "Open book?"

"For you."

She stopped and turned to stare at him. "Just for me?"

Blinking as a hint of a blush tinged his skin under the strange blue markings, Toga seemed flustered by her question. A fleeting glimpse of longing set off a chain reaction in her body. Sierra swallowed hard as his gaze dropped to her lips and stayed there. Breathless moments passed as time stood still. Afraid to move, afraid to upset the precarious balance between wanting and needing, Sierra could only gaze back into those eyes, the ones the same color as the uppermost part of a candle's flame . . .

"I . . . I'd better get you home," he finally said, his voice throaty, as though he had to struggle to make it work. "You're shivering."

Sierra forced her gaze away and nodded as they started walking once more. Funny, though . . . she wasn't cold, at all . . .

Stopping abruptly, Toga growled, grabbing Sierra's arm as he gently but firmly pushed her behind his back.

"Toga?"

"Quiet."

Sierra frowned. The authority in his tone was too prevalent to ignore. She waited, wondering just what made him change so drastically.

"I know you're there," he called out in a calm tone. "Show yourself."

Sierra gasped as two large men stepped out of the trees to the right. Easily as tall as Toga though about twice as wide, she couldn't help but dig into her purse for her cell phone. Sure she knew Toga was strong, and yes she knew that he had trained in some sort of fighting, but . . . these guys were huge, and there were two of them . . .

"Awfully far from home, aren't you, puppy?" one of the men said in a rumbling sneer.

"Showing his credentials, no less," the other remarked.

"Come out of hiding on Halloween? Are you so brave?"

"What do you want?" Toga asked in a careless tone. Sierra frowned but finally located her cell. "Put it away, Sierra. The police won't understand."

*'How did he know? They won't understand?'* Sierra hesitated but didn't dial the number that would have brought help.

"You have no authority here, son of the Inu no Taisho, and your daddy isn't here to save you."

"You two haven't changed at all, have you? Bakas till the end . . . This Toga needs not his father to deal with the miserable likes of you."

"Fujiko sends her regards."

"You dishonor her? For that bitch?"

"I dishonor no one, and I'd watch my tongue if I were you, unless you want to eat it," Toga said mildly.

The two laughed menacingly. Sierra stood on tiptoe to glance over Toga's shoulder. The men stepped closer. "Toga . . . ?"

She gasped and stumbled as Toga shot forward in a blur. Moving too quickly for her to discern, all she saw was the dark streak that was him as he whipped around in a circle with his hand outstretched. A convoluted streak of momentum, and when he stopped, both men were backing away clutching their stomachs as Toga stepped back to shield her from their view.

Mumbling curses under their breath, the men disappeared back into the trees. Toga stood still for a few minutes, as though he were making sure that they were really gone. "Bastards," he said with a soft snort.



## ~ ~ Chapter 9 ~ ~

### ~ My Father's Son ~

Drumming claws on the arm of the sofa, Toga stared at the telephone, trying to make up his mind. He'd been debating for the better part of an hour, whether or not he ought to just do it and get it over with or not. In the end, it wouldn't matter. Sesshoumaru was nothing if not stubborn to a fault. Even if he did let Toga's whereabouts slip to Fujiko's brothers, there was no way he'd ever admit it. Still, they had to find out from someone, and, in his mind, that was taking things a little too far.

*'Damn it, Father . . .'*

After finding out what Sesshoumaru had done to chase Lily out of his life years ago, Toga couldn't help but wonder if this was another ploy . . . and if it was . . .

Still, Toga couldn't quite believe that his father would send anyone after him. It was one thing to pay someone off. It was another thing to send thugs after him . . .

With a sigh, he stood and dropped the phone onto the sofa as he retrieved his brief case. After the disaster in the park the night before, Toga hadn't seen Sierra since. He'd tried to call her earlier but she didn't answer. He'd even called her cell phone. She hadn't answered that, either.

Reminding himself again that he really didn't have any sort of claim on Sierra and that she really didn't have to tell him where she was every single day, Toga didn't feel any better about it and couldn't hold back the small growl that rumbled out of him when he thought too hard about the things she could be out doing.

*'You're inu-youkai, you know. You could track her if you really wanted to . . .'*

Toga sighed. Sure, he could do that. Of course, explaining how he just happened to be wherever she was wouldn't be easy and how would it seem if she thought he was checking up on her?

He did grin slightly though. Part of his training early on had been instruction on tracking. He'd thought it was all a game at the time. The lessons were normally given by Uncle Yasha and usually involved locating hidden items in InuYasha's Forest. Toga's favorites had been the bags of candies that Aunt Gome had made especially for the hunt.

*"How am I s'posed to find this stuff?" eight year-old Toga asked as he stared up at his uncle as the two headed into the forest.*

*"You'll have to use your nose, pup."*

*Toga frowned. "Papa says I sniff stuff too much already," he remarked as he shook his head in confusion.*

*Uncle Yasha snorted. "There's a difference between sniffing out something you're tracking and sniffing your sister's hair."*

*Toga wrinkled his tiny nose and rubbed his fist against it. "I don't sniff Aiko! She smells like a girl!"*

*"Listen. We're hoping you never need to know how to do this, but just in case, we figured you'd best know."*

*"Uncle Yasha?"*

*"What?"*

*"Have you ever had to sniff anything out?"*

*A wan smile filtered over his uncle's face, an irony in his expression that Toga didn't understand for years to come. "Keh. Of course I have. Where I grew up, it wasn't an option not to. If I hadn't, then I'd have been killed early on."*

*"Did Papa teach you how to track?"*

*InuYasha shrugged. "No . . . I taught myself."*

*"Is that why you call Papa a bas—"*

*"Keh! Go track your candy or we'll be out here all damn day."*

Toga chuckled despite himself as he snapped out of his memories. Uncle Yasha had single-handedly taught him more curse words than he'd ever heard come out of anyone else's mouth, ever—a fact that Sesshoumaru had never truly appreciated.

The phone rang. Toga snatched it up and grinned at the name on the caller id. After clicking the 'talk' button, he brought the receiver to his ear and greeted his aunt. "Aunt Gome . . . I was just thinking about you and Uncle."

"Uh oh . . . is that good?"

"Sure. I was thinking about Uncle teaching me how to track. Is something wrong?"

Kagome giggled. "No, nothing's wrong. I was just thinking about you . . . and wondering if you were coming to your sister's wedding?"

Toga winced. "Let me guess. Mother though you'd have better luck guiltig me into this?"

"Not *guiltig* . . . how about persuading?"

Rubbing his forehead with a tired hand, Toga sighed. "I'll be there."

"I'm glad to hear that. Your mom will be so relieved."

He heard the reluctant preoccupation in her tone and braced himself for whatever it was that Kagome was trying to find a way to ask him. He had a decent guess . . . *'I may need to sharpen my claws at that wedding . . .'* he thought as two identical twin hanyou faces flashed through his mind.

"The boys told me that you have a new friend," she finally ventured.

"Did they? Remind me to thank them."

"You want to tell me about her?"

Honestly, he'd love to. He'd love to shout Sierra's praises from the highest mountain peaks. He also didn't want to put Kagome in the situation where she would have to keep secrets from his mother and father, either. "I'd rather not."

Kagome sighed. "Toga . . . you know InuYasha and I . . . and your parents . . . we just want you to be happy. I realize you don't believe that about your father, and, well, I have to admit, he's being a bit of a baka about the whole thing. He really does want what's best for you, but it's up to you to show him who or what that might be."

"It's not that simple. Did Father tell you what he did? That he flew over here just to deal me a ration of shit?"

"No . . . your mother did, though. For what it's worth, InuYasha gave him an earful for that."

"Good ol' Uncle Yasha."

"Yeah, well, he threatened a little Tetsusaiga shoving . . ."

Toga laughed. "Did he? Remind me to send him something nice for Christmas."

"Remember, it doesn't take that much provocation for InuYasha to try to pick a fight with your father."

Toga laughed louder. "I have to admit, I really do wish I'd witnessed some of the better ones I've heard about."

"Ugh . . . what is it with you inu-youkai? You're all so bloodthirsty."

"Must be the dog part . . ."

"Speaking of dogs . . . did you really run this girl's dog over?"

Toga winced. "Uh, yeah."

Kagome moaned. "Oh, Toga . . . InuYasha wasn't impressed."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"I know, but you know InuYasha . . . I thought he was going to stay depressed forever when Dammit died."

Toga made a face. He remembered that, too. Dammit the dog had died when he was fifteen, and InuYasha really had been upset over it for a few months. Toga supposed it was just because InuYasha, himself, had trouble opening up to many people, and when he finally did, then he considered them unconditional family. It wasn't any different with the dog. Add to that the fact that inu-youkai could understand dogs' abbreviated speech patterns, and, well, InuYasha hadn't lost a pet. He'd lost a family member. InuYasha might only be half inu-youkai but in the end, it didn't matter. The only thing InuYasha couldn't do was transform into the larger dog form or the lesser ability of dissolving into the youkai energy form, and those were things that no youkai did anymore.

"Is she pretty?"

Snapped out of his musings by Kagome's casual question, Toga couldn't help but smile. "She's beautiful."

"I don't even know why I asked that. She'd have to be, to have made such an impression on you."

A soft knock on the door interrupted Toga's chuckles. "Just a second," he called as he got up. "I hate to cut you short, Aunt Gome, but—"

"That's fine . . . Toga? Just one last thing?"

"All right."

"If this girl makes you happy, if she's the one you want? Don't let your father interfere."

Toga grinned. "Thanks."

"Love you."

"You, too. Tell Uncle Yasha I said hi."

"I will. Bye."

Toga hung up the phone and dashed over to the door. Two things registered in his mind as he wrestled with the deadbolt lock. Sierra was on the other side of that door, and she was crying.

Yanking the door open wide, he didn't get the chance to say hello or to invite her in. Throwing herself against his chest, she sobbed, clutching his shirt as he helplessly wrapped his arms around her and clumsily tried to comfort her.

He heard footsteps on the stairwell and grimaced. Not wanting whichever one of his neighbors to see her like this, Toga picked her up and brought her inside, kicking the door closed with his foot as he strode around the sofa to sit down with her in his lap. "Is it so bad?" he asked gently pushing her back to smooth her hair out of her face.

She shook her head then nodded then shrugged before letting her head fall against his chest again.

"All right," he told her.

It took several minutes before Sierra managed to stop crying. Reduced to sniffles and hiccups, she wiped her eyes with a crumpled tissue and tried to draw a deep breath. "I'm s-s-sorry," she mumbled.

"You want to tell me about it?"

She shrugged and hiccupped again. "It's stupid," she assured him, frowning at her own upset state. "I'm such a *girl*."

Toga chuckled despite himself and was rewarded with a small, watery smile. "I can't argue with that."

"I got a call yesterday . . . from my father."

Toga frowned. In one of their many discussions, he knew she'd said that her father had died a few years ago. "Your father?"

"My biological father, I guess . . . He said he wants to come see me, and I . . . Toga, I can't . . . I don't want to, but then I feel guilty, and . . ." More tears rose in

her eyes, and Toga winced. "What do I do?" she squeaked in a tiny voice that turned his wince into a near-whine.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do, right?"

"That's just it," she half-sobbed. "I don't *know* what I want . . . I don't want to see him. I don't want to *meet* him . . . but I do, because I want to know why, you know? Why they didn't want me . . . Then my mom . . . oh, it'd kill her . . ." She shook her head miserably. "I didn't know where else to go . . . and . . . oh, I'm sorry . . ."

"Don't be sorry," Toga told her. "I can't tell you what to do, but I'll . . . I'll protect you, if you'll let me."

She suddenly choked out a weak laugh. "Protect me? From what?"

Toga smoothed her hair back, wiped her tears away with gentle fingers. "Anything that would hurt you."

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Toga stared down at the sleeping girl. So exhausted from her upset that she'd fallen asleep against his chest, he smiled as he ran his finger along her jawline. She sighed but didn't stir. It frightened him, how perfect she felt, snuggled against him.

He'd made her the promise.

With a sad little smile, Toga rubbed his cheek against her hair. Did she understand the significance of his promise? Would she ever realize what it meant? Raised as he had been with his father as well as Uncle Yasha, Toga had learned early on that to the inu-youkai, the most significant promise one could make to another: the promise of protection. Sesshoumaru had made it to Kagura. InuYasha had done the same with Kagome. Now Toga had done it, too, and once given, it was a promise that could not be taken back.

*'As binding as mating, Toga. Be careful to whom you make this vow.'*

His father's words echoed through his head. His smile was bittersweet, sad. *'Father . . . why can't you just be happy that I found someone who makes me feel . . . everything?'*

The glint of resolve lit in Toga's gaze. Steely, unwavering . . . *'Father will have to accept it. I've made my choice.'*

Carefully maneuvering Sierra so that she was curled up on the sofa, Toga headed back to his bedroom to grab a blanket for her. Cocking his head to the side as he stared at his bed, he considered Sierra. So forlorn, so sad . . . He'd had moments when he had felt like she did now. The thing that had always seemed to offer him the most comfort back then . . .

Pulling his Mekomoko-sama out of the closet, he chuckled softly as he remembered the time he'd offered it to another who had needed the same sort of comfort . . .

At five years old, Toga hadn't realized that some things couldn't be fixed by seeking the comfort of the black fur cape. Uncle Yasha had seemed so sad that day, high in the boughs of the tree. He'd taken Toga with him into that tree, and unable to understand his uncle's upset, Toga had offered the only thing he'd had.

*"When I'm sad, I snuggle this. Do you want it?" Toga asked, pushing Mekomoko-sama into his uncle's face.*

*Leaning to the side to stare in wonder at him, Uncle Yasha slowly smiled. "Thanks, pup. This is yours, though. You'd better keep it."*

Toga chuckled again as the reverie faded away. Taking the soft fur cape, he strode back into the living room and carefully spread it over Sierra's sleeping form. Hunkering down beside her, staring at her relaxed expression, he savored the sense of absolute peace that she brought to him.

Sesshoumaru's favorite phrase whispered in his mind. *'Toga . . . you are your father's son.'*

How often had he heard that over the years? The highest of praise, Toga supposed, to be acknowledged as such, not only by Sesshoumaru, his father but also by Sesshoumaru, the Inu no Taisho.

The trouble was, Toga wasn't sorry in the least. He couldn't *tell* himself how to feel any better than Sesshoumaru could dictate the same to him. Some things were beyond the decrees of Inutaisho Sesshoumaru, and this was one of those things.

Stubborn, proud, unwavering in his beliefs, strong in the face of adversity . . . Toga's grin turned sardonic. "*Perhaps, in this . . . I am my father's son . . .*"

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Sierra awoke slowly. Something tickled her chin. She didn't remember falling asleep. Come to think of it, she didn't remember much of anything in the last couple days. It all seemed a little blurry, especially after that phone call . . . But something definitely tickled . . . something soft and warm and . . . nice . . . She yawned and slowly opened her eyes.

Wrapped in a glossy black furry blanket of sorts, Sierra couldn't help her smile as she snuggled the fur-like covering against her cheek. She'd never seen a blanket quite like that before. It almost reminded her of some sort of animal pelt. Possessing a certain comforting quality, for a minute she almost believed that nothing could hurt her if she didn't let go of the fur.

Shifting her gaze around the cozy living room, Sierra frowned when her eyes lit on Toga. Sitting up with his back against the wall, arms folded together over on his raised knees, she uttered a soft sound of dismay as she grabbed the blanket and unwrapped herself off the sofa.

Sinking down next to him and spreading the blanket over the both of them, Sierra carefully tugged on his shoulders to settle him more comfortably against her. He uttered a soft whining noise at the forced change but didn't wake right away.

Gently running her fingers through his bangs, Sierra smiled. There was something altogether calming about Toga, she decided. As if just being with him made everything better, like his strength somehow managed to bolster her own. Enigmatic and complex, hidden behind a shy smile and beautiful eyes, she felt as though his heart spoke to hers.

She sighed as her smile faded. Why had she felt the need to come here? Saturday, after the phone call, she had locked herself into her room, scared to even touch the phone when it rang. When the evening shadows had fallen, though, she'd been overcome with the need to see Toga. Why had she felt so pathetic as she stood outside his door? Pathetic enough to break down in tears all over again . . .

Did she want to meet her biological father? Why? It certainly wouldn't change anything. He'd never be her daddy, and she'd end up hurting her family: the only family she'd ever known. Her gaze dropped back to Toga's face. Relaxed in sleep, he seemed younger, more vulnerable.

Shifting a little to make him more comfortable, Sierra's smile resurfaced.

"If you're uncomfortable, I can move."

Sierra gasped. He still hadn't opened his eyes. She had no idea that he was awake. "Did I wake you up?" she asked, trying not to feel so guilty.

He rolled over onto his back and chuckled as his eyes slowly fluttered open. "It's all right. Did you sleep well?"

She nodded. "This blanket is amazing. What is it made of?"

A mysterious look passed over his features, almost a worried expression. "I don't know . . . I've always had it . . ."

"Very nice," she stated. "I think it helped me sleep."

Toga looked surprised. "Really?"

"It's comfortable . . . reminds me of Dennis . . . It doesn't feel the same . . . I think I just felt better, when he was there . . ." He stiffened at the mention of the deceased dog. Sierra winced. "I'm sorry . . . I wasn't trying to make you feel bad . . ."

"Uh . . . that's all right . . ."

She made a face and sighed. "I'm sorry about last night, too . . . I don't know why I came over like that . . ."



# ~ ~ Chapter 10 ~ ~

## ~ D ifficult D ecisions ~

“Are you all right?”

Sierra started and glanced over at Toga with a small grin. “Yeah. Fine.”

He saw through her façade. “You sure you want to go?”

She shook her head. “No. I just . . . I should talk to Mom in person about it.”

“She’ll want whatever you want, won’t she?”

Sierra frowned. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged as he stared at the road. “Stands to reason . . . don’t mothers want whatever is best for their children?”

“Sure. If this hurts her, though . . .”

“So you’re saying you wouldn’t do something because it hurts your mother . . . is that how it is supposed to be?”

Something in his tone stopped her, and Sierra stared at him. He seemed sad, lost in thought, and she had to wonder why. “Toga?”

“Hmm?”

“Why do I have the feeling you’re thinking about your father again?”

Toga sighed and tried to smile. It looked more like a grimace. “I don’t mean to. This is about you, right? Let’s leave it that way.”

Sierra nodded, unsure what else to say or do to draw more information out of him. “Thanks for coming with me.”

He shrugged, as though trying to discount her words. "It's the least I can do."

"No . . . it really means a lot to me. Not many guys would do this, you know?"

A light flush rose in his cheeks, and he shrugged again. "Then they're not worth wasting your time with."

Pulling into the driveway before the sprawling farmhouse, Toga shot Sierra an encouraging smile and shut off the SUV. She frowned when he made no move to get out. "You're going to sit out here?"

"I wasn't sure if you wanted me to come with you . . . I thought you might want to talk to your mother alone."

She had considered that. Now, though, the idea of walking in and asking her mother what she would think if Sierra did meet with her biological father . . . "Will you come in with me?"

Those golden eyes registered Toga's surprise at Sierra's softly uttered question. "All right, if you're sure."

She nodded. She wasn't sure why he made her feel so secure, like nothing in the world could hurt her, but for some reason, just having him near was enough to calm her nerves and to leave her feeling safe and serene. Toga ran around the vehicle and supported Sierra with a hand cradled under her elbow—yet another show of his strange sort of manners that seemed wholly old fashioned yet so in tune with the rest of him.

"Sierra! I'm surprised to see you!" her mother greeted as the two stepped inside. Drawing up short as she rounded the corner into the foyer, Sierra's mother seemed surprised to see Toga again. "Ah, Toga, isn't it?" she said as she came forward and held out her hand.

"Yes," he agreed, accepting her gesture with a quick squeeze of the woman's hand. "Nice to meet you again."

Apparently amused by Toga's perceived manners, Sierra's mother laughed and led the way into the kitchen. "So what brings you two out here today?"

Sierra cast Toga a quick glance. He offered her a reassuring smile as her mother pulled two mugs out of the cupboard and filled them with coffee. "I got a call yesterday . . . I wanted to ask you what you thought."

Mrs. Crawford handed each of her guests a mug and nodded toward the heavy oak table as she turned back to refresh her own cup. Sierra sat down with Toga beside her and waited for her mother to join them. "What sort of call, dear?" she asked as she slipped into the chair at the foot of the table.

Sierra fiddled with her mug nervously. "My, uh . . . biological father. He wants to meet me, but . . . I won't, if you don't want me to. I don't really need to, do I?"

Mrs. Crawford sat back as shock and a hint of pain filtered over her features. "I see." Standing abruptly, she strode over to dig into the refrigerator. "Pie. I think we need pie for this discussion."

Toga intercepted Sierra's distressed expression and reached out to give her hand a quick squeeze. Sierra tried to smile. Toga winced.

"Mom . . ."

Making quick work of dishing up three fat slices of Dutch apple pie, Mrs. Crawford returned to the table with the plates and smiled brightly as she handed them out. "Do you want to meet him?"

Sierra shoved her pie around but didn't actually eat any. Toga didn't touch his, either. "Mostly, no, then I think maybe . . . just to see why he thinks he has the right to come back into my life now."

"I've always wondered if they would come looking for you . . ." Mrs. Crawford admitted. "I guess I had hoped that they wouldn't. I can't tell you what to do, Sierra. You do what is in your heart."

Sierra sighed and shook her head. "I wish I was still young enough for you to tell me what to do," she admitted.

Mrs. Crawford sighed. "I do, too, dear."

"It makes me mad," Sierra went on. "What right does he have to come into my life out of nowhere and say that *he* wants to meet *me*?"

Mrs. Crawford's sad smile was full of compassion. "If you choose to, will you pass along a message for me?"

Sierra nodded.

"Tell them I'm glad they decided to give you up, because regardless of what you do, you'll always be *my* daughter."

Sierra smiled as tears blurred her vision. Toga suddenly got up and left without a word though he did stop and incline his head to the two women before slipping back into the foyer. Sierra watched him go as she wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. "I don't want to do it, especially if it upsets you," she reiterated.

Mrs. Crawford sighed. "Sierra, I can't make this decision for you, and I can't ask you to do anything, one way or the other. It isn't about me. It's about you."

"Thanks . . ."

"You're welcome . . . now eat your pie. You're losing weight, Sierra, and you didn't have much to spare."

Sierra made a face but did as she was told with a dreamy smile. "Mom . . . no one, and I mean no one, can beat your pie . . ."

Mrs. Crawford turned to glance over her shoulder before winking at her daughter, dark brown eyes twinkling mischievously. "So tell me about your young man, dear."

She felt the flush wash over her skin at her mother's use of the possessive. "He's not really mine," she pointed out.

Her mother chuckled. "I don't think that guilt over hitting your dog would have brought him out here with you today, Sierra."

"We're just friends."

"So were your Daddy and I . . . until he asked me to senior prom."

"Well, I'm not so sure about that, but . . . he's a very nice guy."

"He's just a doll-face, doesn't he?"

For some reason, the memory of Toga's face on Halloween flashed through her mind. With those blue streaks and those fangs, he'd had a far more dangerous look, and the cold stare he'd turned on the two men in the park . . . He had managed to look far more ruthless than she could have ever thought possible in those moments.

Then again, recalling the look on his face while he'd slept, the completely relaxed lines, the boyish quality that showed in his restful state . . .

"He's different."

"Different?"

Sierra wasn't sure how to explain what she felt. "It's like he has this whole other side . . . he's nice, and he's funny, and he's sweet . . . but I feel like there's something else there, too . . . something . . ." Breaking herself off with a sigh, Sierra shook her head. "I don't know. I just . . . I like being around him."

Mrs. Crawford smiled. "Why don't the two of you stay for dinner? It gets lonely out here, sometimes."

Sierra grinned. "Let me ask him."

Hopping up from the table to put her empty dish and mug into the sink, Sierra headed out of the kitchen, stopping long enough to kiss her mother's cheek before looking for Toga.

"Hey . . . Mom asked if we wanted to stay for dinner," Sierra remarked when she located Toga in the living room staring at an assortment of framed pictures.

He glanced at her, and again she could feel a strange sadness in him. "If you wish," he answered.

She leaned her head to the side as she stared at him. "Toga? Are you okay?"

He shrugged, jamming his hands into his jeans pockets. "Yes, of course."

"Do you want to go for a walk or something? Dinner won't be ready for awhile."

He finally smiled. "All right," he agreed.

With a giggle, she took his hand and dragged him toward the door.

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"You ought to get down before you fall."

Sierra giggled and reached for a higher branch. "Oh, come on, Toga . . . are you telling me you never climbed trees?"

He stared up at her with a marked frown. "Of course I did," he argued. "But if you fall, how will I explain that to your mother?"

"I won't fall! I've been climbing these trees forever. Come on up, the view's spectacular."

"I'll stay down here, in case you 'don't fall'," he remarked rather dryly.

She laughed at his tone. "Live a little, Toga! You know, right, that you're acting much older than you claim to be."

"Keh!"

"Too bad you won't come up here," she goaded, "there's a great view of Lake Michigan from up here . . ."

"Sierra . . . be careful."

She giggled again. "Yes, I know . . . honestly, I used to spend hours up here."

Toga stifled a sigh as Sierra made herself comfortable on a high branch. "Don't go any higher, all right?"

“Okay,” she agreed. She was quiet for a moment as she lifted her face and breathed in deeply. “Toga?”

Staring up into the branches, the convoluted yellows and reds and oranges of the fall leaves clinging stubbornly to their temerarious hold on the branches, he frowned in consternation at the woman who refused to listen to reason. “Yes?”

“Who are you?”

“What do you mean?”

Letting her chin drop to stare down through the branches, Sierra’s eyes were troubled, turbulent. “I mean . . . there’s something about you, something I can’t put my finger on . . .”

He sighed. Could he tell her? Could he trust her? He’d made the mistake once. He’d told Lily, and maybe that was the real reason Sesshoumaru had been so ready to pay off her father. What about Sierra? Could he keep his father from trying to keep them apart? Toga sighed. Sierra, he trusted. Sesshoumaru? He winced. No, he didn’t trust him on this . . . When his father found out that Toga had willingly found a human girl . . . Toga ground his teeth together. He didn’t even try to lie to himself. Sesshoumaru was going to be livid.

A strange groaning noise that was so soft he had to wonder if Sierra had heard it at all made Toga look up. It took less than a second for his mind to register what was happening. The old branch she sat on creaked once more. Toga reacted before he thought about it, leaping up and snatching her off the precarious perch just before it gave with a startlingly loud crack. Sierra shrieked as she shot a wild glance between the falling branch and Toga. “Oh, God,” she moaned as she buried her face in his jacket.

He landed neatly and set her down on her feet. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, her cheeks ashen, her eyes still wide in shock. “How did you do that? How did you—”

He winced. “Training.”

She didn’t look like she believed him. “Training wouldn’t have given you the ability to jump that high,” she assured him.



~ ~ *Chapter 11* ~ ~  
~ *Matters of the Heart* ~

InuYasha sat cross-legged on the floor staring out the glass doors at the pond and the woods beyond. Lost in thought, his golden gaze unblinking, unseeing. He drew a deep breath and flicked his ears.

“What are you thinking about?” Kagome asked as she emerged from the laundry room with a basket full of fluffy dried clothes.

“Keh.”

Kagome grinned and sat down on the sofa to fold the clothes. “Toga?”

InuYasha nodded. “A human, huh?”

Kagome sighed. “Apparently.”

“Sesshoumaru ain’t going to like that.”

“I didn’t really think so, myself.”

InuYasha turned his head, grinning mischievously. “So . . . do you think Kagura told the bastard?”

Kagome made a face. “I don’t know. Probably not. You won’t either—you hear me?”

InuYasha rolled his eyes. “Keh! Take the fun out of everything, wench.”

She smiled. “Well, maybe not *everything* . . .”

With a wicked glint in the eyes she loved so much, InuYasha rolled to his knees and stalked toward Kagome on his hands and knees. "You know, Kagome . . . the pups are gone . . ."

As if in answer to InuYasha's subtle hint, Kagome sighed as the front door slammed. "*Bakas!*" a female voice rang out in the house.

At the sound of the bellow, InuYasha sprang to his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, legs askew as he waited for the aforementioned 'pups' to enter the living room.

"Keh! Give it up, Gin. That bastard ain't never gonna be good enough to lick your feet, let alone date you," Ryomaru growled as the twins followed a very irritated Gin into the room.

"What was that?" InuYasha demanded.

Gin stopped in her tracks, casting Kagome an imploring look that clearly stated that the young hanyou girl wanted her mother's backing on this.

"Caught some baka who thought he could get a little too close to Gin," Kichiro remarked, crossing his arms over his chest in a mirrored stance of their father.

Gin rolled her eyes and flipped her silvery locks over her shoulder. "I dropped my bag, and he was trying to help me pick up my things when these two dog-boys decided to shove him up against the building."

"Boys . . ." Kagome began in her sternest tone. The twins' ears flattened.

"Who was he?" InuYasha broke in.

"Hakura Akiro," Gin supplied. "He's one of the most popular guys at the college, and—"

InuYasha snorted, having had the whelp in his classes before. "Good job, boys. Keep that trouser-sniffer away from her."

"InuYasha!" Kagome countered with a frown, having noticed the upset in their daughter's expression.

"No way, wench. I'll beat him down, myself, if he comes around here."

Kagome sighed and stood up. "Come on, Gin. Help me with dinner, okay?"

Gin didn't look like she wanted to help but she obediently followed her mother into the kitchen, daring to cast her father a sad, almost pouting, look.

Careful to keep his expression stern, InuYasha silently marveled at just how very much like her mother Gin really was.

"We can't stay," Ryomaru called after Kagome. "Got big plans."

InuYasha eyed his sons speculatively. "What sort of plans?"

Kichiro blinked innocently. "Nothing."

"Don't give me that shit. I'm on to you two. Now tell me what the hell you've got planned."

Exchanging significant looks, the two grinned at their father. "Just a night out with some friends," Ryo hedged.

InuYasha narrowed his gaze and shot a significant look of his own toward the fireplace and the rusty old sword hanging over the mantle. "I'm not as blind as your mother," InuYasha remarked casually enough. "I know you two. You'd better pray your mother doesn't find out because if she does, she'll purify both your asses; you got that?"

"Yes, Father," Ryomaru answered with a straight face.

"Oi!" InuYasha bellowed since he hated being called that, in particular.

The two darted for the front door. InuYasha shook his head slowly as the slam echoed in their wake. Kagome's sons were hell-bent on destruction, InuYasha just knew it . . .

Kagura sat on the huge bed with her legs curled under her as she leafed through an old photo album with a sad smile.

"Mama, what do you think of these flowers?" Aiko breezed into the bedroom and stopped short, a concerned frown casting her amber eyes in cloudy distress. "You miss him. I do, too."

Kagura smiled and hugged her daughter as Aiko settled on the edge of the bed. Idly smoothing back the long silvery strands, Kagura turned her attention to the flowers in the younger woman's hand. "They're lovely, of course."

Aiko shook her head slowly. "Do you think he'll come?"

"I'm almost afraid if he does . . ." Kagura admitted.

"Surely Papa won't argue with him at the wedding," Aiko assured her mother.

Kagura shook her head. "That's not what I'm afraid of . . ." She sighed. "Toga's got a . . . friend."

"A friend?" Aiko echoed with a frown.

"A *human* friend."

Eyes widening in sudden understanding, Aiko's mouth rounded into a silent 'oh'. "That's not good . . . Papa's not going to like that."

Kagura smiled at her daughter's massive underassessment. "What do you think, Aiko? Do you think your father's being unreasonable?"

Aiko sighed and shrugged. "I don't know . . . I mean, yes, I think he is, but . . . I sort of think that I can understand his concern . . . but I don't think he has the right to tell Toga who can or can't make him happy . . . isn't that what's important?"

Kagura nodded. "I wish I could get your father to see that, too . . . and your brother is just as stubborn as Sesshoumaru has ever been . . ."

Aiko leaned her head on her mother's shoulder. "Papa says it's all Uncle Inu's fault . . ."

Kagura rolled her eyes. "He would. Trust me, it has more to do with your father than it does your Uncle InuYasha. He's just too stubborn to admit it."

Aiko sighed. "Mama?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you think Toga misses us?"

Kagura hugged her daughter again. "I'm sure he does, Aiko."

Aiko nodded slowly and hugged her mother back.

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Sierra threw her head back in laughter as Toga jammed his hands deeper into his pockets and shook his head, a bashful grin surfacing as he turned his face to the side, trying to hide his obvious embarrassment.

"Is it so bad, Toga?" she teased, referring to the old couple they'd passed on the corner. The woman had nudged the man and, nodding toward the two, had commented on how nice it was to see such a beautiful young couple.

"Of course not," he agreed. "Just . . . is that what we are? A couple?"

Sierra stopped abruptly and slowly turned to face him. The afternoon sunshine of the late autumn day reflected in those startling amber eyes to make Sierra's stomach erupt in a spiral of butterflies that tickled and teased her belly. "Are we?"

Toga's smile seemed to falter just a little as he shrugged. "Is that what you want?"

She suddenly laughed again, shaking her head as she tried to stop her humor. "We're sad, huh? We just keep asking, and—"

He caught her hand and pulled her close, ignoring the passers-by who stopped to eye the two as though they'd gone insane. Before she could think, before she could react, before she knew much of anything at all, his lips touched hers, and everything else faded away. His hair was caught in the chilly breeze, whipping around the two of them as she pushed herself onto her toes, leaning against him, hands on his shoulders.

The incredible gentleness behind his actions tempered the heady sensations as the butterflies in her stomach broke free. Her body felt lighter than air, the thoughts in her mind drifted into incoherence. The feel of his mouth, so soft, so tender against hers was enough, and she sighed. Nothing seemed to matter as sound faded away, nothing penetrated the wonder surrounding her, cossetting her in an engulfing sense of belonging. Warm and inviting, something about Toga, about his kiss precluded anything she might have thought, any protest that might have surfaced. *'I belong . . . with him . . . ?'* She smiled.

Toga drew away, the light of bemusement clouding his vision as he stared at her. Sierra had to blink to clear her own line of sight, and when she saw that look in his eyes, she couldn't help but laugh. What was it about him that made her feel so happy?

"I guess that was a little forward of me," he remarked with an unrepentant smile as the two started along the sidewalk again. He hesitantly took her hand. She squeezed his fingers gently.

"It was," Sierra agreed with a wide grin.

He chuckled. "I guess I could apologize."

"You could."

She felt his gaze slip toward her, and she tried not to smile.

"And how could I do that?"

Sierra felt her cheeks heat under his scrutiny. "I'll think of something."

They stopped outside Sierra's apartment building. Toga nodded at the doors. "Thanks for going to dinner with me," he remarked, sounding a lot more formal than he normally did.

Sierra checked her watch. True, she had to be at work by five a.m. to set up for a meeting, but it wasn't even seven yet. There was still time. "You don't want to come up for a little while?"

Toga shrugged, his cheeks coloring just slightly. "If you'd like."

Sierra giggled. "You've gone all formal on me, haven't you?"

He chuckled. "Maybe. I'm new to this sort of thing."

She led the way inside, tugging him along by the hand. "You can't be new at this sort of thing," she remarked as they started up the stairs. "You've dated before. You said so."

"You'd be surprised," he answered, his tone drier than normal.

Sierra stopped on the steps and shot him a quick look. "I guess," she agreed finally as she started climbing again. "Fujiko's brothers were pretty big."

"Fujiko's brothers?"

"Yeah . . . in the park?"

"Oh, them . . . yeah . . . yeah."

She stopped again and glanced at him. Staring at the stairs with a consternated frown, Toga seemed lost in thought. Sierra turned to face him. "Toga?"

"Pardon?" he responded as he snapped out of his reverie.

"That night in the park . . . how was it that you moved so fast? I could barely see you . . ."

"It was dark."

"Sure, but . . ."

Toga sighed. "There are things that you don't know about me," he said slowly.

Sierra stepped back, crossing her arms over her chest. Why did she feel like she was better off not knowing? She shoved that thought aside. "Are you a convicted murderer?"

Toga blinked. "No . . ."

"Rapist?"

"No."

"Girlfriend beater?"

"No."

"Child molester?"

"No."

"Sexual deviant?"

"No!"

"Son of a mobster?"

"No."

"*Any* felonies?"

His expression turned chagrined. "Keh! No."

She sighed. "Then it can't be that bad. Come on."

He looked as though he wanted to say something but followed Sierra up the rest of the stairs and down the hallway to her apartment door. The telephone was ringing. Sierra hurriedly unlocked the door and ran inside to intercept the apparatus. "Hello?"

Toga turned on the lights as Sierra frowned.

"Sierra? This is your father. I was hoping to hear from you soon."

"Now's not a good time . . . I haven't decided yet."

The man sighed. "Not to pressure you, but there really isn't that much time. I didn't want to say this before because I didn't want you to come out of guilt, but your mom's sick, and—"

"My *mom* is fine . . . I assume you're talking about my biological mother?" Sierra cut in icily, gripping the phone so tightly that her fingers turned white.

He was silent for a moment, as though Sierra's words had hurt him. "Darling, we never—"

"Don't call me that. You gave up the right to call me that."

Toga's hand on her shoulder offered her a semblance of calm.

"Please . . . it would mean the world to your . . . to Anne."

"I told you, I'll think about it. Calling and hounding me isn't really aiding your cause."

"But—"

Sierra blinked in surprise as Toga's hand snatched the receiver out of her hand. She turned to look at him, frowning at what could only be described as a snarl on his face as he brought the phone to his ear. "She told you how she feels. Leave her alone or I'll make sure you never find her again. When she decides, she'll call you."

That said, Toga slammed the receiver down and uttered a low growl.

Sierra managed a weak laugh. "Sometimes I think you were a dog in a past life," she remarked, trying to lighten her own mood by teasing Toga.

He slowly turned his gaze on her, his eyes dark, fierce. "A past life?"

Sierra jumped as the phone rang again. With yet another growl, Toga snatched up the receiver and brought it to his ear. "Yes?" His mutinous glower dissipated and turned almost sheepish as he blushed. "Oh, uh, yeah, here."

Holding the receiver out with his hand over the mouthpiece, Toga winced. "Your mother."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Sierra took the phone and shot Toga a wan smile. "Hi, Mom."

"Toga is answering your phone?"

Sierra made a face as Toga headed toward the refrigerator. "No . . . I had a prank call a few minutes ago."

"Oh . . . I've told you, dear, an unlisted phone number is a God-send."

"Yeah . . . maybe I should do that."

Mrs. Crawford laughed. "I was calling to ask you if you were bringing . . . anyone . . . to Thanksgiving dinner?"

Sierra winced. "Anyone in particular?" she hedged.

Her mother sighed. "Hm, I can't imagine . . ."

Sierra gave in. "Let me ask." She turned and gasped since Toga was right behind her. She hadn't heard him approach. "Toga . . . Mom wanted to know if you were interested in coming with me to Thanksgiving dinner?"

Toga looked apprehensive at best. "Isn't that for family?"

She shrugged. "Did you have plans already?"

"No," he admitted. She raised an eyebrow. He handed her a bottle of water and nodded as he moved off toward the sofa.

"Okay," she told her mother.

"Good . . . wonderful . . . your brothers were telling me about him, and Brent can't wait to meet him."



# ~ ~ Chapter 12 ~ ~

## ~ T hanksgiving ~

“Hut . . . Hike!”

With a giggle, Sierra dove forward, literally running over her brothers as two of them tried to battle on the line of scrimmage. Brent, her oldest brother, smashed the football into Toga’s stomach. With Sierra heading straight for him, he wrapped his arms around the ball and flashed past her, careful not to move too quickly in the doing.

*‘Kami . . . Father would not be pleased if he saw this,’* Toga couldn’t help but think as he tried to avoid another of Sierra’s brothers—Bill, she said his name was.

Still, he had to admit as he reached the designated end zone, he was having a good time.

Half afraid that he’d be completely out of place at Sierra’s family gathering, Toga had very nearly called and lied about being ill. He was ready to do just that when she knocked on his door earlier than he had expected. Dressed casually in faded jeans and a bulky sweater, Toga had winced and, without a word, had turned on his heel and headed back to his room to change out of the suit he’d already put on. When he reemerged ten minutes later in jeans and forest green tee shirt, Sierra had nodded her approval just before leaning up on tiptoe to kiss his cheek.

Effort well spent, he figured.

“Not bad for a pretty boy,” Mike goaded as Toga jogged back with the football.

“Half-time!” Carol, Kevin’s wife hollered from the front porch where she stood holding a tray of steaming mugs.

Toga dropped the football as Sierra ran over to him. “Having fun?”

He shrugged. "All right."

She giggled. "They never let me play most of the time. It makes the teams uneven."

He laughed as she wrinkled her nose in an entirely adorable fashion. She ran up the steps to the porch to retrieve a couple of mugs.

"A word, pretty boy."

Toga turned to stare at Sierra's oldest brother, Brent. Brent jerked his head toward the driveway. Toga followed. "You're dating my sister, huh?"

Toga shrugged. "Is that what she said?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that it's really not your business . . . unless Sierra has made it your business."

"Whatever. Let me give you some friendly advice: Be careful with my sister, got that?"

Toga could feel his jaw twitching as he tamped down the desire to choke Sierra's meddlesome brother. Leaning casually against his car, Brent looked about as arrogant and sure as he possibly could. It occurred to Toga that he could very easily wipe the smirk off his face, if he really wanted to do so. He curbed that desire, too. "Of course," he answered dryly, in deference to Sierra.

Brent narrowed his gaze. "Look, Sierra's not like other girls. If you're thinking you can just get what you want out of her and move on, then you'd best back off now. You hurt her, and I'll flatten you."

Toga kept his expression blank as he stared back at the man. He could understand Brent's concern. Toga himself felt much the same way about Aiko. The insinuation that he had anything other than good intentions as far as Sierra was concerned, however, irritated the hell out of him. "Do you think you can?" he countered mildly.

Brent's stare shifted to Toga's feet and slowly moved upward. "I'm pretty sure I can," he replied.

Toga leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest as he sucked in his cheeks thoughtfully. "My uncle used to tell me that it's a mistake to underestimate your opponent. I have no intention of hurting your sister. Leave it at that."

Very deliberately, he strode away, intercepting Sierra as she smiled at him and held out a mug of spiced apple cider.

"What were you and Brent talking about?" she asked as she held her mug in both hands and lifted it to her lips. Eyes wide, staring at him over the rim of her mug, Sierra blinked as she waited for him to answer.

"He was just concerned about you."

Sierra made a face. "Oh, that's rich. Biggest womanizer on earth, and he's . . . Did he threaten you?"

Toga chuckled. "Don't worry about it."

She still looked disgruntled. "He's really not that bad," she assured him with a sigh.

"How can he be? He worries about you."

Her smile turned shy as her cheeks registered color that had nothing to do with the crisp November air. "A little *too* much . . ."

Toga shrugged.

"Hey, you two! You playing or what?" Mike hollered. Toga glanced over to see that the game was resuming. Sierra grabbed his mug and ran over to set them on the porch.

Stray strands of Sierra's hair had escaped the neat ponytail she's worn. Blowing in the breeze just enough to send the scent of apple blossoms straight to him, Toga couldn't help the bemusement that filtered over him as he waited for the ball to be put into play. Bill got the ball and headed straight for Toga. He tried

to tackle but only managed to catch Bill's foot. It was enough to bring the man down. Toga rolled to his feet and offered Bill a hand up.

"Not bad," Bill remarked as he accepted the gesture. "Did you play ball in school?"

"No . . . they don't have football where I'm from."

Bill made a face. "A life without football? Sucks to be you."

Toga grinned as they headed back to line up again.

Sierra caught his eye and winked. He was still suffering the effects of her proximity when he suddenly had the ball jammed into his stomach again. This time, however, he was completely unprepared as a small blur hit him moments later. He fell back with a grunt as Sierra landed on his chest. "Gotcha!"

Toga's breath caught in his lungs. It took everything in him to remind himself that her brothers were there and that it would probably not be a good idea to kiss her. Wisps of her hair fell into his face, and he stifled a groan. She hopped up as though she didn't have any idea just what she had done to him. Toga nearly whined.

"God, Toga, that was the oldest trick in the book, and you fell for it," Kevin commented as he helped Toga to his feet. "Keep the girl away from our running back," he hollered.

Bill snorted. "Whatever works!"

Toga could feel the flush seeping up his cheeks. Mercifully, though, the game was called when Mrs. Crawford stepped outside to tell them that dinner was served.

Sierra jogged over to him and hugged him. "I'm sorry . . . did I hurt your ego?"

He shook his head. "Not at all . . . you could do that later, though, if you wish."

She eyed him quizzically. "Hurt your ego?"

He grinned. "Tackle me."

She flushed but leaned up to kiss his cheek. He sighed when she pulled away. "Oh, wait, you've got dead grass all over your back." Lightly and quickly, she brushed away the lingering debris with her hand. He jumped slightly when she reached his rear. Turning to glance at her, he hid his grin. She was biting her lower lip as her cheeks pinked a little more, and her gaze was nowhere near meeting his.

"Sierra."

"Huh?"

"Sierra?"

She gasped, realizing exactly what she was doing, and sparing him a quick glance, she hurriedly ran toward the house.

Toga's grin widened. He'd never really thought that he'd catch her looking at his . . . assets. Couldn't actually say he disliked it, either . . .

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"I wasn't staring, exactly," Sierra grumbled as they stepped into Toga's apartment.

"What would you call it? I feel so . . . violated."

"Oh, please! If you've never been shamelessly ogled before, then I'll eat my shoes."

"Is that what it was?"

She blushed and clamped her mouth closed.

Toga hung his coat in the closet and reached for hers. She had her arms crossed over her chest and looked like she was very close to bolting. "All right," he relented. "No more teasing, I promise."

She wrinkled her nose. "Somehow I just don't believe you," she countered mildly.

Toga laughed as he stepped closer and tilted her chin up. "You may 'shamelessly ogle' me as much as you wish, Sierra."

She tried not to smile. He had to give her marks for effort. In the end, she gave in, her smile lending a brightness to her eyes, her dimples flashing in an entirely sweet show. "You're so bad," she remarked as she stared at him. "Bet you've got your mother wrapped around your little finger, don't you?"

Toga shrugged. "I doubt that. My mother is a formidable woman. We learned early on not to cross her."

"Was she mean?"

"No . . . just a wicked temper and a couple fans you don't dare touch."

"Fans?"

He nodded. "Fans. Hand fans."

She still seemed a little perplexed by Toga's words. He chuckled.

"Thanks for coming with me," she said softly.

Toga slipped his hand up to caress her cheek. Her eyes drifted closed as she leaned against his touch. Her lips parted slightly as she stood still. Smoothing back her hair with his other hand, Toga leaned down to brush a kiss over her forehead, over her eyes. She tilted her head back and sighed as he bathed her face with kisses.

Kissing the corner of her mouth, Sierra turned her head to intercept his lips. Her hands wrapped around his wrists, held onto him with a vice-like grip. She tasted like sunshine, like water cascading over a waterfall. She leaned against him, as though she couldn't stand without his support. A sigh, a breath, a soft trembling, she was everything to him, everything he'd searched to find. He'd traveled halfway around the world to find her, and now that he had . . .

Toga let his thoughts center on her, on the beautiful compliance of her fluid movements. Her hands let go of his wrists to slip into his hair, her lips opening to him as softly as the rising sun. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her close enough to steady her.

She gasped softly as he raked his fangs over her swollen lips with calculated gentleness, a tender initiation of her soul and his youkai. Her aura welcomed him, wrapped around his youki, and whether she knew it or not, it was the last barrier against her acceptance of him.

*'She's the one,'* his mind whispered. *'She's your mate . . .'* The press of his thoughts intruded too sharply. He couldn't ignore the call of his blood, and yet he could not let it take over, either. *'Sierra . . . I'll wait . . .'*

With a harsh sigh, he pulled back. Breathing unsteadily, Sierra slowly opened her eyes, the bemused light that filled her gaze was tinged by something deeper. He swallowed hard and forced a weak smile. She laughed shakily and straightened her sweater with trembling hands.

Toga cleared his throat, breaking the heavy silence that had fallen. "I, uh . . . sorry . . . I think I got a little carried away."

She laughed again and leaned against him. "Don't be sorry . . ."

The phone rang. Toga winced but grabbed it, sending Sierra an apologetic glance. She shrugged and wandered over to flip on the television. He winced at the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Toga! How are you?"

"Fine, Aiko. Is something wrong?"

"Does something have to be wrong for me to call you?"

He sighed. "No."

Aiko giggled. "Mother gave me your number. I thought I'd call and see if you are coming to my one and only wedding, ever."

"Laying it on a bit thick, aren't you?"

"Me?"

"Cut the innocent act, Aiko."

She sighed. "Well, are you?"

Seeing no way around answering, he nodded. "Yes, I'll be there."

Aiko squealed. Toga winced and jerked the phone away from his ear. "Keh! Trying to deafen me?"

"Sorry," she said, sounding anything but apologetic. "So . . . will you be bringing . . . anyone?"

Toga knew that tone. He knew his sister too well to trust that innocent drawl she took on whenever she was fishing for information. "I don't know. I'd hate to ruin your wedding with an argument with Father."

Aiko sighed again. "Toga . . . are you sure? About her?"

Toga turned to gaze at the woman in question. She was clicking through channels on the television oblivious to the conversation that centered around her. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Then you should bring her. Since when do you hide anything from Father? I swear, I've always wondered if you were actually trying to test him. Besides, I want to meet this girl. If she's special enough to deserve you, then I think I have the right . . . and Rin will want to, as well, not to mention Aunt Kagome, and Mother . . ."

Toga snorted. "All right, you've made your point, brat. I'll ask."

Aiko giggled. "Good! Then my job here is done. I'll tell Mother you send your love."

"You do that. Bye."

He hung up and leaned back against the table, staring at Sierra and wondering if he really ought to ask her. Nothing good could come of it. Sesshoumaru would

very likely blow an ass gasket over the entire thing. Still he had promised Aiko, and if there were one thing that had been impressed upon him from early on, it was that he didn't dare go back on his word, ever.

Sierra set the remote control on the small coffee table and turned to smile at him. "Your sister, I take it?"

He nodded. "She was calling to see if I'm coming to her wedding."

She patted the sofa beside her and watched as Toga came around to sit. "She also wanted to know if . . . I'm going to be alone . . ." Slowly raising his eyes to lock with hers, he lifted his eyebrows. "So . . . am I?"

Sierra seemed surprised at his question. She sat back and frowned. "When is it?"

"I have to leave next Saturday. I'll be gone for a couple weeks."

"Oh, I can't. A couple of the other girls in my division already put in for time off. I doubt I can get it."

Toga tried to push aside the slight relief he felt at her words. "That's okay. I wish I didn't have to go."

"Don't you miss your family?"

"Family? Yes. Father? Not so much."

Sierra sighed. "What's the trouble with your father? I know you've said some, but I have a feeling it's more than that."

Toga shook his head. "He has some very . . . archaic ideas. I don't like them, and I'm not living by them."

"He isn't going to like me, is he?"

Toga winced. "There're not many he does," he remarked dryly. That, unfortunately, was also true. "You can't take it personally. Right now, I doubt he even likes me."



# ~ ~ Chapter 13 ~ ~

## ~ H omecoming ~

“So it’s true. The runaway pup’s come home.”

“Uncle Yasha!” Toga greeted as he rose from the chair and strode over to greet his uncle who stood, leaning in the doorway in his characteristically easy manner.

“You look like hell.”

Toga grinned. “What do you expect? Jetlag is a horrible thing.” He’d only arrived a few hours ago, and thanks to the time difference, he didn’t have time to lie down before everyone started arriving for the family dinner Kagura insisted on having.

InuYasha shrugged. “I wouldn’t know,” he remarked with a shrug.

True enough. The same Uncle Yasha who feared nothing also adamantly refused to get on an airplane. Toga wasn’t fool enough to ask InuYasha if he was scared, but it was a quiet joke. The only times Aunt Gome had gotten him off the island was via cruise ship—which InuYasha had also hated but for entirely different reasons. Having grown up over five hundred years ago in Sengoku Jidai, InuYasha didn’t care for confined spaces. How he could stand the congestion of Tokyo was beyond Toga, too. Maybe it was more bearable since he still owned and lived in the forest where he used to roam as its protector and guardian.

“You should come visit me,” Toga couldn’t resist saying.

InuYasha ignored Toga’s suggestion. “Where’s your . . . friend . . . I’ve heard about?” InuYasha asked casually—*too* casually—as he glanced around and tried to look inconspicuous. Golden eyes darting around, he looked anything but innocent. InuYasha was a hunter from the very beginning, and Toga figured some things never changed.

"She couldn't get time off work."

InuYasha nodded slowly, eyes taking on the intense glow that meant he didn't believe his nephew. "Does that bastard of a brother of mine know about her yet?"

Toga shrugged. "I don't think so."

InuYasha's eyebrows rose. "Scared?"

Toga made a face. "No, not at all."

InuYasha didn't look like he believed Toga. "Whatever you say."

Toga grinned. "Well, it *is* Aiko's wedding. I figured I should wait until after it to have it out with the old man."

InuYasha snorted more at the use of 'old man' than at Toga's claim. "Give it up, pup. Sesshoumaru hears you refer to him that way, and he's liable to blow an ass gasket."

Toga's grin widened. "You think?"

"Why do I think you'd like that?"

"I don't know."

InuYasha shook his head and chuckled. "Careful or the bastard will say you've been around me too long."

"He already does."

"Stay away from my son, baka," Sesshoumaru remarked as he strode toward the living room. "Toga, I want to speak with you."

Toga shrugged. "All right, Father."

Sesshoumaru stared at InuYasha with a pointed look. "Alone, if you don't mind."

"Not at all, bastard," InuYasha answered pleasantly. Toga nearly choked as his uncle pushed away from the door frame and ambled off toward the back doors.

"So you did come to your sister's wedding."

Toga was careful in choosing his words. "Did you think I wouldn't?"

Sesshoumaru straightened his glasses and shifted his gaze to his son. "I know not, Toga. You've done many things of late that I cannot comprehend."

Toga leaned back against the doorframe vacated by his uncle and crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't think there's much to talk about, Father. You refuse to bend, and I won't either."

"Fujiko's brothers said you had a run-in a few weeks past. Care to tell me what it was about?"

Toga shrugged. "You'd have to ask them."

Sesshoumaru nodded slowly, narrowing his gaze on his son as he shifted his jaw to the side, considering his next statement. Toga braced himself but gave no sign on the outside that he dreaded what his father was about to say. "They said . . . you were escorting a human girl."

"Did they? Then I suppose it must be so."

"Toga . . ."

"It is none of your concern, Father. I told you, I will not follow your wishes on this."

"Your sister has enough sense to marry a youkai," Sesshoumaru pointed out, rapidly approaching the limit of his control, if the flashing of his gaze meant anything.

"Then make her tai-youkai, Father. I never wanted it."

"You dare turn your back on your responsibilities?"

Toga sighed. “No. Kami, no. You’ve only drilled it into my head a million times if you have once. My choice of mate has nothing to do with it. Would it make me weak, if I were to choose a human?”

“No . . . what it would do . . . It would make you look vulnerable, and if you show vulnerability, you will be challenged.”

Toga shook his head slowly. “Then so be it.”

Striding across the room to stare at the sword mounted over the fireplace mantle—the legendary Sword of the Fang, Tenseiga—Sesshoumaru studied them for several minutes before asking in his quiet, calm voice, “Do you honestly believe I would be so adamant about this just to inconvenience you?” he demanded quietly.

“No, I don’t. The fact is, I have no idea why you do feel the way you do. Care to enlighten me?”

Sesshoumaru turned his back to the fireplace and stared hard at his son. Never being one given to showing emotions, it wasn’t any different now. He could have been gazing at an employee he was about to fire or staring at Toga’s mother. Toga didn’t look away.

“You have responsibilities, and one of those is to be Inu no Taisho, whether you like it or not, and as such, you need a youkai mate—one that can help you instead of hinder you.”

Toga shook his head slowly. “I don’t believe that, and you don’t believe it, either. If you did you wouldn’t have taken in Rin, to start with.”

“My reasons for taking care of her are many and varied . . . and have nothing to do with this.”

“And if Aiko had found a human? Would you have had this discussion with her?”

Sesshoumaru leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest stubbornly. “That matters not.”

Toga shrugged. "It does. You wouldn't have cared, would you? I'm the only one, right?"

"This is not about Aiko, it isn't about Rin, and it isn't about anything other than what I expect of you, as my son."

"Listen to yourself, Father. The role of the tai-youkai has been relegated to little more than circumstance and ceremony. Youkai, human, hanyou . . . does it really matter so long as she pleases me?"

"And you believe that there are none who would oppose you? Who would seek to take it from you by force?"

"And you believe I—your son—could not take them? Come, Father. I was trained from early on, by your decree."

Sesshoumaru shook his head. "That is hardly the same, Toga. What you learned was sparring. You have no experience in actual battle."

Toga didn't back down. "Shall we agree to disagree on this? You won't change my mind, and I'm wasting my time trying to change yours."

Kagura appeared beside Toga. Rising up on her toes to kiss her son's cheek, she patted his shoulder and smiled up at him. "Dinner is about to be served," she stated.

Toga offered his elbow. Kagura took his offer as they headed off toward the formal dining room.

He could feel his father's gaze boring into his back between his shoulder blades. Ignoring him for the moment, Toga smiled at his mother and answered her questions about life in the United States.

He wondered once more if he had made a mistake in coming. He didn't particularly care if Sesshoumaru found out about Sierra, but . . .

Sinking down at the table between Ryomaru and Gin, Toga sighed. Kami, he missed Sierra, and he hadn't even been gone a full day . . .

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"Come on, pup! Keep your defenses up or I'll flatten you," InuYasha instructed as he tightened his grip on Tetsusaiga's hilt. The ancient blade, normally nothing more than a rusty-looking katana, shined and gleamed, transformed into the Sword of the Fang, forged from Toga's grandfather's fang.

Toga renewed his hold on the halberd he held in ready, turning as InuYasha circled. In a flash of crimson fire rat hide, he leapt forward, sweeping the razor-sharp blade in a neat arc toward Toga's shoulder. Toga dropped the halberd and back-flipped out of the path of the descending blade before sticking out his foot to flip the weapon back into his hands.

"Not bad, pup. Don't let your guard down."

"Just bring it, Uncle Yasha," Toga shot back.

InuYasha whistled. "Damn, boy, you're starting to sound more and more like your old man every day."

"You'll regret that," Toga rejoined.

InuYasha lunged forward again as Toga spun away, bringing his halberd in a full circle to catch InuYasha's leg. The hanyou sprawled on the practice mat and rolled to his feet. "Better," InuYasha remarked.

Toga grinned as InuYasha swung at him again. Toga spun the halberd, repelling Tetsusaiga as InuYasha nodded his approval.

"InuYasha, don't you dare hurt him!" Kagome hollered as she stepped into the studio.

InuYasha snorted but didn't take his eyes off Toga. "Keh! He's gotta learn . . . and I ain't gonna kill him."

"As if you could, anyway," Toga scoffed.

"Oh, kami," Kagome muttered as she shook her head in disgust. "Are you two going to go to the wedding or not?"

"It's not for another three hours," InuYasha rebutted as he lunged forward with Tetsusaiga again. Toga didn't move quickly enough and caught the blunt side of the blade against his ribs as he tried to scoot aside.

With a hiss of pain and a wince he couldn't hide, Toga raised his halberd with one hand and smashed his other elbow against his aching side.

InuYasha sheathed Tetsusaiga and nodded. "Enough for now, pup. Come back when you've practiced. Chicago is making you soft."

Toga let his arm drop with a sigh. "See you at the wedding. I'd better get home and get cleaned up before the old man bellows at me about that, too." Heading for the doors, he stopped long enough to kiss Kagome's cheek. She grabbed his sweatshirt and, with a glower at her mate, she tugged the shirt up to examine the damage.

"InuYasha!" she yelled as the hanyou's ears flattened against his head. "Toga, you'd better put some ice on that, at least for awhile before the wedding," she remarked, tracing the already-swelling flesh with her fingertip before dropping the shirt and stomping over to intercept InuYasha. To Toga's undisguised amusement, his formidable uncle was slowly backing away from Kagome as he slipped out the doors with a chuckle and headed for his car.

The drive back to the Inutaisho estate took nearly thirty minutes in midday weekend traffic. Toga sighed as he sat at a stop light. Dialing Sierra's phone, he frowned as it rang and rang. He'd not talked to her in nearly two days, and he was starting to worry.

Remembering the reluctance to say goodbye that lent a shadow to her gaze as his flight was called for boarding, Toga sighed.

*"Two weeks, huh?" she asked as she tried to smile.*

*"Seems like a long time, doesn't it?"*

*"Not so long," she argued then sighed. Her expression said it all. Sad and a little lost, Sierra seemed like she was loath to see him go. It did seem like a long time to her, too. "Yeah, it does."*

*Tilting her chin up to kiss her gently, Toga winced when he leaned away, saw the brightness in her gaze. "I'll be back before you know it."*

*"Final boarding call for Flight 696, nonstop to Tokyo, Japan."*

*Toga sighed and quickly kissed her again. "I'll miss you, too."*

*She nodded and smiled as he turned to walk away. As he stopped to hand the flight attendant his ticket, he looked back in time to see her dash a nimble hand over her cheeks, wiping away the tears he could smell—the ones she tried to hide . . .*

The first week of his forced vacation had dragged by at an unbelievably slow pace. Toga had a feeling it was because Sierra was so far away. *'Where are you, Sierra? Be safe . . .'*

He was about to dial up the travel office and have them book him a return flight when the honk of cars behind him announced that traffic was moving once more. Toga sighed and nudged the car forward again.

Pulling into the wide driveway at his father's home, Toga decided that he'd try her number again this evening. If she still didn't answer, he'd hop on the next flight back to Chicago. For some reason, he had a feeling that Sierra was walking straight into trouble, wherever she was . . .

He spent the rest of the drive worrying about Sierra, wondering where she could have gone. Maybe she went to see her mother. Why didn't Toga believe that, either?

With a heavy sigh, Toga ran up the porch steps two at a time. Wincing as he glanced at his watch, he shook his head. Since the guests ought to be arriving shortly, Toga should have already been dressed and ready to act the role of the good pup, greeting old family friends and basically being bored out of his mind in the process . . .

"You're late," Kagura said as Toga stepped inside.

"I know, Mother. I apologize. Training ran a little longer than expected."

Kagura patted his cheek. "Yes, well, hurry up, please. Your sister is already a bundle of nerves. The last thing she needs is to hear your father berating you for being late."

Toga nodded and loped up the stairs.

Kagura smiled as she watched him retreat. *'So like his father in so many ways,'* she thought as her smile turned a little sad. She'd so hoped that they could come to some sort of understanding. She was starting to think that perhaps they never would.

Sesshoumaru stepped out of the study, decked out in his ceremonial garb, his traditional white clothes and black armor.

"Wow, that brings back memories, Papa," Rin remarked as she lit at the base of the stairs. With a soft smile, she hurried over to hug her adoptive father and handed him the fluffy white Mokokomo-sama that Sesshoumaru had given her years before. He nodded his thanks as he flipped it over his shoulder, tucking one end into his waistband. Rin's smile widened as she reached up to adjust the fluff before Kagura could grab her and drag her off to the kitchen.

Mumbling about inept caterers, Kagura disappeared through the high arched doorway as Sesshoumaru smiled vaguely.

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Sierra stepped out of the cab and handed the driver a wad of bills. She wasn't sure how much she actually owed for the four block trip, but she didn't wait for change as she closed the door and slowly approached the imposing building.

Another fleeting thought that maybe she should have called Toga before she just showed up raced through her mind. Still, she'd wanted to surprise him. He had seemed so sad when she saw him off at the airport. One of the girls in her department had her plans fall through, so she and Sierra had switched a few vacation days, and after making a serious dent in her savings account, here she was.



# ~ ~ Chapter 14 ~ ~

## ~ Contention ~

Sierra frowned in confusion as she took another involuntary step in retreat. *‘Why do I smell like . . . Toga . . . ? What is he talking about?’*

“So you’re the one my son’s been toying with,” Sesshoumaru said quietly as his eyes narrowed just a little bit more. “I smelled you on him . . . faint enough. It will fade, of course.”

“I’m . . . Sierra . . .” she informed him slowly.

“You do not belong here. You don’t belong with Toga.”

“Is he . . . here?”

Sesshoumaru’s golden eyes narrowed just a little as he regarded her. “You should leave. My son is here at his sister’s request. It is not for the likes of you.”

“Father?” Toga stepped up beside Sesshoumaru and muttered a curse as he pushed past him to hurry to Sierra’s side. “What are you doing?”

Sierra shook her head and glanced up to Toga only to see that his question had been directed at his father. Glaring at him with his lips pulled back in a grimace, Toga didn’t back down from Sesshoumaru’s obvious irritation. Sierra stayed behind him, letting him shield her from his father’s blatant hostility.

“Toga!”

He ignored Sesshoumaru’s harsh utterance and stood his ground. “No. I told you how I feel about this. I’ll tell you this, too. If you ask her to leave, I will go. I will not bend.”

Long moments ticked away as the two men glared at each other. Neither looked like they were willing to budge. Finally Sesshoumaru nodded once. "So be it, Toga. We shall discuss this further after the wedding." His cold gaze shifted to Sierra, half-hidden behind Toga's back. "Enjoy the hospitality of my home." With that, he turned and strode away.

Only then did Toga look down at her. "Are you all right? I thought you couldn't come."

"He doesn't like me at all," Sierra managed to say as she forced a smile for Toga's benefit.

He winced. "It's my fault. I didn't tell him much about you. I didn't know . . . I was worried . . . I tried to call you, and you didn't answer . . ."

"I-I t-ried to call," she stammered. "You didn't answer, and the only flight I could get—The phone on the plane was broken, and my cell phone said you were out of range . . ."

"It's fine," he assured her though his smile was dim, his eyes troubled. "I'm glad you came."

She shook her head. "I just got here . . . I thought . . . I should have tried to call again."

"No . . . my father was rude, and I'm sorry."

Sierra frowned as she finally got a good look at Toga's clothing. Dressed in much the same manner as his father, the only real difference was that the shoulder and arm embroidered design on Sesshoumaru's clothing had been an orangey-red shade while Toga's were jade green. Her frown darkened as she leaned back, raising her hand to touch the . . . blanket? Why on earth was he wearing that?

"Toga? What's going on?"

He sighed and shook his head, leading her out of the way as the first of the guests arrived. "I'll tell you everything after the wedding, okay?"

She nodded slowly. "All right, but why are you wearing your blanket?"

He made a face. "It isn't a blanket. It's called Mokokoko-sama."

"A . . . what?"

He waved off her question as he muttered a greeting to some of the newly arriving guests.

Sierra blinked in confusion. Almost all of the people were dressed in a similarly archaic manner, like Toga and Sesshoumaru, but why? "I . . . maybe I should go back to the hotel," she offered with a wince.

Toga chuckled. "The damage has already been done. My father will honor his word. You're welcome to stay."

She wasn't sure if she should feel worse because of the feeling that she was completely unwelcome or because she had a decent idea that whatever trouble there was between Toga and his father, she'd just made it so much worse. "It's okay . . . I'll just go back."

He shook his head stubbornly. "No. I meant what I said. If you go, then I will, too."

"But it's your sister's wedding. It's her day, and she wants you here."

He shrugged. "And I want you here. Forget it, wench. You're staying."

Sierra's rebuttal was cut off when a loud male voice interrupted. "Damn it, Kagome, get off me, will you?"

Sierra peeked around Toga to see another version of the two silver haired boys she'd met before—Toga's cousins? This one was being trailed by a petite black haired woman with shining brown eyes that were, at the moment, centered on something in the man's hair. What surprised Sierra, though, was the crimson red outfit he wore. '*MC Hammer pants*,' she thought with a bemused grin. She wasn't sure why that idea popped into her head, but it seemed fitting . . . And just why was he wearing a sword on his hip?

At least the woman was dressed in more modern fashion. The crimson silk kimono-style dress matched the man's clothes perfectly, and when she caught

Sierra's questioning gaze, she smiled and let go of the man to hurry over to the two of them.

"Is this her?" she asked, leaning up to kiss Toga's cheek as Toga leaned down to let her.

"Yes. Aunt Kagome, this is Sierra. Sierra, this is my aunt and her husband . . . my Uncle Yasha."

Those bright golden eyes darted over her quickly enough. Sierra couldn't help but feel like this Uncle Yasha had just made quick work of garnering an opinion of her, and that the opinion wasn't likely to change, no matter what it was. "So . . . you hit her dog?" Uncle Yasha asked, folding his arms together under the cover of his billowing sleeves.

"InuYasha!" Kagome gasped. She made a face and leaned toward Sierra. "Ignore him. He's got the manners of a mongrel."

"And you love it, wench."

Kagome blushed as two faces Sierra did know stepped up behind InuYasha and Kagome along with a very pretty silver haired girl. "Mother, looking lovely, as always," one of the twins greeted with a loud kiss on his mother's cheek. "Sierra! I wasn't expecting you, though it is a very nice surprise . . . I hope you are enjoying Japan?"

"Keh! Step aside, Kich," Ryomaru said as he shoved his brother out of the way to greet his mother and Sierra. "Nice to see you again, Sierra."

Sierra blinked in surprise. Her interactions with the twins hadn't been quite like this. They almost seemed . . . formal?

"Told you the act differently when their mother is around," Toga muttered in her ear. Sierra nodded slowly. "And that is my cousin, Gin, who is absolutely nothing like her hentai brothers."

"Hentai?" Kagome echoed as she peered over her shoulder at her sons.

"What does that mean?" Sierra asked, unfamiliar with that term.

"Perverted," Toga remarked as InuYasha turned to eye his sons, too.

Ryomaru blinked innocently. "I don't know what he's talking about, Mother," he assured Kagome.

"Must be all the pollution in Chicago. It's affected his brain, and he's starting to mutate," Kichiro joked.

Gin shook her head. "Bakas," she mumbled as she offered Sierra a little grin. "Ignore them . . . they were an accident."

Toga suddenly coughed. Sierra turned to look at him curiously. "Something in the air," he remarked, dropping his fist away from his mouth.

"Has that bastard of a brother of mine met your friend yet?" InuYasha asked, arching a black brow in a pointed manner.

Toga sighed. "Yes. Yes, he has."

Sierra shook her head in wonder. It was obvious that Toga's infamous Uncle Yasha didn't care for Sesshoumaru? She didn't have time to wonder why as Kagome slipped an arm around her shoulders and led her away from the men. "Let me introduce you around, since Toga's not seen fit to do it, himself," Kagome remarked loud enough for the men to hear.

"Oi!" both Toga and InuYasha hollered after them.

Kagome rolled her eyes. "Ignore them. So I take it you haven't met Toga's mother?"

Sierra winced and shook her head. If Sesshoumaru's greeting was anything like what she should expect from the other parent, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to, either.

Kagome led Sierra deeper into the huge mansion, through the dining room—which was absolutely immense—to the kitchen beyond. A very regal-looking woman dressed in about a dozen layers of silk fabric with an overlying kimono of white silk with embroidery that must denote the family, since it was nearly the exact same as Sesshoumaru and Toga's, was directing caterers with the authority

of an army general. That was Toga's mother? Sierra reigned in the impulse to turn and run.

"Kagura . . . look who I found outside," Kagome joked as Kagura turned and smiled at them both.

Her smile dimmed a little as she stepped forward, but it didn't disappear completely. Sierra stared at the woman's magenta eyes. She'd never seen such a color, and the first thing thought that came to mind was, *'Those have got to be contacts . . .'*

"This is Sierra . . . the girl Toga's mentioned," Kagome supplied.

Kagura nodded. "Pleased to meet you. Welcome to my home. I'm Kagura, Toga's mother."

"Thank you."

Kagura's smile widened again as she leaned her head to the side, regarding Sierra critically. "What a lovely girl . . . Where is Toga? I think I need to speak with him before more guests arrive."

"Out side with InuYasha," Kagome said.

Sierra watched as Kagura swept from the room. "That went better than meeting Toga's father," she remarked.

Kagome made a face as she led the way back through the dining room and toward the living room. "Don't worry about Sesshoumaru. There aren't many people he does care for. Besides, Toga's the one who matters, and he likes you just fine, right?"

Sierra smiled. "Yeah, you're right." Staring at Kagome so close up, Sierra frowned. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

Sierra shook her head slowly. "You don't look old enough to have full-grown children."

Kagome grinned and shrugged. "Toga hasn't told you much about his family, has he?"

"A little . . . I know he's been at odds with his father lately . . ."

Kagome nodded. "Well, there's a bit more to it than that, but I think Toga ought to be the one to tell you everything."

Sierra digested that in silence. Just what was going on, anyway?

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"We've always thought he was pretty hideous, too."

Sierra jumped at the soft voice beside her and turned to stare into the shocking amber eyes of the bride, Toga's sister, Aiko. Silvery hair twisted up in an ornate convolution of curls and spirals, the girl was absolutely stunning. Sierra managed a smile as she fought down a blush that she had been 'shamelessly ogling' Toga, who was dancing with a tall bronze haired woman. Willowy and elegant, she looked nice, dancing with him. Sierra winced inwardly as she remembered the strange undercurrent to Toga's behavior around his father.

*"Toga . . . there are other guests here," Sesshoumaru remarked as he drew up beside them at the reception. "You will make yourself available, I assume?"*

*Sierra didn't miss the almost hostile flicker of light behind Toga's gaze. "Certainly, Father. Far be it for me to ignore your guests."*

*Sesshoumaru's cold gaze settled on Sierra for a moment longer before he turned and strode away.*

*"Dance with me, Toga."*

*Casting Sierra an apologetic look, Toga let the woman lead him off like a . . . Sierra snorted. 'Like a dog on a leash.'*

She snapped out of her reverie and forced a smile for the new bride. "Toga said you invited me. Thank you."

Aiko shook her head. "He seems happy with you."

"Does he?"

Aiko grinned. "Not saying I know him better than anyone, but it's a close thing. Although, I've got to admit, if it were my man dancing with an ex, I think I'd have a thing or two to say about it."

Sierra's gaze shifted back to the couple again. "His ex?"

"Uh huh . . . Fujiko. They dated forever, but I think it was more to please Papa than anything . . ." Aiko giggled. "As often as he keeps looking back at you, though, I'd say you've got nothing to worry about." She winked and moved on, leaving Sierra alone to ponder that.

*'So that's his ex? He didn't want to be with her?'* She shook her head. The woman was gorgeous. How could he not want to be with her?

"Enjoying yourself?"

Sierra stifled a sigh and glanced at the short, black haired woman beside her. "Yes . . ." she replied with a small smile.

"I'm Rin, Toga's older sister."

"Oh, yes . . . he's mentioned you."

Rin nodded. "I wish I could say the same. I haven't talked to Toga since he moved. We miss him."

"He . . . seems like he misses you all, too."

Rin winced as she pushed back a lock of her ebony hair. "Most of us, sure. I doubt he misses Father very much."

"He said they weren't seeing eye to eye," Sierra commented.

"That's an understatement. Father's being pig-headed, and Toga . . . it's about time Toga told him where to stick it."

“Toga doesn’t stand up to him often?”

Rin sighed. “Not so much that . . . he’s never had a reason to do it. They used to be so close, and now . . . Well, I guess things change. Everyone thinks Father is being stubborn for no good reason, at least on this. He and InuYasha have fought over it a few times, which doesn’t really mean much since they don’t really need a reason to fight, in the first place . . .”

Sierra managed a weak laugh. “Sounds like my brothers.”

Rin rolled her eyes and patted the back of her hair. “Guess some things are just universal.” She winked at Sierra. “Never mind them. If you make Toga happy, then I wish you both the best.”

“Thanks.”

Rin sucked in a sharp breath of air and touched Sierra’s arm. “I hate to run, but I don’t see Kagome, and it looks like InuYasha is about to do some Tetsusaiga shoving. If you’ll excuse me . . .”

Sierra frowned. *‘Tetsusaiga shoving?’* Watching out the window of the huge French doors as InuYasha started to unsheathe his sword as he stalked toward a young man who had been talking to Gin, Sierra could only figure that his sword must have a name and wasn’t just for ceremonial show . . .

She blinked suddenly and narrowed her gaze, not really believing what her eyes were telling her. She hadn’t noticed it before, but InuYasha was outside barefoot in the middle of December?

Turning her attention away from Rin, who was outside trying to restrain the silver-haired man, Sierra sipped champagne as she stared around the gathering. Catching the eye of a woman nearby, Sierra caught the open anger in the woman’s features. Slowly turning to look behind, to see if there were someone else that the woman could be glaring at, Sierra turned back in time to see the woman casually walking toward her.

“So you’re here with Toga?”

Puzzled over the flash of anger in the woman's violet gaze, Sierra nodded but didn't speak.

"How long have you known him?"

That seemed like a reasonable enough question to her, and Sierra set her champagne glass on the table beside them. "A few months."

"A few months . . . I see . . . he didn't waste time, did he?"

"I beg your pardon?"

The woman offered her a tight little smile. "Oh, it's not important . . . I saw him a few months ago, and he hadn't mentioned you, so I assume he hadn't met you then. It was in Germany."

Sierra remembered Toga's words. *'The last place I was? Berlin . . .'* She shifted slightly. "He mentioned being there."

The flare of something dark and ugly in the woman's eyes surprised Sierra. The woman smiled insincerely, the expression as thin and tight as the subtle lines around her eyes. "I dated him, too, did you know? It was only for a week . . . his father made sure of that."

"His father? How?"

The woman laughed but it was a bitter sound. "Paid my father to move us. I wasn't good enough for him, I guess." She shook her head slowly, shifting those violet eyes toward the dance floor—onto Toga. "It was a long time ago . . ."

"And you were invited to the wedding?"

She shrugged. "My husband is trying to sell Sesshoumaru his business, and Aiko is an old friend . . . I suppose I'm not a danger anymore." Turning her gaze back onto Sierra, the woman narrowed her eyes, as if she were trying to see into Sierra's mind. "Is that why you're with him? Because of who his father is?"

"What?"

"He's rich . . . heir to a fortune . . . makes sense . . ." She brought her gaze back to pin Sierra, to assess her. Violet gaze flicking over her from head to toe, Sierra couldn't help but feel as though this woman despised her absolutely. "Don't hurt him."

"I wasn't planning on it," she remarked stiffly. *'Fine, she's just concerned . . . Hold your temper, Sierra . . .'*

"Everyone has a price," she commented cryptically as she moved away. "It's just a matter of time before the almighty Sesshoumaru Inutaisho finds yours."

A million comebacks shot through her mind. Not one of them was appropriate in the given setting. Sierra clenched her jaw, trying to restrain her desire to let the woman know she'd overstepped herself.

"Sierra? Are you all right? What did Lily say to you?"

Whipping around to glare up into Toga's concerned expression, she felt her anger slowly seep away, and she sighed. "It's not important. I'm fine."

He didn't look convinced. "I shouldn't have left you alone . . . forgive me?"

She smiled. "There's nothing to forgive."

"You're sure?"

Her smile brightened into a real one. "I'm sure. Your family is . . . eclectic."

He winced. "That bad, huh?"

She giggled. "No . . ."

"Oi, Toga . . . so this is Sierra . . . At least you have good taste, pup . . ."

Toga rolled his eyes and gestured at the man who joined them. "Sierra, this is my brother-in-law, Shippou. Shippou, this is Sierra. Did you lose Rin? I thought she kept you locked up during the day."

Shippou shrugged. "I found the key."

Sierra giggled. This relative, she decided, was very, very nice.

Shippou grabbed her hand and started to drag her away. "Oi!" Toga hollered.

Shippou waved over his shoulder. "Just a dance, pup! Get a grip."

When Sierra glanced back, Toga was staring at the two of them with a glower on his face and his arms crossed over his chest.

Shippou swept Sierra into his arms with such a flourish that Sierra had to giggle. Shippou chuckled and held her respectfully as he started to dance with her. "So you're the one he chose, huh? Doesn't surprise me."

Sierra blushed but smiled. The way he'd worded that seemed a little weird, but Sierra discounted it as the differences between the Japanese language and English, which everyone had been using around her since they all seemed to figure that she didn't know their language. She was relieved for that. "Chose me?"

He shrugged. "Sure. Inu-youkai mate for life . . . he didn't tell you?" Shippou made an exaggerated face, a very pronounced grimace. "That figures. Just like InuYasha . . . he rubbed his scent off on Kagome long before he ever bothered to mark her . . ."

She hadn't heard that term before. Shaking her head slowly, Sierra frowned as she asked, "What's an 'inu' —?"

"All right, you've had your dance, Shippou. Step aside."

Sierra stepped back as Shippou raised his eyebrows apologetically before holding out his hand that still had Sierra's clasped in it. Toga took her hand and shot his brother-in-law a dark look. Shippou's grin widened and he bowed slightly to Sierra before ambling away to find his wife.

"What did he mean?" Sierra asked softly as Toga pulled her close to dance. It struck her that even in the strange clothing, he still looked every bit as comfortable as he did in anything else he wore. A sudden thought crossed her mind, a strange sense that maybe she didn't know him at all. His eyes seemed deeper, darker, shrouding some sort of secret that he didn't want to tell her, and if that were true, then what could he be hiding?



# ~ ~ Chapter 15 ~ ~

## ~ Truth and Illusions ~

Sierra turned off the hair dryer and frowned as she tilted her head to listen. The soft knock came again, and she grinned as she yanked open the bathroom door and ran to admit her visitor. *'Toga . . . you're early . . .'*

Swinging open the door with a bright smile, Sierra's greeting died on her lips as her smile faded, and she stepped back in retreat.

"May I come in?"

Unable to find her voice, she nodded and held the door open wider to admit Sesshoumaru Inutaisho. Dressed in regular attire this time, Sierra still didn't find him any less intimidating than she had the first time they'd met. She tried not to show her reluctance as she closed the door but couldn't hide her trembling hands, and she just knew that he knew it, too.

"Thank you for letting me attend the wedding. It was really lovely," Sierra commented, unsure what else she could say as she wondered why he was here.

"I did not come here to exchange pleasantries, Crawford-san" he stated as he passed her. "I gather you know this."

"Then why did you?"

"It has come to my attention that my son has been a bit . . . lax . . . in telling you some things that you really ought to know," Sesshoumaru remarked as he slowly crossed the floor and turned to pin her with his cold gaze.

"Then maybe he should be telling me whatever it is you're going to say," she managed though her voice wasn't nearly as strong as she would have liked. Mustering her waning bravado, she checked her watch before crossing her arms

over her stomach. "He is coming to go with me to dinner, and he said he had some things he wanted to tell me then."

"Toga isn't coming," Sesshoumaru assured her, flicking a nonexistent bit of fuzz off his immaculate suit sleeve. "He's having dinner with an old friend. I believe you saw her? His fiancé, Fujiko."

She shook her head slowly as her mouth went dry, as her hands broke out in a cold sweat. "His what? He said they only dated—that they weren't together anymore . . ."

Sesshoumaru flicked his wrist as though her words meant nothing. "I know what he said. Unfortunately, it matters little what he says, just as it matters not what he wants. He will mate her, and you will be nothing."

"You can't tell him what to do . . . you can't make him marry someone he doesn't want to be with . . ."

Sesshoumaru's cold chuckle made her wince. "I am the tai-youkai—the Inu no Taisho. Toga will inherit the duties and responsibilities of the tai-youkai after me. I assure you, he will do what is expected of him."

"What kind of archaic nonsense is that? People don't marry someone they don't love . . . and you can't honestly expect Toga to do that, either."

"What I can expect is for him to do what is required. He may not mate your kind, and he knows this."

"My kind? What does that mean?"

His eyes widened in mock surprise before narrowing again as he sized her up. "What, indeed? I mean humans, you naïve girl. Did my son forget to mention that? He is youkai. He will marry youkai."

Sierra shook her head slowly as her expression registered her disbelief. "Youkai? I don't know what you're talking about."

Instead of answering, Sesshoumaru slowly, deliberately lifted his hand before his face. As he brought his hand down, revealing his true youkai markings, Sierra gasped. Images of Toga's face on Halloween pressed against her head, made her

feel weak, dizzy . . . Sesshoumaru grinned, and she saw his fangs. As his hand fell away, she saw his claws, and the fierce markings on the backs of his hands.

“Oh, my God,” she mumbled as she stepped back, stepped away. Stumbling as she pushed herself against the wall, eyes wide in fear, she stared at him as she felt the blood being siphoned from her skin. “What are you?”

“Some call us demons. Some call us magic. Mononoke—creature spirits . . . youkai . . . Now do you understand?”

Sierra’s mind rebelled at what she saw, at what she’d been told. Unable to believe Sesshoumaru’s claims . . . it had to be a trick of light, a slight of hand . . . She choked out a harsh laugh before jamming the back of her hand against her dry lips. “There’s no such thing . . . there *can’t* be . . .”

With a heavy sigh, Sesshoumaru swung around in a circle as a long, thin flash of green light shot out of his fingertips. He snapped the string through the air and cracked it against the mirror over the bureau, shattering it as Sierra yelped and shied away even further. The string sucked back into his fingers and disappeared. Only then did he bother to look at Sierra again. “Do you believe me now?”

Sierra didn’t answer.

Slowly, he strode over to her, stopped before her, tilted her chin to force her to look at him. Trapped against the wall, Sierra had no escape, even if she could have moved. She bit back a sob. “Go home, Crawford-san, and for your own sake, stay away from my son.”

He let his hand drop from her face as he turned his back on her. Strolling to the door, he stopped with his hand on the knob and looked back at her. “My private plane is waiting for you at the airport. I’ll tell them to expect you within the hour.”

He slipped out quietly as Sierra’s knees buckled. She sank to the floor with a soft sob. Shaking, heart hammering, she couldn’t control the violent tremors in her body as she fought to find reason behind Sesshoumaru’s statements.

*‘There’s no such thing as mythical beings . . . youkai or whatever . . . they aren’t real . . .’*

Eyes rising to stare at the shattered remnants of the mirror, she winced and drew back as the echo of the energy whip rattled through her head again and again. *'Toga . . . I . . . why didn't you tell me . . . ?'*

Nothing made sense. Nothing seemed real. The only thing she could think of were the words Toga had said to her . . . *'I'll tell you later . . .'*

The things that she hadn't ever understood about him suddenly seemed to fall into place. The quiet questions that he never had answered . . . now she knew.

*'He may not mate your kind, and he knows this.'*

"God!" Sierra gasped as she leaned forward, wrapped her arms around her raised knees. "Toga . . ."

The image of his face, his shy smile, his bashful demeanor as he jammed his hands deep into his pockets . . . Sierra willed the images away, tried to ignore the hurt that came with them.

*'Why didn't you tell me all this, Toga . . . ? Why did you . . . lie?'*

Was that the reason he'd been able to rescue her from that tree? Was that the reason he'd moved so fast the night in the park? Feeling like a fool, like a complete and utter dupe, Sierra couldn't cry. Her mind wouldn't let her.

*'Don't think, Sierra . . . don't think about it . . . the plane . . . get on the plane and go home, where everything makes sense . . .'*

"Home," she whispered as she pushed herself to her feet. "Home . . ."

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Toga loped down the stairs, two at a time. "Going to see Sierra?" Kagura asked as he stepped down the last few.

"Yeah . . . I, uh . . . I need to tell her . . ."

Kagura nodded. "If you're serious about her and she you, then yes."

Toga dropped his gaze and shook his head as a hint of color filled his cheeks. "Mother . . . I promised her that I'd protect her."

She didn't look at all surprised by his admission. "I see . . ."

"Do you?"

Kagura nodded as she smoothed his hair out of his eyes, her gaze searching his for some sort of truth. She must have found it. She smiled sadly, as if whatever it was she saw in her son was undeniable, as she cupped his face in her hands.

"Toga . . . you know I want you to be happy, and I think your father does, too." When he opened his mouth to protest, Kagura silenced him with a finger to his lips, just as she had when he was small. "I know it's hard for you to see it. "You are his son—his *only* son. He's always demanded more of you, always demanded perfection . . . but in this . . . this *one* time . . . I think he might be wrong."

"Mother . . . I've never felt about anyone the way I feel about her."

Kagura smiled. "She's a beautiful girl."

"She's more than that," he said slowly. "She's . . . she makes me want to smile."

She shook her head slowly, the conflict rising in her expression. Trapped between husband and son in a battle of wills . . . Toga winced. He didn't want her to have to be there, ever. "I wish you and your father could come to terms on this, but if you can't, don't you dare back down. If you love her, you fight for her, even if that means you must fight your father," she said with a sad little smile.

Toga sighed and shook his head. "Can I . . . can I do that?"

Kagura stroked his cheek, her eyes clouded with unmasked concern. "Toga, you may have to, if Sierra is the woman you want." She stepped back and gave him the once over before fussing with his collar tabs and finally nodded her approval. "You'd better get moving if you're supposed to meet her for dinner. Darling . . . be careful, telling her your secret. It isn't quite like telling her that you're lying about your age."

He made a face. "She's not going to take this well, is she?"

Kagura lifted her eyebrows. "Probably not, but if she truly cares about you . . ."

Leaning down to kiss his mother's cheek, Toga grinned as Kagura yanked his hair. "Get out of here, boy . . . and don't you dare tell her that your mother was the reason you kept her waiting."

Toga nodded and headed toward the door. He barely stepped back in time to avoid colliding with his father as Sesshoumaru stalked inside with his cell phone plastered against his ear. Toga inclined his head in a barely civil greeting as he reached for the door. Sesshoumaru's voice stopped him. "Toga . . . if you're going to see that girl, she is gone." he flipped his phone closed and stuck it in his pocket as he turned to stare at his son.

"What?" Toga demanded sharply.

"She is gone. That was the pilot on my plane. She's on her way home. She, at least, could see reason." That said, Sesshoumaru wheeled around to head upstairs to change. "By the way, you have a change in dinner plans. Pick up Fujiko. You're having dinner with her."

"What the hell did you do, Father?" Toga growled.

Sesshoumaru was already half-way up the staircase. He stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. "I saved you from making a terrible mistake, Toga. Now leave it alone. Fujiko is waiting for you."

"Damn you . . ." Toga said quietly as he headed for the stairs after Sesshoumaru. Eyes cold, expression blank, Toga didn't give an inch as he stared at his father. "Get it through your head. I don't want Fujiko. I don't want *any* youkai. Sierra's the one I've chosen. She is the one I want. You can take your demands and your ideas of what's best for me and shove them up your ass because I'm not doing what you want, not now, not in this!"

"Toga!" Sesshoumaru hollered after him as the younger youkai stalked up the stairs to his room.

*'This is the last time,'* Toga thought as he snatched the suitcase and threw in his things. *'The last time you fuck in my life; the last time I roll over and submit to your whims . . . No more . . .'* He paused long enough to grab his passport and cell phone before heading back downstairs again.

Kagura's voice stopped him. They had moved from the foyer to the adjacent living room. Toga's frown darkened. He'd never heard that tone from his mother before, had never heard her openly challenge his authority, not like this. "Of all the underhanded, sneaky things to have done! Sesshoumaru, he's your son!"

"Yes, my son!" Sesshoumaru hissed back. "My son, and the future tai-youkai! He must do what he must do!"

"How can you be so stubborn? How can you say that he must do something that will not make him happy? What would you have said if Aiko had brought home a human?"

"I'd have told her to be happy!"

"Then why not Toga?"

The heavy clink of a glass being thumped on a table echoed out of the living room. "Do you think I want this for him? Do you believe I wish to see him unhappy? If he takes a human to mate, Kagura . . . you know as well as I that he will be challenged, and he may be killed."

Kagura heaved a heavy sigh. Toga didn't have to see them to know that she had her arms crossed over her chest with the obstinate scowl on her pretty face that he knew well enough, having seen it a thousand times over the years. "You don't trust that Toga is strong enough to handle that, too? I thought you said that he is your son!"

"And so he is! He's also been sheltered. You cannot name one time he's had to fight, formal instruction aside."

Kagura sighed. "You will cost us our son, Sesshoumaru, and if you do, may kami protect you because there won't be a place on this earth where you will be able to hide from me."

He'd heard enough. Sickened at the thought of what he'd caused, disgusted and angry at his father yet unable to thank his mother for her obvious support, he shook his head slowly, the light of finality punctuating his every movement. Toga stomped down the stairs, purposefully making more noise than was necessary. He didn't acknowledge either of his parents as he jerked the door open and stepped out into the falling night.

Throwing his suitcase into the car before getting in and starting the engine, he didn't look back at the mansion until he was making his way down the driveway. Glancing into his rearview mirror, Toga nearly stopped.

Kagura stood in the open doorway, arms crossed over her chest as she watched him go. Something in her stance struck him. Such a sad air in her youki, like she truly believed it was the last time she'd ever see him. He winced as a thousand images—a million memories—assailed him. How many times had she smiled at him or ruffled his hair? In his mother's own way, she had shown him what love really was, hadn't she? Somehow the feeling that he was losing her . . . It just didn't seem fair. *'I'm sorry, Mother . . . So sorry . . .'*

As though she could sense his gaze on her, she raised a thin hand and waved. Gritting his teeth so hard that his jaw twitched, Toga tightened his grip on the steering wheel and kept the car moving.

She was still in the doorway when he turned out onto the street.

Fumbling with his cell phone, Toga tried to call Sierra. Whether she was out of range or just wasn't answering, he didn't know. Clenching his jaw in abject frustration, Toga hung up and dialed the airport. At least something was working in his favor. Ten minutes later, he was booked on the next flight out, providing he could make it to the airport within the next hour.

Mumbling every curse-word that Uncle Yasha had ever taught him, Toga grimaced as he was caught behind yet another red light.

*'Baka . . . I should have told her sooner . . . I've known she was the one I wanted, and yet . . .'* Toga ground his teeth together as he waited for traffic to move again. *'There wasn't a good time, maybe . . . would there have ever been a good time for that?'*



# ~ ~ Chapter 16 ~ ~

## ~ Confusion ~

Sierra awoke slowly, groaning as her head thumped out a rhythm she wanted to ignore.

Being awake hurt.

Rolling out of bed with a heavy sigh, Sierra stumbled to the bathroom and washed her face. She even managed to brush her teeth, thinking vaguely that she was glad that she was off for the week. She didn't even want to leave her apartment. She hadn't as much as stepped a foot outside her door in the two days since she'd been home.

She wasn't sure if she was angrier at Toga for not telling her, more upset that Sesshoumaru had managed to run her off, at least before she got a chance to tell Toga what she thought of his 'secret', more betrayed that he had flat-out lied to her about Fujiko, or sadder that Toga hadn't trusted her enough to tell her, to start with.

*'Would you have believed him?'*

She winced. No, she wouldn't have. How could she? She had stopped believing in Santa Claus a long time ago. She'd stopped believing in pots of gold at the end of rainbows, in unicorns, and even in 'happily ever afters' . . . at least, she had until she met Toga. Somehow he'd made her think that the 'happily ever after' might be possible. *'I was so wrong . . .'*

Wandering out of the bathroom and heading toward the refrigerator, Sierra glanced at the answering machine in passing. The digital display told her that there were fifty messages waiting for her. How many would there have been if the machine held more than fifty? *'Toga . . . why didn't you tell me?'* For some reason, the knowledge that he had filled her answering machine hurt even more,

and she blinked back sudden tears as she hit the 'delete all' button without listening to a single message.

*'He's just like Allan,'* she thought as she grabbed a container of orange juice and broke on of her self-imposed rules by drinking straight from the carton. *'Just like him, and I . . . I hate him . . .'* Stubbornly blinking back tears, Sierra tried to ignore the other voice that whispered in the back of her mind. *'You don't hate him . . . and you know you don't . . .'*

Maybe that was the problem. After all this, she couldn't hate him, and maybe that was what hurt the most.

Slamming the orange juice down on the table as she pushed the refrigerator closed with her foot, Sierra shook her head. "Come on, Sie. You can't spend the rest of your life hiding . . ."

With a sigh, she dragged a weary hand over her face and shuffled over to the suitcase she left just inside the door.

It didn't take long to unpack. Hanging up the clothes she hadn't worn took less than five minutes. Grabbing out the stack of panties and bras to stuff them back into her drawer, Sierra frowned as a slip of paper fell out of her clothes. She put away the clothes before she stooped to retrieve the paper. Fine linen stationery greeted her, and she slowly unfolded it. Another paper fell into her lap but she didn't read it right away. Staring incredulously at the fine scrawl on the paper, she shook her head slowly.

*Crawford-san:*

*Enclosed is reimbursement for your inconvenience.*

*S. Inutaisho.*

A sense of foreboding flooded over Sierra as she slowly lifted the fallen bit of paper. Eyes rounding incredulously as she stared at the check, she let her head fall back as near-hysterical laughter spilled from her lips.

*'Five hundred thousand dollars . . . ? So is that what it's worth for him to get rid of me . . . ?'*

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Toga stared at the phone with a scowl. *'Do you really think she'll answer this time?'*

He winced. No . . . no, he really didn't.

*'Damn you, Father . . . what have you done?'*

Then again, he had to allow that he should have told Sierra, himself, but his mother was right. How was he supposed to tell her something as big as that? How to explain to her that he wasn't actually human?

Still, his father shouldn't have done what he did, either. Somehow he had to get her to listen.

She was the one, and if he hadn't known it already, he did now. There was no doubt in his mind that Sierra, with her gentle laughter, her smile that lit her entire being, was the one that he wanted to be with.

The phone rang, and for a heart-stopping moment, Toga thought maybe it was Sierra. When he saw the number on the caller ID, he sighed but answered it anyway. "Hello?"

"Toga! You left so suddenly . . . are you okay?"

He smiled wanly at the sound of his aunt's concerned voice. Of all his relatives, she was the one he'd always known could give him the best advice . . . She was the one he trusted. "Tell me how to fix this?"

"Aww . . . she won't listen?"

Toga shook his head. "No, she won't, and I . . . I don't know how to get her to want to."

"That's the key, right? Making her want to listen . . . I wish I had some answers for you. Maybe you should try to remind her why she wanted to be with you, in the beginning."

"This would be so much easier if I were human . . . even half human . . ."

"Ah, now there's one I've not heard before. You wish you were hanyou?"

Toga shrugged. "No one told Uncle Yasha he couldn't be with a human."

Kagome sighed. "Sweetie, your Uncle Yasha had a whole host of other problems. Life isn't easy, but if you're meant to be with Sierra, then you'll find a way to make her listen to you. You're no different now than you were before she knew of your lineage."

"I wish I believed you."

"You don't have to believe me. Just give it time."

"Thanks."

"I've got to go. It's almost time for InuYasha to get home, and I've not started dinner yet . . . but if you need me for anything, just call, okay?"

"All right."

"I love you, Toga."

He smiled slightly. "You, too."

Dropping the phone onto the charger with a heavy breath, Toga tried to will it to ring again. It didn't work.

*'Keh. Pathetic . . . look what you've been reduced to . . .'* With an inward wince, Toga wandered off to take a shower.

Torturing himself with the hottest shower he could stand, Toga stood under the tap until the heat faded and the tepid stream turned cold. Steam still lingered in the bathroom as he draped a towel around his hips and tucked the ends together.

Using another towel to squeeze as much moisture out of his hair as he could, Toga wiped the mirror off with his free hand. It clouded back over within moments. Personally, he preferred Uncle Yasha's habit of shaking off the excess water. Kagura, however, wasn't fond of that, so Toga had gotten used to using a towel instead.

A dull thud made Toga stop and listen. Opening the bathroom door only to be hit by the sudden blast of cooler air, he winced but was galvanized into action when another knock sounded on the door.

Wrinkling his nose to get rid of the scent of the soap, Toga realized too late that he couldn't smell much of anything. With a snort, he swung open the door and stepped back in surprise. "S-Sierra?"

Her eyes were absolutely blazing with angry fire. She waved a bit of paper in front of his face so fast that he couldn't discern it. She evidently thought he should know what it was. Her voice trembled with rage when she spoke. "You . . . you . . . *jerk!* I thought you were different! I thought . . . Take this!" she bellowed, shoving the paper into Toga's hand. "Take it, and tell your father to shove it up his . . . *nose!*"

Toga didn't even look at the slip of paper she gave him. She whirled around on her heel to leave. Toga grabbed her wrist. "Sierra, please . . . just listen . . . don't go."

She stopped but didn't look back at him. Shoulders slumping as her head bent forward, she shook her head slowly. "Why, Toga? Why didn't you tell me you were engaged?"

"Come again?"

She bit out an incredulous laugh followed by a snuffle as she lifted her free hand to wipe her cheeks. Toga winced. "Your father said that you're engaged . . . to that woman . . . or *whatever* she is . . ." Turning her head to glance over her shoulder at him, Sierra's eyes were brimming with tears that hadn't fallen. "What *are* you?"

Toga nearly whined. He closed his eyes for a moment and shook his head. "I'm not engaged. My father was trying to scare you . . . and I should have protected you from him. I'm sorry I failed." He willed himself to let go of her, and as his hand dropped away, Toga turned, leaning back against the door. "You deserve someone who can protect you . . . someone who won't hurt you."

She slowly faced him, her gaze penetrating, intense. "Can I ask you one question?"

He nodded miserably as he crumpled the paper tighter in his hand.

"Why didn't you tell me? About what you are?"

He shrugged. "I wanted to . . . Father warned me that I shouldn't tell humans. He said that they don't understand." His gaze shifted to stare at her. She was looking at the floor, arms crossed protectively over her stomach. Her hair spilled over her shoulders in gentle waves, and despite the distinct redness on her nose, Toga was certain he'd never see a more beautiful woman in his life. He swallowed hard and cleared his throat as emotion rose to choke him, as he felt her slipping away. She didn't trust him, and that tore his soul wide open. "I thought . . . if I didn't tell you . . . I thought he wouldn't be able to hurt you . . . I thought he'd leave you alone."

She shook her head slowly, drawing a deep breath, releasing it in a gust of a sigh. "Toga . . ."

"Maybe a part of me thought I could hide it . . . it's funny. I was never ashamed of being youkai until I saw the lengths my father's gone to, to try to keep me from being with a human."

She lifted her chin just a little; he could feel her gazing at him through the thick fringe of her eyelashes—eyelashes that were still damp from her tears.

Leaning in the doorway as he stared at her, unable to do a thing to help her, unable to stop the flow of raw pain that radiated off her in vicious waves, Toga shook his head. "If there were any way . . . if I thought I could do it . . . I'd give it all up for you."

That brought her face up the rest of the way. The tears she'd been struggling to hold back spilled over. He winced. "Don't cry . . . please . . ."

She tried to stop. It made her cry harder. Slowly, hesitantly, he held out his hand to her. She stared at it for a few moments then took it, letting him pull her inside the apartment before he closed the door.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled as she let him pull her into his arms. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know, just please don't cry."

"Just . . . don't keep things from me," she told him, her voice muffled by his body. "Just . . . hold me."

Toga let out his breath in a rush of relief. "All right," he agreed, unsure which he was agreeing to. In the end, he supposed he meant both. "All right."

It took several minutes before Sierra managed to stop sobbing. Toga did the only thing he could do, holding her and trying to reassure her through the gesture that he was there.

When she finally leaned away, she offered him a trembling smile with her eyes still full of tears. Gently, he wiped her cheeks with his thumbs and kissed her forehead. She gasped suddenly and jerked away from him as her cheeks reddened and her eyes skittered away. "Oh, God, I forgot . . . I didn't . . ."

Toga frowned then glanced down. "I'll . . . get dressed," he mumbled quickly as he hurried past her, down the hallway to his bedroom. His own face was hot with color. He'd forgotten that he was only wearing the towel, himself . . .

*'Baka! Bet that looked good . . .'* he thought with a mental snort. *'Baka, baka, baka!'*

As he reached for some pants, he frowned at the paper in his hand. He'd forgotten he had it. Carefully smoothing it, his eyes narrowed as he stared at the writing he knew too well. A low growl welled up in him, escalating in both volume and rage as he strode over and slammed the paper onto his dresser. *'Damn him . . .'*

Dragging on a pair of jeans and a cream colored long sleeved knit shirt, Toga made a face and left the three neck buttons open before heading back out to the

living room. Sierra had removed her coat but still stood, leaning against the sofa. "He tried to pay you off?" Toga asked, barely containing the rage in his voice.

She nodded slowly then shook her head. "The note I found with it in my bag said that it was for 'reimbursement'."

He clenched his jaw closed, fighting to contain the encompassing anger that turned his stomach. Unconsciously flexing his fingers, Toga didn't realize that his disguise was losing its power of concealment, forgot that he'd always been told that the spell couldn't hold if he were to be close to losing control of his temper. Since he'd had to replace the concealment after Halloween, he alone was responsible for holding it together. Reaching for the phone, his hand moving in a blur of movement as Sierra gasped softly, Toga dialed his father's number and loosened his hold on the phone before it crumbled in his hand.

"Inutaisho Sesshoumaru's office."

"Get me my father. Now."

The secretary paused a moment. "Mr. Inutaisho is currently in a meeting . . . would you like to leave a message?"

"I don't give a fuck if he's in the middle of his own funeral. Get him now."

Another pause. "Please hold."

Unable to stave back the low growl as the tinny sounds of Muzac filled his ears, Toga drummed his claws—now very prevalent—against the table.

"I assume this could not wait, Toga?"

"No, Father, it couldn't. What the fuck did you think you were doing? It wasn't enough that you paid off Lily's father to move her out of my life, you thought you'd do the same to Sierra?"

"Is that what she told you? I assure you, I was simply—"

"Simply fucking around in my life for the last damn time, Father! I've had enough of your meddling! Find yourself another pup to serve you because This Toga is finished!"

Toga never heard the rest of whatever Sesshoumaru started to say. With a pitiful crack, the receiver broke into pieces and fell out of his hand.

Glancing up at Sierra when she gasped, Toga was horrified to see her, hands covering her mouth, absolute terror on her face. "Your eyes," she mumbled, "they're . . . red . . ."

Her words were enough to shock him out of part of his anger. Blinking suddenly, Toga glanced into the mirror above the table and closed his eyes against the sight of his own glowing red eyes. He forced himself to draw a few deep breaths. When he looked again, his eyes were normal.

Afraid to look at her, afraid to see her fear, Toga slowly peeked over his shoulder. Her fear was gone, replaced by confusion. "What happened to you?" she asked softly.

"This is how I normally look. I'm a dog-youkai—inu-youkai."

She shook her head. "No . . . I meant . . . your eyes. I didn't recognize your eyes."

"Do you trust me?"

Sierra considered that question for a moment. Finally she nodded. "I do . . . when I recognize your eyes."

Toga stalked back to his bedroom to retrieve Mokomoko-sama before he dragged on his shoes and grabbed his coat. "Come on. I've got something to show you . . . just remember. I swore I'd protect you. I won't hurt you."

Sierra nodded slowly and shrugged on her coat before following him out of the apartment.

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"So what's this thing you want to show me?" Sierra asked as she hopped out of the SUV. Since she'd spent the entire hour long trip snuggling with Toga's Mokomoko-sama, she was still holding it in her arms.

He chuckled when he saw her, still cuddling the fur against her cheek. Seeing his smile, she laughed softly. "I really, really love this blanket," she remarked casually.

"I need that 'blanket'," Toga remarked as he held his hand out for the furry piece.

Sierra frowned but handed it over. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't want you to be afraid of me. Just . . . I want you to see what I . . . what I can be."

The confusion in her eyes was evident. Toga strode away to the center of the field as he tossed Mokomoko-sama over his shoulder. The empty land was perfect, surrounded by high trees that blocked everything from view. He'd only done this once before. If he wasn't angry it was mentally exhausting to do it. In this case, though . . .

Closing his eyes, Toga concentrated on his form. Willing himself to change, he felt a cold sweat break out on his forehead. The strange, disjointed feeling surged in his veins, he could feel himself stretching, growing, mutating. His senses shifted. His throat changed. The ability to speak was replaced by a heightening sense of smell, of hearing. He discerned Sierra's sharp gasp. A rippling along his spine as Mokomoko-sama merged with him to create a thick mane, a long line of fur that coated his back and ended in a huge bushy tail.

Toga opened his eyes as the tingling died away. It had taken only seconds. It had felt like so much longer.

Spotting Sierra smashed back against the vehicle, Toga uttered a soft whine that still managed to bend a few nearby trees. Thought was more difficult in this form, more abstract, more instinctual.

*'Mate,'* mumbled the mind of the youkai. *'Toga mate . . .'*

Padding toward her, head lowered as he stared curiously at the diminutive human, the youkai nudged her with his cold, wet nose. She shrieked, pushing herself up on the SUV, using her feet to push herself back against the window in her frantic effort to get away from him.

*'Mate fear . . . smell fear . . .'*

Drawing back, he cocked his head to the side, ears quirking as he regarded the small human. One of his paws was larger than the vehicle she cowered on. He uttered a soft wuffing noise. She flinched.

The youkai sat on his haunches, raised his right paw to wave at her, beckoning her to recognize him. Nose filled with the scent of her terror, he growled low, growled at himself.

*'Calm fear . . . no fear Toga . . .'*

She gasped and scooted off the vehicle and grabbed the door handle as she tried to yank it open. The youkai reacted, unwilling to let her escape. Lowering his head to rub against her, he watched as she screamed again and threw her hands over her head in a wholly protective gesture.

Moving slowly, as though the youkai knew he would frighten her if he did not, the great black dog backed away, sank down, legs stretched out, and he laid his muzzle on his paws with a wailing sigh, a mournful sound.

*'Mate afraid . . . not fear . . . Toga . . .'*

Lifting his head, gazing sadly at her, the youkai did the only thing he knew to do, the thing Sierra might understand. Rolling over onto his back, poised with his legs drawn up, his tail tucked between them, he stared at her, willed her to understand what he couldn't say.

"Ah," Sierra breathed, recognizing the show of submission for what it was. Slowly reaching out as she pushed herself away from the vehicle, she came forward. He whined.

Her touch was halting, wary. Stroking the fur on his face, near his ears before she gained a little more courage and sank her fingers into the thicker fur of his



# ~ ~ Chapter 17 ~ ~

## ~ Christmas Wish ~

"Finger."

Toga wrinkled his nose but did as Sierra asked as he shifted the papers from one hand to the other.

She tied the bow, trapping his finger under the ribbon and giggled. "Oops. Sorry."

"Keh."

"What do you want for Christmas?" she asked as she leaned forward to reach the scissors she'd accidentally kicked out of her reach.

"I don't need anything," he remarked absently. "Just leave my fingers attached, okay?"

She shook her head and opened the scissors to curl the ribbon. He winced at the noise but didn't comment. "Everyone wants something for Christmas," she countered. "So tell me what your Christmas wish is."

"Are you going to spend some time with me on Christmas?"

She nodded as she set the scissors aside and arranged the ribbon.

"That's good enough."

Fingers stilling, Sierra slowly looked up at him. "Really?"

He dropped the contract he had been going over and smiled, turning to lean against the sofa with his elbow on the cushions. "Really. Is that hard to believe?"

"Sometimes I think you're too good to be true."

"Far from perfect," he remarked with a wince. "What do you want for Christmas?"

"I don't need anything." She gathered bits of paper and ribbon and stuffed them into an empty shopping bag. "Mom asked me if I was going to bring anyone to Christmas dinner . . ." she trailed off, a shy smile twitching the corners of her lips. "I don't suppose . . . you'd like to go with me?" Wrinkling her nose, she grinned. "That is, if you're not busy."

Toga chuckled. "All right."

She smiled as she got up to throw out the small bit of trash. She stopped in the doorway and glanced back at him. "And no peeking in that bag."

Toga blinked in surprise as he eyed the bag he was supposed to stay out of. Leaning forward just a little, he sniffed cautiously but smelled nothing other than the plastic bags and the dusty scent of the wrapping paper. With a dejected sigh, he sat back, wondering if there was another way to get around 'peeking' . . .

Sierra breezed back from the kitchen with two bottles of water. Laughing when she spotted the almost pouting expression on his face, she handed him the water and retrieved the bag. "I know that look," she remarked over her shoulder as she headed down the hallway to stash the mystery bag somewhere. "You can wait 'till Christmas."

"If you got something for me, then why did you ask what I want?" he grumbled. "I could find that bag, if I wanted . . . I didn't learn tracking for nothing . . ."

Sierra shuffled back into the living room. "Well, the thing I got you is really small. I thought I'd get something else, too. So tell me what you want."

He shook his head. "I told you, I don't need anything."

She made a face. "You are so full of it. I saw how excited you were when I told you to keep out of that bag. Admit it, Toga. You want to know what's in that bag."

He snorted. "Keh."

She knelt beside him and tugged off his glasses. "Better. Those things hide your eyes." Her smile faded as she stared at him. Eyebrows drawing together thoughtfully as she stared at him, Sierra slowly reached out to touch his cheek. "Toga?"

"Hmm?"

She cleared her throat and opened her mouth to speak before closing it again, as though whatever it was she wanted to say was difficult for her. With a slight shake of her head as her cheeks pinked in nervousness—or was it embarrassment—he had trouble discerning the difference between the two, she finally managed to speak. "Can I . . . would you . . . show me your real face again?"

Surprised by her request, Toga stared at her.

Sierra took his momentary lapse as hesitation and made a face. "Forget it . . . I just . . . it's not important."

"No . . . I was just surprised," he told her. Closing his eyes, Toga released the concealment spell. He knew it worked when Sierra sucked in a sharp breath.

"Why are your markings blue?" she asked as she idly traced the lines on his cheek.

"I don't know . . . they're the same color as my grandfather's, or so I've been told."

She frowned as she considered that. "Your father . . . he has a mark on his forehead, doesn't he?"

"Yes. The crescent moon denotes him as a poison-bearing youkai."

She nodded slowly. "That makes sense . . . but you're not?"

"No," he agreed. "Aiko is, though. She bears the crescent moon seal." He suddenly chuckled and shook his head. "She scratched me once, when we were pups. It took forever for that to heal. She was mad. I took her doll and threw it

up in a magnolia tree in the back yard . . . Uncle Yasha said that's what I deserved for taking something from a girl."

"Ahh, you were a bully."

"Keh! Aiko and I were typical, I guess. We fought often enough. One time, she and I got into a yelling match—we were very young, and it was shortly after Uncle Yasha followed Aunt Kagome through the well—and I used one of Uncle Yasha's more colorful words . . ."

"What word?" Sierra asked reluctantly.

Toga laughed. "Bastard . . . he told me that it was his way of telling my father how much he cared about him."

"Oh, my . . ." Sierra giggled.

Toga shook his head. "Mother wasn't impressed."

Sierra frowned suddenly. "Followed her through the well?"

Toga sighed. "It's a long story. I'll tell you if you want to hear it, but . . . it's a really long story."

She settled down and wrapped her arms around her legs, resting her cheek on her knees. "We've got time, don't we?"

He nodded, raising his eyebrows as he drew a deep breath. "All right . . . don't say I didn't warn you . . ."

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Sierra sat up and rolled her head back and forth to alleviate the stiffness in her neck. "You were right. That was a long story."

Toga shrugged. "I warned you."

She grinned and flopped back on the floor. "Are you sure that's a true story?"

"Cross my heart. After everything else you've learned about me, do you really doubt this story is true?"

"Good point," she conceded with a sigh but still looked dubious. "But that would mean your father is . . . over six-hundred years old?"

"Actually, he's older than that . . . We stopped counting."

Her smile faded, and she turned her face away. "I'm sorry, about you and him . . . I feel like it's my fault that you're not talking to him right now . . ."

Toga shook his head. "Don't feel that way. He chose it. He had no right to do what he did to you."

"But he's still your father."

"He's my father," Toga agreed. "I respect him. I don't like what he did, and I won't let him do it to you, ever again."

She turned her head, green eyes cloudy with a strange undercurrent of emotion. Staring at him through her half-closed eyes, she smiled. "You said you'd protect me."

He nodded.

She laughed softly. "Like your uncle promised your aunt?" she teased.

He nodded again as he stretched out next to her on his side, propping his head on his hand as he stared down at her.

"I get the feeling it's a big promise, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but . . . I didn't want to scare you."

Her smile dissipated, replaced by a serious look in her eyes. "I'm not scared anymore, not of you."

"Sierra—"

She leaned up on her elbows and pressed her lips against his to silence him. Drowning in the fragrance of apple blossoms, lost in the warmth of her, Toga reached around her neck, supporting her head with his free hand. She sighed softly, her breath misting his lips, sending pulses of electrifying need shooting through his body.

She leaned to the side to free up one of her arms. Sinking her fingers into his hair, she kissed him slowly, tenderly, teasing him with the softest brush of her lips on his. He dragged his fangs over her mouth, a low growl issuing from him. The feel of her silky flesh against his fangs was too much, too nice, too perfect . . .

Trembling against him, Sierra let him support her, let him coddle her, let him hold her tight. The sensation, the pure rush of adrenaline shot through him. A complete tenderness, the rise and fall, a heady emotion, an unerring sense that the sun, the moon, the stars all met in her, Toga was humbled and empowered, damned and sanctified in a singular moment, in a beautiful purity of absolute completion.

Her body whispered to his, the shifting of scent, the draw of emotion, the overwhelming desire to lay claim to her was tempered by another need, another wish. To cherish her, to protect her, to love her . . . Breaking the kiss was a hard thing to do. A soft whimper wrenched from her as he pulled back, Sierra's gaze was unsteady, her breathing ragged and rushed. She closed her eyes for a moment, managed a weak smile that was no less stunning to him, no less amazing.

"I, uh . . . I think I got carried away," he admitted, his voice still husky.

She laughed unsteadily as she reached up to hold tangle her fingers into his. "I think I did, too."

"Sierra . . ."

"Don't apologize, Toga."

He kissed her fingers, nipped at the tips with his teeth. He heard her catch her breath; he felt the shiver run down her arm. "You are amazing."

She smiled despite the light flush that dusted her cheeks. "You are insane."

"I'd better go." He kissed her fingers again and let go then gathered up his things and shoved his glasses back onto his face as he re-secured the disguise once more.

Sierra stood up, a confused frown on her face. "It's only eight . . ."

Toga sighed and grimaced as he turned back and saw the hint of hurt in her expression. "Sierra . . . it's not you. I . . ." Trailing off as he struggled to find a way to explain to her, Toga tilted up her chin, stared into her eyes. "I've never felt this way before, but you . . . you're precious to me. I won't do anything that might hurt you."

She didn't look like she agreed. Finally she nodded. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

He smiled. "Do you want to see me tomorrow?"

Her eyes lit up when she smiled, too. "Yeah . . . I think I do."

He hugged her quickly then kissed her forehead. "Good night, Sierra."

"Good night, Toga."

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"Inutaisho? Toga? Hello?"

A sharp cough beside him shook Toga out of his musings. Toga blinked quickly and cleared his throat. "I'm sorry. You were saying?"

Mike Sampson shook his head slowly but grinned. "There'd better be a damn good reason for your preoccupation, Toga. Do I know her?"

Toga felt his face warm as the other people in the room sniggered. "It won't happen again," he said, ignoring his boss's warped sense of humor.

"The second oldest lie in the book, Toga," Mike said with a chuckle. "Care to update us on the Whitestaff-Hamlin merger?"

Toga took a few moments to look through his files for the contract that he didn't need, Toga straightened his glasses before answering. "The finalization should be confirmed Wednesday, and the press announcement is ready to be released to coincide."

"Good . . . excellent! So all your cases will be wrapped up by Christmas? Would you mind helping Kari with a couple of hers?"

Toga glanced over at the young woman. Fresh out of college, she'd been brought in just after Toga. She offered him a small, tight smile that somehow matched the severe knot she wore at the nape of her neck. "Not a problem," he answered.

"I knew I could count on you!" Mike declared happily. "Okay! That's it!"

The others stood to leave. Toga sighed as he started gathering his files together. He was more anxious than normal to see Sierra. Stuffing the folders into his attaché case, he was caught off guard by the manicured female hand that reached out to help. He glanced up in time to catch another strained smile.

"I don't really need your help, you know," Kari remarked as she stepped back.

Toga snapped the levers on his case and jammed his hands into his pockets. "I didn't say you did."

"You agreed to help me."

"Mike asked me to."

She narrowed her gaze on him. "Of course he did. So do you want to get some dinner?"

"What did I just miss?" he asked slowly.

"What do you mean?"

Toga grabbed his briefcase and glanced at his watch. "Well, you just got done telling me that you don't need my help . . . now you're asking if I want to get dinner?"

She shrugged. "It's not like we're given a choice, and I'm hungry."



# ~ ~ Chapter 18 ~ ~

## ~ Mistletoe ~

"Is something wrong?"

Sierra forced a smile and shook her head. "No . . . nothing . . . why?"

"You've been quiet the entire time."

She flipped on the radio. "I missed you this week."

"Mike thought that I could use some extra work helping with someone else's caseload."

"I know. Who are you working with?"

Toga shrugged. "A girl named Kari. She's got ten mergers in January."

"A girl?"

Toga turned his head, glancing at Sierra for a moment before looking back at the road. "Does this bother you?"

"No! Of course not!" Sierra scoffed as she concentrated on the passing countryside. ". . . Should it?"

Toga chuckled. "Absolutely not . . . most of the time I'm fairly certain she'd just as soon smash me like a cockroach than talk to me."

Sierra digested that for a moment as she fiddled with the radio station. "Okay . . . what about the other part of the time?"

"Hmm?"

Sierra snorted. "You said 'most' of the time . . . so how does she act the rest of the time?"

Toga frowned. She could feel his gaze on her even though he didn't appear to take his attention off the road. "Are you jealous?"

"Should I be?"

"No."

"Then no . . ." she assured him. Sierra tore a toll booth receipt into tiny bits of confetti. "Is she . . . pretty?"

"She's not . . . *ugly* . . ."

He could feel Sierra's gaze narrow on him, and she uttered a terse 'hrumph' before speaking. "I see."

"What'd I say?" he asked, reacting to the clipped tone of her voice.

"Nothing."

"That wasn't a fair question," he pointed out.

She heaved a sigh. "The fact that you noticed whether or not she was pretty implies that you were looking."

Toga's mouth dropped open. He snapped it closed and refused to say anything else that she could possibly turn on him.

"How long do you have to work with her?"

It was apparent to her that he was thinking that over, probably trying to figure out if she could use his answer against him. "Through January . . ."

"And dinner dates with her?"

"They're not dates," he protested. "Sierra . . . didn't you say you trust me?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is?"

Sierra waved her hand in dismissal. "Forget it."

He didn't press it, but he did sigh.

The rest of the drive was silent. Sierra bit her lip. *'Good, Sie. Guys run when girls get jealous . . .'*

After parking in her mother's driveway, Toga got out and ran around to open Sierra's door for her before offering his hand to help her down. She stared at his hand. The gesture somehow fit him perfectly, as though he had been brought up in another place, in a time that seemed somehow removed from the world she knew.

Sierra pointedly ignored his hand and climbed out of the vehicle on her own.

"You're still upset with me."

She opened the back door to retrieve the bag of presents. Toga took the bag from her. "Nope, not in the least."

He blinked at her clipped tone. "That's a lie."

She shrugged. "Not at all. Can we not talk about this?"

He sighed. "All right," he relented though he still hadn't quite figured out just why she was irritated with him. Staring off over the snow-topped landscape, Toga frowned. "Can you tell me how long you plan on being mad at me?"

Sierra picked a piece of lint off the front of her sweater and shot him a quelling glance. "I'm not," she lied.

He didn't respond to that. He didn't have to. The expression on his face stated that he knew she was lying.

She stepped past him and headed for the house, leaving a rather confused youkai staring after her. Women, he was fast learning, were damn near impossible to

understand, and Sierra? He wrinkled his nose, using his shoulder to push the vehicle's door closed. He had a feeling that he'd never, ever figure her out.

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Toga had to wonder if anyone else could sense the tension that surrounded Sierra like a blanket. He'd known that she would probably mention his extended absence this week. He'd wondered if she would be upset about it. He hadn't really expected that she would be as irritated as she was.

Dinner had been a stilted affair, as far as he was concerned. The talk around the table had been pleasant and happy, and he contributed to it when he was asked a question, as did Sierra. Other than, *'please pass the gravy,'* she'd not said a single word to him.

If anyone else noticed it, though, they didn't comment. Maybe it was his youkai senses that made it so glaringly obvious. Even now, though, as Toga lounged unobtrusively in the doorway as everyone else gathered around the Christmas tree to open presents, he wondered if Sierra would notice if he slipped outside for awhile. He had a present for her stashed in his jacket pocket. He just wasn't sure if she would want it . . .

Sierra laughed as she opened a present from her mother—a fat, squirming little golden retriever pup. Toga frowned. The box had holes, and he was sure that her mother had been careful not to leave the pup in the box long. Still, the idea bothered him . . .

The pup lifted her nose and sniffed the air then squirmed out of Sierra's grasp. Making a beeline straight for Toga, the pup barked happily. Toga barely had time to react as the pup lunged for him. He caught her and blushed as Sierra's brothers started in with commentary about how strange it was that the pup seemed drawn to him.

Toga lifted her to stare into her eyes. The pup whined. Toga growled low as he stared at her. *'What's your name, pup?'*

The pup whined again. *'N-n-no n-name, Lor-rd Dog.'*

*'Let the girl name you?'*

*'Y-yes.'*

Toga nodded and set the pup back on the floor. She scooted around his feet, whining and yipping at him.

"Look, Sierra . . . Toga's taken your dog," Mike pointed out.

Sierra caught Toga's embarrassed grin. She smiled. "He has a way with dogs."

"Oh, hey, Sierra . . . look where Toga's standing," Carol, Kevin's wife, said, pointing above Toga's head.

He glanced up and stared at the tiny sprig of green leaves and white berries suspended by a red ribbon over his head.

"I'd kiss him for you, but I don't think certain people would like it," Christine joked as she winked at Bill.

Toga didn't have to look to know that Sierra was blushing.

"You've got to kiss him," Mrs. Crawford pointed out. "He's just been standing there since dinner."

"Nah . . . if he wants one that bad then he should've pointed it out himself," Brent remarked with a frown.

"Will you guys stop it?" Sierra groaned. "He's from Japan, remember? He doesn't know what mistletoe means."

Toga stepped back so that he wasn't directly under the dangling branch. "Better?"

Mike snorted. "So you *don't* want to kiss our sister?"

Why did he have a feeling that this was another of those catch-22 type questions? Toga tried to figure out a good way out of answering but came up blank.

Sierra threw a wad of wrapping paper at her brother and stood up to stalk over to Toga. He didn't get a chance to say anything as she leaned up on her toes and pressed her lips against his. Meant to be a quick kiss, Toga couldn't help it as he caught her and held onto her. Her body was stiff in his arms for a moment before she relaxed against him and returned the kiss.

She sighed softly. He did, too, but for other reasons entirely. Mindful that this was neither the time nor place for the kissing he'd like to do, Toga ended the kiss far sooner than he'd have liked. Sierra hugged him. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be," he whispered back.

"Good God, someone needs to separate those two," Mike groused loudly.

Sierra hid her face against Toga's shoulder but laughed.

The yipping pup caught his attention, and Toga made a face. "I'll take your pup out while you open your gifts," he told her. Sierra nodded.

Toga didn't bother with his coat as he scooped up the pup and headed for the front door.

The pup barked and whined as she stared at the snow. She turned back to stare sadly at Toga. He shrugged. "Nope . . . snow won't hurt you."

He set her down despite her protesting whines. She stood still for a few moments, shivering and groaning and casting Toga sad little looks.

"Come on . . . you said you had to go," he told her.

She yipped then whined again. '*Paper-r-r,*' she whimpered.

Toga shook his head. "No paper, pup. If you want to go back inside, then you'd better go."

"Talking to the dog?"

Toga stiffened and turned to eye Brent. He hadn't heard him slip outside. "Sure," Toga said cautiously. "They're not stupid."

Brent didn't look impressed. Standing with his arms crossed over his chest, Brent's glower was menacing as he could make it. Toga wasn't impressed. "What'd you do to make my sister so unhappy earlier?"

"I had to work extra hours this week . . . not that it really concerns you."

Slowly, Brent moved forward to stand directly in front of Toga, obviously trying to intimidate him. "I warned you, didn't I? Don't hurt my sister."

"Because I have two sisters of my own, I won't take exception to your belief that I'm trying to hurt Sierra," Toga remarked softly. "even though I'm not trying to. I won't let anyone do that, you understand . . . and I believe you'd better step back."

"Or what?"

"Stop it! Brent! Toga!"

Toga didn't back away as Sierra ran out the door and down the porch steps to push her way between the two. "It's fine, Sierra. Your brother was concerned."

"Brent . . . you don't need to protect me from Toga, okay? Knock it off."

Brent didn't look happy about having his sister call him on his threats. "I mean it. If you hurt her, I'll hurt you."

Toga didn't reply as Brent finally turned and stomped back toward the house. Sierra didn't take her eyes off him until he had closed the door behind himself. "You wouldn't fight him, would you?"

Toga sighed. "Not if I could help it," he answered.

She wasn't comforted by his answer. "What does that mean?"

Toga shrugged. "Do you expect me to back down from him?"

"What I expect is that it never comes to that." She sighed and turned to face him, her arms folded over her chest as though she were cold. "You could kill him, and he doesn't know that."

Toga shook his head, caught her under the chin to make her look at him. "Is that what you think? Do you really believe I'd kill a human?"

"No, I don't . . . Has your father?"

"That was a long time ago . . . before he took in Rin."

She nodded. Her eyes were clouded with doubt, and he couldn't blame her for that. From what she had told him about her meeting with Sesshoumaru, Toga was certain that his father had tried to scare the hell out of her, and he'd succeeded. "Sierra . . . I'm not like him."

She smiled. "I know. Do you want to go home? I'd just like to be alone . . . with you."

Toga smiled, too. "Sounds nice."

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"She said you can name her," Toga remarked as he watched the pup happily scampering around the floor chasing a red rubber ball.

Sierra grinned, lifting her head where she had been resting against Toga's chest. "Did she? Can you talk to her?"

He shrugged. "Sort of . . . more like I hear what she's thinking."

"That's . . . weird."

"Is it?"

"Isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Maybe. I'm used to it. Uncle Yasha has had dogs, too. The first one—Dammit—adopted him, I guess you could say."

"Dammit?" Sierra echoed. "He named the dog—?"

"No. Most dogs already have names. That was what she told him her name was."

She shook her head slowly and let her temple fall against his shoulder again. "I said it before, Toga . . . your family is quite . . . eclectic."

Toga grimaced. "That was nice of you to say."

She giggled. "Your father seems a little less intimidating when he's halfway around the world."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know he was going to do that . . ."

"It's all right. I'm sorry my brother was being mean to you."

Toga chuckled. "I think I'll live."

She wiggled around to scoot up and kiss his chin. "Do you want your present?"

"More of that?" he asked hopefully.

She giggled again. "You're so cheap . . ."

"Don't knock it."

She sat up, bracing her hands against his chest, and untangled herself from him before retrieving the last two packages under the tree. Handing him the presents, she sat back down between his legs and waited.

He sniffed at them. She laughed. He tore away the festive wrap and opened the velvet jeweler's box to stare at the small gold bar tie tack. "Thank you." He made a face. "Trying to remind me of work?"

She snorted. "Not hardly . . . I might have to come by and see you one of these days . . ."

"Trying to catch a glimpse of Kari, you mean?"

She didn't deny it. "Open your other present."

He did and laughed when he pulled the stuffed black dog out of the box. "Is this what you think I look like?"

She shrugged. "No . . . maybe a little . . ."

He let her take the stuffed animal and smiled as she wrapped her arms around it before settling back against his chest again. "I think you bought that for yourself," he accused.

She didn't deny it.

"Do you want your present?" he asked, burying his nose in her hair and breathing in the scent of her.

She leaned away to stare at him. "Yes!"

Toga pulled the small box out of the sofa cushions where he'd hidden it earlier. She stared at the box through narrowed eyes, as though she wasn't sure what to expect and was reluctant to find out. "Open it."

She did, hesitantly. She tore the paper off and stared at the wine colored velvet jeweler's box for a moment. "Toga . . ."

"You can't say you don't like it if you don't look at it first," he pointed out.

She flipped the lid back and shook her head slowly as she gazed at the strand of pearls in the deep red silk. "It's beautiful."

He took the box and pulled out the necklace. Working the clasp and carefully draping it over her neck to fasten it, Toga smiled. "It's not beautiful. It's just a necklace. *You're* beautiful."

She stared at him, her eyes oddly bright. Blinking quickly, as though to stave back tears, she leaned toward him, raining light kisses down all over his face.

He reached out, stroked her cheek, and she sniffled, lips trembling under the weight of her precarious smile. She was delicate and unreachable and completely earthy and beautiful at the same time. "Merry Christmas, Toga."



~ ~ *Chapter 19* ~ ~  
~ *Sierra's Birthday* ~

Toga glanced at his watch without trying to seem obvious about checking the time.

"Something wrong?"

Wincing since he was caught, Toga shook his head and shrugged. "I've got plans. I was hoping we could wrap this up."

Kari's smile was tepid. "Sure," she agreed. "Your girlfriend, right?"

"It's her birthday."

"You'd better not be late for that," Kari mused as she tapped a stack of papers against the table to straighten them before stuffing them back into the file. "Anyway, I think I can handle the rest of this alone."

"Are you sure?" Toga asked, more out of perfunctory courtesy than because he really wanted to help.

Kari made a face. "I'm sure. I never asked for your help, to start with, remember?"

Toga pushed his glasses up as he stood. "Ouch. See what happens when I try to be a gentleman?"

"Get lost, Inutaisho. Pretty boys like you are always more concerned with your next big date when you should be focusing on your job."

Toga grabbed his jacket off the back of the chair and shrugged. "I focus on my job enough. I've blown off more than enough dates to take care of 'business'. Now, if you don't mind, I've got a promise to keep."

He hurried out of the conference room they'd been using to go over Kari's contracts before she could take another stab at his ego. Brushing off her acidic words was a little more difficult.

He wasn't sure why the woman was always so cold and acerbic. She never offered any personal information, and he never bothered to ask. As it was, he was anxious for her mergers to go through so he could stop playing babysitter for her. Her mordant personality was a little more than he could tolerate. Had it not been for his mother's constant insistence that he always show the utmost respect to women, he'd have put her in her place long before.

Noticing the group of people gathered around the elevator, Toga sighed. *'Stairs,'* he thought as he veered toward the doorway that opened into the stairwell. *'Damn . . . I'm going to be late . . .'*

Tearing down the stairs as quickly as he could go, Toga reached the bottom in record time. By the time he reached his SUV, he'd made up for about ten minutes. *'There's something to be said for youkai speed.'*

It took more time to get into his vehicle and maneuver out of the garage, another ten minutes to actually make it onto the road. Traffic seemed to be backed up, and he sighed.

His cell phone trilled. Toga fumbled with the earpiece, checked to make sure the volume control was on the lowest setting, and answered. "Hello?"

"Toga? Thank God."

He frowned at the obvious worry and blatant relief in Sierra's voice. "Sierra? What's wrong?"

She sighed. "It's all over the news. There's been a pretty big accident near your work. I was afraid you were in it."

"No . . . but I think I'm behind it. I'm sorry."

She laughed. "Don't be. As long as you're fine, I can wait."

He frowned. "But the reservations I made can't be held, and it doesn't look like I'll be moving anytime soon."

"That's fine . . . I've got stuff here. I could make a nice dinner for us. You don't have to take me anywhere."

For some reason, that she was being so accommodating only made him feel more like a heel. "All right," he agreed. "If I don't make it in time, I'll take you out another night."

"Okay." He smiled when he heard the pup whimpering in the background. "Oh, I've got to go. The puppy wants out," Sierra apologized.

"I'll see you soon, then," he told her. "And you'd better name that pup before she starts thinking she doesn't have a name at all."

"All right! You can help me with that."

Toga chuckled and clicked off the phone.

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"A book?"

"Oh, you think I'm cheap now?"

"Another necklace?"

"Nope."

"A third world country?"

Toga laughed and tugged on Sierra's hand. "Come on."

"I still think dessert was enough," she informed him as he led her toward the sofa to sit down. "You're not being very fair."

"I'm not giving you your present until after we name that pup."

She heaved a sigh designed to let him know what she thought of his secrets. "But you didn't like the first one I came up with!" she protested.

Toga shook his head. "I didn't mind it. She didn't like it."

Sierra rolled her eyes. "What's wrong with Honey?"

Toga wrinkled his nose. "Too cutesy." When Sierra's gaze narrowed, Toga pointed at the pup, who was laying on the floor with her nose in her paws.

"Okay . . . Daisy?"

Toga stared at the pup. She raised her head and then lowered it again. "Nope."

"Duchess?"

"Uh uh."

"Princess?"

"Nuhh."

"Sugarbear?"

Toga did a double take. "She's not a *bear*."

Sierra heaved another sigh. "I have no idea, then. You can talk to her, right? Ask her."

Toga shook his head slowly but turned to stare at the pup, uttering a low growl that didn't sound menacing but did sound like a demand. The puppy stared back at him, whining softly. Toga returned his growl before the puppy whimpered then wagged her tail happily.

"Well?"

Toga shot her a sheepish grin. "Well . . . she said she wanted a name that meant something to my family, so I suggested one that means something to Uncle Yasha and Aunt Gome."

"And what name is that?"

Toga shrugged. "Kirara."

"Kirara . . . the cat youkai? But—"

Toga winced. "It was that or koishii, and I just didn't think that would be right."

"What's that? Koishii?"

Toga let out his breath as his cheeks reddened slightly. "It means 'beloved' or 'cherished'."

Sierra stared at him for a few seconds before bursting out in laughter. "Kirara it is," she giggled. "Does my puppy have a crush on you?"

Toga's blush darkened. "I think it's time for your present," he announced.

A knock on the door interrupted them. Sierra hopped up and ran over to answer it. Toga dug the small present out of his jacket pocket and set it on the coffee table while he waited for Sierra to come back.

Staring at the manila envelope in her hands with a marked frown, she sat back down on the sofa.

"What's that?"

She shook her head as she turned it over, staring at the return address on the courier service label. "I have no idea. It just says, 'RK'." A sudden darkness clouded her features, and she pushed the envelope at Toga. "You open it."

Toga hesitantly took it. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "I have this weird feeling . . . I don't think I want to know what that is."

Toga opened the envelope slowly and drew out the papers inside. Casting her a quick glance, he read the letter first.

*"My darling daughter,*

*I asked your father to locate you to see if you would come. I would love to meet you. I wish to see what sort of person you've grown to be. There are some things that I must tell you, and I hope this makes it to you on time. Consider it a birthday present, and know that you've always been in my heart. My husband tells me that your name is Sierra. That's a lovely name. I wanted to name you Coral, according to family lore. There are so many things I want to tell you. I hope you use this, and I pray you come to me soon.*

*"All my love forever,*

*Your Mother."*

Toga finished reading and set the letter aside before handing Sierra the plane ticket.

Holding the ticket very carefully in her hands, she looked like she thought it was going to bite her. Her face was pale, her eyes wide and staring. Her upset came at her in overwhelming waves, and she dropped the slip of paper as she raised her questioning gaze to meet his. "What do I do?"

Toga shook his head. As much as he'd love to help her, he really couldn't make this sort of decision for her. He did the only thing he could think of as he pulled her close and held her. "I don't know, Sierra. That's up to you. What do you want to do?"

She let her forehead fall against his shoulder and snuggled closer to him. "I don't know," she whispered. "I just . . . don't know."

"You know . . . you're not supposed to be so sad on your birthday," he informed her, trying to cajole her out of her upset.

His gentle teasing seemed to have the opposite effect as she choked back a quiet sob.

"Sierra . . . don't . . ." he begged, trying to soothe her as she dissolved in tears.

She shook her head, her hand balling into a tight fist. "I'm sorry," she stuttered between sobbing breaths. "I feel so st-stupid!"

Squeezing his eyes closed, Toga sighed and tightened his arms around her. "You're anything but stupid . . ." *'Damn them! How dare they do this to her on her birthday! What kind of parents would do that?'* He opened his eyes as an angry veil dropped over his golden gaze. *'The same kind that would abandon their child, I suppose . . . Bastards . . .'*

She leaned away, swiping furiously at her tears. "I don't know what I want . . . I mean I do . . . I don't want to see them, not now, not ever."

Toga waited for her to finish, sensing the unspoken 'but' in her words.

Tucking her legs under her as she glared at her hands and sniffled, Sierra took the kerchief Toga pulled from his jacket and folded it neatly. Folding it then snapping it open only to refold it all over again and again, Sierra seemed to be gathering her thoughts before she dared to put them into words. "I think . . . I think I have to see them. I think I deserve to have some answers."

"Answers to what?"

She shrugged. "Why they gave me up . . . why they want to mess around in my life. . . Why they think they have the right to do that now that it's convenient for them to do it."

He didn't know what to say about that. In the end, he didn't say anything as he gently placed his hand over hers.

"Will you . . . will you come with me?"

Toga managed a small grin. "You know I will."

Some of the tenseness in her seemed to drain away with his reassurance as she stared at him, her expression cautious yet hopeful, mingled emotions that rose from her heart. "You'll protect me."

He nodded as she leaned toward him once more, content to relax against him, satisfied to accept whatever support he was willing to give her. "I'll protect you, Sierra, forever."

"Forever," she repeated, tangling his hair around her fingers. "Toga . . . what does that mean to you?"

He tipped her chin up with his fingers, made her look him in the eye. "It means that I won't let anything hurt you, if I can help it, ever."

She frowned and opened her mouth to question him further. He pressed a fingertip against her lips and smiled. "Let's worry about you and this meeting first, all right? After that . . . I'll tell you what forever really means to me."

"All right," she agreed. "Do you think . . . ?"

"Hmm?"

She sighed. "Never mind. It was . . ."

"Remember when you said I shouldn't keep secrets from you?"

She nodded.

"Then it goes both ways. Now tell me."

Her cheeks pinked as she avoided looking at him. "I just . . . I wondered . . . will you stay? Tonight? I . . . I don't want to be alone."

Toga smiled. "I won't leave you alone. All you had to do was ask."

She smiled shyly at first then a little brighter. "Thank you." Suddenly, she giggled softly. "Now . . . about that present . . . ?"

He chuckled and grabbed the small package off the table. "This, you mean?"

She reached for it as he pulled it out of her reach. "Toga!"

His laughter escalated as he gave in and let her have the gold-foil wrapped box.

Ripping off the paper, Sierra opened the small box to stare at the pillbox-sized porcelain and gold music box. She dropped the white cardboard on the floor as she gazed at the intricately carved and painted piece. Toga stuck his finger



# ~ ~ Chapter 20 ~ ~

## ~ Office Politics ~

"Do you have my case file on the Ramsden merger?"

Toga glanced up from the contract he'd been reading through. "No . . . was I supposed to?"

Kari sighed, holding one arm over her stomach as she rubbed her temple with her free hand. "Are you sure you didn't take it? Some sort of initiation hazing or something?"

Toga frowned. "And why would I do that? You've worked here long enough that it shouldn't even be an issue."

"I can't find the contract," Kari admitted with a grimace, as though she expected Toga to laugh at her.

Toga dropped the paperwork and his pen on the stack of papers scattered over his desktop and sat back. "I'd love to help you," he said as he shook his head slowly, "but honestly, I have no idea where it is. Can't you call legal and have them get you another copy?"

Kari sank down in the high back wooden chair across from him and glowered at him. "The signing is tomorrow, so no, I can't just get another copy!"

Bristling at her acidic tongue, Toga tried to tell himself that she was just upset over losing the contract. "You know, you'd get more help if you tried to remember that I'm not your enemy," he commented as he deliberately retrieved the contract he'd been looking over.

"You're right," she agreed with a defeated sigh as she leaned forward and dropped her face into her hands. "You've been really nice to me, and . . . I'm sorry."

Letting the contract fall back onto his desk, Toga relented. "It's fine," he told her, ignoring the little voice inside his head that insisted that he was too much of a pushover. "Did you take it home with you?"

She shook her head without looking up. "No . . . I left it on my desk last night because it was all done."

"Did it fall on the floor?"

That did get her attention. Snapping her head up, she shot him a wicked glare designed to let him know that she didn't appreciate his sense of humor. Toga chuckled and held up his hands. "Sorry . . ."

She sighed again as she straightened up. "Toga . . . I'm serious. Sampson doesn't like me. He was against me from the start . . ."

Toga shook his head. "What? Didn't he hire you?"

"Sure, he did. My mother is his second ex-wife. She called in a favor, and if I blow this . . ."

"Let me go down to legal and see if they can do a rush on getting a new contract for you," Toga offered as he stood up.

The relief in Kari's face was instant. "Thank you, Toga! If you can swing this, I'll owe you, big."

He shook his head. "*Huge.*"

She finally smiled. "All right, huge."

He strode down the hallway and into the stairwell, running down the four flights to the legal department. All three secretaries glanced up when he walked in, and he jammed one hand in his pocket as he adjusted his glasses with the other.

"Hi, Toga! How were your holidays?" Lisa asked as Toga stopped walking. She was the one he normally spoke to, and he figured he might as well ask her for the favor.

“Nice,” he answered with a shy smile. “Hey, um, I . . . uh . . . lost a contract, and I was wondering if you could get me a copy of it?”

Lisa shook her head but returned his smile. “What contract?”

“The Ramsden merger.”

Her sandy eyebrows shot up as she peeked up at him. “Ramsden? You’re not working on that one, are you?”

Toga shrugged as he stuffed his other hand into his pocket, too. “I was asked to lend Kari a hand.”

Lisa nodded slowly as she started shuffling through some papers to find the tracking number of the document in question. “You need this by tomorrow?” she asked incredulously.

Toga made a face very much like the one he used to use on his mother when she caught him snitching cookies after school. “Uh . . . yes.”

Lisa stared at him for a long moment before turning to speak to another secretary. “Kendra, is there any way we can get a copy of the Ramsden contract? The signing is tomorrow.”

Kendra looked surprised, too, as her gaze shifted to Toga. He managed an apologetic smile. “Sorry.”

Kendra hooked a strand of her long blonde hair behind her ear and giggled. “If you let me touch your hair, Toga, I’ll see . . .”

“My hair?” he echoed blankly. “You want to . . . ?”

The third secretary—an older woman named Bonnie—laughed. “Of course she does, sweetie. You didn’t know that?”

He shook his head. “Uh . . .”

Kendra got up and ran over to him, her fingers latching onto a lock of his hair before she had stopped moving as Lisa stood and hurried over, too. Toga could

feel his face heating as the girls exclaimed over his hair, and his embarrassment only got worse when Bonnie swept over to join the girls, as well.

"You know, Toga, I'm in charge of next year's benefit calendar . . ." Lisa remarked. "Care to pose? It's all for charity . . ."

"Oh, you know, he'd be a great cover boy, wouldn't he?" Kendra piped up.

"Wha—? No way," Toga muttered as his face warmed another few degrees.

"But think of all the money you'd make, all in the name of charity!" Lisa begged.

"Come on, Toga, just one picture . . . it'd be harmless, I swear . . ."

Toga scowled as he glanced at Kendra. "Why do you care?"

Kendra shrugged but couldn't hide her grin. "I'm on the committee."

He groaned.

"Seriously, it's all for charity . . . You'd make a great Christmas model. You could just hold a package over your . . . package." She wiggled her eyebrows as Toga reddened even more.

"Wh-what?" he rasped out.

The girls giggled. "Charity, Toga: *charity!*" Kendra insisted.

He snorted. "No."

"You're not looking at this the right way," Lisa cut in. "It's just a picture; no biggie."

Wrinkling his nose since he knew how desperately Kari needed the contract, he heaved a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "I'll think about it," Toga grumbled, figuring that they'd drop it if he conceded that much, even if he didn't actually intend to do anything of the sort.

Bonnie cleared her throat. "Girls, you'd better tell him the rest."

"What rest?" Toga asked suspiciously, not liking the sound of Bonnie's tone.

"Oh, nothing," Kendra remarked a little too innocently.

Lisa wrinkled her nose. "It's a beefcake calendar this year."

The look on his face must have betrayed his ignorance, because all three women burst into laughter. "Ask your girlfriend, Toga," Kendra told him. "If she says no, then we promise, we'll never bug you again." Letting go of his hair, she patted his shoulder before heading back toward her desk.

Lisa sighed. "But if she says yes . . . then we'll bug you forever."

"How do you know I have a girlfriend?" he demanded.

Kendra rolled her eyes. "Oh, please, Toga! A cutie like you? Of course you have a girlfriend because you certainly don't act gay!"

Bonnie chuckled. "Okay, Toga. For you and that doll-baby face of yours, we'll have the contract ready for you by ten tomorrow morning."

Toga grinned, as much from relief that the women were heading back to work. "Thank you, ladies," he called over his shoulder as he headed out of the office again.

"Visit again, soon!" Lisa hollered.

He grimaced as he pushed into the stairwell. What was a beefcake calendar, anyway?

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"Hi. Got a minute?"

Toga dropped the papers he was looking over as a bright smile as he rose to his feet and hurried around his desk. "Hi, sure . . . what are you doing here?"

Sierra tilted her cheek as he kissed her. "Well, I was in the neighborhood and thought I'd see if we're still on for tonight."

He sat back on the edge of his desk and grinned. "Sure . . . I learned my lesson. You're a little scary when I cancel," he teased.

She grinned. "So how long do you have to work this evening?"

Toga shrugged. "I could leave now . . . if I wanted . . . if I had a *reason* to leave . . ."

"A reason, huh? well . . . we could get an early start on that dinner and movie," she suggested.

"Hmm, that would depend."

"On what?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "On what you're making for dinner."

Sierra giggled. "What do you want?"

A thousand ideas raced through his head, none of which involved food and all of which weren't things that he dared mention. He relented with a sigh directed more at his own wayward thoughts than at her. "Whatever you make is fine."

"So . . . want to come home with me?"

He grinned. "Sure. I have to tell Kari something then we can go. He grabbed his jacket and jerked his head toward the door. You want to meet her?"

Sierra looked like she was considering it. Finally she nodded and took the hand he offered her. He kissed the back of her hand before dragging her into the hallway. He knocked on the next office and poked his head inside as Kari glanced up from the contract she was looking over. "I talked to the girls in legal. They'll have the contract ready by ten."

Absolute relief surfaced on Kari's face as she smiled gratefully. "Thanks, Toga . . . you're a life saver."

Sierra squeezed Toga's hand and he pulled her into the office behind him. "Kari, this is Sierra . . . Sierra, this is—"

"Sierra. How have you been?" Kari asked as the icy demeanor slipped back over her.

Sierra stiffened behind him, and he turned to look at her. She looked more irritated than he could recall her being, and he frowned. "How's Allan?" she asked stiffly.

Kari offered Sierra a completely insincere smile. Toga glanced back and forth. "Allan?"

"I wouldn't know. We split up because of . . . *you*, wasn't it?"

Toga pushed Sierra behind his back and couldn't keep back the growl that rumbled from his throat. Kari looked surprised as she stepped back in retreat. He glared at his co-worker for another moment before turning back to Sierra. "Let's go."

She didn't look like she wanted to. Finally she nodded and turned on her heel, pulling her hand away as she strode over to the elevator and hit the 'down' button about twenty times before Toga reached her side. One glance at her face convinced him not to ask questions. The brightness in her eyes was too telling, the smell of her tears already registering as he winced. A completely instinctive desire to go back, to tear Kari to shreds made him gnash his teeth together. He didn't know why he was so irate, but he didn't like anyone or anything causing Sierra any pain, and it was obvious to him that whatever had happened between the two before hadn't been pleasant.

She pushed the button a few more times as she struggled to keep herself from crying. With a low whine, Toga grabbed her hand and dragged her to the doorway, to the stairs. The door closed behind them, and Toga picked her up, cradled her against him as he descended the stairs. Sierra buried her face against his shoulder as she let her tears fall.

Trying to soothe her as best as he could as he ran down the stairs, feeling angry at the complete sense of inadequacy, his youkai kept hissing at him, '*Your mate . . . fix it . . . help her . . .*'

Wincing as he realized again that there wasn't much he could do, blaming himself for being stupid enough to introduce the two women, it didn't do any good to tell himself that he didn't know that they were already familiar with the other. *'Baka! It's your fault!'*

"Sierra?" he said softly, on the tenth floor landing.

She drew in a ragged breath and turned her face to the side. "Yes?"

Toga grimaced. "I . . . I'm sorry . . ."

She sniffled and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "What for?"

"I . . . I didn't know . . . I . . ." He trailed off as a black scowl surfaced on his features, self-disgust evident in the lines of his face. "I swore I'd protect you, and I failed . . . I didn't know . . ."

Sierra choked out a weak laugh as she let her head fall against him again. "It's fine. You didn't know, and . . . and you didn't fail. I'm just a stupid girl who cries about dumb things."

He made a face. "You're not *'just'* anything, Sierra, and I lo—I don't want to see you cry."

She gasped and leaned away, her gaze serious, bright, as she stared at his face. He stared straight ahead, blushing at his near slip, hoping she didn't catch it even as he knew in his heart that she probably did . . . "You . . . you do?"

He frowned and shook his head. "No, I don't."

Her frown mirrored his. "You . . . don't . . ."

"No . . . of course not! It kills me to see you cry."

She shook her head quickly. "Not that . . . what you almost said, before that . . . did you mean it?"

Unable to staunch the blood that rushed to his cheeks, Toga nodded once.



# ~ ~ Chapter 21 ~ ~

## ~ Toga's Promise ~

Sierra stared out the window as Toga opened the door. Kirara bounded inside with a happy yip. He never had to leash her when he took her outside. Sierra glanced back at them and shook her head. He maintained that it was because he understood her. For some reason, Sierra felt just a little slighted that the hyperactive puppy always behaved like a perfect little angel whenever Toga was around. Watching as the puppy held her head high and pranced over to the old pillow she used for a bed, Sierra rolled her eyes but smiled wanly as Kirara settled down for a nap.

"She's a spoiled brat," Sierra commented as she continued to stare at the drowsing dog.

Toga chuckled as he dropped his jacket over the back of an armchair. "I'd spoil you, too, if you wanted me to."

Arching an eyebrow as he prowled closer, Sierra frowned. "I have to ask? *She* didn't."

"And how do you know she didn't ask?"

Sierra sighed as her smile resurfaced. "Did she?"

He didn't answer as he dropped a small paper bag of puppy treats on the coffee table. Sierra wasn't surprised. He had stopped by the specialty pet store just around the block, like he did every time he took Kirara for a walk. "I didn't think you'd let me," he finally confessed as he pulled her into a warm hug.

"Let you?"

He shrugged. "Let me spoil you. Money always seems to bother you, so I indulged the pup instead."

She stiffened in his arms and leaned away before turning her back on him as she crossed her arms over her stomach. "I don't want your money, Toga."

"I know you don't."

She shook her head and started to hurry toward the kitchen. "I don't want to talk about this right now, okay?"

He caught her hand and gently pulled her back. Grimacing slightly as he tucked her hair behind her ear, he sighed. "I don't think it is. Why? Why do you hate the idea that I have money? And don't tell me it doesn't bother you because I know it does. It always has. Now tell me why."

It was easier to glare at his stomach than it was to meet his concerned gaze. "I told you about Allan, didn't I?" she hedged, unwilling to bring back memories that still hurt.

"You did. You said he was wealthy," Toga agreed. "But that doesn't really explain why you hate that I am, too."

She shrugged. "He . . . he made a fool of me, Toga, because he *could*.—because he was rich . . . because no one ever told him 'no'." Shaking her head, she finally lifted her chin, dared to look at him, frowned at the confusion, the upset that drew his eyebrows together, that clouded over his topaz gaze. "I dated him for six months, until I found out that he was already engaged."

"To Kari," Toga deducted as something far more dangerous sparked to life behind his gaze.

Sierra jerked her head in response. "When I confronted him about it, he . . . he laughed. He said that little 'country girls' like me were only good for . . . for sex, which is funny since we never—" Cutting herself off, she waved a hand as though to dismiss what she was about to say as her cheeks blossomed in indignant fire. "Anyway, he was just a jerk—a rich jerk . . ."

Toga's breath whistled as he sucked in air. "What?" he growled, unable to contain the rage in his tone. "He said *what*? What's his last name? Does he live around here?"

Shaking her head in confusion, Sierra frowned as she massaged her aching temple. "Hutchins . . . he used to live over on Lakeshore Drive . . . why?" She gasped as he dropped his arms and spun around, grabbing his jacket as he moved in a streak of blurry speed toward the door. "Toga! Wait!" she hollered as she chased after him.

He stopped with his hand on the doorknob, his gaze fierce, challenging. "Stay here, Sierra."

Her eyes widened as his eyes flashed scarlet around the edges. "Toga . . . ? No, you can't!" she yelled as she ran to him, threw her arms around him. "You'll kill him!"

He abruptly stopped trying to move her aside, and Sierra breathed a sigh of relief but didn't let go.

"He *hurt* you," Toga growled, voice thick with frustrated anger. "Damn it, I won't let him—"

"It's okay," she argued. "I'm fine now, and—"

"It's *not* okay," he shot back. "That little bastard isn't going to get away with what he did to you!"

She shook her head, letting go of him only to lift her hands to cup his face. "It is . . . you make it okay for me."

The stubborn set of his expression waned a little as he glared at her. As the glare diminished, he sighed, wrapping his arms around her. "If I ever see him . . ."

She shivered, closing her eyes against the grim determination in his voice. "Just don't kill him, promise me. He's not worth it."

Toga sighed again. For a moment, she thought that he was going to argue with her. In the end, he relented with a nod. "*He* might not be worth it, but *you* are," he pointed out as his scowl darkened. She bit her lip, the anxiety in her expression growing more and more by the second. He relented with a sigh despite his desire not to. "I promise I won't kill him."

Something about his tone worried her, and Sierra tilted her head back to frown at him. "You won't promise not to beat on him, will you?"

He snorted indelicately. "*Hell, no!*"

The narrowing of his gaze was answer enough. Sierra sighed. "Toga . . . I don't want you to fight over me. It's in the past. Can't I just leave it there?"

He snorted. "Keh. No one will hurt you, Sierra, and if I ever see that bastard, I swear, I'll deal with him."

"Toga . . ."

"Forget it, wench. This isn't open to debate."

She sighed. Something about the frosty brilliance in his gaze, the determination in his stubborn expression . . . She had a feeling that he'd already given her the greatest allowance he was likely to make . . . *'No . . . I don't suppose it is . . .'*

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Toga lay stretched out on the sofa with Sierra cuddled against his chest. He wasn't watching the movie. Eyes trained on the screen, he hadn't paid any attention to it at all. He could tell by the way Sierra sighed every so often and by her rapt silence that she was enjoying it.

He couldn't get her words out of his head. "*He said that little 'country girls' like me were only good for . . . for sex, which is funny since we never . . .'*"

He knew that she hadn't been with a man. He could smell that on her. In this day and age, it was practically unheard of, outside of the youkai world, but he'd also known that there was something different about Sierra, hadn't he? Something that set her apart from other women, something rare and beautiful.

Unable to stave back his grimace as his resolve deepened, Toga clenched his jaw. *'I promised Sierra I wouldn't kill Allan, sure. I never promised I wouldn't wipe the floor with him, though . . .'* Perhaps a call to Uncle Yasha was in order since Toga hadn't bothered to bring his halberd with him.

Sierra wiggled around, used her arms against his chest to push herself up to stare at him. "You're not watching the movie at all, are you?"

"No," he confessed.

She shook her head as she pinned him with a knowing stare, the mist in her eyes swirling and flowing like a thick morning fog. "You're still planning on hunting down Allan, aren't you?"

He didn't deny or confirm her suspicions as he idly wrapped a lock of her hair around his finger.

She shook her head, her long sigh designed to let him know that she thought he was being stubborn for no good reason. "I love these," she remarked instead, idly tracing the blue stripes on his cheeks—his crests.

He cracked a small grin. "You have a strange preoccupation with seeing my crests, Sierra," he remarked.

"They look . . ." she shrugged offhandedly. "They look natural on you, I guess."

He made a face. "I suppose."

"Why do you hide them?"

Toga yawned, idly rubbing her back with his fingertips. "Youkai weren't forced to hide until the last hundred years or so. Even then, it was more of a general consensus than an order. Father said that it was easier to simply blend in than to try to coexist with humans."

Sierra looked sad. "Is that why your father hates humans?"

Toga shook his head. "He doesn't hate them. My older sister is human. Father saved her. If Aiko would have wanted to marry a human, Father would have blessed the match. It's just me, because I'm his only son."

"Still."

"Don't worry about it, Sierra. You're the one I want to be with."

She smiled as she shifted her arm, resting her elbow on his chest and propping her chin on her hand. "Will you show me your face now?"

Toga rolled his eyes and removed the concealment. "You're so demanding," he teased.

Sierra traced the crests on his cheeks with gentle fingers. "And you were born with these markings, right?"

He nodded, unable to hold back his smile as she feathered her fingers over his face. Her touch was soothing and yet stirred a deeper part of him, something wholly primal, entirely instinctive . . . Catching her hands, he pulled her down, leaning up to capture her lips with his. Her fingers tightened around his hands, and she sighed.

The softness of her mouth, gentle, teasing, collided with the ferocity that rose in him, a desire so euphoric that it threatened the edges of reason. Her body burned him despite the clothing that separated them as apple blossoms mingled with something far more exhilarating, a scent both primeval and untamed, assuaging the escalating need that shot through his youkai blood.

He flicked the tip of his tongue against her lips. With a whimper, a shudder, a soft exhalation, she opened to his perusal. Letting go of her hands, he slipped an arm around her, drawing her closer against him, raking his claws through her hair as he kissed her deep, tongue seeking the hidden recesses of her, his body reacting to her, the chosen, his mate in his heart, if not in fact. Her body reacted to the unvoiced desires, pressing against his as lingering sanity fell away. Aching madness, resurgent heat, the palpitation of two hearts that wanted to be joined echoed in the room, lingered on the skin, heavy as the earth, lighter than air.

Her heart beat against his in a stuttered cadence, a precarious rhythm that goaded him. If he listened closely, he could hear the blood surging through her, could smell the rising passion as her scent evolved, changing as rapidly as the shifting desert sands, beautiful as the rising sun. His breaths grew shallower as her daring grew. Unwilling to let him do all the kissing, she sank her hands in his hair, rose above him like a tender spring blossom reaching for the sunlight. She stared at him, eyes lit with an inexplicable glow. She didn't hide anything from him. The flush in her cheeks, the blood-red lips, swollen from his kisses,

breath ragged, fanning over him in a white-hot burn . . . if he had ever seen anything quite as breathtaking as she was, he couldn't remember . . .

"Sierra," he whispered softly, reaching for her, hands shaking as he stroked her cheeks, as he reveled in the smoothness of her skin.

Her eyes fluttered closed as his touch flowed over her. With a soft little whimper, a tiny half-moan, Sierra collapsed against him, nuzzling his neck. Her exhalations rippled over him, set off shocking waves of consuming fire through him, devastating his senses, his will. Her hands ran up and down his chest as explosions of light, the fissure of energy surrounded them. The heat of her palms was like a tropical balm. Caught between what he wanted and what he needed, Toga growled as the intoxication of the woman grew thick and heavy.

Running his fingertips down her sides and back again, claws catching the hem of her blouse and pushing it up as he deliberately provoked her, she trembled as her skin erupted in goose bumps, as her flesh quivered under his slow exploration. Her breasts strained against him as she gently licked, suckled on his neck. Toga fought for reason, for his last shreds of logic. Suspended just out of his reach, maddeningly close but too far to touch, his inner youkai dangerously close to taking over, Toga heard the words echoing through his hazy mind. *'Mate needs . . . mate wants . . .'*

Dragging kisses up his neck, along his jaw, finally reclaiming his lips once more as Toga's mind blanked completely, Sierra's kiss scalded him, branded him, spoke to him with a demanding fervor he couldn't ignore. He held her close. She gasped as his body throbbed against her. He swallowed the sound in a wet kiss, in a moment, in a second, in a culmination of fire and sensation.

The telephone's trill cut through the labored breathing, through the comfortable fog with absolutely no subtlety at all. "Ignore it," Toga whispered between kisses. After ten rings, Sierra sat up with a frustrated growl and stumbled to her feet, absently shoving her hair behind her ear as she staggered to the phone.

Toga sighed, willing his body to calm. *'Baka . . . that was too close!'* he berated himself as reason crashed back down on him. *'You can't just . . . you've got to tell her what it means to you . . .'*

Dropping the receiver back into the cradle, Sierra heaved a sigh of her own as she shuffled back to the sofa and stretched out on Toga again. "They hung up," she told him.

Toga made a face. "Sierra . . . we've got to talk."

She digested that in silence for a moment as a suspicious expression, a vague wariness, filtered into her gaze. "What? If you're going to tell me now that you're an alien or something, I'll—"

He managed a weak chuckle as he toyed with her hair. "Nope, no aliens . . . just, uh . . . I almost . . . what we almost . . ." Fighting back the blush that rose to heat his face, Toga shook his head and forced himself to look at her. "We can't . . . not unless you're sure, because for me—for my kind—it's forever."

She looked surprised as she sat up. Toga pushed himself up, too, waiting for her to speak. After several moments of silence, he cleared his throat and started to rise.

"Wait, Toga . . . you mean, if we were to be together then . . . what *do* you mean?"

He sank back down, leaning forward and scowling at the floor. "I'm inu-youkai. When we take a mate, it's forever. There isn't such a thing as divorce. Once you're mated, then there's not a thing that can separate one from the other except death, and even then, most of the time the loss is enough to kill the mate that is left behind."

"And . . . you chose me . . . ?" she asked, her voice breathless, awed.

He shook his head. "I was . . . drawn to you. My youkai chose you."

"And you?"

He grinned as he finally peeked back at her. "I need you."

She smiled, too, then suddenly frowned as she looked away. "Toga . . . but . . . you said that when one dies, the other normally does, too . . ."

He nodded.

"You'll live a long time, won't you? I won't."

He leaned back, tilted her chin to make her look at him. "You could."

She stared at him as hope cautiously flickered to life. "With you?"

He nodded again then shook his head. "I know you've got a lot on your mind right now."

She groaned and let her forehead fall against his chest. "Thanks for the reminder, Toga. Much appreciated."

He rubbed her back with an inward wince. He hadn't meant to bring up her impending trip to meet her biological parents in quite that aggressive a way. "That reminds me, do you still want me to come with you?"

She sat up and sighed. "Are you sure it won't be any trouble? I . . . I don't know if I can face them alone."

Toga smiled. "You're never trouble, Sierra."

She let him pull her into his arms again as she rested her cheek on his chest. "I feel like they're going to say something I don't want to know," she confessed quietly.

"Yeah. I know."

Sierra sat up, stared into his eyes. "You're the only thing I'm sure about anymore, Toga. Why is that?"

He kissed her forehead. "I'm not in a hurry, Sierra. I'm not going anywhere."

She finally smiled, too. "Good. You've grown on me, you know, and Kirara would miss you." She shook herself and got up. "All right, enough of that. I want ice cream."

Toga wrinkled his nose and watched Sierra's hasty retreat. "Thrown over for ice cream," he remarked with a snort. "Keh!"

She served up two cones and came back, sitting down before handing him one. A perplexed look crossed her features as she stared at the cones. "Toga . . . if you're a dog youkai, can you have this?"

He shook his head as he stared at the cones. "What's that supposed to mean?" he demanded as he reached for a cone only to have it whisked out of his reach.

"Well, it's chocolate ice cream . . . and dogs aren't supposed to have chocolate."

"Oi!"

She leaned further away as she eyed him speculatively. "Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen you eat chocolate anything before . . ."

"That's because my mother used to say that it made me incorrigible," he told her. "So I just don't normally eat it."

"Incorrigible, how?"

Toga grinned. "Give me that cone, and you'll find out."

"Hmm, I don't think so," she countered as she licked her ice cream. "That somehow scares me."

He heaved a long-suffering sigh. "All right, fine . . . I'll just watch you," he remarked. "Never mind I'm only *half* inu-youkai . . ."

She relented, handing him the other cone then giggled at the quick shift from total-pout to complete contentment. "You're dripping."

Turning his cone to see what she was talking about, he caught the drip on his tongue as Sierra's giggle escalated. "What's so funny?"

She shook her head as her giggling subsided. "You just remind me of this stupid card I saw once, at the store. It was one of those beefcake cards, and—" cutting herself off abruptly as another round of giggling bubbled out of her, Sierra tried to eat her ice cream and laugh at the same time.

'*Beefcake* . . . ?' Toga frowned. That was the second time that word had been mentioned today . . . "Sierra . . . what, exactly, is a beefcake calendar?"

Her gaze widened in surprise. "Never heard that one, huh?"

He shook his head.

She shrugged as she licked her ice cream again. "It's a calendar full of pictures of nearly naked men."

His eyes widened at that, and he couldn't staunch the flow of blood that shot straight to his cheeks.

"Why do you want to know?"

Toga made a face. "No reason," he grumbled as he bit the top off his cone.

"You look like there is a reason," she countered. "Why?"

Feeling his cheeks explode in embarrassed color, Toga couldn't bring himself to look at Sierra when he finally said, "The secretaries in legal want me to pose for their 'beefcake' charity calendar."

Several seconds ticked away as Toga's embarrassment heightened. Suddenly, Sierra threw her head back and laughed. He stared at her with a worried frown as she tried to control her laughter. By the time she had calmed down enough to speak, Toga had finished his cone as well as hers since she was still too busy laughing to eat it.

"It's not *that* funny," he grumbled.

"I think you should do it," Sierra told him.

Toga did a double take. She looked sane enough . . . "What?"

She shrugged. "You should do it. I mean, it is for charity, right? I remember you answering your door in that towel . . . you don't have a thing to be ashamed of . . ."

Toga sputtered indignantly, leaning away, looking completely appalled. "You cannot be serious! This Toga isn't posing for any stupid beefcake *anything!*"



# ~ ~ Chapter 22 ~ ~

## ~ Battle of Wills ~

Toga ran out of the bathroom as he tucked the end of the towel in to secure it around his hips and grabbed the phone, answering without bothering to check the caller ID. "Hello?"

"Toga, how are you?"

He grinned then grimaced as water from his still-sopping hair dripped an icy trail down his back. "Fine, Mother. How is everyone there?"

"We're all fine. We miss you."

Toga sighed. "I know. I miss you all, too."

Kagura was silent a moment, and Toga braced himself for whatever it was she was trying to figure out how to say. "Your father misses you, too."

He'd figure it would be something like that. "Does he?"

"How long are you going to be angry at him?"

"How long is he going to keep being ridiculous?"

Kagura sighed. "Toga . . . he loves you. He wants what's best for you."

"He doesn't. He doesn't know a damn thing about what's best for me."

"You love her, don't you?"

Toga relented. Kagura didn't sound upset or angry, just resigned. "Yes, Mother, I do."

"And your youkai? Has it spoken to you?"

He smiled. "She's the one, Mother."

"Then it is as it should be. Promise me one thing, Toga?"

"I'll try."

She chuckled. "Will you try to speak to your father just one last time before you make anything permanent?"

"I'll . . . try."

"That's all I ask. Your father will be home soon, and I've made reservations for dinner . . . I miss you. Behave yourself."

"Bye, Mother."

Hanging up the phone, Toga stared at the receiver with a marked frown. *'Talk to Father? Keh . . .'*

A knock on the door drew his attention, and he grinned as he opened it. "You're early," he told Sierra as she stepped inside with a very happy Kirara in tow.

Sierra deliberately took her time removing her coat and letting Kirara off her leash before she turned her face away and stood back up. "You going to wear that all day?" she asked, waving her hand at his towel without looking. "You were supposed to be ready to go. Kirara's first trip to the park? Remember?"

Toga glanced down and shrugged. "Mother called," he explained. "Besides that, you said the other day that I didn't have anything to be ashamed of," he couldn't help teasing.

Sierra's cheeks flushed as she forced her gaze back to him once more. "D-did I say that?"

He nodded. "As for your question, no, I wasn't planning on wearing this all day . . . I figured I could just take it off . . ."

Her blush deepened. "You . . . you're not funny."

He chuckled. "I wasn't trying to be."

"Yeah, well . . . if you're so comfortable running around nearly naked, you might as well do the calendar."

"That's completely different," he pointed out.

"How so?"

He shrugged. "Because here, the only one to see me is you . . . that calendar?" He affected a full body shudder. "Perish the thought."

"Coward," she shot back.

He relented as he headed toward his bedroom to get dressed. There was just something way too invigorating about teasing her . . . it had to be the sweetness of her blushes . . .

The telephone rang again as Toga was tugging on his jeans. "Can you get that?" he hollered.

"Sure," Sierra called back.

He heard her stomping down the hallway before he saw her. She stopped in his doorway, leaning on the frame with a dark scowl on her features, arms crossed over her chest. "It's for you."

He nodded slowly as he fastened the top button on his jeans. "Figures, since it is my phone, wench. Who is it? Did you ask?"

If Sierra were inu-youkai, the growl that issued from her would have been understood. As it was, he blinked in surprise as he stared at her, unsure if she had any idea at all that the growl she'd just uttered was one female inu-youkai used when protecting what they perceived as being theirs. "Your office friend."

With an inward wince, Toga grabbed the shirt off the bed and strode out of his room, pausing beside Sierra to touch her arm. "Yes?" he asked as he lifted the phone to his ear, careful to keep his tone brusque at best since Sierra had followed him and was still eyeing him with that suspicious look of hers.

"Toga? Thank God . . . I hate to ask . . . I really need your help . . ."

He shot Sierra an apologetic smile. "What's the trouble, Kari?"

Kari sighed. "The Torgasen account . . . they revised the contract at the last second, and now I've got to get all the documentation approved before Monday . . . I can't do all this!"

Toga winced. The Torgasen account was one of the biggest mergers they had on the schedule this quarter, and if it was screwed up there'd be hell to pay. On the other hand, the way Sierra was glaring at the phone, he had a feeling that she was contemplating the idea of yanking it out of his hand and bashing it to pieces. "There's no way you can do that yourself?"

"You have plans, right? With . . . *her*."

Toga stiffened. "Yes, with Sierra."

"Never mind, Toga. I thought you'd help me, but I guess I was wrong. See you."

The line went dead, and Toga shook his head as he dropped the receiver back into the cradle.

"You have to go, don't you? To help her?"

Toga shrugged. "I probably should. It's a pretty big account."

She sighed as she stepped over to fiddle with the tan canvas bag she carried her photography equipment in. Taking her time as she checked rolls of film and restowed it, she didn't speak. "We can take Kirara to the park another time," she agreed, her tone pleasant enough. Toga winced at the too-agreeable quality.

"Sierra—"

She grabbed Kirara's leash and snapped it on the pup's collar. "It's fine, Toga. Maybe I'll take her to the park, anyway. I'll see you later?"

He nodded. "If it's not too late. Shouldn't take more than an hour or two, tops . . ."

She forced a bright smile as she slung the bag over her shoulder and led Kirara toward the door. He reached out to stop her. "No kiss?"

A fleeting glimpse of her upset flashed in her eyes before she could manage another smile. Bracing herself against his shoulder, she leaned up to brush a chaste kiss over his cheek. "Bye, Toga."

He sighed as the door closed behind her, crushing the shirt in his hand before dragging it over his head and pulling his hair out of the collar. Her upset wasn't all because of the call, he was sure. As the date of the impending trip to Florida to meet her natural parents drew closer, he could sense her rising anxiety, even if she tried her damndest to hide it from him, and since they were leaving Monday morning, he had suggested the outing with the pup in hopes of getting her mind off all that.

*'Damn . . . Nice, Toga . . . way smooth . . . baka.'*

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"Here."

Toga pushed up his glasses as he glanced up. Accepting the bottle of water that Kari offered, he set it on the table and turned his attention back to the contract. "Thanks."

She sank down across from him and resumed her perusal of the proposed changes.

"Is Torgasen okay with the changes?" Toga asked without looking up.

Kari sighed. "They seem to be, but then, they're afraid their stocks will plunge if the merger falls through. Other than a blatant misuse, I don't think that they'll disagree with any of the changes."

Toga wasn't quite as inclined to agree since the proposed changes effectually ended any of the employee shelters that Torgasen had been adamant about. The way the changes were worded, any and all of the current employees could be fired or replaced at will, and all of them would have to reapply for positions that most had occupied for years. Either way he looked at it, he had a feeling that the merger wasn't going to go as smoothly as it had been anticipated.

"Hey . . . I'm sorry about how I was on the phone," Kari muttered without glancing up from the document. "I was worried, and . . . well, I shouldn't have taken it out on you. You're a really nice guy."

Toga pulled off his glasses and dropped them on the contract before sitting back to stare across the table. "It's nothing," he assured her. "Anyway, there's really not much I can do . . . you're the one that has to okay all these . . ."

Kari made a face. "I feel like this is a set-up," she grumbled with a defeated sigh. "I feel like they *want* me to fail."

Stifling a yawn behind a raised hand, Toga flicked his wrist to check the time and grimaced. Nearly nine.

"She's going to be mad at you, isn't she?"

Toga stacked the documents together and put away his glasses. "Nah . . . well, maybe . . ."

Kari shook her head. "I know she didn't know about Allan and me," she admitted quietly. "That didn't make it hurt any less."

Toga opened the water bottle and took a drink, staring at the label as he nodded. "I'm sure."

Kari shrugged. "Anyway, it doesn't really matter now. Water under the bridge, right?"

"I don't know what went on between the three of you," Toga answered, carefully measuring his tone, his words, "but I know this: I'll protect Sierra from anyone who tries to hurt her. *Anyone.*"

Kari smiled, just a little. "I get the feeling you mean me? Why would I do anything to her?"

Toga set the water bottle aside and stood. "Not just you. I'll see you."

She stood up, too, followed him to the door and watched as he grabbed his coat. "Thanks, Toga. See you Monday."

He shook his head. "Nope. I'll be out of the office this week."

Kari looked surprised but nodded. "All right . . ."

He pulled the door closed behind himself as he checked his watch once more. Hoping Sierra would still be awake, he headed for the stairwell . . .

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Sierra stumbled through the apartment as she turned off lights and stifled a yawn. She gave up on the idea of Toga coming by around nine-thirty, and after taking a shower and watching the news, she was ready for bed. *'A couple hours, huh? Right, Toga . . .'*

Padding across the floor, she shut off the kitchen light and stretched. After taking Kirara to the park and chasing the puppy around all afternoon, she was exhausted. It amazed her, how much energy one small animal could have . . .

The phone rang. Sierra frowned as she hurried over to the table. Muttering under her breath as she raked her shin against a chair leg, she hobbled the rest of the distance and flipped on the lamp before grabbing the receiver. "Hello?" she choked out as she tried to convince herself that she really hadn't broken her leg.

"Sierra? What's wrong?"

She winced at the obvious concern in Toga's voice. "Nothing . . . just clumsy," she answered as she hiked her leg up onto the table to assess the damage.

"Clumsy? Why?"

"Hit my shin on the chair when I was trying to get to the phone."

He chuckled. The soft breathy quality sent shivers down her spine in an entirely nice sort of way. "If you're still up . . . mind if I come over?"

Making a face at the quickly mottling flesh on her shin, Sierra sighed. "Well, gee, Toga . . . You sure you won't get any more distressing phone calls?"

He sighed, too. "All right, I deserved that," he agreed. "So . . . want some company?"

She relented with a smile. "Maybe . . ."

A soft knock made her spin around. Eyes narrowing, she dropped her leg from the table and slowly wandered toward the door. "Is someone there?" he asked quietly.

Sierra didn't answer as she unlocked the door and opened it.

Toga was leaning against the wall with his cell phone still held up to his ear. Offering her a shy smile, he pushed away from the wall to step into her apartment as he closed the device and dropped it into his pocket. "Nice . . . is that what you always wear to bed?"

Sierra leaned back against the door as it closed behind her, the phone receiver clutched against her chest. "Huh?"

He nodded at her, and she glanced down. With a sharp gasp, she shoved the phone at his stomach as she started to run off. Toga caught her hand and chuckled again. "You're fine. I'll behave . . . if you want me to."

"You're terrible," she pointed out with a consternated frown as she brought her arms up to cover the body-hugging white tank top she normally wore to bed. There wasn't any way to cover the stark white boy-shorts panties that made up the rest of the ensemble, and she was glad that she wasn't in her bikini underwear phase anymore. "Now let me go get something decent on."

A low whine escaped him, and Sierra glanced up into his face. Eyes darkened to a soft sherry hue, he stared at her with a subtle defiance lighting his gaze. "I like that," he mumbled, his voice oddly husky.

She blushed but didn't try to pull away. "So . . . how was your meeting?"

He winced. "You're mad about that, aren't you?"

She shrugged. "Not . . . mad . . . just disappointed, I guess . . ."

"Would you believe me if I said I thought about you the entire time?"

"Didn't get much done, then, did you?"

"How about if I said that she finished up what she needed to do, and I swear I'll ignore the phone tomorrow."

"Getting closer."

"What can I do to get you to forgive me?"

"Why do you think you need forgiven?"

His eyebrows rose. "Because you're still pouting."

Her chin shot up, and she pinned him with a haughty look. "I don't pout!"

His laughter was soft. "Oh? You kiss my cheek and make me feel like . . . dog slobber . . . and—"

"Dog slobber?" she interrupted with a giggle. "Dog slobber?"

He grinned. "Yeah . . . dog slobber."

"Oh, that's just gross," she remarked.

"Anyway, I can't leave till you forgive me. I won't be able to sleep, knowing you're upset with me . . . then I'll be up all night, and by tomorrow, I'll be all depressed and maudlin . . . you don't want that, do you?"

Sierra rolled her eyes. "Way to lay it on thick, Toga," she said.

Toga pulled her closer. "At least kiss me."

She thought it over before she pushed herself up on her toes to press her lips against his in a quick kiss. Toga had other ideas, though. Catching her, holding her, he kissed her slowly, gently, and she sighed as her bones seemed to dissolve. There had to be some kind of magic in his kisses, some sort of intoxicating element . . . Arms slipping around his neck, she held onto him as his tongue darted out, tracing the contours of her lips. She shivered.

"Still think it's gross?"

"What?" she asked breathlessly, unable to think straight, let alone to comprehend his question.

"Dog slobber."

Her laugh was weak as she kissed him again. Delightful nibbles as he toyed with her mouth, he deliberately toyed with her senses, thrilling her with his teeth against her lips just before he soothed her with his tongue. She felt him lift her, knew he was moving with her in his arms. It was impossible to pay attention, though, when he still had his lips on hers.

Standing her back on her feet, Toga broke the kiss and tried to smile. Strained and thin, almost as shaky as Sierra felt, his smile was almost pained. "All right. You'd better get something else on, then," he told her

Sierra glanced around. He'd stopped just outside her bedroom door. She started to turn away but hesitated. "Why now?" she couldn't help but ask.

He blushed. "I . . . uh . . . I can . . . I smell you, and . . . and you'd better put something else on . . . something bulky." Letting his arms drop from her, he stepped back, staring at her for a moment before heading back toward the living room again.

Sierra followed him. "What do you mean, you can smell me?" she demanded, interest quirked by his statement.



# ~ ~ Chapter 23 ~ ~

## ~ I nevitabile ~

"You all right?"

Sierra glanced over at Toga and forced a weak smile. "Sure."

His gaze darkened. "You're a terrible liar, Sierra."

She winced. "Maybe a little nervous."

Toga nodded as he turned his gaze out the cab's window at the rapid approach of dusk. "You sure you want to do this?"

"Nope." She shook her head as the Florida landscape flashed past the window behind her. "But I might as well, since I'm here . . ."

"That's the spirit," he drawled as the taxi stopped. Toga didn't wait for a total as he got out and dropped a wad of bills through the driver's window.

"Wait, this is too much," the man hollered as Toga hurried around to help Sierra out of the car.

"Keep it," he told him.

"Thanks!" he beamed as Toga closed the door.

"Do you want me to wait out here?"

Sierra shook her head as she stared at the antiseptic white stucco building. "No . . . please . . ."

Toga nodded and slipped an arm around her waist as she straightened her skirt and squared her shoulders. Toga didn't rush her as she gathered her nerves and stalked forward.

She stopped on the front porch, shooting him a nervous glance before she rang the doorbell with a shaking finger.

Toga could smell the man on the other side of the door before it opened. There was no mistaking his scent. Sierra was definitely his daughter. Quickly kissing her temple, as if the gesture could comfort her, he pulled her back just a little, making sure there was room between her and this stranger, just in case.

"C-Coral?" the man stammered as he opened the door.

Toga felt Sierra's shock as she stared at the man with the strawberry-blond hair, the same peridot eyes . . . "Sierra," she corrected. "Sierra Crawford."

"I'm your fa—"

"You know, you're really not," she cut in coldly. "I don't mean to be rude, but my father died a few years ago. He was still my father, though."

The man looked stunned at Sierra's vehemence but nodded. "I understand," he replied quietly as his gaze shifted to Toga. "Pleased to meet you. I'm Jerry Connors," he introduced himself as he extended his hand.

Toga accepted the gesture. "Toga Inutaisho."

"Would you like to come inside?"

Sierra didn't seem like she wanted to do any such thing but she let Toga escort her through the door. Jerry led them into a well-appointed living room, and they sat down. Toga was careful to sit between Jerry, who sat in a plush recliner, and Sierra, who sat as close to him on the sofa as she could.

"Your wife sounded like she needed to see me," Sierra said, her voice oddly calm as she broke the stilted silence.

A wealth of emotion shot through his eyes as Jerry nodded slowly. Wincing, he heaved a sigh and steepled his hands together. "She did."

“Did?” Toga echoed.

Jerry shook his head. “She’s . . . sick.”

“Sick?” Sierra intoned.

Taking his time in answering, Jerry seemed to be having difficulty in finding a way to explain what he was trying to say. “She has a disease. Huntington’s disease. It’s progressed rapidly since Christmas. She can’t even write anymore, and most of the time she doesn’t recognize anyone.” Standing up, Jerry retrieved a book from the bookshelf and handed it to Sierra. “She wrote this for you, in case she couldn’t tell you . . .”

Sierra stared at the journal with no change in her expression. “I see. If she wrote everything down, why the urgency that I come here?”

Jerry sighed as he slumped back in his chair, his eyes clouded as he let his gaze fall away. Jowls ruddy, eyebrows drawing together, he shook his head slowly and cleared his throat. “There’s no cure for her disease,” he said slowly. “It just gets worse and . . . and she wanted to see you before she forgot she ever gave birth to you. I guess it’s a little late for that.”

Sierra peeked up at Toga. He telegraphed her an encouraging smile.

Sierra shook her head and rose abruptly. “I need to go,” she said.

Toga stood as Jerry got up. “Wait, Coral—”

“It’s Sierra, and I think I should.”

Jerry glanced at Toga, looking for help in convincing Sierra to stay. Toga’s expression told the man he’d do no such thing. Jerry sighed and nodded. “Will you come again?”

Sierra leaned toward Toga as he slipped an arm around her waist, reassuring her that he would stand behind her, no matter what she chose to do. “I don’t know,” she answered quietly. “Goodbye.”

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Sierra stared at the book on the coffee table with a frown. Toga was watching her. She could feel his gaze on her. Turning to stare outside at the sunny skies, Sierra stifled a sigh. He hadn't pressed her at all, allowing her to say what she wanted, when she wanted but she could sense his questions.

It confused her, how he seemed to know exactly what she needed. As thankful as she was that he would drop everything to come with her, she had to wonder just why he would do such a thing. Sure, he was her boyfriend but she also knew that most guys wouldn't have even offered to come along, and that Toga was here . . .

Opening the sliding door that led out onto the balcony of the impressive suite that Toga had reserved, Sierra closed her eyes as the pungent tang of salty air hit her nose, ruffled her hair.

He had been so pensive, so quiet after leaving Jerry's house. Toga hadn't spoken much during dinner though he had smiled encouragingly, and she knew that it was solely for her that he did this. Today was much the same, and the gentle squeezes on her shoulder, the quiet companionship he offered made her want to cry.

The phone rang. Sierra heard the rustle of Toga's clothing as he moved to answer it. His voice was soft, even, and she didn't try to figure out who he was talking to.

She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to make sense of anything at all. She didn't even want to be here, and yet something made her stay.

She heard him hang up the phone. A minute later, his arms slipped around her as he pulled her back against his chest. She crossed her hands over his and sighed as he kissed her temple. "That was Jerry . . . he wanted to invite you to dinner."

"What did you tell him?"

She felt him shrug. "I told him I'd ask you. If you'd rather not go, then I'll tell him that when he calls back."

"Do you think I should go?"

Toga took his time before answering. "Depends on what you want."

"I'm asking what you think."

He shook his head. "Isn't that the point? It doesn't matter what I think. It matters what you think, what you want. I'm just here to be with you, not to tell you what I think you should do."

"That's just it, Toga . . . I want to hear your opinion."

His smile was almost sad. "I've never been in a situation like yours, Sierra. I honestly can't answer that."

"I feel like they're putting me on the spot," she admitted. "I feel like they're trying to force their way into my life, and . . . and I resent that. It was their choice, to give me up for adoption. It should be my choice, if I want to have anything to do with them."

He shrugged. "Isn't it?"

Sierra shook her head. "Not really, no . . . if I do what I want and ignore it, I feel guilty. I mean, do I owe them something for at least having me?"

Toga sighed. "You don't owe them anything."

As much as she wanted to believe him, she couldn't. On the one hand, she didn't want to know them, at all. The only real emotion that she felt when she thought about them was anger, hurt. Even worse was the guilt. The consuming feeling that she was being cold, unfeeling. How bad was it, that she couldn't even muster the will to be sad about her biological mother's disease? Did that make her a monster? "I don't . . . I don't even care, one way or the other that she's sick . . ." Sierra admitted. "How awful is that?"

"Did you want her to be sick?"



# ~ ~ Chapter 24 ~ ~

## ~ T o M a k e H e r S m i l e ~

Sierra fine-tuned the focus on her camera as Toga wandered along the edge of the water. His light blue button-down shirt was untucked, cuffs unbuttoned and sleeves rolled up on his forearms, hair whipping back away from his face, black pants rolled up to keep out of the ebb of the water. His shoes were next to her camera bag, and Sierra smiled as she pulled her sweater closed against the bite of the wind off the ocean. Sixty degrees Fahrenheit wasn't hot, but it was much warmer than it would be back in Chicago.

"You didn't drag me out here to the beach just to take pictures, did you?" Toga grumbled when he heard the camera click.

"Humor me, Toga," she shot back as she raised the camera again. "I'm relaxing."

"Humor you, huh? Put the camera down, and I'll humor you," he offered with a sly smile.

She snapped another picture as he altered his course, heading for her. "You know, you should do that calendar. It'd be a shame not to. Bet you're the best looking guy in your office, and it is for charity."

He wrinkled his adorable nose and snorted very loudly. "Keh! I don't think that even deserves an answer, wench."

"You can't 'wench' me for stating my opinion, Toga."

He chuckled. "I can 'wench' you, wench."

She stared thoughtfully at her camera. "You know . . . I could do it."

He did a double-take. "You could do what?"

She shrugged. "I could take the picture . . . if you'd feel more comfortable."

He made a face. "You think it's a matter of being comfortable? No way, Sierra."

She sighed. "If it turned out bad, then no one would have to know, right? Come on, you're helping me take my mind off stuff."

He opened his mouth to retort as his cheeks pinked up then snapped his mouth closed as absolute chagrin filtered into his expression. "That's not fair."

"Okay, just tell me why you don't want to do this."

Toga dropped into the sand beside her and grinned unrepentantly. "It's sexist and degrading, makes me feel like nothing but a . . . piece of meat or something . . . I can't believe you'd exploit me like that, Sierra, not to mention the fact that my father would—how do you say it? Oh, yes, blow an ass gasket over it."

She rolled her eyes at his lengthy argument. "You sound like I'm trying to get you to pose for Playgirl or something. It's for charity, you know . . . and does it matter if your father did blow that gasket?"

"I wouldn't ask you to pose for any stupid calendar," he pointed out, "and if you did, I swear I'd kill someone."

She wrinkled her nose. "You're sounding awfully bloodthirsty there, Toga."

He shrugged. "Blame it on my Uncle Yasha. I learned from the best."

She giggled as the memory of Uncle Yasha stalking the helpless guy at Aiko's wedding reception filtered through her mind. "You have a very eclectic family."

"And you are far kinder to them than they sometimes deserve."

Sierra shot him a sidelong glance, trying to contain the little smile that broke over her features. "Well, you know . . . I'll bet those cute cousins of yours would do it. I'll bet they'd jump at the chance . . ."

Sierra wasn't surprised to see the absolute consternation that surfaced on Toga's face. "What do I get out of this?" he demanded slowly.

"The joy of contributing to charity?"

He considered that. "Uh, no."

"My eternal thanks?"

Staring at the sky, he nodded slowly. "Getting warmer."

"A kiss?"

"Almost there."

"What do you want then?"

He shrugged as he leaned back on his elbows. "I just want to see you smile again."

She grinned. "Wow, you're cheap."

"Cheap, am I? How about that kiss?"

She wrinkled her nose. "You haven't even posed for one shot yet."

He made an exaggerated face. "Call it a down payment."

"Oh, a down payment?"

He leaned toward her, lifting her chin with a gentle finger. The brisk salt air condensed on his lips, and he tasted like the ocean. She savored the softness of his mouth on hers, the warmth of his body that blocked the unforgiving breeze. *'How easy it is,'* she thought as his lips coaxed hers, as his tongue flicked against hers. *'So easy to forget . . . everything . . .'*

A hushed bemusement, a quiet surrender, she tangled her fingers in his hair, running her fingertips along the curves, the contours of his ears. A wealth of adoration, a riot of emotion, a tousled web of need and desire stroked the slowly kindling burn, the embers of glowing fires, dormant and hesitant, sparking, igniting, twisting around her belly as Toga's lips gave and took.

As wild as the ocean that lapped against the shore, as unbroken as the winter breeze, the storm that erupted in her, tempered only by his presence, shocked her, frightened her, and yet thrilled her at the same time. An odd sense of déjà vu ebbed over her, the knowledge that her soul somehow knew his. If she didn't believe in soul mates before, maybe she did now, because it didn't matter anymore, what Toga was or wasn't. He was hers, she was his, and they belonged together.

But the tears that welled up inside her, so wholly at odds with the sense of peace that he gave her, choked her, thickened in her throat, and she shook her head as she pulled away. Toga stroked her cheek, pulled her into his arms, against his chest. "Sierra?"

She bit back a rising sob as tears squeezed out of her eyes despite her effort to keep them back. The sob swelled inside her, forced its way out, and she clung to him as the emotion broke free. "It's stupid!" she railed, unable to keep her tenuous hold any longer. "Why? I didn't ask for that, I didn't want it . . . I don't want it now! I don't *want* to know!"

Toga rubbed her back, kissed her forehead, tried to sooth her despite the wholly encompassing sense of absolute futility in the face of her upset.

"Why do they have the right to do this?" she demanded angrily, gripping Toga's shirt in her fists. "I didn't have a choice when they decided they didn't want me . . . why do they have the right to come back now, to demand that I listen, that I care when I can't . . . ?"

He sighed. "They don't, do they? You're right . . . but you're too kind, and you care, even if you don't want to."

Another sob welled up, spilled over. "I . . . I want to hate them," she admitted quietly. "I just want them to go away . . . I feel like I don't know anything anymore, like everything that ever made sense in my life is just . . . gone . . ."

He hugged her tighter.

She sniffled, let go of his shirt, smoothed the cloth under her fingers as her lips trembled, as she struggled to keep her tears in check. "You're the only part of my life that makes sense, Toga . . . just you."

He sighed, shook his head slowly. "Sierra . . . I . . . I can't fix this for you . . . I want to . . . but I don't know how."

"I don't want you to fix it, Toga. I just . . . I just don't want to be alone."

His smile was wan, thin, yet completely reassuring. "You won't be."

She sniffled and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "I should go see them again, shouldn't I?"

He shrugged. "I can't tell you to do that, but if you want to, I'll go with you."

She managed a weak smile. "Because you promised to protect me."

He swallowed hard, nodded slowly, eyes glowing, suspiciously bright. "Yeah."

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Toga hung up the phone and turned to face Sierra with a raised-eyebrow expression. "You're all set. You sure you want to do this?"

She shook her head. "Not really . . . was he angry that I declined his dinner invitation?"

Toga shrugged. "No . . . disappointed, but not angry. I told him you'd come by tomorrow to see him. He was fine with that."

She sighed, rubbing her forehead as she closed her eyes. "Toga . . . is it okay if we don't go out to eat tonight?"

"Sure . . . but you have to eat something," he told her as he stared at her. "I'll order something from room service."

She smiled. "Okay."

Toga stepped up behind her, wrapped his arms over her stomach. "Why don't you go take a bath or something? I'll take care of dinner."

She leaned back to peer up at him. "Toga . . ."

He smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. "It's all right, Sierra. Go on."

She nodded and squeezed his hands before pulling away and shuffling out of the living room.

He watched her go as his smile faded. He couldn't remember ever feeling quite so helpless in his life. He'd give anything to make her feel better. In the end, there wasn't a thing he could do, and that was enough to infuriate him.

Staring at the book on the coffee table, he had to wonder if Sierra would ever want to read it. He didn't doubt that she would try. Whether or not she'd really be able to, though, was something he didn't know. In the end, he supposed all he could do would be to offer her his encouragement. He didn't dare voice his own opinions. The decisions had to be hers.

With a sigh, he grabbed the phone to order room service. That didn't take long, and then he called the front desk to check for messages.

"Mr. Inutaisho . . . yes, you did get a call . . . from a Ms. Kari Dennison. She asked that you return her call."

Toga frowned. "All right. Thank you."

Hanging up, he stared at the receiver. *'What would she want? I can't do a thing from here, anyway . . .'*

He could hear Sierra's bathwater running, and he sighed. Digging his cell phone out and dialing Kari's number before he could talk himself out of it, he tapped his knuckles on the table as he waited for her to answer.

"Hello?"

"What now, Kari?"

She breathed a sigh of relief. "Toga! Thank God! I've been waiting for you to call back forever!"

"Cut the dramatics. What's this about?"

"I've lost another merger file."

Toga blinked in surprise. "You what?"

"It was here, I swear it was! I had it there, on my briefcase to take home. When I got back from a meeting, it was gone, just . . . gone."

Frowning at the obvious distress in her tone, Toga shook his head. "Kari . . . I'm on vacation. Even if I wanted to help, there's no way I can. I'm sorry."

"Toga, please! The girls in legal . . . well, they hate me . . ."

"I don't think that I can do anything, Kari. I'm sorry."

She sighed. "That's okay. It was a long-shot, anyway."

Toga winced at the resignation in her tone. "I've got to go."

"Yeah . . . enjoy the rest of your vacation."

He hung up and dropped the phone on the table. Kari wasn't flighty, nor was she incompetent. Why was she losing case files so easily? It didn't seem right . . .

The cell phone rang, and Toga hesitated before he reached for it. Staring at the number on the caller ID, he sighed. The number was out of range, and he had to consider whether or not to answer it before he finally gave in.

"Hello?"

"Toga?"

An instantaneous smile surfaced at the sunny, warm voice that greeted him. "Aunt Gome. Is everyone all right?"

"Sure, sure . . . I was just thinking about you . . . how are you?"

"Just fine. How's Uncle Yasha?"

Kagome giggled. "Oh, you know him. Same old baka, of course . . . anyway, I just wanted to check up on you."

"I'm not a pup anymore."

"You'll always be the sweet little boy I remember," she chided. "How's Sierra?"

Toga had a feeling that Sierra was the reason Kagome had called. Forever playing the matchmaker, or so it seemed . . .

"She's fine. We're in Florida. She's meeting her biological father."

"Oh, that's got to be difficult."

Toga shrugged. "I'm here for her."

"Good. That's how it should be. You're such a doll, unlike your uncle."

"Sounds dubious."

She sighed. "He's been on a stubborn rampage lately. Your father . . ."

Ignoring the little alarm bells that were clanging in his head, Toga forced himself to ask, "What about my father?"

She sighed again. "He and InuYasha have just been at each other's throats a lot lately, that's all."

Toga winced. He had a fair hunch it had something to do with him, if it wasn't completely his fault. "Let me guess, Uncle Yasha told my father he was being an ass, and Father didn't want to hear it."

"Something like that."

"Don't let Uncle Yasha argue with Father over that. If he never understands, then that's too bad, but I don't want to be the cause of all this."

"It isn't as simple as that, Toga. You know how your uncle feels. He's half-human, himself, and your nieces and nephews as well as your cousins . . . InuYasha just thinks Sesshoumaru is being pig-headed for no good reason."

Toga was inclined to agree. Still, he sighed. "Look at how long it took Father and Uncle Yasha to come to terms, in the first place. I don't want to be the reason they're not any longer."

"I know . . . don't worry about it, Toga. InuYasha just wants what's best for you, same as Sesshoumaru should."

Toga shook his head. Sierra wandered back in the living room wrapped in a thick white bathrobe and white slippers. Toga grinned at the almost teddy-bear-like quality of her appearance.

"Listen, Aunt Gome . . . I have to go . . . I'll call you later."

"All right, Toga. Tell Sierra we said hello, and you take good care of her, or else."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Love you."

"You, too."

He hung up the phone and shot Sierra a sheepish grin as she leaned back against the sofa with a tiny smile. "I feel better now," she announced. "It's amazing, what a nice hot shower can do for your mood."

He shrugged. "I'll have to test that out, myself—" he glanced at the door when the knock came, "—after I get that."

"I could get that," she offered as she started to push herself away from the sofa. "Go ahead and get your—"

"Keh! I don't think so, wench," he growled as he caught her hand and pulled her back. "Not in that."

She grinned as he stomped over to the door.

The young man wheeled in the cart with their food, and Toga tipped him before he left them alone again. When he turned away from the door, Sierra was

picking at the trays, eyeing the contents under the dome lids designed to keep the food hot.

Toga leaned back against the door and watched as she delicately loaded a plate with an assortment of cheeses, breads, and fresh fruit. She caught him staring and blushed. "Some of this was for me, right?"

He shrugged. "It's all for you."

"Then thank you," she commented as she sat down on the sofa with her food.

He didn't get a plate as he came around and sank down on the floor beside her. "No need to thank me . . . you have to eat."

She held a piece of cheese over his head. "Open up."

He did as she instructed, and she dropped it before she popped another piece into her own mouth.

"I see . . . you ordered this stuff so I'd feed you?"

He grinned. "No . . . that was a mere perk."

"A perk, huh?"

"You really didn't think I wouldn't take advantage of your generosity, did you?"

"So were you serious about letting me take your picture for the calendar?"

Toga winced. "I hoped you'd forgotten that."

She shrugged. "I'd like another picture, just for me . . ."

He turned to look at her. Pushing some grapes around the plate as she studiously avoided his gaze, her cheeks pinked as he wondered just what she was going to ask of him. "What sort of 'other picture'?" he forced himself to ask.

"One of you . . . the way you're supposed to look . . . I can develop them at work. No one else will see it . . . just me and you."



# ~ ~ Chapter 25 ~ ~

## ~ N a k e d T r u t h s ~

Toga hung up the phone and rubbed his forehead. *'Kami . . . I knew this was a bad idea . . .'*

Against his better judgment, he'd called the girls in the law division and had basically begged them to draw up another copy of the contract that Kari needed. In his negotiations, he ended up agreeing to do the calendar on the condition that Sierra would take the picture. He was nearly deaf now, from the girls' happy squeals. On the plus side, they'd agreed to have Kari's contract on her desk by three this afternoon . . .

*'That barter was made in the fiery bowels of hell,'* he thought with a grimace, trying not to think about what he'd agreed to do. That he'd agreed to do it for Sierra was one thing. Posing for her wasn't something he dreaded. The cheap feeling of being on display, though . . . that was one thing that he wasn't sure he liked at all . . .

He dialed Kari's office number and shook his head. *'This is the last time,'* he told himself. *'If it happens again, I'll probably have to barter off my first-born pup . . .'*

"Kari Dennison."

"Kari, it's Toga. The girls from legal should have your contract ready around three today."

She gasped. "Toga? How did you do that? Thank you! You're so amazing!"

"You have no idea," he grumbled.

"What was that?"

He winced. "Nothing. Anyway, just make sure you start keeping your working files locked up or something because I'm not doing this again."

"Yeah, sure . . . you have no idea how much I appreciate this," she assured him. "Thanks, Toga . . ."

He sighed. "All right. I've got to go. Bye."

"Bye, and thanks again."

He hung up the phone and dropped it on the sofa as he checked his watch. Sierra had been gone nearly five hours now. He frowned as he shot to his feet and stalked restlessly to the balcony doors.

*"Toga, I was thinking, last night . . ."*

*He set aside his tea cup and waited for her to continue. Slapping her socks against her thigh nervously, she made a face, like she expected him to be angry. "I thought . . . maybe I should go alone. Maybe if you're not there . . . maybe I can make myself listen instead of wanting to run away."*

*He caught a lock of her silky hair, hooked it behind her ear before he lifted her chin with his index finger. "If that's what you want . . . it's fine."*

*"Are you sure?"*

*He smiled. "Sierra, this isn't about me, is it? If you'd rather go alone, I understand."*

*She shot him a hesitant smile. "Toga . . ."*

*He shrugged. "Go on, and don't worry about me. I think I'll be all right. Maybe I'll go for a run on the beach."*

*She hugged him then and put her shoes on while he called to get a cab for her.*

But where was she now?

Pushing open the balcony doors, Toga stepped outside and drew a deep breath. His frown darkened as a scent came to him on the ocean breeze, and his gaze swept over the beach below. 'Sierra? Why is she . . . crying?'

He spotted her sitting on a rock near an alcove to the left, and he narrowed his eyes. Before he thought about it, he vaulted over the edge of the railing, dropping the fifteen stories to the sand below. He didn't know if anyone had seen him. He didn't care, either. Using his natural youkai speed to his advantage, he shot over to her, knelt before her as she gasped, as she wiped her eyes. "T-Toga? Where did you come from?"

He winced at her obvious upset as well as her equally obvious desire to hide it from him. "What happened?"

She didn't answer right away. Lifting her hands, palms up, she struggled for words to tell him what was bothering her. When she finally did speak, her voice was oddly detached, as though adding feeling to her words would somehow hurt her all over again. "It . . . it's genetic, did you know? What she has . . . Huntington's disease . . . it's genetic. That's the reason they looked for me, to tell me that they may have passed their damn disease on to me."

"Sierra . . ."

"There wasn't a secret desire to get to know me. There wasn't a need to ask my forgiveness for not wanting me . . . They looked for me to tell me this, and . . . God, I hate them! I *hate* them!"

He winced. What she said and what she felt were completely different, and he knew it. She wanted to hate them. She wanted to despise them and curse them. The trouble was that she just couldn't. Reaching out, smoothing her hair off of her face, he remained quiet, waiting for her to continue.

She shook her head. "I . . . I want to go home, Toga. I just want to go home . . ."

He nodded as he took her hands, pulled her to her feet. "Sierra . . . I don't know what he told you, but . . . I won't let anything happen to you, do you understand?"

"I know you want to believe that," she said quietly. "There's nothing you'll be able to do to stop it, if I carry the gene for it." She looked away, blinking back a fresh wash of tears. "If I do . . . I can't be with you."

"Don't talk like that," he growled, unwilling to let her give up.

Sierra choked back a sob. "Toga, you said forever . . . if I have . . . if I get that disease, forever won't be very long, and . . ." She closed her eyes. "You didn't see her. You didn't see . . . and I can't let you see it."

"That's not your choice," he informed her as he pulled her against his chest. "It's mine. I choose you. I'll *always* choose you."

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Standing still on the deck that overlooked the sloping land, the whispering trees, Sierra gazed at the beauty of the forest without seeing a thing. The sentient trees were blanketed in a fluffy coating of snow that hung from barren branches like stalactites, a gruesome effigy that soothed her. Pulling Toga's Mokomoko-sama closer around her shoulders, she held it together with one hand and lifted a steaming cup of cocoa to her lips with the other.

How was it that he seemed to know her better than she knew herself? Instead of taking her back to Chicago, the bustle and crowd of everyday life, he'd brought her here, instead, to his boss' mountain retreat in Montana. She didn't ask how he'd managed that. She didn't ask how he'd finagled another week off work for both of them, either. How had he known that this quiet, this solitude, was something that she needed, too?

She sensed his presence behind her before she heard him, before she felt his arms snake around her waist. Leaning against him, letting herself draw from his strength, it wasn't the first time that Sierra knew that she'd found something rare and wonderful in him, and that thought brought tears to her eyes. "It's so peaceful here."

Toga sighed. "Yeah. You hungry?"

She shook her head, lifting her face as a snowflake touched her skin. "No . . . are you?"

Toga shrugged and held her closer. "No, but then I don't really have to eat. You do."

"You don't?"

Toga shook his head. "Nope. Youkai thing. Most of us do eat but not for the same reasons humans do."

Sierra was intrigued by this notion, and she turned to gaze at him. "Really? Then why?"

"Youkai—especially mononoke—have heightened senses. Smell, feel, hearing . . . taste. We eat for the experience of the act, not really to sustain us. If we eat often enough, though, our bodies react in much the same way as humans do."

She made a face. "I've heard your stomach growl before."

He smiled bashfully. "Well, I've always liked to eat things. Father said that it does perpetuate our physical growth early on. He doesn't eat often."

"What about hanyous?"

"Hanyous have half-human bodies. They have to eat."

"But your body looks human enough."

"This form makes it easiest to camouflage ourselves. Would you have wanted to get to know me if you'd met me in my youkai form?"

His words reminded her of his transformation, of the giant black dog. She didn't answer his question. She didn't know how.

He chuckled. "Come, Sierra. You're going to catch a cold out here."

She let him lead her back into the warmth of the cabin-house and kicked off her shoes as she set the empty mug on a small table near the door. She'd stood still for so long just thinking about everything she hadn't realized that her feet were quite numb. Trying for a normal gait as she stumbled over to the fireplace, she could feel Toga's gaze on her.

"Sierra? Something wrong?"

She winced but stubbornly kept moving. With every step she took, her feet regained a degree of feeling, and the feelings that returned were enough to make her grind her teeth together. By the time she got to the plaid fleece blanket Toga had laid out, her feet were prickling with sharp, stabbing pains, and she was more than a little concerned that she had gotten frostbite on her toes.

Giving up the pretense that she was fine, Sierra carefully tugged off her socks. She wasn't sure whether she ought to be relieved or not when she looked at her feet as Toga knelt beside her. On the one hand, the angry red color indicated that she didn't have frostbite. On the other, her feet were throbbing painfully, and she groaned.

"I knew I shouldn't have left you alone out there that long," Toga growled as he gently pulled her feet into his lap and rubbed her toes.

She tried to hold in the painful whimper that welled up inside her at the contact. She couldn't, and he flinched. "I'll be fine," she managed.

"What would you do without me," he countered, a hint of teasing in his tone.

"Rub it in, Toga," she grumbled. "Ow!"

He winced and pulled his Mokokoko-sama off her shoulders and wrapped it around her feet instead. She watched as he stood up to retrieve her mug. He refilled it and brought it to her, pinning her with a challenging stare. "Drink it."

She did as she was instructed, letting the warmth of the cocoa spread through her. "Thanks."

Toga sat down again, bracing himself against the coffee table as he pulled Sierra against his chest. "Uncle Yasha says humans are weak."

"Oh?"

"Sure. Can't take extreme temperatures long, get sick far too easily . . . sounds pretty weak to me."

She made a face at his gentle teasing as she reached over her shoulder to tug on his hair. "Weak, huh?"

He chuckled, his breath ruffling against her skin like a warm summer breeze. She shivered, and he pulled her closer. "Don't worry. I like you, even if you are weak."

She rolled her eyes but smiled, hiding her amusement behind the cocoa mug. "Nice to know."

"Sierra . . . when you said you couldn't be with me, if you carry the gene for that disease . . . you didn't mean it."

She winced at his hopeful tone, closed her eyes against the near-panic that shot through her at the idea of not having Toga near. "Toga, I—"

Pulling the mug out of her hands, he set it aside before tugging on her shoulders, making her face him. Golden eyes suspiciously bright, his gaze was fierce as he searched her eyes for a truth that she couldn't hide. "I need you, Sierra, and you need me, too."

She tried to smile, wished she could hide her insecurities from him, if only to reassure him. Her smile failed as her gaze fell away. "I need you to be happy, Toga . . . I can't ask you to stay with me when . . . she can't move. She can't speak. She can't do a thing, and she probably doesn't even know who she is. If I end up like that . . ."

Toga hugged her tight, tried to reassure her through his touch, through his proximity, that she wasn't alone, that she would never *be* alone.

"I want the test," she said, her voice tinged with emotion, raw from unrepressed anger. "I can't do anything until I know . . . If I have the gene, it means I'll have the disease, and . . . and I don't want to hurt you."

He looked like he wanted to understand. The confusion, the torment in his eyes was enough to break her heart. *'You can't ask it of him, Sierra. No matter what he says, you know in your heart that you can't. Toga is everything you've ever wanted, and . . . and you love him . . . but that's why . . .'*

"Let's not worry about it until after the test is done," she told him with a wan smile. "No sense worrying about it now, right? There's a fifty-percent chance I don't have it."



## ~ ~ Chapter 26 ~ ~

### ~ D istractions ~

Toga stifled a sigh as Sierra dragged a brush through his hair. *'Such a baka . . . I can't believe I agreed to do this . . . willingly . . .'*

"Take off your shirt."

Toga blinked and opened his mouth to protest before catching the happy little smile on Sierra's face. With a sigh, he clamped his jaw closed and started unbuttoning his shirt.

"I feel really stupid," he grumbled as he shrugged off the shirt and dropped it on the sofa. "Beyond stupid, actually—about half-way to downright ignorant."

"You don't look . . . stupid or ignorant," Sierra remarked casually as she tossed the brush onto the sofa and retrieved her camera from the coffee table. Taking her time as she adjusted the lens, she held the camera up, pointed at him but didn't snap a picture. "Might need more light, though . . ."

He sighed in response as he crossed his arms over his chest and tried not to look completely self-conscious. "Did I say I think this is a really bad idea?"

She nodded as she set the camera down again and wandered over to turn on a lamp. "Yeah, you did. Just remember, it's for charity," she reminded him as she removed the lampshade.

"I'd be happy to make a sizable donation," he mumbled.

"You're going to," she agreed, "by posing."

For a moment, Toga wondered just how big a fit his mother would throw if she knew. Visions of Kagura coming after him with her fans made him grimace inwardly, and he tried not to consider what Sesshoumaru might do if he found

out about this. His foul cousins, the terror twins would have a field day if they knew, and he could only imagine Uncle Yasha and Aunt Gome's reactions . . .

But Sierra . . .

Humming lightly under her breath as she checked her camera again, she seemed pleased with the results as she waved a hand toward the silver satin sheet she'd arranged over a table to drape onto the floor. Toga shot her his version of the sad-puppy-look, hoping one last time to play on her sympathies. Damned if she didn't smile at him for it.

"Okay," Sierra said, waving one hand toward the sheet as her expression clouded over with her concentration. "Why don't you . . . um . . . kneel there?"

Toga did, arms still crossed over his chest as he humored her.

She frowned. "Come on, Toga, you look like you're going in to arrange your funeral. Spread your knees a little."

Stifling a sigh, he did as she instructed.

"Put your arms down, will you? You look like you're being held at gun point."

He complied, his movements stilted.

Sierra rolled her eyes at his pose and set the camera aside as she knelt before him. "Come on, Toga . . . relax a little, can't you? There's nothing hot about a man who looks like he's about to be shot at dawn," she coaxed as she grasped his arms and shook him. "Just . . . try to do something that feels comfortable."

He wrinkled his nose. "That would be putting my shirt back on," he grumbled.

She grinned as she pulled some of his hair over his left shoulder. "You promised, remember?"

Her answer was a long suffering sigh as he stuffed his hand into his pocket.

She shook her head and quickly kissed his cheek before turning around and scuttling over to her camera without standing up.

Toga winced as she leaned forward, one hand on the floor to retrieve her camera off the table. Presented with a very nice view of her backside, of the way her low-rise jeans gapped away from her body, he bit his cheek as the short white tee-shirt rose, revealing a decent amount of her skin as she stretched out her arm. *'Knock that off, baka . . . If she knew what you were thinking, she'd . . . well, she's got other things on her mind, so forget it.'*

She sat up as she pivoted around on her knees, staring at the camera with a slight frown before she lifted her gaze to meet his again. She stared at him for a breathless moment, bemusement lighting the depths of her eyes as she lowered her camera to the floor.

"You going to do this?" he asked, breaking the silence as he reminded himself that she was supposed to be taking his picture.

Her cheeks pinked as she jerked the camera off the floor and hid behind it. "You know, Toga . . . you could . . . maybe . . . uh . . ." Trailing off as she lowered the camera again, she looked like she wanted to suggest something but wasn't sure how to say it.

"Out with it, wench," he growled.

Her blush darkened. "Maybe you could . . . undo the top couple buttons?"

"Buttons?" he echoed as he glanced down. "What but—oh, no . . ."

"It'd add to the picture," she argued.

"It would not. Putting my shirt back on would be *adding* to the picture."

"Oh, where's your sense of adventure?"

He snorted. "Keh. No."

"Toga—"

"No."

". . . Please?"

He narrowed his gaze at her as her lips turned up in an impish smile. “Don’t do that.”

Impish shifted into wicked. “*Pretty please?*”

“Sierra—”

“I’m begging,” she remarked as wicked melted into exultant.

He sighed. “I am not doing it. If you want them undone, do it yourself.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise at his challenge as her cheeks reddened even more. Satisfied that he’d won that round with his pride still in-tact, Toga couldn’t help his own smile that surfaced—until she set the camera down and scooted toward him again, absolute determination apparent in the set of her jaw, the light in her eyes.

“Oi! Wh-what are you doing?”

Sierra gently slapped his hands away as he tried to block her. “You said I have to do it myself, right? So I’m doing it myself.”

“But—damn it, you weren’t supposed to *want* to do it!” he blurted.

Sierra stopped, slowly lifting her gaze to meet his as her eyebrows arched. “Why challenge me then?”

His expression contorted into one that his aunt normally deemed ‘the pout’—an expression that Toga rarely made.

Sierra giggled as she pulled open the top two buttons on his jeans. “Okay, Toga. It’s all downhill from here, I promise.”

Somehow, he didn’t agree at all. Sierra’s giggle escalated into soft laughter as she picked up her camera and clicked a few shots. “The pout works,” she teased. “Why don’t you stretch out on your side?”

Toga shot to his feet, buttoning his jeans as he stomped toward the kitchen. “That’s enough,” he grumbled. “This Toga is finished.”

Sierra laughed softly as she set the camera down and ran after him. "Now, Toga . . . you said you'd let me take a few pictures for me, too, remember?"

"That's fine," he told her. "You said no one else would see them, right?"

She nodded. "I promise."

He relented. "Let me get some water," he agreed. "You want one?"

Sierra shook her head and let go of his arm. "Toga?"

He dug a bottle out of the refrigerator. "Hmm?"

She leaned in the doorway with a slight frown on her face as she stared past him at the darkened window. "Will you remove your concealment for me? I'd rather . . . I'd rather see you as you should be."

He smiled slowly as he opened the bottle of water. "For you? I could do that."

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"Just show me."

"Show you what?"

"Come on, Toga . . . cooperate."

"I'm letting you take pictures of me, aren't I?"

Sierra shook her head. "Why don't you want to?"

He shrugged. "I didn't say I don't want to. I don't know what you mean."

"Just hold it like you normally would."

Toga sighed. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't normally wear it unless I'm wearing my ceremonial clothes, and I didn't bring those with me."

She grinned. "Then why did you bring Mokomoko-sama?"

"Because *you* like it."

"Toga . . ."

He winced as he leaned on his elbow. "Will you hurry and take the picture?"

She reached over and draped the end of his Mokomoko-sama over his hip, unable to hide the smile that toyed with the corners of her lips as the simple pleasure of feeling the silky fur under her fingertips. Toga frowned but didn't move the furry piece except to drag the end of it up under his cheek. The sudden calm in his gaze touched Sierra deep down, and she reached out slowly to touch his hair.

A low rumble, almost a growl but much more pleasant issued from him, and she couldn't help the warmth that stuttered to life somewhere between her chest and her navel. A beautiful sensation, a wondrous lethargy as he blinked wrapped around her, cosseted her.

"You'd better take that picture," he murmured huskily.

Sierra scooted back and lifted her camera. Staring through the lens, she marveled at the quiet strength that emanated from him. His gaze touched her like a caress, his rumble chasing away the edges of the fear, the hysteria that lingered around her, unshakable, unbreakable.

Snapping a few pictures as he slowly sat up, Mokomoko-sama falling to pool around his hips, Sierra tried to concentrate on what she was doing, but when Toga rose up on his hands and knees and crawled toward her, a strange glow alight behind his eyes, Sierra lowered the camera, sat transfixed, unable to look away, unable to move.

"I-I-I'm not finished," she stuttered in a whisper.

"You're finished," he countered as he stalked her.

Stomach erupting in a thousand jolts of sensation, of undulating yearning; she leaned back as he overwhelmed her. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

She gulped. “Like you’re going to . . . pounce on me.”

“Tempting.”

“Toga—”

“Hmm?”

Leaning over her, his face inches from hers, gaze intent as fire burned bright, Toga refused to back down. Hands shaking, stomach trembling, she couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. The vibrant markings on his cheeks combined with the sight of his fangs lent the gentle being she knew an entirely visceral air. Claws scraping softly against the hardwood floor, he leaned in closer, his breath misting her lips as a violent surge of molten sensation shot through her, left her weak.

“Sierra.”

She blinked in response as her name tumbled from his lips, washed over her with a gruff stroke.

“I want to taste you.”

“God . . .” she murmured as another detonation of flame engulfed her. His shocking disclosure completely devastated her faculties. The light-headed feeling aroused by insufficient oxygen was secondary to the rush of dulcet heat, the heightened flecks of gold that danced in Toga’s gaze.

The brush of his lips against hers exacted a soft whimper from her as the capricious shift in her equilibrium upset the balance between ambition and exigency. His arms twined around her, supporting her when her bones incinerated under his command. Hands kneading shoulders, she held onto him, powerless to stop his ungovernable incursion on her senses as his fangs raked over her lips almost brutally but completely welcome.

“Tell me . . . if you want me . . . to stop . . .” Toga murmured between kisses.

Sierra shook her head, unsure if she was telling him to stop or asking him not to.

Toga chuckled as he nudged her head until she let it fall back as he dragged his lips over her throat, licked the fevered skin that quivered under his touch, scraped his fangs against her pulse as she moaned softly, as her hands sank into his hair.

The fire bathed his body in tawny hues, in stark shadows and ambient light, as his mouth seared her flesh. Her breathing was rushed, shallow, punctuated by soft sighs, by weak moans. Pushing her back, Toga stretched out alongside her, nuzzling the soft fabric of her tee-shirt. The sultry inflammation amplified a swelling tide of desire. She pitched under him, reveled in his proximity, struggled against the inexplicable frustration brought on by the separation of their bodies.

Convergent heat suffused her body, tangled in her mind, a web of need caught her in the silvery strands of a palpable lust. Hidden fantasies and silent desires manifested in the touch of lips, a sigh in the darkness. Toga pushed her shirt up, palms spanning her ribs as the material gathered in soft folds. Skin erupting in a riot of goose bumps, she shivered as he heat of his hands left her abandoned flesh. With every new sensation came an agonizing ache that worsened, a deepening throb that almost hurt.

He pulled her up enough to tug the shirt over her head before tossing it over his shoulder. She would have laughed at his actions if he weren't still staring at her in such a voracious manner. His words taunted her, echoing through her mind. *'I want to taste you.'* She shuddered. In that moment, in that heartbeat, there was no doubt in her head, no misunderstanding. He was a man yet not human, and a wicked passion was building thicker and deeper.

Amber eyes boring into hers captivated her as he leaned forward, hooking his finger under the delicate clasp that held her bra closed. It snapped open, and she gasped as it burst, the shock of his actions rivaled by the combustion of the flesh that shook her to her core.

The thought of covering herself from his arduous gaze didn't cross her mind. He slowly reached out, dragged a single claw from the waist of her jeans upward,

delving into her bellybutton, along the slight hollow that ran up the middle of her stomach. Bolts of lightning seemed to fire off, one by one, as his claw passed over nerve endings, as her flesh heaved under his inspection. "Toga," she breathed as her eyes closed, unable to watch as he devastated her sanity.

Turning his hand, letting his fingers drop against her skin as five streaks of fire blazed through her body, Toga trailed his claws against her skin. Higher and higher, he drew nearer to her breasts but didn't quite touch them before his fingers returned to her waist only to start the ascent all over again. He had to be some sort of devil, some wicked being sent to torment her. She couldn't summon the strength to raise her arms to reach for him, couldn't think, couldn't make a sound as she tried to draw air. When she finally opened her eyes again, she found that he was staring at her so seriously, so reverently that her breath caught all over again, trapped somewhere between her lips and her lungs.

He lowered his mouth to hers, a soothing stroke of his lips as his hand closed over her breast. She arched into his palm, dragging her lips away as a strangled cry welled up inside her. He recaptured her lips; the soft sounds that escaped her were muted by his kisses as he leaned over her. If she could be just a little closer maybe she could make sense of the throbbing ache that was driving her crazy . . .

Spiking desire coursed through her as Toga's tongue sought out the recesses of her mouth, as he broke down the last gentle strands of her resistance. She felt him slip his arms under her back, under her knees but didn't think much of it as he lifted her off the floor. Laying her gently on something warm and soft, she smiled as she realized what he'd done. The fur of his Mokomoko-sama surrounded her in a lethargic comfort as she slowly opened her eyes. Watching through the haze of her lust-clouded gaze as Toga carefully unbuttoned her jeans, pushed them down far enough to hook her panties as she lifted her hips to help him. The jeans rode down as he removed the garments, leaving her bare in the firelight, lost in the heat blazing in his stare.

Sensation rippled through her, body erupting in tremors as the lure of his gaze captured her, held her spellbound. Dropping to his hands and knees again, he stalked her once more, leaned over her, tangling his fingers with hers as his chest brushed against hers in a riot of perception. Lips merging as an encompassing surge of passion streaked through her, she was lost, reacting on instinct, unable to discern anything except the desire to be with Toga, the need for so much more than kisses, than febrile touches.

His mouth burned a path down her throat, along the hollow of her collarbone, torching a route along the vale between the swell of her breasts. With a choked gasp, she tried to say his name. Her mouth and throat were dry; a stark contrast from the balmy heat of Toga's breath, of his kisses on her skin. The violent shock of fangs meeting flesh raged through her as he dragged them along the inflamed rise of her body to drop his mouth over her aching nipple, the comfort of his tongue both soothing and electric as she let go of the last strands of her will, as she gave herself up to sheer sensation.

He growled, a sound issuing from his chest, both unnerving yet wholly delightful. The idea that she pleased him was heady, completely disarming. The absolute possessiveness in his actions, in his control thrilled her. Sierra tried to pull her hands away, the desire to touch him precluding all else as he barraged her senses time and again. The demanding tug of his mouth on her breast released as he nuzzled his way to the other one, leaving a trail of conflagrant flesh in his wake.

Her body demanded his touch, rose to meet him of its own accord. Time and space gave way to need and the throbbing ache that grew thick and heavy inside her. Voicing her desperation in moans, in broken murmurs, Toga ignored her pleas as he blazed a trail of liquid heat down her stomach, as he scorched her from the inside out with butterfly kisses, the caress of his skin on hers.

Letting go of her hands as his fingers coursed along the lines of her silhouette. Sierra sank her fingers into the thick warmth of his Mokomoko-sama. Palms brushing over skin that rippled and twisted, Toga's kisses left her weak, trembling, reeling.

Heated breath against flushed skin, a combustion of kindled desire woven together with the balance of emotion. The whispers of her heart were challenged by the absolute need to hold him close, to hold him forever. His hair tickled her thighs, sensation that cut through the fog of her mind. Curious wonder as the tightening knot of pressure soared into a fluid ache, the last of her sanity was ripped from her as a gentle flick, an insistent pressure invaded her. Hips lifting off the ground as she sought to escape the mindless tide of conflicting feelings, her body told her that she wanted this, wanted him even as her mind argued that his torment was going to destroy her.

Dissolving into a fractured burn, Sierra forced her eyes open as Toga's fingers dug into the soft flesh of her thighs. He was kneeling between her legs, eyes closed as he tormented her, his tongue dancing against her as the tension inside her swelled even more. Falling back as her world erupted, her cry shattered the silence as the pain that twisted her body unleashed. Vaguely she heard his answering growl as wave after wave of consummate fire tossed her. Time and again he goaded her higher, sent her spiraling into shadows and light, always there when she returned, if only to set her free once more.

And suddenly she found herself wrapped in his arms, cradled against his chest as her ragged breathing mingled with his, echoing in her ears. After a few moments to gather what was left of her reason, she craned her neck to stare at him. Amber eyes still lit with unspent emotion, he met her gaze and tried to smile. "Why did you . . . you didn't . . ."

His pained smile shifted into a grimace as he sighed and shook his head. "I told you, Sierra. That's forever . . . unless you want that, too?"

Closing her eyes against the guarded hope in his voice, she pulled away from him as tears burned her eyelids, choked her. "Toga . . ."

He pulled Mokomoko-sama over her shoulders, gently tugged her hair out from under it. Clumsily brushing the tears from her cheeks, he uttered a soft whine, a sound she understood. "It's all right, Sierra . . . I didn't mean . . . I wasn't trying . . ."

"You don't understand," she whispered, trying to stave back her tears. "I want that, more than . . . God, more than anything, but I . . . I can't do that until I know."

He lifted her chin to make her look him in the eye. Shocked by the change in his demeanor, the anger that burned just below his calm façade, the only emotion in his expression was the irate light in his narrowed eyes. "Do you really think that's going to matter? Do you think that I'll leave you if you have it?"

"You could find someone else," she mumbled, ignoring the pain inspired by her own callous words. "You don't need me, and I won't let you stay with me out of pity."

“Pity?” he repeated as he shot to his feet, turned his back on her as he struggled for a calm that he was far from feeling. “You have no idea, do you, Sierra? Once a youkai chooses a mate, there is no going back. Whether you’ll have me or not is quite arbitrary because I’m already yours. Do you really take me for a fickle fool? Is that really what you believe?”

She shook her head slowly, words caught behind a fresh wash of tears. She wanted to tell him that she didn’t believe that, not for a second. Maybe it was better, though, not to say anything at all. He swiped his shirt off the sofa, strode past her to the patio doors. She flinched when he threw them open, watched in silence as he stepped outside, slamming the door closed behind him.

*‘Toga . . .’*

The last thing she’d ever wanted to do was to hurt him, and now . . .

Struggling into her clothes once more as tears clouded her vision, she yanked her tee-shirt over her head as she tried to forget the beauty of the moments she’d just shared with him. Crossing her arms over her chest as she stared sadly at the doors, she padded over to look outside, and what she saw wrung a moan from her, even as her hand lifted to silence the mournful sound, even as her eyes begged her to look away.

Standing barefoot in the snow on the sloping land, Toga had his head back as the wind ripped over his body, his unbuttoned shirt billowing behind him in the cold. If he felt the temperature, he didn’t show it. The vision was unsettling, shredding at her soul as her tears fell. Something sad, melancholy about him, something broken and torn, something she didn’t want to understand. *‘There’s something about youkai . . . something he doesn’t want to tell you . . .’*

Shaking her head to disburse that thought, Sierra reached up, touched the glass doors as Toga lifted his head. She didn’t need to see his face. It was enough to feel the poignant reverberations that reached her where she stood. Silhouetted in the light of the full moon, his hair tinged with the night’s blue tint, she understood what he had been trying to say. Even if she did carry the gene, even if she sent him away, he was the only one she’d ever love.

*‘He would find another,’* she assured herself. *‘He’d have to . . .’*



# ~ ~ Chapter 27 ~ ~

## ~ Solitude ~

Sierra peeked at the clock and sighed. Funny. She hadn't realized before how much she would miss having Toga around. Home alone on a Saturday night casting furtive glances at the telephone as she wished that it would just ring.

*'Call him, Sie. What's the worst he'd say?'*

She didn't want to answer that. She didn't really know what he would say, truthfully. After the stilted silence that had risen between them as impenetrable as a solid wall, she didn't know what she dared to say to him. How could she give him hope when she didn't have much of that, herself?

The journey back to Chicago had been trying. Overly polite words were exchanged only when they were unavoidable. Even the taxi ride to their respective homes had been a study of stiff gestures and careful avoidance of the rift that had opened up between them.

Still she stubbornly clung to the idea that it was all for the best, that maybe, in the end, it would hurt less this way. Even when the tears that lingered just under the surface of her carefully constructed façade rose to thwart her, she refused to let herself believe that things could be different. As much as she had come to rely on him, it would be so much crueler to ask him to stay with her when she couldn't make him any promises.

Kirara paced the floor, whining softly as she sat down near the door, staring at it as her tail thumped once, twice. *'She misses him, too,'* Sierra thought with a wince.

Two days after returning to Chicago, Sierra had made her initial appointment to see a specialist for the genetic testing. Dr. Friedman had advised her to see a counselor before the test, to prepare herself for the possible outcomes. She shook her head slowly. She didn't need to see a counselor. In the end, she only needed

to know one way or the other, whether or not she carried the gene and would, in time, develop the disease. She owed it to herself. She owed it to Toga.

Gaze falling on the manila packet lying on the coffee table next to her birth-mother's journal, Sierra leaned forward to grab the envelope. After clearing it with her boss, she'd locked herself into the darkroom all afternoon to develop the photographs. The grainy black and white images brought on the sting of tears that gathered behind her eyes, tingled in her nostrils. He wasn't smiling in any of the pictures, but it really didn't matter. The look in his eyes was one she recognized, one he reserved just for her.

Separating the picture she'd taken for the charity calendar from the rest, she stared at her favorite shot. Cuddling Mokomoko-sama to his cheek, eyes glowing as he silently challenged her, there was something primitive in the harsh lines of his crests, something wild but contained in the heat of his gaze. The tear that slipped down her cheek went unnoticed until it dropped onto the matte finish of the photograph and rolled toward her hand, dampening her thumb.

Dropping the pictures on the sofa beside her, she wiped her cheek with an unsteady hand, ignoring the fervent wish that the phone would ring, ignoring the ache in her heart when it didn't.

Kirara heaved a little sigh as she turned away from the door. Staring at Sierra with accusing eyes, she wandered over to her bed and turned away from her as she flopped down.

Sierra shook her head and grabbed her shoes. "Kirara, want to go for a walk?" she asked, inflicting as much excitement into her tone as she could. The puppy wouldn't even look at her.

She checked the water and food bowls before grabbing her keys and her coat, slipping out of her apartment and locking the door behind herself.

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Lost in the wandering crowd of faceless people, Toga walked. Without purpose or a destination, he only wished to get out of his apartment, his private asylum. Surrounded by constant memories, the scent of her lingered in the air as sweet

and fresh as her peridot eyes, as soft and intoxicating as the feel of her hair in his hands, he felt as though he was losing his mind.

How long had he stood outside her door, fist suspended mid-knock. He'd wanted to. She was as necessary to him as air, and yet to be near her . . . It hurt.

The mistake, he realized now, was in letting things go as far as they had. He remembered things his mother had told him, things that hadn't really made sense to him, until now. *'When your blood speaks to you and accepts your mate, you'll start to bond with her. Her emotions will become second nature to you, just as yours will be to her. It is necessary. It protects the two of you. You will protect her because she is weaker than you, but she will protect you because she'll adore you.'*

Shuffling along the sidewalk, hands jammed deep in his pockets, more of the lore came back, things that his father had said to him. *'If you care for your mate, Toga, the bonding starts sooner. For that reason, you must be sure. You know the lore, the legends. True, my father did not die after my mother did. He was the exception, not the rule. If your mate leaves this life, you will die, too.'*

But he couldn't tell her that, either. He only wished that he didn't understand Sierra's feelings. As much as it destroyed him inside, he couldn't hurt her, and he wouldn't have her because she felt guilty. He already knew the things that frightened him most. She was already his mate, chosen by his youkai blood, chosen by his heart. To lose her . . .

The only thing he could do was hope to hell that the test would come back normal. Kami help him if it didn't.

Rounding the corner back onto the street that led to his apartment, Toga hunched his shoulders, scowling at the asphalt beneath his feet. Convoluted smells made his head hurt, the stench of the city, the ever-shifting scents of the people passing by, the reek of the man-made toxins that belched out of the passing vehicles on the street. Sounds washed together into a perfidious bubble of noise. He felt his senses being slowly overwhelmed, and for once, he didn't give a damn.

He wanted to offer her his support, his encouragement. He wanted to hold her and tell her that it didn't matter, that nothing mattered, so long as she didn't turn him away. He wanted to make her understand that he didn't care if their time together was limited or not, that he still belonged with her, and she with him.

He'd give up forever, for her, and now he was trying to give her what she needed, even if it meant that she closed herself off from him.

A cell phone rang. It took him a moment to realize that it was his. Digging the device out of his pocket, he checked the caller ID without missing a step. Grimacing as 'private number' flashed across the LCD display, Toga shook his head. If it was Uncle Yasha, he could stand it. If it was his father . . .

Toga tossed the still-ringing cell phone into a trash bin as he passed by. Funny how he didn't miss it at all . . .

The sudden desire to run was difficult to ignore. To clear his mind, his cleanse his soul, to run until he found the ends of the earth, the answers that eluded him . . .

Balling his hands into tight fists as he plodded along, he didn't see the woman step out onto the street ahead of him, didn't notice the stunned look on her pale skin, didn't hear her soft gasp as her cloudy green eyes widened in surprise, didn't notice her strawberry blonde hair blowing in her face as she hooked it behind her ear with a shaking hand, didn't know she was there, at all, until she mumbled his name.

"Toga."

Hesitating in his stride, sure that his mind was playing tricks on him, Toga slowly lifted his gaze as Sierra stepped toward him. Slowly, awkwardly, doubt lingering in her troubled gaze, she reached her hand out toward him, paused for a moment before she let it drop.

Staring at her for long seconds, unable to move his hands, he couldn't find his voice, couldn't summon even a weak attempt at a smile.

"I was hoping you'd call," she ventured, her cheeks pinking as her gaze fell away.

Toga shrugged. "I didn't know if you wanted me to."

She winced at his candid confession. "Do you want to go for a walk? Or . . . if you're busy . . ."

He shook his head slowly. "I've *been* walking." Her cautiously hopeful expression crumbled as she shuffled her feet on the pavement. Toga sighed. "Are you hungry?"

"Sure."

Toga turned on his heel and started walking again as Sierra hurried to catch up to him, her arms wrapped over her chest. "Toga, I'm . . . I'm sorry."

His cheek twitched as he tried again to smile. She frowned. "Don't be. You were . . . honest, and I can't fault you for that."

"Why do you have to be so nice?"

He sighed, wincing as he discarded her question. He wasn't being nice. He was being completely self-serving. The only thing he wanted was to be with Sierra, and if that meant that he had to put off his own desires to cater to her, then so be it. Nothing nice to it, really. He was doing the only thing he could do. "I'm not nice, Sierra. I've got reasons for my selfishness."

She shook her head and caught his arm to stop him. "You're the most giving person I've ever met. I love being with you."

Her words hurt him, and as much as he tried to hide it, he couldn't. The ugliness between them ballooned, enveloping the stifling air. He pulled away and started walking again.

"I, uh . . . I made an appointment to have the test done."

Toga stopped, swallowed hard as a suspect lump swelled in his throat to choke him. "I see."

"Can we talk about this?"

"Is there anything left to talk about?"

She grimaced. "Isn't there?"

Jerking the open the door of the small restaurant, Toga waited for Sierra to step inside before he followed. Neither spoke as they waited to be seated. Following

the hostess to the table, he sat down opposite Sierra and sat back while she mulled over the menu.

“I wasn’t under the impression that I would be given any consideration in your decision at all.”

She set the menu aside as she drew a deep breath. “That’s not fair.”

“You’re right, it’s not. But then, it isn’t really my choice. You’ve made that painfully clear.”

“Do you think I want this? Do you really believe that?”

Toga refrained from answering as the waitress stopped by the table with a very broad, very fake smile as she whipped out a pen and her order form. Sierra ordered a salad and soda. Toga asked for a glass of water.

“Of course I don’t. Should that make me feel better? Toss Toga a few nice words? Scratch the pup behind the ears, and everything is fine again?” Sighing as he rubbed his temple when she flinched at his harsh words, Toga struggled to control his escalating irritation. “Sierra . . . Do you think it’s any easier for me to watch you go through this and to know that if it happens and you do carry that gene that you’ll push me away for my own good? How can you profess to know what is or isn’t good for me?”

“I know you say that, and you might even believe it. Toga, I can’t ask it of you. You’d still have a chance to be happy, to find . . . someone else . . .” Trailing off as she blinked quickly to stave back the tears that pooled in her gaze, she took a deep breath before going on. “I want to be with you . . . but I . . .”

He couldn’t help the incredulity that stole over his features. She really didn’t understand at all, but he . . . well, he couldn’t tell her.

The waitress brought their order, and Toga sat back, eyeing her cautiously as she picked at her food. A thousand things passed through his mind, things he should say to her, the things she didn’t realize that just might change her mind. If she already was the mate of his heart, if not in fact, he’d die if she turned him away. He *knew* it. Flinching inwardly as he realized how pathetic that sounded, he shook his head and remained silent.

"Your pictures turned out really good," Sierra commented as she gave up on her dinner and shoved the untouched salad aside. "I'll give you the calendar one later."

Toga made a face. "That is the least of my concerns," he remarked dryly, unable to stave back the redness that seeped into his cheeks.

"I've . . . I've missed you."

"I've missed you, too."

She smiled, her eyes brightening in the dimly lit restaurant. He knew that smile, felt it tug on his heart. He wanted to return the sentiment, to reassure her that he would be with her, so long as she would have him. He only wished he knew how long that would be.

"Do you want to get out of here?" she asked as she glanced up at the ceiling.

Toga shrugged. "If that's what you want."

She nodded as she scooted out of the booth and grabbed her coat. He stood and took her coat to help her. She dug into her pocket for money. Toga beat her to it, dropping more than enough money on the table to cover her meal and leaving a healthy tip, besides. In truth, he didn't pay any attention to what he'd left. He wasn't in the frame of mind to quibble over it, anyway.

Stepping back onto the street, Toga waited for Sierra to choose their destination. She stuffed her hands into her coat pockets and shrugged as she started walking. The falling night was starless, as overcast as the day had been. The forecast had threatened snow, and the temperature was dropping fast. Sierra shivered as she hunched her shoulders against the cold. Toga stepped closer, draping his arm around her. She smiled up at him.

"Perhaps I should see you home," he remarked as her lips quivered, teeth jarring just a little.

"It's fine," she argued, waving off his concern as she leaned closer to him. "It's kind of nice, not knowing where we're going."

He shook his head as she held her coat closed tighter around her throat. "Do you want my coat?"

She grinned. "You'd look awfully strange if you did that. Extreme temperatures don't bother you?"

"Not especially. The coat's for show."

She laughed. "You know, Toga, you—"

Stopping abruptly as the doors to a club swung wide open, Toga pulled Sierra back in time to avoid a collision as two men stumbled outside, obviously drunk. Beside him, Sierra gasped softly and stepped back. Toga shot her a quick glance and frowned at the upset that registered on her features.

"That bitch had it coming," the taller of the two slurred. "Nothing but a whore, anyway."

The other man guffawed. "Who the hell cares if we've been banned from their club? The tits in there were all sagging, anyway."

"No doubt, I—" Cutting himself off when he looked up to see Sierra and Toga, the man's already arrogant grin turned even more smug. "Sierra, isn't it? Small world, huh?"

Toga's arm tightened around her when she leaned a little closer to him. Her anxiety was coming at him in waves, and he didn't like it at all. "Allan," she answered quietly. "I guess it is."

Light blue eyes flicked over Toga, blatantly assessing him. With a half-sneer, he dismissed the youkai. "Slumming, Sierra?"

Toga stiffened as Sierra gasped, cheeks blossoming in indignant color. "Still haven't changed, have you? Once a jerk, always a jerk."

"Oh, now that hurts," Allan scoffed as he stepped toward Sierra. Toga pulled her behind his back and stood his ground. Allan stopped and glared at Toga. "Move it, will you? Are you stupid or can't you talk?"

"Toga," Sierra murmured, catching his arm as he cracked his knuckles. "He's not worth it."

"I suggest you run away now, little man," Toga challenged quietly, "before you manage to offend me . . . more than you already have."

Allan laughed, the shrill, snide sound filling the air as passers-by paused to stare. "Offend you? Like I give a shit. A friendly word of advice for you: get rid of the useless baggage. She's not even good for a fuck."

Something in Toga's head snapped. In a blur of movement, he grabbed Allan by the throat and shot forward, around the side of the building into the darkened alley as he slammed him against a brick wall with every intention of making the bastard eat his words. Through the enraged haze that engulfed his mind, he could hear Sierra's voice, begging him not to do it.

Allan's hands clawed at Toga's wrist. The pathetic gesture did little to loosen his hold as the man kicked his feet, as his face shifted from pallid white to deep red into a violent lavender shade as his oxygen was cut off. *'Hurt mate . . . Toga's mate . . . kill . . .'*

Gurgling and trying to wheeze as he struggled against Toga's grip, Allan's face contorted in a pained grimace as Toga's hand tightened a little more. "Please," he gasped. "S-s-sor-ry."

"Toga!" Sierra screamed as she tugged on his arm. "Toga, stop! You'll kill him!"

"That's the idea," Toga growled, shifting his glare off the man pinned to the wall to meet Sierra's stricken face. Eyes wide, terrified, she hung onto his arm, pleading with him to stop. "Fuck!" Toga snarled, slamming Allan against the wall once more before letting him drop to the ground in a miserable heap.

Allan's breath rasped, obscene in the still alley as Sierra threw her arms around Toga's waist, burying her face against his chest. "I'll . . . have . . . you . . . arrested," Allan gasped out.

Sierra turned to stare at him. "You really are stupid, aren't you? He could have killed you! If you call the police, do you think he won't? Maybe you should think for once instead of being a jerk."

Allan didn't get up to challenge Toga again. Toga realized that the man's friend had disappeared. He wasn't concerned. He could smell the man's fear, left in his wake. "Don't come near Sierra again. Don't touch her, don't look at her, don't even *think* about her," Toga warned. "Insult her again, and I'll kill you."

Allan shrank back as Sierra gasped. Toga could feel his concealment slipping away, and for once, he didn't care about that, either. Feeling the surge of his youkai blood with his heartbeat, Toga saw the fear register in Allan's eyes as he stared at Toga in horrified fascination.

"What the hell are you?" Allan asked, his tone worried, awed.

"Something you will never understand," Toga answered as he narrowed his gaze on the man. "Just stay the hell away from her."

Allan scooted toward the light, toward the sidewalk. Toga didn't try to follow him.

Sierra watched the pitiful man go before she turned back toward Toga again. "Do you think he'll call the police?"

Toga shrugged as he observed Allan's retreat. Falling once as he tried to get up, he scrambled to his feet and ran. "He won't."

"How do you know?"

"He was scared. I could smell it all over him."

She digested that in silence as she sighed and stepped back, rubbing a trembling hand over her face. "Toga?"

Little by little, he could feel his mind shift back to normal. "Yes?"

She hesitated before she answered, her voice shaking as she slowly shook her head. "You . . . were you really . . . ? I mean, you would have . . . ?"

He understood what she couldn't ask. He couldn't meet her gaze as he nodded. "I've never wanted to kill anyone as badly as I wanted to kill him," he admitted.



# ~ ~ Chapter 28 ~ ~

## ~ The Waiting Game ~

“What do you suppose it’d be like to walk on the moon?” Sierra asked as she stared out the window at the full moon high in the sky.

Toga glanced up from the contracts he was reading through and pushed his glasses up his nose. “I don’t know. Hadn’t really thought about it.”

She shrugged as she ambled over and sank into the overstuffed armchair beside the sofa. “When I was little, my bed was right under the window. I stared at the moon sometimes, and I thought that if I were an astronaut, I wouldn’t want to come back. Do you think the earth looks as small as the moon from there?”

Toga smiled. “Maybe a little bigger.”

She folded her hands together on the arm of the chair and let her chin drop on them. “You’re probably right.”

He set the contract aside and shook his head slowly. “Don’t worry so much.”

She understood his admonishment and forced a small smile. “I know, it won’t make them call any faster with the results, right?”

He looked like he wanted to say something but thought better of it. He returned her half-hearted smile and picked up his contract again.

Sierra stared at him, catching herself memorizing everything about him yet again. She wasn’t sure how often she’d done this in the last two weeks, gazing at Toga, drinking him in with her eyes, etching every detail about him in her brain . . . a brain that may not let her remember him, in time. That thought scared her the most, the idea that she might see a picture of him and not be able to recall the softness in his voice, the shining light in his eyes.

The test was simple enough, just a vial of blood leeches from her right arm. In the five days since the test was done, she'd been incapable of the basest of tasks. Alternately sidetracked by unreasonable fear and the feeling that she was walking the tightrope over a chasm of depression, she couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, sometimes couldn't even breathe. Five to seven days before the results came back, the doctor at St. Luke's Medical Center had told her. His mouth had been smiling. His eyes had been dull.

And Toga . . .

As if he knew and understood her restlessness, how close she was to losing her mind, in his typical way, he'd been there for her, despite the fact that she had adamantly refused to let him go with her for the testing. He was her last thread of sanity. She couldn't let him see her fall apart, which was pretty much what she'd done when she'd gotten into her car after the test. It had taken nearly fifteen minutes to get herself under control enough to stop sobbing.

But then, Toga knew her better than anyone else. While it thrilled her, it scared her, too. She never thought it was possible, and yet he seemed to understand things about her that she struggled with every day. *'You belong with him, Sierra. You know you do.'*

Staring at his face as he frowned down at the contract he flipped through, she had a sudden desire to smooth the slight scowl away. His soft raven hair was flipped over one shoulder as he idly petted Kirara's head as she drowsed on the sofa beside him. With a quiet sigh she closed her eyes as her heart swelled, ached in her chest. Toga's calm was reassuring enough and yet a hint of reluctance remained.

Since the night of the disastrous run-in with Allan, Toga had come by every evening after work. Always greeting her with a warm smile and a chaste kiss on the cheek, there had been too many instances of near-touches, of exchanged glances tainted with the torment of kisses that never quite happened.

She knew what he was trying to do, and she loved him for it. It cost him enough to stay with her when she couldn't make any promises. She didn't dare ask him for more.

Now and again she would see hints of the anger that he hid from her, the same anger that he'd unleashed the night he'd met Allan. There was no denying that

his volatile temper had frightened her. Still it reassured her, too, that Toga did care and would risk everything in his life if she asked him to. The way his eyes had flashed, bleeding crimson into amber with the beat of his heart . . . Maybe she hadn't realized what he was capable of doing before. She did now. In that moment, if she hadn't stopped him, she didn't doubt that he would have killed Allan, and while he had been angry on her behalf, she couldn't stand the idea that he would discard a life so easily.

As if he could feel her gaze on him, Toga slowly looked up from the contract. His smile was hesitant, warm and bashful, and she smiled back even as her breath caught in her throat, even as tears stung her nose and the back of her eyes. In that moment he was more precious to her than anyone had ever been before, and she knew in her soul that she'd never, ever feel that way about anyone else again, either.

Toga's smile faltered as he dropped his gaze for a moment before peeking up at her as his cheeks pinked. "I . . . uh . . . I know you probably don't . . . want this," he said as he dropped the contract on the coffee table and dug a tiny box out of his pocket. He shrugged almost helplessly as Sierra's mind slowed. Staring at the box in his hand . . . she knew what was in it, and she knew what he was asking . . . "The girls in legal . . . they said today is special to you Americans."

She couldn't breathe as he leaned forward and set the royal blue velvet jeweler's box beside her. "Toga," she whispered as she slowly shook her head, unwilling to open the lid, unable to look at . . . that.

He shook his head as he frowned down at Kirara. "I know . . . you won't say yes until you know . . . I just . . . it's not as easy as that for me. You're the mate I've chosen. It cannot be undone. I don't *want* to undo it. That's the only engagement ring I'll ever buy, and I bought it for you."

She sat back, stretching out a shaking hand toward the jeweler's box. She couldn't do it. Jerking her hand away as though the air surrounding the box repelled her, Sierra gasped. As much as she wanted to look, as much as she wanted to take the happiness he was willing to give her . . . A silent sob welled up inside her, an ache in her throat that she couldn't swallow. She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them again, Toga was staring at the window, and the tears in his eyes, the misery in his expression, shattered her heart.

"You don't have to say yes," he mumbled, voice harsh, thick with emotion, "just . . . don't say *no*."

"Toga . . . Keep it, until I can give you an answer?" she whispered as she wiped away the single tear that escaped to slide down her cheek.

His eyes shifted to meet hers though he didn't turn his head. An odd combination of his shy smile and the tear-stained brightness in his gaze forced another tear to slip down her cheek. "That's the thing, Sierra. It doesn't matter what your answer is. That ring . . . it isn't even close to what I already know to be true."

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Toga rolled over and punched his fist into the pillow.

*'Baka . . . you shouldn't have done that. You knew it was stupid. Way to make her feel even worse. Baka, baka baka . . .'*

With a sigh, he sat up. Another sleepless night.

The torment of Sierra's lingering scent played hell on his nerves. She surrounded him in the darkness, the wafting smell of apple blossoms, the more agonizing tint of her that clung to his Mokomoko-sama. Even closed away in the back of his closet, he could still smell her emanating from the fur. Swallowing hard, he willed away the flood of memories as he shot off the bed and strode from the room.

In the eerie stillness of the darkened apartment, Toga wandered restlessly, touching things that she had touched, hearing her laughter echo through the quiet.

He wished that he didn't understand her concerns, her fears. Maybe if he didn't, he could summon the will to argue with her, to tell her she was being stubborn for no good reason. Maybe if he didn't sense her emotions as strongly as he could his own, he could be angry. Every moment he spent with her he could feel himself falling just a little further, a little harder. He understood even if she

didn't. The bond was still deepening despite his careful distance, despite his resolve not to press matters.

Damn it, the knowledge that everything he had searched for could be taken away with a single test result that he had no control over infuriated him.

Pouring himself a glass of water, Toga stared out the window as he shook his head. He'd done the research. Sierra was right. There was a fifty-fifty chance that she carried the gene, and if she did, there was another fifty-fifty chance she would pass it onto her offspring, should she have any. If she didn't have the gene, her children wouldn't have it, either. If she did . . .

Tightening his fist around the glass, it shattered in his hand, tiny shards embedding themselves in his palm, in his fingers as the shocking cold liquid coursed down his arm, dripped from his elbow to splatter on the floor. With a sick fascination, Toga watched as his blood mingled with the water, black in the darkness, as black as his thoughts.

If she carried the gene, she would have the disease. There wasn't any other way it could be.

Still, as much as the thought of her reduced to a mere prisoner in her own body appalled him, the thought of a life without her was too hard to even consider.

*'Giving up already, pup? Keh! That ain't how you were raised.'*

Toga flinched at the voice in her mind, the one that sounded far too much like Uncle Yasha. *'If you only knew . . . what would you do, Uncle Yasha, if Kagome was in Sierra's place? How do you protect her from something that you can't fight, you can't control, you can't see?'*

A pained smile, a bittersweet memory . . . Toga wasn't sure why he thought of it now, but he couldn't help remembering the day of Uncle Yasha and Aunt Gome's wedding years ago.

*InuYasha squatted beside him as he sat under Goshinboku after the wedding. "Something wrong, Toga?"*

*Toga shrugged, trying his hardest to seem unconcerned. "No . . ."*

*"You sure?"*

*"Yeah . . ."*

*InuYasha waited another moment then slowly pushed himself to his feet to head back inside. "Suit yourself."*

*"Uncle Yasha?"*

*InuYasha turned back to face the boy, who had also stood. Toga shuffled his feet, staring at the ground. "Toga?"*

*"You married her? Like a human ceremony? But you're hanyou—half-youkai. Why?"*

*InuYasha knelt down before him and made Toga look him in the eye. "Because Kagome's human. Because this wedding made her happy. Because I love her. Toga, when you meet a girl and feel about her like I feel about Kagome, you'll understand."*

*Toga's frown deepened. "But why did you have to marry Kagome?"*

*InuYasha grinned. "Some day you'll find your own Kagome."*

*Toga's smile faded with the memory. 'Well, I've found her, Uncle Yasha. I've found her, and . . . and I just may lose her, too . . .'*

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Sierra sat in the darkness as thin, silvery blue moonlight filtered in the windows, fell on the floor, a patchwork study of darkness and light as the clock on the fireplace mantle chimed the hour.

*'Six a.m.'*

The mechanical part of her brain that functioned off her mundane schedule kicked in, whispered that it was time for her to shower, to put on her game face, to go into the office and pretend that her world wasn't hanging by the thinnest strand of hope.

She stared at the jeweler's box still sitting on the chair beside her. In the hours since Toga had left, she couldn't bring herself to open it. Everything she'd ever hoped for, everything she'd always wanted was right there within her grasp, and she desperately wanted to take it.

The waiting was the hardest part. If she knew, she could stop worrying and wondering. She could start dreaming again, or she could deal with the broken remains of her beautiful wish.

*'Fifty-fifty . . . half of a whole . . . half a hope . . .'*

The disconcerting image of God or whatever entity that dictated the flux of life solidified in her mind, appallingly real. In his pristine white robes surrounded by fluffy clouds tinged with pink and blue, the shades of morning sunlight . . . Did this being have a coin to flip? Heads you win, tails you lose . . .

Choking out a bitter laugh that rang in her ears like the knelling of a bell, Sierra was surprised to feel moisture on her cheeks, dripping down her neck as panic gripped her stomach.

It seemed so arbitrary, so pell-mell. Who decided who was good enough to live? What had she done to deserve something so frightening?

Her family had gone on vacation one year, to South Carolina to visit her aunt. Aunt Winnifred lived on the beach, and Sierra remembered getting up to watch the sun rise as she sat on the dock with her camera, the sound of the waves, soft and gentle like a lullaby. As the first weak rays of the new morning spread over the ocean bringing with it a sense of complete renewal, Sierra remembered feeling so awed, so inspired by the beauty that she'd forgotten that she had her camera.

She never knew why she had turned to look away from the brilliant colors streaking the heavens above. Narrowing her gaze as she noticed the small form of something lilted and cresting with the rising waves, she lifted the camera, snapped a picture of the lonely rowboat caught in the flow. She'd watched it for hours. It never seemed to move. As though it was anchored there where it bobbed up and down in the water, not coming closer but not lost at sea, either; an unfortunate victim of time and circumstance . . .

That's how she felt. She was that boat, and the waters of fate that held her were the results of a stupid blood test.

Sierra jumped when the clock struck seven. Shaking herself out of her depressed musings, she deliberately ignored the ring box as she uncurled herself from the chair and shuffled off to take a shower.

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The ringing phone could be heard in the hallway as Sierra fumbled with the key. It was probably Toga. He always called right after she took Kirara outside in the morning. She was running a little late today, but it was about time for his morning call . . . "I'm hurrying," she mumbled to herself as Kirara barked happily, darting around Sierra's feet and generally being a nuisance. The door finally opened, and Sierra sighed as she stumbled inside.

"Hold still, Kirara!" Sierra chided as she hurriedly unhooked the puppy's leash and kicked the door closed at the same time. Dropping the leash over the back of the sofa, she snatched the phone receiver carelessly and hit the 'talk' button before bringing it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Ms. Crawford, this is Catherine at St. Luke's Medical Center. The results of your blood test are back, and Dr. Friedman asked me to tell you that he's got an available appointment at 8:30 this morning, if you can make it."

Sierra's blood froze in her veins as she gripped the phone tighter.

"Ms. Crawford?"

Mercifully, the automatic part of her brain kicked in. Checking her watch, Sierra had to swallow a few times before she could answer. "All right."

"Okay, then I'll let Dr. Friedman know to expect you."

Sierra nodded then winced when she realized the receptionist couldn't hear her brains rattling. "Okay."



# ~ ~ Chapter 29 ~ ~

## ~ S i e r r a ' s A n s w e r s ~

*'What the hell is taking so fucking long?'*

Toga paced the hallway like a caged beast as he waited impatiently for Sierra to return. Despite his rush in getting over to her apartment, he just missed her. He wasn't sure what time her appointment had been but it was nearly noon now. Surely it didn't take that long . . .

Kirara whined on the other side of the door. "Sorry, pup. I can't let you out," he apologized quietly. Kirara whined again.

Toga cracked his knuckles as his patience wore thinner and thinner. If she wasn't back in the next few minutes, he'd—

Head snapping up as Sierra's scent hit him, he strode to the stairs just as Sierra looked up at him.

Her face was pale, eyes strangely vacant. Hands shaking as she gripped the railing, she stopped mid-step and opened her mouth.

Shaking his head slowly as he descended the stairs to her side, the sudden fear in her eyes made him wince. The tears that washed into her eyes assailed his nose as he tried to ignore what his mind told him was true. "Toga—" she whispered.

"Let's get you inside," he interrupted. He couldn't hear her say it. He couldn't stand to hear her put it into words.

She grabbed his hand, held it tight as she shook her head miserably. "No, Toga, you . . . you can't . . ."

He didn't answer as he tugged her up the stairs. "I can," he argued, deliberately misunderstanding what she was trying to say.

She choked back a sob but didn't argue as he gently took her keys and let her into the apartment. She stumbled over to the sofa, sank down as she buried her face in her hands. Her breathing was ragged, raw. Toga flinched as he closed the door.

"I've got the gene," she mumbled, her voice muffled by her cupped hands. "I'll develop the disease, too."

"There has to be something," he said quietly. "A mistake at the lab or a treatment . . ."

She shook her head miserably, her shoulders trembling, her breathing unsteady. "No mistake, Toga. There's no mistake. I . . . I can't fight it."

He couldn't accept her answer. He couldn't believe what she said. "You *can't* give up, Sierra, because . . . because that means you want me to give up, too."

"There's *nothing*, Toga! There's no cure, no hope!"

He shook his head, denying the cryptic sound of her words as he shot across the room and knelt before her. Gripping her shoulders, making her look at him, he shook his head again, fierce emotion in his gaze. "There's always hope."

A sob escaped her as she tried not to cry, tried to pull away from him. He didn't let her go. "There is none, not for me, not for you—not for *us*. Before it's all over, I wouldn't even know you, and I wouldn't care, but you . . . Don't ask me to do that."

"Then don't ask!"

"Toga . . ."

His chin dropped as he closed his eyes, searching frantically for a shred of hope, for an optimism that was failing him completely. "I won't leave you, Sierra . . . I need you."

"Then let *me* be selfish," she half-shrieked, half-sobbed. "Let me be selfish because I can't let you stay! I don't want you to see me like that. I don't want you to pity me!" Finding the strength to jerk away from his grip, she shot to her

feet and pushed past him. He stood up and turned around, prepared to argue with her, to yell some sense into her, if he had to. What he wasn't prepared for was the velvet ring box she thrust under his nose. "Take it and go," she whispered, hand trembling as she stuffed the box into his hand. "Find someone else to give that to." She backed away as she swallowed a sob. "I didn't look at it. It wasn't meant for me."

Toga stared at the ring box in his hand, trying to swallow the lump in his throat that threatened to choke him. Maybe he hadn't realized before that she was completely serious. Somehow her actions made it clear to him, and yet a part of him still had to know. "If . . . if the results had been different, what would you have said?"

Sierra sniffled and wiped her eyes as she avoided his gaze, lips trembling as silent tears coursed down her cheeks. "You don't want to know."

"I do," he countered just as softly.

She finally met his gaze, her tears spilling over as she swallowed hard. "I would have married you today," she whispered just before she looked away, just before she uttered a pitiful cry.

He stepped toward her, his youkai senses screaming at him to comfort her. "Sierra—"

She closed her eyes, shook her head. "Just go, Toga . . . I . . ." she hiccupped as she tried to breathe. "I don't want to see you again."

He drew back as though she had struck him. His mind told him that he was hurting her more in his refusal to leave. His youkai blood was howling.

It took everything within him to make himself turn to go. He stopped beside the table by the door though he didn't look back at her as he reached for the doorknob. "If it means anything to you, Sierra . . . I . . . I love you, and I will forever."

Sierra bit her lip to keep herself from sobbing as she watched Toga walk out the door, out of her life.

Sinking to her knees as the force of her sadness rattled through her, she rocked back and forth, arms wrapped around herself as she sought a comfort she couldn't find.

Anger welled up inside her, deep, black, vile. The only things she'd ever wanted had somehow managed to slip through her fingers, as fleeting as a feather in the wind. Toga's eyes stared at her, a face in her mind. Taunting her as he slipped further and further away, she tried to reach out to him. His lips moved but no sound came. In her mind, she saw him turn away again, saw him walk out the door, heard his words, his quiet confession.

*'What have I done?'* she asked herself, time and again, chanting the question as her sobs filled the air, as her heart broke then swelled only to shatter again. An ache raged through her, relentless, unyielding. She felt as though part of her had died, and maybe it had. She wanted to call him back, to let herself be held in his arms as he told her that he would make everything all right. Maybe, just for that time, she could believe him.

A desperate pain shot so deep, a sharp stab of grief that dug into her soul reverberated through her as her heart came undone. She hadn't known she could hurt so badly, hadn't realized how easily love could turn into a surge of fickle emotion. She couldn't remember a time when Toga wasn't there beside her. She couldn't imagine what she'd do, now that he was gone. His presence hung in the air around her, tinged the silent apartment in shades of blue that matched his crests. The sob that welled inside her was enough to choke her as the bitter remnants of her broken dreams seemed to dissolve before her eyes.

Pushing herself to her feet, Sierra stumbled toward the door. She tripped over her shoes and caught herself on the table. Gasping as she jerked her hand back, she stared through her tears at the ring box. He had left it. "Toga," she murmured as she picked it up, wiped her tears away with the back of her hand.

Choking back another sob as she slowly lifted the lid, she keened softly as she lifted a shaking hand to her lips. The solitaire diamond was huge teardrop cut—strangely ironic, she thought miserably. Toga . . . Toga had chosen the ring for her . . .

Snapping the lid closed, she held it against her chest as she sank down against the door. The sobs came again, forced out of her amidst her angry recriminations, her confusion as she tried to figure out why. There were no answers, there was no comfort. All she had were tears and pain and a diamond engagement ring clutched against her heart.

A soft whine, a breathy growl interrupted Sierra's sobs. Blinking back tears as she gazed at Kirara, she choked as she realized that the puppy was holding her leash in her mouth, staring at Sierra as if she knew, as if she were asking that Sierra take her to Toga. Kirara barked around the leash, lowering her chin to the floor as her rear wagged in her pleading way. "I'm sorry, Kirara," she whispered softly as she sniffled and wiped away her tears again. "We can't go see him . . . not anymore."

Kirara barked. Dropping the leash on Sierra's leg and pawing her knee, the pup sat back and whined. When that didn't work, she grabbed Sierra's sleeve and gently tugged, growling softly.

Sierra scratched Kirara behind the ears and closed her eyes

It was for the best, wasn't it? How fair would it be, to ask Toga watch as she developed Huntington's disease? How fair would it be to ask him to take care of her even after she had forgotten who he even was? It wasn't, not at all.

Kirara gave up and lay down, uttering a soft moan as she breathed. Maybe she was beginning to understand that Toga wasn't coming back. Sierra caught the hint of accusation in the dog's eyes and winced. "I'm sorry, Kirara," she said again, her voice ragged and tired. "It was the right thing to do . . . I didn't really have a choice."

Her excuses sounded lame. She only wished it was as simple to convince herself that she was doing the right thing . . .

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Sprinting across rooftops through the city, Toga ran like the hounds of hell were on his heels. It didn't matter where he ended up or how fast he moved. He'd never be able to escape the pain that threatened to tear him to pieces. The youkai

bonding was too strong to ignore, impossible to undo. With every stride that carried him away from her, the pain grew and contracted around him, engulfing him as the distance between the mate of his heart and himself grew wider, further, indomitable.

She had filled a place inside him; a place he hadn't known was empty. With her brilliant smile, her luminous gaze, she had become the center of his world, and his youkai . . .

He'd never felt so at odds with himself. His youkai welled up inside him, raging, brutal, vindictive. It demanded that he go back, that he force her to listen, yet he couldn't do it. To bring her more pain . . . He couldn't do it.

It made no sense. He wasn't human. Why did he understand human emotion? For the first time in his life, he understood the aloof youkai, the will of his kind to hold themselves above such base human emotions as love.

And yet without love . . .

Toga sped up, pushing himself further, faster, harder. Trying to outrun his pain; trying to silence the voice that called her name. He wanted to go back to her, to beg her to keep him and yet he knew that in the end, she would resent him for that, too.

Dropping off the warehouse beside the piers on the shore of Lake Michigan, Toga wandered blindly to the edge of the structure, the overhang that stood above the slapping water. The gray sky blanketed thick with snow clouds loomed overhead, and in his mind, he heard her words, so soft, so broken, so painful . . . *'I would have married you today . . .'*

But she didn't know. She didn't realize. He hadn't told her because he hadn't wanted to hurt her more. He knew the truths, the ancient lore. He knew the reasons that made no sense.

Men wandered around him, scraping out their livings by sticking with the mundane tasks that others didn't want. Lost in the shuffle, a strange face, a solemn façade, he was ignored, neither tolerated nor scorned. Seeking answers to questions that had no rhyme, he stared over the icy waters as he willed his heart to numb.

He'd come to Chicago to find a new life, to map out a place for himself that had nothing to do with his father. In the end, he'd found Sierra, and when he dared to hope for a lifetime with her . . .

Perhaps he would have been better off if he had stayed under his father's dictates. Would it have been better to never know what love felt like? His smile was dry, humorless, older than centuries, untouched by time. No, it wouldn't have been. Even if he felt as though every part of him was slowly dying, he had seen her smile, had heard her laughter, had held her in his arms. It had been enough. The beauty of her would remain a light in the darkness. It had to be enough.

"Hey, buddy. The dock's closing."

Toga nodded slowly as he turned away from the pier. The squat, middle aged man stared at him, his expression wizened by time and the elements yet his gaze was full of quiet compassion. "You alright, kid? You look like you lost your best friend."

"I'm fine, old man," he answered as he started to walk away.

The old man fell in step beside him. "I always lock up about now," he explained. "You need a cab or something?"

Toga blinked in surprise and shifted his gaze to meet the old man's watery blue eyes. "No, I . . . I can walk."

"I hate to see you do that . . . you'll freeze after the sun goes down."

Toga glanced down. He'd forgotten his coat. "That's all right," he assured the man. "I don't feel the cold anymore."

He chuckled, his voice roughened by cold winds and years of laughter. "You from Canada, then? They say our weather is mild by comparison."

"No, I'm . . . I'm from Japan."

The man stared at Toga, his gaze narrowing like he was trying to read his mind. Finally he nodded, his eyes brightening as though he finally understood. "It's about a girl, isn't it?"



~ ~ *Chapter 30* ~ ~  
~ *A fter H ours* ~

"Hey, Toga, do you have a minute?"

Toga didn't look up from the contract in his hand as he drummed his pen against the blotter on his desk. "Not really. What do you need?"

Kari sighed as she closed the door behind herself and sat down across from him. "You won't believe this."

"Another missing contract?"

He could see her wince out of the corner of his eye. "Yeah." She shook her head. "The first time I thought I was careless. The second time, I thought it was suspicious. The third time? There's definitely something going on."

"Where'd you leave this one?"

Kari sat up straighter. "That's the thing. I *know* it was in my briefcase, and I know I locked it."

That got Toga's attention. Dropping his contract on the desk as he finally met Kari's gaze, he shook his head slowly. "That's not possible. If you really did lock your briefcase, it'd still be in there."

"Or so you'd think."

Toga shrugged. "So . . . what do you think is going on?"

She sighed, face contorting in a disgusted frown. "I don't know. Sometimes I think . . ." she trailed off as she drew a deep breath and pinned Toga with a glare that dared him to make fun of her. "I think someone's trying to get me fired."

He didn't laugh, at least not out loud. He did snort, and loudly at that. "Keh! That's a new one. Do you suppose it's the same aliens that abducted Elvis? The ones that masterminded the whole Roswell incident?"

"Oh, you're funny, Toga. Never mind. I was hoping you'd believe me."

He rolled his eyes as Kari shot to her feet and headed for the door, jerking it open with a vicious yank.

"Hold on," he called after her as he asked himself just why he was about to offer to help her. "I was joking, I'm sorry."

She sighed and shut his door again. "You know, this really isn't funny! If I can't keep this job, no one else will hire me. It'll follow me around for the rest of my life! A huge black mark on my professional life, like . . . being Catholic and getting a divorce."

Pulling off his glasses and dropping them on top of the contract he'd been going over, Toga shook his head again as he crossed his arms over his desk. "What contract this time? And be more careful, damn it. I'm out of leverage with the girls in legal."

She grimaced. "The, uh . . . Pfeiser-Telecorp merger."

Toga's eyes widened as he raised his fist to catch his cough. "Wow . . . that's . . . not good."

She made a face and rolled her wrist in a gesture to make him hurry with the teasing she figured was coming. "No, it's not."

That was an understatement. Pfeiser and Telecorp was another of those huge mergers that could make or break the company. He winced. "Did you break a mirror or something?"

She narrowed her icy gaze on him. For a moment, she almost reminded him of his father . . . "Toga, please . . . there's no one else I can ask for help."

"All right, all right," he agreed as he stood up. "I'll go ask the girls, but if they ask for my first-born son, I can't do it . . ."

"That's not what I had in mind."

He frowned. Why did he have a feeling that he wasn't going to like whatever she was thinking? "Okay," he said slowly. "I hesitate to ask, but . . . what?"

"I have another big merger coming up."

For some reason, Toga was assailed with memories of his cousins trying to get him to help them with one of their many schemes in the past, and none of those ever had a good ending, either. "And you want me to try to catch whoever is taking your contracts?"

Kari expelled her breath in a sudden rush. "Yes."

A million reasons why that was a really horrid idea flashed through his brain. He opened his mouth to give her just a few examples then sighed as he caught the desperate hope in her pleading gaze. If it were him, he'd feel the same way, he supposed. Making a face as he looked away, cursing himself for being way too nice, Toga finally nodded. "All right."

She smiled at last, her expression melting into instantaneous relief. "Toga, you're absolutely the best!" She opened the door and started out of the office but stopped and stuck her head back inside to smile at him again. "Sierra's really, really lucky . . ."

He watched her go and sighed. '*Lucky . . .*'

In the week since Sierra's diagnosis, it was all Toga could do to make himself get up every morning, all he could stand to leave his apartment and drive past her building. He found himself staring out his window, hoping to see her, wishing that he dared to approach her. The fear of causing her more upset was just too much for him, and yet he couldn't quite help himself when he trailed her on her errands, always careful to stay hidden from her view. Afraid that she would be in danger if he wasn't there, he told himself it was because of the promise he'd made to her. He knew in his heart it was because he loved her.

Everywhere he went reminded him of her, of the places they'd been together, of her smile, her laughter. Her scent still lingered in his apartment, both comforting and hurtful at the same time. He felt as though a part of him was dying slowly,

withering away, desperate for the light of her presence, and the feeling was excruciating.

His mind told him to leave Chicago, to escape the pain of being near enough to touch her and yet unable to do it. His youkai blood repelled that idea. He needed to be here, even if he couldn't be with her.

If only he could make her listen. He shook his head slowly as he headed out of his office to see if he couldn't get the girls to draw up a duplicate contract. If he could make her listen, what could he possibly say? There wasn't a damn thing he could say to change her mind. He doubted that his side of the truth would even matter, and he couldn't do that to her, either.

He had a feeling that he wasn't going to be able to come out of this unscathed. He was in far, far too deep for that, wasn't he?

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Sierra stepped onto the street and knelt down to offer Kirara the gourmet dog biscuit. The puppy sniffed it and turned up her nose with a low whine. Sierra winced. They were the same kind that Toga always bought for her. It just confirmed what she had suspected. Kirara was more Toga's dog than hers. She couldn't really blame Kirara. It was just too easy to love him.

"I know, Kirara," she mumbled as she dropped the biscuit into the bag and sighed. "You miss him, too."

*'But not nearly as much as you do, Sie. Stop being so stubborn. He knows what the disease means, and he doesn't care. Doesn't that say a lot about him?'*

She ignored the voice in her head. Sure it said a lot about him, but nothing that she hadn't already known. She really didn't have the right to ask it of him, though, did she? She didn't have the right to ask it of anyone.

Kirara jerked on the leash as she let out a loud yelp. It slipped through Sierra's fingers, and she hollered as the dog darted away. "Kirara!"

Breaking into a sprint as she tried to catch the dog, Sierra muttered under her breath. It was her own fault for not holding the leash tight enough. As she weaved her way through the crowd on the sidewalk, Sierra stopped suddenly, a gasp lodging in her throat as Kirara came into view.

The dog must have smelled him. Toga knelt down with her, talking to her in hushed tones as Kirara yipped and wagged her tail happily. For some reason, the sight of him with her puppy sent a sharp, aching pain straight through her; a pain that only grew worse as he slowly lifted his chin, as his eyes locked with hers.

“Toga.”

He tried to smile. He really did. The expression looked more like a grimace, and he held out Kirara’s leash. “You look well.”

“Thanks,” she said as she hesitantly took the dog’s leash from him. Her fingertips brushed his hand, and she winced as she heard his sharp inhalation. “I . . . I need to go. I’ve got some copies to proof, and . . . yeah.” She swallowed the lump growing in her throat and blinked quickly as tears started to form. “Take care, Toga.”

“You, too,” he answered as she hurried past him, stumbling blindly to her apartment building. Her heart expanded as her chest contracted. The resulting pain made her gasp for breath as she closed the door of the building behind herself, blocking out the image of him, standing there on the sidewalk, of the unsteady brightness in his gaze as he watched her go.

Trudging up the stairs to her apartment, Sierra felt the tears sliding down her cheeks. She didn’t try to stop them. Kirara whimpered. Sierra didn’t even try to delude herself into thinking that the puppy was unhappy because she was. No, Kirara was sad because they’d left Toga on the street below.

Closing the door behind herself, Sierra unfastened the leash and hung it up before dropping the bag of dog biscuits into the trash since Kirara didn’t want them. Her coat fell on the floor and she picked it up as the phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey, brat. Ma told me what the doctor said. You okay?”

Sierra managed a little smile at the concern in Brent's voice. "I'm still kicking."

Her brother hesitated before speaking again. "How's that pretty boy of yours treating you?"

Sierra winced. "He, uh . . . we broke up," she said as she tried to keep the sound of her tears out of her voice.

"Son of a . . . couldn't take it, huh? Little bastard . . . I knew it!"

"Brent, it wasn't like that! I don't want to talk about it."

"Damn, Sierra! Why do you always pick the assholes?"

"He's not," she argued, gripping her forehead and rubbing furiously. "It wasn't like that!"

"You need anything? Anything at all?"

She sighed. "No, but thanks."

"You sure? I'd be happy to hunt that fucker down for you and skewer his balls to the wall."

"Look, I said it wasn't like that, okay? I've got to go. Just let it go, Brent. I don't want to talk about it."

Before he could answer, she hung up then turned the answering machine on before turning the ringer off.

With a sniffle as she wiped her cheeks, Sierra stumbled toward the bathroom. *'Tears in the shower don't count,'* she thought with a wince.

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Toga set the contract aside and pulled his glasses off, rubbing his eye with the knuckle of his index finger—a habit he'd picked up early on to keep his claws

away from his eyes. The next big contract in Kari's workload wasn't to be finalized for another week, and since he'd been suckered into helping her catch whoever was trying to set her up, he also had already asked the girls in legal to draw up a second one, just in case.

He wasn't sure if he really bought into Kari's theory but he did have to admit that she wasn't scatterbrained. There wasn't a good reason for her to be losing so many contracts otherwise. Something wasn't right, but he knew from prior experience how to tell when someone was lying. He could tell when their body temperature spiked, could scent the discomfort in them as they tried to do it. It was one of the first lessons that Sesshoumaru had taught him. Kari wasn't lying.

A sardonic smile surfaced on Toga's face at the thought of his father. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that Sesshoumaru, if he knew, was probably as happy as he'd ever been. At least someone would be thankful for the breakup.

The trouble was, it wasn't getting any easier. Every day seemed to get a little harder to deal with, a little more mundane, a little more hurtful. Every morning brought on a new ache in his chest, a pain that got worse and worse, tighter and tighter, and Toga had to wonder if he was really losing his mind, after all.

He saw Sierra everywhere, even places where he knew she couldn't be. He'd glance around and see her only to look again and find that she wasn't really there.

He'd even started to wonder if he had dreamed her up, until this afternoon. When he'd heard Kirara's happy bark, his first instinct was to run, knowing that Sierra couldn't be far behind. She ran out of the crowd, her cheeks pinked from the exertion of chasing down the pup, her eyes bright, sparkling, her hair mussed by the wind . . .

And he hadn't realized that just seeing her, looking at her, yet unable to reach out to her would hurt so badly. He'd never felt so desperate before, never felt so empty. Watching her disappear into her apartment building as the scent of her tears assailed him . . . it was all he could do not to charge in after her, to beg her to love him, because not being with her was enough to kill him . . .

The jarring trill of the telephone jerked him out of his glum musings. Grimacing as he checked the caller ID, Toga sighed but answered. "Yes, Aiko?"

Aiko's pleasant laughter rippled over him, the familiarity an instant balm on his frayed nerves. "Toga! Just the dog I wanted to talk to."

He chuckled though it sounded a little hollow. "Aren't there enough dogs in Tokyo for you?"

"None I call brother," she quipped. "So . . . how are you?"

"Never better," he lied with a wince.

"Really," she countered, her voice giving away her disbelief. "You're saying Aunt Gome was wrong then?"

"Aunt Gome?"

"Sure . . . I saw her a little while ago. She said she's been having one of her feelings . . . she said you're upset."

He sighed. If it wasn't bad enough that everyone else in the family could sniff out emotions, he had to be blessed with a clairvoyant aunt blessed with an overabundance of miko power, and with that power came the intuition that was rarely wrong. "If that's the case, why didn't she call me?"

"I told her I would . . . I thought maybe you could use some sisterly advice."

"Since when do you give advice?"

"Since I surpassed you mentally . . . at about five."

"Oi!"

She giggled. "Seriously, though . . . is something wrong? With you and Sierra?"

"Sort of . . . I'll live."

"Uh oh . . . you sound as depressed as Ryo was last week."

"Why was he depressed?"

Aiko snorted indelicately. "He blew up his transmission—again—and Nezumi raked him over the coals for it. I swear, there are moments I think he just might be scared of her . . ."

Toga grinned a little. Nezumi was Ryomaru and Kichiro's best friend—and a mechanic. It was a mystery to him how a nice girl like Nezumi had ever gotten mixed up with those baka cousins of his. "Maybe she should whack him a good one with one of her wrenches."

"Nah . . . might hurt the wrench; they're so thick-headed . . . sort of like Uncle Inu, just not nearly as endearing for it."

"It's no wonder. She's smarter than both of them put together."

"Well . . ." Aiko agreed then sighed. "So is there trouble in paradise?"

"I guess you could say that," he admitted.

"You going to tell me more or do I need to have Mother give you a call?"

He winced. "We're just . . . uh . . . not together anymore."

Aiko uttered a sympathetic 'aww'. "What did you do?"

"Me?" he sputtered indignantly. "Why did I have to do anything?"

"Come off it, Toga. You're not a saint. You're a baka. I know you did something, so spit it out so I can help you fix it."

He smiled sadly. "You can't fix it, Aiko. No one can."

"Shows what you know. Women are far better 'fixers' than you men. If it weren't for women's abilities to correct men's mistakes, the world would have a lot of single people in it. Now spill your guts."

"Seriously, Aiko, it isn't like that."

"Don't make me come over there," she threatened. "You know I hate flying, but I'll do it, if I have to."

“Why?”

She sighed. “Because . . . Aunt Gome said something else.”

“What?” he made himself ask.

“She said that Sierra has a familiar aura. She said that Sierra belongs with you, and you know Aunt Gome is never wrong on this.”

“What do you mean, she’s never wrong? She closed the well because she thought that Uncle Yasha belonged with Kikyou!”

“Duh, Toga! No woman is good at knowing this sort of thing about herself! Cut Aunt Gome some slack or I’ll tell her you doubted her abilities, and you know what she’ll do then.”

Toga winced. Yes, he had a good idea what she’d do. She’d hustle Uncle Yasha onto the next transcontinental flight bound for the USA, that was what . . . “She’ll never get Uncle Yasha on a plane,” he countered.

Aiko snorted. “It was Uncle Inu’s suggestion.”

“Kami, she told Uncle Yasha about her feeling?”

“And Mama.”

Toga sighed. He was—what was that slang? Ah, yes. He was screwed. “Listen, Aiko, I appreciate your concern, but really, there isn’t a damn thing anyone can do to change her mind. I’ve tried. It isn’t simple.”

“Toga,” Aiko said softly in reaction to his rising tone, “we’re just concerned because we care. All of us.—even Father.”

“I find that difficult to believe.”

“He asks if anyone has spoken with you lately.”

“So he hasn’t found someone else to control then? Jaken’s remains are in the mausoleum. He could use Tenseiga on him . . .”

"That's not funny," she chided with a giggle. "Anyway . . . is there really nothing any of us can do? Maybe if one of us talked to Sierra—"

"Absolutely not."

Aiko sighed. "Promise me something? You'll call if you need us?"

Toga swallowed a suspect lump that rose to choke him. "Yeah."

The knock on the door interrupted his concentration, and Toga blew out a deep breath. "I've got to go. Someone's here."

"Maybe it's Sierra! I'll cross my fingers for you!"

"Bye, Aiko."

He hung up before she could say anything else.

Dropping the phone on the sofa as he strode around it toward the door, Toga frowned at the scent of his visitor. He knew that scent . . .

Toga barely got the door open when Brent Crawford swung at him. His fist connected with Toga's jaw, and had it been anyone else, they probably would have gone flying. Toga's head snapped to the side but he didn't budge. The fist flew at him again. Toga dodged it easily.

"Is there a reason," Toga asked as he sidestepped another fist, "that you're trying to hit me?"

"You bet there is, bastard! What the hell did you do to my sister?" Brent bellowed as he swung again—and missed.

"Oh, that," Toga remarked dryly as he backed up, dodging punches.

"Yeah, that! Just because she has the gene, you left her? What kind of jackass are you?"

"The worst kind," Toga agreed as he ducked again. "I won't fight you."

"Like you have a choice!"



# ~ ~ Chapter 31 ~ ~

## ~ L oneliness ~

"So you've heard."

Sesshoumaru sat back in his desk chair and nodded slowly as Kagura stepped into the study. "I have," he agreed.

"I would have thought you'd look happier about it."

Dropping his glasses on the desk calendar, Sesshoumaru sat back and gazed at his mate with a marked frown. "Why would you believe that?"

Kagura shrugged. "Don't pretend to be concerned. You didn't want him to be with Sierra. You did everything you could to make sure it didn't happen when she was here with him, didn't you?"

"Just because I didn't want him to be with a mortal does not mean I would see him unhappy."

"Would you give him your blessing if she is the one his blood has chosen?"

"It shall not come to that."

Kagura shook her head. "Don't be foolish! Simply because you don't want him to be with a mortal does not mean that his youkai won't respond to her. You are the Inu no Taisho, but even you cannot dictate your son's heart or his blood."

Sesshoumaru strode over to the sideboard to pour himself a glass of water. "His youkai blood is like mine. It shall not choose a human."

"Then you really are a fool. The very things that mark Toga as your son are the very reasons that his blood might well choose a human. He's just as stubborn as

you, just as set in his beliefs, just as willing to fight for what he believes in his heart . . . Do not deny him the happiness he deserves.”

“I will not yield.”

“And I will not stand by and watch you chase away your only son!”

Sesshoumaru squeezed the glass in his hand. It cracked then shattered in his grip. “What do you want from me?”

Kagura threw up her hands in complete consternation as she pinned her mate with a glare. “I want you to listen to him, for once! Listen to him before we lose him!”

“I will listen when he speaks reason.”

“And if his youkai has already chosen the girl?”

He didn’t answer right away as he stared out the window at the gathering night. “Again I shall say his youkai would not dishonor my dictates, as both his father as well as Inu no Taisho.”

“But if it has?” Kagura asked again.

Sesshoumaru slowly turned to stare at his mate. “If it has . . . it can be ignored.”

Kagura shook her head and stormed toward the door, mumbling under her breath about baka mates, wind fans, and general mayhem.

“Where are you going, Kagura?” he called after her.

She stopped in the doorway but didn’t look back at him. “I think I’ll call InuYasha. Kagome said he’s getting a little rusty with Tetsusaiga.”

With that, she strode away, leaving a glowering Sesshoumaru in her wake.

"What are you thinking about, wench?"

Kagome sighed and shook her head slowly as she nestled closer against InuYasha's chest. Staring out over the forest as night fell around them, she couldn't help but appreciate the complete sense of protection that she always felt when InuYasha was near. "Toga."

He nodded slowly. "I figured as much."

"He's in trouble, InuYasha. I *know* he is."

InuYasha stared out of the corner of his eye at his mate. He knew her too well to think that he could convince her that there was nothing to worry about. Most of the time, her hunches were right. "What do you mean, in trouble?"

She made a face as she struggled to put her thoughts into words. "I mean I can sense him, his sadness, but it's more than that. It's like . . . it's like he's dying."

"Dying?"

She shook her head and bit her bottom lip thoughtfully. "A part of him, anyway . . . he's hurting."

"Did you tell Kagura this?"

Kagome pursed her lips. "No, I didn't want to scare her."

"Do you want me to do something? Go after him?"

"I don't know . . . I mean, we're related, but we aren't his parents."

InuYasha snorted. "Keh! You want I should send that bastard after him? He'd only make things worse, as if he ain't already made it bad enough."

Kagome had to agree with that. She never thought she'd see Toga openly defy Sesshoumaru, but then she didn't think Sesshoumaru would be so thick-headed about Toga's choices. "Do you think he'd talk to you? Toga, I mean?"

InuYasha shrugged as he pulled Kagome closer and stared out over his forest. The petrified tree they sat in had been there forever, it seemed. It had always

been one of his favorite perches. How many times had he sat up here with Toga, after the pup's training? He sighed. Too many times to count . . .

"Damn, I hate planes," he grumbled at last.

Kagome nodded and hugged her mate. "I know you do. He's just like one of our own, isn't he?"

InuYasha nodded. "Yeah . . . I guess he is."

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Sierra could hear herself blinking in the darkness. How many more sleepless nights would there be? She sighed. The onset of Huntington's disease normally began between the ages of thirty and forty-five, but that was just an average. It was like walking around with a bomb that you knew was going to detonate; you just didn't know when.

With a sigh, she tossed back her covers and rolled out of bed. There really wasn't any sense in lying down when she knew that she wasn't going to sleep. Wandering through the darkened apartment to the kitchen, she put a mug of water into the microwave for tea, Sierra leaned against the counter to wait.

Was Toga sleeping now? Was he awake, like she was? Was he thinking about her? Did he miss her anywhere near as much as she missed him?

Sierra shook her head as the microwave chimed. She dropped the herbal tea bag into the mug and returned to the living room, pausing long enough to flick on a lamp before she set the mug on the coffee table and sat down.

The journal lay untouched on the table beside her steeping mug of tea. In truth, she had stopped being really angry. It took too much effort. She wasn't sure when it had happened. She just didn't really care anymore. The strength she'd siphoned from Toga had long since dissipated. All that was left was a throbbing ache that wouldn't go away, a quiet pain that palpitated with the beat of her heart.

A bitter smile broke over her features, a humorless facsimile that lacked any conviction. The fear that the journal contained secrets that could hurt her was gone, too. There really wasn't anything in the world that could worsen the ache inside her, because without Toga . . .

She picked up the book; let it fall open to the first page. A short dedication by the woman—her birth mother—to a baby she called Coral—a name that meant nothing at all to Sierra . . . She skimmed it without a change in expression, turned the page and read without conviction.

'My Dearest Coral,

'You deserve some answers, and I only wish I could give them to you, myself. If you're reading this journal, then I suppose that it wasn't possible, that you won't get to hear my side of events that led to the day I chose to give you a better life, one that I couldn't provide for you.

'I was a struggling college student at the time. I met your father at a spring dorm party. He was so dashing, and I was just a naïve young thing. He was a year older than I, studying journalism. We dated for a year when it happened. It never crossed either of our minds, that we wouldn't be able to afford a baby. We were young, in love, and happy.

'I was so pleased when I learned that I was pregnant with you. It was the happiest time in my life. From the very first day I knew you were a girl, and I knew that you should be named after one of my ancestors. Legend had it that she was a strong woman, and I'll tell you more about her later. For now, let me tell you why we decided that you deserved better.

'During the middle stages of my pregnancy, I started suffering severe bouts of depression and strange moments when I would lose my balance for no apparent reason at all. It was in one of those bouts of depression that I tried to kill myself by slitting my wrists. If Jerry hadn't found me, I probably would have died, and you along with me. The doctors couldn't seem to figure out why I was so upset, so depressed. They said that some women did experience such things while they were pregnant, but to me, it wasn't normal or natural, and I feared that I would do you unintentional harm. As the depression grew worse for longer periods of time, it became apparent to the both of us that you would be in danger if we

didn't do something. After much thought, discussion, tears, and pain, we decided that you would be better off with a stable family, with the hopes that you would live a normal, happy life.

'So we gave you up, Coral, just after you were born on my twenty-third birthday. There hasn't been a day that passed since when I've not thought about you, cried over you, and hoped that somewhere in your heart that you could forgive us one day. It wasn't until five years later that the doctors were able to accurately diagnose me. Huntington's disease is a scary thing, and when I think that I may have passed this to you as my legacy, you have no idea how it pains me. Jerry and I tried to contact the agency that handled your adoption, to tell them that there was a risk to you, that you might have inherited the defective gene. They refused to pass the information along.

'We waited until you were of age, but cutting through that much red tape that had been buried for so long was difficult. We finally got your information just after your twenty-second birthday. We haven't tried to contact you yet because . . . well, because I am afraid that you will hate us for what we did to you.'

Sierra grabbed her tea and drained the mug. She supposed she ought to feel something after having so much information explained to her; anger or disgust, compassion or grief . . . yet the only thing that kept filtering through her mind was, *'What would Toga think of all this? Would he say anything at all or would he simply hold me and let me make up my own mind?'*

She winced and shook her head. *'Don't answer that . . .'*

Reading the journal as minutes turned into hours, Sierra didn't notice when the room around her brightened with the rising sun. Scanning through stories of her Irish ancestry, she wasn't paying close attention until a name leapt out at her; a name she had to stare at a few moments to make sure she'd read it right.

'The name Coral, as I said, has a history in this family. Centuries ago, there was a woman who survived after everyone else in her village was destroyed. She was Japanese. They called her a 'youkai exterminator', and her name was Sango, and in Japanese, that means

'coral'. She married a monk named Miroku after they fought a great evil. Half-man, half-youkai, this devil's name was Naraku, and along with a legendary hanyou named InuYasha and a mysterious priestess, they defeated Naraku, banishing him to hell.

'Well, that was the story, anyway. Who knows how much truth is in that old tale? I always thought it was romantic, though. We do know that our ancestry can be traced back to Japan, however, so there is at least that truth. I hope you, Coral, will live up to such a great story. I hope you will be able to add lore of your own to these tales.

'There you have it. The story of who you are, of how you came to be where you are. I do not ask that you don't hate me. I only wanted you to know. I am sorry if I hurt you. That was never our intent. Be happy because whether you develop Huntington's disease or not, that was the only wish I'd ever had for you.

'Always in my heart,  
'Your Mother.'

Sierra snapped the journal closed and set it aside.

InuYasha? Uncle Yasha? And the mysterious miko, Kagome . . . Aunt Gome . . . The stories Toga had told her, about the Sacred Jewel of Four Souls—the Shikon no Tama, about the battle with an evil hanyou, Naraku . . . She pressed her hand against her forehead as she frowned at the journal. Why did everything seem to lead back to Toga?

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Toga stared at the computer with a marked frown, idly thumping the pen in his fingers against his cheek. '*Kami, this is worse than watching grass grow,*' he thought with a grimace. The camera Kari had placed in her office hadn't caught a thing. The Lutz-Boeing contract lay carelessly atop her briefcase. Toga had figured if any of the contracts would mysteriously disappear, it would be that one. The multi-billion-dollar proposal was one of the highest-profile mergers, both in assets as well as in press coverage. If someone really was trying to make Kari look bad, that would be the one to do it.

“Anything?”

Toga didn't look up from the monitor as he shook his head. Kari sighed and came around his desk, leaning on the back of his chair as she gazed over his shoulder at the monitor, too. “I swear, Toga, I'm not crazy.”

“I didn't say you were,” Toga replied. “It doesn't look like you're going to have any trouble tonight, anyway. I'll keep an eye on this until you leave.”

Kari nodded and headed out of the office. “Thanks again, Toga.”

He shrugged.

Twenty minutes later, after Kari finally finished gathering the work she was taking home with her and after Toga got his own things together; he took to the stairs to avoid the congestion around the elevators. Pushing through the doors into the parking garage with a tired sigh, he strode to his SUV without slowing his pace.

Tossing his attaché case into the passenger seat, Toga frowned as the sound of a stalling engine cut through the preoccupation in his mind. Glancing over with a marked frown, he shook his head slowly as he crossed his arms over his chest, waiting to see how long it would take before Kari realized that her car wasn't about to start and gave up.

*'Five minutes,'* he thought as he glanced at his watch. *'Figured it'd take her longer than that.'* Then again, there was no telling just how long she'd been trying to start it before he got down here. He closed his door and leaned against his SUV as he waited for her to emerge from her vehicle.

He had to wonder if she was going to kick the car, she looked so upset. Pushing himself away from his vehicle, he strolled over as Kari popped her hood and started poking around. “You're going to make it worse, then it'll cost more to fix,” he commented.

Kari shot him a glower. “Funny, Inutaisho. This is just perfect.”

Wrinkling his nose at the oppressive fumes rising off the engine, Toga pointed at her alternator. “Your belt broke.”

She sighed. "I could fix that, you know," she informed him. "At least I could if the parts stores weren't probably all closed."

Toga shrugged. "Let me take you home. If you want, I'll bring you back tomorrow. If you're nice, I might even offer to put the belt on for you."

She looked skeptical but grinned despite herself. "For some reason, I doubt you're much good with a wrench."

"That's great; just kick me when I offer to help you."

"Are you sure it won't be any trouble? To take me home? I can get a taxi tomorrow."

Toga gestured for her to follow. "Come on. I've had enough work for one day."

Keri grabbed her briefcase and hurried over to Toga's SUV.

"I can call a taxi," she offered as she hesitated before climbing into the passenger seat.

Toga rolled his eyes. "Do you think I'll bite you or something? Come on."

Kari made a face and shifted from one foot to the other. "It's not that . . . won't Sierra be . . . mad?"

Toga winced inwardly at the blatant reminder. "I doubt it. We aren't together anymore."

Kari looked stunned. "I'm so sorry . . . I didn't know . . ."

He shook his head and gestured for her to hurry up. She finally climbed in and closed the door, remaining silent as he maneuvered out of the parking garage, stopping long enough to explain to the security guards that Kari's car would be there all night.

At the third stoplight when he intercepted her concentrated stare for the tenth time, Toga sighed. "Did I grow horns or something?"

"Sorry," she mumbled as her cheeks reddened.

Toga blinked in surprise. He didn't remember seeing her blush before. Wisely hiding his amusement, he coughed into his fist. "That's okay. Are you sure you don't want me to give you a ride tomorrow?"

"Yes, Toga, I'm sure. I'm not a damsel in distress, and you really don't have to be my knight in shining armor. Besides, I never did buy into the fairy tale mentality."

He shrugged. "So you're saying that women don't like to be taken care of anymore? It's an archaic notion that should have died with the advent of the automobile?"

She giggled. "Not exactly. I just don't really think there is such a thing as chivalry anymore. It's not a big deal."

"Did you develop this cynicism naturally or did you have to work at it?"

"I'm not cynical," she argued, "I'm realistic."

Toga shook his head. "You're jaded."

She laughed but stopped suddenly as she gazed at him. "You want to go get something to eat? I mean, I've got TV dinners in the freezer . . ."

Toga made a face. "Oh, kami . . . tell me you don't eat those."

She shrugged.

Considering the only thing he had planned was sitting in his window staring down at the street as he hoped for just a glimpse of Sierra, he had to admit, the idea of eating something decent did sound inviting. He was pretty sure he didn't have a thing in his own refrigerator or freezer, for that matter. Sierra normally brought food over for him. He missed that about her, too. "All right, then."

Kari smiled. "You pick the place. I'll pay. I owe you, anyway."

Toga shook his head. "You pick the place, and I'll pay."

"Ugh, tell me you're not still trying to be the hero."

Toga snorted. "Keh! I just have a macho-ego problem with letting women buy my food."

Kari shook her head as her smile widened. "You're a funny guy, Toga."

Toga sighed. "You have no idea."

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"Why did you come to the States? Your father's rich, right? Didn't you work for him?"

Toga shrugged as he jammed his hands into his pockets as they wandered down the street from the small Italian eatery toward Kari's apartment building. "My father and I don't see eye to eye," he supplied.

"Hmm. Sounds like me and my father. He's old-school. Thinks women should be home, barefoot and pregnant."

"And you don't agree?"

Kari grinned. "Never was one for changing diapers."

"You're never going to have a family?"

Kari pulled her coat closer around herself. "I'll have one eventually, I guess . . . if I can find someone willing to put up with my ration of crap."

"You? Giving out crap?"

Kari grinned. "Yeah . . . who knew?"

Toga shook his head as they stopped at a corner and waited for the crossing light. He could feel her gaze on him but didn't look at her to make sure. Kari sighed. "Toga, can I ask you something?"

"Go ahead."

"I thought you and Sierra . . . I thought you were serious. Why did you break up?"

He looked away and started walking when the light changed. "She needed some time, I guess," he finally answered. "It doesn't really matter, does it?"

She stared at him for a few moments, a sad smile lighting on her lips. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"No, really. You're such a nice guy, and . . . it just stinks for you." Kari tried to smile but it looked almost more like a grimace. "For her, too."

He stopped outside her apartment building, forced a smile as he pulled his keys out of his pocket. "Thanks for dinner," he told her as he stepped back toward his vehicle.

"Why are you thanking me? You're the one who insisted on paying."

He shrugged. "You invited me."

"I'll see you Monday."

Toga nodded. "And you're sure you don't want me to take you to fix your car tomorrow?"

Kari rolled her eyes and shook her head. "It's fine." She turned to walk away but stopped and glanced back at him. "Toga?"

"Yes?"

She looked like she didn't want to say whatever it was that was on her mind. In the end, she shrugged a little offhandedly and shot him a quick smile. "Listen . . . for whatever it's worth, I think you're a pretty great guy, and . . . well, if you need someone to talk to, you've got my number."



# ~ ~ Chapter 32 ~ ~

## ~ Guilt ~

The knock on the door rattled Toga out of an exhausted sleep. With a wince as he realized he'd fallen asleep on the sofa, sitting up with his head tilted back, he rubbed his neck as the lingering waves of sleepiness dulled his senses.

Another round of knocking forced a few muttered curses as Toga stood up and shook his head before striding over to the door and jerking it open.

"Damn, pup, you look like hell."

Toga blinked in surprise as Kagome stepped forward to hug him tight. InuYasha stood with his arms folded over his chest as he watched Kagome greet her nephew. "Bad night, Toga?"

He shrugged and stepped back to admit his aunt and uncle. He didn't miss the nervous twitching of his uncle's hanyou ears, the guarded expression in his golden eyes. "You look like you're waiting for someone to jump out at you," Toga remarked mildly. "Any reason for that?"

InuYasha snorted. "Keh! There's a reason I hate planes."

"His ears kept popping the entire flight," Kagome supplied, casting her mate a concerned glance.

Toga nodded. He could commiserate. He wasn't overly fond of flying, either.

"The stewardess kept staring at him, too," Kagome mused with a little smile.

InuYasha blushed. "The concealment kept slipping. It was all I could do to keep my ears from exploding," he grouched.

"It was really because he's so cute," Kagome told Toga.

“Oi!”

Toga chuckled. “Why are you two here?”

Kagome shrugged, trying for nonchalance as she hugged Toga again. “We were in the neighborhood?”

“Right.”

InuYasha strode toward the kitchen for a glass of water. “Truth, wench. She was worried about you.”

Toga grimaced. “You were, huh?”

Kagome leveled a no-nonsense look at her nephew. “Yes, I was. What would make me feel like there’s something wrong?”

Toga faked a smile at his far-too-perceptive aunt as he headed down the hallway toward his bedroom. “Not a thing. I hate to do this, but I’ve got to go to work, so I’d better get changed.”

“So . . . wanna tell me why Kagome is having such strong feelings?”

Toga winced. He hadn’t really thought that his uncle would leave it alone, but he had hoped . . . “It’s fine.”

InuYasha snorted indelicately as he leaned back against the wall. “Fine, huh? Want to tell me why I don’t believe you?”

Toga discarded his tee-shirt on the bed and strode over to retrieve a crisp white cotton dress shirt. “I have no idea, Uncle Yasha.”

“Keh. And I don’t breathe.”

Deliberately taking his time with the buttons of his shirt, Toga shrugged off-handedly and grabbed a pair of black slacks. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing can be done.”

InuYasha’s eyebrows shot up. “What happened?”

"Sierra and I . . . we aren't together anymore, that's all."

InuYasha glowered at the floor as he digested that. Toga could feel his uncle's gaze on him moments later even though he didn't look to confirm it. "Toga, let me ask you something, and you damn well better give me a straight answer."

Wincing inwardly as Toga carefully tied his necktie, he nodded once as he stared into the mirror on the back of his door. "All right."

"Did your youkai blood choose her?"

He had never lied to Uncle Yasha before. He didn't want to do it now. Trouble was, he couldn't tell him the truth, either. No, Uncle Yasha would tell Aunt Gome, and Aunt Gome would run over to Sierra's apartment to try to make everything all right. It was her nature to do that. Remembering the sadness, the stricken, broken look on Sierra's face, though . . . He couldn't hurt her more. Forcing a smile, he shrugged as he sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on his socks and dress shoes. "Of course not. Father would blow an ass gasket, wouldn't he?"

InuYasha shook his head slowly. "This ain't about that bastard of a father of yours. It's about you. You're not lying to me, are you?"

"Keh. As if I ever could," Toga remarked dryly.

"I'll believe you, pup, because you ain't never lied to me before," InuYasha stated mildly, "but if I find out you're lying, I swear I'll fucking kick your scrawny ass. You got that?"

Toga shrugged. "Of course, Uncle Yasha. Loud and clear."

InuYasha watched as Toga brushed past him into the hallway. He heard Kagome tell him to have a good day before the door closed softly in his wake. Moments later, Kagome touched InuYasha's arm and smiled hesitantly. "Did he tell you anything?"

He shifted his gaze to the side, regarding Kagome with his knowing stare. "Keh. Like you weren't listening."

Kagome didn't deny it. "He was lying to you."

InuYasha nodded slowly. "He was."

"And?" she asked when InuYasha remained quiet.

"And," InuYasha went on as he straightened up and faced his mate, "there ain't a damn thing I can do to get the truth out of him."

Kagome made a face as she whirled on her heel to stomp out of the room. InuYasha gently caught her arm. "Let go, InuYasha. Whatever is bothering him can't be good, and I'm going to find out what it is."

"Forget it, wench. You can't just pester the truth out of him."

Kagome snorted. "And who says I was going to ask him?"

InuYasha's golden gaze narrowed. "Oh, no, you're not."

"Maybe I can fix it," Kagome explained. "Maybe they just had a disagreement."

InuYasha shook his head. "Or maybe you'll just make it worse. Let the pup deal with it."

"If he was one of our own and not Toga, you'd—"

"Say the same damn thing, wench. You can't spend your life trying to fix everyone else's problems."

Kagome opened her mouth to argue but stopped with a concerned frown as InuYasha winced and rubbed his forehead with a discernibly shaky hand. "That plane really got to you, didn't it?" she asked softly.

InuYasha snorted but his tone was missing much of its caustic bite. "Keh. I'll live."

She shook her head and tugged on his arm. "Toga's got a guest room. I want you to lie down awhile."

"Are you going to lie down with me?"

He didn't miss her slight grimace.

"Kagome, you're not sneaking out to find her, got that?"

Kagome heaved a sigh and nodded slowly, giving in with all the ill-grace she could muster. InuYasha finally let her lead him across the hall to the spare room.

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"Well?"

Toga glanced up from his computer monitor at Kari and shook his head. "Nothing."

She sighed and shook her head as she leaned in the doorway. "Nuts."

Leaning back in his chair as he idly tapped his pen on the desk calendar, Toga shook his head. "You don't think they know the office is being monitored, do you?"

Kari shrugged. "How could they?" She sighed. "Maybe they won't try it this time."

"Maybe," he agreed though his tone said otherwise. He glanced over at her and shrugged. "Something doesn't feel right . . . The signing is tomorrow, isn't it?"

She rubbed her temple. "Yep."

"You've got the spare, right?"

"Guarding that contract with my life," she remarked with a rueful smile.

Kari checked her watch as she nodded. "I'm going to head down to the deli to get a sandwich. You want anything?"

Toga shook his head slowly, waving her off as he turned his attention back to the computer monitor. "No, thanks."

"You sure? I feel kind of bad, leaving you here, watching my office."

He snorted as his phone rang. Kari waved as she strode out of Toga's office. "Inutaisho."

The smooth alto of the receptionist on the first floor greeted him. "Mr. Inutaisho, you've got visitors—Mr. and Mrs. Izayoi."

He kept his gaze on the computer monitor as he grinned slightly. "Ah, can you send them up?"

"Absolutely. They're on their way."

"Thanks."

He dropped the phone into the cradle and resumed the cadence of his pen tapping against the desk calendar. Uncle Yasha and Aunt Gome had probably figured out that Toga didn't have any food in his apartment, to speak of. He braced himself for 'The Lecture' that Kagome would undoubtedly blister his ears with.

*'This is about as exciting as watching paint dry,'* Toga mused with an inward grimace. Still he watched the monitor, unable to shake the feeling that something was about to happen.

"Oi, pup . . . what's with the serious lack of ramen in your apartment?"

Toga grinned as he glanced over at InuYasha. Kagome followed him into the office and sat down, smoothing her brown tweed skirt before she folded her hands together in her lap. "Yeah . . . I forgot about that . . . if someone had told me they were coming, I'd have stocked up. I promise you, though, most of the ramen around here is shameful unless you sniff out a Japanese grocer."

InuYasha wrinkled his nose. "Keh. I knew we should have tried to sneak some through customs."

Kagome rolled her eyes and shook her head but smiled at InuYasha's commentary. "If you're busy, Toga, we can leave."

"No, we can't," InuYasha insisted, shooting Kagome a pointed look.

Toga frowned. "You can't?"

"Nope," InuYasha answered as he leaned back against the wall beside the door.

"I need to be watched at work now?"

InuYasha shrugged. "Nope. Kagome's just trying to stick her nose where it don't need to be."

Toga blinked as he stared at his aunt. "I wish you wouldn't," he finally said, dropping any pretense that he didn't know what Uncle Yasha meant.

Kagome sighed. "Have you tried to fix it?"

Toga forced a small smile. "It's beyond fixing, I think."

"It's never beyond fixing," she chided gently.

Toga started to answer when movement on the computer screen caught his attention. He sat up straighter as his gaze narrowed as Mike Sampson slipped into view of the camera. Glancing around quickly to make sure he was alone, he opened Kari's attaché case and rifled through it for the contract. "That bastard!" Toga cut in as he shot out of his chair and strode around his desk toward the door, interrupting Kagome's gentle insistence that he talk to Sierra. "Something's happening."

InuYasha was right behind him as Toga slammed open Kari's office door. Mike whirled around, red-faced, with the contract still in his hands. "T-Toga . . . something wrong?"

Toga nodded toward the contract in his employer's hands. "So you have been trying to make Kari look incompetent. Why don't you just fire her, if you don't want her working here?"

Mike's face reddened a little more as he puffed his chest out, rife with indignant anger. "Just what are you accusing me of, Inutaisho? I didn't do a damn thing."

"Did you take the other contracts, too?" Toga countered.

"What's going on?" InuYasha demanded.

"Listen, I have every right to check over this contract!" Mike sneered, his scalp reddening under his thinning hairline.

"Of course you do," Toga agreed evenly. "Just as Kari has every right to work here since you *did* hire her."

"Just what are you insinuating?"

"Not a damn thing," Toga retorted.

"What the hell is going on here?" InuYasha demanded again.

Toga didn't take his eyes off his boss. "He's been taking a co-worker's contracts to make her look incompetent so he can fire her."

InuYasha shook his head slowly. "Then why the hell did you hire her?"

Mike bristled under the double scrutiny of the youkai and hanyou. "I've never wanted her here! It doesn't matter, anyway. Don't be stupid, Inutaisho. I hired you. I can fire you, too. You'll never work in this line again."

Irritated with the man's threats, Toga shot forward, grabbed the man by the throat. Mike's face deepened in color as Toga restricted his air flow. "You can keep your fucking job, Sampson. I don't need it anymore, but you will promise that you're done trying to set Kari up. If you want to get rid of her then I suggest you suck it up and do it the right way. What you've been doing is pitiful."

"That's enough, pup," InuYasha said.

Toga held on for a moment longer before shoving Mike away. The man stumbled into the desk behind him, gripping his neck and rubbing as he wheezed to catch his breath. "I ought to have you arrested," he mumbled though his tone lacked any real conviction.

Toga snorted as he headed toward the door. He stopped on the threshold and peered back over his shoulder at his ex-employer. "By the way, it doesn't matter if you destroy that contract or not. Kari's got another one already drawn up."

He didn't bother stopping in his office. With every step he took, his anger grew hotter and fiercer. Slamming open the stairwell door, Toga was vaguely aware of Kagome and InuYasha's voices behind him. The feeling that he'd just severed his last tie to Sierra was enough to further his irritation as he ran down the stairs toward the parking garage below.

He felt as though he was coming apart at the seams, as though his last vestiges of sanity were rapidly slipping away from him. Realization hit him hard as he shoved the door to the parking garage open with a resounding thump. He really didn't have anything left here, at all.

*'I . . . I can't leave her . . .'*

He winced as Sierra's eyes flashed through his head.

*'Sierra . . .'*

"Toga? You okay?"

Shaking his head as he blinked to clear his mind, Toga stared at Kari. Eyebrows drawn down in a marked frown, she tilted her head to the side as. "I caught Mike in your office with the contract. He's been trying to find a reason to fire you."

She looked stunned as she slowly shook her head. "Oh, my God . . . I thought . . . I mean, I suspected . . ."

Toga shrugged. "Yeah, well, he won't do it anymore."

"Thanks, Toga . . . you have no idea how much this means to me!"

He shook his head and strode toward his vehicle, needing to distance himself from this place. "Don't worry about it."

She caught his hand as he started to walk away. He stopped and turned back to face her. "No, I mean it . . . I've never had a friend like you. Thanks."

"I gotta go."

“Toga?” A fleeting glimpse of emotion filtered over her features; a frightening glimpse into something he didn’t want to understand. Toga tried to pull away. Before he could figure out what she was about to do, she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her body against his as she pulled his face down into a kiss.

Shock made him stand still for a moment. His brain seemed to slow then stop as a loud bang and a sharp gasp permeated his foggy mind. “What the—?” InuYasha’s voice registered in his head but sounded so far away.

Sierra’s face shot through his mind, and Toga reacted. A sickened feeling, the shame of betrayal rifled through him; the bitter tinge of bile rose in his throat to choke him, and Toga shoved Kari away from him as he uttered a low but fierce growl.

She stumbled. InuYasha caught her, letting go as soon as Kari regained her balance. Her face was bright red, and she cleared her throat nervously. “Sorry,” she murmured.

Toga shook his head, unable to meet his uncle’s questioning stare. Kagome touched his arm. He jerked away, casting Kagome a wild-eyed glance before he turned and strode toward his SUV.

*‘Kami, what have I done . . . ? Sierra . . . damn it all . . . I didn’t mean . . .’*

He flinched. In the end, all the excuses in the world wouldn’t make him feel any less like a bastard. It was the ultimate betrayal, wasn’t it? To kiss another . . .

A painful burning erupted in his stomach; a vicious nausea that he couldn’t swallow or repress. It didn’t matter at all, not in his mind, that he hadn’t wanted Kari to kiss him. It didn’t matter when the pain of his unwitting betrayal scalded him; branded him with the invisible surge of disgust, the intangible mark of one who had committed the ultimate treason. Whether she was with him or not, she had become a part of him as singularly as his own flesh and blood. Treason against himself? Yes, that was exactly what it was . . .

He didn’t see the man standing beside his car nearby. The man’s expression shifted from shock to surprise and lastly to disgusted anger. Getting back into his car, he watched Toga’s escape in his rear view mirror, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel as rage twisted his guts, brought a sneer to his lips.



# ~ ~ Chapter 33 ~ ~

## ~ Seeking Refuge ~

Toga dropped the phone on the sofa and sighed as he leaned forward, resting his elbow on his knee as he let his forehead fall into his open palm. *'Damn it! What the hell . . . how did that even happen?'* Squeezing his eyes closed, he berated himself. *'Baka! How could I . . . ? Sierra . . . !'*

"You don't have to do this, you know."

Toga didn't acknowledge Kagome's soft words as she sat down beside him. "Where's Uncle Yasha?"

Kagome sighed. "He's lying down. The flight was harder on him than he likes to admit." She paused. Toga could sense the thoughts forming in her mind and winced inwardly. "You can't run away, Toga. You're not a coward."

He shook his head as he slowly met Kagome's worried gaze. "It isn't about being a coward, Aunt Gome. I . . . There's nothing left for me here."

"Are you sure, though? Are you really ready to go home?"

"I'll have to go, anyway. The only reason I was here was because of my work visa. Since I don't have a job anymore, then it'll be taken away."

Kagome smiled sadly. "You know, Toga, when you were a child, I did everything I could think of to make you smile, and you always had one for me. What happened to that little boy?"

He couldn't quite bring himself to force one, even for Kagome. "You can't always fix things for me, Aunt Gome. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do."

Toga's thoughtful expression countered Kagome's claim. "Are you sure?"

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head at him. "Now you sound like InuYasha. Of course I'm sure." She sighed as she reached out and placed her hand on his. "Just remember: I'm always willing to listen."

Toga nodded and patted her hand before standing up. "I'm going for a walk."

He grabbed his coat off the rack behind the door and strode out the door before Kagome could try to stop him.

The air on the streets was oppressive, heavy. Falling like a thick fog, a stifling blanket, it settled over him like a funeral shroud. It was too hard to think, too hard to breathe, too hard to do anything at all. Toga wandered down the street, pausing outside the Italian restaurant Sierra loved so much.

He had booked a midnight flight out, one-way, non-stop to Tokyo. Uncle Yasha hadn't complained but had shot him a disbelieving stare when Toga had suggested that they remain here for a few days. There just wasn't anything left for him here. Even if Sierra wanted him back, he couldn't shake the feeling that he'd somehow been responsible for that kiss in the parking garage.

Anger had given way to bitterness, and bitterness had fostered sadness. Guilt assailed him, wave after wave of a nauseating betrayal. Something he'd engineered in his inability to see Kari's feelings, he figured. Either way, he'd done what was unthinkable. He'd betrayed the mate of his youkai.

He knew the dictates, the thing that must be done. In order to gain her forgiveness . . . But the rest would be up to her.

Toga jammed his hands in his pockets as he hunched his shoulders forward and turned around. There really wasn't any use in procrastinating. His heart grew a little heavier with every step he took, a pain in his chest grew more relentless, more consuming.

*'Sierra . . . I'm sorry . . .'*

Stopping on the corner, he slowly lifted his gaze to stare up at her window. Her light was on. Her car was parked on the street.

People hurried past him on the street, couples holding hands, laughing friends, families with children. Toga felt lost, alone, sealed away from everything around him. The sound of the city muffled, dimmed, as a shadow of movement flickered across the sheer curtains that covered Sierra's window. How had everything gone so wrong? How had it spun away from him?

He stepped toward the building, his feet heavy, leaden. It was the hardest thing he'd ever done, to close the distance, to climb the stairs. His hand was shaking as he reached out to touch the button marked S. Crawford. A man Toga vaguely recognized as one of Sierra's neighbors opened the door. He nodded at Toga and held the door open. Toga mumbled his thanks as he brushed past the man into the sanctity of the apartment building foyer.

Every step contained a memory. How many times had he walked this path before? He tried to block it from his mind, tried not to feel the sharp pain as he tried to understand that it was the last time he would travel this way again. She was close enough that he could make out her scent, apple blossoms mingling with stale air, old carpet, other people. Reassuring and painful just the same, the smell of her was a balm and a torment, a calming pain.

Stepping off the stairs onto the landing, Toga winced as he stared at her door. Drawing a few deep breaths as he tried to tell himself that he had to do this, he forced himself to move forward, raised his hand to knock.

Sierra opened the door and gasped as her hands fell away from her coat. She stepped back as though she didn't dare remain too close to him, her eyes brightened as her cheeks flushed, and just for a moment, she looked like she might be glad to see him. "Toga."

Slowly making himself meet her gaze, Toga couldn't even summon a smile as he lingered in the doorway. Kirara barked happily, lunging at his feet, jumping up to lick his hands. "I wanted to tell you," he said quietly, wincing inwardly at the shock that surfaced on her face. "I quit my job. I'm going home. I'm leaving tonight."

She leaned back against the counter as if her legs wouldn't support her anymore. The color leeches from her skin as her shocked gaze slipped away from his. "I . . . I see."

Toga sighed. "Sierra, there's . . . there's something I have to tell you before I go."

Sierra nodded stiffly, staring at her feet as her eyebrows drew together in a frown. "Toga . . ."

"I . . . I kissed her . . . Kari, I mean."

Sierra's face snapped to the side as she frowned in confusion; as she shook her head slowly. "What?"

Toga lifted his hands, a pleading gesture, then dropped them again as his desire to explain vanished. The upset in her eyes, the pain that surrounded her cut him deep, rattled through him like frigid winter air. It numbed his body, numbed his mind. It couldn't numb his heart. "I . . . kissed her," he said softly, unable to meet her gaze.

She choked out a harsh laugh, a stifled sob as she shook her head. The look on her face devastated him, ripped the rest of his tattered soul to shreds. "It's all right, Toga," she whispered hoarsely. "You . . . you don't owe me any explanations."

"Sierra—"

She shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest, holding herself tight. "Did you choose her to hurt me?"

Toga stepped forward but stopped when her hands shot out to ward him off. He winced. "No, I—"

"Maybe it's better this way," she whispered, her chin trembling, tears filling her gaze but wouldn't spill over. She looked away, drew an unsteady breath, closed her eyes as a tear slipped down her cheek. "I think you should go."

Toga nodded, swallowing hard. He turned slowly and walked out, pulling the door closed behind him. He heard her muffled sob as pain exploded in his heart, blinding him for just a moment. She had sealed his fate, hadn't she?

And yet she didn't even know . . .

Sierra raised her left hand to cover her mouth as she swallowed back another sob.

*'Toga . . . how could you?'*

It didn't help, either, when she told herself that she didn't have a say in it. She was the one who wanted him to move on, wasn't she?

*'But her? Kari?'*

Sierra choked on a sob as Kirara whined at the door. That wasn't really it. It wouldn't matter who the girl was. It would still hurt, and it would still bother her, because the honest truth was that she hadn't expected him to comply with her wishes, at all. How selfish was she, to wish that he had tried just a little bit harder, to convince her that he wanted to stay with her?

*'Nice, Sie. You don't want him but you don't want anyone else to have him, either? Treat him like a toy, you spoiled brat. Get him out to play with when it's convenient for you, and then what? Put him away to wait for you to decide that he deserves to come out again? What in the world is wrong with you?'*

She sniffled and stumbled over to the sofa, sinking down on it as she dropped her face into her hands. She hated herself for what she'd done to Toga. She hated herself for feeling so betrayed, so hurt. She hated the circumstances that had been so cruel. She hated Kari for being the one that Toga had chosen to move on with.

And yet she couldn't hate Toga. She wanted to. She wanted to be angry, to be bitter. Maybe it would make everything easier. She couldn't even have that.

The phone rang, and Sierra dried her eyes, grabbing the handset off the coffee table and turning it on without bothering to check the caller ID. "Hello?" she answered, hoping her voice didn't give away her emotions.

"Sierra? You okay?"

She winced at the sound of Brent's concerned tone. "Oh, hey. Yeah, I was . . . just watching a movie," she lied. "Guess I should stop watching tear-jerkers."

Brent was silent for a moment, contemplating his words. She knew he didn't believe her. Sierra sat back and waited. "I, uh . . . I went to see Toga today," he finally ventured.

Sierra winced. "Oh?"

Brent sighed. "Yeah . . . I wanted to ask him a few things."

"Did you?"

"Sierra . . . why did you two break up?"

Sierra shrugged as she scowled at the coffee table. "We . . . just did. It's not a big thing."

Brent didn't answer right away. "Are you sure it's not a big thing?"

"It's better this way. He's going back to Tokyo." She flinched. She was trying to convince herself, wasn't she? And her brother probably knew that, too.

"Sierra—"

"It's fine, Brent. He told me . . . he told me that he . . . uh . . . kissed . . . Kari."

"Did he?"

"Yeah . . . he stopped by to tell me that he was leaving tonight, and—Anyway, it's better, this way."

"Wait, I don't think—"

"I don't want to talk about it," Sierra cut in as she rubbed her temple. "Really, it's fine."

"But—"

"No, and if you don't want me to hang up on you, Brent, you'll drop it. Please. I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

Brent sighed. “. . . Okay.”

Sierra let out a deep breath. No, she really didn't want to talk about that. The idea of Toga and Kari locked in a kiss was enough to kill her inside.

Hours later, she sat in her window, staring off toward to the west. On clear nights like tonight, she could see some of the larger planes rising above the city from O'Hare Airport. With every one she watched, she wondered if that was the plane he was on.

Toga . . .

Her eyes burned, hot and dry. Tears blocked her throat, an ache that she couldn't swallow. Even now she couldn't quite make herself believe that she would never see him again.

The clock on the mantle struck midnight, then twelve-thirty. In the distance, another plane rose, and as she stared at it, as it rose higher and higher above the city, the bright lights that marked it seemed to wink at her. *'That's the one,'* she thought suddenly as a single tear slid down her cheek. She wasn't sure how she knew it. She had no idea if it really was his flight. Somewhere deep inside, though, she could feel the distance between them widening, stretching vast and painful, and she knew that her heart had boarded that plane with him.

She watched the lights until they dissipated in the night sky as a melancholy ache opened up inside her. Dulled by the space that separated them, the dimmed emotion was easier to deal with.

She stood up and wandered through the dark apartment as she told herself yet again, that this was how it should be, how it must be.

Flopping onto her bed, Sierra sighed, pressing the heels of her hands against her burning eyes. *'Now . . . if I could only believe it . . .'*

It was a long time before sleep came to her.

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Toga dropped his bag on the floor and glanced over his shoulder. "Thanks for letting me stay here."

Kichiro shrugged off-handedly. "Not a problem. Ryo's gone this week, anyway. Sesshoumaru needed him to take care of a problem."

At the mention of his father's name, Toga's back stiffened. Deliberately ignoring the topic at hand, he stared at the bed with a thoughtful frown. "Do I need to flip the mattress or anything?"

Kichiro looked confused. "Flip it?"

Toga shook his head. "Never mind."

The chime of the doorbell echoed through the house. Kichiro shrugged and headed toward the sound as Toga rubbed his hands tiredly over his face.

He ought to get a shower. He made a face. He hadn't slept at all on the plane. His ears kept popping, and his anxiety level had been too high to allow it. He sighed.

"Oi, Toga. Forget something?"

Toga's head snapped up, and by reflex, he caught the black fur that flew at him. Kichiro leaned in the doorway with a marked frown. "Thanks." Toga mumbled as he dropped Mokomoko-sama onto the bed.

"Mother said you forgot that," Kichiro remarked in a too-casual tone.

"I . . . yeah, I guess I did."

Kichiro shook his head slowly. Toga braced himself for whatever it was his cousin was going to say.

"All right, out with it," Toga finally said.

Kichiro shrugged. "You forget your car keys or your jacket. You forget to wash behind your ears or to turn on the answering machine. You forget to wipe your ass, or—"



# ~ ~ Chapter 34 ~ ~

## ~ A mbivalence ~

Toga stared around the empty house with a tired sigh. Luckily for him, the previous owner of the house was more than happy to hasten his departure when offered a little more money in compensation for his troubles. That the place lacked basically everything was of little concern. His lips twisted into a wry smile, almost a grimace. Between Kagura, Rin, and Aiko, he was pretty sure he wouldn't have to worry about lack of furnishings long, especially if he told them to have at it.

The first week after his return to Tokyo had been relatively peaceful, even with the unavoidable commotion of his family's visits. The first day, Kagura, Rin, and Aiko had showed up at different times. He'd just been able to breathe a sigh of relief when another would come waltzing through the door to fire questions at him; questions he didn't want to answer.

As much as he cared about his family, he had to admit that he really didn't want to see them. In fact, the only one he hadn't seen as yet was his father, and that was a meeting Toga could do without for at least a couple hundred years. The last thing he wanted or needed to hear was Sesshoumaru's opinion of Toga's attraction to humans.

Did it really matter anymore? Toga sighed as he turned his attention back out the window as he sank down in the wide sill. The world continued to move around him, and he just didn't care. The sky was clear despite the ever-present haze of pollution that hung over all larger cities. He figured after awhile that people just didn't notice anymore. How long would it be before Toga stopped noticing things, too?

He snorted as his gaze darkened. *'Keh! I could care less what Father has to say on it . . . it's my life, my choice . . . and the choice was made long ago.'*

Even so, he still didn't feel like dealing with Sesshoumaru. He had to admit that he was surprised that the great and powerful tai-youkai hadn't showed up yet.

"Toga? You okay?"

Stifling a sigh as he turned his head to glance at Rin as she set a plastic shopping bag on the floor, Toga couldn't muster a token smile for his adopted sister.

"Your door was unlocked," she explained with a little smile. "I brought a few things over. Mother's at the store now digging through fabric swatches and color motifs . . ." Rin winced as her smile faded. "You really don't care, do you?"

Toga shrugged as he stared out the window again. "I thought she'd enjoy that."

Rin sighed and hurried over, wrapping her arms around Toga's neck as she pressed her cheek against his forehead. "You know, we missed you. I missed you. Father missed you, too."

Toga winced and grinned wanly. "'Father', huh? You're still mad at him?"

Rin shrugged. "A little bit. Can you blame us? Father's being much too stubborn about this, and everyone agrees."

"He has his reasons, doesn't he?"

Rin snorted, which was completely unlike her normal effervescent behavior. "Maybe he does but that really doesn't give him the right to try to tell you what you can and can't feel, Toga. Anyway, I can't believe you're defending him."

Toga shook his head. "Maybe I'm tired of fighting with him."

Rin let go and sat by Toga's foot on the window sill, her eyebrows drawing together as she tried to discern what he was thinking. "Are you giving up? Going along with what Father wants just because he wills it to be that way?"

Toga sat back, turning to brace his shoulder against the glass. "Nope. I just refuse to argue it with him anymore."

"He wants to see you."

Toga didn't comment on that.

"I think he's waiting to see if you'll come to him."

"He'll be waiting awhile, then," Toga allowed. "I have no desire to argue with him again."

Rin sighed, nodding in agreement. Her expression told him that she really hadn't expected a different response. "Will you go back to work for him?"

He didn't answer that, either. Truthfully, he hadn't thought about that, at all. He had more than enough money to get by for a very long time, but there was nothing for him to do, otherwise. Just sit around and pine for the woman who didn't really want him anymore—his mate. *'Damn . . .'*

"Toga?"

He knew her tone of voice. He knew what she wanted to ask. Bracing himself for her questions, Toga waited.

"Why did you leave? Sierra, I mean. You two . . . you seemed close, when you were here for Aiko's wedding. Did something happen?"

Toga rubbed his forehead as he stubbornly avoided Rin's questioning gaze. "You could say that."

"You don't want to talk about it."

"You could say that, too."

"Toga—"

Sudden anger surged in Toga, and he stood, stalking across the empty floor as he flexed his claws. "No, Rin, you can't fix it. Aunt Gome can't fix it. Uncle Yasha can't fix it. Aiko can't fix it. Mother can't fix it. Father sure as hell can't fix it. No one can fix it, all right?"

Rin stood slowly, her eyes flashing with irritation. "Don't be stupid, Toga. Of course none of us can fix it. You're the only one who could do that, or are you really saying that it isn't worth fixing?"

Toga stopped and turned to glare at his adopted sibling. "I'm telling you, it's nobody's business, all right? Why can't you all just back the fuck off and stay out of my life?"

"Toga!"

"What?"

Indignant color blossomed in Rin's pale cheeks. "Is that what you really want? Then why did you come home?"

Toga stopped mid-stride and sighed, anger draining out of him as quickly as it had surfaced. "I don't know why."

He frowned. Maybe he *did* know why and just didn't want to put it to words. Either way, it didn't really matter now. Sierra had made her choice.

"Toga, we just want to help you, but we can't if you won't tell us what's going on."

Toga shook his head. "There's nothing to tell, Rin. We're just not . . . not together. Leave it alone."

Rin sighed, crossing her arms over her chest as she slowly nodded. "If that's what you want, Toga. Just don't forget. You've got lots of people who love you, okay?"

"Sure," he answered as Rin hurried over and braced herself against his shoulder to kiss his cheek.

"All right. I've got to get going before Shippou comes home and starts looking for me."

Toga nodded. "Thanks," he replied since the last thing he wanted, other than a confrontation with his father, was a run-in with his much-too-observant brother-in-law.

Rin turned to go but paused in the doorway, hesitating a moment before facing Toga once more. "You would tell us if there was something serious we needed to know, right?"

"Like what?"

Rin shrugged. "Like . . . anything."

Toga forced a small smile. "Why wouldn't I?"

Rin wasn't appeased with his answer, and the worried expression on her face intensified. "You tell me."

"You're worried about nothing."

"It's my job. Call me if you need me."

Toga nodded and watched as she shrugged on her coat and, with a quick wave and a blown kiss, Rin slipped out the door.

Toga sighed as he sat back down in the window sill again. He had a feeling that his family's questions were just going to get harder and harder to answer.

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*'What's she doing now?'*

Toga shook his head. He was driving himself insane with his questions, with his worries. *'She doesn't want you, baka. Well, that's not entirely true, is it? It wasn't that she didn't want you . . . she just didn't want you to watch her fall apart.'*

He winced. *'Same thing.'*

Even if she did still want him, she wouldn't take him back now, and he knew it. Because of what had happened with Kari, how could he ever expect that Sierra would? Did it matter that Kari had instigated the entire situation? *'How could it matter when it doesn't matter to me? I still . . . I betrayed Sierra, and . . . and she deserves better than that . . .'*

He sighed, hating the confines of the city that surrounded him. Though the house was on the outskirts of Tokyo, it was still close enough to be confining. The stale city air stifled him, dulled his mind as the bitter wind ripped over him. He'd thought—stupidly, he supposed—that leaving Chicago meant leaving behind his memories of Sierra. Yet he still saw her everywhere he looked. Standing on the back porch as he gazed sadly over the obstruction of too-close houses, Toga wished that he could numb his emotions as easily as the winter wind could numb fingers or noses.

“So you’ve come back, Toga, and yet you have not the courtesy of seeking out your father.”

Toga’s back stiffed as he slowly pivoted to meet Sesshoumaru’s steady gaze. There wasn’t a trace of emotion in his father’s expression, nothing to give away what he was thinking. “Father,” he acknowledged with a curt nod. “I didn’t have anything to say.”

Flicking a non-existent bit of fuzz from the immaculate cuff of his navy blue Armani jacket, Sesshoumaru deliberately took his time before speaking again. “I cannot say I am unhappy that you’ve returned. You don’t belong there.”

“It doesn’t really matter, does it? Here or there, I still won’t bend to your dictates.”

“I didn’t expect you would.”

The corner of Toga’s lips curled up in a cynical affectation of a smile. “Really.”

Sesshoumaru’s gaze brightened. He could be angry or amused. Toga didn’t know. “You’ve a little too much of your mother in you. She rarely listens to me, either.”

“Mother always has been wise.”

Sesshoumaru’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he slowly shook his head, a hint of a smile twitching on his lips. “Just like her.”

“So what brings you all the way over here?” Toga asked as he brushed past his father and into the house.

Sesshoumaru followed. "I was in the neighborhood."

Toga shot his father a contradicting look. "You think I'll buy that?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "It's the truth. I was digging your cousin out of trouble."

Toga winced as he dropped a log into the fire glowing in the gray marble fireplace. "Ryo, I take it? Uncle Yasha should have had him neutered at birth."

Sesshoumaru's face registered his distaste at the situation. "Yes, well, he was reluctant to call InuYasha about this. Can't fault him for that. InuYasha would have let him sit in jail."

"Jail?" Toga echoed as he dusted off his hands and stood up. "What'd he do? Rob a bank?"

Sesshoumaru frowned in general disgust. "Drunk and disorderly, or so I was told. He wouldn't give up the microphone at a karaoke bar, and he took a swing at security."

Toga shook his head. "Ryo's been back in town, what? A day? Two, tops?"

Sesshoumaru affected a shudder. "And your uncle saw fit to name the hellion after me."

"Uncle Yasha likes to practice with Tetsusaiga. Maybe you should tell him what Ryo did."

"Your mother thinks it better to let the miko continue to believe that her mate's spawn are golden." Sesshoumaru sighed. "In any case, if I didn't need to send Ryomaru out again, I might have let him sit in jail a few days longer."

Toga's eyebrows lifted in surprise. "That fast? He just got back from hunting, didn't he? Who's he after now?"

Sesshoumaru waved off Toga's question as he made a rather uncharacteristically disgusted expression. "That's a moot point, really. I need him for something bigger but I can't find him now to alter his orders."

“Bigger? How so?”

“A gang of three neko-youkai are said to have murdered fifteen human women. Until now there wasn’t any proof to this. The last attack, however, was caught on security tape. I wanted to have it taken care of before the police got to them, but I just got the news on this after I’d sent Ryomaru after the kitsune he’s pursuing.”

Toga nodded, understanding the parts that his father didn’t say. Renegade youkai who didn’t care about human life also tended to be the same of their kind that didn’t care if they gave up the ‘secret’ of the existing youkai, in general. If those three were caught, there was a good chance they’d talk about much more than simple killings—if the authorities could capture them without being killed, themselves. Messy business, really, and one that his hot-headed cousin seemed to thrive upon, in Toga’s opinion.

“So I’ll go,” Toga tossed out casually. “Where are they?”

Sesshoumaru looked sharply at his son. “They aren’t going to be easy targets, Toga.”

“I didn’t think they would be,” he countered.

Consternation filled Sesshoumaru’s gaze as he stared at Toga for a long moment before he finally gave his consent with a terse nod. “Osaka.”

Toga nodded. “All right. I’ll take care of it.”

Sesshoumaru smiled just a little as he strode toward the door. “Toga . . . I’m glad you came home.”

Toga didn’t answer as he watched his father leave. “Osaka . . .”

Heading back to his bedroom to retrieve Mokomoko-sama, Toga winced at the all-too-strong scent of Sierra that still permeated the fur. If anyone else had noticed, they must have thought better than to comment on it. Either way, he knew, and he could still smell her. Biting back the swell of pain that rose with the scent of her, Toga steeled himself for his task at hand. Maybe a good fight was just what he did need . . .



# ~ ~ Chapter 35 ~ ~

## ~ D ire P redictions ~

Kagome turned off the vacuum and pushed the handle upright with a click as she frowned. She thought she had heard the doorbell, which was the reason she'd turned off the cleaner. Letting go of the machine, she hurried through the house and into the foyer just as the doorbell chimed again.

"Toga!" she greeted with a bright smile that faded when she saw what he held under his arm. Stepping back to admit her nephew, she accepted the chaste kiss he planted on her cheek before she closed the door and followed him into the living room. "What brings you by?" she asked, keeping her tone carefully neutral.

"I need to pick up my halberd. Is Uncle Yasha home?"

"No . . . he and Gin went for a run. You're going to look for a fight? That doesn't seem like you."

Toga made a face. "It's not like that. Father needed me to go after a few neko-youkai."

Kagome frowned as she sat down on the sofa. "That sounds dangerous. Why don't you wait for InuYasha?"

Toga shook his head but did sit beside her. "It's fine, Aunt Gome. I can take care of it. I'm not a pup anymore, remember?"

"I know you aren't. That doesn't mean I can't worry. Toga? Tell me what really happened with you and Sierra."

She didn't think he was going to answer her. He sat up straight, his expression closed over—the same response she'd gotten whenever she'd pried too much. This time, though, Toga sighed, and when his shoulders slumped in a defeated

sort of way, Kagome grimaced and slowly took his hand. "Do you think we can't see how badly this is affecting you? Do you think we can't tell what this entire situation is doing to you? We can, you know. All of us can."

Toga looked so sad, so lost, and for a moment, he was the same little boy who cried when one of Dammit's pups was stillborn. He'd been inconsolable for a long time after that. The same haunted look was in his eyes now, the same sadness that Kagome couldn't take away or lessen, and that broke her heart.

He winced as tears filled Kagome's eyes, and he looked away quickly, clearing his throat as he started to rise. "I'll just get my halberd and go."

"Toga, wait," she insisted as she caught his hand and stopped him. "I know you. I've always known you. Is it so terrible that you can't say?"

"Yes," he growled as he tried to pull away.

Kagome held on. "Then tell me."

"I can't."

"You can. Stop being so stubborn!"

"She's going to get sick, Aunt Gome!" he yelled as his temper spiked. When Kagome gasped, dropping his hand as her fingers fluttered over her lips, he sighed and relented. "She's going to get really sick."

"How do you know this? Maybe—"

"Huntington's disease. It's genetic. There is no 'maybe'. There's only a question of 'when'. Sierra . . ."

"And you left her? Toga—"

"Keh! What do you take me for? Of course I didn't leave her . . . She sent me away."

"Still," Kagome said dubiously. "She needs you, I know it."

Toga blinked sadly, the expression in his gaze unsettling. He looked too calm, too understanding . . . almost as though he didn't quite believe that it really could be over. "It hurts her to have me near."

"But you love her," Kagome argued softly.

Lips turning up in a bittersweet smile that didn't reach his gaze at all, Toga suddenly reached out and hugged Kagome. "That's why I left," he whispered, his words rasping, harsh.

"Oh, Toga . . ."

He let go and stepped back, his smile surfacing again despite the marked brightness in his eyes. "I've got to go. I promised Father . . ." Turning on his heel, he headed for the foyer but stopped in the doorway and lowered his head. "Take care, okay? I'll . . . I'll, uh, see you."

Kagome stood there long after Toga closed the door behind himself. It wasn't until much later that she realized something else.

Toga had forgotten his halberd.

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Kagome lay awake in the darkened room, staring at the shadows dancing over the ceiling above her. The house was quiet, deathly still. It was a miracle that InuYasha could sleep. He had been so acclimated to the sounds of the forest that she knew he'd had trouble adjusting to the stillness inside when he'd first arrived in her time.

That wasn't the trouble now. Thoughts kept her awake, spinning around in her head, things that didn't make any more sense to her now than they had when Toga had walked out the door. She'd told InuYasha what he'd said. Though he had seemed concerned enough, he had also assured Kagome that Toga was fine. Trouble was, thinking back now, Kagome was almost certain that InuYasha was trying to convince himself of this as much as he was trying to convince her.

*'Why do I feel like something is terribly wrong? Toga . . .'*

She sighed and sat up. InuYasha didn't stir. *'That's why I left . . .'*

*'That's why he left . . . because she loves him, too, and it hurts . . .'*

Why did she feel like it was deeper than that? There was more to it, more that Toga hadn't said. Those things that had been left hanging in the air . . . those were the things that kept Kagome from sleeping. "InuYasha?"

The hanyou popped one eye open. Kagome wondered if he'd actually been asleep at all. He sighed and rolled over, propping his head on his hand as he waited for whatever it was Kagome wanted to say.

"Toga forgot his halberd, you know? But he said he came over to get it."

"You want I should take it to him?"

Kagome shot InuYasha a consternated glance. "I'm serious."

He sighed. "I know you are. I am, too. Did you think I wasn't?"

"It doesn't make sense," she went on, ignoring InuYasha's questions for the moment. "He was too calm about everything, too . . . I don't know . . . too accepting of it, like . . ."

"Like what?" InuYasha prodded when Kagome trailed off.

She shook her head. "Like he didn't totally believe it, or—"

Kagome's frown deepened as she remembered feeling that way, herself. *'I left, too . . . I thought InuYasha would be happier if I let him go, and I know what that feels like, to be the one to step away, but Toga . . .'* She shook her head slowly. *'It wasn't disbelief in his expression . . . it was resignation. It felt like he was saying . . .'*

"Or what?"

Kagome's scared eyes met InuYasha's, and she had to force herself to put her feelings into words. "InuYasha . . . when he left, he said something. He hugged me, and he said to take care. You don't think . . .?"

InuYasha's eyebrows drew together as he considered Kagome's words. "Keh! Of course not."

She winced, wondering if he realized how unsure he sounded, himself. "It sounded like he was saying . . ." she swallowed hard, ". . . goodbye."

"That's crazy," InuYasha grumbled as he sat up. "It's impossible. The only way that'd happen is if his blood accepted her as his mate."

"You didn't see his face," she insisted. "He *accepted* it: whatever it is he thinks he deserves. InuYasha, *please!* If you won't listen to me, who will?"

He was going to argue with her. She saw it in his expression when he turned to stare at her. Something in her eyes must have convinced him. Seconds later, mumbling curses under his breath, InuYasha was rifling through the bureau for some pants.

"InuYasha?"

He shot her a quick glance. "You gonna lie there all night or are you gonna get dressed?"

"Where are we going?"

InuYasha rolled his eyes as he pulled his long hair out of the neck of his tee shirt. "Where do you think, wench? I don't know where the pup went. The only one who does is his bastard father."

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"Earth to Sierra . . . are you all right, dear?"

Sierra glanced up from her coffee, forcing a smile to alleviate her mother's obvious concern. "Fine . . . why?"

Her mother wasn't buying. "You're pale, Sierra, and you've lost weight you didn't have to spare."

Sierra grimaced. She'd purposefully put makeup on thick today in hopes that her mother wouldn't notice. "I just haven't slept well lately," she confessed. *'Actually, I haven't slept at all, not since Toga left . . .'*

She made a face. That wasn't entirely true. She had slept, off and on. She just had to be utterly exhausted to do it.

"Can I ask you something? If you think it's none of my business, just say so."

Sierra nodded, bracing herself since her mother rarely put things quite like that. "Okay."

Her mother toyed with her coffee mug as she tried to find a way to phrase her question. "It's because you broke it off with Toga, isn't it? Why did you do that, Sierra? He made you so happy, and don't tell me that he didn't, because I know you. Any man who has the fortitude to drive you out here after he killed your dog has to have a good heart."

Sierra sighed. "I can't . . . I couldn't ask him to stick around knowing what I was going to become. How could I ask that of him?"

She shook her head as she smiled tenderly at her daughter. "I don't think that's how he would see that."

Sierra swallowed a suspicious lump that threatened to choke her as she remembered that day, that same conversation.

*"There is none, not for me, not for you—not for us. Before it's all over, I wouldn't even know you, and I wouldn't care, but you . . . Don't ask me to do that."*

*"Then don't ask!"*

*"Toga . . ."*

*"I won't leave you, Sierra . . . I need you."*

She sighed. She needed him, too. She hadn't *stopped* needing him. The ache in her heart wasn't getting any better. It was getting worse and worse, instead, and every day that passed seemed like a lifetime. When she dared to consider the

future, she felt herself die a little more. She felt like she was standing on the edge of a deep, dark chasm, and the future was the void that threatened to engulf her.

“Mama . . . I can’t even risk having children. I could pass this . . . this gene on to them, and . . . I can’t do it to them, and Toga . . .” she blinked quickly, willing herself not to cry. “Toga’s already moved on, anyway.”

“Are you sure about that?”

Sierra shrugged. “He told me . . . he . . . he kissed another girl.”

She winced. *‘God . . . that hurts even worse. Toga . . .’*

Her mother sighed as she pushed her coffee mug aside. “He doesn’t strike me as the kind who would get over you that fast. He seems really loyal.”

“Yeah,” Sierra agreed with a small smile, “like a . . . puppy . . .”

Mrs. Crawford chuckled as she stood up, grabbing her cup and Sierra’s and taking them to the sink. “I don’t know if I’d have compared him to a dog, Sierra.”

Sierra’s laugh was as hollow as the emptiness in her soul; the place that Toga used to fill. “Yeah, I . . . I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Her smile faded as she slowly shook her head. *‘Nope . . . I don’t know what I’m thinking, at all . . .’*

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Kagura stumbled down the stairs as she shook her head quickly, wondering just who would be pounding on her door in the middle of the night. The thumping didn’t stop, either. Sesshoumaru uttered an uncharacteristic growl behind her, attesting to his irritation. “Someone had better be dead, baka, or I’ll rectify it,” he hollered. Kagura shook her head and yanked open the door.

InuYasha barely nodded at her as he stomped inside, dragging Kagome by the hand behind him. “Shut the hell up, bastard! Where did you send Toga?”

"Toga?" Sesshoumaru echoed, staring at InuYasha as though he was no more than a speck of dirt on a white linen shirt.

InuYasha snorted. "Keh! Yeah, Toga! Your son . . . Toga? Looks like you with black hair and a personality?"

"What is this about?" Sesshoumaru demanded. "Have you not heard of a telephone?"

"You wanted me to tell you over the phone that you sent your son to die?" InuYasha growled.

Sesshoumaru glared at his brother. "Are you implying I did such a thing?"

"It's something Toga said to me before he left," Kagome hurried to explain, stepping between the brothers as Sesshoumaru started toward InuYasha. "Please!"

Sesshoumaru stopped and shot Kagome a cursory glance. "Speak quickly, miko, before I dispatch your mate."

"Toga said he left because she asked him to, not because he wanted to. She carrying a gene that causes Huntington's disease later on, but I—"

InuYasha interrupted as he pulled Kagome out of Sesshoumaru's reach. "He was lying when he said his blood didn't choose her."

"No," Kagura rasped out, her hand fluttering above her heart as she collapsed weakly against the table behind her. "Oh, no . . ."

Kagome forced herself to voice her biggest fear, craning her neck back to stare at InuYasha. "He didn't go on this hunt as a favor to you, Sesshoumaru. He went . . . he went to die."

Sesshoumaru didn't respond. Turning his back on them all, he strode into the living room as he stared at the swords crossed over the fireplace mantle.

"Tell me where he is, Sesshoumaru," InuYasha growled as he followed the taiyoukai into the room. "I'm going after him."

He didn't answer that, either.

"Sesshoumaru?" Kagome asked, peering over InuYasha's shoulder as the hanyou grimaced furiously.

Kagura stalked past them all, stepping around Sesshoumaru and forcing him to look at her. "Damn you, Sesshoumaru! You fix this!" she demanded, her eyes flashing with angry tears. "Fix it before it's too late!"

"What would you have me do?" he countered. "Toga—"

"Find him!" she screamed. "Find him and tell him the things you should have told him long ago!"

"What things?" Kagome asked, loathe to interrupt but having to know just the same.

Kagura didn't turn her glare away from Sesshoumaru's. "Things that Sesshoumaru never told him because he *hoped* Toga would choose a youkai." Dashing the back of her hand over her eyes, she continued to challenge her mate. "Find him, Sesshoumaru. Find him before your pride costs us our son."

The two continued the silent war a few moments longer. Finally Sesshoumaru jerked his head once in a nod before he brushed past Kagura to yank Tokijin off the wall. Kagome winced as he hesitantly pulled Tenseiga down.

"I'm coming with you," InuYasha growled as Sesshoumaru strapped the swords to his waist and started past them all toward the front door.

Sesshoumaru whipped around, pinning InuYasha with a formidable glare. "I will do this my way, InuYasha. Go home."

"Go to hell, bastard," InuYasha retaliated. "You've done nothing but fuck up the entire situation so far. You ain't going near Toga without me."

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"I'm sorry," Kagome apologized again as Kagura handed her a cup of tea. "I should have figured it out sooner . . . I should have said something, but . . . InuYasha said I was just worried about nothing."

Kagura sat down on the sofa beside her and sighed. "It isn't your fault. You didn't know, either."

Kagome set the mug on the coffee table and shook her head. "What sort of things didn't Sesshoumaru tell Toga?"

Kagura sighed again, rubbing her forehead with a slightly shaking hand. "The mix of youkai blood with that of a human . . . it would save her—Sierra. It would protect her from human disease, much like the fusion of your miko blood—holy blood—with InuYasha's protects your children from transforming into full-youkai."

Kagome gasped softly. "No one ever told us that, about youkai blood preventing disease . . ."

Kagura smiled sadly. "It wasn't that we were keeping it from InuYasha . . . it just wasn't ever an issue that brought it to mind. Over the years, though, when Toga was drawn to humans time and again, I asked Sesshoumaru to tell him." Her lips curled into a cynical sneer. "He thought that Toga would think it was his blessing to find a human to mate."

"Kami."

Kagura shook her head slowly. "I keep remembering how close Toga and Sesshoumaru used to be. There was a time when he idolized his father. When InuYasha came through the well, he became Toga's hero. Sesshoumaru never said as much but I know . . . sometimes he seemed so sad, and I always wondered if that was the reason."

"And that's why Sesshoumaru sent Toga to InuYasha for training?"

Kagura nodded. "He said it was because I wouldn't let him use real swords, but . . . I think he believed Toga would try harder for InuYasha." She took a long sip of her tea before setting it aside, too. "And I wonder, too . . . I don't think Sesshoumaru had it in him, to hurt Toga, even in training."



# ~ ~ Chapter 36 ~ ~

## ~ A Reason to Live ~

“Get a move on, you slow-assed bastard!” InuYasha snarled as the two sprinted through the cover of night. The landscape provided enough shelter from curious human eyes, if there were any awake at this hour to see the two figures moved in a hazy blur. Their footfalls crunched against dry, dead leaves, on pebbles and twigs that littered the ground as they ran.

“Shall I beat you down now or later, baka?” Sesshoumaru asked, his tone as dry as his expression as he refused to spare his half-brother as much as a glance.

InuYasha snorted. “Keh! Just bring it if you think you can.”

That earned InuYasha a somewhat bored scowl. “Remind me *after* I find my son.”

InuYasha hurtled over a fallen tree. “I’ll remind you, all right . . .”

Sesshoumaru sped up, passing InuYasha in a blur of movement but not quickly enough for InuYasha to miss the obvious concern in the depths of his half-brother’s gaze. *‘Fucking bastard . . . what the hell was he thinking was gonna happen? Damn it, Toga . . . you’d better still be in one piece or I’ll . . . Hell, I’ll do something . . .’*

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Toga glanced around the small clearing just outside Osaka with a slight frown marring his brow. He could smell the neko-youkai. He’d tracked them here from the scene of the last known attack. Their stench was thick in the air but he couldn’t locate their hideout. In the darkness of the starless night, the moonlight was hazy, blocked by clouds and choked by the shadow of the earth. The thin

sliver of a moon couldn't compete with the gloom, and the black shadows gave away nothing.

The midnight fur of his Mekomoko-sama billowed in the breeze behind him. Extending over his shoulder, the comforting and wholly disconcerting scent of Sierra that clung to the fur gave him strength even as it left him feeling oddly empty, wholly alone. He shook his head, willing his mind to clear as he slowly stepped into the clearing.

A sharp hiss erupted on his left side as a singsong wail announced the arrival of then neko-youkai. "Who are you?"

Toga kept his expression blank as two more youkai stepped out of the shadows beside the first. "Keneke, he reeks of the Great Dog," one of the lesser-youkai hissed.

Keneke's pupils dilated in the thin moonlight. "The Great Dog? Then you're his son . . . the next tai-youkai," he scoffed.

"If you know who I am, then you know why I'm here," Toga countered as he let his concealment dissipate without taking his eyes off the pitch-black cat.

The third cat youkai laughed nastily, brandishing his claws in a flash of captured light, his green eyes glowing like filmy twin flashlight beams in the dark. "Sent you, did he? What'd you do to piss off your old man, puppy?" he demanded arrogantly, stroking his short-tufted, orangey-yellow streaked hair away from his face.

Toga didn't blink as he snorted derisively and flicked his gaze to the tabby cat and back to the leader once more. "Keh. I volunteered."

The screechy quality of the youkai's laughter grated on Toga's already frayed nerves. The three cat-youkai literally fell over one another as the sounds of their mirth rose in the predawn skies. They circled Toga slowly, cautiously. He saw the glint of their claws in the miserable light, knew that they were planning on attacking together. The thought made Toga's lip curl derisively. *'Damn cowards . . . strength in numbers? I think not . . .'*

Toga was ready when they pounced. With a loud snarl, a bestial hiss, the neko-youkai howled as they lunged for him. Toga was faster, rolling out of the way

before they could strike. The orange tabby and the silver-gray cats—the lesser-youkai—caught each other with their razor-sharp claws, and their pained yowls split the night like a jagged tear.

The third neko-youkai altered his course in mid-air, landing beside Toga. “Clever puppy!” he spit angrily. “Cleverness won’t keep the skin on your back! Jiromura! Yamagoro! Get him!”

Toga brushed dirt off his hands and cracked his knuckles as the youkai stalked toward him. With a fierce howl, the leader of the cats sprang at him. Toga’s claws flashed in the moonlight as his hand shot out to catch Keneko across the center of his chest. Keneko’s screech of pain hammered through his head as Toga’s claws shredded through the thin fabric of the cat-youkai’s shirt, digging deep welts into the flesh underneath. Blood raced to fill in the lines left behind by his claws, oozing thick and hot as the scent of the rich fluid shot straight to Toga’s brain, unleashed a rush of adrenaline as something far more primitive exploded inside him.

“Damn you, dog! You’ll pay for that!” Keneko hissed.

Toga stared in fascination at the blood that stained his claws. The scent was intoxicating. “Did that hurt?”

With a savage howl, the cats plunged toward him, needle-sharp claws slicing through the air in a blur of movement, a whistle of sound. The fabricated noise rang in Toga’s ears as he dodged both Jiromura and Yamagoro. Keneko caught his arm.

His gasped exhalation was the only discernable evidence of Toga’s discomfort as he slid back. His thick leather coat protected him well enough, but he knew it wouldn’t last for long. Neko-youkai had some of the sharpest claws of any of the mononoke . . .

“Did I push the puppy?” Keneko nearly purred in self-satisfaction. “Not very agile, are you, son of the Great Dog?”

Toga ignored the blatant taunt.

“Why don’t you turn around and run back to Papa, little puppy? Tell him you couldn’t find us, and we’ll let you live.”

"Funny," Toga remarked in a deadly quiet voice as he narrowed his gaze at the two cats who were trying to slip around behind him. "I don't recall being frightened of the likes of you."

Keneko flexed his fingers, stretched his hand as his claws seemed to grow longer, catching glints of moonlight like steel in the darkness. "You should be."

"Haven't you heard?" Toga countered softly, icily. "Dogs always chase cats."

The two lesser-youkai lunged at him. Toga ducked in time to avoid Yamagoro as his hand shot out toward the second. Jiromura's screeches split the night. Toga winced at the high-pitched yowl that rang in his ears as his claws cut deep into the youkai's neck. Blood spurted from Jiromura's ruptured jugular, showering Toga in the hot, sticky flood. Time seemed to falter as the cat's eyes widened in shock, a dizzying gurgle producing a horrifying black-tinted bubble from the gaping wound. It quivered with a tremulous resonance as it grew larger—oily, pungent then popped. Jiromura's gaze dulled slowly as his life slipped away, and he crumpled in a pitiful heap at Toga's feet.

"Jiromura!" Keneko keened, his cry both shrill and unforgiving, like the shattering of glass. His black hair stood on end, his lips curled back in a vicious snarl. With a cry borne of frustration, of anguish, Keneko rushed at Toga, his sing-song wail rising behind a dreadful wail.

Toga spun away but couldn't avoid the youkai's claws. Piercing the leather, the puncturing claws razed his right shoulder as he winced and faltered, catching himself before he hit the ground as he rounded in a crouch and shot to his feet once more. Ignoring the blistering pain erupting from his wound, Toga bared his fangs in a slight grimace, grinding his teeth together as he willed away the sting. The heat of his blood soaked the fabric of his shirt, spiraled down his arm, dripped from his fingertips onto the ground like black rain with a coppery smell.

"Is that the best you can do?" Toga goaded, blanking his features as his father so often did.

*'Never give them the satisfaction of seeing your emotions,'* Sesshoumaru's voice whispered in the recesses of Toga's mind.

*'Thank you, Father. Rather sound advice . . .'*

He gave his head a quick shake. The scent of his blood was confusing; the vertigo that edged closer was hard to ignore.

"I'll gut you," Keneko promised as he unleashed five blades of air at Toga, much like Uncle Yasha's Hijin-Ketsusou attack but without the blood.

Toga dodged, eluding all but one of the air blades that grazed his cheek. The white-hot pain cleared the dizziness away. "Try harder, kitty," he growled as he slowly wiped the blood from his cheek with the back of his left hand.

With an irate hiss, Yamagoro barreled forward, yellow eyes glowing fiercely, angrily, completely malevolent. Toga whipped around to avoid the cat and sliced through the night in a blur of motion. He could feel his claws tear through flesh and tissue, the wet rip of muscle and the crunch of shattering bone a vindictive reward as Yamagoro fell on Jiomura's corpse. The neko-youkai groaned, the thin hiss, the gurgling belch of life expelling as Yamagoro reached for Keneko with a trembling hand. He pitched forward, his blood leeching black on his filthy white shirt as his body stilled.

"Damn you!" Keneko screamed, his youki popping and snapping with static energy. Unleashing a wail that brought a war cry to mind, the cat threw his head back, his arms out at his sides, his eyes glowing with obsessed rage. "I'll kill you!" he bellowed. "For Jiomura and Yamagoro, I'll kill you!"

The breeze shifted, cut with a bitter edge. Keneko shot forward, claws whistling as Toga leaped back. The cat's face contorted into a morbid facsimile of a smile, a line of spittle hanging from his lip. With a piercing shriek, he pummeled both hands into Toga's chest, laughing maniacally as his claws flexed and contracted. Toga uttered a half-growl, half-yelp as his skin tore, as a jolt of excruciating pain shot through his body.

Thrown back from the impact, Toga slammed into a stout tree and slumped to the ground. Dazed, unable to regain his breath, he lay sprawled on the ground. His shoulder throbbed, his head felt like something was inside fighting to get out. His chest burned with every movement, and his back felt like it did the one time Uncle Yasha had accidentally caught him with the blunt side of Tetsusaiga. Blinking into the darkness as his lungs struggled to fill, Sierra's face flashed through his mind, and suddenly, Toga laughed.

He closed his eyes, sensing Keneko's rapid approach. *'What did it matter, really?'* he asked himself as he sat up slowly, shaking his head to ward off the dizziness. *'Nothing's mattered to me at all . . . not since the day she walked out of my life . . .'*

Blinking away the fuzziness that clouded his vision as he forced himself to his knees, then to his feet. Keneko split into two then merged back together, his arm drawn back as he closed the distance between them.

Toga flexed his claws and stood his ground. He wasn't going down without a fight—damned if he would. "If I go, I'm taking you with me," he mumbled, unsure if he had spoken out loud or if he had just thought it.

A hiss, a low hum, a flash of green light streaked past him as Keneko started to bring his claws down. Toga stopped with his arm drawn back, his brain registering the familiar scents even as Keneko's body flew in the opposite direction.

"Fucking damn it, pup! What the hell are you trying to do?"

Toga frowned as InuYasha glowered at him. "Why are you here?" he countered as Sesshoumaru's energy whip—the flash of green light—retracted into his father's hand once more.

"You are my son, Toga," Sesshoumaru commanded sternly. "Fight for your mate. You cannot save her if you cannot save yourself."

Toga stared at his father, his mind trying to understand the implications of Sesshoumaru's words. *'Sierra . . . My . . . mate . . . ? Father knows . . .'*

Keneko snarled in outrage as he got to his feet, inspecting the seared flesh on his shoulder where the energy whip had burned him. "I'll finish you off, puppy; then I'll take care of your father!"

*'Fight . . . to save Sierra?'*

Her scent wrapped around him again, and Toga swallowed hard. A surge of strength shot through him, the desire to see her face again precluded the reckless need for carnage. Ignoring the pain that rattled through him, Toga braced himself, sprang off the ground to meet Keneko in the air. His shoulder erupted in a flaming hot gush of fresh blood as he drove his fist forward, as he felt the

soft tissue of the neko-youkai's stomach rip. Toga's claws shattered the youkai's spine, passing straight through as the cold night air hit his blood-soaked hand. With a violent shove, he wrenched his hand free, sending Keneko sprawling back. His body exploded in a blast of dust and wind before he hit the ground.

The sun broke over the horizon as the earth seemed to stand still. Toga stared at the crimson fluid that coated his hand as his stomach rolled in revulsion. He'd never killed before. The closest he had ever been was when Allan had insulted Sierra. He closed his eyes for a moment. He wasn't a killer. The only reason he'd volunteered to do this . . .

"Can you travel?"

Toga blinked a few times before hesitantly raising his gaze to meet his father's inscrutable stare. "Yeah."

Sesshoumaru turned and started away. Toga's voice stopped him. "Why did you come after me?"

Sesshoumaru stopped but didn't face him. For a moment, Toga didn't think his father was going to answer. "Your blood can save her, Toga . . . and she . . . she can save you."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't think you needed to know that," Sesshoumaru admitted quietly.

"What?"

"You didn't tell me she would become sick, and you didn't tell me your youkai chose her."

"Damn it—"

"Hash it over later, pup," InuYasha grumbled as he grasped Toga's good shoulder to propel him forward. "We got a long way to go, and if we don't hurry, your mother is liable to send out a search team."

Toga winced as he wiped the thickening blood off his cheek with the back of his left hand, watching in silence as Sesshoumaru flicked his whip out once more.

The bodies of the lesser-youkai disintegrated in a thick cloud of ash, leaving behind no trace of the neko-youkai as the tai-youkai turned on his heel and stalked away.

With a sigh, Toga trudged after his father, suddenly feeling so very old. Unfortunately, Uncle Yasha was right . . .

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Toga tried not to wince as Kagura spun around on her heel to pin her son with her formidable glower. He knew what was coming. He really had hoped that she'd wait a day or two before she let him have it, though. No such luck, not with his mother. He plastered on his best contrite expression and braced himself for the storm to come.

"How could you not tell us, Toga?" Kagura demanded in a much quieter tone than he had expected which could only mean one thing, as far as Toga was concerned: Kagura was past furious and was struggling to keep reign on her soaring temper, and *that* certainly didn't bode well for him, at all.

"I didn't know it would matter," he told her.

"What do you mean, you didn't know it would matter? You think that your father and I wanted to see you like that?"

Toga opened his mouth to point out that Sesshoumaru had been dead-set against his being with a human. Kagura held up her hand to silence him. "It makes all the difference in the word, and you should know that! Do you think your father would have been so stubborn if he had known that your youkai had already chosen Sierra?"

Toga made a face as he stared at his mother. "Yes, I do."

Kagura sighed. "You can't really believe that."

He shook his head slowly, wincing when his shoulder throbbed as he tried to sit up straighter in the bed. "He made his wishes painfully clear, Mother. What

else was I to think? And he never told me about the healing properties of mixing our blood, either."

Noticing her son's discomfort, Kagura hurried over to fuss over him a little more. "He didn't think you'd need to know. He thought you'd choose a youkai. I'm not saying he was right, but I do know he'd rather see you with a human than lose you."

Toga didn't answer right away as he stared at the cell phone in his hand. Kagura had dropped it onto the bed when she'd first breezed through the door. It seemed to him that she had every intention of staying until he made use of the thing to call Sierra. He set the phone on the nightstand and shot his mother a pointed look. "It's the middle of the night there," he explained when Kagura arched an ebony eyebrow. "Besides, I'd rather call her alone, if you don't mind."

Kagura pursed her lips and sighed, obviously disagreeing with him despite his reasonable tone. "All right," she gave in, looking completely irritated by the concession. "But you promise me you'll call her soon?"

Toga nodded and smiled just a little. "Of course, Mother."

"And promise me you'll get some rest."

Toga nodded again, deciding against pointing out that his injuries would likely only take a day or two at most to heal.

Kagura hurried over and kissed Toga's uninjured cheek. "I'll come by later to check on you," she promised. Toga managed to hide his grimace as he watched her go.

Minutes later he heard the front door close, and only then did he release the sigh of relief that had been building inside him. As much as he loved his mother, there were times when her concern could be more than a little stifling. Both Uncle Yasha as well as Sesshoumaru had tried to talk Toga into returning to the mansion to recover. Considering how much Kagura had fussed over him in the few hours since her arrival, he couldn't help but be thankful that he'd stubbornly refused the hospitality.

Toga winced as his chest muscles twitched painfully. The neko-youkai had been his first real challenge, his first real battle. His body wasn't used to the strain of

the exertion and while he would heal quickly enough, Toga decided with a wry grin that he would leave the fighting to his hot-headed baka cousin from now on. Ryomaru thrived on the adrenaline of the fight. Toga found that it left him full of undisguised distaste.

He sighed as he stared hard at the phone in his hand. Would Sierra even listen to him? After their last conversation, he wasn't all that convinced that she would. He stared at the cell phone for a long time as he tried to gather his thoughts. How could he get her to listen?

Drawing as deep a breath as his battered body would allow, Toga reached for the phone and punched in the numbers to her cell phone—the numbers he knew by heart. *'Come on, Sierra . . . just listen to me . . .'*

She answered on the seventh ring, just when he had been about to give up. "Hello?"

Toga tried to speak. His throat was dry. Sierra's voice was husky and low. He winced. "S-S-Sierra?"

She didn't respond right away. He could hear the creak of the phone, as though she was holding onto it as tightly as she could. "Toga."

"Sierra," he forced himself to say, brushing off the fear inspired by the resigned tone in her voice. "Listen, there are some things I have to tell you—"

Sierra sighed. "You've already said more than enough," she replied stiffly. "There's nothing left to say."

He winced as the connection cut off. He hadn't missed the tears in her voice. He hadn't missed the pain, either.

*'Damn!'* he thought as he hung up only to redial the number again. *'Damn it, Sierra, just listen!'*

He spent the next three hours calling both her apartment and her cell. She must have had both off the hook because he got nothing but busy signals.



# ~ ~ Chapter 37 ~ ~

## ~ Foolish Misconceptions ~

Kagura leaned in the doorway staring at her mate with a pensive frown as he pushed his glasses up and stared at the paperwork in his other hand. She was beginning to think that Sesshoumaru didn't notice her arrival when he dropped the document onto the desk and sat back with a sigh. "It isn't like you to hesitate, Kagura. Is something on your mind?"

Pushing herself out of the doorway, Kagura strolled into the study with a heavy sigh. "She apparently changed her phone number."

"Who?"

Narrowing her magenta gaze on her mate, Kagura tried to figure out if he was being obtuse on purpose or if he really didn't know of whom she spoke. Sesshoumaru's expression seemed innocent enough, and Kagura rubbed her throbbing forehead with a tired hand. "Sierra."

Sesshoumaru stood up and jammed his hands into his pockets as he turned to stare out the window. "And Toga knows this?"

Kagura's hand stopped rubbing as she quirked an eyebrow at Sesshoumaru's back. "Who do you think told me?"

Sesshoumaru glanced back over his shoulder before turning his attention back out the window once more. "What *isn't* your son telling you?"

"What makes you think he isn't telling me something?"

He shrugged. "Because the girl seemed pleased enough with your son at Aiko's wedding. Something must have happened to change her opinion of him, if she's willing to such lengths to avoid him now."

"My son?" Kagura echoed incredulously. "My son? So he's stopped being your son because his blood chose a human? You arrogant—"

Sesshoumaru turned his head far enough to stare at Kagura out of the corner of his eye. "He is *your* son when he is fool enough to let the girl get away with her unacceptable behavior," he countered. "My son would make her listen."

Kagura rolled her eyes. "It isn't as though he doesn't want to go make her listen," she argued. "His body isn't healing like it should."

"His injuries weren't that severe," Sesshoumaru remarked as he finally pivoted to face his mate again.

"That's what I'm trying to tell you! His body is already breaking down. He can't go after her. He can barely get out of bed."

Satisfied that Sesshoumaru was finally listening to what she had to say, Kagura nodded toward the phone. "I'm going to talk to her. Someone has to make her listen."

She reached for the telephone on the desk. Sesshoumaru's hand stopped her. Prepared to argue with him if she had to, Kagura lifted her gaze to lock with his. What she saw in his eyes tore at her. Despite the blank features, there was a very real concern in his stare. Amber gaze darkened by worry and even a trace of fear, Sesshoumaru shook his head slowly as she pulled her hand away from the phone.

"Toga will not speak to me about this," Sesshoumaru admitted quietly as he lifted the receiver and hesitated. "You stay with him. I'll make her listen."

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" she asked pointedly.

Sesshoumaru's gaze darkened. "Yes, I am," he insisted.

Kagura wrinkled her nose. "Hmm, well, make sure you apologize for being an ass to her," she advised. "Otherwise she won't—not that I'd blame her."

Sesshoumaru sighed and had the grace to wince slightly. "I'll make her listen," he repeated.

Kagura leaned across the desk to rub her knuckles over Sesshoumaru's cheek. With a tiny but warm smile, she kissed her fingertips and brushed them over his lips as he put in the call to their private pilot before hurrying from the room to pack his suitcase.

She only hoped that the American girl *would* listen.

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Kagome wrung out the cloth and gently wiped Toga's face. She heard InuYasha, felt his presence as he slipped quietly into the room.

"No change?"

Kagome sighed as she carefully folded the cloth and set it on the nightstand. "He woke up a little while ago. He . . . he was asking for her again." InuYasha stepped up behind Kagome and squeezed her shoulder as she slumped against the chair's high back. Kagome leaned her head back, stared into her mate's concerned eyes with confusion, sadness in the depths of her gaze. "What's happening to him?"

"I don't know. The youkai weren't poisonous. The pup wasn't that badly injured."

"Then why isn't he healing? He's got a fever . . . his wounds aren't closing . . ." she challenged as she gestured at Toga's shoulder.

InuYasha pulled the cloth aside that Kagome had used to cover the wound. He clenched his jaw tight. The skin that should have been healed within a day or two was still covered with deep gashes leached grayish-white and puckered over muscle tissue that should have at least been pink but seemed covered with the pallor of dying flesh.

"Kichiro wouldn't stitch it," Kagome said quietly, her voice husky and close to breaking. "He said he couldn't sew a youkai. He said . . . he said it won't work." She barked out a hollow laugh that lacked any real humor. "Why are we even sending him to medical school if he can't do anything now?"

InuYasha dropped the cloth back over Toga's bare shoulder and turned around then glared over Kagome's head. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Kagome sat up and turned then stood as Sesshoumaru strode into the room. "I've come to see my son," Sesshoumaru said quietly.

InuYasha started to argue. Kagome hurriedly grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the door. Kagura nodded her thanks as she waited for them to pass before stepping into the room, lingering in the doorway.

"It took a long time for me to understand," Sesshoumaru spoke quietly without taking his eyes off his son's face, "why my father did not follow my mother in death."

Kagura quietly crossed the room and took up the cloth that Kagome had left on the nightstand. "Why didn't he?"

"Many reasons," Sesshoumaru mused as Kagura dipped the cloth and twisted it. "Easiest to say that it was because I was young. He needed to see that I survived."

Something in Sesshoumaru's tone stilled her hands as she turned her face to stare at him. "But you don't really think that's the reason, do you?"

Sesshoumaru shook his head as he pulled the cloth from Kagura's hands and sat down on the edge of the bed to wipe his son's forehead. "I think my father took my mother as his mate because it was expected . . . because he needed an heir."

Kagura rubbed Sesshoumaru's shoulder. "You know as well as I do, Kagura. Inu-youkai choose only one mate of the blood. Perhaps Toga is more like my father than I will ever be."

"Toga is more like *his* father than you give him credit for," Kagura said softly.

Sesshoumaru didn't answer right away. Sparing another minute to gaze at his son, the tai-youkai finally stood up and faced his wife. "I will bring her back."

Kagura managed a small smile as she quickly squeezed Sesshoumaru's hands before pulling the cloth away. "Make sure you do, Sesshoumaru."

He nodded once and kissed Kagura's forehead. She watched him stride out of the room but didn't miss his hesitation in the doorway, the last look he paused to cast his son.

She smoothed Toga's hair out of his face, tried to push back the rising fear at the growing shadows of purplish half-moons under her son's eyes. *'Hurry, Sesshoumaru . . . before it's too late.'*

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Sierra pulled her coat closed tighter against the bitter wind that whipped through the city as Kirara whined sadly. "We're not going back inside until you do your thing," she told the dog. "You'd better hurry before you become a pupscicle."

Kirara whined again.

Sierra looped the leash over her wrist so she could tie her scarf a little more snugly around her throat. The news had said that they could expect a warm-up in the weather. *'So much for that warm-up,'* Sierra thought as she made a face. *'Rotten liars.'*

The trill of her cell phone drew a little yelp out of her as she dug into her pocket for the device and wrinkled her nose at her jittery nerves. "Hello?" she answered, sounding a little more irritated than she should have since her heart was still hammering against her ribcage.

"Ouch . . . did someone bite you?"

Sierra rolled her eyes at the disgruntlement in her brother's voice. "No, the phone surprised me."

"Yeah, well, you know, I had to call Mom to get your new phone numbers," Brent complained. In the background, Sierra could hear Missy as she finished up dinner. The absolute normalcy of her brother's life made Sierra wince inwardly. That had been the kind of life she'd wanted, too, wasn't it?

'*Stop it, Sie,*' she told herself sternly. "Sorry," she grumbled as Kirara plodded along beside her.

"Why did you change your numbers?" Brent went on, missing the hint of sadness in Sierra's tone.

"No reason," she lied.

"Ri-i-i-ight," Brent agreed. "What's the real reason?"

"Toga," she mumbled, half-hoping that Brent didn't hear her and frowned when Kirara's head snapped up at the mere mention of Toga's name.

"Toga? I thought you hadn't heard from him since he left."

"He . . . he called a few days ago," she admitted."

"What'd he want?"

"I don't know," she lied. "It was a bad connection."

'*Keh. Bad connection, my ass, Sierra . . . you hung up on me.*'

She grimaced. '*Not now, Toga . . . get out of my mind, will you?*'

Brent sighed. "Listen, Sierra, about that afternoon . . . you do know, right? Toga didn't—"

A car in dire need of a new muffler rumbled by on the street and stopped at a red light beside her, making both talking and hearing impossible. She smashed her hand over her ear and sighed. "I can't hear you, Brent. I'll call you later," she told him, raising her voice to be heard.

Brent mumbled something unintelligible, and Sierra hung up.

'*Toga didn't? Didn't what?*' Sierra shook her head as she pushed the pedestrian crossing button a few times and waited for the light to turn. '*It doesn't even matter, does it? It doesn't really change anything . . .*'

*'Because you don't want it to, do you? So you'll just make us both miserable?'* Toga's voice whispered. *'I thought you were different, Sierra . . . I thought . . .'*

The light changed, and Sierra jerked on Kirara's leash, hurrying the dog across the busy intersection. Of course she didn't want him to be miserable. He wouldn't be miserable, not long. Did it matter if the woman was Kari or someone else as long as she made Toga happy?

*'Right, Sie. Tell yourself that a few more times. While you're at it, why don't you tell yourself not to breathe?'*

Sierra stopped and grabbed a newspaper and dropped money onto the stack of magazines on the vendor's table, staring at the headlines with no real interest at all.

"Sierra?"

She stiffened at the sound of that voice and slowly lowered the paper to stare at the one person she really didn't want to see. "Kari," she greeted stiffly.

Kari bit her bottom lip as she held the neck of her coat with one hand and tucked a lock of hair behind her ear with the other. "I, uh . . . I just wanted to apologize . . ."

"For what?" Sierra asked, amazed at how calm her voice sounded.

Kari's cheeks reddened as she quickly looked away. "I . . . I kissed him. I know you were broken up, and I thought . . . Anyway, Toga wasn't interested in me."

Seconds ticked away as Sierra's brain slowed to a crawl. Trying to make sense of what Kari was saying seemed just beyond Sierra's grasp, as though a part of her didn't want to understand, didn't want to believe her. As though . . . *'If . . . if Toga didn't want her . . .'*

Dropping the newspaper onto the vendor's table and ignoring the man's irritated grumbles, Sierra glanced down at Kirara and tugged on the leash, prattling some flimsy excuse as to why she had to hurry along. She couldn't even make sense of what she had said, she realized as she hastened her step along the sidewalk. She didn't stop. She didn't look back. She didn't dare.

Toga didn't want Kari. He never had. The haunting pain in those amber eyes she knew so well had told her the truth of it the night he'd left for Tokyo. She was the one who hadn't wanted to hear it, wanted to believe that he'd moved on because . . .

Because otherwise she had to accept the truth, didn't she? That it really was all her fault, all her choice, and that all the ache she felt inside, the anguish and the torment when she thought about how many thousands of miles there were between them . . . it was all her own doing; all hers. At least before she could unload some of her guilt on him. Now that had been taken away, too.

Her eyes burned hot and dry, fevered as she fumbled with the key in the door to the apartment building. Maybe they'd changed the locks in the hour she'd been out. Maybe someone switched her keys when she wasn't looking. The key was too large, too thick, too clumsy.

Her fingers shook as she jabbed the key against the hole a few more times. "D . . . dang it," she muttered, temper flaring with her inability to unlock the door. Kirara whined softly. Sierra gripped the key so tightly that her fingertips leached white, stabbing the key into the thick steel door hard enough to leave little dents, scratching away paint as she missed time and again.

With a soft gasp, the key slipped from her fingers, clattering on the stoop under her feet with an alarmingly loud clank. The key bounced off the bricks with a tinny reverberation and fell once more, the muted ring cut off as it slid and stopped. "D-d-damn," she muttered, cheeks growing hot at her perceived clumsiness. She bent down to retrieve the key, noticing with a frown that her fingers were shaking worse than ever.

Kirara's whine erupted in a happy yip. The puppy rolled over onto her back and tucked her tail demurely between her legs over her rounded belly.

Sierra paid no attention as she reached for the key but she jerked her hand back as black leather-covered fingers beat her to it, nimbly retrieving the key and picking it up between the index and middle finger. The hand flipped over, palm up, other fingers curling, extending the tiny bit of metal as Sierra slowly stood up.

"Thank you," she murmured as the key dropped from the long fingers into her open hand. She finally glanced up at the Good Samaritan and stepped back as a



# ~ ~ Chapter 38 ~ ~

## ~ Swallowing Pride ~

“Why did you come here?” Sierra asked as she stared into the fragrant mug of tea and ignoring the throbbing pain in her knee. She hadn’t wanted to come with Sesshoumaru but she also didn’t know how to get out of it, either. She’d locked Kirara in her apartment and ignored the urge to hide with the puppy. It wouldn’t have done any good, anyway. She knew from experience, exactly what Sesshoumaru Inutaisho was capable of; the memory of his demonstration in her hotel room was too vivid to forget.

The only thing that kept her from trying to bolt was the deeper realization that only something quite serious could have brought him this far to seek her out, and despite the strain between them, the nastiness of their first few encounters wasn’t there. Sesshoumaru might not be happy about being here but the fact that he was willing to be civil to her had tempered her desire to run away. “Is something wrong with Toga?” she forced herself to ask as she wondered why she kept thinking that there was something terribly, horribly wrong . . . Sierra sighed and waited.

Sesshoumaru sat back in the booth, his eyes glinting as he stared across the table. Sierra couldn’t quite define the emotion in his gaze, or maybe she just didn’t want to. A vague sense of a nameless fear shot through her. Sierra rubbed her arms as she tried to will away the feeling. “You bear the scent of my son,” he observed without answering her question. His tone wasn’t unkind though he seemed more reconciled than pleased.

Sierra shook her head as she tore a pink packet of sugar substitute open and dumped it into the steaming cup. The soft chime of the silver spoon was comforting and somehow grating at the same time. She set the spoon on the saucer and sipped her tea. “What does that mean?”

“Miss Crawford, what has my son told you?”

She frowned as she set the cup back on the saucer and idly traced the pattern on the cream lace tablecloth with her index finger. "About what?"

Sesshoumaru flicked his wrist, glancing at his watch before tugging his shirt cuff down. "About . . . his heritage."

"He said that you don't want him to be with someone like me," Sierra admitted as her cheeks reddened, as she lifted her chin defiantly. "Of course, you haven't really tried to pretend that you don't think I'm good enough for him. Why don't you just tell me what you came here for?"

Sesshoumaru nodded as the unnamed emotion in his eyes glowed a little brighter, a little fiercer. "Fair enough. I've come because as much as I might wish it otherwise, Toga . . . needs you."

Sierra swallowed hard. "He doesn't need me," she answered quietly. "Toga's . . ." she trailed off with a curt shake of her head as the words died out. Just the sound of his name was painful enough. "I don't think he'd have a problem finding someone else."

Sesshoumaru's gaze narrowed, eyes flaring angrily as he leaned forward slightly. "Do you really think it is that simple for him? Or you, for that matter?"

She sat up, her own irritation sparking dangerously. Ignoring the warnings, the memories of the last unpleasant encounter, Sierra couldn't control her rising temper. She didn't like what Sesshoumaru was implying. She didn't understand anything at all. His words seemed like a vague threat . . . or a promise . . . "No, I really don't," she replied, her tone clipped and prim.

"If you care about my son at all, you will come with me."

Little alarm bells started ringing in her head. *'Is he nuts? People disappear all the time, never to be heard from again . . . and don't forget, Sie . . . he really hates you, remember?'* Sierra winced inwardly and tried to block out of the voice of reason as another flash of Toga's face raced through her mind—eyes closed, skin pale, he seemed almost . . . "Go with you? Where?"

A faint glimmer of sadness passed through Sesshoumaru's gaze before he closed off the emotion, his eyes as cold and calm as they had been just moments before. "To see my son."

She started to shake her head. Sesshoumaru raised a hand to stall her protests. "Before you decline, there is one thing I think you ought to know. What Toga is . . . what I am . . . our blood chooses our life-mate. Once the one has been chosen, there is no looking back. If he were to be separated from the one he has chosen, the consequences . . ." he trailed off, drew a deep breath as his piercing gaze returned to meet hers once more. "The consequences are . . . eternal."

A chilling sense of foreboding crept up Sierra's spine as an irrational fear gripped her, wouldn't let her go. "Are you saying Toga's in trouble?" she forced herself to ask. *'It's worse than just being in trouble, isn't it? It's . . . much worse . . .'*

Sesshoumaru's jaw twitched as he shifted his gaze out the window at the crowded street, the aimless, wandering people. "I am asking you to come with me."

Sierra covered her mouth with a trembling hand as she tried to make sense of everything Sesshoumaru had said—and everything he hadn't said, too. It seemed like hours ticked away as she told herself that it had to be a really sick joke. In actuality it took her less than a minute to make a choice. The logical part of her scoffed at Sesshoumaru's claims. The other part of her—the part that could still see Toga's face, his pallor . . .

"I have to get my passport," she said quietly.

Sesshoumaru visibly relaxed though he still seemed preoccupied, tense. "Can you be ready to leave within the hour?"

Sierra blinked in surprise. She hadn't missed the hint of quiet desperation in his tone, and it finally registered in her mind, just what the emotion in his eyes had been. Sesshoumaru Inutaisho was grieving; like he thought something was inevitable and just didn't want to voice it yet. *'Toga . . . what's going on?'* With a quick nod, she scooted out of the booth and dug into her pocket for money.

Sesshoumaru pulled a small wad of bills out of his pocket and dropped it carelessly on the table. Without another word, Sierra followed him out of the café and down the street toward her apartment building.

The stabbing pain of bright light cut through the darkness with all the finesse of a dull knife. With a smothered gasp, Toga winced as the throbbing ache in his shoulder intensified with the return of coherent thought. His chest felt like it was being ripped wide open, and he tried to comprehend how long he'd been unconscious as he slowly opened his eyes.

"Damn, Toga. You look like fucking shit, did you know?"

Toga shot his baka cousin as fulminating a glower as he could manage but it rapidly deteriorated into a wince as he tried to sit up and failed with a gasp of pain. "Heaven forbid . . . I should look better than I feel," he grumbled.

"Why'd you do it?"

Toga knew what his cousin was asking. He didn't want to answer. "And just what did I do?"

"Don't give me that shit. You know what I'm talking about."

Yes, Toga supposed he did know. He sighed then grimaced as the wounds on his chest felt like they were ripping open all over again. "I'm tired, Ryo."

"And I don't give a shit if you are," Ryomaru challenged. "Selfish bastard! Damn, you piss me off!"

Toga's gaze narrowed as he finally glared at his cousin. "Selfish? What the hell are you talking about? I did what had to be done, didn't I? It's hardly my fault that those damn cat youkai decided to use me as a scratching post. Now how is that selfish?"

Ryomaru snorted. "Keh! It's just like you, you stupid bastard! Got every single one of the women in the family bawling their damn eyes out because you're too fucking stupid to leave my job to me!"

"I seem to recall you were gone at the time," Toga pointed out stiffly.

"How fucking ignorant are you, Toga?" Ryomaru continued as he shot out of the chair and stalked around the room, his fists opening and closing. Toga knew

that if he weren't so weak, his cousin would be laying into him right about now . . . Had he ever seen Ryo so angry?

He sighed. No, no he really didn't think he had . . . "Hell, you know, the old man always—*always*—told us that we should be more like you, you stupid bastard! 'Think, Ryo! You never think enough! Why can't you be more like Toga? At least he thinks about stuff, even if he is a little too soft!'" Ryomaru whipped around on his heel to pin his cousin with a bitter glare. "You should have stayed *here*, baka! At least then you wouldn't be—"

"Be what?" Toga asked quietly, letting his cousin's rage roll off him.

Ryomaru grimaced as he balled his fists tighter. Seconds later, the scent of Ryomaru's blood tingled in Toga's nose. Ryomaru turned and stomped out of the room, slamming the door in his wake.

In the sudden quiet, Toga winced as he tried to draw a deep breath. He felt like his chest was wrapped in iron bands that prevented him from drawing adequate breath. A strange dampness accompanied the unsettling feeling, and he tried to figure out why. A vague memory came to mind as he frowned, draping his left arm over his eyes to block out the painful glaring light.

*"Come on, Toga, it won't hurt you. It's just water."*

*Toga whined, staring at the pond behind Uncle Yasha's house with a consternated frown as Aunt Gome stood in waist-deep water with her arms stretched out toward him. Six years old was too old to show his fear. He hated water, just despised it. There was no rational thought behind his loathing. He just knew that he did not belong in that pond.*

*"Just think of it as a really big bath," Kagome coaxed as she stretched her arms toward him a little more.*

*"I don't need to swim," Toga hedged, digging his toes into the soft grass as he retreated a step. "Papa doesn't swim."*

*Kagome smiled as the afternoon sunshine reflected off the water and in her eyes. "But your Uncle Yasha does, did you know?"*

*'Uncle Yasha does . . .'*

*Toga screwed up his face as he stared at the seemingly harmless water. On the one hand, his six year-old brain told him that if Uncle Yasha knew he was being such a baby, he'd be sorely disappointed. On the other hand, the irrational belief that something really terrible was lurking just below the surface of the seemingly idyllic pool nearly brought tears to his eyes.*

*"Okay," Kagome agreed as she waded toward the shore. "If you don't want to, I won't make you," she said then stopped, cocking her head to the side as she stared at him thoughtfully. "You sure you don't want to try?"*

*He nodded once as his expression darkened even more. No, the last thing he wanted to do was to step even one toe into that water.*

*Kagome smiled. "All right. Let me go check on the babies, and I'll be right back, okay? We'll play ball or something."*

*She ruffled his hair as she hurried past him toward the deck and into the house. Toga watched her go with a heavy sigh before he swung his head back around, his gaze troubled as he stared at the sinister pond. Trying to trick him in the still afternoon, it looked nice enough, calm enough. He knew better. He'd heard tales before about youkai who lived underwater. Shippou had told him about a few that Uncle Yasha had fought in the past, like the fake water god . . . Shippou said that the fake god required little boys as sacrifices, and though Toga also realized he wasn't human, he was male, and that counted, didn't it? He knew that some of them waited just out of sight for children to venture in before they struck, and those children were never found again.*

*Still . . .*

*Uncle Yasha swam in that pond all the time. Toga knew that. Aunt Gome had just been swimming in it, too. Aiko had been in the water before, and she was still alive. Toga wrinkled his nose. It was his considered opinion that Aiko should be fed to the pond youkai. She was a pain, and if it weren't for her telling Uncle Yasha that Toga hated water, he wouldn't be standing on the shore now in dark green swimming trunks that were about three sizes too big.*

*Toga made a face as she skirted around the pond and clamored onto a large, flat boulder that extended out over the water. Hunkering down as near as he dared to the edge, he leaned forward to stare into the green-hued water and sniffed as his frown deepened. He didn't smell a pond-youkai . . .*

*Leaning in further, Toga scowled as he stared at his reflection in the water. Kanaye ran out of the back door. Toga could smell the dog's approach but didn't turn to look. With a happy bark of greeting, the gangly mutt lumbered forward.*

*He should have realized that Kanaye, who normally stayed in the house to watch over the twins while Kagome played outside with Toga, would want to issue his normal tackle-greeting. He was too preoccupied with inspecting the water for the ever-elusive pond-youkai.*

*Toga was completely unprepared when Kanaye launched himself at him. With a loud squeal, six year-old Toga pitched head first into the water. Flailing his arms as panic surged inside him, he kicked his legs wildly. Feet touching the sand as something clingy seemed to wrap around his foot, he tried to scream again but choked as water rushed into his mouth and nose. His lungs burned, his eyes and ears stung as he kicked frantically to untangle his foot. His head broke the water's surface, and he tried to gulp air, tried to yell once more but he was dragged down again.*

*Arms locked around him—strong arms that tried to pull at his body. Toga scratched, clawed, tried to fight away the pond-youkai as he tried to scream again. The arms pulled him up out of the water. His shriek gurgled in the recesses of his lungs as the scent of fresh blood infiltrated his mind.*

*"Toga! Stop!"*

*"N-n-no!" he screamed. "You can't e-e-eat me!"*

*"Eat you? Toga, damn it, knock it off!"*

*And the voice suddenly registered in Toga's frantic mind. His body went limp as his head fell back, frightened, wild eyes locking with ones he knew. It wasn't a pond-youkai set on eating him, after all. "U-uncle? Uncle Yasha?"*

*The expression on InuYasha's face was a mixture of concern and irritation and . . . fear? He glowered at Toga for a few moments before crushing him against his chest in a tight hug. "You're all right," the hanyou assured him.*

*Toga wheezed in an effort to breathe. The water in his lungs made it impossible as moisture filled his eyes. "I-I'm not c-crying," he squeaked, his voice muffled by his uncle's embrace.*

*InuYasha cleared his throat as he waded toward shore, and when he spoke, his voice was gruff, choked. "Yeah, pup. I know you're not."*

Toga winced as the memory faded. *'That's what it feels like,'* he mused as he tried to breathe again. *'I feel like . . . I'm drowning . . .'*

Waves of sleepiness washed over him, and Toga felt the comforting tendrils of unconscious curl around him. Pale green eyes smiled at him in the darkness of his mind. Toga tried to smile but the movement seemed just beyond his ability. *'Sierra . . .'*

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*'Sierra . . .'*

Sierra dropped the tea cup she'd just been handed. It shattered on the floor as the hot liquid splashed her jean-clad legs. She'd heard Toga's voice as clearly as she would if he was right beside her.

Sesshoumaru let the edge of the newspaper he had been reading fold over as he glanced curiously at Sierra as the one stewardess he employed hurried over to clean up the mess. "I can get that," Sierra said as she unbuckled her seatbelt and started to stand.

The stewardess waved her hand and smiled. "No trouble," she said with a friendly smile as she carefully gathered the pieces of broken china.

Sierra sat back down and rubbed her arms. The air in the plane's cabin was cold, and she hadn't thought to bring a sweater with her.

"Miaka, Miss Crawford appears to be chilled," Sesshoumaru remarked as he turned his attention back to the newspaper again. He didn't speak again until after the stewardess disappeared through the door that closed off the back portion of the plane. "My apologies. I forgot that humans feel such things more acutely than youkai do."

Sierra looked up when the vent above her head suddenly started blowing out warm air. "Thanks."

Sesshoumaru nodded but remained silent as he disappeared behind the newspaper once more.

She stared at him with a thoughtful frown. She felt mentally exhausted but her body couldn't relax enough to sleep. Too many questions kept rolling around her mind, and so far, she hadn't gotten any answers from Sesshoumaru at all.

He hadn't told her exactly why he had come all the way to Chicago to see her. She knew that it had something to do with Toga. She could *feel* that it had something to do with Toga. Why did she know in her heart that there was something horribly wrong?

"What's wrong with Toga?" she asked softly, almost without thinking. She didn't know if she expected him to answer or not. His silence on the subject was unsettling. He stiffened, his hands tightening on the newspaper, and he seemed to be thinking about what, if anything, he would tell her as he slowly lowered the paper once more.

His cold eyes narrowed as he stared at her, his emotions hidden behind his predatory stare. Sierra briefly considered recanting her question but another set of amber eyes flashed through her mind, and they were eyes she knew, eyes she loved.

"What makes you think that something is wrong with my son?" Sesshoumaru asked instead.

Sierra shrugged, hoping he couldn't see her fear, her worry that there really was something wrong; that only the direst situation would have brought Sesshoumaru Inutaisho so far to see her, to ask her to come with him. "Isn't that why you came?"

Sesshoumaru inclined his head in a curt nod. "Surely you're not so simple that you cannot tell, yourself? It should come to you as intuition."

*'Intuition?'* Sierra frowned. "How would I know? I haven't spoken to him since he left, and—"

"And you feel nothing? You cannot sense my son's emotions? And yet you bear his scent?"



# ~ ~ Chapter 39 ~ ~

## ~ The Reunion ~

Sierra stared at the small house with a distinctly nervous twinge in her stomach. *'Toga's in there.'*

She was tired, she was ruffled, she was emotionally drained . . . Sesshoumaru hadn't offered to take her to a hotel. He hadn't said anything since the plane touched down, actually. It didn't matter. The weird sense that something was inexorably wrong was growing worse by the moment, and with every passing second, Sierra couldn't help but feel like Toga was somehow slipping further and further away from her.

The door opened with a resounding crash, and Sierra jumped back as one of Toga's twin cousins stormed out of the house. She stumbled as her foot slipped off the step. Sesshoumaru steadied her and quickly dropped his hands from her shoulders. "Sierra?" the cousin said, surprise evident in his expression. "You came?"

Sierra nodded. "Where's Toga?"

The cousin snorted. "Keh! Where the fuck do you think he is? He's in his kamiridden bed waiting to—"

"That's enough, Ryomaru," Sesshoumaru interrupted coldly.

Sierra glanced back from one to the other. Ryomaru still looked angry as he flexed his knuckles, popping them with an obscenely loud sound. If she didn't know better she'd swear he was considering attacking his uncle. Sesshoumaru, on the other hand, looked a little bored. What kind of family was this?

"Go on. I trust you have much to say to my son," Sesshoumaru rumbled without taking his eyes off his errant nephew.

Against her better judgment, Sierra hurried past Ryomaru into the house, absently hoping that she wouldn't regret leaving those two alone as she headed down the hallway that had to lead to the bedroom. Following her instincts, she knew he was close. She could feel Toga calling to her, even if she wasn't sure where she was going.

Stopping before a heavy oak door, Sierra slowly reached for the handle. Her hand was shaking. Badly. A cold chill swept over her, and she knew in her heart that whatever Toga's condition, it wasn't good.

*'If he were to be separated from the one he has chosen, the consequences . . . the consequences are . . . eternal.'*

She swallowed hard as her fingers closed over the handle. *'Eternal? But . . . but that would mean . . . That can't mean . . .'*

Closing her eyes as she gathered her courage to a sticking point, Sierra pushed down on the handle. The door swung open without a sound. Opening her eyes, she gasped softly, staring in complete disbelief at the defeated form on the bed. He didn't even look like the Toga she knew . . .

Forcing her feet to carry her forward, she edged closer to the bed, winced at the rent flesh on his right shoulder, the angry wounds that marred his chest. She uttered a soft gasp and tried to look away. The wounds hurt her, maybe more than they hurt him. His breathing was shallow and labored, and as she drew closer, she could hear the faint rattling below the sound of his ragged breaths. "Toga," she whispered as her cold fingers touched his even colder cheek. The feel was startling as pain exploded inside her, as she slowly sank onto the edge of the bed beside him. "Wake up, Toga . . . what have you done?"

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*He was cold.*

*Wandering through the darkness, Toga looked around, searching for something to guide him, searching for a reason —*

*'A reason? A reason for what?'*

*It didn't hurt here. The pain that seemed to be so close was far away. It didn't hurt.*

*'Live, baka . . . don't you want to?'*

*Toga frowned as he wandered further and further in the dark. To live . . . but he was alive, wasn't he? And the pain he knew . . . it was because of that, wasn't it? Because he lived and breathed . . . but why did it hurt?*

*"Toga! Come down from there before you fall!"*

*Toga glanced down and blinked in surprise. Nestled high in the branches of a very old tree, he didn't remember climbing up there. Hadn't he just been walking? He shook his head. That didn't make sense. If he had been walking, he would still be on the ground, right?*

*He hopped out of the tree and ran to his mother. Kagura knelt down with a bright smile. "Come, Toga. Your father will be home soon."*

*Toga frowned. Why was his mother speaking to him as if he were still a pup? He glanced down again and scowled. 'Because . . . I am a pup . . .?'*

*The blackness suddenly faded, and he was standing in Sesshoumaru's study. It was too familiar, the scene, and yet he shouldn't have been more than four years old. He'd been waiting impatiently. Waiting . . .*

*"So is he here yet?"*

*"It is not yet time Toga, now get down and behave."*

*"But I can't!" The little boy replied with a bit of a pout. "Just I heard so many stories, from Shippou, and . . ."*

*"Like what kind of stories?" Sesshoumaru asked in a rather bored tone.*

*"All kinds . . . like when Uncle Yasha cut off your arm . . ."*

*"Really, how could he have known that?"*

*"He said it was a story of his from when this other lady was there . . . she told it to him."*

*"I see."*

*"Is it true? Did he cut off your arm, Papa?"*

*"Yes it's true . . ."*

*"But you got both arms though?"*

*"Yes . . ."*

*"How?"*

*"Long story son . . ."*

*Toga grinned happily and hopped up and down with his small hands resting on his father's arm. "Okay . . . so how?"*

*"I will tell you later."*

*"Can I see the scar?"*

*"No . . . there is no scar . . ."*

*"Really?"*

*"Yes . . ."*

*"Can I see?"*

*"No."*

*"Papa . . . please?"*

*"I said no, now go play . . ."*

*"When I grow up I want to be just like Uncle Yasha!"*

*The study faded away, and Toga was suddenly beside Uncle Yasha with his hands clamped over his ears as they hurried through the forest. Aiko was in Uncle Yasha's arms shrieking her head off, and Toga just couldn't take it anymore. "Make her stop!"*

*InuYasha's face looked grim, determined. "I'm trying! Move faster!"*

*And Aunt Gome was suddenly there, holding Aiko while Uncle Yasha and Dammit the dog chased Toga in a game of Tag. Toga liked Aunt Gome, even from the first time he met her. She smelled nice, and she smiled at him.*

*"You're a human," Toga stated flatly. "I am youkai."*

*"You have pretty markings on your cheeks. What's your name?"*

*"I am Inutaisho Toga, son of Sesshoumaru. Father says that my crests are inherited from my grandfather. His were blue, too. InuYasha is my uncle, but he's hanyou." He sat down by Kagome's feet. "What's your name?"*

*"Kagome," she supplied. "Should you be telling me that you're a youkai?"*

*Toga shrugged. "Father says that you're a powerful miko. Father said you battled Naraku and defeated him. Father says—"*

*"Your father apparently talks way too much," InuYasha growled as he flopped down on Kagome's other side.*

*Kagome laughed. "A miko? I'm not a miko!"*

*The warning look that InuYasha sent the boy's way staved back whatever commentary the lad had begun to form. Toga looked duly befuddled, but let the subject drop. His golden eyes rose to lock with Kagome's after a moment, and InuYasha narrowed his gaze.*

*"She's sleeping. Aiko won't go to sleep for anyone but Mama." Toga dug the heel of his shoe into the dirt in a nervous gesture. "Could you put her down? You could play with us! Can't she, Uncle Yasha? I know she's a girl, but . . ."*

*InuYasha grinned. "I guess," he allowed, making a show of his feigned reticence. Kagome made a face as she gently shifted Aiko to lay her down.*

*After checking the girl to make sure that she was still asleep, Kagome hooked her arms around her raised knees and scrunched up her shoulders. "What are we playing?"*

*Toga hopped up, arms waving wildly in excitement. At the last moment he remembered not to yell, but he smiled brightly when he said, "Can we play hide and seek?"*

*But the forest faded away, and this time, Toga was standing in one of the darkened rooms of the Inutaisho mansion where the family portraits were displayed. "I need to know one thing," he said as he gazed into Lily's eyes.*

*"What . . . is it . . . you need to know?" she asked, her breathing heavy. Toga shook a little as he cornered her against the wall. He became uncomfortable. What was this? He was nervous? Inutaisho Toga was nervous around this girl? Suddenly she leaned forward and kissed him.*

*Toga froze. No woman had ever been so bold to kiss him first. His eyes widened. And he looked at her face. He knew it! She was a youkai. Why else would she be so courageous? He kissed her back, ecstatic that he finally found someone. They stood there for a long time, bodies and lips together. Finally Lily broke the kiss. She looked at him, a smile on her face. Toga smiled back. "Finally another youkai; someone I can be with," he whispered.*

*Lily took a step back. "Another what?" she asked in confusion. It was obvious that she hadn't ever heard the word before. Toga blushed and sniffed the air. Mixed in with her intoxicating scent of flowers was another scent, a little vague, but it was definitely human. In his eagerness for her to be the one, he had assumed she was youkai.*

*"I . . . well . . . it's just that . . ." Toga stammered, searching for the right words to say. The gods must have hated him, for none came. He looked at her eyes. Those bright violet eyes were questioning him. "Those violet eyes . . ." he thought.*

*"Why are your eyes violet?" Toga blurted out.*

*"Contacts, but what does that have to do with anything?" She straightened up quickly, obviously annoyed.*

*"Lily . . ." Toga was still trying to figure out how to tell her. Most humans would run away, would she run too? She seemed different from those other girls.*

*"Lily, do you see these paintings?" Lily looked around.*

*“Family pets?” she asked. “Man your family must really love their dogs. I had a retriever named Gumbo when I was younger, but we had to get rid of it when . . .”*

*Toga interrupted lightly. “Not pets—family.” Lily stared blankly at him. She did not understand.*

*“Yeah, Gumbo was like a little brother. I cried for days when daddy w—” Toga gently pressed his finger to her lips, silencing her, then he continued.*

*“I am a youkai, Lily. I am not human.” He watched her, trying to read her emotions. “I thought with your eyes, and pale hair that you were perhaps a youkai too,” he sighed. Now she was going to leave for sure.*

*“Go ahead and leave,” he said as he let go of her. “I know you do not want me anymore.”*

*Lily stayed. She still seemed confused, but there was something else there, too, something in her that didn’t want to leave. Youkai or not, she grabbed his hand, pulled him in again and kissed him. “You are lucky I do not know what a youkai is.”*

*But Lily faded away, and Toga was alone in the blackness again. The cloying sense of being stifled was overwhelming; the feeling that he couldn’t breathe was harder to bear. He couldn’t sense anything in the darkness, couldn’t smell or see, couldn’t hear or speak. Memories came faster now, flashes of familiar faces that he couldn’t quite place. Flitting through his head too fast to discern more than a blur of shapes and colors, Toga struggled to make out someone—anyone.*

*“Toga . . .”*

*He knew that voice. Turning slowly as he tried to find her face, Toga opened his mouth to call her name but the blackness choked him. Drowning in the darkness, he was a child again but this time there was no Uncle Yasha to save him, no Aunt Kagome holding her arms out for him. Fighting to clear his mind as the charcoal obscurity closed over his head, seeped into his skin, he couldn’t remember if he was a child or an adult because the monsters that lurked in the shadows were more terrifying than the memories of a childhood accident.*

*“Toga!”*

*Bright green flashed before his vision, eyes that stared at him came into focus. Wavering like a dream or a fantasy, the eyes he knew were full of concern, of worry, of tears. He knew her. Clad in a black silk dress, the solitary figure appeared before him. She smiled at him, her strawberry blonde hair curling in brilliant tendrils around her, bathing her in a golden light as she slowly extended her hand to him. "Come on, Toga . . . you can't give up now, can you? You love me? Fight for me . . ."*

'Fight for . . . her?'

*His arm didn't want to cooperate as he tried to reach for her, too. Weighed down by an invisible force, he grimaced as he fought to touch her. If he could take her hand, everything would be all right, wouldn't it? If he could feel the warmth of her fingers, he'd be safe. If he could just remember her name . . .*

*"You know me, Toga. You know me, and you love me . . ."*

*He grimaced as he stretched his fingers, strained to reach her. 'I do know her. She is—'*

*Her smile widened as her voice whispered to him. "I am . . ."*

'My . . . mate?'

*"You promised, Toga . . . You said you would protect me . . ."*

*Fighting against the force that tried to hold him back, Toga's body shook as he battled the invisible thing, the lure of the darkness and the beckoning oblivion. 'S-S-Sie . . .?'*

*"That's it, Toga . . . remember . . ."*

*He blinked in surprise as he stared at the water fountain. Lit up and glowing, bathed in a soft light, she was beside him, and when she looked up at him and smiled, he knew that he had been there before. The fountain faded away, and he was standing at the base of a tree. She was up in the branches, and again she smiled at him, her eyes catching the light as the scent of apple blossoms assailed him. He knew her, absolutely. He knew her heart, her mind . . . her body.*

*"Of course you do . . . you know me, and I . . . come on, Toga . . . say my name, and you'll wake up . . ."*

*He frowned, his hand pausing as he continued to try to reach her. A strange sense of fear washed over him, as though there was something he had forgotten, something about her. 'If I do wake up . . . she won't be here . . . because . . .'*

*Because . . . ?*

*'Because . . . because she doesn't want to be . . . because I . . .'*

*Jerking his hand back, Toga watched in horrified fascination as another woman pulled him close, leaned toward him, kissed him. 'Kami, I . . .'*

*"But you didn't, Toga! And I know you didn't! Wake up, please . . . you've got to wake up!"*

*She stretched out her fingers, waved her hand slightly, like she thought the motion would bring him closer. "You said you wouldn't leave me, Toga! You promised, so remember . . . remember us!"*

*'Us? Is there an 'us'? Didn't I . . . didn't you . . . didn't we . . . ?'*

*"Do you remember? Mistletoe and Christmas . . . the walks in the park? You showed me your true form . . . and I wasn't afraid anymore . . . Toga . . ."*

*'Sie . . .'*

*"That's right."*

*He reached for her again, his fingers mere breaths from hers. He had to touch her, had to feel her. If she slipped away again, he would be lost. If he could touch her, he'd remember her . . .*

*Leaning toward her, straining against the strength of will that held him back, he could feel every part of him calling for her, begging her to reach for him, too. She did. Her fingertips brushed over his, and he gasped softly, the current of her touch bringing back bittersweet waves of memory, tides of emotion that had been dulled. Her name crashed over him and spilled from him with an urgency that was borne of the desire to live, to breathe, to escape the stagnant dream water.*

*"Sierra . . ."*



# ~ ~ Chapter 40 ~ ~

## ~ D ispellling the I llusions ~

“What do you mean, you didn’t have a choice?” Sierra countered angrily, narrowing her teary glare on Toga. Maybe it was the delayed fear that brought the emotion out, the unbearable realization of just how close he was to dying. Maybe it was her own fury that she would be so stupid not to have realized sooner, just what those strange feelings, those odd allusions had meant. Maybe it was the knowledge that she might have known all of this, all along, and that she just really didn’t want to face that.

Toga sighed. “I mean exactly what I said, Sierra. I didn’t choose anything.”

She shook her head slowly as her anger vanished as quickly as it had come. “I don’t understand, Toga . . . What does that *mean*?”

“Why did you come?” he asked instead. Eyebrows drawing together as he stared at her, he silently dared her to lie, refused to look away.

“Your father asked me to.”

He flinched and scowled, looking completely crestfallen. Sierra bit her lip and waited for him to speak. “I see.”

His gaze slipped away from hers, and he tried to move over. Sierra caught his chin and gently made him look at her again. “Toga . . . why? Why didn’t you tell me that Kari . . . that you didn’t . . .”

He rasped out a weak laugh that held absolutely no humor at all. “It doesn’t matter,” he told her. “The end result was still the same. I . . . I *allowed* myself to betray you.”

“Is that what you think? Do you really believe that?”

When he refused to answer, Sierra sighed and stood up, wandering around the room, migrating toward the window. "Your father said . . . he said that if you were separated from the one you chose, the consequences would be eternal . . . What did he mean?"

Toga sighed. She heard the bed creak as he struggled to sit up. When he gasped softly, she turned. He'd managed to do it alone though his face had lost what little real color he had. His eyes were bright, and when she stepped toward him again, he looked away. "I didn't want to tell you," he admitted. "It would have seemed . . . foolish, I guess. Selfish, maybe . . ."

"Selfish?" she echoed with a shake of her head. "I don't understand."

Toga took his time, gathering his thoughts in the quiet room. Sierra sat down on the foot of the bed and waited, fighting down the urge to demand that he spit it out. If it was this hard for him to admit whatever it was he had kept from her, the least she could do would be to wait and listen.

"When a youkai loses their mate, they die. I hadn't realized that we had already bonded enough for that to be the case. Even then, I didn't want you to stay with me because of that."

It took a few minutes for her to comprehend the enormity of his confession. "Because I said I couldn't be with you?"

Toga winced. "Father didn't tell me . . . Sierra, do you want to be with me?"

His question both thrilled her and frightened her. The idea of a future of any kind without him was a horrible, hurtful thought. The idea of his condition, of the way he'd seemed so very close to death. "Toga . . ."

"I can save you," he interrupted softly, his gaze piercing through hers just before he smiled ironically. "Maybe we can save each other."

Sierra shrugged helplessly, unsure what to say, unsure what he meant. "Toga, I can't . . . don't you ever want children? Because I can't . . ." She trailed off, unable to finish her statement as a different kind of pain welled up inside. Deep within the confines of her heart, her soul, the barely acknowledged truth of what she was admitting cut her deep—one of the concerns that she hadn't wanted to voice before.

He shook his head and sighed. She couldn't meet his gaze. Staring at the blank white wall, she wished that she could say the words he needed to hear. He had to know. He deserved to know. "Sierra, you're still not listening," he said, his voice gentle, almost . . . amused?

*'He absolutely sounds like he thinks something's funny!'* Sierra fumed as she scowled at the wall. *'Funny, my foot!'*

"I can save you, Sierra. My blood will override yours. You'll live as long as me, and you'll have my immunities. It's not possible for youkai to have human diseases. Do you understand? Your gene . . . it won't matter, and it wouldn't affect our pups, either."

She couldn't breathe. Struggling to understand what he was saying, she sat in silent shock as she stared at him. "Why . . . ? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

He sighed. "I didn't know it before," he admitted. "Father didn't tell me this until after . . ."

Sierra wasn't sure if she should laugh or cry, but Toga was paling considerably. He still wasn't out of danger. He was weakened far too much to think that he was. Scooting forward, she pulled the blanket up, trying not to wince at the injuries that hadn't healed. "How did you do this?" she asked as she frowned at the angry tears in the flesh of his shoulder.

"Cat youkai," he mumbled as he strained to keep his eyes open. "Nasty vermin."

Sierra snorted at the hint of arrogance in his tone. "Did you win?"

He snorted. "Keh. What do you think?"

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "Go to sleep, Toga. You need to get better, okay?"

It took a moment for his gaze to focus on her. "You'll be here when I wake up?"

"Yeah, I'll be here."

He nodded slowly but didn't close his eyes. "And . . . you forgive me . . . ?"

Sierra swallowed the lump that rose in her throat and tried to smile. "There's nothing to forgive, Toga. There never was."

He didn't look like he believed her but he finally did close his eyes.

A reassuring feeling of warmth crept over her, and Sierra couldn't help but smile as she watched Toga's expression relax. She didn't even question whether or not Toga could feel it, too. She knew he did. The whole idea that his youkai blood had chosen her was intriguing but she could wait to ask him about that.

*'Maybe we can save each other.'*

*'Yeah,'* Sierra thought as she stretched out beside him, careful not to touch his injuries as she cradled his hand in hers. *'I think . . . I think I'd like that . . .'*

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A horrendous crash awoke Sierra from a dreamless sleep. With a strangled yelp, she sat bolt upright on the bed and pressed her hand against her chest as Toga groaned softly. "What the—?"

"If I didn't know better, I'd swear that was Uncle Yasha," Toga remarked dryly.

Sierra stood up and hurried over to the window. With a startled gasp as her eyes widened in shocked disbelief, she gaped at the carnage that used to be Toga's back yard. "Oh, my . . . God . . ."

"Uncle Yasha?" Toga asked in an almost bored tone.

She shook her head. "No . . . Ryomaru and . . . your father."

"Oh?" She heard the bed squeak and groan as Toga struggled to sit up. "This I must see . . ."

Sierra wasn't at all sure that it was a good idea, but she tore herself away from the window to help Toga since he was determined to get out of bed. Their nap hadn't lasted long—a half-hour at best—but he seemed stronger now than he had been.

Toga turned the handle and pulled the window open, but remained silent as he stared at the scene laid out before them.

Sesshoumaru was standing in the middle of the yard looking almost bored as Ryomaru braced his left arm with his right hand and rotated his shoulder. "You're losing your touch, old man," Ryomaru goaded.

"Please," Sesshoumaru scoffed casually as he lifted his right hand to pop his knuckles. "You've got nothing on your father, puppy."

"Keh! I've been taking it easy on you—respectin' the elders."

Sesshoumaru shook his head. "By all means, if you think you can."

The sod was torn and ruffled like a bed sheet, and what looked like it had once been a healthy enough cherry tree now stood like a skeleton with the broken bones of its branches littering the ground.

"You're going to fix all that," Toga hollered dryly as Sierra slowly swung her head to stare dubiously at the weakened youkai.

Ryomaru shot him a cursory glance and snorted. "Keh! Get your weak ass back in bed, Toga. This don't concern you."

"Actually . . ." Sesshoumaru drawled slowly.

Toga sighed. "Fine, whatever, just don't hit the house, all right?"

Sierra shook her head, unable to wrap her head around the fact that Toga didn't seem concerned about this in the least. "Is this . . . normal?"

Toga made a face. "Normal? No . . . 'normal' is Uncle Yasha and Father having at it. Ryomaru is usually gone on a hunt of one kind or another."

"A hunt?"

Toga shrugged. "He hunts down renegade youkai for Father. He was gone when Father found out about the cat youkai, so I volunteered to go."

Sierra's eyes narrowed as she shifted her incredulous stare to him. He could feel the edges of her irritation rising rapidly, and he grimaced inwardly, bracing himself for the blast that he knew was forthcoming. "You're telling me you *wanted* to go?"

Toga winced at the underlying menace in her tone. "Well . . . I wasn't expecting to get hurt, no . . ." he assured her, obviously hoping to placate her before the situation got any worse.

"So you're saying you willingly went after these cat-thingies and got the crap beat out of you? Because you *wanted* to go?"

"Uh . . ."

"Think fast, Toga," she remarked as she crossed her arms over her chest, unaware that the relatives outside were now intently listening to the exchange with varying degrees of interested amusement.

"Not *wanted*, exactly . . ." he hedged.

"What, *exactly*, were you trying to do?" she countered.

Toga opened his mouth and closed it a few times with stuttered beginnings of coherent words that were otherwise rendered ineffectual before he managed to piece together a pitiful defense. "They're dead!"

Sierra made a face. "And that's supposed to make me feel better?"

His expression shifted into a pout that she'd never seen before. "It's supposed to make you a little less angry, yes."

She rolled her eyes. "Try again, Toga."

"Damn," Ryomaru muttered loud enough for both Sierra and Toga to hear. "Reminds me of Mother and the old man."



# ~ ~ Chapter 41 ~ ~

## ~ E xplanations ~

“So you’re telling me she’s descended from that pervert?”

Kagome rolled her eyes. “And Sango. Sango wasn’t a pervert.”

InuYasha snorted. “Keh! She might have been once the monk rubbed off on her.”

Kagome rolled her eyes again. “That’s great, though . . . I wonder if Sierra has any of Miroku’s spiritual power?”

InuYasha suddenly grinned. “Dunno about spiritual power, but from what I hear she had Toga on the ropes.”

Toga grimaced as he kicked his feet under the blanket that Sierra had informed him to stay under just before she’d headed off to take a shower. After blistering his ears over what she thought was his lack of good judgment, she’d told him what her biological mother had written in the book. He had just passed that information along to Uncle Yasha and Aunt Gome to circumvent his uncle’s teasing. It had worked for about ten minutes . . . “She’s kind of scary when she’s mad.”

InuYasha shook his head. “If she’s anything like Sango, that don’t really surprise me.”

“InuYasha!” Kagome complained with a shake of her head. “That’s not even funny . . .”

“It wasn’t supposed to be, wench. Sango was a little scary when she was mad.”

“You never said that to her.”

"Keh! That's because I liked my parts where they are, thanks."

Kagome heaved a sigh but grinned as she turned her attention back to her nephew again. "You look much better, Toga. I'm glad."

"I feel better," he agreed. "I'd feel even more so if I could take a shower."

InuYasha wrinkled his nose. "You can say that again, pup."

Toga grimaced at his uncle. "If Sierra wouldn't have a fit, I would."

InuYasha shook his head. "You're gonna let her tell you what to do?"

That earned him a dark scowl from his mate.

Toga hid his amusement as InuYasha's ears flattened a little. "For now, yes."

InuYasha snorted but scooted back in his seat when Kagome leaned toward him.

After pinning the hanyou with one last, long look, Kagome turned her attention back on Toga as her smile resurfaced. "I told Kagura that we'd be happy to have Sierra stay with us."

Toga's amusement disappeared. "What?"

InuYasha's lazy grin widened. "Ears broke, pup? You didn't really think that she was staying here with you, did you?"

Toga opened his mouth to reply then snapped it closed again. It was his opinion that Uncle Yasha was enjoying this a little *too* much. "Why *can't* she stay here?"

Kagome was the one who spoke next. "Your mother thought that Sierra—being human—would rather be married first, Toga . . . and I agree."

"What do you think I'm going to do? Attack her? For the love of kami, I'm still bedridden," Toga argued.

InuYasha snorted. "And your bastard father was concerned that your Mocomoko-sama already smelled . . . strange. Be a shame if you couldn't wear it to your own wedding, wouldn't it?"

Toga winced. "That was an accident," he mumbled, fighting back the flush that heated his cheeks.

InuYasha grinned as Kagome stared at the ceiling. "Accidental, huh? I hear you, Toga."

"InuYasha . . ." Kagome began in a warning tone.

"I get the point," Toga grumbled.

"What point?"

He stifled a groan as Sierra wandered back into the room wearing one of his shirts and a very large pair of sweatpants that obviously had to be tied up to keep them on her. She was toweling her hair dry, and she smiled at Toga, which made him feel quite a bit better—until InuYasha opened his mouth to say something.

Kagome rose out of her seat to clamp a hand over the hanyou's mouth. "We were just telling Toga that we would love to have you stay with us while you're here."

Toga didn't miss the questioning glance that Sierra shot him. He grimaced and shrugged just a little. "Uh . . . oh . . . okay."

Kagome took her hand away from InuYasha's mouth to grab his hands instead. "Come on, InuYasha. I'm sure Sierra and Toga had better things to talk about, and we're just in the way."

InuYasha made a face. "Nice try, wench. Sesshoumaru wanted—"

Kagome tugged on his hands. "Since when have you cared what Sesshoumaru wanted? Now come on!"

"But—"

"We can come get her later, InuYasha."

"Oi!"

Toga shook his head slowly as Aunt Gome dragged Uncle Yasha out of the room.

"What was that all about?" Sierra asked, her tone reluctant as she sat down in one of the vacated chairs.

"I don't think you want to know," Toga admitted.

Sierra looked like she might agree despite the quirking of one eyebrow. "Probably not," she agreed. "So tell me."

He made a face. "Father and Mother thought it would be best if you stayed with Uncle Yasha and Aunt Gome, is all."

"Because we aren't married, you mean?"

Toga jerked his head in agreement.

She smiled and shrugged. "It's probably best," she mused, "since I want you to concentrate on getting better, anyway."

"I'd heal faster if you were here with me."

"I *am* here with you," she countered as she scooted off the chair and onto the bed beside him. "You look tired again."

He started to argue with her but a yawn cut him off. "Why don't you lie down with me?" he conceded.

Sierra thought it over and shrugged. "A nap wouldn't be a bad idea," she allowed. "Let me dry my hair or something."

Toga grabbed her hand and tugged until she stretched out beside him. "You're fine," he argued as his eyes closed. "I don't have a hair dryer."

"Mmm," she murmured as she snuggled closer beside him, her head resting on his good shoulder as she relaxed. "M'kay."

"Come on, Toga," Sierra prodded as she held the spoon in front of his face. "You're always hungry, and none of that, 'I don't need human food,' business, either."

Toga wrinkled his nose dubiously at the herbal concoction she was trying to make him eat. "I can feed myself," he pointed out.

"Sure you can," she agreed. "Humor me, then."

He shook his head. "There's nothing in that," he argued. "It's just colored water."

"Colored water with vitamins and stuff," she informed him as she poked the spoon against his lips. "Now eat it."

He opened his mouth to tell her that he wasn't going to eat it. She shoved the spoon into his mouth. "Trying to choke me?" he challenged after he swallowed the tepid broth.

"If you'd cooperate I wouldn't have to," she retorted as she refilled the spoon.

Toga made a face at the broth that dripped off the spoon onto his chest. "This is entirely unnecessary," he said as he gently pushed her hand away. "That stuff reeks."

Sierra sniffed it then shrugged. "Kichiro said that it would help you."

Toga snorted. "Keh! When we were younger, he and Ryo spent entirely too much time trying to pull pranks on me. I've very little doubt that this is just another one of his stupid jokes."

Sierra rolled her eyes. "I don't think that's true. Anyway, it can't hurt, can it?"

"You'd be amazed," he countered dryly as he gently shoved her hand away again.

She gave up with a heavy sigh, dropping the spoon into the cup before she set them both on the nightstand. "You win, Toga, but you really do need to eat something."

"What I need," he grumbled as he sat up straighter, "is for everyone to stop trying to tell me what I need."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that I don't think anyone has any real idea what's best for me."

Sierra sat back and stared at him for several moments before she broke into a slight smile. "Why do I have the feeling this is about more than the herbal remedy Kichiro made for you?"

Toga snorted again. "It doesn't matter."

She narrowed her gaze as she stared at the pouting expression on his features. "Does this have something to do with my staying with your aunt and uncle?"

"No," he grumbled then grimaced. He let out a long, exaggerated sigh as he tried to look like he didn't care. "They, uh . . . they just don't think it's a good idea for you to stay here with me until after we . . . umm, that is . . . if you'll . . . marry me?" he mumbled as he tried to avoid looking at her.

She sat still, her heart lodging itself in her throat as she swallowed hard. "You . . . you're asking?"

He winced. "Not if you're going to say no."

Sierra grinned at his grumbled reply. "You think I'd say no?"

"I asked you before. I never took back the offer."

"Do youkai normally get married?"

Toga shrugged and tried to look nonchalant, crossing his arms over his chest with only the barest twinge from his wounds. She had been relieved that in the three days since her arrival, he'd recovered a lot faster than she thought he would have. If she hadn't known that he was close to dying days before, she

never would have believed it. "Not always . . . sometimes. Aiko did. It's mainly for show, but you're human."

"So you'd marry me because of that?"

He nodded. "There's that."

"What else is there?"

A quiet emotion filled his gaze, a hint of reluctance, as though he were afraid of something that he didn't want to voice. Toga frowned as he stared at the blanket and made a face. "I'll honor you, Sierra. I want you to have the things you need, the things you want."

She smiled. "Yes."

Toga blinked a few times and shook his head in confusion. "Yes?"

She giggled. "Yes, Toga . . . I'll marry you."

It took another few seconds for him to comprehend that, too. "You . . . *yes?*"

The warmth of her laughter echoed off the walls and settled over him like a soothing balm. "First I want you to get better," she told him, "and I want you to promise me you won't do anything this foolish again."

Toga grimaced as his face shifted into a scowl. "You make it sound like I did it on purpose."

"Maybe not on purpose," she agreed as she smoothed his bangs off his forehead. "It *was* careless, though."

"I didn't realize it would be that way," he told her. "I didn't know . . ."

"But you'll be fine now," she said quietly. "We both will, won't we?"

"Are you sure?" he asked, amber eyes searching her gaze for any traces of uncertainty.



# ~ ~ Chapter 42 ~ ~

## ~ U lterior Motives ~

Toga leaned in the doorframe of his father's study with his arms crossed over his chest and a scowl darkening his features. Nearly a month since Sierra's arrival in Tokyo, and Toga was at his wit's end. Either he was going to get some answers from his father or he was going to die trying . . .

Sesshoumaru didn't look up from his paperwork to acknowledge his son's presence as he pushed his glasses up. "Something bothering you, Toga?"

Toga pushed himself out of the doorway and jammed his hands into his pockets as he deliberately ambled forward. "Bothering me? No . . . but something was . . . nagging at me. Care to ask me what that is?"

Sesshoumaru flipped a page of the stapled document and didn't as much as glance at his son. "Do tell."

Toga let out an exaggerated sigh as he wandered over to the long windows to stare at the back yard of the Inutaisho estate. "It seems to me that . . . people . . . are trying to keep Sierra away from me. You wouldn't know what I'm talking about, would you, Father?"

"Of course not," Sesshoumaru replied smoothly—*too* smoothly.

Toga nodded slowly. "I see . . . so . . . you won't mind if I decided to elope with Sierra then?"

Hiding his smile as Sesshoumaru paused in his reading, Toga waited for his father's answer. "That's not a good idea," Sesshoumaru remarked. "You know as well as I that your wedding is not that simple an affair."

"There's that," Toga agreed, knowing well enough that it was also symbolic of Sesshoumaru the Inu no Taisho giving his blessing to his son in his choice of

mates. If anyone wanted to challenge Toga's right to be his father's successor, it would likely come at the wedding. "Of course, it doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, my blood has already recognized Sierra as my mate. No ceremony or challenge will change that."

"I wouldn't expect it to," Sesshoumaru stated. "How would it look, though, if you disregarded the significance of the ritual because you could not wait a bit longer?"

Toga turned around and leaned against the cold glass. "And you wouldn't be above . . . dragging your feet about the wedding, now would you, Father?"

Sesshoumaru dropped the document and stood up, deliberately strolling over to pour a glass of ice water before he pivoted to face his son. "Do you think I would do such a thing, Toga?"

Toga wrinkled his nose. "Do I think it? Of course not. I *know* it."

Sesshoumaru nearly smiled as he drained the water glass and set it aside. "Surely you want your future mate to have the kind of weddings that humans desire?"

Toga nodded slowly, conceding that much in his gesture. "Sure. Tell me, does it really take over a month to have a dress made?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "Longer, if the bride is as picky as your mother."

"Three weeks to choose a caterer?"

"Food is important to mortals."

Toga reigned in his desire to roll his eyes. "It's the same caterer you always use, Father," he pointed out reasonably.

"Interestingly enough, so it is."

"And the florist?"

"Your mother thought magnolias would be lovely."

"And since when do *you* care about any of this?"

"I don't," Sesshoumaru agreed, "but your mother does. Besides that, there is the matter of your future mate's family to take into consideration. They can't simply drop everything to come here, can they?"

Toga sighed. He was no closer to winning this argument than he figured he would be. Still, he had to try . . . "You know, it occurred to me . . . did you properly marry Mother before you took her as your mate?"

Sesshoumaru didn't bat so much as an eyelash. "Times were different then," he replied smoothly.

"And Uncle Yasha? Were times different then, too?"

Sesshoumaru wrinkled his nose. "That baka has never done things the traditional way."

"I'm onto your game, Father," Toga assured him. "No more delays."

That said, Toga strode out of the study, pausing long enough to kiss his mother's cheek in passing as Kagura swept into the room.

She turned to watch her son's retreating form before pivoting to stare at her mate, who was trying this hardest to hide a little grin. "You're lucky he has an even temper," Kagura remarked.

"It will do Toga good to practice patience. He's spent far too much time around InuYasha for my comfort, anyway."

Kagura shook her head as she crossed her arms over her chest. "He isn't stupid, Sesshoumaru. You didn't really think he wouldn't figure out that you're delaying his wedding on purpose, did you?"

"If he hadn't figured it out then I'd have *known* he'd spent too much time around that baka half-brother of mine," Sesshoumaru agreed.

"I like her," Kagura stated flatly, changing the topic since she was certain there would be no reasoning with Sesshoumaru on this. He might have accepted the fact that his son and heir had chosen a human for a mate. That didn't mean

Sesshoumaru was above something as petty as prolonging Toga's torment in the meantime. "She's a good match for Toga."

That killed the humor in Sesshoumaru's expression. "You think so?"

Kagura hid her own amusement. "Absolutely. She'll keep him in line, and the beautiful thing is that he'll never realize she's doing it, either."

Sesshoumaru snorted. "Spoken like a true woman."

"Keep it up, mate," Kagura challenged. "Seems to me it's been awhile since you've slept in a guest room."

Sesshoumaru straightened his back proudly. "This Sesshoumaru fears not his mate, Kagura."

She grinned. "Of course you don't. I wouldn't want you to fear me . . . but I did hear you tell our son that it was my fault that it took so long to hire a florist, did I not?"

"Did you? I don't recall . . ."

Kagura shook her head slowly as she heaved a sigh and strode toward the doorway. "You'd better let your son get married soon. Your mind is already starting to deteriorate."

She glanced over her shoulder as she hurried out of the room, smiling to herself at the very rare sight of Sesshoumaru Inutaisho with his mouth hanging open and a frustrated look on his face.

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"Don't the two of you have something else you'd rather be doing?" Toga asked, shifting his gaze from one of his obnoxious cousins to the other.

Kichiro sat back with a smug grin. "I think Sierra likes us," he remarked.

"Well, we *are* more interesting than Toga," Ryomaru agreed.

"You're both asking for it," Toga told them. His idea of taking Sierra out for a nice, quiet, and hopefully romantic dinner had been shot down with the twins' announcement that they were 'bored' and wanted to tag along. Toga had happily informed them that the reservations he'd made were for two, and that the restaurant wouldn't be able to alter that.

What he hadn't counted on was the fact that Ryomaru was close friends with the hostess at the restaurant, and after a few minutes of schmoozing, the reservation for two had become a reservation for four, and, from what Toga had overheard, a scheduled rendezvous for the miscreant hanyou after the restaurant closed.

It wasn't fair, not at all. With the wedding still six weeks away and everyone pitching in to make sure that Toga and Sierra weren't alone in the same room for more than two minutes—very likely by Sesshoumaru's decree—he was lucky if he got much in the way of kisses from Sierra without interruption, let alone anything else. He was damn near begging, and that was more than enough to irk the hell out of him.

Toga glanced over in the direction that Sierra had disappeared when she excused herself to go to the ladies' room. "If you two leave now, I'll think about letting you live later."

Kichiro blinked innocently. "It's not so bad, Toga . . . besides, the old man and Uncle Sesshoumaru preferred if you weren't left alone . . ."

"I don't think anything is going to happen here, of all places," Toga growled.

"You'd be surprised what could happen at a restaurant," Ryo commented with a lazy grin.

"Kami, you really should have been neutered," Toga grumbled as he tried not to think about what Ryomaru was implying.

"You need to lighten up," Ryomaru persisted. "You're way too much like your old man."

Toga didn't bother commenting on that as Sierra approached the table with a brilliant smile. He stood up and held out her chair. Kichiro groaned. Ryomaru made a tiny gagging sound.

“Shut up,” Toga rumbled under his breath.

“Are you sure you want to marry Toga?” Ryomaru asked, ignoring Toga as he turned his attention on Sierra. “You’d have more fun with, say, me or Kich . . . or both.”

Toga kicked his cousin under the table. Ryomaru didn’t even flinch.

Sierra blushed and shook her head. “That’s okay,” she quipped as she shot Toga a little grin. “I think Toga’s the one for me.”

Her words were enough to curb Toga’s rising desire to drag his idiot cousin outside and use Ryomaru to sharpen his claws.

“Oi, Ryo . . . check her out . . .”

Ryomaru’s head snapped to the side as Kichiro nodded toward a young lady in a very short, very tight cream-colored dress. Ryomaru pushed his plate away and stood, reaching back to slap Kichiro’s arm. Without another word, the twin menaces followed the girl to the bar and cornered her like a rabbit. With one on each side, the poor human looked like she wasn’t sure what to do.

Ordinarily Toga would have intervened before his cousins could stir up trouble. This time, though, he had more important things on his mind—like the ring in his pocket.

Sesshoumaru had sent the twins to retrieve Sierra’s belongings and they had just returned last night. Kichiro had come over to give him the engagement ring he’d found on her dresser while Ryomaru had taken Kirara—who had been staying with Sierra’s mother—straight to Sierra. The brothers had hired someone to pack up the rest of Sierra’s things, arranged for a moving company to send it all over, and after delivering the wedding invitations and plane tickets, the boys had scampered back to Tokyo.

But that was all beside the point since Toga just wanted a quiet moment to make everything official, at least with Sierra, and since it was probably the most ‘alone’ they’d be, it was now or never . . .

Trying to convince himself that he really didn't have to be nervous, Toga dug the ring out of his pocket as Sierra pushed salad around her plate, glancing over at the twins with a slight shake of her head. "How is it that Kagome and InuYasha have absolutely no idea just how bad those two are?"

Toga made a face as he stared at the diamond ring in his hand. "They hide it from them, of course, and Aunt Gome is convinced they're angels, so what can you do?"

Sierra shook her head slowly. "But Kagome said . . . can't you smell things? Why doesn't InuYasha know?"

Toga snorted as he wondered just why they were discussing Kichiro and Ryomaru when he was holding her engagement ring. "You can wash off . . . some scents, but I've no doubt at all that Uncle Yasha knows they're . . . I'd suppose he just doesn't tell Aunt Gome because she likes to believe the illusion that her sons are perfect. Anyway, why are we talking about them?"

Sierra turned to give Toga all her attention as she smiled. "Sorry. Was there something else you wanted to talk about?"

Toga drew a deep breath and held up the ring. "Kich brought me this. Will you . . . wear it now?"

Her smile faltered as she stared at the ring but resurfaced when she lifted her hand and spread her fingers to make it easier for him to slip the ring into place. His hands were shaking, and it took a few moments to get the ring to line up. Sierra giggled as his fingers closed over hers, slipping the diamond in place. "I . . . thank you," she whispered as she leaned over to kiss him.

Toga sighed, breathing in the scent of apple blossoms that radiated from her.

"I told you, baka, I have a date lined up for later," Ryomaru grumbled as he sat back down in his chair.

"Come up for air, Toga . . . don't make me separate you," Kichiro joked.

Toga sighed again, but this time it was more irritated than whimsical, and he pulled away from Sierra to glower at his cousins.

"Damn, leave them alone for two minutes, and they're all over each other," Ryomaru said with a heavy dose of disgust.

"I don't really think Uncle Yasha would miss you too much," Toga drawled as Sierra dabbed his mouth with her napkin.

Kichiro coughed to hide his amusement. "Nice shade of lipstick, Toga. Looks almost as nice on you as it does on Sierra . . ."

"Mother's got some eye shadow that would match pretty good," Ryomaru added.

"You know, I could have sworn that Uncle Yasha mentioned something about Gin kicking both your sorry asses the other day?" Toga remarked to shut the twins up.

Kichiro flinched. "Damn, Toga, that hurts."

Ryomaru snorted. "I let her win."

Toga grinned as Sierra coughed delicately into her napkin.

His gaze caught on the sparkling ring around her finger, and Toga stifled a sigh. *'Six more weeks,'* he thought as he grimaced inwardly. *'Six more weeks, and if the wedding is delayed after that? I swear I'll drag her off somewhere and marry her, anyway.'*

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Toga wiped his forehead on his shoulder and rotated his right arm once as InuYasha circled around him. His uncle had yet to bust out Tetsusaiga, and Toga's halberd leaned against the wall out of reach, too.

"Getting frustrated, pup?" InuYasha goaded as Toga launched himself at his uncle but missed when the hanyou leapt out of the way.

“Not at all,” Toga lied as he ducked and rolled to avoid InuYasha’s claws. Landing in a crouch, he swept his right leg to catch his uncle’s foot but missed when InuYasha hopped back again.

InuYasha laughed as he shot forward again. Toga dove to the side to avoid the contact and winced as he landed on his right shoulder. The flesh had healed well enough but the scar tissue was still tender, and landing on it wasn’t helping at all. Gritting his teeth and trying not to let his uncle see that the injury still bothered him, Toga pushed himself back to his feet and barreled toward InuYasha. Catching him before the hanyou could react, he sent his uncle flying back with a well-placed shove to his chest.

InuYasha hopped up and nodded as he hitched his shoulders. “Not bad, pup. Not good, but not bad. Get your halberd.”

Toga loped over to retrieve the weapon as InuYasha drew Tetsusaiga behind him. Taking a few minutes to reacquaint himself with the halberd, he spun it around a few times before tossing it over his shoulder and catching it neatly behind his back.

“Yeah, if you’re done playing, pup?”

Toga grinned as he spun around to face InuYasha. Hefting the huge blade of the massive sword over his shoulder, InuYasha sprinted toward Toga, and he blocked Tetsusaiga with the length of the halberd’s long metal rod. “Losing your touch, Uncle Yasha?”

InuYasha snorted. “Keh! Not fucking likely, pup. Your aunt reminded me that your wedding is in a few weeks, though, and that you’d probably like to be able to stand for it.” Disengaging the weapons, InuYasha spun around only to be blocked again.

Toga shoved against Tetsusaiga. InuYasha slid back a few feet. Using the moment to take the offensive, Toga lunged for his uncle and caught him with the rod held between his hands, bearing InuYasha down into the exercise mat. “Do you concede?” Toga demanded.

InuYasha snorted as he heaved Toga off and rolled to his feet. “Keh! In what world?” he scoffed as he darted at Toga again.

“Toga, are you—?”

Sierra gasped as Toga turned to glance at her. InuYasha couldn't stop himself fast enough, and Toga barely had enough time to keep Tetsusaiga from splitting him straight down the middle as he lifted the halberd at the last second.

Grimacing as he landed flat on his back, Toga watched with an irritated snort as InuYasha sheathed Tetsusaiga with a fierce glower on his face. “That was fucking stupid, Toga!” InuYasha snarled. “I could have killed you, you baka pup!”

Toga rolled to his feet and rotated his shoulder once more. “I doubt that,” he assured his uncle. “I don't die easily, remember?”

Mumbling some choice curses under his breath, the hanyou stalked past Sierra and outside.

“What were you doing?” Sierra demanded, her face pale and peaked.

Toga stuck the weapon in the rack and planted his hands on his hips as he turned to face Sierra. “I was training, Sierra. It was fine. I nearly beat him this time.”

“That's not what it looked like to me!” she argued.

Toga made a face. “Well, I would have if you hadn't interrupted.”

She started to respond but stopped, an odd sense of dread filtering over her features. “Toga . . .?”

“What?” he snapped a little too gruffly.

She sighed. “It's part of your life, isn't it? Fighting? Using real weapons?”

He dragged a tired hand over his face before he rubbed his aching shoulder. “Yeah, it is.”

“You . . . you're telling me that our children . . . they'll fight, too?”



# ~ ~ Chapter 43 ~ ~

## ~ A Youkai's Humanity ~

Sierra stared into the tea cup without seeing as Kagome set a plate of English muffins on the table before her. "Are you okay?"

Sierra didn't hear the question. She hadn't slept well the night before, and now it was coming back to haunt her. After Toga's nonchalant answer about fighting and his automatic assumption that their children would have to do that, too, she hadn't known what to think. *'Fighting . . . ?'*

The thing was, she knew her brothers tended to get into little fights now and then, even with one another, and that hadn't ever really bothered her. Something about the use of real weapons—good God, InuYasha's sword was massive—bothered her, and the direct results of what might happen if they weren't careful . . . Toga might be youkai and would heal faster, sure, but she was pretty certain that he wouldn't be getting up at all, if he ever took a direct blow from something like that . . . She wasn't sure what she really thought about all of it outside of the absolute panic that gripped her every time she remembered seeing Toga, lying on his bed and closer to death than she really wanted to think about.

"Sierra?"

"Huh?" Sierra muttered as she blinked and looked at Kagome.

Kagome sat back with a concerned expression clouding her features. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah," she lied as she tried to force a smile.

Kagome nodded. "You know, InuYasha used to tell me that I was terrible at lying. It doesn't seem like you're much better."

Sierra stared at Kagome. She liked Toga's aunt, even if she did still have to remind herself that Kagome really was much older than she was. Kagome seemed more like a girl friend than a motherly-figure, which was just as well. With a sigh, she gave in. Maybe Kagome could give her a better perspective than she had at the moment. "I just . . . I guess I didn't realize . . . I didn't know until yesterday . . . Toga said our children would have to fight."

"And that bothers you," Kagome finished with a slow nod. She sighed as she stood up to refresh her tea. "Youkai and hanyous have always had to fight. It's . . . it's their way, I guess. Toga learned early on, how to protect himself. Sesshoumaru wanted him to know, even if he never had to. The difference was, Toga never really wanted to use what he knew. That's why it surprised me when he volunteered to go after the cat-youkai."

Sierra digested that for a few minutes as Kagome sat back down with her tea. "Your kids fight, too?"

Kagome nodded. "Ryomaru hunts down rogue youkai for Sesshoumaru—the ones who don't like humans . . . the ones who threaten the secrecy of the youkai. Kichiro can fight, though he is more like Toga and would rather not have to. Gin's been trained, too, and I used to fight. I guess we feel that it's better for the children to know how to protect themselves and those they love."

Toga's promise came back to her, and Sierra nodded slowly. *'I'll protect you, if you'll let me . . .'* She really hadn't understood what he meant back then. She hadn't really understood a lot of things . . .

"It's . . . a little scary," she admitted quietly.

Kagome nodded. "It can be. It can also be reassuring. InuYasha had to fight a lot. He chose to fight, and he chose to live. Times are different now, and he doesn't have to do that anymore, but it gives us peace of mind knowing that he could protect us all if he had to. Toga . . ." Kagome sighed as she trailed off. "Toga's never been a fighter. Sure, he'd yell at Aiko, and yes, he's been trained in fighting. He'd fight again, if you were ever threatened. In his heart, though . . . he's a good man."

"Hmm, unlike his father."

Kagome smiled as Kagura strolled into the room and sat down at the table. "I didn't hear you arrive," Kagome said as she got up to pour Kagura a cup of tea.

"Gin was leaving as I was coming in," Kagura explained. "She looked a bit irritated."

Kagome made a face as she poured tea into a thin china mug. "She had an argument with InuYasha."

Sierra picked at an English muffin as she tried to hide her grimace. It wasn't an 'argument' as much as it was a very loud debate, actually. InuYasha hadn't been impressed with the young man who had come by to take Gin to the movies, and in true InuYasha fashion, he'd flat-out told the boy to go straight to hell. Gin had tried to argue with her father, and the 'disagreement' had escalated into a very heated debate by the time Kagome had arrived home and intervened. Gin's final claim, however, that she was going to die a virgin, had left InuYasha speechless and obviously furious while Kagome has pressed her lips together into a very thin white line. Sierra, who had been trying to remain inconspicuous and seated on the couch, had a feeling that Kagome was trying very, very hard not to laugh at the absolute shocked chagrin on the hanyou's face as he watched his daughter stomp off to her room.

*That had sparked a round of, "She's your daughter," commentary by InuYasha as he pointed in the direction that Gin had disappeared.*

*Kagome shook her head and laid her hands on his arm to placate him. "Well, she does have a point . . . she really is old enough to date, you know."*

*"Keh! Whose side are you on, wench?"*

*"I'm not taking sides, InuYasha. Gin's old enough to decide! I was younger than she is when I fell through the Bone Eater's Well."*

*"And look where the hell that got you, wench!"*

*Kagome smiled. "That's right. It got me the cutest little dog-boy, ever."*

*InuYasha's face shifted into a pout that Sierra did recognize, having seen about the same expression on Toga before. "Keh."*

"So, Sierra, are you ready for your final fitting?" Kagura asked, breaking through Sierra's memory.

"Yeah," she answered as she forced a smile.

Kagome glanced from Sierra to Kagura. "Sierra's having a little difficulty with the idea of her future children being trained to fight."

Kagura nodded slowly, uttering a little 'mmm' as she regarded Sierra. "This poses a problem for you?"

Sierra shrugged. "I hadn't really thought of it before. I didn't realize that it was a consideration."

"It's par for course for youkai and hanyous. As a rule, we don't have to anymore. Did your brothers ever fight?"

"Yeah, just not with weapons."

Kagura nodded again. "Youkai heal faster and are more physically resilient to humans. Toga isn't given to fighting often. He confines himself to training with his uncle when he feels like doing it."

Sierra frowned. "Yeah. His uncle nearly cut him in half," she grumbled.

"Toga's perfectly safe with InuYasha," Kagome assured her. "He wouldn't hurt any of them."

Sierra didn't find any solace in Kagome's assertions. "Is there really that great a chance that they would have to fight?"

"Toga will be tai-youkai. Do you know what that means?" Kagura asked gently.

Sierra shook her head. "Not exactly. I know he's mentioned that. He never really explained what it is."

"It means that he will be the one who is expected to make sure that the lesser youkai remain hidden from humans. Years ago, humans rose in power, and when they did, they sought to destroy youkai with their guns and their man-

made strength. The only reason we've survived is because we have striven to hide what we are."

Kagura stopped and smiled almost sadly. Sierra waited for her to continue.

"Sesshoumaru must take steps to ensure this. When Toga becomes tai-youkai, it will become his responsibility. From time to time, though, it might be necessary for Toga to defend his right to be tai-youkai. He has been raised knowing what his responsibilities are. He will be fair and rational where another who only wants the prestige of the title might not. That is why he has learned to fight. That is why your children would, as well."

"I see," Sierra finally said. Explained that way did make more sense, even if Sierra wasn't completely at ease with the idea. It had shocked her, she supposed, seeing Toga fight. She knew that he could. It was just easy for her to forget that he really was dangerous, that his enemy might have a weapon that was made for the sole act of killing.

Seeing him lying in the bed when she'd first arrived in Japan had terrified her. She knew he had killed the cat-youkai he'd fought. The knowledge did little to alleviate the other memory of seeing InuYasha's sword descending on him, either. *'But the question is, can I deal with this?'*

"In a perfect world, no one would ever have to fight, Sierra," Kagome said gently. "This isn't a perfect world, and there's not much we can do about it otherwise. It's okay. I know it scares you, but isn't Toga worth that?"

Sierra stared at the now-tepid tea in her cup and considered Kagome's words. *'Isn't Toga worth that?'*

She hadn't thought of it that way. Toga was who he was because of the things he'd been taught, wasn't he? He still made her feel safe, made her feel secure. He still gave her the sense of being completely at ease, and that was something, wasn't it?

Was Toga worth it?

Sierra finally smiled as she thought about the tender side of him that she knew. It was best that she did know what he was capable of doing, right? In the end he was still the same person. It didn't matter what he was because he possessed

more decency than most of those who professed to be 'human'. He'd never hurt her, and he'd never let anyone hurt his family.

'Yeah,' she thought as she stood up and rinsed her tea cup in the sink. *'He's worth it. He's absolutely worth it.'*

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"All right, Aunt Gome said something was bothering you," Toga said as he and Sierra walked through the forest. He wasn't sure how he'd managed to wrestle some time away from everyone else, but he was thankful for the excursion, even if Sierra seemed a little preoccupied.

"I just didn't realize that our children would have to fight, too," she confessed. "It's okay now. I think I understand why. It was just not something I had considered before."

"I'm sorry. I hadn't realized it would be that big an issue for you," he admitted as he jammed his hands into his pockets.

"It's okay, Toga. I trust you."

He blinked in surprise and nodded as Sierra tugged his sleeve until he pulled his hand from his pocket and wrapped her fingers around his. "I think Father is trying to drive me insane," Toga admitted with a shake of his head. "I think it's his way of getting the last word in about my choosing you as a mate."

"Surely he's not as petty as that."

Toga made a face. "Petty has nothing to do with it," he grumbled. "He's doing it because he *can*."

Sierra shook her head. "That sounds petty," she countered. "You said we'd be together forever, right? So . . . is six weeks really that long a time to wait?"

The look he shot her told her that he thought six weeks was close to an eternity. "I was thinking," he said slowly, carefully. "Maybe we should consider moving back to Chicago."

"Why's that? I mean, my family is there, sure . . . but aren't you needed here?"

"I rather appreciated having my family further away," he admitted. "They're far less annoying that way."

Sierra giggled as she stepped around Toga, dropping his hand as she slipped her arms around his neck. "You know, it doesn't matter where we are, as long as I'm with you."

"So . . . we could just . . . leave?" he asked, unable to keep the hopefulness out of his voice.

Sierra shook her head. "I don't think that really has any bearing on it. The wedding isn't that far away, though I wish everyone wasn't so set against us spending time alone . . . why *are* they doing that?"

Toga snorted but wrapped his arms around her to pull her just a little closer. "Keh! It's my father's doing, I don't doubt. Apparently he thinks that my spending time with you will lead to . . . things . . ."

"Things?" Sierra echoed. "Things like what?"

Toga didn't answer but he finally did smile. "Just . . . things . . ."

"Toga?"

"Hmm?" he murmured as his gaze dropped to her lips, as a shiver raced up her spine at the way his eyes darkened, intensified.

". . . We're alone now . . ."

"Mm-hmm."

". . . Toga?"

"Yes?"

". . . Do you *want* to kiss me?"

"Yes," he breathed.

She tried to smile but couldn't manage as his mouth hovered above hers. ". . . Okay."

Close enough that she could feel the heat of his breath fan over her lips; Sierra let her eyes flutter closed as she waited for his kiss. His arms tightened around her as she reminded herself to breathe. A million sensations rippled through her belly as Toga's subdued strength enveloped her in a comforting warmth. This was what she missed most, this feeling of security, the knowledge that Toga wouldn't let anything happen to her.

His lips whispered over hers in a feathery touch, the softest flutter of breath and warmth. Gentleness that was so familiar, the beauty of Toga's humanity was both amazing and frightening.

"Kami, Toga! Can't you wait?"

Toga stifled a frustrated growl as he turned his head to glower at his sister. Sierra sighed and opened her eyes, acute disappointment washing over her as she glanced at her not-soon-enough-to-be sister-in-law. "Hi, Aiko."

Aiko grinned and hooked and impossibly long strand of silvery hair behind her ear. "Aunt Gome said you and Sierra had gone for a walk."

"You'll understand if I'm not jumping for joy at seeing you here," Toga remarked stiffly.

"Now, Toga, you love me, remember? I'm your darling sister who you adore."

Toga snorted but didn't let go of Sierra. "Keh. Sometimes."

Aiko's grin widened. "Be glad, because I didn't come here to see you. I came to see Sierra."

"Me?"

"Yes. Mother thought that I should take you shopping. She thought it'd be easier for you to adapt if you had the honor of decorating Toga's bland home."



## ~ ~ Chapter 44 ~ ~

# *Three Weeks...and Counting*

Toga dragged a tired hand over his face as Sierra paced the thick blue carpet, arms crossed over her chest, fingers drumming impatiently against her biceps. Rin tucked her feet under the chair demurely as she shifted in her chair to lean toward her brother. “Shouldn’t you try to calm her down a little?”

Toga shot Rin a bored stare. “Right, so you can tell Father that I was misbehaving? No, thanks. Three more weeks . . . I’m not waiting any longer than that, no matter what *he* comes up with to delay the wedding—again.”

Rin coughed into her fist but Toga didn’t miss the upturned corners of her lips or the telltale light in her deep brown eyes. “That really *was* a fluke, and Papa had nothing to do with it,” she remarked, referring to the latest delay in the wedding plans that had pushed back the date another four weeks. With three weeks left before the blessed occasion, the ever-calm Toga was ready to lose his cool, and everyone knew it. “Who would have thought that Sierra’s mother would injure her foot?”

Toga snorted. “Keh. That’s hardly a reason to postpone the wedding, don’t you think?”

Rin narrowed her gaze. “Do you want me to answer that?”

It was enough to make him grind his teeth together, actually. With the influx of guests for the upcoming wedding, Toga was being forced out of his home and back into his parents’ house. It was decided that it would be best for him to stay in his childhood home so that Sierra’s family could use his house since they didn’t speak Japanese and would have an easier time if they weren’t at a hotel. Toga had offered to hire a translator. Kagura had told him not to be ridiculous.

Sierra stopped pacing long enough to stare out the window of the airport’s private waiting room as the Inutaisho plane touched down. “They’re here!”

Ignoring the knowing look Rin cast him, Toga stood up stiffly and wandered over to Sierra's side. Sierra tapped her foot as she waited impatiently for the plane to stop and for the occupants to disembark.

"I hope the trip went well," she commented as she wrung her hands and stared at the empty hallway with a slight frown.

"Your brothers came with her, right? I'm sure she's fine," Toga remarked.

Sierra made a face. "Just Kevin and Bill. Kevin gets motion-sick, and Bill always sleeps when he travels."

Toga stifled a sigh. As if having his family constantly surrounding them, now Sierra's family was arriving to thwart him, too. Kevin Crawford and his wife Carol were the first to step into the waiting room. Sierra hurried over to greet her brother with a tight hug that ended in a squeal as her brother lifted her off her feet and swung her in a wide circle. Depositing her on her feet again, Kevin kissed her cheek before Carol hugged her.

Bill and Christine were next. Sierra laughed when Bill hugged her. Toga smothered the urge to growl when her brother held on just a little too long. Christine seemed tired but looked happy enough as she greeted Sierra with a quick hug. Mrs. Crawford was the last out of the hallway. Moving clumsily with a cane to offer support, she smiled at her daughter and hugged Sierra with her free arm before waving Sierra's offer of assistance away.

"I'm fine, Sierra. You don't have to worry about me."

"Still, Mom . . . we can take you to Toga's house, if you'd like . . ."

Toga plastered on a tepid smile as Sierra's family seemed to finally remember that he was there. "Are you sure this isn't an inconvenience?" Mrs. Crawford asked.

Toga shrugged. "Nope, it's fine."

"Papa said he would make sure your luggage is taken to Toga's house," Rin said as she stepped up beside her brother.

Toga made the introductions and offered Mrs. Crawford his arm before leading the Americans out of the waiting room and through the airport. Sierra walked between her brothers, laughing and chattering happily.

"I'm glad my Sierra came to her senses. She was miserable without you," Mrs. Crawford said as Toga glanced over his shoulder at Rin, who was quietly explaining things to Christine and Carol. She grinned at him just before he turned around again.

"I missed her, too."

"I have to admit, though, it is strange, to think of her living so far away from all of us."

"I'll bring her back to visit whenever she wants to go," he assured her.

"You're a good man, Toga."

He smiled. "I'll take care of her."

Mrs. Crawford poked his side. "You'd better."

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Toga tossed the Frisbee to Sierra and laughed as Kirara leapt between them to intercept the hot pink disk. Sierra caught it in her fingertips and giggled as the happily yapping dog ran around her. Sierra whipped the Frisbee to Bill, and Kirara chased after it.

Kagura sat on the wide stone patio with Mrs. Crawford as Rin and Aiko led Christine and Carol on a guided tour of the Inutaisho estate. Sesshoumaru was actually talking with Kevin about kami-only-knew what, and Toga breathed a sigh of relief that his father was showing no outward disgust at the idea of his home being overrun with humans.

It was a good sign, he figured. Considering that he had yet to explain to Sierra's family that he wasn't human, he needed all the help he could get. *'Some after-*

*dinner conversation that'll be,' he thought with an inward wince. 'By the way . . . I'm not human, and our pups won't be, either . . .'*

For some reason, he didn't really think this would go over well.

Fortunately for him, dinner was quiet as Kagura and Sesshoumaru took turns asking inoffensive questions and answered ones posed to them. Sierra caught Toga's gaze and smiled. Toga stifled a sigh since he knew very well that it was no accident that she was seated across from him. Shippou kept the Americans entertained with his quick wit while Toga didn't speak much at all.

As dessert was served, Toga could feel what little he had eaten turn to lead in his stomach. The prospect of telling Sierra's mother about his heritage wasn't sitting well with him. He declined the thoroughly American dessert of vanilla ice cream and apple pie with a quick shake of his head. Sesshoumaru also waved off dessert. "Toga . . ."

He made a face as visions of his future in-laws choking on their desserts rushed through his mind. A quick glance at Kagura made him wince even more. She was shaking her head ever-so-slightly at her mate though she did spare Toga a quick glance complete with a raised-eyebrow look.

*'This is liable to make me look like a complete idiot,'* Toga mused as he stifled a sigh. "I need to tell you a bit more about myself before Sierra and I get married," he blurted, silencing everyone at the table as Sesshoumaru sat back in his chair with an inscrutable expression. Toga narrowed his eyes. If he didn't know better, he would swear that his father was enjoying the entire affair . . .

Forcing himself to meet Mrs. Crawford's puzzled gaze, Toga pushed his chair back and fumbled for the right words to explain his heritage. "I'm . . . uh . . . not . . . human."

Mrs. Crawford's eyebrows lifted though she didn't offer any commentary. Sierra fidgeted in her seat as she stared at her hands in her lap. Bill and Kevin stared at Toga in varying degrees of disbelief while the women glanced from Toga to Sierra and back again. Rin quietly excused herself to start gathering dishes. Shippou—the ass—was grinning from ear to ear.

"Come again?" Mrs. Crawford asked quietly as she blinked in a helpless sort of way, like she didn't know what to do with the given information.

Toga drew a deep breath before blurting, "I'm not human. I'm youkai, as are my father and mother."

Mrs. Crawford digested that for a moment before looking at Sierra. "What is he talking about, Sierra?" she asked mildly enough.

Sierra made a face. "It means . . . he's . . . a creature spirit—not human."

The brothers looked like they thought both Sierra and Toga had lost their minds. Shippou chuckled unmercifully as Sesshoumaru raised a fist to tap against his twitching lips. "Smooth, Toga . . . nice," Shippou muttered.

Toga reigned in the desire to smack his brother-in-law silly. "Because of this, though, I can save Sierra. She'll never have Huntington's disease, and neither will our pups."

Kevin's gaze narrowed. "Pups?"

"Children," Sierra blurted as her cheeks reddened. "Toga's . . . a dog spirit . . ."

"Dog?" Bill muttered incredulously. "As in . . . *dog*?"

"All right, this is insane," Kevin pointed out with a quick shake of his head. "Just . . . insane. There are no such things as 'you-whatever', and—"

"What do you mean, you can save Sierra?" Mrs. Crawford broke in, her voice cautious yet still reasonable. "There isn't anything that you can do to fix it . . . it's genetic."

"It is," Toga agreed. "Since I'm not human, my blood can save her. Youkai are immune to human diseases. As my mate—"

"*Mate*?" Bill echoed, obviously disliking Toga's choice of words and ready to take issue over it.

"Mate," Toga stated again. "She'd be more than my wife. She would be with me as long as I live."

A foreboding expression passed overshadowed Kevin's normally friendly countenance as he shot his brother a wary glance. "What do you mean by, 'as long as you live'? Why do I get the feeling . . . you're not talking a human lifetime?"

"Youkai live for centuries," Toga explained. "Sierra . . . she won't age like humans do."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Bill interrupted, waving his hands in a gesture meant to silence Toga. The young man shot to his feet and paced the length of the dining room as Sesshoumaru leaned back a little more and watched in avid interest though he didn't offer to help Toga explain, either. Shippou's laughter escalated, quelled only when Rin finally shot him a scathing glare. "You can't honestly expect us to believe all this . . ."

Toga sighed. "Well, I'd hoped, yes," he confessed as he pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

"Maybe I can help," Shippou offered as he choked back another round of laughter. Standing slowly, the kitsune held out his hand. "*Kitsune bi!*" he yelled as a flash of fox fire shot across the room over Sierra's head, earning Shippou a slap upside the head from Toga and a little yelp from Sierra. The fox fire hit the wall and vanished without leaving a trace behind.

"Well, that was stupid," Rin remarked as she rolled her eyes and planted her hands on her hips, glowering at her nit-wit mate. "You could have hurt her!"

"She wasn't going anywhere, and the worst it would have done would be singeing her hair or something," Shippou grumbled as he flopped back down.

"Yeah . . . singe her hair," Rin snorted, "three weeks before her wedding? Sometimes, Shippou . . ."

"Shippou's a kitsune—a fox youkai . . . and a moron," Toga explained to alleviate the shocked expression on the human's faces. When they still didn't look like they wanted to believe it, Toga sighed and removed his concealment.

"What the hell *are* you?" Kevin demanded as he grabbed Carol's arm to pull her out of her chair.

Kevin tried to drag Sierra to her feet, too. “Stop it!” Sierra insisted. Carol was still too stunned to fight her husband’s hold. Sierra, on the other hand, wrenched her arm free and glowered at her sibling. “He’s still Toga, that’s what! Now quit it! He had to tell you this—*all* of this—because I won’t age with the rest of you, either!”

Toga stood up, too, intent on keeping Sierra away from her brothers if they really meant to try to take her. He wasn’t sure what he was thinking, though if he stopped to consider it, his mind was repeating a few words over and over again: *‘Three weeks, damn it . . . three kami-forsaken weeks . . .’*

Sierra didn’t need his help, however, and Kevin looked like he definitely heard what she was saying, even if he didn’t like it. “This isn’t . . . it’s weird!”

“It isn’t,” she said, her tone softening now that he was listening to her. “They stay hidden because they choose to. Just be happy for me, okay?”

Kevin still didn’t look convinced but he seemed to relent despite the glower he shot at Toga.

Kagura stood up and clapped her hands briskly. “Perhaps we should let them finish this discussion alone,” she remarked. Shippou and Rin followed her out of the room though the kitsune did spare one last glance over his shoulder at Toga. His soft chuckle was, in Toga’s opinion, sorely misplaced. Sesshoumaru stood, too, but didn’t follow the others. He strode over to his son and stood beside him, silently facing the humans but making no move to leave. He looked bored, his expression completely blank. Toga knew better. His father didn’t have to speak for Toga to understand that, in his own way, he was giving Sierra his approval.

Mrs. Crawford dropped her napkin on her untouched dessert and sighed. “Is there anything *else* you need to tell us, Toga?”

“Aren’t you rushing into this just a little?” Bill finally asked as he stood up, too. “You’re talking about a long time here.”

Toga couldn’t stop the low growl that escaped at the inference that the wedding should be delayed—again.

“My son has waited this long to claim his mate,” Sesshoumaru finally spoke up. “His family has taken great care to make certain nothing . . . irreversible . . .



# ~ ~ Chapter 45 ~ ~

## ~ A n A merican G irl ~

“What if she ran off?”

“Shut up.”

“She could have.”

“Will you shut up?”

“If she realized that she was marrying you—”

“Ryo . . . unless you want to die, you’d better shut up. *Now.*”

Ryomaru relented with a soft chuckle that irritated Toga just the same. Standing in the decorated garden behind the Inutaisho mansion while the string quartet played *The Moonlight Sonata*, Toga felt his hands—cold and clammy—shaking just a little.

The humans in attendance didn’t seem to realize that they were surrounded by youkai. Sierra’s family was oblivious to the fact that they were grossly outnumbered. In deference to Sierra’s family, Kagura had included notes for all the youkai to keep their disguises on for the festivities. The humans had enough trouble dealing with the idea that Toga was youkai. They figured that it’d be best not to tempt Providence by allowing the youkai to show their true forms at the wedding . . .

All in all, the one brother Toga figured would be the most upset by the idea of his sister marrying into a youkai family didn’t seem nearly as agitated by the news as Kevin had been. Brent had asked questions and had been a lot leery of the truth in it all but had actually not flipped out, or so Toga had been assured since Sierra had explained everything to him before Toga had arrived to escort her family to dinner.

Kagura had suggested since Sierra was American, that the ceremony be traditional in that sense. Toga had agreed since he would have agreed to just about anything by then, which was another reason that the youkai didn't stand out to the humans. Foregoing ceremonial garb and opting for suits and dresses, the crowd was nondescript at best.

"If she's smart, she skipped out the front door and made tracks for Chicago," Ryomaru mumbled.

Toga didn't move his head as he shifted his gaze to the side to impale his baka cousin with a fulminating glower. "If you were smart, you'd shut the hell up," he growled through clenched teeth.

"Who in her right mind would want your father as an in-law?" Ryomaru countered.

"I'm more concerned with my idiot cousins," Toga retorted. "Now shut up or I'll—"

"Well, fuck me! She *did* show up!"

"Kami, I swear I'm going to put you out of my misery if you don't shut your yap, Ryo," Toga threatened as two ushers pulled open the huge glass doors. All heads turned to catch the first glimpse of the bride, but Gin was the first to emerge from the house. Her silvery hair was only shades lighter than the short silk sheathe dress she wore. After gliding gracefully down the runner, she kissed Toga's cheek, careful to wipe away the trace of lipstick she left behind before she winked at her cousin and stepped aside.

Toga's mouth fell open as he gaped. He knew Sierra was beautiful. He never expected her to look quite like that.

Okay, so he had to admit that the extra time it took to alter the dress for her was time well spent. The simple style and clean lines of the spaghetti-strapped confection hugged Sierra's body only to gently flare around her tiny waist into a full skirt with a short train that glided over the white runner that had been rolled out hours ago. Tiny pearls caught the sunlight, lending her a brilliant glow as the sun poked out from behind fluffy clouds. Sierra slipped her hand under Brent's elbow and smiled at her brother before he slowly started the procession

toward Toga, who bit off the low growl that escaped him when Ryomaru's elbow dug into his ribs.

"Knock it off, dog! He's her *brother!*" Ryomaru hissed.

Toga snapped his mouth closed and snorted. Brent whispered something to her, and her smile widened just before her gaze lifted to meet Toga's. He couldn't remember ever seeing her so glowing, so happy. Her shining eyes brightened even more as her lips trembled, but her smile didn't falter. Hair swept away from her face in a simple tail that curled down her bare back, Sierra didn't look away even after she stopped beside him.

He tried to smile but the emotion inside didn't seem right. Humbled that she would willingly agree to be with him, bemused by the sight of her, a smile seemed like an empty gesture. He wanted to kiss her, needed to touch her. She slipped her hand up to brush over his cheek. He caught her hand and kissed her knuckles and he didn't let go when he lowered her hand.

As much as he would truly love to take her far, far away, he'd waited this long. He supposed he could wait a little longer. The soft scent of roses mingled with apple blossoms as Toga tried to remember that he didn't dare drag her off with him now despite the merit the idea held. The tiny rosebuds that covered the hairpiece were strung together with tiny pearls, and the yards of lace that cascaded from the flowers fell past Sierra's waist. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. He wiped it away, and she laughed. "Good thing I used waterproof mascara," she murmured. Toga finally smiled.

The Christian minister they'd found to officiate the ceremony cleared his throat. After a last lingering stare, they turned to face the holy man, and the wedding began.

Toga tried to pay attention. Most of the ceremony passed by without much notice since all he could concentrate on was the way Sierra smelled, the happy smiles she shot him, the trembling in her hands as he slipped the small platinum circle onto her finger. He had managed to say, "I do," without the embarrassment of being prompted. Still, Sierra's scent was too close, too warm, too inviting, and the sight of her looking so different and yet so familiar . . .

It seemed to Toga that the minister took his sweet time reciting the words that he'd waited to hear. Lecturing them both on their responsibilities, on their duties

to take care of one another, to cherish one another, the minister droned on while Toga tried to keep his patience in check. He knew all of that, and he would make damn sure he lived by it. Sierra squeezed his hand, and Toga shot her a wan smile. The look in her eyes reflected his own wish that the man would get on with it. *'If I find out Father paid the man to ramble on and on, I'll—'*

"You may now kiss your bride."

The words came so quickly that Toga blinked for a moment before they had a chance to sink in. He turned to face Sierra as the assembly broke out in murmurs. Sound faded as he stared into Sierra's eyes, as she smiled through a wash of happy tears. "So . . . are you going to kiss me, Toga?" she asked quietly.

That was all the prompting he needed. Tilting her chin with his crooked index finger, he brushed his lips over hers in a kiss meant to complete the ceremony. She leaned up, crushing her bouquet of blush tea roses against his shoulder as she caught his mouth and deepened the kiss.

Time and space fell away as the dim buzz of their rapt audience was forgotten. The only thing that mattered to Toga was the woman pressing against him with the softest whisper of silk and lace. Slipping his arms around her waist to pull her closer, he savored the feel of her, tried to assure himself that she was real, that she was his, that she would be with him forever. She acquiesced to him, surrendered herself in that kiss. He didn't want to remember anything, didn't want to feel anything but the warmth of her that radiated to him, the dizzying knowledge that they would have forever.

"Kami, dog! Come up for air," Ryomaru's voice rudely intruded.

Toga reluctantly broke off the kiss before shooting his cousin a glower as Sierra giggled.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce to you, for the first time ever, Mr. and Mrs. Toga Inutaisho."

The crowd clapped politely as Toga offered Sierra his arm and smiled down at her before escorting her back down the aisle.

He didn't really feel any differently, he decided. Then again, he hadn't been married long enough for that. If he could just get through the reception, he'd be home free.

Sierra sighed softly. "Are you as anxious to get out of here as I am?" she murmured as she leaned in closer.

"You have no idea," he admitted.

She laughed. Toga grimaced.

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"Do you think they'd miss us if we sneak off now?"

Toga missed a step in the dance as he glanced down at Sierra. She met his gaze with an impish smile, and while she didn't look tired, she did look quite anxious. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Oh, fine," she assured him as her grin widened. She glanced around quickly as her smile turned bashful. "I just think . . . I'd rather be alone . . . with you . . ."

He stifled a groan. "Damn, wench," he complained.

"Okay, Inutaisho. Step away from the girl."

Toga's back stiffened as he slowly pivoted to stare at his newly acquired brother-in-law. Brent grinned and held a hand out to Sierra. She shot Toga an apologetic smile and stepped back, letting her brother take Toga's place as her dancing partner.

"If you do it, I'll never let you live it down."

Toga turned and forced a grin as Gin laced her arm through his. "You look nice," he commented, giving up on the idea of reclaiming Sierra—for now.

"Thanks," Gin replied. "Congratulations."

"You don't sound like you're having a good time," Toga remarked.

Gin sighed. "Same old story. No one will dance with me because they're afraid of Papa, so the only one with enough guts to ask me was promptly threatened with the removal of crucial anatomical parts."

"Uncle Yasha?"

Gin's pretty face contorted as she shook her head. "Nope . . . Ryomaru, the baka hypocrite. You know, he brought Nezumi with him, and he's yet to even look at her?"

Toga's gaze sought out the girl in question. Sitting alone at a table toward the back of the yard, Nezumi looked distinctly uncomfortable, and he had to wonder just how Ryomaru had been able to talk the tomboy into attending a wedding, of all things. "Why did he bring her?"

Gin tugged on Toga's arm and dragged him out to dance. "She said something about owing him a favor." Frowning as she stared at the girl in question, Gin slowly shook her head. "You know, she would be really pretty if she'd stop hiding in those oversized clothes she wears."

Toga considered Gin's statement and nodded. Nezumi was dressed in an impossibly baggy pin striped suit that could have easily fit Ryomaru, and for a moment, he wondered if his cousin had loaned Nezumi the outfit. Black hair pulled off her face in a severe knot at the nape of her neck; she didn't even use a hint of makeup to accentuate the delicate features of her face. Had it not been for the sternness of her hair, she would have been very pretty in spite of her outrageous clothing.

Toga shook his head. It wouldn't matter if she was drop-dead gorgeous. Ryomaru wouldn't notice Nezumi. She was his and Kichiro's best friend and had been for years, and if Toga knew anything about the twins, he knew that they gravitated toward flashier women.

"If you ask me, I think she's in love with the baka," Gin remarked as her eyebrows drew together. "Stupid Ryo. He'd never notice. He takes her for granted."

Toga hadn't thought of that. Leaning his head to the side as he danced with his cousin, he stared at Nezumi. To his surprise, he couldn't help but notice how her gaze sought out Ryomaru time and again as the idiot strolled from woman to woman, basically making the rounds as his date sat quietly and watched. "What the hell is wrong with him?" Toga growled.

Gin sighed. "I told you, *Ryomaru no baka*."

"Keh!"

The song ended, and Gin leaned up to kiss Toga's cheek. "Go find your mate, Toga."

He bowed slightly and pushed through the crowd, acknowledging words of congratulations without paying attention as he scanned the assembly for Sierra. He finally spotted her standing with his father and mother, and Toga blinked in surprise as Sierra laughed at something Sesshoumaru said. While it boded well that his father was warming up to her, Toga couldn't help the little groan that escaped him, either. Sierra's proximity to Sesshoumaru would absolutely prevent Toga from implementing his 'sneak-away-with-Sierra' plan.

"Father. Mother," he greeted as he slipped an arm around Sierra's waist.

"Congratulations, Toga," Kagura said as she tugged his arm to pull him down so she could kiss his cheek. "I trust you'll take care of her."

Toga grinned at his mother. "Of course."

Sesshoumaru pulled a white, legal-sized envelope from his jacket. "From your mother and me."

Toga took the envelope and glanced at Sierra. She shrugged and waited for him to open it. He did and raised his eyebrows as he stared at the document. "Are you sure, Father?"

Sesshoumaru nodded once. "We'll see how you do with this one."

Sierra leaned closer to look at the deed. Toga let her take it. "Taishocorp?" she read with a slight frown. "Isn't that half the company?"

Sesshoumaru shrugged. "Not quite. It'll all be yours one day, anyway. It's time for you to take some responsibility."

Toga made a face. "You make it sound like I've never worked in my life," he commented dryly.

Sesshoumaru broke into a rare smile. "Funny. I don't recall you working since you returned from the States." Toga relented with a curt nod. "In any case, you'll take over after you've returned from your honeymoon." Sesshoumaru's gaze narrowed as he sighed. "If you'll excuse me . . ."

Toga turned to watch his father's retreat and couldn't help the surprise that filtered over his own features. Sesshoumaru was striding purposefully toward Ryomaru, who was staring down one of the guests—a wolf youkai and son of one of Sesshoumaru's lawyers. Nezumi was shaking her head, staring at Ryomaru like he'd lost his mind, and Toga had to wonder just what had caused the altercation. Knowing his baka cousin, it didn't take much.

"Excuse me," he murmured as he kissed Sierra's knuckles. With a sigh, he headed toward his cousin.

"What's going on?" Toga asked as he sidled up beside Kichiro.

Kichiro spared Toga a glance before nodding toward his brother. "Ryomaru caught him talking to Nez."

"Just talking?"

"Think so."

"He's ignored her the entire time and gets bent out of shape because someone else pays attention to her?"

"Apparently."

Sesshoumaru stepped between Ryomaru and the wolf, pinning each with an icy glare. "You wouldn't be trying to ruin Toga's reception, would you?"

Ryomaru snorted. "Hell, no."

"Are you sure?" Sesshoumaru asked.

Ryomaru stepped back. "Of course, Uncle. Wouldn't dream of it." Shifting his glare to the wolf youkai again, Ryomaru cracked his knuckles. "Just stay away from her."

The wolf wasn't impressed with the implied threat. "Didn't realize I couldn't be friendly."

"Knock it off, Ryo," Nezumi gritted out between clenched teeth. "Baka."

Ryomaru snorted as he glanced at Nezumi. Something in her expression gave him pause, and Toga was surprised to see his cousin immediately drop his territorial stance. "Keh. Whatever," Ryomaru grumbled as he shoved his hands into his pockets.

A warm hand slipped into Toga's, and he glanced down as Sierra shot him a questioning look. "Is everything okay?"

He nodded as he took her hand and led her away for another dance. "Just fine," he assured her as he swept her into his arms, all thoughts of his idiot cousin fleeing from his mind as he focused on his new bride.

Sierra traced a finger along his lapel with a soft sigh. "I've looked forward to my wedding day ever since I was a little girl," she mused as he gaze lifted to meet his. "As often as I've imagined it, though, I don't think I ever thought I'd feel the way I do, right now."

Toga's eyebrows lifted as an enigmatic little smile turned up the corners of her lips. "Oh? How do you feel right now?"

A light blush crept over her cheeks as her eyes took on a brighter sparkle. "Like I really want to get out of here."

Toga chuckled. "But this is your day, isn't it?"

She moved in a little closer as her blush deepened. "I'd rather it be *our* day, Toga."

He made a face. "If I thought for a second that we really could sneak away . . ."



# ~ ~ Chapter 46 ~ ~

## ~ A lone ~

Sierra stifled a yawn as she wandered around the cozy beach house as Toga closed the door behind them. He had told her that she could choose where they went on their honeymoon, but when she had taken up InuYasha and Kagome on their offer to use the family beach house instead of heading off for some exotic location, he had seemed surprised but hadn't argued with her.

The five-hour trip had been spent cuddled against Toga in the back of the hired limousine, and Sierra had fallen asleep just outside Tokyo. They hadn't been able to escape the reception until the guests had finally started to leave, and since she hadn't been able to sleep at all the night before, Sierra was still tired. One glance at Toga was enough to dispel the fatigue. Leaning back against the door with a little smile adding a light to his amber gaze, Sierra couldn't help but smile back as he straightened his back and slowly stepped toward her, dropping his jacket over the back of the overstuffed chair as he closed in on her.

"I can't believe it," he admitted in a hushed tone as he smoothed her unbound hair away from her face. "You're beautiful."

She ducked her head and laughed nervously, unsettled by his compliment more than she was by his proximity. "You need your eyes checked."

"I don't think I do."

"I'm just glad we're finally alone—really alone."

He looked like he agreed. "You're tired, aren't you?"

Sierra tried to stifle a yawn. "Nope," she lied.

Toga shook his head. "I might have bought that if you hadn't yawned," he remarked. "We can . . . we can wait."

Sierra laughed at the hint of a pout in his voice that he hadn't been able to mask. "And you think I'm too tired for you?"

"Kami, I hope not."

"I slept in the car," she told him. "I'm fine. In fact . . . can we go for a walk? If you don't care?"

Toga nodded as he took her hand and led her through the beach house toward the back door. It seemed like a million stars were twinkling high in the sky. Sierra stared at them, enchanted as Toga wandered through the sand. While she had taken the time to change into a casual dress for traveling, he hadn't changed out of his tuxedo though he did undo his necktie. The top two buttons of his shirt were open, and his sleeves were rolled up his forearms. One hand jammed in his pocket while the other was wrapped around her fingers, Sierra felt her heart skip a beat as she stared at Toga's profile in the moonlight.

She pulled her hand free long enough to lean over and removed her shoes before she tossed them back onto the patio. Toga was smiling when she turned around again, and she slipped her hand back into his. "It's nice out here," she said, her voice low, almost as though she were afraid to break the stillness. The rumble of the ocean was soothing and somehow thrilling at the same time, and Sierra gazed at the moonlight dancing on the rising swell of the black waves. She sighed. "It was a beautiful ceremony, but I'm glad it's over."

Toga suddenly chuckled.

"What's funny?"

He shook his head. "Uncle Yasha."

Sierra frowned. InuYasha had, like every other man in attendance, worn a tuxedo. "I thought he looked very nice."

"Keh! I'll bet he hated it worse than he used to hate the kotodama rosary, or so I've been told—and if he didn't hate the tuxedo, you can bet he hated the shoes."

"Well . . . I'm sure he's fine now."

Toga shrugged. "Of course. Aunt Gome has a way of talking him into things that he hates doing. I'm sure they reached some sort of agreement."

Sierra giggled as she leaned against Toga. Wandering along the shoreline, she couldn't help but feel a certain sense of peace that penetrated her very being. She stepped closer to the water's edge and smiled as the wet sand squelched between her toes only to be washed clean with the flow of cool liquid. "Has your uncle owned this house long?"

"No. Father owned it for a long time. When Father was thinking about selling it a few years ago, Uncle Yasha bought it. He brought Aunt Gome here just after she regained her memory."

"I'm glad your family's close," she admitted as she grabbed Toga's other hand and tugged. He stopped walking and pulled her into his arms. She laid her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes for a moment. "I can't believe we're married."

"I can't believe you didn't want to go somewhere more exotic."

She tilted her head back to gaze at him. "Do you really think it matters to me? So long as we're together . . . that's what I want."

A fleeting shadow passed over Toga's features, and for a moment, he looked like there was something really bothering him.

"Toga?"

Toga blinked and shook his head before smiling almost sadly.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he lied as he quickly looked away. She could tell he was hiding something. She just couldn't figure out what. "You ready to go back yet?"

"Don't lie to me," she said gently, turning his face back to look at her. "You can't, you know. We're married now, right?"

He nodded and let go before flopping down in the sand with a heavy sigh. "I . . . uh . . . I've got to do something, and . . ." he trailed off as he shook his head. "I don't know if I can."

She sank down beside him, tucking her legs under herself as she waited for Toga to explain.

He sighed. "I have to mark you. It's really not done much anymore. It used to be done just to prolong human life and to offer protection for the mate, but . . . Father discovered with Rin that by giving her his Mekomoko-sama, it worked just the same."

Sierra digested that for a moment. "But that won't work for me?"

He shrugged. "Well, it would, but in order for my blood to help you, I have to mark you, and . . ." he heaved another sigh, shook his head slowly, almost dejectedly. "Damn it."

"What does it mean? Marking me?"

He flinched. "It means . . . I'd have to hurt you, and I . . . I don't know if I can."

A distinct shiver ran up her spine as she dared to peek at her new husband. Silhouetted in the thin, silvery light of the moon, she couldn't see his eyes, couldn't read his expression, but if he was this reluctant to do something that would ultimately save her, it had to be so much worse than he was letting on. "I don't understand," she forced herself to say.

"I'd have to . . . cut you open and let you bleed . . . You'd lose almost all of your blood until . . ." he winced again, "and then I would give you my blood. That's what it means . . . and . . . I don't think I can."

Sierra didn't speak for several long moments. The truth of his words hit her hard, and she pressed the back of her hand against her mouth. *'In order to save me, he'd have to . . . ? But . . . he can't, and I . . .'*

"You'd be fine in the morning," he told her quietly. "It's actually harder on the youkai than it is on the human. I just . . ."



# ~ ~ Chapter 47 ~ ~

## ~ Merging Souls ~

Sierra stepped out of the shower and heaved a long sigh. Stepping over to the sink, she wiped the condensation off the mirror and frowned at her reflection. She hadn't told Toga that what he'd said scared her. She knew him, and she trusted him. Still the ritual he'd so eloquently described to her was daunting, and she had to admit that it frightened her. In the end, though, if the result was a forever with him . . . She managed a tiny smile. *'Forever with Toga . . .'*

Toga said that he wasn't sure yet where she'd have to be marked. He said that it varied from female to female, and that he hadn't looked for the spot before.

She wrapped a thick cream-colored towel around herself and tucked in the end as she grabbed another towel for her hair. *'Do you really think he'll be able to do it? He's Toga . . . he couldn't even tell you that he didn't want to kiss Kari, remember? What makes you think he'll be able to hurt you, even if it would save you?'*

Sierra made a face as she pulled her watch off the counter. It was nearly eleven. She set the timepiece down again and opened the bathroom door, shivering slightly when the blast of cooler, drier air hit her skin.

Toga was in the living room staring out the glass doors at the ocean. If he heard her approach, he didn't acknowledge it. Standing with his back to her and his hands stuffed into his pockets, he still seemed concerned, apprehensive.

"Do we have to do that right away?" she asked softly, deciding that there was no sense in beating around the bush with it. She knew what caused his preoccupation. Toga wasn't going to relax as long as he was thinking about the marking, and his anxiety was substantial enough to feel.

"No," Toga remarked with a quiet sigh. "But . . . eventually . . ."

Sierra shrugged as she squeezed the ends of her hair in the fluffy towel. "Maybe there's some other option that you haven't thought of yet. Don't worry. We're on our honeymoon, remember?"

He sighed and turned his head to shoot her the bashful, lopsided grin that never failed to make her heart flop over in her chest. "Yeah . . . we are."

"Let me go dry my hair."

"There's nothing wrong with your hair," he remarked.

"It's wet, and . . ."

"Sierra."

She swallowed hard, marveling at the way his eyes darkened. The small flames that gamboled in the fireplace cast a warm glow on his face, the planes and angles etched in a deep relief in the darkness of the night. He reached for her hand, brought her knuckles to his lips. A surge of heat slammed through her body as his concealment faded away. "T-Toga?"

"Can you see me?"

She nodded.

"I thought so. Most of the time youkai can conceal themselves better than hanyous. Once you've seen a hanyou in true form, you'll probably always see them that way. Aunt Gome can see through the concealments, but she's also the strongest miko around."

"You know, Toga, as much as I like your family, I'd rather not talk about them."

He blinked in surprise, as though he didn't realize what he had been talking about just before he chuckled. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry."

Sierra bit her bottom lip, unable to look away as Toga stared into her eyes. The dark blue streaks on his face seemed more savage, more startling, and when his

lips parted, his fangs glowed in the half-light. "Mine," he muttered as he pulled her to him.

The influx of sensation shocked her as Toga's mouth slashed down over hers in a kiss full of need, of barely restrained desire. After the months of forced separation, the deluge of emotion was heady, welcome, necessary. Sierra didn't fight as he held her tighter, closer, nearer.

He murmured against her lips, things she didn't understand. In the torrent of rising sentiment, in the engulfing sense of wonder and awe, she let him draw her in. He stood like a buffer against the well of obsession that licked at her, tried to consume her, and she reveled in the shelter he offered, the protection from the storm of her own wanton emotions. She felt the current of his awakening need, the undertones that she heard and knew but didn't understand. *'Closer . . . just a little closer . . .'*

He growled in response to her unvoiced entreaty. She answered him without a word. Drawing herself up on her toes, pressing her body to his as her temperature spiraled higher, she wanted to melt into him. His lips crushed hers, his tongue flicking at her until she opened to him. He took what she offered, gave back to her what she needed, commanded her senses in a gentle tug of war. Lost to the flood of convoluted sensation, the undulating riot of craving and inevitability collided, leaving Sierra weak, breathless, bemused.

Passion welled and flowed, hummed in the air with an electrical current, a magnetism that pulled her body toward his as the lure of his flesh drew her trembling hands. Clutching his shirt in her fists, she fought back the dizziness he inspired in her. Tormenting memories of the last time they'd touched like this goaded her, drove her as she fumbled with buttons that weren't made for shaking fingers. She finally compromised by tugging the shirt out of his pants and pushed it up, dragging it over his head as he relinquished his hold on her long enough to help her with her task.

His flesh burned under her touch, conflagrant skin rippling with his muscles as he tasted her. Tongue flicking over her lips as she shuddered in his arms, he caught her as her knees gave way. Vaguely it registered in her befuddled mind that he had picked her up and was carrying her somewhere. It didn't matter to her, so long as he didn't break the kiss . . .

But he did break the kiss as he started up the stairs. Sierra let her head fall against his shoulder—against his scarred flesh; the uncomfortable reminder of how close she'd come to losing him forever. She closed her eyes as he held her. "I could walk," she told him, her voice sounding foreign to her ears.

"No . . . I promised I'd take care of you, didn't I?"

She laughed as she relaxed against him, fingers idly toying with his hair. The house was silent, still, comforting. Toga didn't set her down until he reached the huge bed in the master suite. Letting her legs drop on the cotton comforter, he tilted her chin with his left hand as his right arm crushed her against his chest. Bathed in the darkness, the misty blue shadows of the full moon's light filtered through the wall of windows. He stared at her, managed a tender half-smile, promised her an eternity, would pledge her the world if she asked for it.

"I love you," she whispered as her unsteady fingers traced his lips.

He closed his eyes as a shiver raced through him. His body shuddered under her touch, and whether the response was triggered by her words or the feathering brush of her fingertips, she didn't know. She cupped his cheeks in her hands as she rose up higher on her knees to press her lips against his. His kiss was laced with unrestrained desire, unrequited need that wrung a moan from the depths of her soul as a torrent of feel and tactile emotion rifled through her. Weak and clinging, she held onto him, afraid to let go as sensation fed passion, as desperation swelled, spiraling higher and thicker, deeper, darker, sparkling like the ocean in the moonlight.

The towel that separated their skin seemed to melt away. With a gasp as the scorch of his flesh met hers, Sierra's head fell back. Toga's lips descended on her throat as her fingers dropped to his shoulders, dug in as her mind spun away. His heart beat against her chest, an unsteady rhythm that was impossible to define. The flow of heat, the burn of lethargy washed with a heady sense of inebriation as she felt his body shudder against hers.

Sharp fangs whispered against delicate skin to feed an incipient ache that burgeoned inside her. Rising fast with the unsteady cadence of his heart, a need so strong, so pervasive, so consuming that it left her weak, left her clinging and aching, spellbound in a realm where touch and feel were the only things that mattered. The brush of quaking fingers, the balm of breath fanning her skin, the

scorching heat of bodies all melded together in delicious sensation, incomprehensible emotion that threatened to sweep her away.

A tempestuous fervor built, escalated in a heavy wave as Toga goaded her, invaded her mind with entreaties murmured so softly that she couldn't make sense of them. Barely contained muscles twitched and strained against her, his body hard against hers as he struggled to repress the insistent need, the will to claim conflicting with the desire to protect. She spurred him on, dragging on his shoulders as her body demanded. She reined him in with her sighs, with her whimpers.

She felt as though she were coming undone, as though her body were reaching for his. He deliberately ignored her silent cries, tortured her with his proximity while feeding the fire that burned inside her. Her skin blazed against his, an ache that intensified as she fought to speak, to tell him that she needed him. Her voice didn't work, her words wouldn't form, the incoherence that surrounded her brain in a merciless blanket of fog transcended the abilities of her physical body.

He leaned toward her, lowered her gently to the bed, mouth trailing over skin in a conflagrant combustion of heat and moisture. Teasing a path down her collarbone, along the rise of her breast, a low rumble that seemed to issue from somewhere deep inside broke the quiet of the room. It soothed and excited Sierra at the same time. Flicking his tongue over the aching rise of her breast just before his mouth closed over her, Toga growled as Sierra gasped, as her hands sank into the thickness of his hair, holding him in place as he ravaged her senses with a gentle viciousness, a guttural burn.

The nerves in her body wound tighter and tighter, drawn rigid like a wire ready to snap. His constant attention only served to worsen the rampant ache that wound around her and left her breathless, clinging. Too much sensation, too strong emotions fed on one another like a rising spire in the turgid air. A gasp, a sigh, a moan in the dark became a pulsing thing, a rampant swelling of sound and susceptibility.

Incoherent words spilled from her lips like water, like rain in the driest heat of summer. Broken entreaties surged with the current of need and want, conflicted in her grasp as she pulled and pushed on him. Unsure if she wanted him to continue or to stop, the disagreement between what she felt and the absolute torment he inflicted on her rapidly deteriorating control was wicked. He goaded

her to the very limits of her jurisdiction then he pushed her further into a realm where time and space fell away, into a place where the only thing that mattered was Toga, was the pattern of his beating heart, was the sound of his ragged breathing.

She spoke to him with her body, dragging him closer as his teeth grazed over her tremulous flesh. His hands closed over her breasts as he foraged a path along the hollows of her body, his unspoken promises hanging in the dark like an incandescent beam, the illumination that led to him. He glowed in the waning light, his eyes bright like flaming jewels as she fought to stare at him even as her eyelids drifted closed again. Giving herself up to the vast emotion that surged around her, she felt his love—a palpable thing, an entity that sheltered her as Toga gently demanded her heart, her soul, her body. She couldn't remember a time when he wasn't there, a time when he wasn't whispering in her mind. As though she'd known him forever, his soul spoke to hers, claimed her with a benign brutality, a totality that left her soaring even as the ache inside her deepened.

“Sierra . . .”

Her name on his lips was a balm on the intense need, soothing and taming despite the effervescent froth of overwhelming passion. The surge of heat quelled in the fissure of energy where their bodies touched, culminated in a jarring emotion that shot through her like lightning splitting the sky. His hands trailed down her sides, his claws raked against her flesh. Lost in the vortex of Toga's desire, Sierra cried out as his mouth surrounded the ache with a moist heat, a raging fire.

Lifting her hips to meet him, unable to form any semblance of thought, of reason, she could feel her sanity slip away. Unsure of anything but Toga, unable to remember that she needed to breathe, her body reacted, lost in the waves of the chaotic ocean, cresting time and again as the tide ebbed and flowed. Everything he was, everything he could be, everything he inspired began and ended with him, and in those moments she knew that Toga was the man she was meant to love, and that even a lifetime with him might not be enough . . .

His tongue flicked against her, swirled around her as sensation swelled and engulfed her. He wouldn't let her escape, unmerciful and unrelenting as her fever broke wide, as she called out his name again and again. He lifted her high only to shatter her composure with his gentle insistence. She reveled in the

tenderness he showed her, the reverence in his actions. The insistent burn flared around her, threatened to swallow her in a fiery hell where he was just beyond her grasp, and in desperation born of her need, she called to him just one last time. "Please, Toga, I can't . . ."

She could feel the surge of pride her words inspired in him, as though her admittance that she couldn't stand anymore torment had satisfied a wholly primal need all his own. The bed trembled as he moved away, and she couldn't stave back the whimper of protest as he stood up. Forcing her heavy eyelids open was another task, and when she did manage, the sight of Toga, standing at the foot of the bed with his pants undone but still up as he stared at her dissolved the tattered remnants of her waning control.

Unable to resist the lure of him, she sat up slowly, dragged toward him by a force she didn't fully recognize. Words replayed in her head, cycling like a scratched record: '*Touch him . . .*' The need to know the feel of him was impossible to ignore. His skin shined with a blue aura in the moonlight, the shadows and planes of his body pulled her in, and he gasped when she leaned up, her hands on his chest as she pressed against him, as her lips sought out his once more.

He crushed her to him again, his kiss brutal and wholly primitive as the remaining semblance of his authority slipped away. His hands on her hips pulled her closer, and she whimpered at the contact. The fabric of his pants chafed her, inflamed her, even as the heat of him slammed straight through her body to her brain. The shockwaves ripped through her, exploding somewhere deep inside her as the ache welled deeper, throbbed in time with his thundering heart.

Her hands slipped down his chest, cascaded along the ripples of skin that lurched under her fingertips until they caught on the offending slacks. If he realized what she was doing, he didn't show it. She hooked his waistband and pushed down, letting go only when the pants slipped past his hips, allowing him to step out of them without breaking the contact of their bodies. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she moaned as he leaned toward her, his weight offsetting hers as they fell back in a tangle of limbs and heat, a primitive configuration of flesh against flesh.

She touched him, impatiently indulged the desire to learn the paths of him as he uttered a sound, almost a whine. She kissed the angry scars on his shoulder, his

chest, tried to soothe the brutal reminders away as he mumbled things that she didn't comprehend, as his hands stroked her back, as he nuzzled her neck. He lingered on the fluttering pulse in her throat, his quaking body giving away the struggle inside him: the will to give her the time she wanted fighting against the need to claim her.

He compromised in the end, leaning back as he nudged her legs apart with his knee. Rising up on his elbows, he stared down at her, the raw emotion in his expression enough to give her pause. She reached out with trembling fingers, stroked his cheeks as he closed his eyes, as though her touch was enough to humble him. That thought unsettled her, and she realized with a shaky smile that she didn't want him to be broken, didn't want to bend him to her will. A being such as Toga wasn't to be governed by the whims of humanity, and she rose up, kissed him, surrendered to him.

Her body felt like it was breaking apart, as though she wanted to merge with him, to exist as a singular extension of him. "Sierra . . . I love you," he whispered, stroking her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs as he stared down at her, eyes glowing golden, a look of complete reverence on his face.

She tried to smile, tried to see through the hazy fog that consumed her mind. In the end, she pulled him down, kissed him gently, tenderly, kissed him with the emotion that she couldn't voice, and he understood.

He slowly pressed against her, wringing a gasp from her as the precarious hold she had on the ache within her exploded only to be replaced by an incredible sense of completeness, of wonder that even the momentary pressure that stretched then broke didn't register to her. Too many new sensations warred for dominance in her mind; too many conflicting emotions. As she struggled to catch up with them, he moved inside her, and the world erupted once more in a wash of heat and light, of brilliance and awe.

Her body rose against his only to be pushed back as he uttered a broken growl, as he shuddered in her arms. She arched back, searching for the elusive pleasure as he teased her. His breathing was harsh, ragged, fanning against her cheek as he strained and surged. Every muscle of his body was tensed and controlled. Sweat beaded on his chest, trailed a salty path down his skin, dripped onto her as she writhed under him. Accepting what he offered as she gave back all of herself, and he accepted her, cradled her, gentled her with the stroke of his hands, with the current he created in his steady, tormenting movements.

She ran her fingernails up and down his back, delighting in the tremors that she unleashed in him, in the jerking motions of his body with hers. He reached back, cradled her leg against him, kissed her deeply when she gasped. Caressing her tongue with his as his body strained in hers, Toga moaned softly, the sound captured in their kiss. The deep ache swelled, deepened as an uncontrollable force shredded the last sense of herself. Relying on Toga to show her the way, Sierra hung onto him as he pushed her closer and closer to a frightening place, to the edge of something that plunged into the darkness below.

His voice echoed through her mind, telling her not to be afraid, assuring her that wherever she ended up, he would be there with her. Whether he had spoken or she had just heard it in her mind, she wasn't sure. The insistent tug of Toga's body on hers was impossible to ignore. The pressure that built inside her was nearing an apex, as though she couldn't stand much more. She moved against him, clumsily beckoned him without conscious thought. The feel of his flesh was the only thing that mattered, and she begged him for whatever peace he could give her. He responded in kind, his movements altered, faster, harder, deeper.

She teetered on the brink, on the edge, ready to fall into the blackness. Concurrent emotions faded into thought, into motion, into blurred colors—the shades of Toga's gaze. He seemed to reach for her, his bashful smile bright in the dark, taking her hands as his body pushed her closer and closer to the edge, to the cliff, and with a final push, she fell. The blackness flashed, engulfed in the brilliance of blinding light. Her world seemed suspended, her body dissolved in a flood of exacerbated sensation. Her nerves fired off, one by one in a wondrous crescendo as somewhere in her mind, she heard Toga call out her name, as she felt the molten fire rage through her once more.

It took a long time for the haze engulfing her mind to fade away. She was cradled against Toga's side with her head on his shoulder, and she opened her eyes as a smile surfaced on her face.

Stroking her shoulder, he pulled her a little closer and sighed.

"What are you thinking?" she asked in a whisper, unwilling to disturb the quiet of the room.

He sighed again, but this one sounded almost disgusted. "I don't think you want to know," he confessed.



# ~ ~ Chapter 48 ~ ~

## ~ K eeping P romises ~

"Any ideas?"

Sesshoumaru sat back in his chair, steepling his fingers before his chest as he calmly regarded his son. Toga slouched, crossing his ankles as he leaned to the side, rubbing his forehead with a tired hand.

"It doesn't surprise me that you cannot do this," Sesshoumaru remarked mildly though Toga could tell from his father's expression that he wished it were otherwise. "Deliberately inflicting harm upon your mate is something that goes against the nature of the youkai."

Toga heaved a sigh and slowly shook his head. "There has to be another way."

Sesshoumaru stared at him for several moments, his gaze penetrating, stern. "There is not."

Toga flinched. "Yeah."

"Where *is* your mate?"

Toga shrugged as he sat up a little straighter. They'd come back from their honeymoon a few days early because Sierra had wanted to spend a little more time with her family before they left to go back to Chicago. He smiled to himself. Sierra had been reluctant to ask him, thinking that he would be upset that she wanted to return to Tokyo after a week. When Sierra had mentioned going shopping with her mother, Toga had decided there was no time like the present to have this discussion with his father. "She's spending the day with her mother."

"I see," Sesshoumaru commented. "What will you do?"

Shaking his head, Toga rubbed his eyes and sighed. “You marked Mother, didn’t you?”

Sesshoumaru nodded slowly. “I did.”

*‘Father did it . . . and I have to do it, too . . .’* Toga let his hand drop as he raised his gaze to meet Sesshoumaru’s. “I understand.”

“It isn’t designed to be a pleasant undertaking, Toga, but it is necessary.” Sesshoumaru pushed his glasses up and regarded his son. “For what it’s worth . . . I found no pleasure in the doing, but I did appreciate the peace of mind that it was done.”

Toga digested that in silence. *‘Sierra . . . she’ll be saved, if I do this . . . I have to do this . . . for her—for us . . .’*

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“Digging in the dirt?” Toga asked as he strode up the sidewalk toward InuYasha and Kagome’s front door.

Kagome sat back and dusted her hands off before yanking off her canvas gloves, dropping them into the little caddy that contained all her gardening tools. Bracing her hands on her knees, she stood up and grinned at Toga. “I wasn’t expecting to see you so soon! Why’d you come back early?”

Toga handed Kagome the keys to the beach house and shrugged as he followed her toward the front door. “Sierra wanted to spend time with her family before they leave,” he replied, leaning around his aunt to hold the door open for her.

Kagome smiled at him as she hurried into the house and straight toward the kitchen sink to wash her hands. “Did you enjoy the beach?”

“It was nice,” he agreed. “Is, uh . . . Uncle Yasha around?”

Kagome sighed. “Nope. He’s at the school, but he did say something about coming home early. Is there something I can help you with?”

Toga winced. He had wanted to talk to InuYasha about the marking, but . . .  
“Uncle Yasha . . . he marked you, right?”

Kagome dropped the kitchen towel on the counter next to the sink and pressed her hand against her left side. “Sort of,” she hedged, slowly nodding as her eyes lost focus, like she was seeing something that Toga couldn’t.

“Sort of?” he echoed with a frown. “What does that mean?”

Kagome shook her head, dispelling the vision that preoccupied her. “It means he marked me, just not in the traditional sense.”

Toga’s frown deepened. “Not following,” he admitted.

Kagome laughed. “I mean, he had some help. We saw Midoriko’s spirit, and she did it. He never had to hurt me.”

Toga made a face and sighed. “Don’t suppose she’s still around?” he grumbled, only half-joking.

Kagome lifted her eyebrows as her laughter diminished though her smile remained. “No . . . unfortunately not . . .”

“I could do it,” Toga said quietly, “if I didn’t have to hurt her . . . if I didn’t have to . . . I could, then . . .”

“Toga . . . do you want to have children?”

Toga shook his head, unable to figure out why his aunt had just changed the subject. “Yeah . . . eventually . . .”

Kagome nodded. “Well, you do realize that having children can be painful, and sometimes having children can be dangerous, too.”

Grimacing, Toga shook his head again. “Thanks, Aunt Gome . . . hadn’t thought about that,” he remarked dryly.

“Don’t be silly, Toga. Women have children because they want to, and once she holds her child, the pain is forgotten. I’m just pointing out something you ought to already know. Sometimes women do things that hurt because we have to. It

doesn't mean that our trust or our faith in someone wavers. It just means that we know the benefits outweigh the risks."

"So . . . you're telling me you think I should just do it."

Kagome shrugged. "I'm saying that in your case, the benefits would outweigh the risks."

"What risks?"

Toga turned to eye his cousin as Kichiro breezed through the back door and into the house. "Oi, Mama, what's for dinner?" he asked as he hurried over to kiss her cheek

"Gin wanted oden," she remarked as she patted her son's cheek.

Kichiro made a face. "Don't you have ramen around here?" he complained.

Kagome rolled her eyes but smiled indulgently. "If I left it to your father, we'd be having ramen every night," she said ruefully.

Kichiro grinned unrepentantly. "The old man just doesn't want to bother you with cooking those long, tedious dinners."

Kagome snorted. "Inconveniencing me has absolutely nothing to do with it."

Kichiro laughed as he dug a soda out of the refrigerator and tore off the plastic lid. "So what are you risking, Toga?" he asked mildly, poking the clear marble into the bottle and sending droplets of soda flying.

"You're cleaning that up, you know," Kagome remarked as she tossed Kichiro a towel.

Kichiro did as he was told before rolling up the towel and snapping it next to Toga's head. "Baka," Toga countered but didn't flinch. "It's none of your business."

"Keh! Fine! See if I ever pretend to be concerned again," Kichiro shot back.

Kagome shook her head in dismay at her son's perceived lack of manners.

"Where's Ryo?" Toga asked, hoping to change the subject since getting serious answers from either of the twins was akin to pulling teeth.

Kichiro shrugged as he sucked down his soda. "Eh, he said something about going to look at motorcycles with Nez."

Toga grimaced at the idea of his careless cousin on a motorcycle. "At least he was smart enough to take someone with him that has some common sense," Toga remarked.

"Yeah . . . let's hope she talks him out of wanting one," Kagome said as she dumped some chopped vegetables into the hotpot.

"I'm surprised you don't want one," Toga mused as he stared at Kichiro.

Kichiro made a face. "In what world? I'd rather be a passenger, thanks. The view's better. Can't pay attention to the girls when you're driving."

Toga shook his head as Kichiro flicked the towel again. "You're such a dog."

"Woof."

"Either get out of my kitchen or I'll put you to work," Kagome announced as she shoved her son toward the living room.

"You should have gone with him," Toga remarked as he followed Kichiro.

"Why's that?"

Toga hid his smirk. "To remind Ryo to get a sidecar for you, baka."

Kichiro snorted as he flopped down on the sofa. "Ha, ha, you're funny . . . oh wait . . . you weren't trying to be funny, were you?"

"I thought it was funny."

"That's because you're an ass."

Toga laughed. "I still don't understand why Nezumi puts up with either of you. You call her 'rat', for the love of kami!"

Kichiro belched as he leaned forward to thump his empty soda bottle on the coffee table. "She calls herself rat—and no one can remember her real name, anyway. Besides that, she's more Ryo's friend, really."

Toga wrinkled his nose. "I'm amazed that she can even stand to be around you two."

"Kichiro, can you get that?" Kagome called when the telephone rang.

"Sure, Mama--. Anything for you," he called back as Toga shook his head. Only Kichiro could get away with saying something like that without sounding like he was trying to dig himself out of trouble.

"Oi, pup, what are you doing here?"

Toga turned and stared at his uncle. InuYasha pulled the glass door closed and set his briefcase down before yawning as he arched his back to stretch. "I wanted to talk to you," he admitted. "I already talked to Aunt Gome about it, though."

InuYasha shrugged. "Probably a better idea," he mused. "She's normally got better advice, anyway."

Toga nodded and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Yeah."

"Since you're here, you might as well spill it."

Toga hesitated for a moment before he spoke. "I don't know if I can do it," he finally admitted.

InuYasha didn't ask what Toga meant. With a sage nod, the hanyou folded his arms together as he regarded Toga for several long moments. "Yeah . . . I didn't think you would."

Toga uttered a terse laugh that lacked any real humor but was laced with a heavy dose of incredulity. "I've got to do it, right? It's just the idea of . . ." he

trailed off with a wince, and for once InuYasha didn't comment on it. "But there really isn't any other way."

"Any way to do what?" Kichiro said as he strode toward them, holding the phone receiver out to his father.

InuYasha took it. "Don't leave," he told Toga before he lifted the phone.

Toga nodded.

"Come on, answer my question," Kichiro prodded. "I won't make fun of you . . . unless you're being stupid."

Toga glared at his cousin then shook his head with a sigh. "If you have to know, it's about marking Sierra."

Kichiro looked surprised. "You haven't done that?"

"No, Kich, I haven't done it yet."

Kichiro actually grimaced. "Can't say I blame you. It's a nasty business. I was hoping I'd find another hanyou, so I wouldn't have to do it."

Toga dragged a hand out of his pocket and rubbed his temple. "Yeah, well, that doesn't really help now."

"You know," Kichiro began then trailed off, an odd expression crossing his features as he slowly narrowed a speculative stare on Toga. "Isn't it just a blood transfusion?"

Toga let his hand drop. "Yeah . . . I guess . . ."

Kichiro shrugged off-handedly before he retrieved a magazine off the coffee table. "So? Get a blood transfusion, then."

Toga started to tell Kichiro not to be stupid, but the repercussions of his cousin's simple statement started to make sense. "That *is* all there is to it . . ."

Kichiro stopped leafing through the magazine to glance back at Toga once more. "I could do it," he offered casually.



# ~ ~ Chapter 49 ~ ~

## ~ The Marking ~

Toga frowned as he stared at the glass container beside Sierra as she kept her eyes on his face, careful to avoid following the direction of his gaze. She hadn't complained when the needle had been inserted into her arm. She hadn't moved much since then. He'd sensed her aversion when Kichiro had begun prepping the area on her arm for the bloodletting. She hadn't said a thing. She didn't need to. Toga had to admire her resolve even if he wished that she didn't have to suffer in silence.

"Are you feeling all right?" Toga asked as he sat down on the edge of the examination table in the stark white doctor's office. Sesshoumaru had arranged for them to use the family physician's office to do this, and since it had been Kichiro's idea, he was the one taking care of everything even though Dr. Yamoura was still in the office. Potentially safer than the old method, Sesshoumaru had been keen on the idea of testing Kichiro's theory. If it worked, it could alter the way future markings were done.

Toga sighed. Seeing Sierra hooked up to the heart monitor as well as the other pieces of modern technology was scary and yet somehow comforting at the same time.

Sierra nodded and smiled to reassure him as she reached for his hand. "It'll all be over soon, right?"

Absently staring at the heart monitor, he agreed. Forcing his gaze off the reassuringly steady green blips, he managed a little smile and smoothed her hair out of her face. "Right."

Kichiro stepped into the room and closed the door quietly. Toga had to look at him twice. Seeing his troublemaking cousin in a very professional white lab coat was disconcerting to him. Kichiro didn't interrupt as he picked up the paper

readout slowing issuing from the heart monitor. Staring at the endless trail of paper, he frowned slightly, rubbing his chin in a thoughtful way.

“Something wrong?” Toga asked, disliking the look on his cousin’s face.

Kichiro blinked as though he had forgotten that Toga and Sierra were even there and broke into a tepid smile as he bent down to check the rapidly filling bottle. “Nope, it looks good. Toga, you need to sit over there,” he remarked as he waved at the chair beside the examination table.

Toga moved without comment as Kichiro glanced at the heart monitor again. Stepping around the table, he waited while Toga rolled up his sleeve. Kichiro tied a thin rubber tube around Toga’s arm and took his time examining the youkai’s arm to find the right place to draw blood. “All right, if you start feeling light headed, you need to drink some juice. You’re youkai though, so it really shouldn’t be too bad. Anyway, it’s time.”

Toga glanced over at Sierra. The monitor was registering her subdued heartbeat, and in the length of time it had taken to prep Toga, she had fallen asleep. Kichiro cleared his throat. “Where?”

Toga had to force down a rising lump that threatened to choke him before he could answer. Something about the vulnerability of Sierra’s pose, the absolute quiet of her forced unconscious bothered him. “Her throat,” he replied, his voice gruff, low. During their time away, he’d discovered that he was inordinately drawn to her throat, and he figured out that was where she should be marked.

Kichiro glanced at him and nodded, patting Toga’s shoulder as he turned away to hook Sierra to the other part of the apparatus. He worked quickly and in silence. When he stepped back, Toga couldn’t stop the wince that surfaced as he caught sight of Sierra’s ashen skin and the needle sticking in her neck.

“I’ll get you some juice,” Kichiro said quietly. “Don’t worry. She’ll wake up in a little while.”

Toga nodded and sighed, holding his arm still despite his desire to touch her, to hold her hand until she opened her eyes.

Watching the tube that carried blood from his body to hers, he repressed a shiver. This was brutal enough, in his opinion. There was no way he’d have

been able to do this the old fashioned way. He didn't care if his feelings made him seem weak or pathetic. He had admitted long ago that he didn't have it in him to hurt someone he loved.

He let his head fall to the side, leaning against the wall as he stared at Sierra's face. Her color seemed to be losing the slight hint of gray, the tinge of blue to her lips. The heart monitor registered the slight increase in her pulse, and he tried to smile. His face felt paralyzed, and he knew he wouldn't be able to do that until she opened her eyes . . .

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Toga opened his eyes slowly and blinked into the darkness. He was in his bed, in his home, but the unsettling thing was that he didn't remember getting there. He could smell Sierra near though she wasn't in the room. Maybe she'd just stepped out. Either way, her absence worried him, and he grimaced as he sat up.

Biting back the waves of dizziness that hit him as the metallic tinge of bile rose to coat his mouth, Toga flopped back against the headboard as Sierra slipped into the room with a tall glass of orange juice. "Oh, you're awake! How are you feeling?"

Toga managed a weak smile as she sat down on the edge of the bed and slipped the glass into his hand. "Drink this."

She looked fine, happy, as though she hadn't been leeches to the point of dying hours ago, and for that, Toga was thankful. "I'm fine," he lied without batting an eye as he drained the glass as quickly as he could. His stomach lurched that the influx of liquid. He swallowed a few times to keep it down.

Though she didn't look like she believed him, she nodded as she took the empty glass and set it aside on the nightstand. "Good."

"How'd I get here?" he asked since the last thing he did remember was Sierra opening her eyes in Dr. Yamoura's office.

Sierra leaned forward to push Toga's hair out of his eyes. "Your father."

“My father?”

With a nod, she sighed and ran her knuckles along his cheek. “You didn’t drink your juice, and you passed out . . . That’s what Kichiro said.”

Toga grimaced. He hadn’t even thought about drinking the juice Kichiro had brought in. He’d been too busy watching Sierra to make sure she was recovering. He sighed. “How long before we figure out if it worked or not?”

“It worked.”

He frowned. “How do you know?”

Tilting her head the side, she held down her collar. Toga’s gaze narrowed as he slowly lifted his hand to touch the faint white scar. Shaped like a curved slash, the mark was unmistakable to him. It was the slightly altered mark of the Inu no Taisho—Toga’s seal . . . Toga’s mark. “When did you get that?”

Sierra shrugged as she let go of her blouse and straightened her shrugged. “It wasn’t there. It just . . . sort of appeared in the last hour or so.”

Toga finally smiled as he held his arms out to her. With a giggle, she stretched out beside him, resting her head on his chest. Toga pulled her hair back and gently ran his fingers over the mark, reveling in the ferocious pride that surged over him, the wealth of emotion that accompanied the sight of Sierra—his mate, bearing his mark.

“It’ll all be okay now, right?” Sierra asked as she tilted her head to stare into Toga’s eyes.

He chuckled. “It had better be.”

“Oh? What’ll you do if it isn’t?”

Toga tilted her chin, kissed her forehead. “I’ll fix it, of course.”

She cuddled closer. “You ever wonder what would have happened if you hadn’t moved to Chicago?”



## ~ *E pilogue* ~

Something warm brushed over his skin, waking Toga from a deep sleep. It took him a few moments to figure out what it was, and when he did, he couldn't help but smile.

"Wake up, Toga . . . I thought you said you don't need sleep."

"Don't stop," he complained, his voice still thick from sleep.

Sierra kissed his shoulder again. The bed dipped a little as she sat up and draped herself over him to kiss his cheek. "You know what today is?"

"Uh huh," he agreed without opening his eyes as he pulled the blanket closer to his chest. "Saturday."

Sierra sighed and shoved him playfully. "Besides that!"

"It's your fault," he argued. "You're the one who kept me up all night."

"Right," she countered as she tugged his hair. "You cooperated."

"I didn't. You took complete advantage of me," he protested. "I've been so used . . . Sometimes I think you only love me for my body . . ."

She snorted and sat up. "All right," she told him. "You asked for it."

Cringing when she blew a loud, short whistle, Toga dragged a pillow over his head seconds before Kirara bounded through the door with a resounding crash and landed on his chest. "Oof!" he complained, his voice muffled in the pillow.

"Get him, girl!" Sierra coaxed.

With a playful growl, the golden retriever yanked the pillow away. Toga didn't get his hands up in time to warn off the dog, and he groaned in protest as Kirara

licked his cheek. "You win," he grumbled as he sat up, pushing the dog off his chest. "I'm up."

Sierra sniggered. "And?"

"And I won't go back to sleep," he agreed.

"And?"

He hid his smile. "And I'm hungry?"

"Toga!"

He chuckled as he sank his fingers into Kirara's thick fur, holding the dog's face to stare at her. "Get your ball, Kirara! Get your ball! Mama will play with you."

Sierra snorted.

Kirara barked happily and leapt off the bed, her paws slipping on the hardwood floor as she loped toward the doorway again.

"Ow!" Toga hollered when Sierra brought a pillow down on his head. He turned on her, catching her and knocking her back against the mattress as she shrieked in surprise and dissolved into fits of giggling. "Say you're sorry," he demanded as he tickled her sides, careful to keep his fingers bent so she didn't catch his claws.

"No—way!" she managed between giggles.

He tickled her a little more.

"Okay," she gasped. "I'm sorry!" He stopped tickling, and Sierra gasped for breath. "I'm sorry," she repeated with a mischievous glint in her eyes, "that you're a pain."

Toga shook his head and sighed, making a show of his mock-dismay. Instead of tickling her again, he rolled toward her, pinning her body with his. She pushed at his shoulders, and he laughed at her feeble attempt to move him. "We could stay in bed all day," he suggested, unable to keep the hopeful tone out of his voice.

"Could we?" Sierra countered breathlessly as she stared at him.

"Sure," he agreed just before he leaned down to kiss her. She stopped trying to push him away and with a sigh, her arms wrapped around his neck.

"Happy six-month anniversary," she murmured as he trailed kisses down her chin, down her throat.

He paused and leaned back to smile at her. "Six months . . . doesn't seem that long."

She started to answer but stopped when the doorbell chimed.

Toga didn't move right away. "Think they'll go away?"

Sierra shrugged and pushed him back as she rolled to the side. "What if it's important?" she asked him as she tugged on her pink silk robe and tied the belt.

He cocked an eyebrow at her as he propped his head on his hand. "What if it isn't?"

"It could be your parents or your aunt and uncle," she pointed out.

He snorted. "Or it could be one of my baka cousins . . . or both."

Sierra grinned as she shook her head and hurried out of the room. Toga watched her go with a defeated sigh before tossing back the covers and grabbing the first thing he laid hands on: in this case, the jeans he'd worn last night. Still buttoning the fly, he strode out of the bedroom and down the hallway to see who dared to intrude.

Sesshoumaru stood in the living room with an odd look of irritation on his face. Toga stopped short and frowned. He couldn't remember seeing his stoic father looking quite so put out, and he had to wonder just what might have caused that sort of reaction. "Father?"

To Toga's surprise, Sesshoumaru's expression darkened even more as he met his son's gaze.

"Something bothering you?"

Sesshoumaru's eyes narrowed slightly, reminding Toga of the few times he'd gotten into real trouble. Something told him that now wasn't really much different.

"I had a meeting yesterday, did you know?" Sesshoumaru remarked, his tone tighter and more controlled than normal. "Berman Industries . . . their American office."

"Kentai-san?" Toga asked.

"Yes, Kentai-san," Sesshoumaru agreed.

Toga flopped down on the sofa as Sierra slipped back into the room. She sat down beside him, pulling her legs up as she casually sipped a steaming mug of coffee. "Was I supposed to be there?" Toga asked, wondering just why Sesshoumaru was acting so strangely.

"Oh, no . . . your presence there was really . . . unnecessary."

Toga took Sierra's mug and winced as he swallowed a healthy gulp of the nasty brew. "So . . . what's the problem?"

Sesshoumaru pursed his lips as he regarded his son with the same cold stare. After several moments of stilted silence, he sighed and shook his head. "Toga . . . did you do anything I might find . . . questionable . . . while you lived in Chicago?"

Toga frowned. "No . . ."

Sesshoumaru blinked without a change in expression. "I see . . . no . . . *calendars* or . . . anything . . ."

Toga's back stiffened as the memories of the photo shoot came back with a vengeance. "Oh . . . uh . . . that . . ."

Sesshoumaru nodded. "Yes, Toga, that."

Toga shot Sierra a glance. Sierra scooted closer to him, offering him her quiet support but not offering to explain the situation. Toga winced inwardly. "Well, it *was* for charity," he explained slowly.

Sesshoumaru wasn't impressed with Toga's answer. Rubbing his forehead in a tired gesture, he let out a deep breath, as he seemed to struggle for words. "Toga . . . do you have any idea just how badly your mother will take it when she finds out?"

Toga shifted uncomfortably. "You're going to tell her?"

"Kentai-san's wife is on the school board. I think my telling your mother is a moot point."

"It was a good picture," Sierra spoke up. "Toga looked very nice."

"That's hardly the point, Sierra," Sesshoumaru argued. "Never mind . . . I'll tell your mother you . . . I don't know, I'll think of something. I knew I should have kept you away from that baka brother of mine."

Toga clamped his mouth shut until after the door closed behind his father before he burst out laughing. Sierra laughed, too. "I feel kind of sorry for him," Sierra admitted between giggles. "Your mom might not take it well."

Toga let her take the coffee cup and set it aside before he pulled her back against his chest. "I don't think she'll take it as badly as Father did."

"I love how your father always blames InuYasha for things."

Toga laughed again. "To hear him talk, you'd think I was perfect before Uncle Yasha came through the well."

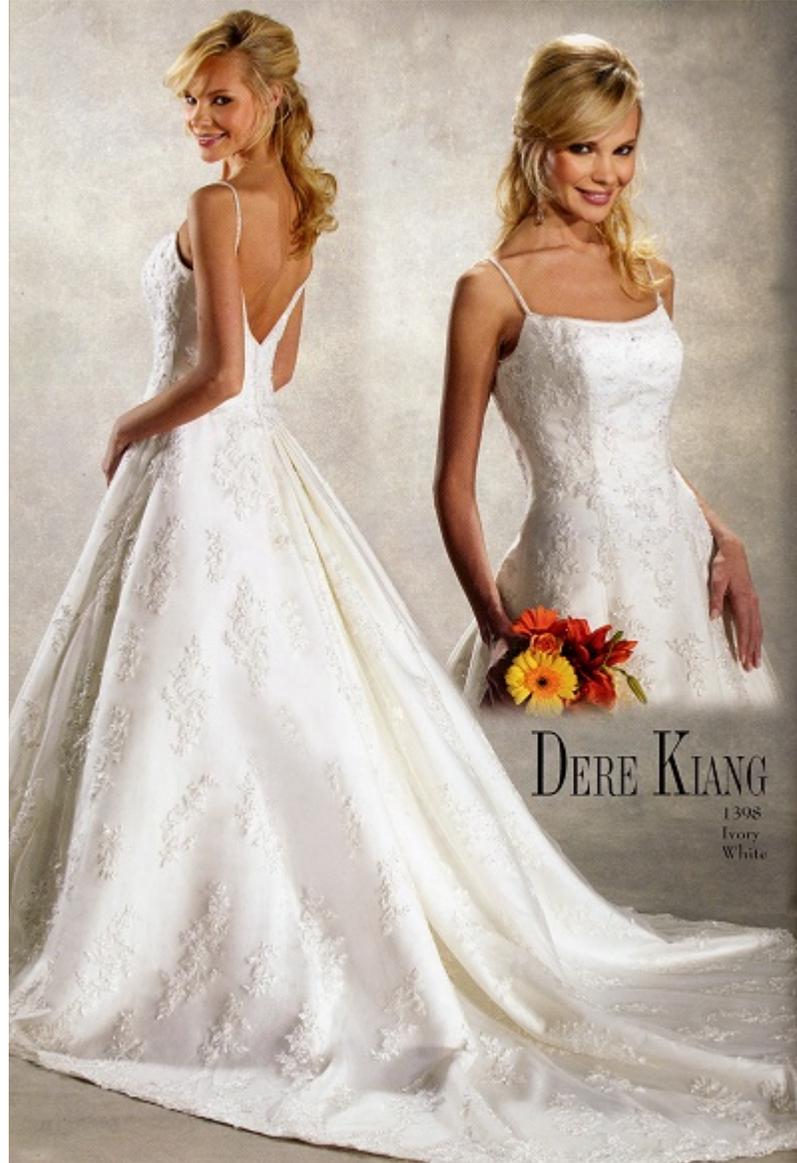
"Weren't you?"

Toga snorted. "Keh! Would you love me if I were?"

Sierra considered that as Toga nibbled her lips. "No," she agreed absently as her eyelids fluttered closed. "No . . . I don't think . . . I would . . ."



# Sierra's Dress



# Sierra's Veil

