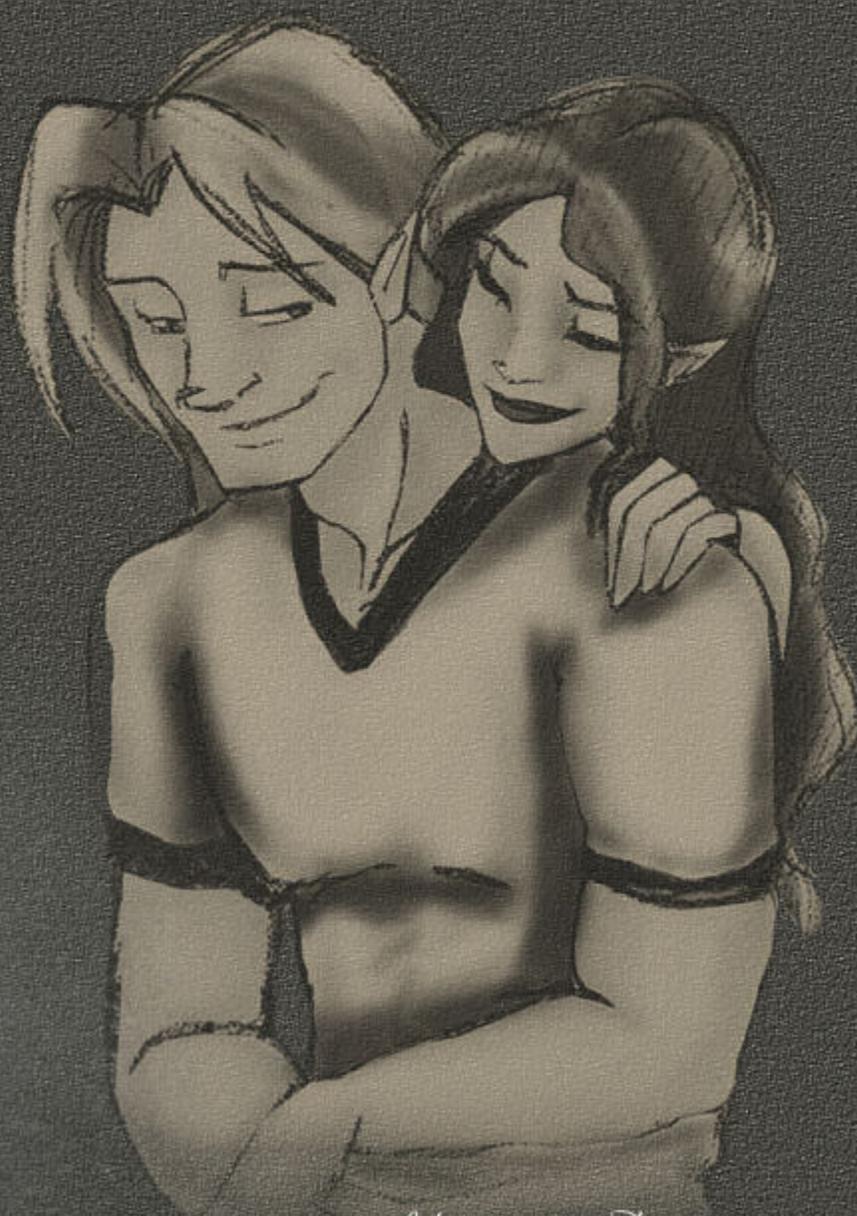


PURITY 5: *Phantasm*

by Sueric



cover art by Uchinanchu Duckie

Dedicated to Greta
The last of the original Hentai Betas
:sniffle:

Cover art by Uchinanchu Duckie

*Blanket disclaimer for this fanfic (will apply to this and all other chapters in **Phantasm**): I do not claim any rights to InuYasha or the characters associated with the anime/manga. Those rights belong to Rumiko Takahashi, et al. I do offer my thanks to her for creating such vivid characters for me to terrorize.*

Purity 5:
Phantasm

Chapter 1
Smoke and Mirrors

'Your father is going to kill you.'

Bas Zelig grimaced as he slammed the door of the late-model Ford Bronco and faced the imposing edifice of the mansion he called home. *'It was hardly my fault,'* he argued. *'Dad would have killed me if I hadn't done a thing.'*

'Tom was your best friend, idiot. Safe to assume he's not anymore.'

Bas snorted as he strode toward the doors and up the wide porch steps, stopping long enough to set up a pot of his mother's beloved lilies. *'Like I care,'* he scoffed. *'Tom had it coming.'*

'Yeah, and about that . . . do you think your parents are going to be pleased? You were kicked out of law school, you know. I don't think either one will be impressed . . .'

'It was boring. I wouldn't have lasted an hour as a lawyer, anyway . . .'

'Oh, well, that's good reasoning for you. Never mind you'll be damn lucky if Tom doesn't press charges for battery.'

Bas didn't bother answering that as he stepped inside the mansion.

"Sebastian? You're home early," Gin Zelig said, setting aside the dust cloth as she hurried over to kiss her son. He had to bend down to receive the greeting. Wincing at the long version of his name, Bas sighed and brushed a chaste kiss over his mother's cheek. "Class cancelled today?"

He shrugged. "Well, uh, no," he grumbled, staring at his feet and wondering just why his tiny mother had the ability to make him feel about five years old without even trying. "I . . . got kicked out."

Gin had been retrieving the cloth. It fell from her fingers as she whipped around to stare at her son. "What?"

He cleared his throat. "I was expelled," he stated a little louder.

"But why? How?" Gin blurted then shook her head as she waved her hands in a dismissive gesture. "Never mind that. I'll have your father call. I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding . . ."

"Forget it, Mom," he said as he headed for the stairs. "I didn't like it, anyway."

"Sebastian—"

"No, it's fine," he interrupted, taking the stairs three at a time in his haste to get away from his mother's line of questioning. Mother was easy to evade, but his father . . .

It was safe to say that people didn't normally evade Cain Zelig. The North American tai-youkai was a force to be reckoned with, and Bas wasn't looking forward to his father's demands for answers. Grimacing as he heard the light footfalls of his mother following him up the stairs, he didn't have to be brilliant to know that she was probably heading straight to Cain's studio. He'd give it ten minutes before his father was knocking on his door.

Sebastian grimaced. It only took five. "Come in," he called, bracing himself for the rapid-fire interrogation that Cain normally reserved for those who had displeased him.

Filling the doorway with his nearly seven-foot-tall frame, Cain Zelig crossed his arms over his chest and stared thoughtfully at his oldest son. "Your mother said you were kicked out of law school. Care to tell me why?"

Bas sighed. "It isn't important. Just a disagreement."

"A disagreement doesn't get you kicked out of school," Cain argued. "Try again, son."

"It was stupid. Tom was running his mouth, and I shut it for him, was all."

"Tom was . . .?" Cain sighed, knowing well enough that Bas' friend had a nasty habit of saying stupid things at the wrong time. Normally harmless enough, Cain figured Tom must have gone a little too far, or maybe Bas had just heard it one time too many.

Either way, it wasn't the first he'd heard tale of Tom's having said something stupid, but it would be the last . . . "Running his mouth about what?"

Bas shot his father a glower that might have ordinarily have earned him an upbraiding. Cain seemed to realize that it wasn't necessarily directed at him, and he simply waited for an explanation. "What do you think? The same shit he always says."

Cain's bland expression dissolved behind a mask of controlled irritation. "He's just not the brightest bulb, is he?"

Bas snorted. "Pfft! No, not really . . ."

He looked reluctant to ask, probably because he knew that whatever it was, wasn't good. In the end, curiosity won out over trepidation, and he heaved a sigh. "Okay, I'll bite. What did the little punk say this time?"

Bas made a face. Cain knew that Tom had a habit of fairly drooling over Bas' mother. He had since he'd hit puberty. As far as Bas was concerned, he'd issued enough warnings on the subject. Apparently they hadn't stuck in his friend's head, though, and Tom, in Bas' considered opinion, had deserved the wallop he'd gotten. "Nothing much . . . just details of things he'd love to do to Mom . . ."

Cain grimaced. "I hope you wiped the floor with him."

Bas sighed. Sure, Tom had overstepped himself. Still, Bas was nearly full-youkai, and with that came almost freakish strength in comparison to mere humans like his ex-friend. He'd been told forever that he had to control his temper. One hit from a youkai would probably kill a human, and while Bas had controlled himself enough not to cause lasting damage, he had caused damage enough. "He's . . . got a broken arm . . . and nose . . ." Bas confessed.

Cain nodded slowly. "I'd have done worse," he grumbled. "Is he going to press charges?"

Bas shrugged. "Don't know . . . I doubt it."

"As much as I hate to, I suppose I should call and offer to take care of the medical bills . . . Consider yourself lectured over the ramifications of fighting with humans," he said. "So if your mother asks . . ."

He nodded, tugging off his shirt before rifling through his closet for his practice hakama. "Yeah, fine . . . 'Don't fight with humans because they're weak and pathetic, blah-blah-blah.'. I got it."

Cain rolled his eyes but let the subject drop.

"Hey, Dad . . ."

Cain stopped and turned to face his son once more. "Yes?"

Bas dropped his jeans on the floor and pulled on the hakama. "I was thinking . . ."

"I'm listening."

"Since I can't go back to school and the odds of transferring aren't good, considering . . . You, uh, got an opening for a hunter?"

"What?"

Glancing up as he tied the pants – a gift from his grandparents – Bas grimaced at the foreboding expression on his father's face. "I thought I could hunt for you."

Cain sighed. "I hate your uncles, you know that? Didn't used to hate Ryomaru, but I think I do now . . ."

"It isn't Uncle Ryo," Bas maintained. "I'm not cut out for a nine-to-five job, Dad."

"And that's a good reason to become a hunter?"

"No, but I can do it. I've been trained."

"And I hate your grandfather, too, by the way . . ."

"This isn't about the old man or anything," Bas said, referencing his grandfather in what InuYasha Izayoi considered to be the highest respectful title any of them could use. Well, Gin and her younger brother notwithstanding. They called him 'Papa', as did Bas' half-sister Bellaniece, who was married to Gin's brother, and that was another can of worms that Bas would rather not open . . .

Bas had spent almost every summer vacation since he was eight with his grandparents in Japan, learning how to fight and being trained in tracking and hunting skills. It was considered that since he would one day usurp his father as North American tai-youkai that he should be trained, and in the tradition of old, he'd received his training not from his father, but from his grandfather, and a couple of summers had been spent with Toga Inutaisho, the next Japanese tai-youkai. The belief used to be that one's father would not be as diligent in training, and while InuYasha had taught all of his children the

skills, Cain had been fostered by InuYasha's older half-brother, Sesshoumaru, the Japanese tai-youkai as well as the overall Inu no Taisho. Cain hadn't liked the idea of sending his eldest son to Japan, especially not at the tender age of eight, but Gin wanted her sons trained by her father, and when Bas had quietly voiced his own desire to go, Cain had made the arrangements.

The ruckus that preceded the youngest of Cain's sons made Bas roll his eyes as he sank on the edge of his bed and slowly shook his head. "Does he have to make so much noise?" he grumbled moments before Evan Zelig poked his head into his brother's room.

"Busted!" Evan hissed with an incorrigible smirk. "Is it true? Daddy's boy got in a fight?"

Bas shot his father a look. Cain reached over and thwapped his youngest son across the back of his head. "Don't pester your brother."

Evan's grin widened. "About time you grew some balls. I was starting to wonder . . ."

"Go crawl back under your rock, brat," Bas retorted.

"So what did good ol' Tom say this time?"

"Does it matter?" Bas countered, nearly tripping over Badd, his butt-ugly dog. A mix of several breeds of very large dogs, Badd actually stood for Big-Ass-Dumb-Dog, but since Gin objected heartily to the name, Badd's name had been shortened. Badd cocked his knobby head to the side, tongue hanging out as he slobbered on the floor. All in all, he looked fairly stupid – hence his name – but Bas loved him, anyway.

Evan shook his head. "Not really, but you can't blame the poor bastard for looking. I mean, being completely objective, Mom *is* hot."

"Hey!" Cain barked.

"Makes me wonder why she married an ugly mutt like Dad," Evan joked.

Cain snorted. "Pfft . . ."

"Your father isn't ugly," Gin scolded as she brushed past her youngest son to slip her arms around Cain's waist.

"Daddy? Ugly? Puh-leez!"

“Oh, my God . . . is there a reason why every one of you nutters has to be in *my* room?” Bas groused as fifteen year-old Jillian Zelig ferreted her way past Evan to hug Cain’s other side.

“You’re not *still* mad about Lisa, are you?” Jillian asked with a disapproving shake of her head.

Bas snorted but didn’t deign to answer. So what if Lisa, his last girlfriend – and the one before that, come to think of it – had become smitten with his father? Bas wasn’t upset about that; not at all . . .

“There’s just something about the brooding artist-type,” Lisa had said.

‘Brooding artist? Right . . . Dad hasn’t ‘brooded’ since he met Mom . . .’

Lisa had just laughed at him, patting his hand as though he were no better than a pup in love with his babysitter.

“I still don’t see the need for the family reunion,” he grumbled, glowering pointedly from one sibling to the other, neither of whom got the message that they were welcome to leave.

“So did we find out why Bassie was expelled?” Jillian asked, ignoring her brother’s obvious irritation.

“Fighting,” Cain answered simply.

Gin looked shocked. “Fighting? Sebastian . . .”

“You got the full name treatment!” Evan chortled. “Really, *really* busted!”

“You’re about to get the full ‘foot-up-your-ass’ treatment if you don’t get the hell out of here,” Bas growled, advancing on his brother.

Gin stepped over, placing a hand in the center of her eldest son’s chest to stop him.

“No swearing at your brother, Sebastian.”

“Sorry, Mom,” he grumbled as Evan laughed out loud.

“That’s not the real issue,” Cain interrupted with a sigh. “Bas wants to become a *hunter*.”

Gin blinked, mouth falling open. She closed it and swallowed, shaking her head as she stared from her mate to her oldest son and back again. "A hunter?"

Cain seemed to think of something, and he grinned. "Yep, a *hunter*, Gin. He wants to be a hunter, just like your brother. Isn't that *great*?"

Bas winced. He knew his father's ploy: banking on the idea that Gin was going to disagree completely, Cain waited for the gauntlet to fall. "I think he'd be a good hunter," Gin finally said.

"What?" Cain demanded.

"Bassie? A hunter?" Jillian remarked with a raised eyebrow. "When donkeys fly . . ."

"Don't you have someone else to pester?" Bas demanded. "Where the hell is your damn Gavvie when he could be useful?"

"You leave Gavvie out of this," Jillian complained, her expression registering her instant hurt at Bas' below-the-belt attack.

Bas ignore the stab of guilt over having reminded Jillian of her one-sided love affair with her childhood friend, Gavin – Gavvie, for short.

"Go, Mom," Evan muttered.

"Shut up," Bas growled at his brother.

"Yeah," Gin stated, nodding her approval. "He's been trained by the best, and he *is* your son, Cain. He'll be fine. I think you should give him a shot."

"Eh?" Cain rasped. "Gin . . ."

"I should call Papa. He'll be so proud," she said, turning to speed out of the room before Cain could stop her.

"I want to talk to Grandpa!" Jillian hollered as she ran after her mother.

The tai-youkai heaved a sigh and shook his head slowly, sparing a moment to eye his eldest son before turning on his heel and striding out of the room. "Damn it . . ."

"Swe-e-e-et!" Evan exclaimed, grinned as their father pushed past him to follow his wife. "If you get slaughtered, I'll be tai-youkai," he remarked as he grabbed Bas' football off the dresser. "Awesome."

Bas stood up and snatched the ball out of his demented sibling's hands before slapping Evan upside the head. "Dad'll live forever if you're his only heir," he shot back, thumping the football onto the dresser again before shoving his brother out of his room.

Evan chuckled and retreated across the hall into his upstairs bedroom that he rarely used since the basement had been soundproofed for his musical delusions, slamming the door behind him.

Bas let out a deep breath just before the vaguest hint of a smile surfaced. A hunter . . . he could do that.

Staring in morbid fascination as blood spiraled down her arm from her raised hand, she blinked and swallowed hard, forcing the bile that rose in her throat back into her stomach as the reek of death filled her nose. '*Curious, really,*' she thought as she cocked her head to the side; as she gazed at his body, askew on the bed. She thought there would be more of a feeling of completion, didn't she? She thought she'd feel something more than the hollowness of nothing. No pity, no sorrow, no despair . . . *Nothing* . . .

Raising her hand in front of her face again, she sighed softly. Blood as deep as scarlet; glistening on her claws like stars in the night sky . . .

He hadn't cried out, had he? He hadn't made a sound when she'd stared into his eyes, when she cut his throat with a flick of her deadly-sharp claws. His blood had flowed over her like a macabre flood, and she hadn't shoved his body aside until the flow had slowed to a drip. The pool of crimson on the white sheets . . . She'd remember it forever. Insanity, perhaps? Divine retribution . . . Maybe she was as much of a monster as he was. Maybe that was why she hadn't felt a damn thing.

The opulent apartment solidified in her line of vision, and she smiled almost sadly. She wouldn't miss it; not at all. The trinkets and baubles . . . he had thought he owned her, didn't he? It was all a charade; a well-played deception, and she was absolutely, unequivocally an expert on deception . . .

With a sigh, she slipped into the adjacent bathroom, turned on the shower taps and stepped into the frigid cold. Closing her eyes against the sight of the watery streaks of red that washed down her body under the unrelenting flow, she stood there for what could have been hours. The water warmed, washing away the remnants of a terrible dream; of a dim shadow of life that sustained her.

Would the nightmares stop now? Would they leave her alone? The contorted beasts of distorted memory that had haunted her sleep . . . They'd tormented her for longer than she could recall; the demons of a night that would never let her go.

There should have been a sense of finality. There should have been some sort of recognition; a sense of completion to something that had begun so long ago. There was nothing, really. No peace, no happiness . . . not even self-loathing at the things she had done. She'd bided her time, waited for her chance, struggled to live in a world that hadn't even noticed her; fading in and out of the shadows that had offered her a strange sort of solace only to emerge into the light that blinded her . . .

It was nearly over, wasn't it? The end was so close she could feel it. She was tired; tired of running, tired of hiding, tired of living the charade in her world—a hall of mirrors. Good and bad had become a matter of perception, and maybe that was the truest evil of them all.

Shutting off the taps and stepping out of the shower, she dried herself off with curiously steady hands as her mind clicked over into habit. *'Dress . . . brush your hair . . . remember, you have to get out of here. Don't fall apart . . .'*

Hand pausing with the brush in mid-stroke, Kit suddenly smiled. *'Fall apart?'* she mused as she resumed the brushing. *'Fall apart . . .'*

Catching the odd sparkle in her deep green eyes, she wondered why she looked so calm, so nonchalant. She'd killed someone—premeditated murder. Funny. She didn't *look* like a killer, did she?

Dropping the brush onto the counter, she wrenched the door open and slipped back into the filmy light of the bedroom. The coppery scent of his blood was already fading, shifting into something darker, more rancid, something deeper and uglier . . . an odor she couldn't forget . . .

The flicker of memories that she knew only too well shot to life and flared up like the flames of a fire. Another time, another place . . . a run-down building where no one could possibly live . . . Another body left broken and bloody, and in the darkest corner . . .

Impossible, wasn't it? Images and memories combined in her head. Muffled screams, cries for mercy . . . Kit shook her head and drew a deep breath.

'Get out of here. You've done what you came to do. Don't get caught; not yet. Get out of here because they're coming. They'll hunt you, and they'll find you, and they'll kill you . . .'

She knew that. Of course they would. They'd come with the wrath of God on their side, and they'd be right, wouldn't they? She expected no mercy, no quarter. It wouldn't matter in the end. It was a game, and it was still her move. She'd see it through till the end.

Sparing a moment to gaze around the room, committing the scene to memory, Kit didn't smile as she blinked, staring at the disheveled bed, the blood soaked linens . . . His arm hung limply, knuckles scraping the floor. An edgy laugh welled inside her. Knuckle dragger? Somehow fitting, wasn't it? Clothes strewn haphazardly – he'd been in a hurry to get them off . . . She'd played her part well. He hadn't realized a thing until it was too late to do a damn thing . . .

'One more, Kit . . . just one more . . .'

Digging through his wallet, she took his cash – cheap bastard. Pocketing the hundred dollars she found, Kit turned toward the window and pushed it open. Into the night, into the shadows, blending into the darkness that she knew so well, she didn't look back. Somewhere in her mind, she wondered if the sense of accomplishment would come with the other. *'New York City . . . That's where he is . . .'*

Just one more, and she'd be free . . .

"It's not a game, you know. Hunting is serious business."

Trying not to roll his eyes, Bas sat back in the chair across from his father's desk and nodded. "I know."

Cain wasn't finished; not by a long shot. "It's kill or be killed most of the time. Are you sure you're ready to kill someone? They won't hesitate to harm you, especially if they know who you are."

"Yes, sir."

"For the record, I think this is the worst idea you've ever had, but your mother thinks you'll be all right . . ."

"Yes, sir."

"I trust you, of course. You've been trained. It's dangerous, Bas, and if you're smart, you'll guard your real identity with your life."

"Yes, sir."

Cain sighed and slouched back, dragging a hand over his face before scowling at his son. "I'm dead serious, damn it."

"I know you are, Dad. So am I. I can do this."

Staring at Bas as though he were trying to measure him up, Cain finally nodded and leaned forward, pushing a large manila envelope across the smooth desktop. "Here you go. Your first hunt. This one is kind of different, though."

"Oh?" Bas questioned, picking up the envelope and bending the tabs to open the flap, scowling at the contents of the packet. A thick stack of hundred-dollar bills, a prepaid cell-phone, a one-way ticket to Los Angeles on a flight set to depart at noon, and a very thin folder . . . "What's this?"

"Expenditures. Never use anything that can be traced; never use a phone that can be tapped. I want you on that plane. Time is of the essence right now . . . and that," he said, nodding at the file, "is the profile of the girl I want you to bring in, such as it is."

"Girl?"

Cain nodded, watching Bas' face as he opened the file and scowled at the single piece of paper that should have had all the identifying information as well as a photo attached. Most of the lines were blank. Where height should have been listed was the vague reference, *'somewhere between five and six feet tall'*, which pretty much encompassed better than ninety-five percent of females, and for hair color, it said, *'rumored to be red'*. The name was actually filled in. *'Kit'*, it said, but didn't give a last name, either. "Cat youkai?" he asked dubiously. "What the . . .? Dad, there's nothing to go on here."

"We don't always have the best information," Cain remarked. "That's all we were able to get. She was apparently Cal Richardson's girlfriend, and the last one to see him alive."

"Cal Richardson?" Bas echoed, eyebrows lifting in surprise. The man in question wasn't a general but he was a high ranking youkai officer. He was murdered? Why? "This girl killed Cal Richardson?"

Cain sighed. "So it would seem. I don't know . . . there's something weird about it. I can't put my finger on it. Anyway, I thought it'd be best to bring her in for questioning before a real hunt is issued for her."

That gave him pause. Cain never ordered someone be brought in for questioning. Then again, unless it was dire, hunts were considered to be last-resort options . . . "What do you think is weird about it?"

"I don't know, exactly," Cain admitted. "Just a feeling, maybe . . ."

Bas hesitated, knowing his father's feelings about that particular youkai, but had to ask, "Are you sure that you're not looking for more since you hated the bastard?"

Cain leveled a dark look at his son and sat back. He'd never made any bones about his feelings toward Cal Richardson. The man had been a pain in Cain's side for years. Too cowardly to challenge the tai-youkai outright, Richardson had spent way too much time trying to undermine Cain's authority in hushed whispers to others who might object to Cain's decision to take a hanyou as a mate, especially after Cain's first wife—a human—had died. "Just because I wasn't fond of Richardson doesn't mean that I wouldn't have his killer brought to justice."

Bas grimaced inwardly. "Sorry."

Cain sighed, relaxing out of his wary posture. "If you read the file, I think you'll see what I mean. There's something missing; some crucial bit of information that simply isn't there. This girl might have that answer. Bring her in, Bas."

Bas frowned as he glanced back at the pitiful document. "Age: unknown . . . rumored to be very young? Is that right?"

Cain nodded. "That's one of the things that doesn't make sense."

"I see."

"Think you can do it?"

Bas stared at the paper for a moment before tucking it back into the folder and slipping all the items into the envelope once more. "Yeah."

"We just want her for interrogation right now, but remember: if she did kill Richardson, then she's dangerous."

"Understood."

“She was last rumored to be in the Los Angeles area. I’ve made arrangements for you to take your sword, but you have to take it in the suitcase you pack. They won’t let you take it as a carry-on.” Cain sighed. “Don’t make your mother worry, all right?”

Bas nodded. Cain hid his emotions well enough most of the time. He couldn’t hide the trace worry in the depths of his sapphire stare. “I won’t.”

“You’d better get packed.”

Bas stood and strode toward the door. His father’s voice stopped him. “That cell phone . . . it’s not standard to take one along. If anything goes wrong – and I do mean anything – you call me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” he answered, using the address that he’d been taught to use when speaking to Cain the tai-youkai, not Cain the father.

Cain stared at him for a long moment then finally nodded. “Good luck, hunter.”

Bas nodded once and turned on his heel to leave.

‘This feels weird, Bas . . . Your father didn’t give you hardly anything to go on.’

‘I know.’

‘You don’t suppose he wants us to fail, do you?’

‘Don’t be stupid. Dad’s never wanted me to fail.’

‘Can we do this? Can we, really?’

Bas’ golden gaze lit with determination as he ran up the stairs to his bedroom. ‘Yeah,’ he thought as he checked his watch. He had less than an hour to pack and to be on his way to the airport. *‘We can do this, or we can die trying . . .’*

‘. . . Nice choice of wording.’

‘She’s a cat – a young cat. We’ll find her and be back within a week.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

Bas shrugged, spotting the suitcase Gin had already opened on his bed. *'It was probably just a fit of jealousy or something. Stranger things have happened. Maybe the girl didn't realize what she was doing. She's probably hiding somewhere, scared to death.'*

'Your father was right, though. If she did kill Richardson, then she's dangerous. Just don't take any stupid chances, and don't underestimate her, okay?'

'I won't,' he agreed as he tossed the envelope onto his bed and pulled the top dresser drawer open. *'If I can find her . . . I don't have a helluva lot to go on, do I?'*

'Let's just get there and see what we can dig up. Maybe one of Richardson's friends can give us more information.'

Bas nodded, tossing a few changes of clothes into the suitcase before tucking his sword, Triumvirate – a gift from his grandfather, great-uncle, and father – between layers to keep it from being jostled around in transit then closed the locks with a snap. *'Good idea . . .'*

His youkai sighed. *'You ready?'*

Bas did, too, staring at the closed suitcase before tugging it off the bed and grabbing the manila envelope, too. *'Yep. Let's do this.'*

A/N:

Hakama: traditional Japanese pants ...

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Final Thought from Bas:

A cat-youkai, huh ...

Chapter 2

The Next Generation of Hunters

"You know the rules, Kit. Either buy something or get the fuck out."

Tapping her claws on the warped old counter in the dingy little place, Kit tossed a dollar bill at the balding man with the middle age spread behind the bar.

"Water."

The barkeep, better known as Leech, snorted. "'Water,' she says . . . One of these days . . ."

"I paid for it, didn't I?" she countered, her smooth voice dropping to a near-purr as she cocked an eyebrow at the disgruntled human.

Leech slammed a grimy glass of tepid water onto the bar and slipped the dollar into his pocket. Leaning over with his meaty arms resting on the counter, he crooked his finger to lure her closer. "There's a guy been lookin' for you the last couple nights. Thought you needs ta know."

"You don't say. What does this guy look like?"

He shrugged and craned his neck, scratching his chin with grungy fingernails. "My mind's goin' in my old age," he deadpanned, eyes shifting around the bar. "You want to jar my memory?"

She smiled insincerely, restraining the desire to wipe the lecherous smirk off the native New Yorker's flabby face. "And how could I do that?"

Sheer force of will kept her from recoiling as Leech leaned in. Hiding her disgust at the grimy yellowed teeth, the squalid breath as he laughed in her face, she narrowed her eyes and waited. "We could make a deal, you and me – something mutually beneficial, if you know what I mean . . ."

His gaze roamed up and down her body, and she didn't even try to delude herself in thinking that the man wasn't stripping her naked in his mind. "I don't know, Leech . . . can you still get it up?"

Face contorting in an angry scowl, he turned his head to spit on the floor.
“Stupid bitch! Why don’t you go into the back room with me, and I’ll show you what I can still do.”

“You can shove your information and your stubby little prick up your ass, as far as I’m concerned. I can take care of myself. I don’t need you to worry about me. Lay off the junk food, you fat bastard. You’ll live longer, don’t you think?”

Leech’s expression clouded over, and for a moment, she thought he might try to strike her. Suddenly he wheezed out a laugh, his breath hollow and airy before the laughter gave way to a wet smokers’ cough. “I likes ya, even if ya are a real bitch. You’s got balls.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, tiring rapidly from the game that Leech just loved to play. “Are you going to spill your guts or not?”

“Ain’t much to tell, thinkin’ on it. He just came in and asked fer yas. ‘Do you know a woman named Kit?’ he asks, all business-like. Stood out like a sore thumb, he did. All neat and clean and young . . . Hell!” He laughed and coughed in turns, “He even said fuckin’ please and thank you!”

“What’d he look like?” she asked, ignoring Leech’s amusement.

Leech made an exaggerated face as he straightened back up, wiping a glass with a dingy gray bar towel. “Tall . . . real tall: a huge motherfucker – a real brick shithouse . . . Long hair – a fuckin’ weird color, like Goldilocks or some damn thing – a little darker, mebbe . . .”

“Anything else?”

With a shrug, Leech dropped the towel and grunted as he picked it up and wiped the next glass. “Yeah, one thing.”

To her surprise, Leech seemed unsettled, almost scared. “His eyes were the same fucked up color as his hair. Musta been contacts or some shit. Do you know who he is?”

She ignored Leech’s question as she grabbed the glass of water and walked away. In the darkest corner of the establishment, in the hidden recesses of the deepest shadows, she slipped into the chair at the table as she digested Leech’s words.

'They're coming for me? That was fast . . . Sounds like a different hunter, then . . .'

She was supposed to leave for New York City, had planned on doing that right after slipping out of Cal Richardson's apartment, but she had a few more things to take care of. By the time she was ready to go, she'd learned through the police radio she'd tapped that there was a full-scale, albeit quiet hunt for her, and while humans and their pitiful excuse for law enforcement didn't worry her, if she was detained for any length of time, she'd be a sitting-duck for the hunter that the tai-youkai had apparently sent after her . . .

At least she didn't have to worry too much in her neighborhood. People learned quickly that squealers normally met with their own sort of comeuppance. Everyone was an outcast. No one conformed to the standard of society's molds. It was a vast network of eyes and ears where even a hunter better expect to watch his back.

She pushed the water glass away and sat back in the chair, eyes darting over the room, she took in the same faces she'd seen a hundred times if she'd seen them once . . . The man at the bar who never spoke sat slumped over the one mug of flat beer that he would nurse all night until closing time . . . The haggard woman at the table by the window . . . She had to wonder if the woman had ever seen whatever it was she was looking for.

Precious few strangers milled into the establishment. They drew attention to themselves in a strange sort of way. More transient than the seasons, the unfortunate few who wandered through the doors. *'Just how do people end up here? Is it by accident or design? Is it something destined to be? Preordained or just a fluke?'* Frowning as she considered her own questions, she bit her lip and sighed. If it was the luck of the draw, could she accept that? Maybe that was the bitterest of ironies. Maybe there wasn't any real choice in it, at all . . .

The tired bell above the door announced the arrival of another shapeless stranger. She glanced up and started to look away only to stop as her eyes darted right back to the man who had stepped inside. "Youkai . . ." she murmured softly, leaning her elbow on the armrest and letting her chin fall into the 'L' of her thumb and index finger. *'Dog-youkai? Interesting . . .'*

Impossibly tall, he had to duck to clear the doorway, and he stood in the entrance as his eyes traversed the room. There was a strange tinge in his aura, a predatory sense of dexterity in his movements. Golden bronze hair that caught the dingy light behind the bar, he seemed to be looking for someone.

She could feel him extending his youki, felt it brush over hers with a tentative air. Probing, searching, he was. He must have realized that he wasn't the only youkai in the room. He stared at the shadows where she sat, and for the briefest moment, she thought that perhaps he could see her. Leech asked him what he wanted, and the man turned. Black leather duster flaring around his lean legs, she wasn't surprised to see the flash of the sword hilt strapped to his side. He was young, she noted – very young. She couldn't see his eyes from where she sat, but the wash of curiosity that surged through her was electric.

'Golden,' she thought fleetingly, a whimsical notion, the fleeting breath of a transient dream. He looked younger than he seemed. The commanding air of his youki . . . *'A fool's arrogance? He's not a hunter – he's not a killer. Could he really possess the tenacity to perform the task?'*

'Don't underestimate him . . . it might well be the last mistake you ever make.'

She smiled lazily, gaze narrowing as she studied his mannerisms from the security of the shadows. Broader of build than most youkai, he moved with a strange sort of grace, an elusive sense of something untamed with eyes that could see right into her soul . . .

As though he could sense her ardent perusal, he slowly turned around, gaze sweeping the barroom once more.

'Well, well, well . . . if it isn't the hunter . . .'

Bas stepped into the grimy bar on a whim. He'd already been there a couple times, but having had no luck anywhere in the week since his arrival in Los Angeles, he figured it couldn't hurt. If anyone knew Kit's whereabouts, they were keeping their mouths shut tight.

Ignoring the curious glances he garnered, Bas glanced out over the thin population. The place was a study of shadow. One long fluorescent bulb illuminated the bar but did little to dispel the pervasive darkness. "Water," he said in a low tone to the slovenly barkeep.

The barkeeper snorted. "I don't serve fucking water, pretty boy. Try again or get the hell out."

Bas cleared his throat. "Fine. Whiskey."

The man glared at him for another moment before slamming a shot glass onto the counter and sloshing the whiskey into it and shoving it across the counter. Bas dropped a five dollar bill onto the counter and turned away with the drink in hand.

There was a youkai in the back of the room. He could sense her there. '*Cat youkai . . . it couldn't be . . . could it?*' Then again, that would be way too easy, wouldn't it? He sighed inwardly.

Slowly, deliberately, Bas straightened his back and ambled into the darkness.

"Excuse me," he said, clearing his throat as the pinpoint flashes of light from her eyes flicked up to meet his gaze. "May I sit here?"

"It depends. Do you bite?"

Bas shook his head, feeling the rich smoothness of her soft alto voice flowing over him like water. "Not unprovoked."

"Oh? And if I provoke you?"

He didn't even crack a smile. "I'm a fairly patient man. It's not that easy to provoke me."

She sighed. "Well, *that's* a shame, then."

Slipping into the chair across from her, he set the glass down and waited for his eyes to adjust to the trace light.

"So what brings a puppy like you out to play?"

Gritting his teeth at the allusion to his age – or lack thereof – Bas shrugged and pushed the grimy glass away. "Funny thing coming from a feline."

"Aww, did I touch a nerve?"

"Nope, not at all . . . tell me something. I'm looking for a woman named Kit. You know her?"

"Should I?" she countered.

He didn't miss the almost defensive way she'd asked her last question. "I hear she's a cat like you. *Do you know her?*"

"I know . . . *of her . . . why are you looking for her? Tired of playing with the mutts?*"

"I just want to talk to her. Is that a crime?"

"Talk is cheap. Haven't you heard?"

"If you don't know her, just say so."

The girl didn't answer right away. He heard the rustle of fabric, the soft snick of a zipper. Moments later, she struck a match to light the end of a cigarette. Bas blinked in surprise. He wasn't sure what he'd expected to see in the harsh flare of light. In those seconds, those fleeting heartbeats, he saw her face. Unsure what he had really expected, she caught him completely off-guard.

Golden skin warmed by the paltry light accentuated the delicate curves and hollows of her face. Hidden in shifting shadows and brushed with a softness that belied the age he saw in her emerald green eyes, he could tell that she was young, at least biologically. If she was twenty years old, he'd be amazed. Her eyes, though, bespoke an age that had nothing at all to do with her physical body. How much had she seen in her lifetime? Shaking the match with a painfully bony hand, she dropped the burnt stick into a bent tin ashtray. Bas tamped down the desire to growl. He wanted to see her face in better light.

The glow of the cigarette's ember gave the enveloping shadows a hazy feel. She exhaled softly and blinked. "I know her," she said, her voice little more than a breath. "I probably know her better than anyone."

"Can you tell me where to find her?"

"Kit?" she asked with a jaded little laugh. "Kit . . . she's easy to find."

"You don't say," he mused and shrugged. "Go figure."

"Why do you want to talk to her?"

Bas sat back, narrowing his eyes as he tried to discern more than the vague outline of black against black, as her silhouette blended a little too easily into the shadows. "I just want to ask her a few questions."

She sighed. "So ask them."

He snorted. "I'd rather ask her, if you don't mind."

"Oh, right . . ." She was quiet a moment. Bas could feel her gaze on him even if he couldn't really see her expression. "I could . . . take you to her, if you want."

He frowned. "And why would you do that?"

She chuckled. "I don't know . . . maybe I feel a little sorry for you."

"Sorry for me?"

"You look so lost and miserable, puppy. Let's just say I'm just feeling magnanimous tonight."

She moved so quickly that Bas had trouble covering his surprise. He stood up slowly as the girl laughed. "How do I know I can trust you?"

"You don't."

Not comforted at all by her admission, Bas followed her anyway. It was the best lead he'd had so far. Even if the girl was just toying with him, he didn't have anything better to do.

She didn't say anything else until they were out of the bar. The light from the streetlamps cast the area in grating shadows, severe misshapen things, dilapidated buildings and contortions of life. Casting her an appraising stare under the cover of his thick bangs, Bas narrowed his eyes. She looked even younger than he had first thought—definitely younger than himself. If it weren't for the knowing glint in her eyes, he would have thought she was no older than his fifteen year-old brother and sister.

Rubbing her bare arms against the chilly night air, she glanced up and down the street, eyes ever-moving, as though she expected someone to leap out at her from the shadows, and while she didn't appear to have a weapon on her, he didn't doubt for a moment that she knew how to use her razor-sharp claws. Flexing them almost nervously as she turned on her heel and started away, she stopped long enough to glance back at him, to jerk her head, indicating that he should follow.

Absently wondering just how she could move so fast as he shook his head and stared at the four-inch stiletto heels she wore, Bas strode after her, trying not to

gawk at the tiny tube of black spandex – he supposed she considered it to be a skirt – that barely covered her bottom.

“Where are you taking me?” he asked, breaking the lull, the shocking quiet. Didn’t the girl have enough common sense to wear a jacket or something? He wasn’t cold, but he was from Maine, and the weather there was easily twenty degrees cooler back home. Los Angeles might be a hell of a lot warmer, but the girl kept rubbing her arms, crossing them over her chest in a pitiful attempt to retain body heat. The black tank top didn’t reach her navel, and she adjusted the left shoulder strap before snatching at her purse, protectively cradling it against her chest.

She peeked up at him quickly, shrugging her thin shoulders as her eyes darted around: constant motion, or so it seemed. “It’s not far,” she assured him, tucking a strand of deep auburn hair behind her ear.

“What’s your name?”

“What’s yours?”

“I asked first.”

“But I’m a lady.”

He couldn’t argue that logic. “Bas,” he supplied slowly. “Your turn.”

She smiled vaguely and stopped. “Sydnie. Should we shake hands now, or are there more pleasantries to exchange first?”

“I’d rather you take me to Kit,” he remarked.

She shrugged and started walking again. “Suit yourself, pretty boy, but I warn you: Kit’s not exactly what you’d call a ‘people-person’.”

“I’m not really here for a social call.”

“Why *are* you here? Was Kit a bad . . . kitty?”

“I’m not really at liberty to discuss anything with you. You understand.”

She smiled. “Right . . . Don’t tell me you’re a long lost boy-toy? You don’t really seem her type . . .”

Keeping his chin down in an effort to hide the hot color that filtered into his cheeks, Bas shrugged in what he hoped was an indifferent show and cleared his throat. "Ever meet her boyfriend? Cal Richardson?"

"Cal Richardson? Yeah, I met him . . . a real bastard, if you want my opinion. Are you a dic?"

"A what?"

"A dic? A P. I. A detective . . . a *cop*."

"Oh . . . no."

"Yeah, you don't look the type."

"Don't I?"

"Nope. You don't look like a *complete* asshole."

"Thanks . . . I think . . ."

She glanced around again, biting her burgundy painted lower lip before veering to the left, into the gaping black doorway of a derelict building that looked like it was ready to crumble.

Bas had no choice but to follow her into the ramshackle building. Listening intently as he scanned the darkest corners, he didn't sense anyone else and shook his head. "Listen, Sydnie . . . I don't know what your game is, but —"

"Ask me no questions; I'll tell you no lies."

". . . What?"

Standing in the center of a shaft of moonlight filtering through the line of ventilation windows that ran the length of the building, she whirled around to face him, a strangely sad, almost ironic sort of smile twisting her lips. Her bangs fell over the left side of her face, her skin glowed blue in the weak light. So impossibly slender that he could see the pronounced hollows above her collarbones, she looked somehow unreachable and altogether vulnerable at the same time.

"What is it you want to know, Bas the Hunter?"

He stifled a sigh, dragging a hand over his face as he shook his head and stared at her. "I thought you said –"

"I know what I said. I said I'd introduce you to Kit."

"So where is she?"

That enigmatic little smile appeared again, and she dropped her purse on the floor, raising a small cloud of dust. "She's me . . . I'm her . . . and this is my turf."

He couldn't stop the incredulous laugh that slipped out at her outlandish claim. "You're Kit? *Ri-i-ight* . . . Come on, Sydnie. If you don't know her, just say so."

She sighed. "You don't believe me?"

Bas snorted. "Pfft! No."

She nodded slowly, lowering her chin as she paced around the filthy room. "How can I convince you?"

"Why would you want to? Your friend is in some very serious trouble."

"Are you here to kill me, Mr. Hunter – a nameless, faceless nobody?"

"Assuming I believe you're who you claim to be – which I don't – what makes you think that I'm here to kill anyone?"

"Oh? Isn't that what hunters do?"

"Sometimes."

"They're called 'hunters' for a reason, right? So what are you here for, if not to kill me?"

"I told you. I just want to talk to Kit."

"And I told you, puppy, talk now or forever hold your peace."

Grinding his teeth together in an effort to keep his irritation under control, Bas shook his head as he stared at the cat-youkai. "You really want me to believe you're Kit?"

She shrugged and stared at him, her eyes glowing almost yellow in the murky dark. *'Cat eyes,'* he thought with a slight shake of his head. *'Cat eyes . . .'*

"It doesn't make a great goddamn to me, one way or the other, pretty boy. If you don't want to believe that I am who I say I am, then you can walk out that door right now and never look back. Then I suppose you can go back to your tai-youkai and tell him that you failed, can't you?"

'But . . . she can't be . . . can she?'

'She could be, sure. Stranger things have happened. Red hair, Bas . . . She does have red hair . . .'

Assessing her where she stood in the shaft of moonlight, she looked completely harmless, didn't she? Hair cascading around her like a silky waterfall, translucent skin stretched so taut over an otherwise bony frame . . .

Youkai could exist without eating, of course. If they didn't, though, they ended up looking much like this girl. Painfully thin, every bone of her body seemed visible. Under the short shirt, he could see the discernable lines of her ribcage, and he winced inwardly. There was a vast difference between word games and murder. This girl, no matter what her story might be . . . His mother always said that he should trust his heart, trust his instincts, and those instincts were screaming at him: she wasn't a murderer. She couldn't *be* a murderer, and he knew it.

"Prove it."

"Prove what?"

"If you're Kit, then prove it."

"And how shall I do that?"

He shrugged. "Find a way."

She smiled slightly; a cynical expression devoid of humor, of emotion. "Nine days."

"What?"

She sighed, pinning Bas with a look that bespoke her disgust at his ignorance. "Nine days . . . To be more precise, nine days, twenty hours . . . some odd minutes . . ."

He shook his head without taking his eyes off her.

"You poor stupid puppy . . . Isn't that what you came here to find out? You wanted to know, right? I killed Cal Richardson – that miserable bastard."

Her words stung him, and yet his mind still refused to believe. Could someone so young, so innocent-looking despite the age writ in her eyes really be a murderer? "Reciting a time of death that is of public record barely proves guilt or innocence in this world."

"Did you go there?"

"Go there?"

"To Richardson's apartment. Did you go there?"

"Of course I did."

"You didn't smell me there?"

"It's a crime scene. There have been a hundred people parading in and out of that place. Picking up a scent is nearly impossible."

"I suppose it is. Makes your job harder, doesn't it?"

"Why do you want me to believe that you're Kit?"

"Why do you want to believe that I'm not?"

He shook his head. "So you tell me you are her, and then you say you killed Cal Richardson? Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"Tell me why you killed him."

Sinking down on a broken cinder block, legs askew but knees together, she seemed to be considering his question. Bas draped his hands on his hips and waited for her answer. "It doesn't really matter, does it? To kill . . . to live . . . to

die . . . it all circles back on itself." She didn't move as her gaze shifted to meet his, green eyes glowing with something akin to amusement . . . or maybe it was something a little deeper, a little more frightening . . . "I don't fear you. I don't fear any of Cain Zelig's hangmen."

"All right," he allowed slowly. "If that's the case, then you have to come with me."

"I do?"

"Those are my orders. The tai-youkai wants to talk to you."

"Sorry to disappoint him," she remarked in a rueful tone. "I'll have to decline his offer."

"You don't have much of a choice."

She stood up slowly, refusing to drop her gaze. He saw the fleeting glimpse of regret flash through her eyes. "In another life," she murmured softly. "In another time or place . . ."

"What's that?"

Her smile was sad, mysterious, and the flash of her movements startling. Caught off-guard, Bas started to draw his sword as he whipped around to face her. Blinding pain flashed, an explosion behind his eyes, and he slumped to the floor with an expelled gust of breath.

Sydney caught him, carefully lowering him onto his back despite the immense weight that accompanied his very solid physique. He'd be safe enough here, in this building. No one dared to enter it. She'd made sure of that, herself. Kneeling beside the young hunter, she bit her lip and sighed.

Pushing his bangs out of his face, she almost smiled at the boyish features he hid behind those startling golden eyes. The angles and planes were tempered by the wide set of his jaw, by the smoothness of his skin. He might well be older than she was, but not by much. Why did looking at him make her sad? She shook her head, pulled her hand away from his cheek. "Why didn't you listen to me? Why didn't you just turn around and walk away?"

His only answer was the even rhythm of his breathing. "I'm sorry, Bas the Hunter . . ."

With that, Sydnie stood up, retrieved her purse, and disappeared into the murky shadows of the night without looking back.

Final Thought from Bas:

Who the hell is she?

Chapter 3

Femme Fatale

Groaning softly as he sat up slowly, rubbing the side of his head where the girl had hit him with . . . God only knew what . . . He had a feeling it was that gargantuan monstrosity she called a purse. He should have realized it wasn't a purse at all but a weapon . . .

'Way to go, Bas . . . She could have killed us.'

'Damn her . . . I just want to talk to her, not hurt her. What the hell . . .?'

'Never mind that. Let's find her.'

Wincing as he got to his feet, swaying precariously as he bit back the edges of dizziness, he shook his head and blinked.

He wasn't unconscious long: five minutes at the most. She obviously wasn't trying to kill him, but he had underestimated her. How dangerous was she, hiding behind that innocent face? *'She really is the one I'm looking for, isn't she?'*

'Your father would have your ass if he knew how careless you were just now.'

Shuffling toward the empty doorway, Bas snorted. *'Yeah, I know . . . Damn it, I didn't think she would do that.'*

'What is it that your grandfather always tells you?'

Though he didn't really feel like hearing 'The Lecture' from his youkai, no less, Bas heaved a sigh as he stepped outside the building and carefully perused the empty street. *'Don't let your guard down.'*

'And what did you just do?'

He made a face as he caught her lingering scent. *'Yeah, okay, you made your point.'*

'Be more careful next time, moron. You know, right? If you die, you kill me, too, and if I die, then I'll really be ticked off . . .'

'Shut up, will you? I'm trying to concentrate. I don't think she got far . . . I think I can still catch her.'

Breaking into a sprint despite his aching head, Bas gritted his teeth and forced himself to run, following her scent—the unsettling mix of vanilla and warm spice. *'Cinnamon? Cloves? What is that?'*

'Who cares what spice she smells like, you moron? You're tracking her, not looking for a date to the prom . . .'

The first place he'd gone after arriving at LAX was Cal Richardson's apartment. Sneaking past the guards stationed outside the apartment was easy enough. Dropping from the roof onto the balcony, he'd slipped inside without commotion, only to find that the place had been crawling with investigators and police officers. He'd tried to come up with a scent of the elusive girl despite all that. It wasn't possible. Whatever scent she might have left behind was covered with the reek of way too many humans. Even Richardson's scent on the bloodstained bed was faint and masked.

None of Richardson's friends were helpful. Richardson normally divided his time between Chicago and New York City, and the few friends he had in the Los Angeles area had never met this alleged girlfriend, which just figured. Humans, he was coming to understand, were a horribly indifferent lot who didn't notice much of anything if they weren't told to look for it. They could talk to someone for twenty minutes and not be able to recap the gist of the conversation, let alone to describe what the other person looked like.

The waif-like appearance of the young woman seemed to dance before his eyes. In the harshness of the yellow street lamps, her eyes seemed to glow as her lips turned up in a thoroughly amused grin. *'Frustrated, puppy? You poor widdle thing . . . You'll never catch me, will you?'*

Squelching a frustrated growl as he sprinted past derelict buildings and ramshackle businesses that looked like they'd fail an inspection by the Department of Health, Bas couldn't tell if he was closing in on her or not. A left turn here, a right turn there, and still her scent lingered, teasing him, goading him, as if she were doing little more than toying with him, batting him to and fro between her proverbial paws.

'Cat and mouse . . .'

'Damn it . . .'

When he turned the corner by the abandoned building where he'd started the chase, Bas skidded to a stop and growled. She really was playing with him, wasn't she? "All right, Sydney . . . Kit . . . whatever the hell your name is," he mumbled as his gaze swept the area. He could feel that she was close. If only he could see her . . . "The game is on . . ."

Sydney peered over the edge of the building and bit her lip. *'I shouldn't have circled back . . . He was fine, right? I knew he was fine . . .'*

Still, she hadn't been able to shake off the feeling that she really had hurt him. She'd taken off with every intention of disappearing for awhile – at least until the Bas the Hunter was gone. She hadn't gotten more than a few blocks away when her conscience had begun gnawing at her. Though she'd tried to tell herself that it didn't matter, that he would wake up eventually, she wasn't surprised to see that she'd circled back, but when she'd ducked inside to see if he was still breathing, she figured out he was gone.

The dusty darkness played tricks on her. The lingering remains of his aura seeped out of the drafty cracks, the blackened holes. Filtering through the shrunken floorboards as the chill night winds siphoned in, it seemed as uncontainable, as untouchable as a midsummer's dream. Why did she feel even more alone? The hunter with the golden eyes . . .

'He's coming, Sydney. Get out of here, will you?'

'He's coming? Who?'

'Bas – the hunter – the one you ran from . . . he's coming, and you really shouldn't be here when he gets here.'

The building was so decrepit that she didn't dare run up the old staircase when she felt his presence closing in. She'd barely had time to leap onto the roof outside before he came back into view. *'He's a damn good tracker; I'll give him that . . .'*

In her haste to get away, she hadn't forgotten the few simple things she'd learned over the years. Altering her course between the sidewalk, the roofs, and the alleys normally made it harder for the few youkai that inhabited the area to find her, and humans? She smiled insincerely. Humans had a tendency not to look up.

'This is all your fault,' she sneered, shrinking back into the shadows but still leaning over enough to see as Bas the Hunter's head came into view.

'My fault? And how do you figure that, Missy?'

'You just had to feel bad, didn't you? You just had to come back to check on him . . .'

'Oh, and you didn't want to? Come off it, Sydney. I'm your youkai, but you know, I don't make you do anything you don't already have a mind to do.'

'That's stupid! I was all set to disappear, remember? You're the one who—'

'Yeah? Well, you're the one in charge of the body, so don't even go there. I can't make you walk anywhere you don't want to go, but if you sleep better at night deluding yourself, then knock yourself out.'

'His hair looks really soft,' she mused, smiling slightly as she peered over the edge.

'You think so? Then ask him if you can feel it, but you'd better do it fast. He's like to want to throttle you when he finds you.'

'If he finds me, thank you very much. I've spent a lifetime escaping and hiding, haven't I? Bas the Hunter might be good, but he's not that good.'

'It's getting tiring, isn't it? The running? The hiding? All of it . . .'

Sydney stifled a sigh as she sank back on her knees, resting her chin on her clasped hands atop the low lip that ran around the perimeter of the roof. *'Just a little longer . . . Just a little more, and I can stop . . .'*

'There is no going back, Sydney. You know that, right?'

'I know that,' she agreed with a sad sort of smile. 'No going back; not ever . . .'

There wasn't, was there? Nowhere to hide, nowhere to run . . . the only thing she had was the hope that she could elude them long enough to see her vengeance through.

She'd spent her entire life hiding in the shadows; had run so far for so long that it was the only thing she really knew. What did Bas the Hunter hide behind those golden eyes? What sort of things had he grown up with? A loving home, no doubt . . . a beautiful life full of smiles and laughter? A mother who tucked him in at night until he got old enough to make her stop? A father who went to all his football games and said silly things, like, "That's my boy . . ." Siblings? Pets? The golden dream . . .

Unleashing a piercing scream as a firm hand wrapped around her wrist and jerked her to her feet, Sydnie was whipped around, crashing straight into the very solid mass of a body – Bas the Hunter’s body. Glowering down at her behind a mask of barely contained irritation, he looked like he’d rather choke her than capture her, and just for a moment, her heart skipped a beat.

“Care to tell me why you bitch-slapped me back there?”

“So you caught me.”

“Yeah. Answer my question.”

“What are you going to do with me?” she countered.

Eyes shrouded in the darkness as he glared down at her, Sydnie wished that she could read his eyes. She could sense the barely contained anger that flowed through him, and though he wasn’t holding onto her tightly, he was definitely too strong for her to easily gain her freedom. “I could have sworn I told you: you’re coming with me.”

“I’d love to take you up on that,” she drawled, “but I’ve got things to do. You’ll understand.”

“You don’t have a choice. Don’t make me lock you up.”

“Lock me up? That sounds fun . . .”

“Are you going to try to escape?”

She smiled. “Every chance I get.”

He sighed, reaching into the inner breast pocket of his black leather duster. Her eyes flared as she watched him pull a set of shiny silver handcuffs, and she couldn’t suppress her amusement as he slapped one around her wrist without taking his gaze off her.

“You don’t really think those are going to stop me, do you?”

He chuckled. “Actually, I do.”

“Really?”

“Ofuda.”

"What?"

He shrugged as he clipped the other handcuff around her free wrist. "Ofuda. Paper charms. The scrolls are sealed inside the metal. If you had a mind to escape by transforming into an energy form, you can't."

"Oh, now, that's sneaky."

"And cold-cocking me wasn't?"

"You're not going to hold that against me, are you?"

"Let's try this again," he said, ignoring her question. "Who are you, really?"

"Not this again . . . I've told you, right? I'm Kit."

"You've also said you're Sydney."

"I am."

He stared at her for several moments. "So you're saying you're both Kit and Sydney?"

"You catch on quick, puppy. Not just a pretty face, are you?"

"Are you schizophrenic?"

"No."

"Then how can you be both Sydney and Kit?"

She rolled her eyes and giggled. "Come now, Bas the Hunter. Surely you've heard of aliases before."

"Ri-i-ight."

"Don't you think that this is a little extreme?" she questioned, holding up her bound hands.

"Nope."

"But I can't pet the puppy this way," she pouted.

Bas snorted, grasping her arm as he prepared to leap from the roof.

“So you *are* trying to kill me,” she said before he could jump.

He stopped abruptly and glowered at her. “What?”

“How am I supposed to jump when my hands are tied up?”

“You’re a cat. You’ll land on your feet.”

“Without my arms, I’ll lose my balance. Killing your quarry? Then where will you be?”

“And how do you know I haven’t changed my mind about killing you?”

She grinned. “You haven’t. Your tai-youkai wanted me alive, didn’t he?”

“That was before you decided to sucker-punch me.”

“Hardly a sucker-punch. You should have known that a murderer can’t be trusted.”

“Just move it, cat.”

“Well, if you’re supposed to bring me in alive, then you’ll be in trouble if I die when you drag me off the roof.”

He sighed and rolled his eyes as he pondered her not so subtle threat. With a frustrated grunt, he hefted her up over his shoulder and hopped off the roof before she could protest. As soon as he lit on the ground, he let her slip off his shoulder. She stumbled but managed to catch her balance as she shot him a fulminating glare; as she tried not to blush at the obvious insult.

“Move it, will you?”

Cheeks burning at the hunter’s brusque treatment, Sydnie narrowed her eyes as she glowered up at him. “I don’t think I will.”

“Suit yourself,” he growled as he reached for her again.

Sydnie stepped back in retreat and nearly stumbled over a large rock behind her. “I don’t think so.”

“Then *walk*.”

Seeing no way around the intolerable predicament, Sydnie stomped away with a heavy sigh. Bas fell in step beside her, deigning only to grunt and point when they reached the end of the block. She turned to the left, following the sidewalk that he'd indicated. *'I can't believe he's such a jerk!'* she fumed as her purse strap slid off her shoulder. The bag thumped against her knee as she continued to stride forward.

'Well, you can't really say you didn't earn that.'

'That's irrelevant. I thought he was nicer than that.'

'Nice? You want nice? You clocked him with your purse, Sydnie! It's a little late for 'nice', I think...'

The brush of his fingertips against her arm made her falter, and Sydnie stopped short, staring incredulously as Bas the Hunter clumsily pulled her purse strap up and let it fall on her shoulder again. "Thank you," she said before she could stop herself.

He shrugged and started walking again. "You got lead in that thing?"

She blinked as her gaze fell to her bag, and for a moment, she almost smiled. "Nope, bricks."

"I thought as much."

"I'm sorry I hit you," she muttered.

It was his turn to stop and stare at her, his eyes hidden in shadows. The chill breeze rippled through his hair, carrying an odd but inviting scent of wood and sun-dried grass. "Come on," he finally said, turning away from her as he moved on. "We're leaving first thing in the morning."

"Leaving? How?"

Bas sighed. "Not sure. I have to call my – the tai-youkai and ask him how he wants you brought in. If you really are Kit, then the human authorities are probably looking for you."

"Human authorities? You mean the cops? They don't frighten me."

Bas shook his head and snorted. "Yeah, well, we don't really need to mess with them if we don't have to, right?"

"We? Hmm . . . that has a nice ring to it . . ."

"There is no 'we', Sydnie. There's just me, and this 'me' is taking you back to Maine so you can plead your case to the tai-youkai."

"I'd rather eat dirt than talk to him," she quipped pleasantly.

"Ah, then it's a good idea that you don't get to choose. You're already scrawny enough. You look like a sack of wet cats, you know. Can't think that eating dirt would help that, in any case."

"A sack of—!" she sputtered indignantly, trying in vain to jerk her hands through the tight confines of the handcuffs. "Why, you—"

"Just move it, will you?" he grumbled. "I'm tired, and for some reason, my head feels like it's going to explode."

Snapping her mouth closed at the blatant reminder, Sydnie kept walking. She tried to catch the eyes of a passing group of teenagers, but they all seemed too busy to notice her plight. *'That's fine,'* she thought as she bit her lip and kept moving. *'I'll find a way to escape . . .'*

'Maybe you should go with him, Syd . . .'

'What?'

'Think about it: you need to get to New York City, right?'

Frowning as she realized the truth in that, Sydnie slowed her pace. *'Sure, but with him?'*

'Why not? At least you won't have to travel alone.'

'There's nothing wrong with being alone.'

'Of course not, but you know, at least you won't have to worry about getting there, or did you really think the hundred bucks you lifted off Richardson would get you all the way across the country?'

Sydnie grudgingly conceded the truth of that as she stole another glance at the hunter. Eyes shifting around as he scanned the street for trouble, he looked deep in thought.

'He'd just be a means to an end, right?'

Sydney's youkai voice laughed. '*... Sure, Syd. Sure ...*'

*Final Thought from Bas:
Bricks ...*

Chapter 4

The First Night

Bas sat in the overstuffed chair in the small hotel room and rubbed his forehead with a tired hand as he heaved a sigh and peeked up through his lashes at the cat-youkai perched on the double bed, rubbing her emancipated wrists.

"That's hardly a way to treat a lady," she pointed out, lips drawn down in a moue.

"All this from the girl who had no qualms about walloping me with her purse? I think not."

"Really . . . you don't think I should have just stood by and waited for you to handcuff me, do you?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that she should have done just that. "Of course not," he grumbled.

"And I apologized for hitting you."

"All right," he growled. "You've made your point."

She rolled her eyes as she brought her legs up, sitting on her knees with her hands planted on the tacky floral print coverlet, leaning forward as she regarded him curiously. "Where are you from, Bas the Hunter?"

"Does it matter?"

She shrugged. "No, not really . . . So, where?"

He sighed. "Maine."

"Ahh . . . Is it pretty there? Maine? I've seen pictures . . . postcards . . ."

"Sure."

"What are you doing?" she demanded as he reached for the telephone.

"I'm hungry," he said, measuring his words, struggling for a patience that he just didn't possess. "I'm going to order food."

"Food?" she echoed.

Bas sighed and shrugged. "Yes, food. You don't look like you've eaten a decent meal in – well, *ever*, and I'm starving."

Ordering two steaks with all the trimmings, a bottle of water for himself, and a glass of milk for Sydnie, he didn't look at her again until after he hung up the phone.

"Two steaks? You're really hungry," she commented.

He shot her a dark look. "One of them is for you."

"For me? But I'm not hungry . . ."

Bas stared at the frail girl and shook his head. '*Stubborn, prideful . . . she's starving, damn it! Look at her!*'

'*Then trick her,*' his youkai shot back calmly.

'*Trick her? How?*'

'*I don't know . . . find a way.*'

He sighed again. "Then don't eat it."

"I-I won't."

"Fine."

Flexing her claws, kneading the coverlet, Sydnie pursed her lips as her eyes darted around the room, scanning the corners, as though she were afraid that something was lurking in the semi-dark.

If he hadn't been so irritated when he'd turned on the lamps in the room, he'd have paid more attention to her. As it was, he'd ended up staring for several moments when he'd turned around only to come face to face with what he hadn't really expected. She looked completely different in the light . . .

He hadn't realized that her hair was so vibrant. While he had seen the deep auburn sheen of her hair, he hadn't realized that she had golden streaks running through it.

Catching the light, bathing her in a warm glow, her eyes seemed even more startling; darker, deeper, full of secrets that she guarded with jealous tenacity. Her body was thin – almost painfully so – making her seem even more delicate, vulnerable, and he supposed it was that impression that had caused him to let his guard down with her in the abandoned building.

She looked like the proverbial girl next door, not some deranged woman who had killed a man in cold blood.

She nearly jumped out of her skin when the curt knock sounded on the hotel room door. Bas stood up as Sydnie shrank back, eyes widening, pupils dilating. If he listened really close, he wondered if he would be able to hear her heart beating . . .

Holding the door open to admit the young man with the rolling cart, Bas waited patiently while he anchored the cart's wheels then slipped a tip into the waiter's hand before closing the door.

Strolling over to the cart as he caught the way Sydnie rose on her knees, lifting her chin and tipping her head back as she tried to see the food, Bas slowly, deliberately lifted the silver domes off the steaming plates of food. "Hmm, looks good," he remarked. Sydnie snorted but didn't comment. "You sure you don't want one?"

"I'll pass," she grumbled, sinking down on her heels.

"You positive?"

She forced herself to nod. "Uh huh."

"All right," he said with a defeated sigh. "Suit yourself."

Eyes shifting, watching him as he grabbed the bottle of water and returned to the comfort of the easy chair, Sydnie sat back, drawing her legs up, wrapping her arms around them as she dropped her chin on her knees.

Bas cut into his steak and ate in silence, ignoring the voice in his head that upbraided him for eating in front of someone who wasn't doing the same. Wrinkling his nose at the whisper that sounded entirely too much like his mother, Bas stifled a sigh and took his time chewing, peering up at Sydnie without lifting his head.

'Sebastian, I'm surprised at you! I know I taught you better than that . . .'

'Give me a break, Mom . . . She won't eat.'

'Good God, Bas! You're talking to your mom, and she isn't even here!'

'Hmm, well, blame it on her. If she hadn't whacked me upside the head, I wouldn't be hearing Mom's voice in my mind.'

'Oh, for the love of— Don't be stupid! Besides that, look at Sydney. She wants that food; you can see it in her eyes. Find a way to get past her pride, would you?'

Following the advice of his youkai, Bas nearly smiled at the wistful expression on the girl's face. Staring at the food as though she were willing it to move into her hands, he swallowed some water and cleared his throat. "You can have it if you want it," he coaxed almost gently.

"I-I'm not hungry," she stammered.

"All right, but . . . seems like a waste."

"What do you mean?"

Bas shrugged as he cut another bite and stuck it in his mouth. "I mean," he said around a mouthful of food, "It'll just be thrown away if you don't want it."

"Thrown away?" she echoed, looking entirely too outraged to credit. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?" he asked as he swallowed.

"Because," she shot back, cheeks pinking in indignation, "it's wasteful!"

"Well, I've got my food. I don't need that. Do me a favor, would you?"

Her eyes narrowed dangerously. "What's that?"

"Dump that milk in the bathroom sink. It'll be gross if you don't."

He saw it in her eyes, the wavering resolve as she frowned at the food on the cart. "Millions of people starving all over the world, and you're going to throw away food?" she grumbled.

He heaved a sigh and set his plate aside to cross his arms over his chest as he stared at her. "Listen, Sydney. I'm too damn tired to care about saving millions of people. If you want to do something about it, then eat it. If you do, then you won't have to feel bad about my wastefulness."

He didn't think she was going to comply. She scowled at him for what seemed like a full minute before slowly untangling her legs and cautiously approaching the cart. Moving in stilted, jerky motions like she was afraid that someone would swoop down and snatch the food out from under her nose she glanced around as her hand slipped under the plate and picked up the glass of milk before shooting him an inscrutable look before hurrying back to the bed.

They ate in silence. Bas didn't really taste his food, his attention too keen on the girl. She seemed a little clumsy with the steak knife. He caught her eye and shrugged offhandedly, gesturing at the knife with the one in his hand. "Would it be easier if you used your claws?"

Cheeks darkening as she quickly looked away, she stubbornly worked the utensil without comment.

'You embarrassed her, Bas,' his youkai pointed out.

'I didn't mean to . . . It probably would be easier for her to use her claws,' he mused.

'Still, you hurt her pride.'

'She's got more than enough pride, don't you think? One little comment about using her knife isn't going to crush her, is it?'

Interrupted from his thoughts as he watched Sydnie swallow the milk in a series of gulps without coming up for air, Bas sighed inwardly as he reached for the phone to order more.

"I don't need it," she said as he dropped the handset back into the cradle.

"Don't worry about it."

"But I don't want anything from you."

"I know."

"I have money," she offered grudgingly.

"Keep your money. I didn't ask for it."

"But—"

"It's just a meal, Sydnie. You look like you could use one."

That shut her up. Cheeks reddening as she stared at her empty plate, she slowly got to her feet and set it back on the cart before retreating to the bed again.

Bas stifled a sigh. It was going to be a long night . . .

"What are you reading?"

Bas didn't look up from the paper in his hand. "None of your business."

Sydnie scowled as she chewed the last bite of green beans. "Fine, fine . . . You're pretty grouchy."

"And you're pretty nosy."

"What do you expect? I'm a cat."

"Haven't you heard the old saying? 'Curiosity . . .'"

"Ah, but what a way to go . . . Anyway, is it important?"

Bas sighed and shot her a bored glare before tucking the paper back into the manila envelope and sticking it in his suitcase before snapping the locks and striding toward the bathroom.

Sydnie grabbed the empty milk glasses and carried them over to the table, pausing as she stared at the condiment packets strewn on the cart. Before she could think about it, she scooped up the packets of salt and pepper as well as the two foil packets with wet-naps inside. Hurrying over to grab her purse and ferret away the items, she scowled at her fingers as she quickly yanked on the zipper.

"What are you doing?"

Choking out a startled yelp, she whipped around, clutching her purse tightly. "Doing?"

Bas eyed her suspiciously, rocking back on his heels as he crossed his arms over his chest. "Yes, Sydnie. What are you doing?"

“Nothing.”

“Nothing,” he echoed dubiously.

“That’s right – nothing.”

“What’d you put in your purse?”

“My . . .? I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she scoffed.

Bas stared at her for another moment before tugging her purse out of her arms.

“What are you –? What do you think you’re doing? Who do you think you are? Give that back!” Sydnie hollered, trying in vain to retrieve her bag.

Ignoring her pleas, he unzipped it, holding it open to frown at the contents inside.

“Sugar . . . salt . . . pepper . . . ketchup? What the hell is all this?”

Sydnie snatched her purse out of his slack hands and retreated to the sanctuary of the bed, wrapping her arms around her purse as she glowered at the coverlet where she sat.

“Why do you have all that crap?”

Unable to fight back the deep blush that rode high in her cheeks, Sydnie refused to answer.

“I don’t get it, Sydnie. Do you need it?”

“You never know,” she grumbled. “I might.”

“You’ve got plastic silverware in there,” he pointed out.

“I might need it.”

“What? Do you live out of that bag of yours?”

Ducking her chin a little lower as she wondered just how this stranger – Bas the Hunter – could make her feel so stupid. “So what if I do?”

He sighed and shook his head before flopping into the chair once more. “Reminds me . . . I’ll take you by your place tomorrow.”

“My place? Why?”

Telegraphing her a look that stated quite plainly that he thought she was simply being stubborn, he tapped his claws on the armrest impatiently. "To get your things . . . your clothes."

"I don't need to go anywhere," she grumbled.

"Don't be stubborn. You need some clothes, and whatever else. Just pack light."

"I've got everything I need," she countered, wondering just why she was telling him anything at all.

"Sydnie—"

"Not everyone lives in a stupid apartment. What is it anyway, but a cage with a door?"

"So where do you live?" he asked almost cautiously.

Sydnie shrugged and lifted her chin defiantly. "Here . . . there . . . lots of places, really."

"You don't have a home?"

"Define 'home'."

"Don't be catty."

"*Mee-ow.*"

"I'm being serious."

She sighed, rolling her eyes as she zipped her bag and shoved it behind her back. "And you think I'm not?"

"What about your clothes?"

Flicking her claws to examine them, she jerked her head, indicating her bag. "All there."

"What?"

"I thought puppies had good hearing."

"What-fucking-ever, cat," he grumbled.

"Besides that, having too much stuff is overrated. Sooner or later, someone comes along and tries to take it."

". . . People stole your things?"

Sydney shrugged. "Well, it wasn't ever like I had much, anyway. Does it matter?"

He stared at her, eyes bright, searching. A flicker of some foreign emotion surfaced before she looked away. It wasn't pity, exactly, and for that, Sydney was thankful. She couldn't stand to be pitied . . . "I wasn't trying to steal your purse," he said quietly.

"Didn't your mother ever teach you that it's not polite to snoop in a lady's purse?"

"Didn't your mother ever teach you that it's not polite to smack someone upside the head with the same lady's purse?"

She smiled slightly at the belligerent expression on his face. "Touché, pretty boy. Careful, or I might start liking you."

"God forbid," he muttered, reclining in the chair as he propped his ankles on the dresser. "Go to sleep, will you? And don't make me handcuff you, okay?"

She almost argued that with him out of spite. Staring at the warm, clean bed, she bit her lip and stole another glance at the hunter. Eyes closed, completely relaxed, he almost looked like he was already asleep. She knew better, but still . . .

How long had it been, since she was comfortable enough to sleep well? Grimacing inwardly as she decided that she was far better off not answering, Sydney crawled under the covers and curled up on her side, purse nestled between her knees and her chest as she closed her eyes.

She'd figure out everything in the morning. It would all make more sense in the light of day . . .

Final Thought from Sydney:
Was the Purse-snatcher?

Chapter 5

Too Easy

Bas stifled a frustrated growl as he tapped his foot impatiently and tried to figure out just how to convince the irrational woman to comply. Arms crossed over her chest with a mulish scowl on her pretty features, she gazed around in a rather bored manner as she slowly lifted her eyes to him once more.

“Hurry up, will you? Just pick some clothes so we can get moving.”

“I don’t like anything in here,” she informed him.

“Seven outfits, Sydney.”

“Seven?”

“Yes, seven.”

“I told you, I don’t like the clothes here.”

Striding over to the nearest rack, Bas jerked down the first dress he saw. “This one will do,” he growled as he reached for another.

“I am *not* wearing that,” she warned as she glared at the floral print, knee-length dress.

“If you won’t pick out some clothes, then I will, and if I do, you probably won’t like them. Now get moving, will you? We should have been on the road hours ago.”

She opened her mouth to retort then snapped it closed as an entirely . . . *catty* grin surfaced on her face. “You haven’t been laid in awhile, have you?”

Unable to staunch the flow of blood that darkened his cheeks to a ruddy hue, Bas blinked and squeaked out something between an outraged squeal and a frustrated growl. “That is none of your business,” he grumbled as Sydney, wisely choking on her laughter, quickly turned away before she burst out laughing, right in his face.

‘*She’s got to be the single most impossible woman ever created,*’ he fumed, jamming the dress back onto the rack before pinning her with the fiercest glower he could muster —

entirely unsatisfactory since he could tell his face was still flushed. Between her outrageous line of questioning and her desire to challenge him at every turn, he figured that if it had been safe to fly back to Maine with her, he would have hustled her onto the first plane out . . .

Unfortunately, that really wasn't an option.

Worried that the human authorities were also searching for her, Cain had left explicit instructions that Bas was to drive back with her. "It would look suspicious," Cain had maintained this morning while Sydnie was in the bathroom, "if you were hightailing it back here. Better to take your time . . ."

"Take my time?" Bas echoed incredulously, glowering at the rumpled sheets that still smelled like the girl who had slept there. "Dad—"

"You're pretty good with people," Cain went on, ignoring his son's reluctance. "Maybe you can get her to talk."

"About what?"

"You said she told you that she killed Cal Richardson?"

"She did, but . . . I don't know. I don't believe her."

Cain didn't reply right away, and when he did, Bas grimaced. "So you like her?"

"It's not like that, Dad. It's just . . . call it gut instinct . . . she's not a murderer."

"Well, if you don't think she did it, do you think that you can get her to talk?"

"Thought that's why you wanted me to bring her in."

"It is, and I do. Since you'll be traveling with her, though, I thought maybe you could try to get something out of her."

Bas sighed, rubbing his eyes with a weary hand. "I can try."

"Okay. Call me in a couple of days. Let me know how it's going."

"Will do."

And he'd hung up just as Sydnie, wrapped in a thin hotel towel, came padding out of the bathroom, toweling her hair dry . . .

Of course, then she'd pitched a fit about going clothes shopping, but there was no way in hell Bas was letting her run around for God knew how long in skirts that barely covered her and shirts that revealed more than they concealed.

"I tell you what, puppy," Sydnie said, snapping Bas out of his recollections as she idly pushed hangers aside on a rack of skimpy summer dresses. "I'll humor you with the clothes if you'll humor me in return."

"Humor you?" he repeated dubiously. "And just how will I humor you?"

She shot him another catty grin before turning her attention back to the rack in front of her. "I think you need to get laid."

He closed his eyes for a moment, gritting his teeth together as he counted to twenty – then on to fifty for good measure. "I think you need to mind your own business."

"You said that you were taking me to Maine, right? That means that we'll be traveling together awhile, and if you're this grumpy now, I can just imagine how bad you'll be in a week or two. You need to get some ass; that's all there is to it."

He wasn't sure if he were more shocked that she was actually suggesting that she would help him find a willing girl or that she was able to discuss such things in a thoroughly nonchalant manner. Either way, it didn't bode well for him, and he snorted. "Yeah, my sex life is none of your concern."

"Do you even *have* a sex life, pretty boy?"

Taking the time to count to twenty again, Bas slowly shook his head. "I could have sworn I told you that it's none of your business."

"Relax, Bas the Hunter. It's not like I'm saying you have to jump into bed with me . . . I'm sure we can find someone you can handle . . . a *librarian* or something."

The color that rushed to his cheeks this time had more to do with anger than it did embarrassment. Bas could feel his jaw ticking and wondered if she were trying to nerve him on purpose. "Just pick out some clothes, Sydnie," he gritted out between his clenched teeth.

"Is this really necessary?" she asked with a sigh. "This all looks so . . . domestic."

Rolling his eyes at the disgust evident in her tone at the very idea of being 'domesticated', Bas shifted his jaw to the side, lips pursing as he reminded himself that he didn't dare yell at her in front of everyone in the store. "Look, it's cold where we're going. You'll be sorry if you don't have something warmer to wear."

A sudden scowl crossed her features, more of a thoughtful frown than a show of displeasure, and she slowly turned to regard him. "Bas?"

"What?"

"It snows there, doesn't it? In Maine?"

He frowned, too. "Snow? Yeah . . . 'course it does."

He wasn't sure how to interpret the strange glint that lit behind her sparkling green eyes. "I've never seen snow," she finally admitted, her voice soft, husky – caressing.

Mentally brushing aside the distinctly pleasant shiver that ran down his back as her voice flowed over him, Bas shrugged. "Guess it doesn't snow in LA."

"That'd be a crime, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah," he agreed, relaxing just a little. "You've never been out of LA before?"

Sydney pulled a short little wool sweater dress off the rack and held it in place with her chin as she stretched out her arm to measure the length of the sleeve. "Nope."

Bas' frown shifted into a thoughtful scowl. "Not ever?"

"Nope."

"The white one would be prettier on you," he commented absently.

She shot him a quick glance. "White stains too quickly."

"So just be careful not to spill on yourself."

Sydney stared at the sweater dress for a moment before casually slinging it over her arm. "Fine, but only because I'll get to tell you that I told you so when it gets ruined."

"Does it matter? I'm paying for it."

He regretted the words almost as quickly as they came out of his mouth. Sydnie's back stiffened and the tell-tale wash of color filtering into her cheeks told him before she spoke that he'd managed to offend her – again.

"I don't need your charity, pretty boy."

"It's not charity, Sydnie."

"Yeah, well, whatever you call it, I don't need it."

Grimacing, he watched as she jammed the sweater dress back onto the rack and stalked away. Bas stifled a frustrated growl and grabbed the abandoned dress before running after her, catching her arm to stop her. "How did that offend you?" he asked, careful to keep his voice down.

Her eyes were bright, scathing, as she slowly lifted her chin to glare at him. "I've taken care of myself for years. I don't need some puppy to come along and think that he can toss around a few bucks to make me forget that there really *isn't* anyone else I can depend on. Just step off, Bas the Hunter. I don't need you or your sympathy."

"I'd hardly call it sympathy, Sydnie. You make it damn near impossible to feel sorry for you."

Her only reply was the slightest narrowing of her eyes.

"Look, let's go pay for this so we can get moving, okay?"

She arched her eyebrows meaningfully but refused to speak. Heaving a frustrated sigh, Bas pulled her along toward the cash register.

"Let go," she grumbled as he stopped behind a few women standing in line at the only open cash register.

"Why?"

She made a face. "I need to use the bathroom."

He sighed again. On the one hand, he wasn't entirely sure he could trust her. On the other, she'd very likely make a scene if he didn't let her go. "You'll come right back?" he asked slowly.

"I'll *think* about it," she shot back.

"Sydney . . ."

"You really want to cause a scene about my going to the bathroom?"

He shook his head. "I'll trust you," he finally allowed. "Don't make me regret it."

Her answer was an insincere smile as he let go of her arm. He watched her walk away, disappearing in the aisles of merchandise until loud throat clearing behind him caught his attention. He was holding up the line.

'I think that was a mistake, Bas.'

Bas didn't reply as he handed over the dress and paid for it with cash. Following Sydney's lingering trail to the bathrooms, he sat on the bench to wait and sighed as he checked his watch with a scowl.

Two young women hurried past, murmuring to each other as they pushed into the bathroom. Bas' scowl darkened, and he tapped his foot impatiently.

Leaning forward, dangling the bag between his knees as he waited until well after the two women he'd seen go into the bathroom came out again.

'Hey, Bas . . .?'

'What?'

'You don't think . . .?'

He sighed, gaze darkening menacingly. *'Damn it . . .'*

"You'll come right back?"

"I'll think about it."

Before he could consider his actions, Bas shot to his feet. Two steps separated him from the women's bathroom. Stretching out his arm straight, he smacked the door open. It hit the white tile wall with a resounding thud that echoed in the otherwise empty room. Repeating the process at each of the five metal doors only verified what his nose already told him, and when he got to the last stall, he sighed, shaking his head, staring incredulously at the wide open frosted glass window. While it wasn't a big window, he

figured it really didn't have to be. As scrawny as Sydnie was, she could have easily slipped out of it, and, failing that, she could have even taken an energy form, if she were capable of it.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it,' he growled, stomping out of the bathroom and garnering disgusted looks from a few women who were walking into the bathroom as he was leaving. "Sorry," he muttered, cheeks pinking as he stormed past them. One said something in reply that Bas didn't catch. Knowing Sydnie, she had decided that it was as good a time as any to escape.

Running through the store as he berated himself for letting her go off by herself, Bas growled as the automatic doors slowed him down. Squeezing between the still-opening doors, he scanned the street when he reached the sidewalk, sniffing the air in the hope that she hadn't gotten that far.

'When I find her,' he fumed, catching the vaguest hint of her unmistakable scent on the shifting wind and setting off at a dead sprint, *'I swear to God I'm going to handcuff her. I don't care how much she pouts, damn it . . .'*

'What do you expect, Bas? It's not really like she's traveling with you by choice.'

'That doesn't matter! There's such a thing as courtesy . . . Sydnie, it seems, doesn't know what that is . . .'

'Oh, come on! Did you really think she was going to tell you what she was planning?'

'Not really,' he allowed, dashing around the side of the building. Sydnie was close; he could smell her. Hell, he could feel her aura, but she didn't seem to be moving.

Racing down the alley, he let his senses guide him. He didn't really see the slight alcove to the left. So intent on finding Sydnie that he didn't slow his gait at all, he was brought up short by a voice off to the side as he sprinted past.

"Going somewhere?"

"What the hell are you doing?" he barked, sliding to a halt as he rounded on the cat-youkai.

She uncrossed her legs and stood up slowly, smoothing the short black skirt over her thighs as she reshouldered her bag and sauntered over to him. "Just waiting for you," she quipped lightly.

Digging into his inner breast pocket with one hand as he locked his other around her wrist, he jerked her slightly to bring her closer as he tugged the handcuffs loose. Her eyes flared wide as she blinked at the contraption. She tried to step back, but couldn't escape.

"You can't put those on me!" she gasped, shaking her head, turning imploring green eyes up to meet his angry gaze.

"You wanna bet?" he growled, flicking his wrist to open the cuff.

"I never take a bet when I don't like the odds."

"So you're not completely stupid."

She winced as he snapped the first cuff around her imprisoned wrist. "Bas?"

"Quiet."

"But—"

"That means that you're supposed to shut up."

"But—"

"You're not shutting up."

"I wanted to tell you something—"

"Shutting up would mean that you're supposed to stop talking, wench."

"Wench?"

"Yeah, wench. Give me your other hand."

She snorted indelicately, making no bones about the idea that she wasn't about to hold out her hand to let him snap the other cuff onto her.

"Now."

"As if! And since you're so busy being a jerk, then what do I care if your shoe is untied?"

“What?” he echoed, shaking his head as he glanced up from the unlocked handcuff.

She rolled her eyes. “Your shoe is untied, Bas the Hunter.”

It was an automatic reaction, he figured. Glancing down at his feet, it took a moment for his mind to grasp that his shoes were most certainly not untied since he’d worn boots instead. The moment was all that Sydnie needed. Whipping around so quickly that he barely had time to react, she jerked her hand free and vaulted onto the building, wasting no time at all in taking off over the rooftop.

‘Damn it!’ he growled as he leapt after her. He couldn’t believe he’d fallen for such a stupid ploy as that. She was fast—almost too fast. Dropping off the far side of the building, Sydnie didn’t look back as she broke for the cover of the park.

‘I don’t think so,’ he thought grimly. Pushing off near the edge of the roof, he landed on the asphalt in the middle of the street and sprinted after the irrational cat.

Weaving in and out of the trees, Bas slowly closed in on her. Close enough to hear her harsh breathing, he closed the distance between them. She darted into the shadows created by the network of tree branches high overhead. She was wearing heels, he noted absently. How the hell much faster would she have been if she weren’t? He grimaced. He wasn’t sure he really wanted to know the answer to that . . .

She veered off to the left again, running deeper into the cover of the trees. If she kept it up, she just might be able to elude him, but every second that passed only served to irritate him that much more.

‘Come on, Bas! Don’t let that scrawny little cat get the better of you!’

‘Don’t you think . . . I’m trying to catch her?’ he grunted as he sped up a little more.

She broke through the trees and stopped abruptly. The rattle of a chain link fence echoed through Bas’ ears. The fence had been unremarkable in the blur of motion. Sydnie must not have realized that there was something to thwart her escape. She crouched to spring over the fence as Bas lunged at her. Catching her around the waist, he grimaced as his weight carried them both against the fence before springing back and falling to the ground.

She landed on top of him, her elbows sinking into his stomach as the air rushed out of his lungs. It was pure instinct that kept his arms locked around her, and when she started to struggle, he stilled her with a harsh growl.

"Let go, you damned oaf!" she hollered then squealed when Bas' arms tightened around her.

He didn't answer right away, taking a moment to regain his breath as well as the rapidly dwindling control over his soaring temper.

"I mean it! Let go!"

"Knock it off, Sydnie," he finally bit out, jaw clenched tight as she renewed her squirming attempt to escape.

"You're such a jerk!" she yelled, pushing against his chest, which only made him tighten his grip a little more. "Let go, let go, *let go!*"

"I'm a jerk? You're trying to run away, and you expect me to *let you?*"

"You're hurting me!"

Bas rolled his eyes and snorted. "Right. You think I don't know my own strength? I'm not hurting you, so knock it off, will you?"

Sydnie wrinkled her nose and scowled petulantly. "I don't like you."

"The feeling's mutual."

"You're an ass."

"And you're a brat."

"Stupid dog."

"Catty bitch."

"Let me go!"

"Over my dead body."

"That could be arranged."

He narrowed his gaze. "Just bring it."

She tried to lean away again. "I hate you."

Bas sighed but held her firmly. "Give up, Sydney. You're not getting away."

She didn't reply, but the mulish set to her mouth told him that she was far from finished in her plight to escape.

"Are you going to tell me just what crawled up your ass to make you decide to run away?"

She wiggled enough to pull her hand out from between their bodies and took her time regarding her claws with a bored affectation.

"I could lie here all day," he goaded, giving her a little squeeze to remind her that if he did, she would be, too.

"I have money," she grumbled as color stole into her cheeks. "I don't want anything from you – no clothes, no food . . . *nothing*."

He shook his head, scowling at the stubborn girl who refused to meet his gaze. "Is that what this is all about? You're mad because I wanted to buy you a few dresses?"

Her eyes were bright with obvious irritation, indignation that he would dare overstep his bounds with her, he supposed. "I don't need you. I don't *need* anyone. I've taken care of myself for years, you know. Why don't you just go back to wherever you came from and leave me alone?"

"I'd love to," he ground out. "I'm here to do a job. It's nothing personal, Sydney; just a job."

Sydney paused for a moment, her gaze darkening with a strange sort of melancholy. It was masked as quickly as it had appeared, and she relaxed, as though all the anger she'd been harboring had suddenly evaporated. "I didn't think there was anything else to it," she whispered.

'Does she have to look so sad?' he thought with an inward grimace. Sensing that she was done trying to escape, at least for now, Bas let his arms go slack though it was another moment before Sydney realized it and sat up.

He sat up too, staring at the handcuff that dangled from her limp wrist, and sighed. "If you swear that you won't try to escape, I'll take that off you."

"Not try to escape? For how long?"

Bas shook his head. "Until after you talk to the tai-youkai."

She shot him a quizzical glance that melted into a rather sad smile as she looked away, raising her gaze to the sky. "I can't promise that."

"It's all or nothing, Sydnie. I can't let you run off whenever you feel like it."

She thought that over and sighed. "How about if I just promise not to try to escape for the rest of the day?"

Bas nearly smiled as he slowly got to his feet and held out his hand to help her up. "I'll *think* about it."

Sydnie rolled her eyes but let him take her hand.

Final Thought from Bas:
... *Wench!*

Chapter 6

Curiosity Killed the Cat

"What are you reading?"

Bas sighed but didn't even glance up from the manila folder open in his hands.

"Something."

"Obvious, but still not a real answer."

"Something that's none of your business."

"Grumpy, aren't we, Mr. Puppy-Pants?"

That earned Sydnie a scathing glance before Bas returned his attention to the file once more.

"What's it about?"

"Research."

She blinked and sat up straighter, leaning forward from her perch on the end of the bed as she sat up and tried to see over the top of the folder. "Intriguing . . . so what are we researching?"

"We?" he echoed pointedly.

"Yes, 'we'."

"I could have sworn I just told you, it's none of your business."

"Incidentals, Bas." A sudden thought dawned on her, and she sat back, mouth rounding in a knowing 'oh'. "I see . . . it's me, isn't it? Let me see!"

"I don't think—"

"Hand it over," she demanded, wiggling her fingers as she held out her hand.

“It’s not about –”

“So you say; so you say . . . what else would you be researching, if not me?”

“Would you stop being a pain in my –?”

She hopped up and snatched the file out of his hands before retreating to the sanctuary of the bed as he growled in frustration and slowly stood up to retrieve the pilfered document.

“‘Name: Kit’,” she read before glancing at him. “Or Sydney . . . I prefer Kit.”

“Give it back, *Sydney* – what *is* your last name?”

She made a face and held out her hand to stave him back as she kept reading. “Mine? Taylor . . . ‘Age: unknown; rumored to be very young’.” She shifted her eyes toward the ceiling with a thoughtful scowl as she tapped the edge of the file against her chin. “Whoever does your research really sucks.”

“So how old are you?” he countered, crossing his arms over his chest, figuring that maybe he should see if he could get any of the answers out of her since she was obviously in the mood to chat.

“How old are *you*, puppy?”

Bas snorted. “If I tell you how old I am, will you tell me how old you are?”

“I don’t know . . . will you show me yours after that?”

“What?”

The catty grin resurfaced. “I’ll *think* about it.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m twenty-five.”

She seemed genuinely surprised at that. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know why. “Really? I’d have said younger.”

He wrinkled his nose. He figured it would have to be something like that. “Okay, now how old are you?”

“Twenty.”

He couldn't quite keep his eyebrows from shooting up at her nonchalant statement. "You're twenty?"

She peered up at him with a scowl, and slowly nodded. "Yes, twenty . . . at least, I think I'm twenty . . ." She shook her head and waved a hand dismissively. "Yes, I'm sure I'm twenty – pretty much."

Bas blinked and shook his head. "You *think* you're twenty?"

A barely discernible blush crept up her cheeks as Sydnie bit her lip and shrugged in a nonchalant manner. "Yeah, I think so . . . why?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"Does it matter? Age is irrelevant, don't you think?"

He shook his head again, sinking down onto the edge of the bed and gently catching her arm, forcing her to meet his gaze. "How could you not know how old you are?"

A momentary flicker of something . . . sadness? Regret? Fear? It was gone too quickly to discern, and Sydnie shrugged again. "No one really told me . . . at least that I can remember."

"Your mother or father –"

"Dead."

"Sisters or brothers?"

"None."

". . . Aunts or uncles . . .?"

"Get it through your thick head, pretty boy: when I said there was no one, I mean just that, all right?"

"Everyone has someone."

"No, they really don't."

"Sydnie . . ."

She grimaced and dropped the file, swinging her legs off the bed as she abruptly pulled away and shot to her feet. "Don't do that to me, Bas the Hunter. Don't you dare look at me with pity in your eyes."

Bas let his hand drop to the coverlet and sighed, turning his face away as color stole into his cheeks. "It's not . . . I don't pity you."

Sydney uttered a sound suspiciously like a frustrated growl, back stiff and proud as she deliberately strode across the room and sloshed ice water into a glass on the table. "I take care of myself, puppy. I don't need a mommy or a daddy to tuck me in at night. I don't need . . . I don't need *anyone*."

"Is that why you killed him? Cal Richardson? Because you didn't need him?"

She whipped around, her eyes sparkling dangerously as her pupils narrowed to tiny slits. 'Cat eyes,' he thought absently, refusing to look away as her skin blossomed in indignant color; as her youki crackled with the sudden surge of anger.

"You don't know a damn thing about Cal Richardson, do you? You don't know what a sick bastard he was . . . you have no idea what he was capable of."

Bas stood slowly, took a step toward her as she stepped back in retreat. "Did he hurt you? Is that what you're telling me?"

She swallowed hard, forcing her gaze away, her hands shaking so badly that water sloshed over the brim of the glass, spilled over her fingers and dripped onto the floor. "No one hurts me."

"Why'd you kill him, Sydney?" he asked softly, reaching out a tentative hand to take the glass before she dropped it.

She bit out a bitter chuckle—a sound devoid of humor, as dry as the autumn leaves skittering across the barren, brown earth. "It doesn't matter. I won't make excuses."

"It might matter," he argued. "It might matter a lot."

She sighed and shook her head slowly, sadly, rubbing her bare arms as though she were cold. "I . . . I'm going to take a bath," she said quietly.

He watched her go without a word, scowling as he tried to make sense of her riddles; of the things that she refused to acknowledge. She was paradox in motion, wasn't she? A walking mystery that eluded his reason.

'Just who is she?'

'I don't know, Bas, but I think . . .'

'Think what?'

'I think she's lonely. I think . . . I think she's tired of running.'

'That's ridiculous. Tired of running? She didn't kill Richardson that long ago—if she even really did do it.'

His youkai was silent as he retrieved the file off the bed and dropped it onto the table.
'You don't think she did it? She told you she did.'

'Sure, she said she did,' he agreed, *'but she's not a killer. She's not a murderer.'*

'Killing and murdering are two entirely different things, yes. Don't doubt for a second that she killed Cal Richardson even if you don't want to believe that she could be a murderer.'

'I'm not stupid,' he grumbled. *'I'm not a pup.'*

'You've underestimated her a few times now. You'd better stop that or she'll end up making you regret it.'

'Make me regret it, huh . . .'

Wincing when his cell phone rang, Bas snatched the black leather duster to rifle through the pockets for the digital device. "Hello?"

"Bas? How's it going?"

Letting out a deep breath at the sound of his father's voice Bas dropped into a chair and rubbed his temple with a weary hand. "It's fine."

"You sound . . . odd."

"Yeah, well . . ."

"Have you had any luck in getting any answers out of her?"

Bas rubbed a little harder. "Nothing that makes any sense."

"I see."

Shaking his head since he saw no way around telling Cain exactly what Sydnie had told him, he heaved a sigh and leaned to the side to make sure that the bathroom door was still closed. "She talks in riddles. She says she killed Richardson, but . . ."

"But you don't think so?"

"No, I believe her. I just think that there's more to it that she isn't saying."

Cain was quiet for a moment. "Do you think she'll tell you?"

"I don't know. She doesn't trust anyone, especially me."

"Can you get her to trust you?"

Bas sighed. "I can try."

"Sebastian . . . there's more to it than just trying. This girl . . . If she did kill Cal Richardson—if she did have a solid reason . . . I have to know."

"Understood," he replied. "Look, I have to go. She's taking a bath, but I'm not sure how long she'll be in there."

"All right," Cain agreed. "Keep in touch, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

Cain sighed. "And your mother sends her love."

Bas stared at the cell phone long after his father had hung up.

'He's catching hell over this entire situation.'

'Of course he is. Your father's never made any bones about hating Cal Richardson. If he's not careful, people will start thinking that he doesn't care that the man was murdered.'

'Yeah, well, you have bigger fish to fry, as it were.'

'Like what?'

'Like the fact that Sydnie isn't exactly the most forthcoming person with her secrets . . . Just how do you plan on getting answers out of her, anyway?'

A dull pounding erupted behind Bas' eyes, and he furiously rubbed them, trying to dispel the throb before it escalated into a full-blown headache.

Sydney's secrets . . .

He heaved a sigh, dropping his cell phone onto the table and leaning forward to cradle his temples in his fingertips. The image of her very real upset when he'd broached the subject of her family flashed through his mind, and he grimaced.

'That's a good question . . . damn it . . .'

'If you were smart, you'd get the hell away from him before he gets to you more than you've already let him.'

Sydney slouched lower in the cramped little tub and stretched out her toes to catch the handle of the hot water tap to shut it off. *'I haven't let him get to me . . . he's just a pretty boy—a puppy.'*

'A puppy? Come on, Sydney. He's older than you are.'

'Biologically, maybe, and I thought you agreed with me that age is irrelevant.'

'Be reasonable, will you? Whether you want to believe it or not, that man's dangerous.'

'He wouldn't hurt a fly. He's no hunter.'

'So you'd like to think. He must have the credentials. You might not like the tai-youkai, but even you know that there's no way that he'd send out a hunter who couldn't cut it.'

'Get a grip. It's not like I'm planning on running off with Bas the Hunter. I'm just trying to get to New York City—you should remember. It was your idea, wasn't it?'

'That was before,' her youkai maintained stubbornly as Sydney worked up a lather on a snowy white wash cloth.

'Before what?'

'You can't tell me you don't sense it. If you try, you'll be lying.'

'Dunno what you're talking about,' she grumbled, taking her time as she washed her arms, her shoulders.

'He's familiar.'

'Now who's being stupid? I think I'd have remembered if I'd met him before, don't you?'

'It has nothing to do with meeting him before, Syd. This is different — entirely different.'

'He's harmless. I'm just with him to get to New York City; that's all. Now shut up, will you? You're giving me a headache.'

'All right, fine. Answer one question, and I swear I'll shut up for the rest of the night.'

'... Okay.'

'If I'm so stupid... if I'm wrong... why are you telling him things?'

'I haven't told him anything important.'

'You've told him more than you've told anyone. In a couple days, he knows you better than anyone else has since K—'

'You've had your question,' she cut in, flopping back in the tub and submersing herself in the water to rinse the shampoo from her hair.

Her youkai sighed but grew quiet, and Sydnie pushed herself back up, setting against the back of the tub and slowly letting her eyes drift closed. It was nice, she had to admit. Feeling safe enough to take a long, relaxing bath was nice. How long had it been since she'd felt that way? She grimaced and squeezed her eyes closed for a moment before letting a soft sigh escape in the steam-fogged air. *'Maybe I'm better off, not answering that.'*

'Sydnie?'

Popping one eye open, as if she were looking for the owner of the voice only she could hear, Sydnie wrinkled her nose and braced herself for whatever her youkai was going to say. *'What?'*

'He's got really pretty eyes, doesn't he?'

Sinking a little lower in the tub, letting the vanilla scented bubbles cover her chin, Sydnie stared at the tile wall without actually seeing it. No, what she saw were a pair of

brilliant golden eyes touched with a softness, tinged with unmistakable curiosity . . . a little shiver ran down her spine, and she rubbed her arms as gooseflesh broke out over her skin.

Shaken out of her reverie by the faint sound of someone knocking on the hotel room door, Sydnie frowned and sat up, reaching for a towel to dry her face and arms as she slowly stood up.

She wrapped one of the towels around her body, tucking in the end to secure it, but grimaced as she turned to eye the clothes she'd just taken off. Both of her outfits were dirty. She normally just settled for baths – clothes and all in the pond at the park near the derelict building she called home – with whatever soap she'd managed to procure at the time. She washed herself and her clothing all at once, and while it wasn't really preferable, it was the only real alternative she had. Now the very thought of putting her clothes back on wasn't one she liked. While she could wash them out in the tub and wear them till they dried, she'd never been fond of trying to sleep in wet clothing, and she had a feeling that Bas the Hunter would complain about that, anyway.

Sydnie sighed, digging her change of clothes out of her purse before kneeling beside the tub and dumping her clothes into the still-warm water.

It didn't take long to scrub the two skirts, two shirts, and two pairs of panties she owned. Standing on her tiptoes, she hung the garments over the shower curtain rod and readjusted the towel. It really couldn't be helped, could it? Surely he'd understand . . .

'Oh, sure he will, Syd. Never mind that you had to go and act like a baby when he tried to get you to pick out more clothes earlier.'

'It was the principle,' she maintained as she wiped off the cloudy mirror with a hand towel before leaning her head to the side to run her fingers through her hair since she didn't have a brush, either. *'I don't want him to buy me things.'*

'Don't be so proud, Sydnie. He wasn't trying to offend you.'

'I thought you said you weren't going to talk the rest of the night?'

'Yes, well . . . and another thing . . . do you really think that wearing just a towel is a good idea?'

'What's wrong with the towel? It covers everything, doesn't it?'

'Sure, but the implication –'

'I could go out there naked . . .'

'The towel's fine,' her youkai blurted.

Sydney grinned as she opened the door.

Bas was standing at the window, holding the sheer curtain aside as he stared out at the night sky. The glow from the lamp on the nightstand cast him in a golden hue. Staring at his back, she smiled just a little, enjoying the moment of peace that would shatter the second either of them opened their mouths to speak. Not for the first time, the thought came to her, *'If I'd met him in another lifetime, things might have been so much different . . .'* Why did the thought make her feel so sad, so hopeless . . . so lonely?

"I didn't know what you wanted, so I just ordered us the same things," he said quietly without turning to look at her.

She glanced at the table and stared, swallowing hard as she took in the tall, frothy glass of milk standing beside what had to be her plate since the other glass was filled with soda. For some reason, that he had remembered something as basic as her affinity for milk . . . it scared the hell out of her.

Deliberately ignoring the food, Sydney sat on the foot of the bed, tucking her hands under her thighs as she scrunched up her shoulders and gathered her waning bravado. "I'm not hungry," she lied, tugging her hands free to wrap her arms over her stomach to staunch the rumbling inspired by the enticing aroma of the food.

"Oh, hell, Sydney, do you have to turn everything into a battle of wills?" he growled as he pushed himself away from the window and strode toward the table, hands jammed in his pockets as he stared at the floor. "I'm not your enemy, damn it."

"I beg to differ," she retorted stiffly.

Bas stopped and looked up, eyes bright, flashing, angry. They lit on her and flared wide as his mouth dropped open, as color shot into his cheeks. "I – you – wha – *Where the hell are your clothes?*" he bellowed, waving his hands in her direction.

She smiled sweetly, oddly calm in the face of Bas' tirade. "They're wet," she stated simply.

"They're . . .? What the hell did you do? Throw them in the tub?"

She crossed her knees and wrapped her hands around them. "No, silly . . . I washed them."

“Washed . . .?” Snapping his mouth closed tight, he looked like he was fighting for control of his soaring temper. He strode over to his bag, yanked the zipper open, and flung the first thing he laid hands on—a maroon colored tee-shirt—at her. “Wear that.”

She wrinkled her nose as she made a show of holding the shirt up and inspecting it carefully. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

“Hmm, yeah, well, this isn’t negotiable, Sydnie. Put it on. Now.”

“If it’s all the same to you, I don’t think we know each other well enough to start smelling like a couple. You’ll understand, I’m sure.”

“What I understand is that you’re obviously devil-spawn posing as a cat-youkai. Now get the fucking shirt on, Sydnie. I’m not joking.”

She tossed the shirt aside and slowly stood up, arching her back as she reached above her head to stretch. Bas’ loud gasp echoed in her head, and she quickly turned away to hide her amusement. “Relax, puppy. My clothes will be dry in an hour or two. I’ll get dressed when they are.”

He didn’t respond. Daring a peek over her shoulder, she couldn’t help but grin at the completely dumbstruck look on his face. If he realized he was gaping at her, she wasn’t certain. Pulling her hair over her shoulder as she turned to face him again, she ran her fingers through the length of it. “What’s the matter, pretty boy? Cat got your tongue?”

He opened and closed his mouth a few times. He didn’t make a sound.

Giggling softly, she sauntered toward him. His eyes flared a little wider, but he didn’t move away. So close that she could feel the raw heat radiating from his body, she slipped her hands between them, kneading the muscles hidden by the fabric of his shirt as she gazed up at him, issuing him a silent challenge. “You look a little shocked, Bas the Hunter. Is something wrong?”

He swallowed hard once, twice, blinking rapidly as he fought for a semblance of his composure. “S-Sydnie . . .”

“Yes?”

He closed his eyes against the husky quality in her reply. “Put the shirt on.”

“Scared of the little kitty?”

“Just . . . do it.”

Arching her eyebrows, she stepped back. “If you say so,” she countered, bringing her hand up to toy with the edge of the towel. “Are you sure?”

He finally realized what she was threatening. Closing the distance between them in one long stride, his hand shot out to stay hers, and he stifled a low growl. “Damn it . . .”

“What’s the matter? Haven’t you ever seen a naked woman before?”

Violent color blossomed in his cheeks. He jerked her hand away from the towel, gaze burning her as she bravely – or was it stupidly – stubbornly stood her ground. “What do you want, Sydney?”

“What makes you think I want something?”

He narrowed his eyes and snorted. “Last I checked you could barely tolerate me. That would mean that all of this is just an act, so why don’t you forego the dramatics and just tell me what it is you’re after?”

“I tolerate you, puppy,” she said, letting her eyes travel up and down his chest. “My clothes were dirty, so I washed them. That’s all. Now aren’t you ashamed? You really *are* a dog, aren’t you? Did you think that I made up the story about my clothes just so I could parade around in front of you in a towel?”

He let go of her hand and stomped over to the table. “Whatever.”

She laughed. “Rest assured, Bas the Hunter . . . if I wanted to flash you, I wouldn’t make up a lame story like that. I’d just do it.”

“Eat your food before it gets cold,” he grumbled.

Sydney retreated to her perch on the end of the bed once more, thoroughly enjoying the feeling of having beaten the hunter in a battle of wits. ‘*The game’s on, pretty boy . . .*’ she thought with a grin.

The grin widened when her youkai heaved a loud sigh.

Final Thought from Sydney:

Score one for Sydney! Bas the Hunter has met his match!

Chapter 7

Unsettling

"I seriously think you need to get laid."

Bas stopped short and swiveled his head to glower at Sydney. Unsure if her completely nonchalant attitude bothered him more than the current subject that she refused to drop, he slowly shook his head and ignored the urge to tell her to shut the hell up.

"This is a waste of money."

"Just pick one, and let's go," he growled.

Wrinkling her nose at the array of winter coats, Sydney shook her head and shrugged. "I don't need one, thanks."

Bas sighed and rubbed his cheek, counting to twenty in an effort to keep control over his temper. "You might not now, but you will soon enough. Pick one, or I swear to God I will, and if I do, then I doubt you'll like it. You'll *wear* it, even if I have to put it on you, myself, but you won't *like* it."

"Awfully good at tossing around the threats, aren't you, puppy? I'm youkai, or did you forget?"

"So?"

"So I don't get cold."

"My ass."

"And I don't need you to buy a coat for me."

"Humor me."

Her hand dropped away from the rack of coats as she slowly turned to eye him. Arms crossed over his chest, he blanked his features as he stared over the women's department without meeting Sydney's gaze. "You've been in a bad mood since this morning," she remarked, her lips twitching as a little smirk formed.

"Yeah, that tends to happen when I wake up with someone staring me down," he growled.

Sydney laughed before turning her attention back to the coats once more.

He couldn't understand her; not one damn thing about her. Most of the time, she acted like she couldn't stand him; as though she thought he was a stupid little puppy. The rest of the time? He straightened his back and told himself that she was trying to irritate him and that reacting wouldn't do him any good.

The rest of the time, she confused the hell out of him.

He'd fallen asleep in a chair after sitting up half the night, wondering if he was being foolish to leave her out of the handcuffs. Waking up this morning with the oddest feeling that someone was staring at him, he'd opened his eyes only to find her perched on the edge of the bed, clutching the coverlet in her hands as she leaned forward, eyes trained on his face and the most curious expression on her face. If she realized that he'd opened his eyes, he wasn't certain, but she'd continued to sit there for several minutes, staring at him without blinking, her gaze curious, almost fascinated . . .

"What are you staring at, cat?" he demanded, sitting up and pushing the thin white blanket aside. He wasn't sure where the blanket had come from. He hadn't had it before he sat down.

She snapped out of her reverie, color rising in her cheeks as she deliberately stood up, arched her back, and stretched as a wry little smirk surfaced on her features. "Don't be silly, Bas the Hunter. I was just checking to see if you were dead."

"Wishful thinking, kitty," he grumbled, tossing the blanket onto the bed and just missing Sydney.

She blinked at it before shifting her gaze back to him, her eyes brightening as the smirk widened into a smile. "Do you always wake up crabby?"

"You'd be crabby, too, if you'd spent the night sitting up in that chair."

He regretted the words about the moment they were out of his mouth. Back stiffening as she snatched up the blanket and shook it out, he could tell that he'd offended her yet again, only this time, he wasn't certain how.

"Hurry it up, will you?" he growled, shaking off the memory as the store came back into focus again.

"What's the rush?" she countered, pushing hangers back and forth but not bothering to pull any of the coats off the rack.

Bas sighed. "We were supposed to be on the road two days ago, Sydney, that's what."

"Oh, that? Incidentals, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think."

Her answer was a mocking stare, her eyebrows arched as an impish smile taunted him. "You said a mouthful."

"I don't feel like arguing with you. Just pick a coat, okay?"

"I don't like them," she complained, stepping away from the rack and slowly shaking her head.

Bas regarded Sydney for several long seconds before snatching a coat off the rack, grabbing her hand, and dragging her toward the cash register. "Good enough."

"But—"

"You weren't picking one, and I warned you."

"Will you—?"

"Nope."

She heaved a sigh. "*Really* need to get laid," she mumbled.

"Listen, cat—" he cut in, cheeks flaming.

"Are you always such a grouch?"

"Just when cats piss me off."

"Aw, but this kitty *loves* the puppy."

"Ri-i-i-ight."

"Just think, Bas . . ." she began, her eyes narrowing into little slits as her smile widened to Cheshire cat-like proportions. Whatever was on her mind, he wasn't sure he wanted to hear it.

He stifled a groan, cheeks heating even more. "Sydney."

"You could have your own personal . . ."

He groaned. "Don't say it," he warned, absolutely positive that he didn't want to hear whatever she was about to say.

"Private—"

"I'm warning you."

"*Pussy.*"

The hot color that he'd been struggling to hold back exploded in brilliant Technicolor in his cheeks, and Bas tightened his grip on her arm and propelled her forward as Sydney's soft laughter taunted him.

"What's the matter, Bas? Don't like the allusion?"

"Allusion? Cat . . ."

She ran around him, planting her hands in the center of his chest as she positively beamed up at him. "Hmm?"

He swallowed hard, all too aware of just how beautiful the elusive youkai really was. Green eyes glowing as she gazed at him, she smiled at him, cheeks kissed with a soft pink flush, she laughed softly before leaning up on her toes to lick his cheek. "S-Sydney . . ."

She giggled, cupping his cheek in her free hand. "Yes?"

He cleared his throat and knocked her hand away. "Come on."

"I thought puppies were playful," she pointed out with a melodramatic shake of her head.

"Maybe they are," he grumbled, slapping the coat onto the counter. "Too bad I'm not one."

"You're not? Are you sure?"

"Seventy-five dollars and thirty-nine cents."

"That's highway robbery," Sydnie informed him indignantly.

"Shut up, Sydnie."

"Mee-ow."

Bas sighed, rolling his eyes as he dug a hundred dollar bill out of his pocket and dropped it on the counter. Swiping up the bag without waiting for his change or for the receipt, he grabbed Sydnie's hand again and hustled her toward the exit.

"You didn't wait for your change," she pointed out.

"Acceptable loss."

"Are you so rich you can toss money around like it's nothing?"

"I don't think it's nothing," he said with a weary sigh. "I just didn't feel like standing around, waiting for you to say something else completely outrageous." He wiped his cheek on his shoulder. "And no more licking."

"I don't like that coat," she told him, her eyes darkening as she slowly shook her head.

"At this point, I don't really give a rat's ass, what you like and don't like."

"You're really not very nice, are you?"

Bas pulled her into a small drug store and jerked his head toward the hygiene products. "Need anything? Deodorant . . . toothbrush . . . whatever?"

She opened her mouth, probably to tell him that she didn't want or need a single thing from him, but she stopped, a perplexed look on her face, as if she were trying to decide if she weren't biting off her nose to spite her face. "I have money of my own," she said grudgingly. "I'll buy my own toothpaste . . . and I don't need deodorant because I *don't* stink."

"I just bought a coat for you that cost a helluva lot more than a few measly toiletries, Sydnie. Just pick out what you want, and let's go, okay?"

She smiled tightly and offered a nonchalant shrug. "I'll buy my own things."

Rubbing his forehead, he nodded. "Fine. Whatever. Just move it."

She shot him a glower before turning on her heel and stalking away, back straight and proud, the cloak of thick auburn hair cascading down her back as she moved, her body projecting an easy grace, a feline dexterity, a sense of subtle refinement. Bas watched her for a moment, the barest trace of a smile breaking over his features as he watched her haughty retreat. What was it about her that set him on edge? More than her penchant for saying things that could only be construed as intentionally outrageous, there was something about Sydney that spoke to him without the need for words.

'Oh, awesome . . . I'm losing my mind.'

'Ehh, she's not so bad, Bas. Give her a break. It's not really as though she's coming along with you for the fun of it.'

'Well, no. I didn't think that she was.'

'And she's just trying to test her boundaries – trying to see how far she can push you before you snap.'

'Snap? I'm well past snapping. I'm ready to throttle her . . .'

'Because she unsettles you? Come on. You're the next tai-youkai. You think your father ever got that rattled by your mother?'

Bas snorted, knowing very well that the one person on earth who could 'rattle' Cain Zelig was, in fact, Bas' sweet little mother, Gin.

'Okay, bad analogy. Just think about it, though . . . She's keeps you on your toes; that's all. She's not all bad, and you know it.'

'Yeah, you're not helping . . .'

'Give her another chance. Who knows? You might like her.'

He wasn't sure if he'd go that far, but Bas finally nodded. *'All right, fine. One more, but I swear to God, if she . . . licks me again . . .'*

His youkai laughed. *'That wasn't so bad.'*

'The hell it wasn't.'

'You didn't like it because you didn't know how to take it.'

'She licked me! That has to be unsanitary . . .'

'Unsanitary? A hot as hell woman does something as personal as lick you, and all you can say is that it has to be unsanitary? Good God, Bas . . . you're a lost cause.'

Bas wrinkled his nose and tried not to blush as he looked around to find Sydnie. She grinned, sauntering toward him, and as she approached, he noticed two things. Firstly, she hadn't picked out anything that she might need for the trip. Secondly, she held a slip of paper in between her first and middle fingers. Narrowing his gaze on the suspect paper, he wasn't sure he wanted to know just what so obviously amused her now.

"How much do you love me, Bas the Hunter?" she gushed as she linked her arm through his.

"What did you do?" he asked, ignoring the sinking feeling in his gut that told him that he was better off not asking that particular question.

She grinned, eyes shining with mischief as deep dimples dipped into her cheeks, as his heart skipped a beat. Unable to think as precious seconds ticked away, he blinked in shock, in surprise as he realized somewhere in his Sydnie-clouded mind that this girl—woman—enigma . . . she was far more dangerous than he could have possibly imagined.

"See that girl?" she asked, tugging on his arm and pointing with the fingers that still held the slip of paper.

Bas slowly lifted his gaze, following the direction of Sydnie's outstretched hand. A tall blonde near the wall of coolers smiled timidly at him, raising her hand to wiggle her fingers. He scowled but lifted a hand to return the greeting. The girl giggled and whispered something to her friend. Sydnie tugged on Bas' arm again, and he shot her a sidelong glance. "What did you do?" he repeated, his tone cautious, almost reluctant.

She laughed. "I told you, puppy . . . you need to get laid."

He groaned.

"She looks easy enough, don't you think? Not easy in a dirty way, but, you know: loose."

The groan escalated into a low growl as disbelief gave way to irritation.

"Her name is Buffy, if you can feature that . . . Total sex-kitten, if you ask me. I wonder what her parents were thinking . . . I mean, what are the odds that she will ever find gainful employment with a name like that, right?"

"Sydnie," he choked, hoping, praying, that he wasn't quite as red in the face as he suspected he was.

"Anyway, I figure she's a shoo-in, so to speak . . . Not even you can mess this up, pretty boy."

"Absolutely not," he snarled, grabbing Sydnie's arm and hustling her toward the doors.

"You should probably pick up a box of condoms," she went on, trying to turn around.

He slung an arm around her shoulders and shoved her forward. She stumbled and caught herself on his jacket, but her mood hadn't waned, and she laughed. "Don't you want it?" she asked, waving the paper under his nose as they stepped out of the store into the plaza.

He shot her his version of the 'We Are Not Amused' look and snatched the paper out of her fingertips. Scowl darkening as he read what had to be a phone number with the name 'Buffy' scrawled above it, he crumpled it into a tight little ball and tossed it to the side before grabbing Sydnie's upper arm and shoving her toward the mall exit.

"Bas . . ."

"If you value your hide, you won't say a fucking word to me right now," Bas bit out.

She sighed. "I was just trying to help you with your little problem," she pointed out a little too reasonably.

"I mean it, cat . . . be quiet."

"It's nothing to be ashamed of, you know. Sex is an integral part of a well-balanced psyche . . ."

"And just where did you hear bullshit like that?"

"Maervis," she answered simply, giving the name of a popular talk-show host-slash-renowned sex therapist.

Bas growled and propelled Sydnie toward the exit again.

“She said that if you don’t have sex, a part of you just sort of shrivels up and dies . . .”

“Damn it . . .”

“Care to guess which part, puppy?”

He stopped abruptly and swung around to face her, eyes blazing as he felt his skin shoot up in flames. Grabbing her arms and giving her a quick shake, he growled again when her smile only widened. “Stop it, Sydnie, I mean it! Just shut your pretty little mouth for *five* minutes!”

He glowered at her as her smile slowly disappeared. Blinking as she stared at him, she was speechless for once as a strange sort of brightness filtered into her eyes, and she nodded.

Pausing a moment to make sure that she’d gotten the message, he finally jerked his head in a curt nod, hands dropping away from her as he slammed open the mall doors and strode outside to the rental car.

Bas wasn’t sure what woke him. A dull thump . . . a muffled sob . . .

Sitting up in the chair where he’d fallen asleep and pushing the thin hotel stock blanket aside, he stumbled to his feet—they were tangled in the blanket—and he blinked in confusion as he slowly shifted his gaze around the small room.

The bed was rumpled where Sydnie had lain down. She wasn’t there. The bathroom door stood ajar, blackness oozing from the threshold like a hideous gaping maw. He could feel her close; he knew her aura. He could smell her, sense her . . . he just couldn’t *see* her.

Another soft sound . . . almost a whine; not quite a cry . . .

Scowling as he slowly shuffled toward the little alcove where the sinks stood outside the actual bathroom on the left, he glanced at the sliding panel doors of the closet on the right. He paused with his hands on the doorknobs and drew a deep breath.

He couldn’t see anything in the darkness. The light of a single lamp left burning near the windows cast deeper shadows, and in the blackness there was nothing but emptiness; the echo of shattered breathing, the dull patter of a broken heart. Bas narrowed his eyes, tried to discern a shape in the unfathomable blackness as the sorrow of her aura scalded him; the fear, the pain, the consuming sense of loneliness . . . Sydnie.

"No . . . Kit . . ." she whispered, her voice so soft that he had to strain to hear her. He could sense her upset as she whimpered.

Too dark, too deep, the hurt that she guarded so jealously radiated from her, wrapped around him like a silent entreaty. He could feel her movement, her body shaking somewhere in the shadows. Another soft cry made him wince, and without thinking, reacting on instinct, he lifted her into his arms, cradled her against his chest, clumsily patted her back to soothe her.

She didn't wake as she buried her face against his chest. Absently noting just now little she actually weighed, he winced as he uttered little sounds meant to comfort her. Slowly she calmed, relaxed in his arms. The frown that marred her features waned but didn't disappear completely. She looked so vulnerable, so soft, so different from the hellcat he had come to know. *'Who is she? Who is she really?'*

There were no answers, no whispers, no secrets. The bits and pieces that she'd told him only served to further his confusion. She spoke in riddles, answered in innuendo. Somewhere between the two lay the truth. Cain thought that Bas could get answers out of her? Bas sighed. He wasn't nearly as confident as his father.

Standing up without waking her, he carefully carried her to the bed. She whimpered when he laid her down, automatically curling into a little ball with her chin tucked into the cradle of her crossed arms.

He pulled the blanket up to her chin and smoothed her hair back gently, kneeling beside her. Studying every angle, every curve of her face, he watched her features contort as she moaned. He stroked her cheek with his knuckles, and marveled as the upset on her face faded. She seemed to scoot toward him, unconsciously seeking the acknowledgement that she wasn't alone.

She concealed so much behind her tough façade. He'd sensed that before, hadn't he? *'She's not a murderer; I know it . . . She might hide behind her pride; she might infuriate me to no end, but . . .'* Bas shook his head. *'It's all just an act, isn't it? Sydnie – the real Sydnie . . . I don't think she really is all that tough.'*

He finally stood up, his fingertips lingering on her cheek before he turned back toward the chair once more. Absently dragging the blanket over himself as he flopped down and leaned back, he didn't take his eyes off Sydnie for a very long time.

Final Thought from Bas:
Just who is she?

Chapter 8

Cain's Dilemma

"We want answers, Zelig," Jared Brantley demanded, settling back in his chair and shifting a glance around at his fellow generals.

Cain rubbed his eye and shrugged. "You know what I know, Jared. Bas has located her and is in the process of bringing her back for questioning."

"You sound as if you doubt that she murdered Cal Richardson," Martin Sanstrom, the general in charge of the west coast division of the North American faction, added.

"I never said that," Cain countered, dark blue eyes shifting to meet Martin's stare. "I think that it wouldn't be a bad idea to check into it a little more. By all accounts, this girl is young. I just wonder if there isn't more to the situation than we know so far."

Steve Vasquez – Mexico, and Marshall Billings – southern states – exchanged significant glances. Cain didn't miss it. "What?" he demanded, his tone sharper than he intended.

Marshall cleared his throat, steepling his fingertips together as he took a moment to figure out the best way to state his concerns. "Are you sure your . . . sense of fairness . . . isn't impaired by your own dislike for Cal Richardson?"

"Do you honestly believe that?" Cain challenged.

Steve leaned forward, holding out his hands to stave off the escalating argument. "Of course not, Zelig. No one in this room doubts your integrity."

"The fact is, I've heard grumbling," Marshall went on. "Cal Richardson was a powerful youkai – maybe the most powerful of those who aren't generals."

"His power was illusory at best," Cain cut in coldly. "Power over the weak isn't really power at all."

"Be that as it may," Ben Philips interrupted, "they have a point. Richardson was a bastard; we all knew that. He spent his lifetime saying that the reason he wasn't chosen as one of your generals was because you feared him. The faster we resolve this, the better."

Cain shook his head. "I'll not issue a hunt for a girl who might not actually have done anything wrong at all."

"She was the last one to see him alive," Jared pointed out. "The hotel staff working that night said that she accompanied him to his room."

"Which might account for why the girl ran, don't you think? I'd run like hell if I were the prime suspect in a murder case," Cain growled. "Anyway, Bas is bringing her in."

"When will she be here?" Steve demanded.

"She'll be here when she gets here," Cain said.

"I have a few questions for her," Jared added.

Cain shot him a dark look as he sat up straight and narrowed his eyes. "Yes, well, need I remind you? You're not the tai-youkai. I'll question her, and I'll tell you what she said. I am not asking your approval over my actions, because, to be quite honest, I don't need it. The office of the tai-youkai has never been a democracy, remember?"

Marshall shook his head and sighed. "The people deserve answers, Zelig. Mark my words: if this girl has killed once, she'll do it again."

"I'm not saying that she won't. I am saying that I just want to talk to her before I make a decision, one way or the other. I might not have liked Cal Richardson, but that doesn't mean that I'll ignore a murderer. Then again, we all know what he was capable of. If this girl had just cause, I won't sentence her to death, either."

The generals didn't respond to that. Whether they were satisfied with Cain's answers or if they simply didn't want to garner the wrath of the tai-youkai, Cain wasn't sure.

They filed out of the study, grumbling to each other without sparing Cain a second glance. He heard Gin's soft voice bidding the generals goodbye, and he heard the door close. Moments later, she poked her head into the room, offering him a compassionate smile. "Bad meeting?"

"Understatement," he grumbled, letting his face fall into the cup formed by his raised hands. "Sometimes being tai-youkai sucks – *really* sucks."

"Surely they can't blame you for wanting to make sure that what you decide is fair."

Cain held out his hand and shook his head. "Oh, they can, and they do . . ."

She stepped into the room and skittered over to his side, slipping her hand into his and letting him pull her into his lap. Nuzzling her hair, letting her scent soothe the frayed edges of his nerves, he couldn't help but smile at the woman who still looked so young . . . his mate, his world, his life.

"You've put a lot of trust in Sebastian," she mused, tangling her fingers in the long bronze ponytail that hung over Cain's shoulder.

"I know," he admitted.

"He won't let you down."

"I know that, too . . ." Cain scooped Gin up and stood, depositing her on her feet before stalking across the floor. "That's the thing, baby girl," he said. "It doesn't matter if he brings her back or not. If he succeeds in his hunt or even if he fails . . . Bas . . . Bas won't ever let me down. He's my *son*."

Gin's smile was bright though her lips trembled, her eyes filled with tears. "You're a good man, Cain Zelig, and your son is a good man, too."

Sydney's claws were literally embedded in the armrest mounted to the passenger side car door, and for once, the cat-youkai was completely silent. She'd been like that the entire time since early this morning when he'd finally managed to get her out of Los Angeles. She'd tried cajoling him into getting a room when they'd stopped for lunch just after they'd crossed the border between California and Arizona.

"You okay, Sydney?" he asked without taking his eyes off the road.

She didn't answer.

"Haven't you ever ridden in a car before?"

Her head jerked once: no.

"Really?"

He could feel her eyes penetrating her skull. "No."

"Not . . . ever?"

"A few times, when I was little," she replied. "Does it matter? I just don't like cars."

Bas flicked his wrist, glancing at his watch with a sigh. *'Only four in the afternoon . . . damn it . . .'* He shot her a quick glance. She was staring out the window, her golden skin pale under the California tan. He could only see a sliver of her face, but he couldn't mistake the absolute panic in her youki, either. "We can't stop yet," he told her, his tone almost apologetic. "We need to put in a few more hours of driving time."

She nodded slightly. Bas grimaced. They were closing in on gas station, and while they didn't need fuel, he knew that Sydnie desperately needed the break. He pulled up beside the only empty pump and killed the engine. "Need anything?"

Her hands were shaking as she fumbled with the handle. "No," she muttered, her voice barely above a whisper.

He reached across her and grasped the latch. "No running?"

"I'll think about it," she replied though her tone lacked much of her usual candor.

Bas nodded, figuring that was probably as good as he was likely to get, and pulled the lever to open the door. Sydnie stumbled out of the car, taking a moment to draw a deep breath before she squared her shoulders and slowly, deliberately, walked toward the gas station doors.

'How can she not have traveled in a car?'

'Is it really so hard to believe, Bas? She lived in LA, for God's sake, and she's youkai. She's probably never had to ride in one before.'

He frowned, drumming his claws against the steering wheel for a moment before opening his door and stepping onto the asphalt. Carefully standing so that the gas fumes were carried away from him, he started refueling and turned his face to the side.

The trill of his cell phone cut through him like a knife. Grimacing as he dug into the inner pocket of his black leather duster, he frowned as he flipped it open and hit the 'connect' button. "Hello?"

"Bas. Can you talk?"

Bas peered over his shoulder. He could see Sydnie through the window. She was looking at a shelf of generic truck stop knickknacks. "For a minute."

Cain Zelig's sigh was audible. "How's it going?"

"All right. We're on Interstate 10 . . . I'm hoping to reach New Mexico before we stop for the night, but I'm not so sure that'll happen . . ."

"Oh?"

"Sydnie . . . hates cars."

"Does she?"

Bas managed to unhook the nozzle and recap the gas tank one-handed. "Yeah, she does. Says she never rode in one before."

Cain digested that for a moment before speaking again. "Have you gotten any information out of her? Anything at all?"

"Not yet."

"Damn it."

"Why?"

"The generals are demanding answers. They want to know why nothing's been done as yet."

"Last I heard, the generals took orders from you; not the other way around," Bas remarked as he strode toward the station.

"Yeah, I reminded them of that. Anyway, I'm counting on you, Bas. You've told me that she isn't a murderer, and I trust your judgment. The only way to save her is to get her to talk."

"I'd love to, Dad," Bas grumbled. "It's not that easy. Getting straight answers out of her . . . well, it's damn near impossible."

"Trade stories with her. Maybe if you told her a little about yourself, you could get her to open up a little."

"What? You said not to tell anyone who I am."

"And I'm not telling you to tell her that, either. Just . . . you know . . . little things so she feels like she can trust you."

Bas sighed and rolled his eyes as he jerked the door open and strode inside. Sydnie had moved on to a small section of the store with an array of travel size toiletries and some other grooming items that travelers were notorious for forgetting. She pulled a hairbrush off the rack and stared at it for a moment before replacing the item and sauntering toward the check out counter. He frowned. She didn't appear to have anything to pay for . . .

"I don't know . . ."

"Just try, Bas. That's all I'm asking. I'd hate to order a hunt for someone who might have had just cause."

Bas rubbed his temple and nodded. Sydnie said something to the boy behind the counter and dug some money out of her purse as the boy retrieved a pack of cigarettes. She smiled sweetly and dropped the change into her purse before sauntering out of the store once more. Standing beside the car, she tapped the cigarette pack against the heel of her hand and dug one out of the pack, pausing to wave at him before lighting the end and exhaling a puff of smoke.

"All right," he agreed, wondering why such a simple gesture could make him want to smile. "I'll see what I can do."

"Keep me posted."

"Yes, sir."

Cain sighed again. "Thanks."

The line went dead, and Bas snapped the device closed. Striding over to grab a soda out of the glass cooler, he stopped and stared at the single serving sized bottles of milk lined up in a plastic rack in a cooler further down. He grabbed one and let the door slide closed with a dull thump before heading for the check out to pay for the drinks and the fuel, stopping along the way to nab the brush Sydnie had been eyeing and deliberately trying to keep from analyzing why he wanted to buy it for her. On impulse, he picked up two tacky little silver spoons with an enameled picture of a cactus and the word 'Arizona' emblazoned over it – one for his mother, who collected the cheesy keepsakes, and one for Sydnie – before heaving a sigh and hurrying over to the checkout before he could impulse-buy anything else for the crazy feline.

Sydnie ground out the butt of her cigarette under the spiked heel of the black stiletto shoe as Bas drew nearer. Tucking his soda under the arm that held her milk, he quickly

shoved the other items into his pocket. "Here, cat," he said, tossing the milk bottle to her.

She caught it and turned it over in her hands. "What's this, puppy?"

"Let me move the car, and we can go for a short walk."

Emerald eyes narrowing in suspicion, she nodded slowly as he ran around to the driver's side and got into the car. She stayed put while he moved the vehicle into one of the parking spaces beside the station. He climbed out of the car and waited as she wandered over. "Where are we going?" she asked, one deep auburn brow disappearing under her thick fringe of bangs.

"Just for a walk," he told her, twisting the cap off his soda and tossing it into a nearby trashcan. "Unless I'm mistaken, and you *want* to get right back into the car . . ."

"I didn't say that," she said as she glided toward him, a lazy grin twitching on her lips, her voice low, husky . . . almost a purr.

Bas stared at her for a moment before stuffing his hands into his pockets and jerking his head to indicate that she should follow him.

"Where are we?" she asked, falling into step beside him as she broke the seal on the milk container.

"Arizona."

She digested that as she tipped the drink to her lips. "Well, I knew that much, pretty boy . . . where, exactly, in Arizona are we?"

He snorted. "Pfft! Then you should reconsider the way you word things," he informed her but chuckled. "We're about sixty miles from Tucson."

"How much further do you want to go today?"

"New Mexico." He pulled the brush out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Here."

"Why'd you buy this?"

"You were looking at it, weren't you?" he grumbled.

Sydney made a face. "So?"

"So that's why I bought it."

"I don't want it."

"Then throw it away."

"But it's brand new."

"And I have one. Do you?"

Sydney didn't reply right away. "I make do."

"Oh, for the love of—"

"I could have bought my own," she pointed out.

"Yeah, you could have, but now you don't need to."

"Does money just grow on the trees for you?"

"What?"

She walked faster. "You toss it around like there's no tomorrow. I'm not jealous, mind you. I simply think you're incredibly wasteful."

"Oh, that's rich . . . Sydney, I'm not your enemy."

She stopped, her chin dropping as she drew a deep breath. "That's where you're wrong."

"Fine, fine . . . I swear I'll never buy you another brush again."

Her head snapped up, and Bas grimaced. "How much do I owe you for the milk?" she demanded.

Bas shot her a disbelieving look. "Nothing, Sydney."

He could sense the return of her legendary pride. It blew in on the crisp autumn air. "But—"

Rounding on her, glowering at her misplaced show of stubborn pride, Bas shook his head, held up his hand to silence her. "Why do you have to be so damn stubborn? It's just milk; that's all."

"I refuse to owe you, Bas the Hunter. I refuse to owe a single soul."

"Look," he said, raking his hand through his hair. "The tai-youkai gave explicit instructions that I was to bring you back. He didn't say a single thing about making you go without."

Her eyes flared wide, nostrils quivering, and he could sense the rage that spiked in her aura. "The tai-youkai? Fuck him. Fuck you both . . . I don't need a damn thing from either of you; not your pity, not your sympathy, and certainly not your milk."

"What is your problem with him? What did he ever do to you?"

"Nothing," she spat as indignant color blossomed in her cheeks. "Nothing at all."

"Really," he challenged, crossing his arms over his chest as he met her defiant glare with one of his own. "You sound like you hate the man."

"I do."

"Have you met him before?"

"Of course not!" she scoffed.

"Hmm, well, you can't very well hate someone you've never actually met."

"I can, and I do. Get over it, puppy."

She started to stomp away. Bas caught her arm and pulled her back. "Tell me why."

He didn't think she was going to answer. Eyes narrowing dangerously in an entirely feline way, she pursed her lips and shifted her gaze to the side. He loosened his grip but didn't let go. The sound of her voice—soft, silky—startled him. "I told you. He did nothing."

Bas shook his head, stifling the urge to growl at her incessant riddles. "How could you hate him if he didn't do anything?"

She finally looked back at him. Every line of her face was etched in fury. The wind whipped her hair into her face, her eyes, and she didn't blink. "It's easy. It's simple. I never said he didn't do *anything*. I said he did *nothing*. There's a huge difference."

“Hide behind your riddles, Sydnie, if they help you sleep at night, but then, you don’t sleep at night, do you?”

“What?”

Bas snorted. “Your nightmares. I’ve heard them. Tell me why I found you in the closet.”

She snapped her mouth closed, eyes darting away as a furious blush rose in her cheeks. “Was I?”

“Yeah, you were. Why?”

Sydnie shrugged, a thin smile backed by bravado and little else gracing her lips. “Maybe I was sleepwalking.”

“Maybe,” he agreed. “I don’t think you were. What were you hiding from?”

She rolled her eyes, uttered a terse laugh. “I don’t hide, Bas the Hunter.”

“God, you have got to be the most infuriating creature on earth!” he fumed, letting go of her arm and squeezing a fistful of air in his empty hand.

“Puppy . . .”

“What?” he snarled.

“Your shoe is untied.”

Bas erupted in a low growl. “If you think I’m going to fall for that line of shit again—”

“Whatever. You were warned.”

Careening around, she darted down the road. “Damn it!” he ground out. He started to sprint after her but stumbled, catching himself before he ended up face-first in the dirt. Glancing down as he gave chase, he ground his teeth together as his face exploded in a painful blush.

‘So they really are untied,’ his youkai commented, obviously amused by the predicament.

‘Shut up.’

‘That’s what you get for wearing sneakers today.’

Bas forced himself to run faster, stifling a groan as Sydnie veered off the road and neatly vaulted over a short wire fence. He followed suite, thankful that there was nowhere for the infuriating cat to hide. Launching himself at her, he tackled her, arms locking around her as he turned just before impact so that he took the brunt of the fall.

"Let go, you stupid dog!" she hollered, squirming for her freedom as she pushed against his chest.

"Oh, I will," he growled. Securing her with one arm, he dug the handcuffs from his pocket with his free hand, deftly flicking his wrist to open the gadget before slapping it around one of her slender wrists.

"No!"

"Yes," he countered, easily catching her other wrist and securing the cuff before shoving her off and sitting up to tie his shoe.

"I *hate* you!"

"Feeling's mutual!"

"Take these off me!"

Bas stood up and grabbed the short chain between her wrists, jerking her to her feet and dragging her back toward the road.

"Ouch!"

"Save it, Sydnie."

"You're an ass – a *complete* ass. I don't think I've ever met anyone who quite measures up to your level of assitude."

He kept walking, ignoring her tirade.

She stumbled. He yanked on the chain to keep her moving. "Tell me, Bas," she ground out.

"Tell you what, Sydnie?"

"Is Bas short for 'bastard'?"

He snorted but didn't stop. "Is Sydnie short for 'bitch'?"

"I swear, I'm never talking to you again, you mutt!"

Bas hefted her over his shoulder and jumped over the fence. He could only hope that she was being serious for once. . .

Final Thought from Sydnie:

I hate that dog!

Chapter 9

Battle Lines

“Hold out your hands.”

Sydney shot Bas a glare, uttered a low ‘hrumph’ and turned her attention back to the television screen.

He rolled his eyes, wiggling his fingers in a gesture meant to hurry her along. “Don’t be stubborn.”

She lifted the remote control between her bound hands and flipped through the stations until she found something that suited her: reruns of *Friends* on *Classic Comedy Central*.

“Knock it off, cat,” he growled, kneeling before her and tugging her hands toward him.

Bas turned the tiny key and pulled the cuff away when it sprang open. Sydney jerked her hand back, cradling it against her chest as he unlocked the second restraint. Grimacing at the bluish red that ringed her slender limbs, he held onto her left hand despite her resolve to pull away. He stifled a sigh. He’d smelled her blood just after they’d entered the Lordsburg, New Mexico city limits and stopped to eat at a small diner just inside town. At least, *he’d* eaten. She’d refused to let anyone see her bound wrists, and had opted instead to keep her hands in her lap under the table top. The only concession she’d made was to pull her glass of milk close enough so that she could reach the straw. He’d stopped at the first decent hotel he could find after that. Sydney hadn’t deigned to speak a single word to him since she’d announced that she was never speaking to him again. He wasn’t sure he wanted to know just why that bothered him, either.

Tiny lacerations oozed trace amounts of blood, and she sucked in a sharp breath when he gently rubbed his thumbs over the sensitive skin. *‘I left them on her too long . . . I should have known she’d never tell me if they hurt her . . . Way too proud for her own damn good . . .’* Leaning in close, he licked the wounds, the coppery tinge of her blood drawing a grimace that she – thankfully – didn’t see.

“B-Bas?” she stammered, trying to jerk her hands away. He held on, concentrating instead on cleaning her wounds on a purely instinctual level. “Wh-what are you doing?”

Bas blinked and glanced up, realizing a moment too late just what he had been doing. Dropping her wrists as he sat back on his heels, he turned his face away as he fought down an agonizing blush.

Sydney alternated as she rubbed her wrists, her cheeks nearly as pink as his.

"You should have told me that they were chafing you," he grumbled under his breath.

She snorted. "I told you they hurt."

Shoving himself off the floor, he stood up and stomped over to his suitcase. "Yeah, you did – in that loud, obnoxious way that meant they really didn't hurt at all – at the time."

He could feel her eyes boring in the back of his skull as he dug through the suitcase for clean clothes.

"If you hadn't been yanking me around like some sort of rag doll –"

Shaking his head as he stared up at the ceiling, Bas drew a deep breath and tried not to lose his temper. "You were trying to run away!"

"And just what was that a minute ago?"

"What was *what*?"

"You were *slobbering* all over me!"

"That – I – You – *I wasn't slobbering!*"

"Oh? Then what would you call it, puppy?"

"I was *cleaning* your wounds!"

"Why would you do that?" she hollered, rising on the bed, standing on her knees, arms crossed over her chest.

"I haven't a clue!"

"You should!"

"Why?"

"Because *you* did it to me!"

Bas threw his hands up at his sides and stomped toward the bathroom. "I'm taking a shower. If you're not here when I get out, I'll find you, and I'll stick you back in those handcuffs for the rest of the trip, so help me God!"

She grabbed a throw pillow off the bed and hurled it at him just as he slammed the door. "*Argh!*" she bellowed. Bas sighed.

He tossed his clothes onto the counter beside the sink and locked the door, wondering why it was that he always seemed to lose every last ounce of common sense he had whenever Sydnie was even remotely close.

'You're just upset that you inadvertently hurt her.'

'Oh, hell, aren't you dead yet?'

His youkai chuckled. *'Not by a long shot, Bas. Anyway, it's a set-up.'*

'A set-up?'

'Yeah . . . like a sting operation, and that girl . . . she's the one pulling the strings.'

'You make it sound as though she's the puppet master.'

'Maybe she is. Bas . . . your father told you, right? You have to be careful . . .'

'Careful? I'm being careful.'

'She's dangerous.'

'I can handle her. She's just a scared little kitty, trapped in a room full of rocking chairs.'

'Cute, cute . . . don't say I didn't warn you.'

Bas yanked the shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor, his eyes darkening as he sank down on the lid of the toilet and leaned forward, letting his face fall into his open hands. *'She's making me look like a fool,'* he fumed, wincing as the image of Sydnie's earnest expression, as her words whispered in his mind.

"Your shoes are untied . . ."

No wonder she didn't ever seem like she was taking him seriously. *'Hell, I wouldn't take me seriously,'* he thought with a grimace. *'Damn it . . .'*

He'd been trained to fight by the best of the best. He'd started his training with his father, and despite the fact that Cain Zelig wasn't really a fighter at heart, he was certainly no slouch. If push came to shove, he could take care of business. It was simply that Cain chose to try other ways, viewing fighting and violence as absolute last-resort. At nine, Bas had been sent to his grandfather, InuYasha, the hanyou of legend. Gruff and surly, what InuYasha lacked in people skills he more than made up for in his ability to fiercely protect those whom he considered his own. During the summers Bas had spent with his Japanese grandparents, he'd trained with his cousin, Morio and the future Japanese tai-youkai, Mamoruzen – better known as Gunnar – Inutaisho, Bas' second cousin.

Gunnar's mother, Sierra was originally from Chicago, and while her husband, Toga had insisted that his successor have a Japanese name, Sierra had complained that Mamoruzen was too difficult for her son to say. She'd started calling him 'Gunnar', and so had everyone else. At fifteen, both Gunnar and Bas had started alternating between being trained by Cain and being trained by Sesshoumaru Inutaisho, the current Japanese tai-youkai. It had cemented the friendship that extended beyond simply being second cousins, and the years of training had given Bas the skills necessary to protect himself and to defend his right to be the North American tai-youkai. The thing was, something about Sydnie constantly disarmed him . . .

'She's catty . . . she's clever . . . but I don't think she's as much of a fighter as she is an actress.'

'An actress, huh?'

'Think about it, Bas . . . she's not a murderess; you've said as much yourself, but she's tough, and she's got the art of escaping down to a science.'

'Whatever. It doesn't matter. The faster I get her back to Maine, the faster I'll be rid of her.'

'Don't forget the other stuff your father said. Someone needs to get the story out of her.'

'Yeah? Well, count me out. She hates me, and at the moment, I'm not too fond of her, either.'

'That's just your bruised ego talking.'

Bas kicked his shoes off and leaned down to tug at his socks. *'How do you figure?'*

'You're irritated because Sydnie didn't like your attention.'

'What? That's ridiculous! I don't care about that! I don't even know why I did that!' he blustered, face growing hot at the reminder of what he'd done.

'Don't you? Come on, Bas . . . You knew what you were doing on some level.'

Standing up to shed his jeans, Bas kicked them off and turned on the shower tap with a vicious jerk. *'Dunno what you're talking about.'*

'Keep telling yourself that. Maybe someday you'll believe it.'

Sydney sank down on the bed, staring at her wrists with a thoughtful frown. A delicious shiver prickled up her spine at the memory of Bas' touch. She didn't understand exactly what it meant, but the languor that seeped into her very bones made her swallow hard as she pressed her wrists to her chest. *'Why did he do that?'*

The stillness of the hotel room was broken only by the dull hiss of the running shower, and Sydney bit the side of her bottom lip. What was it about Bas the Hunter that spoke to her in a voice so quiet and yet so very powerful at the same time?

'He's nothing . . . just the means to an end, right?'

'Do you believe that?'

She glanced up at the television, and made a face, retrieving the remote control and turning up the volume. *'Yes, I do.'*

'He keeps you on your toes, Sydney. He does things for you. You might say you're independent and that you don't need anyone, but the fact is, you like that he takes care of you, even if it isn't a permanent thing.'

'I don't, and he doesn't. He doesn't do anything but yell at me.'

'Oh, and you don't do a thing to deserve that, do you?'

'That is completely irrelevant. What I do or don't do doesn't matter. Bas is the one who bullied me into coming along with him, and . . .' she trailed off as her frown deepened as she rubbed her wrists again. *'Why did he do that?'*

'I don't know. Why don't you ask him?'

Sydney snorted and scrambled off the bed. *'I think I will.'*

'Sydney . . . what are you doing?'

Rolling her eyes as she strode toward the closed bathroom door, she finally broke into a smile. *'Like you said, I'm going to ask him,'* she thought as she jiggled the doorknob.

'Locked . . . smart puppy . . .'

'I meant after he comes back out.'

'Procrastination is the root of all evil.'

'So you say, so you say . . .'

Kneeling down, she cocked her head to the side and licked her lips as she examined the lock. It was a simple hole in the middle of the knob—standard, if not somewhat cheap. One strategic poke later, and the knob twisted easily enough. *'Score one for the kitty . . .'*

'Your inability to wait is going to be the death of us.'

'If you didn't want me to go in, then you shouldn't have told me to ask him.'

Her youkai only heaved a sigh as she deftly turned the knob and strolled into the bathroom. "Bas, I was wondering—"

"Ah!" he hollered, "Sydney!"

She giggled. "Something the matter, puppy?"

"Get out!"

"In a minute."

He erupted in a menacing growl. "Will you get out of here?"

"I will; I will . . . Let me ask you a question first."

"You can ask me after I get done in here," he snarled.

Sydney heaved a melodramatic sigh and jerked the shower curtain aside. "Tell me—oh my . . ." Eyes rounding in wonder as her smile brightened, she stared at Bas' very naked, very wet backside. Glancing over his shoulder, face a deep shade of crimson, he

turned away from her a little more as he dropped the bar of soap and glowered at her, slapping the only thing available – the cheap, thin hotel washcloth – over his crotch, which was amusing since she couldn't see that side of him at all. Hair plastered to his head with the points of his ears peeking up through the tangled strands, the muted bronze was darker; made his eyes appear to glow brighter, fiercer. Muscles rippled under his skin . . . Wide shoulders tapered to a narrow waist . . . She couldn't help but gape at the cute little indentations just above his buttocks, and without a second thought, she reached out, giving one of his cheeks a firm squeeze.

He jerked away with a hiss, slamming against the wall. "Sydnie!" he snapped. "Get out of here!"

Uttering a shaky laugh, she forced her eyes to meet his. "You should walk around bare-assed more often," she goaded.

Bas blushed a little darker and reached back to yank the shower curtain closed. "Shut up, cat."

Sydnie pushed the curtain out of the way again. Bas caught it and tried to pull it closed once more. A moment later, the curtain gave with a loud ripping sound. Bas spared a moment to glare at Sydnie before stretching to nab the towel hanging over the rack.

"Need some help, Bas the Hunter?" she offered innocently.

He fumbled with the towel, trying to wrap it around his hips without allowing her any more of a view than she was already getting. "Damn it, Sydnie! Get the hell *out*, will you?"

"Not until I ask you –"

"*Now!*" he bellowed.

Sydnie started to reach out to touch his chest as he tucked the end of the towel in. "Oh, calm down! You shouldn't be ashamed of your body."

"I'm not ashamed of my body," he grumbled, shoving her hand away from his chest as he shut off the water and glared at her.

"You absolutely *should* consider running around without your clothes more often."

"Get the hell out of here, Sydnie, or I'll –"

"Get out?" she repeated with an innocent blink.

"Yes, damn it!" he snarled.

She broke into an enigmatic little grin. "If you say so, puppy . . . It's been a real slice."

Turning on her heel, she sauntered out of the bathroom, grabbing her purse off the end of the bed as she walked past, pausing long enough to slip on her stilettos before heading for the door.

'That was low, even for you, Syd.'

'He's the one who said that he wanted me to get out.'

'Getting out of the bathroom is one thing . . . he didn't mean for you to leave.'

'Then he should be more careful when choosing his words, don't you think?'

'Okay, but don't say I didn't warn you . . .'

'Yeah, yeah . . . hush, will you?' She grasped the doorknob and turned. 'Free as a bird . . . or in this case, a kitty . . .'

The hand that flashed past her head to slam the door made her gasp out loud as the doorknob slipped from her grip. Moments later, the rough jerk on her arm that brought her around and flush against a damp, hard body forced the breath out of her as she stared, transfixed, into the golden eyes ablaze with irritation. He gripped her biceps in his hands, tightly enough to keep her from bolting, but not nearly tight enough to hurt her. Her heart hammered against her ribcage, so loudly that she wondered vaguely whether or not he could hear it, too. "Fancy meeting you here, pretty boy . . . Anything I can do for you?"

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" he growled, jaws clenched so tightly that his cheeks bulged just a little.

She flashed him a grin full of more bravado than she was feeling and shrugged. "You told me to get out, remember?"

"You knew what I meant."

"Then you should reconsider the way you word things," she said, using his words against him.

"Don't play with me, Sydnie."

"You might like it, puppy."

"Damn it –"

Swallowing hard as she lifted her hand, running her index finger down the shallow vale in the center of his chest, she cleared her throat before she could find her voice. "You're still all wet, Bas the Hunter. If you don't dry off, you're going to catch a . . . cold."

He shook his head, eyes never leaving her face as his nostrils flared, as his eyes burned brighter.

"I could help you," she offered. Leaning toward him, pressing her hands against his damp skin, she flicked out her tongue, caught a droplet of water that was running down his chest. He gasped and jerked back but didn't relinquish his hold on her. She stepped forward and repeated the process again – more daringly this time; her tongue raking against his flesh. He uttered a ragged groan, closing his eyes for a moment before tightening his grip. Fingers digging into her arms, he didn't seem to notice, and Sydnie wasn't inclined to mention it, either. The heat in his stare burned her, and this time, Sydnie was the one who couldn't look away. She cleared her throat and pressed her lips together as he simply stared at her.

"D-don't . . . do that . . ."

"Don't do what?"

He grimaced, swallowing hard. "Don't . . . *lick* . . . me."

"Why not?"

"It's . . . it's . . . *unsanitary*."

She giggled. "No more unsanitary than you licking my wounds earlier."

He blinked as the florid blush deepened. "Sydnie . . ."

Slipping her arms around his neck, she stood on tiptoe, pulling his head down, her lips lingering so close to his that she could feel the moist heat of his breath. "Yes?"

Water dripped from his hair like rain on her cheeks. He stared at her, his expression an odd mix of hesitant fascination and unmistakable distrust. The conflicting emotions lent a brightness to his gaze that intensified as she licked away a droplet of moisture that trembled precariously on the edge of his upper lip.

"Stop . . ." he murmured, his tone more bemused than demanding.

"What's wrong, pretty boy? Frightened of a little . . . pussy?"

He flinched at her choice of wording. "I just . . . you should . . . Sydnie . . ."

"Hmm?"

His reply was cut off by a sharp hiss of breath when Sydnie nipped his chin. Pulling her closer, his muscles straining as he tried to resist her, Bas uttered a low growl as she let her hands trail along his shoulders; down his arms.

He squeezed his eyes closed as Sydnie stared, transfixed by the conflicting emotion that he just couldn't hide. "Stop," he demanded, his voice harsh despite the subtle hint of underlying longing. "Just . . . stop."

"Do you really want me to?"

His nod seemed more like an afterthought, and he cleared his throat, grimacing slightly as she let her claws drag along the skin of his sides, down his waist, down his hips, tracing along the edge of the towel as his muscles jumped under her inspection. Wincing, he let go of her arms only to grab her wrists, jerking them away from his body, her claw caught in the hem of the towel, and he growled as she tugged the end loose. Shoving her hands back, he grabbed the towel before it fell, stepping back as an infusion of heat and color surged under his skin. "Damn it, cat . . . just . . ." He trailed off as he backed away before turning to stride off toward the bathroom once more.

Sydnie's soft laughter filled the room, gaze trained on the sagging towel that barely covered his ass. "Need some help, puppy?"

He snorted but kept walking, slamming the bathroom door behind him.

Her laughter faded but her smile didn't. Sure, she'd known that he was strong. Of course she'd sensed as much. She just hadn't expected him to be put together quite so well; that was all . . . Bas the Hunter was just full of surprises, wasn't he?

The smile widened as a soft giggle escaped her. *'Well, well, well . . . what other surprises do you have for me, pretty boy?'*

She shoved herself away from the door and sauntered around the room, prowling, she supposed, like a feline. *'We'll just have to wait and see, won't we?'*

Bas dropped into the nearest chair by the table, studiously ignoring Sydney, who was sitting on the bed, legs tucked demurely to one side as she carefully examined her claws.

To add to his discomfort, it had only taken him a minute to figure out that his clothes were soaked. When the curtain had been pulled down, the errant spray had misted everything in the room, his clean clothes included. So he'd had to stomp right back out of the bathroom to dig more out of his bag, much to Sydney's undisguised amusement. Since all the towels were wet, too, he'd had to settle for the driest of them, which wasn't really dry at all. Damp skin worked against him, making his clothes cling to him uncomfortably, but he'd finally managed to get dressed, and by the time he'd stepped out of the bathroom, he'd almost wished that Sydney were gone. At least then he'd be able to relieve some of his aggressions by chasing her. In true Sydney form, though, she hadn't done any such thing.

'At least she's not laughing at you anymore,' his youkai pointed out reasonably.

'Aw, shut up, will you?'

'Okay, you're mad because you liked what she does to you. You just don't know what's in it for her.'

'I . . . I said to shut up.'

'Come on, Bas . . . think about it. Sydney never does anything without a reason. What do you suppose she's after?'

'Isn't it obvious? She's trying to kill me.'

'Don't be stupid.'

He sighed. *'She's just trying to get under my skin.'*

'Maybe she likes you.'

'Ri-i-i-ight . . .'

'Then ask her.'

'Like she'll give me a straight answer. She doesn't know the meaning of that.'

'Then maybe she's just playing with you. She's a cat, right?'

Deliberately ignoring the sarcasm in his youkai's voice, Bas snorted inwardly. *'That's exactly what she's doing. Damn it. She's just batting me around like a fucking mouse . . .'*

'Bas—'

"Are you going to ignore me all night, puppy?"

He stifled a growl. "That was the plan, yes."

"Why would you want to do that?"

"Look, Sydnie, I don't know what the hell you're trying to do, but you can knock it off. I'm here to do a job, not to entertain you. Got that?"

"You sound a little angry, Bas the Hunter . . . is something wrong?"

"Just stop, all right? Stop with the riddles and the innuendos . . . stop trying to fuck with me, okay?"

She sat back, leaning on her hands. "Fuck with you? Is that what you think I'm trying to do?"

"Aren't you?"

She sighed, lips turning down in a pout. "Maybe I'm finding a new respect for dogs."

"Sure, Sydnie." He shook his head and rubbed his forehead to stave back a rising headache. "I'm not a toy, okay, and I'm not stupid."

"What makes you believe that I think you're either of those things?"

"Come off it, cat. It's not like we're on a vacation here. I'm taking you to Maine. I'm taking you to the tai-youkai."

Her back stiffened at the mention of the tai-youkai. "That's right . . . that's right . . . how stupid of me. You don't really think I'd forgotten that, do you?"

"I don't know." He stood up and sighed, striding over to grab the room service menu from the caddy behind the telephone. "Just stay the hell away from me. I mean it."

She was silent for a moment. When she didn't respond, he shifted his gaze to the side, eyeing her cautiously. She sat back, mouth rounding in an 'oh' as her eyes lit with some sort of understanding that eluded Bas' comprehension. "I get it . . ."

"Get what?"

She waved her hand, curling her legs under her as she sat up and squared her shoulders. "You've got a bitch back home, don't you?"

"That's none of your b— yes," he blurted, face reddening as he tamped down the misplaced feeling of guilt that assailed him over the lie.

Blinking rapidly, she managed a stiff little smile as she slowly scooted off the bed. "I see."

Bas watched as Sydnie strolled over to his suitcase, hefted it onto the bureau, and deftly unfastened the locks. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

She didn't even spare him a glance, lifting the lid and carefully rummaging through it. "What's her name?" she asked, her tone carefully neutral. He couldn't see her face.

"Her name?"

She nodded as she pulled a neatly folded shirt and sniffed it. "Uh-huh."

His mind blanked as he tried to think of a name—*any* name—to appease the cat. "Mad-Madison," he said, latching onto the first female name that came to mind; the first female name that didn't actually belong to a family member. "What are you doing?"

Dropping the shirt on the short bureau, she reached for the next one, repeating the smelling process before answering. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

Bas stared as she continued sniffing through more of his clothes. "You're not going to smell anything in there."

She shot him a dark glower.

"No, I mean it. You're not."

"We'll see, puppy."

"Why do you care, Sydnie?"

"I don't."

"You don't, but you're sniffing all my things?"

She shot him a cursory glance as she lifted a pair of jeans to her nose. "That's right," she replied sweetly enough, her voice muffled by the coarse denim.

"You'd have a fit if I rifled through your purse."

"That's different," she shot back.

"How so?"

She dropped the jeans onto the pile of shirts and reached into the suitcase once more. "It just is."

Bas rolled his eyes and pushed her aside, scooping up his clothes and smashing them back into the suitcase again. "Enough, cat."

She hopped onto the lid of the suitcase after he'd fastened the clasps. "Is she youkai?"

He leaned back, staring at her, trying to figure out just what was going through her head. "Yes, she is."

"What kind of youkai?"

"Half pole cat – well, *mostly* pole cat. Her father is pole cat, anyway . . ."

"A pole cat?" Sydnie demanded, eyebrows disappearing under her thick fringe of bangs. "You're dating a *skunk*?"

Why did it have to sound even worse coming from Sydnie? Bas swatted her hip with the menu that he still held in his hand. "Move it."

She wrinkled her nose and leaned to the side, allowing him better access to her rear. "Care to try again?"

Bas rolled his eyes but couldn't stave back the blush that rose. "Just get off my suitcase . . . not that you'd hurt it since you're so fucking scrawny."

She opened and closed her mouth a few times as indignant color tinted her skin. "I'm not scrawny!" she gasped.

"You are," he countered mildly. "Disgustingly scrawny, actually . . ."

"*Disgustingly . . .?*" she sputtered.

Bas wrapped his hand around her upper arm and nodded at where his fingers overlapped themselves. "Scrawny," he stated again.

"I'm not scrawny," she gritted out, yanking her arm away from him. "I'm *sleek*. There's a *huge* difference, puppy."

He chuckled and leaned in toward her, his face no more than inches away from hers. "You're *scrawny*, cat—*pathetically* so. Get used to it."

She snorted, shoving him back and hopping off the suitcase before she stomped over to the bed and threw herself down on it in a huff. The bed barely trembled, and Bas tried not to laugh—and resisted the urge to point that out to her, too. "I'm from LA, pretty boy. Everyone's skinny in LA . . . have you seen most of the famous actresses? They're all underweight—in fact, they're probably more underweight than I am."

"They say the camera adds ten pounds," he agreed.

"See?"

"Sydnie?"

"What?"

"You're not on TV."

"So how . . . *chubby* . . . is your bitch?"

That effectively ended his amusement. Bas winced inwardly. "She's not chubby," he told her, "but she's not *scrawny*, either."

"Does she stink?"

Bas shot her a dark glower. "No, she doesn't."

"Well, she's a skunk."

"And that isn't even remotely funny."

"I think it's hilarious."

"Yeah, and you're bent, too."

"Are you sure you have a girlfriend?"

"Are you calling me a liar?"

"Oh, heavens no!" she said, her eyes wide with mock innocence. "I'm just wondering why you didn't mention her before, and you know what they say . . ."

He turned away, pinching the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes. "No, I don't. What do they say?"

"If it *looks* like a skunk . . ."

"Sydney . . ."

"And it *smells* like a skunk . . ."

"Cat . . ."

"Then it must *be* a skunk."

"Quiet."

"But you know, you don't smell anything like skunk, so that can only mean one of two things . . ."

Whipping around to pin her with as menacing a glower as he could muster, Bas planted his hands on his hips and narrowed his eyes. "Can we drop this?"

"Hmm, nice try, puppy . . ."

"I mean it."

"Either you're lying about having a bitch . . . or you haven't been very close to her . . ." Her expression brightened dramatically as she snapped her fingers and rolled onto her hands and knees, staring at Bas with undisguised amusement. "Is she frigid?"

Bas stifled a growl. "No!"

"Are you?"

"Will you just shut the hell up, Sydney? Just sit there . . . don't talk, don't think – don't do *anything!*"

She opened her mouth to argue.

He poked a finger at her. "Not . . . a . . . *thing.*"

She scowled at him, sitting up and crossing her arms over her chest. "For how long?"

"Knock it off! Just sit there while I order something for you to eat."

"I'm not hungry," she ground out.

"Well, too damn bad! You look like you're going to blow away if the wind picks up! If you weren't youkai, I'd swear you were anorexic."

She snapped her mouth closed and seemed to shrink back a little. Bas ignored the twinge of guilt that assailed him as he turned around and grabbed the phone. '*Irritating cat . . . I swear to God, she's trying to kill me . . .*'

Bas' youkai sighed.

Final Thought from Sydney:
... Scrawny ...?

Chapter 10

Truce

Bas made short work of ordering a meal along with a gallon of milk for Sydney and slouched into a chair, shaking out the newspaper and taking refuge behind it while he waited for her meal to be delivered. The relief he felt over her odd silence faded quickly enough, only to be replaced by distinct twinges of guilt over the lie as well as over the harshness of his words. Peering at her out of the corners of his eye, he scowled. Letting the newspaper slip as the pretense of inattention fell away, he watched Sydney.

Her eyes kept roaming over the room, coming to rest time and again on the tiny closet across from the bathroom. There was another small closet near the door, but that one didn't seem to interest her at all. *'Why?'* Bas wondered with a scowl. *'Why closets?'*

He'd found her in one the night she'd had the nightmare. Why would she do that?

He shook his head. The only person who could answer that was Sydney, and she certainly wasn't talking. His father's words came back to him, and he sighed.

"Yeah, I reminded them of that. Anyway, I'm counting on you, Bas. You've told me that she isn't a murderer, and I trust your judgment. The only way to save her is to get her to talk."

'Uh-huh, except we can't seem to talk at all.'

'Don't be so harsh . . . I mean, you've gotten some information out of her, right?'

'Some information? Like what?'

'She says she has no family to speak of.'

'That could be a lie.'

'Could be, sure. I don't think it is.'

'Oh? And what makes you the expert on this?'

'Think about it, Bas. If she had family, she certainly would have tried to get away, at least to tell them she's safe, wouldn't you think?'

'Not necessarily. She wouldn't put them in danger, would she?'

'And you've told her that she's just being brought in for questioning.'

He sighed. *'Okay, fine. She has no family. What else have 'we' learned?'*

'There's also the idea that for reasons she won't elaborate on, she hates your father.'

Bas snorted.

'Okay, not exactly your father . . . but she hates the tai-youkai.'

'There's not a lot of difference there.'

'There is. Cain is your father, and he's the tai-youkai, but the tai-youkai is not your father. You know the difference.'

'She hates the office of the tai-youkai, is what you mean.'

'Yes.'

'Good thing she doesn't know who I am, then. She already hates me enough.'

'That's the thing, Bas . . . I don't think she hates you, at all.'

'Uh-huh . . .'

'Seriously, I don't.'

'Okay, then I don't like her.'

'You do, too.'

'Oh?'

'Sure you do. If you didn't, why would you lie about having a girlfriend?'

'What do you mean, why? You heard her. She'd never leave me alone otherwise!'

'I think you like her.'

'I don't—'

'I think you need a reason to keep her away from you . . . at least, you think you do.'

'It's not—'

'There're only a few degrees of separation between love and hate, Bas, just so you know.'

Bas sighed and propped his head on his hand, watching as Sydnie's eyes darted to the closet once more.

'A few degrees of separation? That's a bunch of bullshit . . .'

She drew her legs up against her chest, wrapped her arms around her shins and rested her chin on her knees.

'Why does she always have to look so damn lonely?' he fumed, dropping the newspaper in a careless heap on the floor. So fragile . . . so delicate . . . and so very, very sad . . .

The knock on the door drew him out of his reverie, and Bas let out a deep breath as he heaved himself out of the chair and strode over to answer the door. The bellhop smiled as Bas stepped aside. "Evening, sir . . . miss."

Bas watched as the boy wheeled the cart past, digging into his pocket for a few dollars for a tip. Glancing up long enough to intercept the young man's bemusement as he stared at Sydnie, who was still sitting on the bed, Bas cleared his throat loudly and jerked his head toward the door. "Thank you," he grumbled, trying not to wonder just why the bellhop's ardent attention on Sydnie bothered him.

The boy blushed slightly and hurried back the way he'd come, pausing only long enough to take the money from Bas' hand before slipping past him. Bas watched him go, arms crossed over his chest, until he disappeared into the elevator. Moments later, Bas heard the door slide closed.

'Where the hell is she now?' he growled, scanning the room as he slowly shook his head. He could sense her youki near, and he knew that she hadn't tried to escape. Closing his eyes, he dragged a tired hand over his face and sighed. She was close . . . very close.

In his mind, he could see her, gazing at the closet.

'The closet . . .'

Pausing long enough to pour a glass of milk for the stubborn girl, he carried it over and slowly pushed open the doors. "Your food's here," he told her gently, kneeling down and holding the glass out toward her.

She glanced at the milk but made no move to take it. He'd have been surprised if she had. Setting it carefully on the floor, he pushed it toward her then sat back on his haunches. "How about you come out of the closet and eat?"

"I don't need it," she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

Bas nodded slowly. "I know you don't," he agreed. "Humor me, will you?"

"Why should I?" she asked listlessly.

"I'll get in trouble, you know," he teased, deciding to try a different tactic. "The tai-youkai might think I starved you, and then I'll catch seven kinds of hell."

"I told you, I don't need it."

He sighed. "Okay, okay . . . if you change your mind . . ."

"I won't."

Another inspiration hit him, and Bas scooted the milk a little closer to her. "I'll make you a deal, Sydnie."

That seemed to have gotten her attention. "What kind of deal?"

He shrugged and stood up. "If you eat your dinner, I'll give you something."

She wrinkled her nose, gaze narrowing in suspicion. Her aura seemed to close in around her, protecting her, he supposed. "I already told you, I—"

"—Don't need anything from me; I know." Bas stuffed his hands in his pockets and shrugged, fighting down the urge to blush as he concentrated instead on luring her out of the closet. "It's just something little. I thought you'd like it . . ."

"A comb to match the brush?" she grumbled.

Bas sighed. "No, Sydnie."

"What's it for, then?"

"Nothing. It's completely useless, actually."

"Useless? Why would you buy something useless?" she scoffed.

"I don't know. I thought you'd like it. If you don't want it, you can throw it away, but you can't have it until after you eat."

Her face contorted in a stubborn scowl. "I don't want it, puppy."

"That's fine. Do what you want."

He walked away, retrieving the newspaper and sat down with a quiet groan. Leafing through to find the sports section, he browsed the football scores and pretended to ignore Sydney.

"What . . . is it?" she asked.

He glanced over the top of the paper and bit his cheek to keep from grinning. She's crawled halfway out of the closet and was peering around the accordion-style doors, her gaze still suspicious but her eyes glowing with curiosity. "Dunno. Guess you have to eat before you find out, cat."

"I didn't say I *wanted* it," she shot back, cheeks pinking prettily as she scooted back into the closet just a little. "I just *wondered*."

"I know; I know . . . come on, Sydney."

She looked around slowly, searching for something. "I don't see it," she challenged.

"It's in my suitcase."

She snorted. "You're a liar, then."

"I am?"

"Yes . . . I looked in your suitcase, remember? I didn't see anything . . ."

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Maybe you didn't look in the right place."

She made a face but hesitantly crawled forward a few paces. "You're not lying?"

He shook his head again. "Nope."

"And it isn't useful? Not at all?"

"Not in the slightest."

She sat still, bit her lip. He was starting to think that she wasn't going to fall for it after all, but she slowly stood up and shuffled toward the table. "What's that?" she asked, nodding at the plate.

Bas glanced at it and shrugged. He'd avoided ordering her something that required a knife since he hated to see her stubbornly struggle with the utensil. "Beef tips and mushrooms . . . It's good. Try it."

"Beef tips?"

"Steak."

"I know what beef is."

"Just try it."

She reluctantly slipped into the chair and sniffed at the food. "Is it big or little?"

"Is what big or little?"

She carefully stabbed a mushroom with her fork. "The useless thing."

"Oh . . . it's little."

"Why would you buy something useless?" she asked grudgingly, lifting the mushroom to her lips and nibbling at it. She made a face and leaned the fork against the plate. "Those aren't good," she declared.

"Leave them if you don't like them. Just eat the steak . . . and the vegetables."

She cleared her throat. "But that's wasteful."

Bas stifled a sigh. "Fine . . . I'll eat them, then."

"You like mushrooms?"

"Yeah."

She made a face and glanced around uncomfortably.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I left my glass in the closet."

Bas stood up and retrieved the empty glass with a smirk. Glancing back toward Sydnie, he saw her sweep the condiment packets off the table. She peeked at him, but he turned away before she could see him watching. Sliding his eyes to the side, he watched her hurry over to stash the packets away in her purse before skittering back to her seat. He'd come to understand that the peculiar habit was more of a compulsion than anything else, and since she tended to get overly embarrassed about it, he tried to make sure that she didn't realize that he knew what she was doing.

He picked up the glass and sighed inwardly. Somehow he'd known that she'd drink the milk as soon as he turned his back. Detouring into the bathroom long enough to rise the glass out, he strode over and set the glass on the table. She watched as he carefully filled the glass then pushed it toward her, her expression grudgingly thankful. He hid his smile as he sat back down again. "There."

She blinked at the glass and shot him a quick glance. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She ate the steak and green beans without complaint. Bas stabbed mushrooms with his claw and ate those, too. Eight glasses of milk later, she sat back and stared at him expectantly. "Well?" she prompted.

He shook his head in mock dismay. "More milk?" he deadpanned.

She almost grinned. "The pitcher is empty."

"I can order more . . . or you can."

She made a face. "I don't like to use phones."

"All you have to do is dial nine-zero. That connects you to the front desk," he added.

"I don't need more milk."

Bas sighed and stood up, ambling over to his suitcase and unfastening the latches. "Do you *want* more?"

She twisted her hands together in her lap and scrunched up her shoulders. ". . . No."

He smiled wanly as he dug the present he'd picked up earlier out of the small compartment on the side of his suitcase. Without bothering to close it, he reached for the phone instead, calling down to order more milk as Sydnie turned to stare at him.

"Here."

Blinking, she leaned forward and peered at the small plastic case he held out to her. She reached out to touch it but jerked her hand back, as though she were afraid that he was going to yank it out from under her nose. She shot him a wary glance and leaned forward a little closer. "What is that?"

"It's a spoon, Sydnie."

She made a face. "I know that! Why did you buy me a spoon?"

Bas sighed and slipped the box onto the table before slouching down in his chair. "It's a souvenir; that's all, and a cheesy one at that."

She leaned to the side to stare at the spoon through the clear plastic case. "It's tiny."

"Yeah, well . . ." He shook his head. "I bought two of them. I don't know . . . I thought . . . you've never been out of Los Angeles, right? I thought you should have something to remember the trip."

She did a double take and unleashed a curt laugh. "Remember the trip? I'm going to be dead in the end. Awfully short memory, don't you think?"

Bas narrowed his gaze and crossed his ankles, settling deeper in his chair. "You're being taken in for questioning, Sydnie. Don't read more into it than that, all right?"

She cautiously reached out to touch the box then snatched it tight and brought it up under her nose. "Questioning. Right. For murder. Uh-huh."

"The tai-youkai wants to know why."

"Why, what?" she asked absently, tilting the box from side to side as she stared at the chintzy trinket.

"Why you killed Cal Richardson."

"Oh, so you finally believe me?"

"I believe you," he answered. "I also believe there's more to it than he was a 'bad man'."

"Why?" she challenged, green eyes flashing as she lifted her eyes to meet his.

"Because," he parried, standing up to answer the knock on the door, "you also said that you hate the tai-youkai, so that would make him a bad man in your book, too. Do you plan on killing him?"

Sydney wrinkled her nose. "No."

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

He took the pitcher from the bellhop and slipped a five dollar bill in the boy's hand before wordlessly shutting the door and taking his time, pouring milk into Sydney's glass.

"What do you do with this?" she asked, her attention on the spoon once more.

"Nothing . . . just look at it, I guess. I told you, right? It's not really useful."

She started to smile, her eyes glowing brightly. Just as suddenly as it began, it faded, and she glared at him as though she'd just realized something important. "You bought two of these?"

He nodded as he flopped back into his chair again. "Yes."

Her gaze narrowed on him as one deep auburn eyebrow arched. "Is the other one for your bitch?"

He grimaced inwardly. He'd forgotten about that . . . "Actually, if you must know, it's for my mother."

She blinked in surprise, the animosity dissipating as quickly as a spring storm on the ocean. "For . . . your . . . mother?"

'Oh, nice . . . way to go, Bas . . . You might not know much about girls, but do you really think that she's going to be flattered that you bought her the same thing you bought for your mom?'

'Shu-u-ut u-u-u-up!'

"Uh . . . yeah," he replied, cheeks pinking as he waited for her tirade to swing into full-gear.

“Your mom . . . likes these?”

He nodded, unable to meet Sydnie’s curious gaze. “Yeah . . . she . . . collects them. She’s got a huge collection of them . . . cheap ones . . . expensive ones . . . I’m babbling . . .”

“You . . . really bought . . . me . . . something you bought your mom?”

“Yeah, I know. It’s lame as hell. I’m sorry. If you don’t like it, I’ll just take it back and get you something else.”

Her reaction was almost violent. Bas blinked in shock as she smashed the small box against her chest with both hands, effectively sheltering it from view as she turned to the side as she uttered a territorial little growl – almost more of a hiss – and glowered at him. “You *can’t* take it back! You *gave* it to me! It’s *mine!*”

“I-w-y – You . . . *like* it?”

She swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes.”

“It’s just a stupid little spoon,” he protested weakly, still shaken by the vehemence in her reaction.

“It’s *my* stupid little spoon – and it isn’t *stupid*, at all.”

“Okay,” he agreed quickly, holding up his hands to show his surrender. “It’s yours, absolutely.”

“You can’t take it,” she warned him.

“I won’t,” he promised. “Sydnie . . .”

Satisfied that he wasn’t going to try to take it from her, she lowered her hands and stared at the spoon once more. “Hmm?”

“I’ll . . . I’ll buy you one in every state we travel through.”

She seemed almost happy and looked completely surprised. “Okay,” she agreed slowly.

Bas finally broke into a smile. “Why is it that you’ll accept the spoons but have a fit when I buy other stuff for you?”

Staring at him for a moment, her gaze friendly for once, she grinned shyly and shrugged, stroking the box with her delicate fingers. "That's simple," she replied, her smile widening. "It's useless . . . it's a gift."

"You could consider the other things to be gifts."

She shook her head and reached for her milk. "No . . . I don't *need* you, Bas the Hunter . . . but it's okay to accept a gift."

Final Thought from Bas:
Gifts, huh ...

Chapter 11

In the Dark

"So you grew up in Maine?"

Bas nodded as he glanced into the rearview mirror and turned down the radio. "Yep . . . on the ocean, even."

"Does it look the same as the Pacific?"

He shrugged. "Dunno. I can't say I noticed the Pacific when I was in LA . . . I had other things on my mind, you know."

She rolled her eyes at the blatant barb and dug around in the center console between the seats to select a different CD. "All your music is crap," she stated flatly, wrinkling her nose as she shuffled through the cases.

"Picky, aren't you, kitty?" he shot back. "Stop changing the CD every five minutes."

"Live with it, puppy. It keeps my mind off other stuff."

"Like what?"

"Like this infernal deathtrap you've locked me into."

"Relax. I'll have you know, I'm a very safe driver."

"Famous last words, pretty boy."

"Shut up and look at your spoons," he grumbled.

Sydney heaved a sigh and ejected the CD, carefully slipping it back into the case before opening the cover on the new selection. "When will we reach the Texas state line?"

Bas grimaced when the speakers erupted in very loud music and turned it down again before answering. "You'll be sorry if I end up deaf, Sydney, and it shouldn't take that long to reach the border."

He could feel her gaze penetrating his skull but didn't look to confirm it. "And you . . . you'll buy me another spoon?"

He grinned at the hopeful tone in her voice. "Yes, cat, I'll buy you another tacky-assed spoon."

Digging the two plastic-encased spoons from her purse, Sydnie sat back and stared at the trinkets.

"You can take those out of the boxes, you know," he informed her when she fell silent.

"I know."

"They sell wooden display racks," he went on. "Mom's got a few of them."

Sydnie didn't look away from her spoons. "Really?"

He kept his eyes on the road but nodded. "Yep. It's got built-in slots to hold the spoons for display."

"I'd have to take them out of the boxes, wouldn't I?"

"Well, yeah . . . don't like that idea, huh?"

Sydnie shrugged. "But they look so nice in the boxes."

"Then keep them in their boxes, if you'd rather."

She held up her spoons and examined them. "I'm not sure which one I like better . . . Arizona's is nice, with the cactus . . . but New Mexico's is interesting with the Indian . . . What do you think?"

Bas spared a glance at the spoons. "They're both nice. I don't really think one is better than the other . . ."

She considered that and nodded, slipping the spoons back into her purse with a happy little sigh. "I like them both, too," she declared.

The conversation seemed to die, and Sydnie bit her lip as she peeked out the window. To her surprise, Bas had stopped after a few hours' driving yesterday, citing a headache as the reason for his desire to call a halt to their journey. He'd spent the rest of the day walking around a mall with her, pointing out silly things and buying odd little treats for her to sample. So far she'd figured out that she liked soft pretzels with cheese sauce,

large sugar cookies, and vanilla ice cream, but she didn't care at all for saltwater taffy – even though Bas swore that it was 'great stuff'.

When they'd gotten into the car this morning, Bas had suggested that Sydnie pick out some music, which had effectively kept her from dwelling on the car, itself, and all the news reports she'd seen through store windows of lethal automobile accidents. It seemed as though there were at least five or six during the nightly news. Projected through the ten huge televisions in one store's windows, it seemed much more daunting . . .

She knew on some level that he was just trying to distract her from clawing at the door – she figured that he'd probably have to pay the rental company because of it but hadn't really been able to help herself, either. It still made her feel better, just to know that he was attempting to get her mind off of what she considered to be the most upsetting aspect of the trip.

The car slowed down, and Bas pulled it over beside the road before shutting off the engine and turning to look at her. "We're here."

She looked around and shook her head since he'd stopped in the middle of nowhere. "Here, where?"

Bas rolled his eyes and got out of the car, striding around it to open her door and pull her out by her hands. "Texas. See?"

She blinked, following the direction he was pointing in and smiled at the large stone monument that did, indeed, proclaim it to be Texas. "Looks like a tombstone," she quipped.

Bas shook his head but tugged her toward the hulking stone edifice. "Must you always think in terms of death, cat-girl?"

"I could climb this," she announced as she eyed it.

"In stilettos?"

"Sure."

"I've got to get you new shoes," he grumbled.

"These are fine," she retorted.

Bas stood back as Sydney leapt onto the top of the slate marker and sat down. "Be careful, Sydney."

She rolled over onto her stomach, feet kicked up in the air as she leaned forward to peer down at Bas. "Do I make you nervous?"

He grinned and shrugged, shielding his eyes from the mid-day sun. "Not at all."

A breeze stirred his hair, whipping it back from his face, and he turned his head to the side to scan the area. She frowned. It wasn't the first time she'd noticed that he didn't seem to wear a concealment. The other time she'd noticed was a couple days ago, when she'd walked into the bathroom while he was showering.

'If he wasn't wearing a concealment, then where were his crests?'

Her youkai sighed. *'That's not really something that should concern you, don't you think?'*

'Maybe. Maybe not. I mean, it is an interesting question, right? Because I saw quite a bit of him then, and I didn't see any signs of youkai crests . . .'

'Ah, Sydney . . . you shouldn't—'

"Bas . . . tell me something?"

"Hmm?" he replied, still staring at the area, as though he were looking for something.

"You don't wear a concealment, do you?"

He shot her a suspicious glance. "No . . ."

She shrugged as she sat up and scooted forward to drop off the monument. "So where are your crests?"

She wasn't sure what sort of reply she was expecting, but it certainly wasn't the violent surge of color that stained his cheeks crimson. He cleared his throat, shifted from one foot to the other, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked everywhere but at her. "I . . . uh . . . It's not . . . I-I-I don't have any," he blurted.

"You don't have any?" she repeated.

He shook his head. "Nope. None."

"But you're youkai."

"Actually, I'm hanyou."

She rolled her eyes. "You're not. I think I could tell if you were youkai or hanyou."

He shrugged. "My mother's hanyou, and my father's youkai, so I'm hanyou . . . technically speaking."

She shook her head. "You're almost full youkai then, and youkai have crests, so where are yours?"

"Let's go, Sydnie," he grumbled, grabbing her wrist and hurrying her back toward the car.

"Do you have crests?" she pressed.

"No."

"Can I see them?"

"No."

"Are they intimidating?"

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Drop it."

"Bas?"

"What?"

". . . I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

She really hadn't thought it would be possible for his face to redden any more than it already was. She was wrong. "Get in the car and shut up, Sydnie, or I swear I'll gag you, too."

She laughed at him but did as he instructed. '*Oh, now that's interesting,*' she mused as he stomped around the car and slipped into the driver seat. '*Really, really interesting . . .*'

'I don't know, Sydnie . . . maybe you ought to leave it alone.'

'Maybe,' Sydnie agreed noncommittally. *'May bees don't fly in November . . .'*

The basement was a bereft, lonely place, undoubtedly intended to shroud the inky shadows of the youkai sitting in the corner of the empty space.

Jeb Christopher strode into the chamber slowly, deliberately, heels resounding like gunfire in the cavernous void. Well below the earth's surface, there'd been rumor that the basement had been used to store illegal goods in days long past. Smuggling was a simple thing for youkai. Supplying whatever demand might come of the latest embargos and sanctions was an art form, and in this place, Jeb could still smell the lingering stench of liquor from the long-past days of prohibition, of guns and artillery used to supply small suburban gang wars, of all manner of illegal substances . . . The place had seen just about everything at one time or another. Now it stood empty; the silent witness, the sentient dark.

Dragging the long fingers of his right hand through light brown, shoulder length hair, Jeb flicked his left wrist, knuckles cracking in dangerous warning. He'd heard tale of these youkai: Darius Trent, Mort Corvelle, Roddy Durvin . . . He made it his business to know as much about potential clients as he knew about the jobs they offered. Most of the ones who retained Jeb's services were rich – disgustingly so. He'd discovered over time that it didn't take much to convince that kind to seek out the ultimate vengeance, and these three . . . they weren't really any different. Overseeing jobs as simple as bringing back the fiancé of a spoiled debutante to the nastier but always interesting tasks that involved a more hands-on approach, so long as the money was paid – half down, and the other half when the job was done – then Jeb left his conscience at the door, figuring that whatever blood was ultimately spilled, would be on the hands of the one who had done the hiring.

Jeb smiled coldly. These youkai thought that they were so smart . . . He already knew what they wanted. What he wanted to know was how much they were willing to pay.

"Mr. Christopher, we're glad you could agree to meet us here."

Jeb stopped, casually rubbing his neck as he narrowed his gaze to make out the nondescript forms. *"You can dispense with the pleasantries. I just want to hear your pitch."*

The youkai on the left cleared his throat. The youkai on the right shifted uncomfortably. The one in the middle chuckled. "We want justice."

"Of course you do."

"Cal Richardson's killer . . . we want her dead."

Jeb nodded slowly, digging a clove cigarette out of his pocket and taking his time as he struck a match. In the dim light, he could make out the faces. He'd already known who they were. "Isn't that the job of the tai-youkai?"

"It isn't a secret that Zelig felt threatened by Cal Richardson. We simply don't think that the tai-youkai is compelled to see the bitch brought to justice," Darius Trent commented casually.

"There's not much information available on her. It'll make it damn difficult, and difficult will cost you."

Trent grunted. "We realize that."

"Good, because I happen to know that the tai-youkai already has her in custody, so to speak."

"One of Zelig's hunters has her, yes. There never was an *official* hunt issued, though."

"Zelig's hunters aren't pussies. One of my men tangled with Cartham last year."

"Oh?"

Jeb shrugged. "Good thing I never really liked that guy . . . Cartham scattered him on the seven breezes . . . or so I heard."

"We're prepared to pay accordingly."

"Are you now?"

"There isn't a price high enough to ensure peace of mind," Trent replied.

Jeb barked out a terse laugh. "Enough of your sanctimonious bullshit. I'm not a priest, and I don't give a shit."

"Of course."

“Three million down and five more when the job’s done,” Jeb said.

The men were silent for a moment. “Eight million?” Trent asked, unable to mask the incredulity in his tone.

“Take it or leave it.”

“Here,” the youkai on the left – Mort Corvelle – said, tossing an envelope down at Jeb’s feet. “There’s two and a half . . . and we’ll pay another three when the job’s done.”

“So much for no price being too high to ensure your peace of mind,” Jeb tossed back acerbically.

“It’s far more than you normally make, isn’t it?” Trent parried.

“Careful. I’m not the one who wants someone dead. Eight or no deal.”

The men mumbled to one another. Jeb didn’t care to listen to their mundane jabber. “Done.”

Smiling insincerely, Jeb kicked the envelope back, ignoring the belligerent question. “Try again,” he replied, inflicting a measure of boredom into his tone. “I don’t bend over.”

Corvelle picked it up and hesitantly stepped forward to hand it over. Jeb took it, digging a flashlight out of his pocket, and glanced into the envelope before returning his gaze to the youkai assembled before him. “I’ll count this later. You understand that if you’ve shorted me by so much as a dollar, I keep the cash, and you’re shit out of luck.”

“We’ll call you –” Roddy Durvin began.

“I’ll call *you*,” Jeb cut in. “And you’d better have the rest of the money when I do.” He turned on his heel and started away, flipping off the flashlight and stowing it away in his pocket once more. He stopped abruptly and whirled around. “Oh . . . I forgot to tell you . . . should there be any unforeseen complications, the price *is* subject to change.”

He strode across the floor once more, heading for the exit as his cell phone vibrated against his hip. Waiting until he was out of earshot in the blackened stairwell of the three story climb, he pulled the device out of his pocket and clicked the button to connect the call. “Talk to me.”

“Hey, Jeb, it’s Myrna. I got some interesting intel.”

Jeb grinned as the velvety smooth sound of his second-in-command's voice. "Let's hear it."

"Target located, and, uh . . . she is not in the company of any of Zelig's normal hunters. In fact, my sources tell me that this one . . . he's young."

"Young, huh? That *is* interesting . . ."

"Any orders?"

"Not yet," he replied, pushing open the heavy steel door and stepping into the dim light of the early evening. Taking the concrete steps up to ground level, he slipped out of the alley and blended into the milling crowd heading for their treks home on the packed New York City subways. "Tell Cody I want him on standby."

"Cody?"

Jeb tucked the envelope into the inner breast pocket of his leather jacket. "Yes. He's ready. He should be able to take care of this job alone."

Myrna hesitated before she answered. In the end, she sighed but didn't question his decision. "Consider it done."

" – Room 215 . . . yes, the room is very nice . . ."

Bas cracked one eye open and scowled slightly as his vision adjusted to the hazy light of the dusky room. Illuminated by a weak shaft of fabricated light from the streetlamps three stories below, he couldn't see Sydnie's face very well, and she was obviously keeping her voice down in hopes that she wouldn't wake him. '*What's she doing? She hates using the phone . . .*' he thought, shaking his head as he tried to figure out what she was up to.

Sydnie turned away, wrapping the coiled phone cord around her finger. "Um, it's a little cold up here, and I was wondering if you could bring me a spare blanket?"

'*Cold . . .?*' Bas shrugged inwardly. Then again, with as skinny as the feline was, it really wouldn't surprise him if she really were cold. She could have asked him. He'd have gotten her another blanket . . .

"Thank you," she continued. "Oh, but please don't knock . . . the man I'm traveling with is sleeping, and I'd rather not wake him."

She hung up the phone, taking care not to make any noise. Bas watched her slip over to the door. She turned the deadbolt lock slowly and cracked it open. He edged his hand closer to his black leather duster, slung casually over the back of the chair beside him. Ready to take off after her if she decided to attempt an escape, he spared a moment to glance at his sword. He discarded the idea of reaching for it. Even if he could get it without drawing Sydney's notice, there really wasn't a chance in hell that he'd actually use it on her. Grimacing since his back hurt from nights on end spent sleeping in chairs, he noticed that she didn't have either her purse or her shoes, and at that realization, he relaxed just a little.

She kept leaning into the hallway without actually leaving the room.

'She wouldn't get cold,' he thought with a slight snarl, 'if she'd wear more than just those stupid miniskirts and tank tops . . .'

' . . . Bas?'

'What?'

' . . . I don't think the blanket is for her.'

'Not for her? Then for whom . . .?'

He nearly sat upright as slow understanding dawned on him. The vague memories of nights past, of waking up in the morning only to find himself covered in blankets that he never remembered getting for himself . . . *'Sydnie . . .'*

"Thank you," Sydney said, her voice low, soft. She closed the door, turning the deadbolt just as quietly as she had unlocked it. Bas closed his eyes as she turned around and padded toward him. She let the blanket fall open and carefully tucked it in around him, and moments later, he felt the warmth of her knuckles brush against his cheek so softly that it might have been no more than a whisper of a breeze if he hadn't known the truth.

He sat frozen, unable to move as she breathed out a sigh and shuffled back to the bed. When he finally dared to open his eyes a crack, she was curled up in a little lump, her face buried in the cradle of her folded arms. A tiny smile twitched the corners of his lips, and Bas swiveled the rocker-recliner so that he could watch over her while she slept.

She fell asleep quickly enough. The night grew thicker in the hotel room. Her hair glowed in the wan light filtering through the windows. It reminded him of a candle flame: the golden glow of her natural highlights; the darkest auburn below . . . Spilling over her shoulder, hiding her face, he could only see the black fringe of lashes that lay so softly against her cheek.

She whimpered suddenly, the sound stark, shocking. Bas sat up, dropped the blanket as he strode to the bed and knelt beside it. "It's okay . . ." he whispered, smoothing the hair back out of her face. "Sydney . . ."

Smoothing the lines that furrowed her brow, he scowled, wishing he understood the phantasms that only she could see. "Don't . . . leave me . . ." she moaned.

Bas grimaced at the raw emotion behind the quietly uttered words. Sydney scooted a little closer to him, turning her cheek, pressing into his palm, as though she needed the contact, and maybe she did. Just how long had she been alone? She'd said she'd been alone since she was a small child, but how could that be? She'd have been too young to make it on her own, hadn't she? Three years old . . . what could a three year-old possibly do to take care of themselves? He sighed. Somehow he knew that it had been far, far too long . . .

Slowly she relaxed again. The nightmare's grip loosened, and she slept peacefully once more. He pulled the blankets over her and sat back. The silence in the room was comforting. Sydney moaned softly. Bas could hear his youkai voice talking, but he paid it no mind. So intent on watching her sleep, nothing else really mattered to him. The mystery of her spoke to him, unsettled him. He wanted to help her. He wanted to understand the things that frightened her in the darkness of her dreams.

She infuriated him, confused him, left his sanity in tatters to scatter on the breeze. He'd never known anyone like her before, and he knew in his heart that he'd never find another woman quite like her again, either. Sydney was mysterious and magical, and Bas couldn't help the slight smile that started somewhere deep down inside him as he stared at her.

Seven days.

He'd known her for seven days, and those seven days . . . they felt like a lifetime.

*Final Thought from Bas:
What's she dreaming ...?*

Chapter 12

Mysterious

'I wonder what he's dreaming about . . .?'

Sydney sat, perched on the edge of the bed, hands clasped between her knees as she tilted her head to the side, regarding Bas as he slept in the reclining chair. A soft smile touched his lips now and again, and his smile made her smile, too.

He looked so different when he was sleeping. Younger, softer – less intimidating . . . there was a certain air about him, almost a sense of vulnerability, that she couldn't ascertain when he was awake. True, she liked to tease him. She called him a puppy and laughed when he got all defensive. Still she could sense that he really wasn't nearly as inept as she had first thought. Her first impression had been that he was a little too soft, a little too refined. Maybe it wasn't weakness she'd sensed, after all. She'd come to realize that it was something entirely different, something wholly contrary. Bas the Hunter possessed compassion, and that was a trait that Sydney wasn't sure how to deal with. She hadn't seen it often over the years. It confused her. It frightened her.

"I don't need a damn thing from either of you; not your pity, not your sympathy, and certainly not your milk."

Digging her claws into the coverlet, Sydney leaned forward, hunching her shoulders as she watched the sleeping hunter.

'I don't like it, Syd . . .'

She wrinkled her nose at the intrusion of her youkai voice. *'Don't like what?'*

'What do we really know about him? Think about it, will you? He knows more about you than you know about him, and that's not good.'

'It doesn't matter. He doesn't know anything important; not really . . . and even if he did, that wouldn't really change anything.'

'You're not serious, right?'

She grimaced when Bas frowned in his sleep. *'What's he dreaming about?'*

Her youkai sighed. *'Good God, Sydnie . . . can you hear yourself?'*

'What?'

'You're getting all up in arms because he's having a bad dream? This . . . isn't good . . .'

'Dreams can be scary,' she replied hotly. *'They can be worse than reality.'*

' . . . So that's what this is all about . . .'

Scowling stubbornly, she shook her head and shifted her gaze away from the sleeping hunter as she crossed her arms over her chest and proudly straightened her back. *'It's not 'about' anything. It's . . . not.'*

'Uh-huh. Then why do you make sure he has a blanket every night?'

'Don't be ridiculous! It gets chilly; that's all.'

'Look, I don't think that there's anything wrong with him. It's just not like you to let things slip, either.'

Bas groaned quietly, the frown intensifying as he mumbled something that she couldn't discern. Scooting off the bed, Sydnie crept closer. The watery gray light of the dawning morning lent Bas' skin a bluish tint. Kneeling beside his chair, she carefully smoothed the lines that marred his brow. He let out a soft sigh, unconsciously turning toward her touch. "Syd . . . nie . . ." he murmured.

Her heart skipped a beat as her name slipped from him, and she leaned in closer, waiting . . . hoping . . . *'Is he . . . dreaming about . . . me?'*

Something in his expression drew her, captured her. His lips parted slightly, his breath misting her face. A tremor raced up her spine as the air stilled in her lungs. He looked so peaceful, so relaxed . . . She heard the unvoiced whispers that she didn't completely understand; as though his very being was calling out to her. Leaning toward him, drawing a ragged breath, she felt her eyelids fluttering closed but couldn't stop, couldn't think, couldn't fight against the temptation . . .

His lips were warm, moist, yielding. Brushing against his softly, hesitantly, she pressed her hand to his cheek, savoring the feel of the stubble under her fingertips. Tilting her head, she kissed him again as a million shivers broke over her. He felt so vibrant, so alive, and she couldn't help the ragged little sound that escaped her. Somewhere

between a purr and the softest moan, she stood up without breaking the contact, slipping onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

In the back of her mind, a thread of recognition condensed as a faraway sense of understanding became no more than a reaction. His hands locked around her, holding her close. He returned her kiss – a slow, pulsing thing, as his throaty groan echoed in the room. She relaxed against him, straddling him, legs tucked neatly against his thighs. He shuddered as she drew on his mouth, her tongue stroking his lip as he ran his hands up and down her back.

Groaning quietly, the sound captured by her mouth, Bas pulled her closer. She pressed her palms against his chest, carefully kneading his muscles, her claws poking lightly through the thin material of his shirt. Grinding her hips against his, she traced his teeth, his fangs with the tip of her tongue as he uttered a terse growl, ragged and harsh. “S-Syd . . . nie . . .?” he rasped between kisses.

Sydney couldn't restrain the whimper that escaped her when Bas abruptly turned his face away. His breathing was rough, stilted, and he had to clear his throat before he could manage words. “Wh-what are you . . . What do you think you're doing?”

She couldn't muster the bravado for one of her normal replies. “You said my name,” she whispered.

Bas glanced at her, skin flushed, eyes bright. “W . . . what?”

She shook her head. “You were sleeping, and you said . . . my name.”

“So you –” He winced as his blush deepened. “–Crawled into my lap and . . . kissed me?”

“No,” she replied with a shrug, hoping that her tone was a little more carefree than she felt. “I kissed you first; *then* I crawled into your lap.”

He slowly shook his head, his gaze narrowing in abject confusion. “Sydney –”

She stood up and quickly turned away, snatching up the blanket that had fallen onto the floor and taking her time, folding it, avoiding the questions in his stare. “Oh, relax, pretty boy . . . it was just a kiss. It didn't mean anything.”

She heard his sharp gasp but refused to look. He stood up and brushed past her, heading for the bathroom. “Yeah,” he agreed, his words oddly hollow. “Not a damn thing.”

Wincing when he slammed the bathroom door, Sydnie's knees gave out, and she sank down on the end of the bed, blanket slipping from her slack fingers as she stared dumbly at the floor. She'd hurt him, hadn't she? Proclaiming that the kiss meant nothing to her . . . It was a lie. She *knew* it was a lie. Bas, however . . . he didn't know, and with any luck at all, he never would.

'It . . . has to be this way,' she told herself sternly, nostrils prickling as something hot stabbed at the backs of her eyelids. She swallowed hard and shook her head, trying not to think about the rawness of his voice. *'It just . . . has to be.'*

Bas leaned against the car and shifted his gaze around the parking lot outside the small rest stop, scanning the area with a slight frown. Everything seemed all right, and yet he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't. He wasn't sure why he felt so unsettled, but he'd been taught to trust his instincts, and at the moment, he knew — just *knew* — that something simply wasn't right.

He scowled, eyes dropping to the asphalt below his boots. *'No,'* he decided slowly, shaking his head as he let out his breath in a gust. *'Not wrong, exactly . . . It feels more like something's about to happen . . .'*

Pushing away from the car, Bas snorted as he shot a glare at the short brick building. Sydnie had pitched a fit until he'd agreed to stop for a potty break. Either there was a line in the women's restroom, which he doubted since there were only two cars, counting his, in the parking lot, or Sydnie was deliberately trying to irritate him.

A man and woman strolled out of the building, murmuring quietly as they headed for the other car. Bas glanced back and sighed. He'd have smelled Sydnie if she had tried to escape out a window or another exit. She was still inside, but he wouldn't put it past her to stay in there until he went looking for her. *'Stubborn cat . . .'*

She'd been uncharacteristically quiet since they'd left the hotel. He grimaced, rubbing his forehead and slumping back against the car again. *'She's been quiet,'* he allowed, *'since I woke up with her kissing me . . .'*

"Oh, relax, pretty boy . . . it was just a kiss. It didn't mean anything."

He kicked his toe against the asphalt. *'Didn't mean anything . . . Of course it didn't . . .'*

'You don't believe that, do you?'

Bas shrugged. *'It's what she said.'*

'Don't be ridiculous. Of course it meant something to her.'

'It doesn't have to. It doesn't have to mean a thing.'

Bas straightened his back and strode off toward the building. *'This is Sydney we're talking about. Everything she says and does means something.'*

"Bas!"

Bas stopped, head snapping to the side as he spotted Sydney being dragged along behind a strange youkai who was hustling the cat toward a small grove of rather sad looking trees. His hand wrapped around her slender wrist, the youkai tugged her forward, sending her stumbling after him. She dug her claws into his arm, and he hissed before jerking on her arm again.

Bolting after the two of them, Bas gritted his teeth as he ran. He didn't have his sword – he'd left it in the car. He'd stopped wearing it since it was a pain to drive with, and wearing it, or so he'd thought, would cause more trouble than it prevented.

"Damn it . . ."

Sydney glanced back, casting him a pleading glance as the youkai – a cougar – jerked on her arm once more. She stumbled, catching herself against the youkai's back. Over the distance between them, Bas could hear the youkai growl before shoving her away. She lost her footing and landed on her rear but scrambled to her feet and started to run. Bas skidded to a halt as Sydney hurled herself against his chest, her body trembling as her heart hammered like a wild creature. "Get behind me," he commanded.

Sydney blinked, leaning back to look him in the eye. "I can fight," she insisted.

"Not now, cat. Just move."

He thought she was going to argue with him for a minute. She must have reconsidered, though, and with a curt nod, she slipped behind him as the strange youkai slowly sauntered toward them. "So you're the hunter," the youkai remarked, light brown eyes glowing with obvious amusement.

"Who are you? What do you want?" Sydney demanded, the bravado in her voice a familiar and unwelcome intrusion at the moment. Bas' hand shot back, pressing against Sydney's hip in an effort to quell her overzealous tongue.

“It doesn’t matter who I am.” The youkai’s gaze narrowed, as though he were sizing Bas up. “Hand over the bitch.”

Bas didn’t move. “I answer to the tai-youkai. She’s coming with me.”

The cougar-youkai chuckled. “She’s a murderer, hunter. In the eyes of the youkai, the penalty for murder is death.”

“I think I know the laws of the youkai well enough,” Bas remarked without batting an eye. “You’re forgetting that no one is ever convicted unless there is adequate reason to believe that it *was* a crime.”

“The youkai grow tired of Cain Zelig’s reluctance. It’s nothing personal, hunter. Don’t make it into something that it isn’t.”

“If I were you, I’d walk away,” Bas replied. “I told you that she’s coming with me.”

“You’ll make me kill you?” the cougar asked, raking his clawed fingers through his hair. “Have it your way.”

“I don’t like threats, so you’d better be able to back up that claim.”

The cougar cracked his knuckles, grinning as he shook his hands to loosen up his wrists. “I don’t make threats, pretty boy. I make promises.”

He lunged at Bas without warning. Bas grabbed Sydnie and leapt aside, barely missing the cougar’s descending claws. “You stay here,” he told her as he set her on her feet.

“He’s a bounty hunter,” Sydnie insisted, glancing around Bas nervously. “They do whatever they have to do. He won’t—”

“—Lay a hand on you,” Bas growled. “Now stay out of the way.”

“Bas—”

He whipped around to glower at her, jamming his index finger under her nose. “Sydnie . . .”

She scowled but crossed her arms over her chest, resting all her weight on one hip as she relented to his demand that she not interfere. Satisfied that he’d made his point, Bas glanced over his shoulder in time to see the youkai barreling straight toward him again. Sydnie sprang aside as Bas vaulted off the ground, turning his body in mid-air as he reached back, slamming his arm out straight and catching the cougar in the center

of his chest. Wincing as the youkai's claws cut through the leather duster and into his forearm, Bas heaved him back, sending him flying in the other direction.

The cougar started to sit up. Bas strode over and planted his heel against the youkai's chest, the steel toe of his boot hooked under the cougar's chin. "I'll suggest again that you leave," he growled.

A moment's hesitation vanished as the youkai swallowed hard and nodded. Bas pressed down on his foot then shoved the youkai away with his heel before turning his back and starting toward Sydnie once more.

'Lousy, miserable, rotten—'

"Bas! *Look out!*"

Whipping around just in time to sidestep the slash of claws as the cougar bore down on him, Bas only had time to react. Stretching out his fingers, he swung his claws at the youkai. The tearing of flesh was an awful sound, the squishy, wet gurgle spraying a mist of blood further than the searing gush that erupted under his claws. The cougar's eyes blanked for a moment, as though he couldn't believe what was happening. Dropping to his knees as he clutched his torn throat, he gurgled out a slow cough as his fevered gaze rose to lock with Bas'.

"You . . ." he wheezed, unable to manage more than an airy hiss that Bas could barely discern. "You're . . . the Zelig . . ."

"Close enough," Bas allowed, wishing he could look away yet unable to do so. Blood squeezed through the youkai's fingers, dripped onto the ground as he blinked, trying in vain to keep his vision clear.

The youkai choked out a burbling laugh—a hysterical sound. "I'm not . . . the last . . ." he whispered. "Not . . . the . . . last . . ."

Bas didn't respond to that. Rasping out a harsh gasp, the youkai fell to his hands and knees, then collapsed into the puddle of pooling blood. Moments later, his body exploded in a flash of light; in a blast of wind. Choking dust scattered on the fabricated breeze. Bas stared at the spot where the youkai had fallen, unable to process the idea that he'd just killed someone.

"Bas?"

Blinking as the soft sound of Sydney's distant voice cut through the haze that had wrapped around his brain, Bas slowly turned his head to watch as she darted to his side.

She opened her mouth to say something then winced, hesitantly stepping toward him, wrapping her arms around him. He didn't move for a moment, but slowly, slowly lifted his arms to hold her close.

He wasn't sure how long they stood there, holding each other in the shelter of the small grove. Closing his eyes as he deliberately tried not to think about what had just happened, he concentrated instead on the comfort she offered him. How could she know his desperation to reaffirm that he wasn't a monster for what he'd just done? How did she understand the numbness that had engulfed him?

He felt an odd sense of warmth, of something damp and burning through the thin material of his shirt, but he didn't look. A vague voice echoed in his mind, and this time, they were words he could comprehend. *'She understands, Bas . . . because she's felt the same way . . .'*

'She . . . she isn't a murderer . . . any more than I am . . .'

'Not a murderer . . . no . . .'

Opening his eyes, he blinked at the unchanging world. Drawing a deep breath as he gave her a quick squeeze and stepped away, he cleared his throat and sighed, scanning the area for any trace of unnatural movement. "Come on, Sydney. We've got to get out of here."

She nodded, chin lowered so that he couldn't see her face. He stared at his blood-stained hands and grimaced. As much as he'd like to take the time to wash, he wasn't sure if the youkai had been alone or not, and his instincts were screaming that he get Sydney out of there. "Let's go," he told her as he started trudging away.

He didn't see her dash her hand across her eyes; didn't see her wipe away her tears.

Sydney swished the water in the tub and sat back on her heels.

'Bounty hunters . . .'

Leaning back, letting her head fall into the makeshift cradle formed by her outstretched arms, she sighed. She hadn't expected the cougar-youkai who had been waiting for her to emerge from the bathroom. Too busy dwelling on the kiss that never should have happened, she had been caught off-guard when the youkai's arm had snaked around her waist, drawing her back against the solid mass of his chest.

"You're a hard woman to track, Kit," he growled, breath hot in her ear. "Now you be a good girl, and I'll kill you quickly."

"Who are you?" she whispered, grimacing as he tightened his arm around her stomach.

"Names aren't really necessary, cat."

"Who do you work for?"

The youkai laughed as he dug his claws into her side hard enough to coerce her into moving, drawing a trace amount of blood. "I'll tell you that before I kill you," he assured her. "Move it."

A soft knock on the bathroom door jarred Sydnie out of her reverie. Pushing herself up on the side of the tub, she deliberately shoved the memories aside.

Bas leaned against the doorframe, staring blankly at the curtained windows across the room. He looked tired—exhausted, really—and so much older than he had this morning. Dark circles under his dull eyes . . . a gauntness in his face that hadn't been there before . . . He blinked slowly, bringing a hand up to rub his cheek. Traces of the cougar-youkai's blood still crusted his fingers, and his hand shook just a little.

"I drew a bath for you," she said quietly. "I thought you might need one."

"Baths are for girls," he replied in a monotone. "I'll take a shower."

"Baths aren't just for girls," she assured him.

He shoved himself away from the doorway and stepped over to peer into the bathroom. "Bubble bath, Sydnie? That's *not* for girls?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Don't be such a guy. It's a *milk* bath, and milk is good for you."

He opened his mouth to argue with her but snapped it closed as he relented with a sigh. "All right, cat. Just this once."

Satisfied that he'd use the bath, she slipped out of the room and hurried over to find a change of clothing for him since he hadn't bothered to find one, himself. Laying the stack of clean clothes on the floor outside the bathroom door, she wandered back over and retrieved the room service menu from the drawer in the nightstand. She wasn't really sure what Bas wanted, but he seemed to prefer plain meat like steak to sandwiches, and to that end, she ordered him a medium rare New York strip steak with baked potato and green beans.

'You're being awfully nice to him, aren't you?'

Sydney hung up the phone and shrugged inwardly. *'Am I?'*

'Yes, you are . . . you know you are.'

Digging a couple of wet-naps out of her purse, she sat down with Bas' leather duster and tore the packet open with her teeth. *'I don't know what you're talking about.'*

'You're mothering him.'

Sydney paused before tugging the wet-nap out of the foil packet and shaking it open. *'I am not!'*

'You are, too! Look at you! You're cleaning his jacket!'

She rubbed the right sleeve, carefully removing the sheen of blood that had dried on it. *'He's got enough on his mind,'* she argued. *'He's never killed anyone before; I know he hasn't.'*

'Sydney, he chose to be a hunter. A hunter kills other youkai. He had to know this, don't you think?'

Carefully wiping away the blood that dulled the leather, Sydney scowled and shook her head. *'That might be. Still, I chose to kill Cal Richardson, right? I knew what I was doing, and I'm not sorry . . . that doesn't mean that I enjoyed it, does it? It doesn't mean that Bas would, either.'*

'So you do care about him.'

Tossing the first wet-nap into the small trash can on the other side of the nightstand, Sydney opened the next packet and shook out the cleansing cloth. *'Maybe.'*

'You called out for him because you knew that he could save you. Maybe he can even save you from yourself.'

'And just what is that supposed to mean?'

'You know what it means, Syd, and you know that deep down, you want him to do it, too.'

She didn't answer as she finished cleaning the leather duster. Five wet-naps later, she tied the thin plastic bag closed and pulled it out of the trash can. The crisp knock drew her attention, and she strode over to answer it. "Who is it?" she called, pressing her ear against the solid steel door.

"Room service."

Bracing her weight against the door, she turned the deadbolt and slowly opened the door. The young man dressed in nondescript white shirt and black slacks smiled at her, and she stepped back to allow him entrance. He strode past her, depositing the tray on the small table. Sydnie hurried over, digging a few dollars out of her purse. Repressing the slight panic that always accompanied spending money, she shoved it at the young man and, as an afterthought, held out the trash bag, too. "Would you mind getting rid of this?" she asked, pasting on her brightest smile as the bellhop took the bag.

"Not a problem," he assured her. "Do you need anything else?"

Sydnie shook her head and shrugged. "No, thanks."

She followed him to the door and locked it behind him before heading toward the closed bathroom door. "Bas?" she called.

He didn't answer.

She frowned. "Bas?" she repeated a little louder.

He still didn't answer.

Biting her lip as she hesitantly picked up his clothes and tried the knob, she was vaguely surprised that it turned easily in her hand. "I got clean clothes out for you," she said as she slipped into the steamy room and averted her gaze as she set them on the closed toilet seat.

He grunted something in response. It might have been 'thanks'.

She sighed and started to leave but stopped. "Do you want me to wash your back?" she offered, carefully keeping her tone neutral.

He grunted again.

Taking that as a 'yes', she turned around and knelt beside the tub, absently grateful that the bubble bath obstructed her view since he didn't seem to care that she was still in the room with him. "Sit up."

For a moment, she didn't think he was going to comply. He did, though, bracing his feet against the far end of the tub, he sat up, draping his arms over his knees and leaning forward, eyes closed, bubbles sticking to his hair like little piles of snow. She carefully pushed his hair over his shoulder and grabbed the still-dry washcloth off the side of the tub before retrieving the travel-size bottle of Ivory soap body wash and dumping a generous amount onto the cloth. Taking her time as she dunked the cloth and squeezed it to build up a good lather, she slowly rubbed his back, massaging the tense muscles as she scrubbed.

He sighed.

"I ordered some food for you," she said quietly.

Bas nodded. "Thanks."

"You'd better hurry or it'll get cold."

"I'm not really hungry, Sydnie."

"I didn't figure you were."

He peered over his shoulder at her, his expression inscrutable. Finally, he nodded. "All right."

She handed him the wash cloth and rinsed her hands. "Thank you," she said, leaning in to kiss his cheek before she stood up and hurried to the door. "No one's ever . . ." she trailed off, cheeks pinking, and she cleared her throat. "Anyway, thanks."

She slipped out of the bathroom and closed the door, pressing her hand against her chest as she willed her heart to stop hammering out an unsteady rhythm against her ribs as the image of him, standing over the fallen cougar-youkai with his boot to his throat flashed through her mind. He'd looked so proud, so confident, and in that moment, Sydnie had felt a strange surge of emotion, a complete fascination . . . Such easy grace, such power . . . sure, she'd realized that she had underestimated Bas the Hunter before.

Now she was positive. He was no ordinary hunter, but she wasn't certain just who he really was.

“What’s that?”

Bas stopped shaking the bag long enough to glance up at Sydnie. Perched on the end of the bed, she was sitting up straight, chin tilted back as she tried to see what he had in his hands. “What? This?” he deadpanned.

“What is it?” she demanded again.

Bas carefully pulled on opposite corners of the sealed bag. “Popcorn.”

She bit her lip and scowled, digging her claws into the coverlet but stubbornly remaining silent.

“Want some, kitty?” he asked, shaking the bag close enough for her to see the popcorn but far enough away that she couldn’t snatch the bag.

She shot him a fulminating glare. “That’s the last time I’m nice to you, puppy,” she shot back.

He shrugged, delving into the bag and stuffing a handful of popcorn into his mouth. “Suit yourself.” He swallowed. “Mmmmmmm . . .”

“Pig.”

“Oink.”

She snorted, crossing her arms over her chest and slumping down as she forced her gaze away from the popcorn bag.

“Popcorn and movies . . . I think they were invented for each other.”

Sydnie replied with a wide yawn as she crawled back to the head of the bed and curled up on her side.

Bas plopped into the chair beside the bed and shook the bag of popcorn at her again. She ignored him. Stifling a chuckle, he settled back with a sigh. “You sure you’re not hungry?”

"Nope."

"You didn't order yourself any dinner."

"I wasn't hungry."

"Oh, I know," he said. "You're never hungry, are you?"

She muttered a haughty 'hrumph'. "That's right, puppy. I'm youkai, and youkai don't need to eat."

"Of course you don't," he agreed. "Want some milk?"

She hesitated a moment before quickly shaking her head. "No," she pouted, cheeks pinking. "I'm fine."

Bas set the bag of popcorn on the nightstand and grabbed the phone to call room service. It didn't take long to order a gallon of milk for Sydnie. When he turned around to retrieve the popcorn, however, it wasn't on the table anymore. The definite sounds of crunching popcorn made Bas shake his head. Sydnie cradled the bag in her lap, happily eating his popcorn.

He reached over to grab a handful. Sydnie snatched the bag away and uttered a low, sing-song wail. "Hey, cat! That was mine!" he pointed out reasonably but pulled his hand away.

"You set it down," she countered. "You abandoned it."

"I did not," he argued. "I was ordering milk . . . for *you*."

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law, pretty boy. Deal with it."

"Ever heard of sharing, Sydnie?"

She shrugged. "Sharing's overrated."

He sighed. "All right," he relented, hauling himself out of the chair and shuffling over to stick another bag into the microwave.

"Don't even think about it, kitty," warned as he sat back down with the fresh bag of popcorn. "This one's mine."

A knock on the door announced the arrival of Sydnie's milk. Bas nearly set the bag down but thought better of it as he shot her a suspicious glance and headed over to get her drink.

"That wasn't very filling," she remarked as he poured a glass of milk for her.

"It wasn't supposed to be. It was just popcorn," he said. She crumpled the empty bag and took the glass he offered. He sat back down and leaned back to get comfortable. Sydnie set the glass on the nightstand and crawled across his lap to toss the empty bag in the trash. "Sydnie!" he complained, head falling back to avoid staring at her wiggling backside, clad in a filmy pair of nylon panties – the only thing other than her tank tops that she ever wore at night – as she pushed herself back onto the bed.

"What?"

He sighed, hoping that his face wasn't as red as he suspected it was. Sydnie giggled, and he grimaced, figuring that it was worse than he had feared. "Red's a good color on you," she teased.

"Shut up, cat," he grumbled.

She rolled her eyes and swallowed her milk. He could see her throat constrict as she gulped down the drink, and he had to force his gaze away once more. *'Damn it . . . I swear to God, she does that on purpose . . .'*

The trill of his cell phone cut through his musings. "Hello?"

"Bas? I got your message. What's going on?"

Bas grimaced at the obvious concern in Cain's voice. He'd called his father earlier while Sydnie was drawing his bath, but he'd only gotten voice mail, so he'd just left a message, instead. Bas sighed. "We were attacked today . . . or Sydnie was, anyway."

"What?"

Bas shot Sydnie a quick glance. She didn't appear to be listening, but with her, he could never be certain. "Just a minute." He stood up, setting his popcorn on the nightstand. "Sydnie, I'm going to take this call outside. You'd better not try to run off, got it?" Bas rolled his eyes and waved a hand in front of her face when she didn't respond. She caught his hand and shoved it away, leaning to the side so she could see the television.

"I hear you, puppy, now quiet. I'm watching the movie."

He sighed again, wiping his fingers on his jeans as he strode toward the door. Stopping on the threshold and glancing back over his shoulder, he shook his head and rolled his eyes when he saw that Sydnie had wasted no time in claiming the second 'abandoned' bag of popcorn. "Bounty hunter," Bas explained as he pulled the door closed behind himself.

Cain let out a deep breath. "That's what I was afraid of."

"You thought this would happen."

"I hoped it wouldn't," he agreed. "Damn it."

"He was a cougar-youkai."

"Did you kill him?"

Bas grimaced, rubbing his temple with a weary hand. "Yes."

"No idea who sent him?"

"Nope. Sydnie said that she asked him, but he never told her."

"Great."

"Yeah."

Cain sighed. "Let me do some checking around. I'm not sure who'd issue a bounty, but Richardson's influence cannot be underestimated."

Bas nodded, scowling as he fingered the hilt of his sword, Triumvirate. He'd strapped it on shortly after his bath. Sydnie had watched him with an expression akin to horrified fascination on her face but hadn't said a word. A gift from his father, Cain, his grandfather, InuYasha, and his great-uncle, Sesshoumaru and forged from their fangs, Bas treasured the sword above all else. "Yes, sir."

"Best for you to keep moving, too, but . . ." Cain trailed off, and Bas grimaced. He had a fair guess as to what his father was thinking.

"But you think I'd be better off to zigzag around, right?"

"It might be harder for them to track you if you deviate from the plan, yes."

"That's pretty much what I was thinking, too."

"Where are you now?"

Bas scratched the back of his neck. "A little way north of the Dallas-Fort Worth area . . . Denton, I think it's called."

"Okay. Stay there. I'll see about having some money wired to you in the morning."

"All right," Bas agreed. "Anything else?"

Cain grunted. "Make damn sure you don't tell them who you are."

"Wasn't planning on it."

"Give me a few minutes. I'll call you back."

Bas clicked the phone off and sighed. *'The cougar knew who you were,'* his youkai pointed out.

'I know. No way he could have told anyone else, though.'

'Still, if he wasn't alone, and you just didn't see the others . . .'

'If he wasn't alone, they'd have attacked by now.'

'Don't take chances.'

'I won't.'

'Bas?'

'What?'

'You, uh . . . We . . . won't let them take her, right?'

He frowned. *'Hell, no.'*

' . . . Good, because she's right. Bounty hunters don't give up so easily. If the price on Sydney's head is high enough, they'll be back.'

Bas' gaze darkened as he glowered fiercely at the seemingly empty hallway, as he cracked his knuckles and clenched his jaw. *'They can't have her.'*

'You're sure?'

'Damn straight.'

'Protect her, Bas.'

He didn't hear the low growl that surged up in his throat, spilling over in the dimly lit hallway. 'I'll protect her,' he vowed. 'As for the bounty hunters . . . let them come.'

A/N:

Triumvirate: an association or group of three; in this case, the sword was thusly named because it was forged from the fangs of InuYasha, Sesshoumaru, and Cain ...

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Final Thought from Sydnie:

So the puppy does have claws ...

Chapter 13

Green-Eyed Monster

Bas glanced up over the top of his menu as Sydnie tapped her claws on the Formica tabletop. "Let me guess . . . the colors of the place offend you?" he asked quizzically, lifting an eyebrow as he dropped the laminated menu onto the table with a dull thump.

"Maybe," she said mulishly, idly turning her hand in front of her face as she inspected her claws.

He stifled a sigh. "Let's see . . . the first place smelled bad—"

"It did."

"The second place was too loud—"

"It was."

"The last place *felt* dirty—"

"Did you touch the table, pretty boy?"

"It's got to be the colors here."

"That's as good a reason as any," she agreed, grabbing her purse and slipping out of the booth.

"Sydnie."

"Hmm?"

"I'm hungry."

"I know."

"I want to eat."

"I know."

"I don't care where."

"Then let's go. The sooner we leave; the sooner you can eat."

He heaved a sigh and stood up, deciding that the battle was not worth the war. "Come on."

She followed him out of the restaurant and rubbed her arms when they stepped outside. It wasn't cold, but it was cooler than she was probably accustomed to. She'd refused to wear one of his sweatshirts, though, and at the moment, he was hard pressed not to point that out to her.

He scanned the street with a scowl on his face and shook his head as he shot her a quick glance. "You know, Sydnie, I don't think there's much left in the way of restaurants," he complained.

She wrinkled her nose and pointed down the street at a small neon sign that glowed in the semi-darkness. "We haven't tried that place," she told him.

Staring at the blinking pink light of the tired neon sign, he stifled a sigh and nodded. "All right," he agreed slowly since he hadn't really wanted to try the dingy-looking diner. If she had complaints about the other places, did he really believe that she wouldn't have a list of them about that one? He grabbed her hand and tugged. "Come on."

She followed him without complaint, and she didn't try to pull her hand away from him, either.

Pausing with his hand on the metal handle on the plate glass door, Bas stared at Sydnie. "I'm *really* hungry, cat," he warned.

"Sucks to be hanyou?" she teased, arching a delicate eyebrow.

"I don't eat just because I'm hanyou," he grumbled, jerking the door open and waiting for Sydnie to step inside. "I like food."

"How does that work?" she asked, caught off on a tangent at the mention of his being hanyou.

"What do you mean, how does that work?" he countered as Sydnie slipped into a booth in the corner furthest away from the door.

She shrugged and crossed her arms on the table top, leaning forward as she shot him a toothy grin. "I mean, you don't *look* hanyou. Do you become human once a month?"

He grabbed a menu from behind the napkin holder and snorted. "Pfft! No."

"Hanyous do, don't they?"

"I said I'm *technically* a hanyou."

"Technically?"

"Yes, technically."

"Okay . . ."

He sighed, dropping the menu onto the table and slumping back as he carefully studied her expression. She looked vaguely amused and even a little confused. He grinned slightly. "Basically, I can't take an energy form, and I can't transform into a dog, either. Other than that . . ."

"So you never become human?"

"I used to," he allowed. "That stopped when I was thirteen."

"Puberty?" she asked, both eyebrows disappearing under her auburn hair.

His face reddened, and he smiled nervously. "I guess so."

"That seems odd."

He shrugged. "My uncle thinks it is because pups have more of their mother's blood than their father's, and apparently that changes when one reaches puberty, as you so blithely put it. That's the theory, anyway."

"Your uncle?"

"Uncle . . . brother-in-law . . . depends on who you ask . . ."

"How so?"

He grimaced, having not intended to talk about his strange familial ties. "Ehh . . . Dad was married long before Mom, and he had a daughter – my half-sister. Anyway, my

sister married my mother's brother – my uncle – and completely screwed up my family tree.”

Sydney looked like she was trying not to laugh. “That’s a little messed up.”

“A little?” he echoed with an incredulous snort. “My first grade teacher called my parents. She thought I was being lazy on the assignment to make a family tree when the branches crossed over.”

“She called your parents?”

He sighed. “Dad made Mom explain it. He said it was entirely her fault for having an ass-monkey for a brother.”

Sydney’s lip twitched. “An . . . ass . . . monkey . . .?”

Bas scowled thoughtfully. “Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever heard Dad call my uncle by name. It’s always ‘the ass-monkey’ or ‘Dr. Fill-in-the-blank’ . . .”

She shook her head. Bas chuckled. “Dad never uses the same adjective twice when describing my sister’s mate.”

“Oh, my . . .”

“What can I get y’all?”

Bas blinked and glanced up at the waitress as she snapped her Winterfresh gum and tapped the chewed end of an ink pen against the small order pad. Reeking of way too much musky perfume and the unpleasant odor of Aqua Net hairspray, she patted the back of her very bouffant brassy blonde hair and shot him an obnoxiously orangey-red, very toothy smile.

“Oh, uh . . . do you have any specials?”

“SOS, hun.”

Bas shook his head. “SOS?”

The toothy grin reappeared as she patted his shoulder in an entirely matronly way. “Shit on a Shingle, sugar. Sounds terrible, but it’s the best in the south.”

He scowled at the description of the food under discussion, casting Sydnie a surreptitious glance and not surprised to find her with her arms crossed over her chest and a rather irritated look pinching her features. "I don't think—"

Sydnie scooted out of the booth and strode toward the door. Bas grimaced, digging a ten dollar bill out of his pocket and shoving it at the waitress for her trouble before hurrying after the perplexing feline. "Sydnie!" he called as he darted out of the diner.

She didn't stop walking, and she didn't look back. Bas heaved a frustrated sigh and sprinted down the sidewalk to intercept her. "Will you wait?" he bellowed, catching her arm and swinging her around to face him. "What now?"

The look she cast him said that she thought he ought to know exactly what was bothering her. Bas rolled his eyes, throwing his hands up at his sides as he shook his head and snorted. "Spit it out, cat! I don't feel like chasing you down tonight."

Sydnie tapped her foot, jaw settling into a stubborn line as her eyes narrowed, and she glowered at the building off to the left. "*She* offended me," she growled.

Bas blinked in surprise, caught off guard by Sydnie's haughty claim. "Who did?"

Sydnie wrinkled her nose. "That . . . that . . . that . . . *floozy!*" she fumed, waving her hand in the direction of the diner they'd just left. "Who do you think?"

"Floozy?" he echoed, shaking his head as he tried to comprehend just what Sydnie was so up in arms over. "Wha—?"

"She was all over you, if you didn't notice," Sydnie spat, poking a finger into Bas' chest to emphasize her words. "All over you like—like—like . . ." She shook her head. "Like a *fungus!*"

"Fungus?"

"Yes, a fungus," she went on, prowling back and forth as she crossed her arms over her chest then jerked her arms apart to plant her hands on her hips. "A mushroom or an algae . . . or whatever kind of fungus . . . toe jam . . . crotch rot . . . You know, you'd probably catch something from her, if you're not careful. Ever think of that, pretty boy?"

"But I didn't—"

"Oh, but you *would* have!" she spat, rounding on him and glaring up at him. "She was just nasty, puppy—*nasty!* How *could* you?"

"How could I what?" he sputtered, cheeks pinking as a moment of hurt flashed over her features.

"You let her *touch* you!"

"I didn't!" he protested, holding his hands up in a gesture of complete surrender.

"And the others? I suppose everyone's just all 'touchy-feely' in the south?"

"Others?" he muttered then shook his head since he wasn't sure just what she was thinking. Bas caught her by the shoulders and grimaced. "Apparently, because I didn't—"

"Oh, right!"

"Sydnie!"

"Listen, puppy, I don't care what you do when you're alone, but as long as you're with me, you can keep your wandering eyes to yourself because if one more woman so much as touches you, I swear to God, I'll—"

"You're jealous," he cut in quietly, hands dropping away from her as comprehension slowly dawned.

Her face paled as her mouth fell open seconds before color blossomed in her cheeks.

"That's—I—you—Don't be ridiculous, pretty boy."

Bas couldn't help the smug little smirk that surfaced on his face as he leaned back and stared at Sydnie. "Ridiculous, am I?"

She made a face. "Yes."

"You *are* jealous!"

"I am not!"

"Oh? Then what would you call it, kitty?"

She blushed a little darker at the perceived endearment. "I . . . I . . . *Possessive!*"

"I don't see a difference," he scoffed.

Sydney waved a hand to shut him up. "There's a huge difference, puppy – *huge*."

"Do tell."

"I will."

"I'm listening."

"You're *talking*."

"And you're trying to think of a difference."

She narrowed her eyes at him, and for a moment, he thought maybe she was considering sharpening her claws on him. The idea made him chuckle. '*As if she could* . . .'

"I'm possessive," she began. "Jealousy would mean that I *like* you."

"Which you don't."

"Of course I don't!"

"Okay," he agreed, schooling his features to hide his amusement as he waited for more of her explanation. "I don't like you, either."

She snapped her mouth closed on whatever she had been about to say and cast him an almost hesitant glance. "You . . . don't?"

He snorted. "Hell, no. Why would I?"

"G-good! Because I don't like you, either!"

"Already established. Go on."

"With what?"

He shrugged. "Your definition of the differences between 'possessive' and 'jealous'."

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that."

"Fine."

He rolled his hand to hurry her along.

"Since you just *had* to force me out of LA, then I've decided that I *own* you."

"Really."

"Don't interrupt."

He nodded and tried to affect a bored stance, leaning back against a mailbox, crossing his ankles and blanking his features accordingly.

"And since I own you, then that would mean that I *possess* you, right?"

He snorted.

Sydney wasn't finished. Rubbing her hands together as though she were just getting started, she paced a few steps and snapped her fingers. "And to possess something – in this case, you – would make me the *possessor*, and would, in fact, mean that I am not, as you say, jealous. It means – as I said – that I am *possess-ive*."

"Interesting," he allowed. "Does that mean I . . . *own* . . . you?"

She wrinkled her nose. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because, puppy . . . you *dragged* me out of LA . . . kitty-napped me, you might say."

He almost laughed at the chagrined expression on her face. Clearing his throat, he bit back the urge to chuckle. "Incidentals, Sydney. You say possessive; I say jealous."

"But I'm not!" she argued.

Bas chuckled and grabbed her hand, dragging her back down the street toward the car. "Okay, fine; you're possessive, not jealous, and I'm starving, not hungry."

"Where are we going?" she demanded, tugging on her hand but not trying very hard in her attempt to get away from him.

"I saw a little grocery store near the hotel."

"Grocery store?"

He sighed. "We're out of options since the hotel doesn't have room service – unless you want to go back to one of the restaurants?"

She uttered a little hissing growl.

Bas laughed, unsure why Sydney's jealousy made him so unaccountably happy. "I didn't figure you'd want to."

Final Thought from Bas:
She ... owns ... me ...?

Chapter 14

Regrouping

Cain dropped the telephone receiver into the cradle and scowled at the email he'd just received.

'Nothing.'

He'd set his best minds on the case, and not one of them were able to uncover a thing about the bounty placed on the cat-youkai. Having just taken the call from the last of his informants who had come up empty handed, Cain's suspicions had been confirmed. The hunt was being handled by one of two factions, both of which were infamous for their ability to see the job done.

"Damn it," he muttered as he reread the email.

'Z,

'Information scarce. No one is talking. Tighter security than expected. Advise to continue or abort.'

Cain sighed, scrolling the trackball and hitting 'reply'. Grimacing as he stared at the monitor, his fingers hovered over the keys as he considered his options. On the one hand, the search for information didn't seem to be working, but that didn't mean that the person he'd sent would fail. On the other hand, delving too deeply might cause more harm than good, in the long run. He'd dealt with both the organizations before, and he knew from prior experience that, while they might not match the might of the tai-youkai's office, there'd been damage enough done during those encounters to make him reconsider trying to infiltrate them too deeply. *'Bas might be in danger,'* he reasoned, *'but he's been well-trained, and he's smart . . .'*

'Abort,' he keyed in and hit 'send'. He was putting a lot of trust in Bas, but he also couldn't justify the potential loss, should the spies he'd sent be captured.

"How about a break?"

Cain snapped the laptop computer closed and glanced up at his wife. "In a bit," he said, giving her a little grin that he hoped she couldn't see right through.

"Still nothing?"

"I'm not having much luck getting information on this bounty," Cain grumbled, rubbing his forehead with a tired hand, knowing that it was futile to hide much of anything from Gin's discerning gaze. She knew him a little too well, he figured. Sometimes it was a really bad thing.

Gin frowned and pushed away from the doorframe, uttering a soft, commiserating moan as she ambled around the imposing desk. "Sebastian is okay, right?"

"Yeah," he agreed. "For now."

Rubbing his shoulders, she nodded. "They don't trust you to see justice done?"

Dropping the pen in his hand onto the stacks of files cluttering the desk, he leaned back to look into his mate's face. Brilliant golden eyes shining gently, she smiled her encouragement as she ducked her head to kiss him.

"Cal Richardson has been nothing but a pain in my ass for years," Cain remarked. "If this girl—Sydnie—had reason . . ."

Gin let Cain pull her into his lap. "You've always been more than fair," she assured him.

"I don't know . . ."

Brushing the wayward bronze bangs out of Cain's face, she leveled a no-nonsense look at him. "You're questioning your own judgment?"

"I'm questioning everything lately," he admitted. "It's just a gut instinct, but . . ." Trailing off, he propped his elbow on the desk and pinched the bridge of his nose. "What if I'm wrong?"

"About Sydnie?"

"She's out there with my son—"

"Our son."

"Our son," he amended. "Damn it . . ."

"You've always told him to trust his instincts, Cain. You should take your own advice."

Wrapping his arms more securely around Gin's waist, he pulled her closer and nuzzled her neck. "You're right," he allowed with a sigh. "Absolutely right."

"And don't you forget it, Zelig-sensei." She smiled sweetly then bit her lip as a hint of sadness crept into her eyes.

"What's on your mind?" he prodded gently.

Gin managed a half-hearted smile. "I was just thinking," she murmured.

"Bout what?"

She shrugged. "Sebastian."

"What about him?"

Her lips trembled, but her smile brightened. "Just remembering how it was when we first brought him home."

"Hmm?"

"You hogged him, Cain Zelig," Gin pointed out.

"You were recovering," he grumbled.

"For awhile there, I didn't think you were going to let me hold him at all."

"That's why we had Evan, wasn't it?" Cain countered with a bashful grin.

Gin rolled her eyes. "Ten years later!"

Cain chuckled. "They're my boys."

She giggled and tugged his ponytail. "And you *never* put Jillian down."

"She's my girl."

Gin groaned but giggled and kissed Cain's cheek. "Cain?"

"Yes?"

Her laughter died away, and she sighed. "Sebastian will be fine."

He swallowed hard, thankful for the absolute determination in Gin's tone as he kissed her forehead and hugged her tight. "Of course he will."

Bas groaned and rubbed his shoulder as he pulled out of the parking lot at the rental car agency. He'd taken to changing cars every day or two, just to be safe, figuring that it would be a little harder to track them if they switched their mode of transportation more often. Sydnie fiddled with a small silver locket she'd dug out of her purse and shot him a probing glance. "Are you all right?" she asked quietly.

"Fine," he replied, tilting his head from side to side to alleviate some of the built-up stiffness from nights spent sleeping in chairs.

"Good."

"We'll cross the border and stop in Oklahoma tonight. You want another spoon?"

"Oh, um . . ." she hedged. He tried not to smile at the anxious glance she cast him. "I don't need one."

"No one needs those," he reminded her. "But you like them."

She didn't respond to that, and Bas figured it was her way of agreeing. '*Stubborn cat,*' he mused with a soft little chuckle. "I'll get you one."

"We just switched cars yesterday," she pointed out.

He shrugged. "I know. You said this one wasn't as comfortable as the other one."

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "You're not blaming this on me," she grumbled, cheeks pinking prettily as she scrunched up her shoulders.

"I'm not blaming you. You just said—"

"I know what I said, Bas the Hunter."

He sighed. "Are you more comfortable?"

Turning the locket over in her nimble fingers, she nodded. "As comfortable as one can be in a moving deathtrap," she allowed.

"That's pretty," he commented, nodding at the jewelry in her hand.

Sydney glanced at him, her eyes startled, suspicious. "You think?"

"Sure. Had it long?"

"Long enough."

"Gift?"

"I guess so."

He shrugged. "From who?"

She stuffed it back into her purse and shrugged. "Someone I used to know."

He scowled at her cryptic answer, but let the subject drop, concentrating instead on the expanse of road that stretched out behind them in the rearview mirror. They weren't far from the Oklahoma border. Since they had some time to spare, he'd figured that crossing the state line wouldn't be such a bad idea.

"I'm bored."

Bas glanced at Sydney and chuckled softly. "We can stop early if you want."

"But I'm bored *now*." Flexing her claws, she heaved a melodramatic sigh. Bas grimaced as she raked those claws idly over the door handle.

"All right, all right," he relented. "Uh . . . a game."

"A game?"

"Mhmm."

"We can't play a game in the car," she scoffed. "Anyway, aren't you a little old for games?"

"Well, you're the one who calls me a pup."

She shrugged. "You say you're not."

"I'm not."

She snorted, crossing her arms over her chest. "What sort of game?" she asked cautiously.

"I don't know . . . truth or dare?" he suggested, recalling the silly little game that his sister, Jillian used to badger his family with, whenever they went for an extended trip. He used to pretend he was asleep to avoid having to participate in the stupid game. 'Maybe,' he thought as he tightened his grip on the steering wheel, 'maybe it'll work to get some answers out of Sydnie . . .'

"You want to play truth or dare?"

He sighed since he really didn't want to do any such thing.

Cain's words echoed in his head. *"We need answers, Bas, and Sydnie is the only one who can supply them . . ."*

"Sure," he said in a careless tone. "Why not?"

"Okay, puppy," she agreed despite the reticence in her tone. "I'll go first."

"Fine."

"Truth or dare?"

Bas turned the radio off and settled back in his seat. "Truth."

"Does she kiss good?"

"Who?"

Sydnie snorted. "Your bitch."

He winced. "My . . .? Sydnie . . ."

"Hmm?"

"I don't think that's really any of your business," he grumbled, fighting the wash of crimson color that rose to stain his cheeks.

"It's truth or dare, puppy. You shouldn't have suggested it if you didn't want to play."

"No personal questions."

She rolled her eyes. "If I can't ask personal questions, then what's the point of playing? Everything's likely to be personal to you, Bas the Hunter. Just forget it, okay?"

Stifling a growl that welled in his throat, he scowled at the road. "Fine . . . she's fine."

"Just fine?"

Deliberately trying to ignore the tiny voice that insisted that he tell her the truth, that he didn't really have a girlfriend at all, Bas snatched up his bottle of soda and took a swallow. "Yeah, just fine. Truth or dare, cat?"

Sydney stretched out her arm straight, turning up the back of her hand and carefully examining her claws. "Truth."

"Do you purr?"

Sydney shot him a quick glance. "Of course not."

"But you're a kitty, and kitties purr."

"Not this one, pretty boy." She turned to face him and shook her head. "At least, I don't think I do."

"Ah, so you might."

"Anything's possible. Anyway, truth or dare."

"Truth."

She fiddled with the On-Star control panel but didn't push any buttons. "You're kind of boring, aren't you? What's the matter, puppy? Don't believe in taking risks?"

"What makes you think that answering questions isn't worse than taking a stupid dare?" he challenged.

"Do you have something to hide?"

"Doesn't everyone?"

"Fine, then," she said with a sigh. "Have you had lots of girlfriends?"

He grimaced. "No."

"Hmm . . ."

"What?"

She grinned. "That just surprises me."

"Why?"

"A pretty boy like you? I think you're lying."

"Think what you want," he muttered. "I'm telling the truth . . . Truth or dare?"

"Truth."

"What about you?"

"Nope, I've never had a girlfriend," she deadpanned.

"You know what I meant," he argued.

She raised her eyebrows and tried not to smile. "You should have said what you meant."

"Have you had many boyfriends?" he amended.

Sydney sat back, resting her temple against the plush bucket seat and curling her legs up under her. "Boyfriends? No . . . Kitty toys? Absolutely."

"Toys?" he growled, tamping down the irrational surge of anger that rose to choke him.

"Sure . . . pity you made me leave them all back in LA, don't you think?"

He gritted his teeth. "And yet you didn't want to say goodbye to anyone."

"As if you'd have let me."

"You'll never know since you never asked."

"Truth or dare, puppy."

He shot her a long-suffering look. "Truth."

"I see . . . All right, then. Tell me . . . have you ever had sex before, Bas the Hunter?"

Bas snorted. "Yeah, I'm not answering that one."

She opened her mouth to argue. Bas shook his head. "I'm not kidding."

"Then you have to take a dare."

". . . Let's hear it."

"Okay . . . I dare you to . . . show me what you can do with your big, bad . . ." She planted her hands on the center console and leaned in close. He swallowed hard, tried to ignore the scorch of blood that surged through his veins. ". . . *Sword.*"

"My . . . sword."

"Yes."

He cleared his throat and stole a glance at her. She was entirely too bright-eyed, entirely too attentive . . . entirely too close. Leaning toward him, she licked his cheek and giggled when his face shot up in flames. "Damn it, Sydney! That's completely unsanitary—" he grumbled as he rubbed his cheek against his shoulder.

She sat back with a soft giggle, hands still resting on the console. "So are you going to show me?" she challenged, ignoring his tirade over her wayward tongue.

"Considering there's no good place to do that? No, I can't."

She wrinkled her nose. "Fine, fine . . ."

"I will another time if we find some place that isn't so open," he promised.

"Really?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

She clapped her hands happily.

He sighed. "Truth or dare, kitty?"

"Truth."

He cast her a sidelong glance and snorted. "Now who's boring?"

She pretended not to have heard him.

"You really don't remember what happened to your parents?"

"You're wasting your questions on things I've already told you," she pointed out stiffly.

"So you were being honest."

She shrugged, combing her hair with her fingers. "I'm always honest."

His snort proclaimed that he didn't believe her. "Honest, but you speak in riddles."

"I've never lied to you."

"Your turn, cat," he growled, leaning his elbow on the door and resting his temple in his fingertips.

"Where are your crests?"

"Nowhere special."

"You're really cute when you blush," she countered.

"And you're really fucking nosy."

She laughed.

"Truth or dare, Sydnie?"

"Truth," she told him.

"You were three when you were left alone, you've said, and you don't remember your parents, either, right? So who took care of you after your parents died and until you were three?"

"Who said anyone did?"

"Come off it. I have a little sister, and I remember when she was three. She was just a toddler. She certainly couldn't have taken care of herself."

"Well, I did," she retorted.

"A brother or a sister?" he pressed, careful to keep his tone gentle, neutral.

A strange sense of sadness filtered into her gaze. Bas caught it before she could hide it from him. "It doesn't matter, does it? I was left alone, and that was that."

"Sydney . . ."

"I don't want to play anymore. This is a really stupid game." He could feel her turning away from him; not only her body but her mind, as well. She was drawing into herself the way she always did when he asked questions she didn't want to answer.

Bas sighed and stared out the window. He'd been close to getting some answers out of her. *'Damn it . . .'* If he could just get her to talk, he'd be two steps ahead of the game, but . . . how? She guarded her secrets closer than he did. Her secrets, he knew, were far worse than his. Still . . . Maybe . . .

'So tell her something that you don't tell anyone else. Tell her something to let her know that you trust her with your secrets.'

'The day I trust her—'

'Don't be stupid. Who's she going to tell, anyway?'

He sighed, stealing a peek at her and grimacing when he saw the forlorn expression in the depths of her eyes. "No," he blurted, unable to staunch the flow of blood that stained his cheeks crimson.

"No?" she echoed, clearly confused as to why he was saying 'no'.

He grimaced. "No," he repeated, his voice almost dropping to a whisper. "I've never . . . I haven't . . ." He sighed. "No girls . . . not ever."

She tried not to laugh; he had to give her that much credit. Covering her mouth with her hand as she cleared her throat a few times, she sat up and stared at him. "So you *are* a puppy!"

"I am not!" he growled. "I just . . . I hadn't found the right one, and— and . . ."

"You're not one of those romantics who believe in happily ever after and all that crap, are you?"

"My idiot brother whores around enough for the both of us," he grouched.

"Oh?"

He snorted. "There's nothing wrong with being picky. It's a big deal to me, okay?"

She nodded. "And your girlfriend? Is she the 'right' one?"

Bas dragged a hand over his face and avoided her gaze. "No, Sydnie, she's not the right one, either."

"You're a strange puppy, Bas the Hunter."

He pulled into the parking lot of the small gas station and shut off the car. "About that . . . I don't—"

The sound of Sydnie's door opening cut him off, and he sighed. "I'll be right back. I'm dying for a smoke."

He let his forehead fall against the steering wheel for a moment as he uttered a soft groan. *'Damn it, damn it, damn it,'* he berated himself. *'Tell Sydnie something personal, huh?'*

'It's not my fault you decided to stop here before you could try to wheedle information out of her.'

'That's the last time I take your advice,' he growled. *'Just shut up, will you?'*

'You know, Bas, it's not that bad.'

'That's debatable. Arming her with knowledge like that? I'm going to be sorry; I know I am.'

His youkai laughed, and Bas groaned again as he stumbled out of the car. *'You're already sorry. Know what I think?'*

'No, and I don't think I want to.'

'I think you should just march in there and tell her you want her to be your bitch.'

Bas stopped short, his hand poised on the handle of the gas station door, and sucked in his breath in a sharp gust. *'Shut up, you. Just shut up.'*

Damned if his youkai didn't laugh even harder.

'Damn him . . .'

Staring out the window at the insignificant humans flooding the streets like vermin, Jeb Christopher crumpled the bit of paper in his fist, digging his claws into his palm. The coppery scent of blood filled his nostril, and he blinked in absent bemusement at the scarlet ribbons that snaked down the heel of his hand, winding around his wrist, disappearing under the cuff of the black linen shirt he wore.

"Jeb?"

He didn't turn to acknowledge the intruder. That she'd left him alone this long had been a minor miracle. Lifting his gaze back to the city, laid out in a grid of asphalt and steel; of brick and mortar, it stretched to the horizon, as far as the eye could see. "I want to know his name."

"Already on it," Myra informed him, the careful comfort of her voice a welcome solace that he shoved aside. "I sent Tom and Lessa."

"Good . . ." Lips curling in a cynical sneer, Jeb squeezed the paper a little tighter in his fist. "Send Glave, too."

Myra paused before replying. "All three?"

Jeb's face broke into a menacing grin, completely devoid of any traces of real humor. "Damn right."

"Understood."

He heard the click of her footsteps as she strode toward the door.

"Myra."

"Yes?"

Jeb tossed the message away. "Bring me the hunter. I want him alive."

Sydney tapped a delicate claw against her lips as she stared thoughtfully at the overstuffed recliner. Jammed into the corner on the other side of the nightstand, it looked sorely out of place, and while it might be a nice thing to relax on, it certainly wasn't a bed, not by any stretch of the imagination.

'Since when do you feel bad about the puppy's sleeping arrangements? It's not like he's complaining about it.'

She frowned. *'Of course he's not complaining about it. That doesn't mean it's comfortable for him, either. Bas is well over six feet tall, I'd say. Sleeping in that chair? That's just not a good thing...'*

'You like him a lot, Syd.'

'I tolerate him, you mean.'

'Just tolerate him?'

'Yes.'

'If you just tolerate him, then suppose you explain why you're standing here trying to figure out how to get him off that chair and into your bed.'

'You make it sound a lot worse than it is,' she pointed out.

'It's bad enough.'

'You're insane.'

'Insane? I don't think so. At least I don't live in denial.'

Sydney wrinkled her nose and shifted her gaze to her claws. *'I could just slice up the chair a little,'* she mused.

'You can't do that. That'd be a little too obvious, even for you, and then Bas would have to pay for the chair.'

'All right, if you're so clever do you have any suggestions?'

Her youkai sighed. *'Do I have to do everything, Syd? Just do something so that he can't sleep on it, but you don't have to destroy anything. Put it out of contention, so to speak.'*

'Hmm, like a temporary obstruction?'

'Yes, yes, something like that.'

She pondered that with a little frown.

'You'd better hurry. He went to the grocery store, and he's been gone awhile.'

Turning her head to gaze around the room, her eyes lit on the empty ice bucket and stuck.

'He can't sleep on a wet chair, can he?' her youkai prodded.

Sydney didn't answer as she glanced back and forth from the chair to the bucket and back again. It only took two steps to reach the table where the bucket sat. Before she could talk herself out of it, she hurried into the bathroom, filled up the bucket, and, biting her bottom lip, slowly poured the water over every inch of the seat cushion.

She stepped back and surveyed her handiwork with a thoughtful frown as she debated whether or not she ought to refill the bucket again. Eyes flaring wide as her head snapped to the side, Sydney gave a little yelp as she scurried to replace the bucket and launch herself onto the bed. Scrambling for the remote control, she was shuffling through the channels when Bas stepped into the room and kicked the door closed behind him.

"Milk, cottage cheese, yogurt, bagels and cream cheese . . . Hope you're hungry, kitty."

Sydney snorted and turned up the volume. "Not really, puppy, but I'll humor you."

He set the bag on the table and pulled his duster off, tossing it over a metal chair before unstrapping his sword and leaning it against the wall. She leaned her head back and rose on her knees, trying to see over his shoulder as he unpacked the two plastic bags. After neatly stacking the dairy products, he grabbed a clear plastic box and popped the lid before stuffing it into the small microwave on the bureau beside the television.

"What was that?" she asked grudgingly.

Bas chuckled. "Fried chicken. Want some?"

"I'm not—"

"Yeah, yeah, you're not hungry. I know."

She shrugged and smiled as he poured a glass of milk for her and closed the distance to hand it to her before sitting down on the edge of the bed to pull off his boots. "You were gone awhile," she remarked as she leaned to the side to see the television.

"You can't complain," he joked. "I brought you food, didn't I?"

She shrugged. "I suppose."

The microwave beeped, and he strode over to fix two Styrofoam plates. The smell of the reheated chicken made Sydnie's tummy growl. Bas chuckled again as he handed her a plate and a clear plastic fork. "Not hungry, huh?"

"Mind your own business, pretty boy," she shot back, cheeks pinking as she set the fork aside and picked up the chicken with her fingers.

He rolled his eyes but grinned. Plate in one hand and soda in the other, he shuffled over to the recliner and started to sit down. Sydnie choked on a bite of chicken when he sprang out of the chair, dropping both food and beverage with a loud curse. "What the hell . . .?"

"Something wrong, Bas the Hunter?" she asked rather blandly.

He scowled at the soaked chair and slowly turned, narrowing his eyes as he glowered at her. "Sydnie . . ."

"Hmm?"

Heaving a sigh and deciding that it wasn't worth the effort to argue with her, Bas stomped over and dug a dry pair of pants from his suitcase, mumbling under his breath about heathen cats who just couldn't be trusted. She managed to keep her expression blank until she heard the bathroom door slam. The little smile that surfaced, though, was tempered only by the slight twinge of guilt over the lowdown tactic she'd employed.

He stomped back out of the bathroom, tossing the wet jeans in the direction of his suitcase. Turning off the television then pulling out the bureau to unplug it for good measure, Bas turned slowly, hands on hips, scowling at Sydnie as though he were pondering her imminent demise. "Care to tell me why you soaked the chair, cat?" he growled.

Sydney bit her lip and blinked innocently, setting her plate aside and folding her hands in her lap. "It was an accident," she maintained. "You don't really think I'd do something as mean as pour water on it, do you?"

He heaved a sigh, raking his hands over his face. "Are you trying to kill me, Sydney?" he demanded.

"Why would you think that?"

Letting his hands drop, he slowly shook his head before striding over to clean up the mess he'd made with the food. "Forget it. I'm tired," he grumbled, tossing the plate and soda can into the trash. He strode off toward the bathroom again, this time returning with a dampened towel. He made quick work of cleaning up the spilled soda before stretching out on the floor and completely ignoring Sydney in the process.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, peering over the edge of the bed.

Bas snorted but didn't open his eyes. "What does it look like, cat?"

"You can't sleep on the floor!" she blurted before she could stop herself.

That got his attention, and he popped one eye open to stare at her. "Well, *someone* soaked my chair—it must have been a ghost."

Sydney rolled her eyes and slipped off the bed, curling up on the floor beside him.

"Sydney . . . what are you doing?"

"If you can sleep on the floor, I can, too," she assured him.

He sighed. "It's fine. Get back on the bed, will you?"

"I will if you will," she agreed.

"Cat . . ."

"Oh, please! We're both adults, Bas the Hunter, and that is a pretty big bed."

His expression said plainly that he didn't really like her suggestion.

"Just make sure you stay on your side, puppy, or I'll scratch your eyes out."

Bas growled low but slowly sat up, sweeping Sydnie up off the floor as he got to his feet. Momentarily speechless as he stared at her with an inscrutable look on his face, she wasn't prepared for him to drop her rather unceremoniously on the bed. He stalked around the bed and stretched out on the other side as close to the edge as he possibly could. Sydnie wrinkled her nose and got up to throw away her plate, too.

Curling up on her side of the bed, facing away from him, she yawned and closed her eyes. She was almost asleep when she felt the brush of a blanket being pulled up over her, but she couldn't do much more than smile wanly. She thought she heard him murmur something as she drifted off to sleep. Not able to comprehend his words, she sighed quietly and scooted a little closer.

"Night, Sydnie," he'd said. "Sleep well."

*Final Thought from Jeb:
Who the hell is this hunter?*

Chapter 15

Eye of the Storm

“So what, exactly, do they do at one of these carnivals?” Sydnie asked again as Bas dragged her toward the middle of town. She pulled her hand away to rub her arms as if she were cold, but she smiled a little hesitantly when she peered up at him through the thick fringe of bangs that framed her face.

“I told you, kitty. There’ll be games and crafts and food . . . All kinds of things.”

“You’ve said that already. What else?”

He shrugged. “They’ll probably have rides and stupid stuff like that, too. You cold?”

She rolled her eyes like she thought that question was absolutely ridiculous. Bas grinned and grabbed her hand, leading her past the brightly painted metal barrels that blocked off the street for pedestrians. “I’m youkai, pretty boy. I never get cold, remember?”

“Oh, yes, and I don’t breathe. Tell me if you get too cold. I’ll take you back to the hotel.”

It really wasn’t that cold, Bas mused as Sydnie craned her neck to look around. He’d wager it was around fifty degrees—a little above average for November in Ardmore, Oklahoma, or so he’d heard. The clerk at the hotel had commented on it when she was telling Bas about the Thanksgiving Festival. He figured that it was more of a ploy to get them to stay for another night. He had been about to turn in their key when he’d noticed the acute interest that Sydnie had tried in vain to hide. For reasons that he really didn’t understand, he’d instead paid for one more night, ignoring the voice that cautioned him that it might well be a mistake. The bounty hunter he’d fought wouldn’t be the last, and from what he’d gathered from speaking to his father, the chances were good that they’d run into the thugs again if they lingered too long in one place.

‘She’s never done silly stuff like this before, has she?’ he thought as he waited for Sydnie to take a shower and get dressed.

‘If she really has been alone since she was three, probably not,’ his youkai agreed.

He sighed and brushed some caked-on dirt off his boot. ‘It’s just a stupid festival.’

'Maybe. Then again, maybe it might mean something to her, and that's what you want, isn't it?'

'Why would it matter to me? She's just a crazy little cat who spends all her free time devising new ways to drive me nuts.'

'Like last night?'

He blushed at the reminder, scowling menacingly at the brush he'd been using to clean his boots. 'She did that on purpose; I know she did.'

'Of course she did it on purpose. She soaked the entire chair, Bas. Ever wonder why she'd do such a thing?'

He snorted, dropping the shoe brush into the leather case that held his cleaning tools and the oil rag that he used on the blade of his sword. 'Because she likes to make things more difficult.'

'Oh, for the love of . . . Bas, you know, sometimes I think you're a lot stupider than you let on.'

'Why else would she have done that?' *he shot back, yanking his boots on and tugging his jeans over them.*

His youkai sighed. 'Because, you moron, she knows that you've been stiff and sore from sleeping in those God-forsaken chairs.'

'So she had to drench the damn thing?'

'And you'd have said yes if she'd just offered to share the bed?'

Bas didn't answer that, remembering all too vividly, just how warm and nice it had been, waking up with Sydnie curled against him. Sometime during the night, she'd moved closer to him, or maybe he'd gravitated toward her. Either way didn't matter, considering the end result was the same. She'd rolled over in the night since he distinctly recalled that she had been facing away from him. He was still on his back, but she'd been nestled there in the crook of his arm, her cheek leaning against his ribs and a wan half-smile touching her lips. She'd looked so fragile in the burgeoning light of morning that siphoned through the cracks between the thick brown curtains. Half expecting her to panic when she awoke to find herself, for all intents and purposes, nestled in his arms, he'd been amazed when she'd yawned and slowly opened her eyes only to smile at him with an expression on her face that had made him forget that he desperately needed to breathe . . .

“What’s that smell?”

Bas blinked and quickly shook his head, drawing a deep breath as he glanced around at the milling crowd. “Which smell, Sydnie? There are a lot of things here . . .”

She waved a hand impatiently. “It smells like food . . . kind of.”

“Oh,” he remarked, nodding in understanding. “It’s all the fried junk they are selling.”

“Fried?”

“Yup. Most of the carnivals I’ve ever been to have had tons of fried foods . . . I think it’s easier to fry it out here than to cook real stuff.”

She wrinkled her nose and pointed at a craft booth. “What’s all that?”

Bas rolled his eyes, grasping Sydnie’s hand, and dragged her toward the booth. “It’s all pretty useless, really. Just an excuse to hustle money and eat a lot of crap,” he told her.

Sydnie caught his wrist with her free hand. “Useless? Really?”

He grinned. “Yes, kitty, completely useless.”

She digested that in silence as he hurried her toward the crafting booths.

The first stand was nothing but woodwork: wooden cars with painted wheels, wooden trains with carved wooden tracks, wooden beads, painted and strung to make colorful necklaces, wooden paper towel holders and whatnot shelves . . . Sydnie frowned as she eyed a small cabinet. Bas peeked over her shoulder and smiled. “You want one of those for your spoons?” he asked, nodding at the beautiful oak spoon display box. It had fifty slots with little brass labels above each with the names of the states listed in alphabetical order. There were two more rows of empty slots for miscellaneous ones, too.

“No,” she insisted, wrinkling her nose at the thought of having to take the spoons out of their cheap little boxes.

“Okay,” he agreed, taking her hand and pulling her toward the next craft booth. Mostly little trinkets designed for children that Bas remembered from long ago trips to the dime store with his mother, he couldn’t help but smile at the arrangement of ‘vintage’ toys. She’d always bought him silly little things, like rubber jacks and those tubes of rainbow-colored plastic that she’d smear on the end of an obnoxiously pink straw so that he could make those bubble-like balls that always shrank down, leaving

the plastic all puckered and distorted. The stuff stank horribly, but Bas had spent hours chasing his makeshift balls all over the studio while his mother and father worked on their various projects.

Smiling slightly as he pulled a pinwheel out of a little tin can, he held it up and blew on it, grin widening as Sydnie stared at the shiny spinning blades. "What's the matter, kitty? Never saw a pinwheel before?" he teased.

"I've seen them before," she grumbled, cheeks pinking as her pride reasserted itself. She turned on her heel and stomped a few steps away. Bas handed the girl manning the booth a five dollar bill and strode after her without bothering to wait for his change.

"Here."

She glanced at the pinwheel and wrinkled her nose. "Aren't you kind of old for that sort of thing?" she challenged.

He grabbed her hand and wrapped her fingers around the toy. "I bought it for you."

She blinked at it. He blew on it, and she jerked her hand away, watching in mute fascination as the wheel spun.

"You're a strange little cat, you know that?"

Sydnie shifted her eyes to the side as a secretive little smile tugged at the corners of her lips. "You think so?"

He chuckled. "Come on. Let's go win you a stupid, useless prize."

"You can win those games?" she demanded, nodding at the array of gaming booths and clutching her pinwheel tight.

He shrugged. "Sure, unless they're rigged."

"And you're going to win a prize?"

"Yes," he told her, dragging her over to a football tossing game. "Excuse me. What are the rules?"

The man standing behind the counter shrugged. "Toss the ball through the holes, and get a prize according to your points. Ten tosses for five bucks; a hundred points for one of the big stuffed animals."

Bas glanced back at the painted wooden game board. A series of five holes were cut in the board, and each one had a number value. The larger holes had smaller values, and there was only one worth ten points. He grinned as he glanced down at Sydnie and dug a five dollar bill out of his pocket. "All right, kitty. Watch the pro."

She rolled her eyes but smiled as she stood back and waited. Bas pushed his elbows back and swung them forward a few times, loosening up his shoulders. "You're not just being cocky, are you?" she teased.

Bas snorted indignantly. "Stand back, Sydnie," he went on with an arrogant little grin, "and you'd better pick out what you want."

The eye rolling became more pronounced. Bas palmed the football a few times, testing his grip on the ball. Sydnie leaned toward him with a soft giggle. "Good luck, Bas the Hunter."

"I don't need luck, kitty. I've got this all under control," he assured her as he let the first ball fly. It sailed cleanly through the ten point hole, and his grin widened as the ball caught on the netting behind the board and wobbled down to a stop. The man tending the booth whistled and grabbed the ball to toss it back to Bas.

"I guess you don't," Sydnie allowed.

Nine throws later, Bas stood back while Sydnie narrowed her eyes thoughtfully, staring at the array of hulking stuffed animals that hung from the top of the booth. "Any of them?" she asked without taking her eyes off the assortment.

"Any of them," Bas agreed as he pointed at an overstuffed, over-exaggerated misrepresentation of a white Persian cat, complete with blue glass eyes. "What about that one?"

Sydnie wrinkled her nose. "I want that dog."

Bas snorted but couldn't help the little grin that surfaced as the attendant grabbed the dog in question with a long pole with a hook on the end. Bas took it from the man, knowing that Sydnie probably wouldn't. "Thanks," he mumbled, stuffing the goofy-looking dog into Sydnie's arms. "That's one ugly mutt."

Sydnie scowled up at him. "He's not ugly!" she argued. "I think he looks like you."

"You think he—?" Bas choked out as he stared at Sydnie's obvious approval of the God-forsaken mutt. 'Okay,' he grumbled to himself. The dog was bronze in color like Bas' hair. Other than that, however, there were absolutely no similarities between the stupid

stuffed animal and himself. "And that just isn't nearly as complimentary as it should have been," he grouched.

"Well, I think he's cute," she shot back, thoroughly appraising her acquisition.

"Pfft! The day that dog—" Bas cut himself off abruptly as another thought siphoned into his brain. Cheeks reddening as he struggled to keep a neutral tone, he had to clear his throat before he could speak. "You . . . you think I'm . . . cute?"

She shot him a look at told him just how dense she thought he was being. "Of course you're cute, pretty boy . . . just like an overgrown puppy!" Giggling as she gazed happily at the stuffed dog, Sydnie nodded. "Just like you," she stated again. "I think I'll name him Bas Junior."

"What?" he growled, still irritated over her backhanded compliment.

"Bas Junior . . . he's our baby."

"Baby?" Bas echoed incredulously. "He's a stuffed *dog!*"

"Lower your voice or you'll make him cry," Sydnie chastised.

Bas erupted in a low growl, clenching his teeth together so tightly that his jaw bulged.

"Can you win a sister for him?"

Stifling a sigh, Bas planted his hand on the small of her back and gave her a gentle shove. "Move it, Sydnie."

She laughed and hugged the scruffy looking stuffed dog as he led her toward a food stand. "Don't forget to get something for Bas Junior."

He didn't comment on that, either. "You enjoying yourself?" he asked instead.

"I am," she said, her voice quiet, eyes bright as she gazed at him.

"Good," he told her. "I'm glad."

She glanced at him, opening her mouth to say something, but the words died away before she could get them out as the amusement in her eyes faded only to be replaced by a different emotion; one that Bas didn't fully understand. She stared at him as though she were trying to figure something out. A slow realization dawned on him, and he slowly reached out to brush her bangs out of her eyes, letting his fingertips trace

along the curve of her cheek, the line of her jaw. Catching her chin and tilting her face up, he stood, transfixed . . .

“Excuse me, sir . . . did you want something?”

Bas blinked and jerked away from her, startled gaze shifting to meet the grinning expression on the woman tending the food trailer. Forcing a weak smile, Bas swallowed hard, tamping down the irritation at the untimely interruption as he scanned the menu written in festive colors on the dry erase board hanging on the far wall of the trailer.

Beside him, he could hear Sydnie’s soft sigh, and he grimaced inwardly. He had a feeling that he knew exactly what she was thinking, because he was thinking it, too . . .

Sydnie sat on the bench, watching the spinning pinwheel with a little grin as Bas sat, hunched forward, slowly eating soggy chili-fries. She wrinkled her nose and turned away when he held one out to her. He chuckled and popped it into his mouth as she blew on her pinwheel to make it spin faster. “I bought these for you,” he commented, wiping his hand on a thin paper napkin.

“I’m not hungry,” she assured him.

“Me, either – at least, not for these.” Scowling at the shallow cardboard box of fries, he leaned over to chuck it into the gaudy orange trash barrel beside the bench. “You ready to go?”

“Go where?”

He shrugged. “We can go back and finish looking around, if you want . . . or we could go get some real food.”

“I don’t mind sitting here awhile,” she remarked as the pinwheel slowed.

Scooting back, he turned toward her, resting his elbows on his knees. “Okay.”

Slipping her gaze to the side, she tightened her hold on the stuffed dog, burying her chin in the animal’s fur. *‘He’s really something, isn’t he?’*

'Stop fawning all over Bas the Hunter and pay attention, Syd. You're acting like a lovesick fool. Can't you see it?'

'See what? And I am not!'

'Oh? Do you remember ogling him when he was palming that football?'

Sydney fought down a furious blush, studiously trying to avoid looking at him while she toyed with the small tuft of golden fur sticking straight up from the top of the stuffed dog's head. *'Well, he could nearly wrap his hand around the damn thing . . . that was fairly impressive, don't you think?'*

Her youkai groaned. *'Oh, for the love of—'*

'Anyway, you know what they say about men with big hands . . .'

'Focus, Sydney, focus! You're only staying with him to get to New York City, right?'

The wind shifted, blowing Bas' hair into her face. The wispy ends tickled her cheek, and she grinned. *'Yes, yes . . . New York City. Absolutely.'*

'You know, though . . . it wouldn't really be so bad, would it? Staying with Bas the Hunter for awhile?'

Sydney's smile faded, and she scowled at the almost hesitant question. *'It . . . wouldn't be so bad, no . . .'*

'Then maybe . . .?'

She sighed. *'Maybe,'* she agreed reluctantly.

"We should get moving soon. Staying in one place too long could be bad."

Sydney started out of her musings and glanced at Bas. He was surveying the park as though he expected someone to jump out at them. She shifted her gaze, scanning the small grove of trees, too. She didn't sense anything out of the ordinary, but she didn't like how worried he seemed, either. *"You mean tonight?"*

He nodded. *"Yes. I don't think the bounty hunters have figured out where we are yet, but . . ."*

She didn't need him to finish his sentence to understand his implication. A distinct shiver ran up her spine, but staring at him out of the corner of her eye was enough to

lend her a feeling of security that both unsettled her and somehow comforted her at the same time. "I hate cars," she mumbled.

"I know," he replied in an apologetic tone. "We could take a plane . . ."

She scowled at him. "The car's just fine, puppy."

"I thought so."

Sydney's retort was cut short at the distinct sound of a crying child. Turning to look back at the path that meandered through the park, she uttered a low sound deep in her throat as she saw the little girl. She had her back to them, and she sat in the middle of the path with her tiny hands pressed over her eyes to staunch the flow of tears. Not more than four years old, the girl's little frame shook with the force of her tears, and Sydney stood up, a thoughtful frown marring her brow as she cautiously approached the child.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, carefully keeping her voice low, calm.

The girl sniffled and uncovered her eyes, blinking at Sydney as her lip quivered precariously. "I dropped my Sno-Cone," she whispered, her little voice as soft as the breeze.

Sydney clucked her tongue as she noticed the paper cone on the ground. Lying on its side with the cherry-red treat spilling all over the path, it was slowly melting, dispatching in ribbons streaking the dirt. "Kittens shouldn't cry over spilt milk," Sydney said as she shook her head.

The child wiped her nose on the pink cuff of her light jacket, shoulders slumped, the air of abject despair surrounding her.

Sydney sighed and slowly held out the stuffed dog. "Here. Would you like this? He could use a good home."

With a hiccup, the girl reached out and took the offering. A small smile that seemed completely misplaced with the tears that still stood in her eyes spread over her face, and she stood up quickly, throwing her arms around Sydney's neck. "Thank you!" she exclaimed.

Sydney hesitated for a moment before hugging the child. "Shouldn't you go find your parents?"

The girl nodded and let go. "Mama's working the hat booth," she said. Turning on her heel, she skipped away, hugging the stuffed dog tight as she disappeared around the curve of the path.

Sydney waited until the child was out of sight before slowly pushing herself to her feet, dusting her hands off as she broke into a little grin.

"I won that for you, you know," Bas said softly as Sydney turned to face him. He didn't sound irritated at all, and his eyes were strangely warm as he gazed at her.

"Children shouldn't cry," she murmured, unsure why his scrutiny made her knees feel weak.

He stuffed his hands in to the pockets of his duster and ambled toward her. "No, they shouldn't," he agreed. "You, uh, want me to win you another dog?"

She shrugged. "I have a puppy . . . I don't need another one, do I?"

For once, the term didn't seem to bother him, and he grinned as his cheeks pinked a little. "You surprise me, cat."

"It was just a stuffed dog."

He stopped before her, amber gaze glowing bright, the vaguest hint of a smile touching the corners of his lips. She couldn't interpret the emotion in his eyes, but the flicker of approval was obvious enough. She'd somehow managed to please him, even if she didn't really understand how.

Bas' smile didn't disappear as he gazed at her, staring down at her as though he were trying to see into her mind. "Who are you *really*, Sydney Taylor?"

She shrugged as her eyes skittered away, finding it easier to watch the leaves dance across the muted brown grass. "Who do you want me to be, Bas the Hunter?"

He caught her hand, lifted her knuckles to his lips, blew on the blades of the pinwheel. The exhalation lifted her bangs as another little shiver raced down her spine. She stared at it, watched the convolution of swirling colors. Bas let go of her hand only to bring his palm up to cup her cheek, rubbing her cheekbone with the pad of his thumb. Sydney caught his wrist but didn't try to push him away, clinging to him as she shook her head, as she tried to figure out just what was happening. Blood pounding through her body made her feel curiously hot, strangely lethargic. She felt her breath hitch in her chest as his gaze narrowed the tiniest bit. A hint of challenge? An unvoiced warning? Or was it a promise of something that she didn't quite dare to hope for . . .?

Bas lifted his other hand to stroke her face, his touch feathering over her skin as softly as the brush of a feather. Sound seemed to fade as he gently tilted her head back, as his lips hesitated on hers for little more than a moment only to return once more. She leaned against him, accepted his kiss, let go of his wrist only to slip her arms around his neck. The idea of trying to resist him hadn't occurred to her at all. Tilting his head as he moaned softly, Bas wrapped his arms around her, offering her support, stability . . . offering her his protection.

His lips opened to hers; pressed against hers with a gentle ferocity that spoke to her soul. Barely contained emotion simmered just below the quiet façade. His body trembled against hers; strength humbled by a quiet restraint. Sydnie traced the contours of his lips with the tip of her tongue. He growled; a primitive warning silenced by the shocking feel of his tongue against hers: stroking, caressing . . .

The beat of his heart synchronized with hers, wild, erratic, and entirely soothing while the burgeoning swell of desire hung thick in the air. Friends or enemies; rivals or reluctant adversaries . . . it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered to Sydnie was the draw of Bas' youki, the lure of something that could be beautiful, if she only had the courage to meet him halfway.

The power that seemed to radiate from him engulfed her; welcomed her. She sighed against his lips and tried to press her body closer, welcoming the heat of his skin that permeated the thin fabric of his t-shirt. Slipping her hands under his coat, she kneaded his wide shoulders, reveled in the raw strength that she could feel simmering just below the surface. The absolute lure of him had become a palpable thing. Driven by an unvoiced desire, she willed him to understand. Maybe her pride wouldn't allow her to admit as much out loud, but her actions would. Bas crushed her to him, her feet barely touching the ground as the world spun away from her; as time slowed then stood still, leaving only the two of them in a world where nothing else really mattered at all . . .

The intrusion of a shift in the atmosphere was dulled in her mind. She couldn't think, didn't want to lose the contact of Bas' body against hers. With a sharply muttered curse, he tore his mouth away from hers, glancing over his shoulder seconds before he shoved her away. The sharp hiss of his gasp echoed in her ears as a gust of wind and the whistle of swift movement zipped past her. Bas grunted as the impact of the attack hit him, and the anger that had barely begun to form at the perceived callousness of his actions dissolved. "*Bas!*" she screamed, pushing herself off her bottom to her knees.

The force of the energy blast exploded in a white-blue light, hitting him in the center of his chest, and he grunted as he slid back, his boots leaving scars in the dormant earth. As the light died away, Sydnie's eyes widened in shock. Bas had managed to draw his sword, and, slamming the tip into the ground, had prevented himself from being sent

flying from the blast. Jerking the sword free as he straightened his back, he uttered a harsh sound – not quite a bark, not quite a growl – that she somehow understood. Without looking back, she pushed herself to her feet and darted behind him. She blinked, pressing her hand against her chest as she swallowed hard and willed her heart to slow, resisting the need to melt against him, to draw from his calm, his strength, as hers faltered for just a moment.

'Get a hold of yourself, Sydnie . . . The last thing either of you need is for you to lose your head.'

She winced at her youkai's sound, if not gruff, advice. Closing her eyes long enough to draw a deep breath, she grasped the back of Bas' leather duster for a moment as she reigned in her rioting emotions. She leaned to the side to peer around his arm, she stifled a groan. *'More bounty hunters . . .?'*

"Well, well, well . . . now this is interesting, don't you think?"

"Quite . . . No wonder he's taking his time in taking her to the Zelig . . . it makes much more sense to me now."

The man – a bat-youkai – rolled his head from side to side, neck popping in response to the action as a toothy grin surfaced on his gaunt face. Running his fingers through his spiky black hair, he leaned to the side to get a good look at Sydnie and chuckled.

"Can't say I blame him, Lessa. She's a pretty little pussy cat, what say?"

Lessa wrinkled her nose but didn't take her eyes off Bas. "Remember: we're here to do a job, can't you?"

She bit her lip. Two against one was hardly fair. Then again, bounty hunters weren't exactly known for conducting themselves in a sportsman-like manner. They'd fight dirty if they had to, and while she didn't doubt that Bas could beat them both in fair fights, she wasn't so sure what his odds were against the likes of these two.

"Bas . . ."

"Quiet, cat. Just stay behind me," he growled.

"Oh, look . . . he's going to protect her!" the male mocked. "How *precious*."

"Just remember: the boss wants him alive," the wind-youkai reminded her cohort, crossing her arms over her chest as she smiled insincerely. "As for the bitch . . ."

The man laughed again. "There's that, too, but a bit o' sport never hurt anyone."

Her smile widened. "Sport, you say?" Allowing her gaze to roam up and down Bas' frame, she grinned lazily. "He's a little more my type than she is."

Sydney couldn't repress the sing-song howl that rose in her throat at Lessa's goading. She started to dodge around the obstacle of Bas' body, but he must have anticipated her move, catching her wrist easily in his free hand and tugging her behind him once more. "Stay back, Sydney," Bas muttered. "I mean it."

Lifting her right hand, fingers splayed before her face as her smile widened, Lessa slashed the air, her hand outstretched, unleashing five blades of wind that shot out of her fingertips. Bas deflected them with *Triumvirate*, his body jerking slightly as each of the projectiles reverberated against the youkai weapon. "Ah, so you're not just a pretty face, after all," she teased.

The bat-youkai shot forward, claws drawn back as he swung a wide arc at Bas' chest. "Why don't you just hand her over? You know, save us the time and trouble."

"Over my dead body," Bas growled, raising the blade of his sword in time to block the youkai's descending claws.

The male grunted, pushing off the blunt side of *Triumvirate's* blade as he sprang back to regroup. "So sorry, hunter. Nothing personal, but the boss' orders, you see? Alive, maybe, but the boss didn't say we couldn't rough you up a bit, first."

He threw his head back, uttering a sharp noise, an unrelenting pitch that nearly brought Sydney to her knees. So high in pitch that human ears likely couldn't discern it, the sound was designed to disorient youkai, and Bas—a dog-youkai—had to feel the effects of it worse than she did.

She pressed her hands over her ears, unable to do much more than squeeze her eyes closed and wait for the sound to end. The blade of Bas' sword thudded against the ground, and Sydney had a feeling that it was taking every bit of willpower he possessed to keep himself from dropping the weapon completely.

The next wave of wind blades zipped past. Bas managed to lift the sword in time to block one of them, but he had to lean to the side to avoid another. It grazed his cheek, and he growled, sparing a moment to glance over his shoulder to make sure Sydney was still safe.

The sound was deafening. Forcing herself to peer around Bas again, she gasped as the bat-youkai lunged at Bas again. Bas hefted the sword over his opposite shoulder and hissed as the bat's sharp talon-like claws tore through the leather covering his arm. With a loud grunt, he brought the hilt down against the youkai's throat. The insidious

racket mercifully stopped abruptly as the youkai sprang away once more, hand clenching his neck.

A flash of misty blue light shot out of Lessa's fingertips and whistled through the air — an energy whip. Bas blocked it with his raised forearm. The end wrapped around his arm, and he gritted his teeth as the wind-youkai flicked her wrist, tugging him toward her. Sydnie caught Bas' other arm and tried to pull him back.

Twisting his wrist, he caught the whip and sucked in his breath as it cut into his hand. Wrapping his hand once, twice, he jerked on the glowing line. Lessa growled as she stumbled, and the whip uncurled as she retracted it.

"Bas? Are you all right?" Sydnie demanded, forcing her horrified gaze away from his blood-soaked palm.

"Fine," he muttered tersely. "I thought I told you —" Cutting himself off abruptly, Bas' chin snapped up as he eyes quickly scanned the surrounding trees. "*Fuck!*"

She looked around, too, scowling at the darkened trees; the shadows she couldn't discern. Too many flashes of light, too much of the unearthly sound that still rang in her ears, and much too strong, the scent of Bas' blood that filled her nose and turned her stomach . . . She couldn't tell what Bas was worried about, and she finally glanced up at him for clarification. "What is it?"

He shook his head, grimacing as he shifted Triumvirate into his injured hand so that he could grab Sydnie's wrist with the other. "Just stay close to me, Sydnie. Understand?"

The bat-youkai leapt again, arm drawn back to strike, a maniacal light blazing in his wild eyes. With his attention focused on Lessa, Bas didn't see him. Sydnie wrenched her arm free and darted forward to meet the youkai. With a fierce howl, she slashed her claws, catching the youkai across the side of his head, slicing through the tender flesh of his ear. The sickening rip of cartilage was drowned out by the furious rasping screech as the youkai's blood sprayed her arm, her shirt, her face. Raising his arm to strike her, he growled in absolute rage. Sydnie reacted on instinct, bringing her foot up and kicking it out, digging the spike of her stiletto heel into the bat-youkai's testicles.

"Oh, *damn*," Bas mumbled, grimacing as he spared a moment to watch the bat-youkai double over. "Remind me to buy you *flat* shoes, cat."

"Like I'd kick you in the balls, puppy."

"God, I hope not."

“Bitch!” the youkai bellowed as he lurched toward Sydney.

Bas caught her and shoved her back again, raising his sword and cleaving through the youkai’s chest. He turned away as the youkai exploded in a violent burst of light and dust and wind.

Sydney shot out of the way of another blast of wind blades, lighting on her feet between Bas and the youkai as she glared at the bounty hunter. “Look at him again; I dare you,” she growled as she skirted around Lessa.

Lessa glanced from Bas to Sydney and back again. “Jealous, kitty?”

She smiled insincerely as he stalked her prey. “Jealous? Of you? Do you think he’d really want to have anything to do with you when he can play with a *real* . . . pussy?”

Bas blinked at Sydney’s choice of wording as he caught her shoulder and pulled her back. “No, Sydney,” he mumbled in her ear.

She scowled at his almost distracted tone of voice. “She’s nothing but a lot of hot air,” Sydney scoffed.

“I don’t like killing women,” Bas asserted.

Lessa chuckled. “That’s your downfall, hunter.” She drew her hand back to strike again. Bas grabbed Sydney and leapt away. The wind blades hit the ground at his feet, sending chunks of earth flying into the air.

“I told you to stay behind me,” he growled.

Sydney shook her head stubbornly and shot him a baleful glower. “I will when *she* stops looking at you!”

Bas shook his head and caught her arm again. “We don’t have time to—”

A brilliant flash of light cut him off. He didn’t have time enough to do much more than jerk her into his arms, turning them both so that she was sheltered from the blast that hurtled toward them. He grunted as it struck with a force so powerful that the two were lifted off the ground and blown backward. Somehow he managed to shift their positions in mid-air, gasping as he hit the earth hard with Sydney’s added weight atop him. “Damn it,” he groaned, carefully shoving Sydney aside so he could stand. He’d lost his grip on Triumvirate. It lay on the ground about fifty feet away at Lessa’s feet.

Sydney scrambled to her feet, too, and darted away before Bas could catch her. "You came after me, right?" she called out as she circled around the wind-youkai.

Lessa stepped back to keep both in her line of sight. "It's nothing personal. You're just a paycheck to me."

Sydney kept moving, luring Lessa into doing the same. "How much am I worth?"

Lessa clucked her tongue. "Ah-ah-ah . . . breach of professional etiquette, you understand."

"Then you'll need to tell your boss that you need a raise . . . that is, if you make it back because I won't die so easily."

Lessa raised her hands in front of her chest as a bright ball of white energy sparked and started to grow. Out of the corner of her eye, Sydney saw Bas closing the distance though he still wasn't close enough to reach his sword. One arm tucked neatly over his ribcage, he looked a little pale despite the grimly determined set of his features. Sydney concentrated on the youkai, preparing herself to spring out of the way. The ball of energy between Lessa's hands crackled and popped dangerously; an ominous warning.

Sydney glanced away long enough to check on Bas' progress. Lessa noticed the slip and whipped around, ready to unleash her attack. Bas dove, retrieving his sword as he rolled to his knees, his body nothing more than a blur of motion. Sydney screamed as the energy ball exploded, shielding her face with her arms and squinting as the glow blinded her, as an unnatural wind howled in her ears. Lowering her arms when the wind died away, she blinked, staring in numb disbelief at the lone figure of the man on his knees, his sword still held in the position where he'd thrust it through Lessa's chest. The wind-youkai was gone, and the park seemed eerily quiet.

"Bas . . ." she murmured, stumbling toward the hunter.

Lowering the sword as he slowly got to his feet, Bas groaned as Sydney hurled herself against his chest. "Come on," he grumbled after indulging her for a moment. He stepped back and dropped *Triumvirate* into the scabbard strapped to his hip. "We can't stay here."

"You're hurt," she pointed out.

"It's fine," he argued, grabbing her hand. He forced a wry smile, but he looked absolutely exhausted. "Let's go."

"But—"

He rounded on her, glowering down at her, eyes bright with obvious irritation. "Look . . . that fight was loud, don't you think? Someone was bound to notice it, and I, for one, would rather not be here when the human authorities arrive. We've got to move, Sydnie, now . . . and I've got to call the tai-youkai."

"You should tell *him* you want a raise," she grumbled but let him take her hand and drag her toward the trees. He kept glancing around as though he was looking for something, but as the consuming fear that had assailed her loosened its grip, she couldn't quite help herself, either. "And how dare that bitch eyeball you? You should have let me scratch her eyes out . . ."

Bas sighed. "Be quiet, can't you? I'm trying to listen . . ."

"Listen for what?"

He shook his head. "To make sure we're not being followed."

She stopped short. "Are we?"

Bas tugged her hand and quickened his pace. "Nope . . . now move."

She let him lead her through the trees, a thoughtful scowl marring her brow. Bas was lying; she could tell. She just wasn't sure *why* he was lying . . .

They hopped over the row of hedges surrounding the park, and he grimaced as he hit the sidewalk. '*He really is hurt,*' she mused as he hurried her toward the cars lining the street. Thankfully, he'd parked nearby, and as the first police car zoomed past, lights flashing and sirens blaring, she couldn't help but agree that maybe putting some distance between themselves and Ardmore, Oklahoma just might be a really good idea.

Final Thought from Bas:
... *Damn it* ...

Chapter 16

Changes in the Plan

Bas rubbed his eyes and tried not to flinch as he kicked off his boots and waited for his father to answer the phone. His entire body ached. The thick leather duster had saved his shoulder from being torn open though the slits in the fabric were rather ominous reminders. His hand had been cut open when he'd touched the wind-youkai's energy whip though luckily that had stopped bleeding hours ago. The tiny cut on his cheek was minimal, barely worth noting, actually. His ears still rang from the bat-youkai's ungodly shrill wailing, and his head thumped painfully. No, the crux of his pain centered on his ribs. The right side of his torso ached horribly, and every time he moved, he felt like screaming, which had made the hours on the road sheer torture.

She'd remained quiet as he'd wrapped her cream colored tube skirt around his hand — it was the only thing that they could find to staunch the flow of blood. He'd hastily turned in the car and traded it for a different rental, handing over a wad of cash — he wasn't sure how much — to pay the agency to turn in their hotel room key. They'd left his suitcase behind along with all his clothing, but he'd been leaving the file with Sydnie's information in the car since the cat was a little too curious for her own good. Sydnie had everything of hers stuffed into that monstrosity she called a purse, so he'd chalked the sacrifice of his clothing up to acceptable loss and figured he'd just have to take the time to buy new clothes when they were safe enough to stop.

Sydnie had pointed out that it would only take a minute to run inside and get his suitcase, but Bas had refused. So far as he could tell, she didn't realize that there had been a third youkai in the park. He hadn't seen the stranger, but he had sensed the presence, and therein laid the problem. He couldn't run the risk of being trapped in another fight; not with his body suffering the effects of the previous encounter. It was his fault; entirely his fault. He'd let his guard down. He'd allowed himself to be distracted, and he was damn lucky that Sydnie hadn't been hurt . . .

He'd driven the rest of the day and well into the night, stopping just long enough to change cars again before the rental agency closed. He'd purchased *The Old Farmer's Almanac* for the detailed road maps, and had kept on the back roads, only venturing close to towns when they needed to refuel. Sydnie hadn't complained though she'd kept casting him worried glances; no small wonder since he hadn't been able to completely mask his discomfort. Country roads might be good for getting around without drawing undue attention, but they weren't the smoothest to travel on, and

more than once he'd nearly moaned out loud when they'd hit a pothole or an unexpected bump.

"Bas? Something wrong?" Cain demanded, voice still groggy from sleep.

Glancing at the clock, Bas sighed, rubbing his forehead with a shaking, weary hand. It was after midnight, Louisiana time. Bas wasn't sure. Maine time might be an hour later . . . "Sorry, Dad . . . I wasn't thinking. I should've waited . . ."

"No, no . . ." Cain insisted. Bas could make out creak of his parents' huge oak bed as his father sat up. "You sound a little off."

"Met up with some more hunters," Bas went on, his voice sounding oddly detached and flat. "A wind-youkai named Lessa and some bat-youkai . . ."

Cain didn't reply right away. "You took care of them?"

"Yes, sir."

"Damn it."

"I think there was a third, but I never saw him."

"A lurker? Figures. Did you find out anything?"

Bas grimaced. "I was a little too busy to ask."

"It's all right . . . Sesshoumaru's tangled with these two factions before. He sent Gunnar with the information they have on the groups. Are you sure you're all right?"

Gritting his teeth as he shifted slightly, Bas paused before answering. "I'm fine."

". . . You don't sound 'fine'."

"I took a couple hits," he explained.

"Tell me exactly what happened," Cain prompted.

"Not much to tell," he grumbled, unable to staunch the flow of blood that filtered into his cheeks at the memory of what had transpired just before the fight. "The female—the wind youkai . . . She hurled an energy ball at us. I got Sydney out of the way, but she hit me."

"Got her out of the way? How?"

Bas grimaced again. "I shoved her."

"Oh . . ."

"Anyway, the bat-youkai had some sort of sonic attack. My ears are still ringing, but he was fairly simple to take out. The wind-youkai was tougher."

"Bas?"

"Yes, sir?"

Cain sighed. "Didn't you see them before they attacked?"

". . . No . . ."

"You didn't sense them?"

". . . No . . ."

"Were they cloaking their youki?"

Bas squeezed his eyes closed and heaved a weary sigh. ". . . No . . ."

"Then how did they sneak up on you?"

"Well . . ."

"Bas," Cain began in a warning tone.

He tucked his arm around his ribs and braced his feet on the floor to push himself up a little straighter. "I was . . . distracted . . ." he admitted.

"Distracted?" Cain echoed incredulously. "'Distracted', how?"

"Just distracted; that's all," Bas muttered.

"Sebastian . . ."

"I-we-she—" He sighed. Getting the proper-name-treatment from his father just didn't bode well; not at all . . . "I was . . . kissing . . . her."

In the background, Bas could hear the faint 'snick' of a disposable lighter, and he grimaced. Cain had obviously slipped out of the bedroom and was in one of the two places in the house where Gin allowed him to smoke: his personal studio or his study. Bas waited for the gauntlet to fall. "You were *kissing* . . . Sydney?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're supposed to be bringing her in for questioning about the murder that she admits to having committed," Cain reminded him.

Bas grimaced. "She isn't a murderer!"

"That's not the point."

"It wasn't as though I sat there *trying* to find a reason to kiss her," he grumbled.

"That hardly matters."

"It won't happen again."

"Can you really promise me that?"

Bas clenched his jaw. "Yes, sir."

Cain sighed. "I see."

"I-i-it wasn't—I didn't—I mean, she and I—"

"Is there something you need to tell me?"

His grimace shifted into a low groan, his father's inference clear. "No, sir."

"I know you've said she's not a murderer—"

"She's not!" Bas cut in, unable to keep the sharp edge out of his tone.

"And I believe you. Bas, I trust your judgment, however—"

Bas dragged a hand over his face as he tried to stave back the feeling of complete exasperation. "Everything's fine."

"I'm not trying to pry into your personal affairs, son, but I have to ask . . . are you sure you can handle this? And before you get mad, I mean to say that if you're letting yourself get . . . *distracted* . . . by her, then can you really do your job?"

"Yes," he gritted out, clenching his fist, digging his claws into the heel of his hand.

"I trust you won't let something like this happen again?"

"Absolutely not."

Cain sighed again. ". . . I'm going to send Gunnar out there to talk to both of you."

"I don't think —"

"I need for you to tell him everything you remember about these bounty hunters. He's helping me try to figure out who they are, and who hired them."

"Yes, sir," Bas forced himself to say. He just knew that Cain had ulterior motives for doing such a thing, but he also knew that Cain would never admit as much, either. "Fine."

"Stay put. I'll send him out as soon as possible. Tell me where you are."

"Shreveport, Louisiana," he replied. "The Cypress Hotel, room 102."

He could hear the faint scratch of a pen on paper while Cain wrote down the address.

"Are you sure you weren't followed?"

Bas started to say that he was then scowled. "Not unless they were on foot," he allowed.

"And that's entirely possible, too." Cain let out a deep breath. "Can't be helped, but I doubt they'd walk into the hotel . . ."

Bas grunted. He'd thought as much, too. Unlike humans, who didn't seem to care where they did their dirty deeds, youkai, for the most part, tended to lean toward secrecy, normally lying in wait until an opportunity presented itself to avoid drawing undue attention. Even those who hated humans kept to the unwritten rule. After all, stirring up suspicion and drawing notice weren't exactly conducive to covert operations. All the same, Bas added, "I doubt it, too. Then again, I didn't figure they'd attack in that park, either. The city was sponsoring a Thanksgiving festival downtown, and the park was just off the main quad."

“Just lie low, okay?” Cain asked.

“Yes, sir,” Bas assured him. Sighing again as he lowered the phone and snapped it closed, he dropped it carelessly onto the table as Sydnie stepped out of the bathroom. She’d bathed and changed into her only change of clothes – a black tank top that didn’t quite reach her belly button and a pair of decidedly feminine pale pink g-string panties. Toweling her hair dry, she gazed at him with those bright, jewel-like eyes. “Where are the rest of your clothes, Sydnie?” he rasped out, quickly turning away before he did something utterly stupid – like grab her and kiss her again.

She clucked her tongue. “You used my other skirt for a bandage, remember? And the clothes I just took off were filthy. Anyway, I drew a bath for you. You should soak awhile.”

Snapping his mouth closed on the retort that had been forming on the tip of his tongue, Bas sighed instead. Sydnie was right. He had used her skirt as a bandage – at her insistence. “I’m fine,” he grumbled, gritting his teeth as he ignored the pain in his ribs whenever he drew a breath.

She folded the towel lengthwise and careful laid it over the back of a metal chair at the rickety old table before grabbing his leather duster and her purse and settling on the end of the bed. “Are you sure? The fight was pretty intense.”

“Yes, cat, I’m sure,” he grouched. “Anyway, what are you doing?”

Sydnie spared him a quick glance before digging into her purse for a packet of wet-naps. “Cleaning your jacket,” she said simply. She scowled at the torn shoulder. “I can try to mend this, if you want. I have a little sewing kit in here . . .”

Momentarily surprised at her offer, Bas could only nod while she fished around in her purse for the aforementioned sewing kit. “Thank you,” he mumbled. “That’d be really nice.”

“Mmm,” she murmured as she examined the ripped leather.

Bas watched her for a moment, a hesitant grin surfacing on his face before he turned slowly and headed for the bathroom.

Sydnie knocked on the bathroom door.

Bas grunted in reply, and she grinned. "Are you all right in there?"

"As fine as I was two minutes ago when you asked, Sydnie."

"You need me to wash your back, puppy?"

He sighed. "No."

"You need me to wash your front?"

". . . No."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," he growled.

"Are you positive?"

"Sydnie . . ."

"Don't say I didn't offer." She laughed softly and sauntered back toward the bed, settling down with Bas' jacket to figure out how to stitch the torn leather. She'd bought the small sewing kit months ago, figuring that it would be cheaper to mend her clothing than to replace them. She wasn't very good at it, but she wasn't terrible, either. Thing was, she'd never tried to mend anything as difficult as Bas' leather coat, either.

Pressing her lips together in a thin line, she scowled as she held the leather and carefully caught the edges as smoothly and evenly as she could, whip-stitching the smallest tear. The needle was difficult to force through the unforgiving leather, but, using the small plastic thimble in the sewing kit, she managed to close the laceration fairly quickly, and was mid-way through the second cut when the unnerving trill of Bas' cell phone made her jump. It took a moment for her system to settle down again, and she cast a fulminating glower at the ringing phone before wrinkling her nose and trying to ignore it. After ten rings, it fell mercifully silent, and Sydnie heaved a sigh of relief as she resumed her task once more.

Two minutes later, it rang again. Sydnie ground her teeth together and tried to ignore it, but when the phone started ringing for the third time, she gave up with a frustrated sigh. Dropping the leather duster onto the bed beside her, she sprang to her feet and grabbed the annoying device before stomping toward the bathroom. "Bas," she called, rapping lightly on the door, "your phone is ringing."

The slosh of water drifted through the thin, pressed wood door. "Just ignore it, cat."

"But it *keeps* ringing," she whined.

He sighed. "Then shut off the ringer."

"How do I do that?"

"Look on the side. There's a switch that says 'ringer' and you can turn it off there, okay?"

"You should have taken it in there with you," she pointed out as the final ring cut itself off mid-tone.

"Just shut it off, and leave it alone."

Sydney growled out a 'hrumph', stalking away from the door and shuffling over to the bed once more. Sitting down once more, she turned the device over in her hands, looking for the switch he'd mentioned. The cell phone rang, and she squeaked out a strangled little scream, very nearly dropping the phone in the process. Flipping it open, she scowled at the digital display screen. She pushed the button labeled 'connect' and cautiously lifted the phone to her ear. "Hello?"

". . . You're not Bas."

She blinked in surprise at the deep, lazy sound of the caller's voice. "No, I'm not," she agreed.

"You sound much sexier than Bas."

Sydney grinned, her initial irritation melting away. "I am!" she agreed.

"Kami, I hope so . . . Can I ask to whom I'm speaking?"

She giggled. "Sydney."

"Sydney," he repeated. "As in, *the* Sydney?"

"The one and only," she quipped.

"Sydney the kitty?"

"Mee-ow."

"Nice . . . *very* nice . . ."

She shifted her weight, curling her legs onto the bed beside her. "And who are you?"

"Me? I'm Bas' cousin, Gunnar."

"Cousin?"

He chuckled. "Well, technically, more like his second cousin or some such . . . my father is Bas' mother's cousin."

"Gunnar," she repeated. "I like Gunnar."

"And I think I really like Sydnie."

"Of course you do," she assured him.

"So tell me, Sydnie the kitty . . . are you as sexy in person as your voice is on the phone?"

"No."

"No?"

She grinned. "More."

"Really."

"Absolutely."

"I can't believe that," Gunnar replied. "You sound *damn* sexy . . . I can't imagine you being sexier than that . . ."

"Oh, I am, Gunnar . . . are you a puppy like Bas?"

"A puppy?"

"Mhmm."

"I assure you, Sydnie, there's nothing 'puppy-ish' about me."

"You don't say."

"I do say."

Sydney laughed. "Does that mean you have a big . . . gun?"

"Damn straight."

"Why are you calling so late, Gunnar?"

He chuckled again, countering Sydney's question with one of his own. "Do you always answer Bas' phone?"

Eyebrows lifting in surprise at the sound of Gunnar's strange accent, she noted that he spoke English perfectly despite the foreign lilt in his tone. "Only when it keeps ringing at me."

"Can I ask where my cousin is?"

She sighed. "He's taking a bubble bath."

". . . A . . . *bubble* . . . bath."

"Yes."

". . . Bas is in a bubble bath?"

"Of course . . . he was in a fight, you know."

Gunnar grunted. "Ah, yes . . . the fight."

"Let me see if he's almost done." Sydney untangled herself and sauntered back to the bathroom door again. "Bas?"

"What?" he growled.

"Do you want me to bring you the phone?"

"No, Sydney, I don't."

She rolled her eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Damn it, cat! You're the one who insisted I needed a good soak, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then leave me alone while I'm doing it!"

Sydney wrinkled her nose. "Suit yourself, puppy . . ." She lifted the phone back to her ear as she skulked away from the door. "He's a little grumpy right now."

"Aw, poor kitty."

"Hmm, yes, poor kitty . . . he just doesn't understand me at all."

"You know, Sydney, I am still having trouble believing that you're *hotter* than you sound."

"Believe it, puppy."

He paused for a moment, as though he were considering something. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Tell me something . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Does that phone have a camera on it?"

"I don't know . . ."

"Well, look at it. If it does, there should be a small LCD screen and a button with a camera icon on it."

She lowered the phone and looked it over. "Oh, so there is! You're such a clever puppy!"

"Why don't you take a picture of yourself and send it to me?"

"I can do that?"

"Sure."

"Hmm, hold on."

"Okay."

Beside the camera button was one with a little depiction of a stopwatch. Sydney slowly pressed the button, mouth rounding in an 'oh' when the screen asked her to select how

much time she wanted. She selected twenty seconds and folded the device so that it would sit on the low bureau beside the television. It snapped the picture, and Sydnie stared thoughtfully at the area shown on the small screen before resetting the timer – this time for thirty seconds – and hurried over to sit on the floor in front of the bed, leaning on her hand as she curled her legs to the side.

The click of the camera was strangely loud in the silent hotel room, and Sydnie crawled over to retrieve it. Grinning happily at the image, she lifted the phone back to her ear. “So tell me, Gunnar . . . how do I send this to you?”

“Hmm,” he drawled, “well . . . if it’s like my phone, you have to scroll through the list of numbers in memory and send it to me. If it’s one of the newer ones, you should be able to just tell it to send it now.”

“Let me look,” she agreed. She tapped the ‘menu’ button and grinned, selecting the ‘send image’ option from the list presented. “There!”

“I’m getting it now,” Gunnar told her. “Hold on . . .”

She waited for a few moments when he stopped talking. Sinking down on the floor and leaning against the bed, she drummed her claws on the carpet as she waited for him to speak again. “Well?”

He cleared his throat. “Holy dogs,” he murmured, his voice a little gruff, almost hoarse. “Damn . . . I think I just came in my pants, kitty . . .”

“Really?”

“Hell, yes. I like your little panties.”

“Bas was complaining about them.”

“Well, maybe you should just take them off?”

“Maybe,” she giggled. “I’m hot, huh?”

Gunnar chuckled and cleared his throat again. “Hot . . . no . . . I think you need a whole new word.”

“Like what?”

“Hmm,” he muttered as he thought it over. “How about . . . pussylicious?”

She giggled. "Oh, I like that!"

"I thought you would."

"Bas thinks I'm scrawny," she went on.

"The hell you say!"

"The hell I do say!"

"Is he blind?"

Sydney laughed. "No, but he seemed to like kissing me well enough."

"Bas . . . kissed you?"

"Mhmm . . . right before those bounty hunters attacked us."

"I see . . . you know, Sydney, if you get sick of Bas, I'd be happy to help you out."

"Oh?"

"Absolutely. How'd you like to be my goddess? I swear I'd worship you properly . . ."

"Bowing to the power of the pussy?" she teased.

"I'd hit my knees for you."

"Of course you would, puppy . . . I'm pussylicious, right?"

"Da-a-amn . . . You wouldn't be interested in being my mate, would you?" he teased.

"Well, I'd have to see what you look like before I made a commitment like that," she quipped.

"Me? I'm an ugly mutt . . . only one uglier than me is Bas."

"Bas is uglier than you, is he?" she mused.

"Yes. Yes, he is."

"Then I definitely have to see a picture of you. After all, you've seen what I look like . . . What's it called? Tit for tat . . . I titted you . . . time for you to show me your . . . tat."

He chuckled softly. "Fine, fine . . . I think I have a picture on this. Let me look, okay?"

He fiddled around with his phone for a few moments then sighed. "There."

Sydney giggled as the picture appeared on the small monitor. Long black hair tumbling over one shoulder, lean face with a slightly mocking grin, she noticed that the man in the picture had the same eye color as Bas, but most surprising of all were the tiny triangular dog ears perched atop his hair. "You're hanyou!" she exclaimed. "You have *puppy ears!*"

"You want to stroke 'em, don't you, kitten?"

"I want to *bite* them," she clarified.

"You can do that tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?"

He chuckled. "Yep . . . I'm coming out there in the morning to get information on the bounty hunters from you both."

"I get *two* puppies?"

"Sydney, sweetie, you can have anything you want from me."

Sydney laughed but didn't even glance up when the bathroom door opened. Bas shuffled out of the bathroom and stopped short, uttering a terse growl as he stalked over to snatch the phone out of her hand, glancing at the caller ID screen before bringing the device to his ear. "What the fuck do *you* want?"

Sydney pulled the duster off the bed and grinned as she resumed her mending. Bas grumbled unintelligible words into the phone and stomped toward the door, slipping outside into the hallway to have some privacy while he finished the phone call.

She giggled softly. She wasn't sure what to make of this cousin of Bas', but she was looking forward to his impending arrival very, very much.

'I don't know, Syd . . . How do you know that you can trust this 'Gunnar' person?'

She wrinkled her nose. *'He's Bas' cousin, isn't he? Bas trusts him or he wouldn't have his phone number, right?'*

'You're playing with fire; just so you know.'

'Gunnar is a lot better for a girl's ego than Bas is ...'

'You're asking for trouble, Sydnie.'

She sighed, her grin widening as memories of the kiss filtered through her mind. *'Then again, Bas has a few redeeming qualities, doesn't he?'*

Her youkai groaned softly as Sydnie's laughter filled the hotel room.

***Final Thought from Bas:**
... Dad's sending Gunnar ...?*

Chapter 17

Bas' Lie

Bas groaned as the incessant pounding on the door rattled through him, jarring him awake. Sydnie whimpered and buried her face against his side, and with a smothered yelp of pain, he sat up a little too quickly, only to flop back down once more. "Damn it . . ." he gritted out, wrapping his arm over his sore ribs before attempting to sit up again. Sydnie pulled the blankets over her head as he staggered toward the door and jerked it open with a vicious yank to glower at his cousin. "Oh, hell, you found us."

Gunnar Inutaisho grinned and held up two McDonald's bags. "Yeah, yeah . . . let me in, will you? I stopped off and got you some breakfast. Hope you like sausage McMuffins . . . it was the only thing that sounded even slightly appetizing . . ."

Bas made a face as Gunnar pushed past him. He closed the door and turned around in time to see Gunnar, who had deposited his suitcase as well as the two fast food bags on the table and was leaning over the bed, gingerly pulling back the covers.

"Step away from the cat, you asshole," Bas growled.

"Aww, she likes me," Gunnar mumbled as he knelt down and leaned in close. "We had a nice, long talk last night. I think we bonded . . ."

Sydnie sighed as she rolled over, uncurling herself from the tangle of arms and legs that she found most comfortable for sleeping. Arching her back as she stretched languorously, she kicked the blankets away with her feet, exposing the very tender skin of her belly as the high string of her panties peeked out from under the covers. Bas growled as Gunnar sat back, and maybe he would have found the absolute amazement in his cousin's face a little more amusing if the bastard weren't gaping at Sydnie with obvious interest. Gunnar Inutaisho was known for his ease with women, and not for the first time Bas had to tamp down the desire to shove his cousin right back out into the hallway again—before Gunnar got a chance to work his charms on Sydnie.

"If you like your balls, you'll get the fuck away from her," Bas growled, stepping over and jerking Gunnar to his feet by the front of his rumpled white shirt.

Gunnar grinned unrepentantly. "What's the matter, Bas? Do you even know what you're supposed to do with a kitten like her?"

Bas let go of Gunnar's shirt and cracked his knuckles. "Why don't you suck my —?"

"Gunnar!" Sydney squealed, launching herself off the bed — straight into Gunnar's arms. With a giggle, she pushed herself up on his shoulders to lick his cheek as Bas grabbed her around the waist and tossed her back on the bed, gritting his teeth as his sore ribs cried out in agony but completely ignoring the painful burn in his muscles.

"Get dressed, cat!" he bellowed, yanking the blanket out from under her and tossing it over her instead.

"Oh, hell . . . don't make her do that," Gunnar complained.

Bas' head swiveled around to glare at his cousin. "Shut it, Gunnar. I mean it."

"Jealous much, Bas?"

"Bastard much, Gun?"

Gunnar grinned. "I can't help it. I see a pretty little pussy like her —"

"Gunnar . . ." Bas began in a warning tone.

Sydney scrambled off the bed, mercifully hidden under the folds of the blanket that she'd wrapped around herself. Gunnar chuckled as he reached out to stroke her hair. "— And I just have to . . . *stroke* it."

"You're so dead," Bas ground out, advancing on his cousin with every intention of making him rue the day he was born. Gunnar — the ass — laughed, ducking to avoid Bas' first punch. Sydney caught Bas' arm. He gently but firmly shook her off as he swung at his cousin again.

Gunnar evaded that one, too. "What's the matter, Sebastian? You're moving a little slowly."

"Fuck you, Mamoruzen," he shot back, lowering his shoulder moments before he barreled into Gunnar's chest.

The wall shook as Gunnar — still laughing — grimaced as he pushed himself away from the surface. "Damn, you're still a fucking howitzer," he complained, throwing a quick jab of his own — and missing.

"Sebastian?" Sydney piped up. Bas winced and shot a glance over his shoulder at the entirely too-quick cat. Gunnar took the opportunity to land a blow on Bas' right side

just below his arm. With a harsh cry, he fell to his knees, gripping his ribs as he tried not to pass out. Ordinarily, Gunnar's hits didn't faze him, but on ribs that were already quite bruised . . . He concentrated on drawing deep breaths as Sydnie gently cupped his face in her hands, forcing him to look at her as she gently smoothed his hair back out of his face. "You *are* hurt! I should have known last night when you swore you were fine . . . stubborn dog!"

"I *am* fine, Sydnie . . . he's just an ass; that's all."

"Let me see."

He shoved her hands away as she tried to yank on his shirt. He brushed her off and slowly got to his feet. "Leave it alone."

She uttered a sound suspiciously close to a hiss, knocking his hands aside and grasping his collar, rending the material under her claws as if it were made of little more than paper. "Damn it!" he growled.

Sydnie sucked in her breath and pushed the ruined shirt off his shoulders.

"Holy dogs . . ." Gunnar muttered. "Bas . . ."

She winced, gently brushing her fingertips over the mottled bluish-purple-and-black skin that started just under his sternum and wrapped around his chest, extending across the flesh on his back. Bas stubbornly refused to look, pushing her hands away again as he turned on his heel and strode off toward the bathroom, slamming the door before sinking down on the covered toilet with a grimace.

Seconds later, the door opened, and Sydnie slipped into the room. She didn't speak as she strode over to the high rack on the wall, yanking down a few towels that she tore into wide strips. "Stand up," she said, her tone gentle as she set the strips aside and shook out the first one.

"Sydnie—"

"Stand up," she repeated, her voice wavering, faltering.

Bas stifled a sigh and slowly got to his feet. Sydnie leaned toward him, reaching around him to wrap the first strip over his torso. She worked in silence, wrapping all the strips around him and pinning the last one in place with a couple of tiny safety pins she'd likely dug out of her purse. "You should have told me," she finally said.

"I'll be fine in a day or two," he mumbled.

"You still should have told me."

"It's okay, Sydney."

She stepped away, tugging her skirt off the shower curtain rod and shaking it out before slipping it over her feet. Bas turned his face toward the ceiling and tried not to blush. "You should lie down," she told him as she adjusted the tiny tube of fabric.

"I'm—"

"You're not!" she interrupted, her eyes flashing angrily. "You're not! Those bounty hunters . . . they're coming after you because of me, and—"

Bas caught her arm and pulled her close, clumsily wrapping his arms around her to silence her tirade. "Sydney . . . it's okay."

She whimpered quietly, and he sighed. "Bas . . ."

"It's my job, cat. Don't worry about it."

She let her arms drop and stepped away from him, her back straight and proud despite the curious flash of hurt in her gaze. "Of course it is," she agreed quietly as she grasped the doorknob but didn't turn it. "Your job."

Bas heaved a sigh as Sydney slipped out of the bathroom, wondering just why it was that, no matter what he said, it never seemed to be the right thing. She made absolutely no sense to him, and he wasn't even sure why it bothered him as much as it did. Somehow, seeing her so upset because of his injuries . . . it didn't set well with him; not at all.

'*You don't know, Bas?*' his youkai chimed in gently.

'*No,*' he thought as he sank down on the toilet once more.

'*Then listen a little closer. She's the one, you know?*'

'*The . . . one . . . ?*'

'*Yeah,*' his youkai added cryptically. '*She's the one . . . the only one.*'

Sydney stirred the cup of coffee with a delicate claw, watching as the low-fat non-dairy creamer swirled in a rich tan color. Gunnar opened the door and stepped into the hotel room as he snapped his cell phone closed. "Still sleeping?" he asked, jerking his head toward the bed where Bas slept.

She nodded. "Out like a light."

"Good." He sighed as he slumped into the chair across the table from her. "So tell me what happened?"

Sydney shrugged. "Not much to tell. They showed up and attacked us. Bas – Sebastian – killed them both."

"Bas said he was distracted."

She grimaced. "That's a new word for it. Yeah, okay . . . he was distracted."

Gunnar crossed his arms over his chest, eyes bright, curious as he gazed at her. "I don't mean that in a bad way. Just that as a hunter, he really can't afford to let himself get distracted . . . at least, not in public."

"And that's my fault?" she challenged.

Gunnar chuckled. "Not really. I'd be distracted, too, if I had a kitty like you around."

She didn't even smile.

"The bounty hunters didn't say anything about who sent them? Nothing at all?"

"Nope . . . all I know is that the bitch's name was Lessa, and she had a preoccupation with staring at Sebastian."

"And that bothers you?"

She snapped her mouth closed on the retort that had been forming and turned her face to the side as she willed the hot flood of color not to surface in her cheeks. "No."

"Women normally think Bas is a little intimidating," he supplied.

"Sebastian?"

He nodded. "Yep."

"He's just a puppy," she scoffed.

"Maybe to a kitty like you."

"Maybe," she agreed.

"Oh, yeah, I almost forgot." Sydnie blinked as Gunnar stood up, digging into his pocket and producing a thick wad of bills that he dropped on the table before her.

"What's that?"

He grinned. "I sold your picture to Bas' brother, Evan. Figured you should have it."

She slowly took the money and counted it, blinking in surprise as she shook her head.

"Four hundred dollars?"

Gunnar shrugged as he sank back into his chair. "Sure . . . I could have gotten more. It was all he had on him."

"Four hundred dollars for that picture of me?"

A wolfish grin surfaced, and he chuckled. "Evan said he'd have paid more."

She laughed, tucking the cash into her purse. "So you know Sebastian pretty well?"

"Better than anyone, I guess. He's pretty much my best friend."

"I see . . . so you know his bitch."

"Come again?"

Sydnie wrinkled her nose, unable to keep her eyes from narrowing as she scowled at the coffee cup. "His bitch—*Madison*."

Gunnar coughed suddenly as he sat up a little straighter. "Wait . . . did you just say Madison?"

Her answer was a significant glare.

"Did Bas say . . . anything else about her?"

Sydney fluttered her hand dismissively and rolled her eyes. “Madison – Maddy – pole cat youkai . . . Is she pretty?”

“Pretty?”

“Where’d he meet her?”

“Meet her?”

“How long has he known her?”

“Uh . . .”

“Have they been dating long?”

“Well . . .”

“What does she *smell* like?”

Gunnar winced since the last question was accompanied by a very pronounced cracking of her knuckles. “Let’s see . . . Pretty? She’ll probably be damn gorgeous one day . . . She’s the daughter of a family friend . . . He’s known her almost all her life . . . to my knowledge, he hasn’t been dating her . . . and she smells like . . . a fourteen year-old girl, I suppose.”

Her eyes flared wide seconds before her pupils thinned to tiny slits. “He’s dating a *fourteen* year-old girl?”

“No, no . . . he’s not dating her at all, though I’ve very little doubt in my mind that *she’d* be more than happy to date *him* . . .”

She dug her claws into the pressed-wood table. Gunnar grimaced as it creaked and groaned. “That . . . that . . . he *lied* to me?”

Gunnar sighed. “Sounds like it, but . . . Sydney, he might not have been trying to –”

She shot to her feet, but sank down again, her shoulders slumping dejectedly as she struggled to hide the sudden pain that welled in her chest. “I see.”

“Would it matter to you if I told you that Bas isn’t really that great with women?”

She sent him a scathing glance. He held up his hands in mock surrender. “Okay . . . that would be a ‘no’, right?”

Taking a moment to compose herself, Sydnie slowly got to her feet and grabbed her purse.

“Where are you going?”

She strode toward the door. “For a walk.”

The scrape of his chair told her that he wasn’t going to let her leave, and she stifled a frustrated sigh as he caught her hand and pulled her back. “I can’t let you do that. What if more bounty hunters followed the two of you?”

“I’m not helpless,” she informed him. “I can fight if I have to.”

“I’m sure you can,” he agreed easily enough. “I still can’t let you do it.”

Jerking her arm away from Gunnar, she turned on her heel and strode off toward the bathroom.

“Sydnie?”

“I’m going to take a bath. That’s allowed, isn’t it?”

Gunnar sighed but let her go. She slammed the door behind her and locked it. Eyeing the small frosted glass window over the tub, she snorted. *‘All right, Bas the Hunter . . . if you can be a bastard, I can be a bitch . . .’*

The window pushed open easily enough. After checking the area outside the hotel, she balanced on the edge of the tub and turned on the water taps for good measure. *‘There is something to be said for being scrawny,’* she decided as she shimmied out the narrow opening and slid to the ground below, thankful that Bas, for once, had gotten a room on the ground floor, probably because his ribs were so banged up, she supposed. She hadn’t questioned it last night . . .

Straightening her back proudly, she smoothed her skirt and slowly walked away from the building.

Bas opened his eyes slowly and grunted as he tried to take a deep breath only to remember a little too late that it wasn’t a good idea to do that. His brain seemed

sluggish, and he carefully sat up with a wince. “Fuck,” he muttered, squeezing his eyes closed against the intrusion of pain that shot through him with every movement of his body.

“Feeling any better?”

“God . . . you’re still here?” he gritted out, eyes popping open to glower at his cousin.

Gunnar glanced up from the manila file in his hands. “So it would seem.”

Bas opened his mouth to tell Gunnar to get the hell out but stopped as he looked around the room. “Where’s Sydnie?”

“Taking a bath.”

Bas grunted in reply, forcing himself to stand up. “How long are you staying?” he demanded, draining the cup of lukewarm coffee sitting on the table.

“Till your ribs are healed up,” Gunnar remarked. “Anyway, we need to move tomorrow. It’d be a bad idea to stay in one place more than a day or so.”

“Yeah, fine.”

“So Bas . . . you know, if you wanted to lie to Sydnie, don’t you think it’d have been a good idea to tell me not to blow your cover?”

Bas dropped the Styrofoam cup and coughed, wincing as the movement sent shockwaves of pain straight to his brain. “What?”

“Your girlfriend . . . *Maddy*.”

“. . . Shit.”

“Coming up with a fake girlfriend isn’t really that bad, but don’t you think you should have at least picked a girl who wasn’t jailbait?”

“Shut up, Gunnar. Did you tell Sydnie?”

“Yeah, I did,” he replied with a grimace. “She was rather upset with you.”

Stifling a sigh, Bas nodded. “I tried to tell her, but—wait . . . did you say she’s taking a bath?”

Gunnar closed the file and dropped it onto the table as he sat back to stare at his cousin. "Yes, but she's been in there awhile."

"Fuck!"

It took five long strides for Bas to reach the closed bathroom door. "Sydnie," he called, knowing that she wasn't going to answer, and knowing, too, that it was because she wasn't in there. He could hear the rush of water from the tap, and with a muttered curse, Bas grunted as he slammed his shoulder against the door. Another long string of expletives accompanied the sight of the empty bathroom and the window that stood wide open. Pausing only long enough to shut off the running water, he stomped out of the room again, grabbing his sword but not bothering with his coat as he ran out the door into the hallway of the dimly-lit hotel.

Down the hall and out the glass doors at the end, Bas paused long enough on the sidewalk to sniff, catching the lingering hint of Sydnie's scent. She'd headed west, and he gritted his teeth together in a determined scowl as he sprinted after her. His chest ached horribly, his ribs protesting the jarring motion of his strides. Vaguely he heard Gunnar call out to him, but he didn't stop. Uttering a low string of invectives, he ignored the pain and kept moving: cursing Sydnie for being so stubborn, cursing Gunnar for not having realized that she'd bolt the first chance she got, cursing himself for being stupid enough to fall asleep . . . cursing himself for being stupid enough to lie to her in the first place.

He wasn't even sure why he had lied; not really. Chalk it up to his inability to think whenever she was close at hand, he supposed. Damn her for being so provocative. Damn him for letting her get to him time after time . . .

Sydnie's scent led him down a side street just off the main drag that ran past the small hotel. The surreal sense of suburbia was lost in a haze of motion as Bas sprinted down the sidewalk. He wasn't sure how much of a head start she'd gotten, but her trail hadn't diminished very much. Running past houses, he tried to assure himself that he didn't need to worry, that he'd find her. Unfortunately he knew only too well that Sydnie was just too damn good at getting herself into massive amounts of trouble. With his luck, he'd find her all right, and he'd end up finding more bounty hunters, too . . .

'Damn her! Why can't she just stay where I fucking leave her?' he fumed, pushing himself a little faster, grimacing as his ribs jarred painfully. *'When I find her, I swear I'll . . .'*

'You'll what?'

Bas scowled but didn't miss a stride as he closed in on a large grove of trees off to the left of the road. *'I'll beat her; just see if I don't!'*

'You won't beat her,' his youkai scoffed.

Bas snorted in reply since the ache in his body precluded a more rational line of thought. *'Fine, but if she puts up any sort of fuss at all, I'll slap her into the handcuffs, damn it!'*

'You can't,' his youkai pointed out.

'Oh? And why can't I?'

'Because, Bas . . . you left those in your jacket, and your jacket is still at the hotel. Besides, it's bad form to handcuff your future mate, don't you think?'

' . . . Shut up,' he growled as he darted through the trees on the moisture-sodden earth.

'Would you do that? Would you really? You know, right? You were wrong – dead wrong. You never should have told her that you have a girlfriend back home, even if you don't think it's any of her business, and another thing . . .'

'What?'

'Do you really think that she'll trust you now? She knows you've lied to her once. How do you expect her to tell you things when you've been dishonest with her?'

He sighed, skidding to a stop as he broke into a small clearing beside a picturesque little lake. It wasn't the water that stopped him, and it wasn't the view of the placid scene laid out like a postcard image. Sydney sat on a small boulder on the shore, her back straight, proud, and her legs tucked neatly to one side as she stared out over the lake. Her hair whipped around her in the wind coming off the water, but she didn't make a move or give any indication that she'd heard his approach. She sighed, a delicate lifting of her thin shoulders, a rippling of her flesh as the pale pink crescent moon-shaped youkai crests encircling her shoulder blades contracted slightly before dropping in an entirely defeated fashion. He grimaced as his anger suddenly dissolved.

"Sydney," he murmured, taking a hesitant step toward her. "I . . . I'm sorry."

Final Thought from Sydney:
... The jerk!

Chapter 18

Righteous Indignation

Sydney's back stiffened at the softly uttered words. Fighting down the surge of pain that welled inside her, she swallowed hard, staring out at the expanse of water before her. She'd stopped beside the picturesque lake to gather her thoughts, or so she'd told herself. She certainly hadn't been waiting for Bas. *'That's absurd,'* she insisted. *'As if I'd do something as stupid as that . . .'*

"It's getting dark," Bas said gently. "You . . . you should come back to the hotel."

"I don't think so," she murmured stiffly.

She heard him take a few steps toward her. She leaned forward enough to let him know that she would bolt if he even tried to touch her. He stopped and heaved a sigh. "Where were you going?" he asked.

Sydney shrugged offhandedly. "I was waiting for the bus, puppy."

"Waiting for the . . . bus," he intoned. "I see." She saw him shuffle forward into the line of her peripheral vision. She lifted her chin stubbornly and refused to meet his wary gaze. "Tell me, Sydney . . . wouldn't it be better to wait for the bus at a . . . bus station?"

"Maybe," she agreed, her nostrils flaring slightly as she tried in vain to curb her rising irritation. "But since the next bus isn't coming through until midnight, I had a few hours to kill."

"I can't let you leave," he told her, his tone almost apologetic.

"I don't remember asking for your permission, pretty boy."

"Good, because I don't remember giving it."

"You're such a bastard, did you know? A real jackass."

He nodded slowly. "We've all got our own burdens to bear. Now come on, will you? You can yell at me later if you want."

She rolled her eyes and shifted her weight, tucking her legs under her as she finally deigned to look at him. “You’re a liar, Bas – Sebastian – whoever the hell you are. You’re a liar and a jerk, and I’m not going anywhere with you!”

“Sydnie –”

“Go to hell, puppy! I don’t know which was worse: thinking that you were whoring around on your bitch with me or knowing that the only reason you kissed me is because you’re no different from every other guy I’ve ever met!”

Did he have to look like she’d just slapped him? Did he have to flinch and blush? She hadn’t missed the flash of acute embarrassment that he hadn’t been able to mask fast enough before he hid behind the emotion behind a calm façade that hid everything that he was thinking. He drew himself up proudly, his expression blank, stoic. Sydnie steeled her resolve, reminding herself that *he* had been the one who had lied; that *he* had deliberately tried to hurt her.

Bas stepped toward her, grasping her arm and pulling her to her feet. “I’m not going to stand around and argue with you, cat. Move it, will you? Come on.”

Narrowing her gaze, she jerked on her arm in a futile effort to free herself. Bas held onto her, tightly but firmly. “I’d rather swim naked in a lake of molten lava. I’d rather eat a million maggots. I’d rather die a million times than to go anywhere with you ever again! Leave me alone, damn you! Just leave me alone!”

“I can’t, Sydnie,” he explained. “You know I can’t.”

She uttered a low hiss, a sing-song little growl. He tugged on her arm, and she leaned back, using her weight as leverage in her struggle to keep from being dragged back to the hotel.

“Don’t make me toss you over my shoulder,” Bas warned.

“As if you could, you swine. You’re still hurt, remember?”

If the look on his face meant anything at all, the man really had forgotten that he was hurt, and he was also quite seriously considering hefting her over his shoulder as he’d threatened to do. Golden eyes flashing dangerously, he looked more irritated than he ever had. Bas tightened his grip on her arm and yanked. She stumbled, catching herself before she fell. Glaring up at him, she dug the heel of her stiletto into his foot until he let go with a grimace and a grunt of pain.

She didn't wait for him to recover. Darting around him, she broke for the trees again, intent on escaping the hunter before he could try to make good on his threats. She could hear him barreling after her, and she didn't dare spare a moment to glance back. If he hadn't been upset with her already, she didn't have to be stupid to know that he had to be now. The trees provided a modicum of cover, and she dodged in and out of the shadows in an effort to elude Bas the Hunter.

'Damn him . . . how can he run so fast when he's hurt?' she grumbled, sprinting faster as the sound of his heavy footfalls grew steadily nearer. Determination, maybe? The all-important 'job' he'd been hired to do? She snorted, covering her face with her hands to keep from being struck by the low hanging branches of so many cypress trees. The earth tried to mire her down, the spongy ground still saturated from rain seemed determined to thwart her. Careful to keep her weight on the balls of her feet as she ran, she gasped and stumbled when her heel caught in the tangled tree root. Her scream was cut short by Bas' considerable weight as he tackled her. His arms wrapped around her, his body rolling to the side to break the fall. He landed on his left shoulder, grunting as the impact rumbled through his body. They rolled a few times and finally stopped. Sydnie gasped and shoved futilely at Bas' shoulders as the hunter slowly rose on his elbows, shifting some of his weight off her in the process.

"Get off me, you oaf!" she yelled, grimacing as clammy moisture seeped through the thin material of her clothes.

"If you're smart, Sydnie, you'll shut the hell up," he ground out.

"And if you're smart you'll move," she countered, "or I swear I'll knee you in the balls."

His already impatient expression darkened even more, and Sydnie gasped when Bas thrust his knee between her legs, effectively blocking any attempt she might have made to carry out her threat. "Knock it off or I'll lock you up until we reach Maine."

She pounded on his shoulders. He didn't even flinch. "Lock me up, bastard! See if I care!"

"Damn it, Sydnie, stop it! You're coming with me, and that's final."

"The hell I am," she spat, jerking her arm free and swinging her hand to scratch his cheek.

He caught her wrist and slammed her arm against the ground beside her head. She bucked her hips to dislodge him. Bas gritted his teeth and leaned to the side, cutting the bandage that she'd wrapped around his chest earlier. Catching the first strip between his teeth, Bas jerked her arm toward him, deftly looping the fabric around her

wrist before catching her free hand and repeating the process, overcoming her resistance without any real trouble. "No!" she hissed as he pushed himself off her and jerked her to her feet.

"I'd shut it now if I were you, Sydnie," he bit out, tucking the loose end of the makeshift bandage under the other layers. "Now move it."

She tried to pull her hands free, but he'd tied them much too securely. Scowling at his handiwork, Sydnie made a face and stifled a frustrated growl. "Thought I told you, *Bas-tard*, I'm not going anywhere with you."

"And I thought I told you, bitch, you're coming with me whether you like it or not."

She jerked her arm away when he reached out to grab it then stopped suddenly, her gaze shifting from him to the surrounding trees.

"Sydnie, will you just—"

"What's that?"

Bas sighed and shook his head, shifting his weight to his right leg and draping his hands on his lean hips. "That's my idiot cousin, Sydnie. Now will you *move*?"

She scowled at him for a moment and stubbornly shook her head. "It's not Gunnar, Sebastian. I think I can tell the difference between him and someone I don't know."

Bas shot her a suspicious glance but slowly turned to peruse the area, drawing his sword as he took a limping step toward the trees.

Sydnie pursed her lips, taking a quick step toward him.

"There's no one there, just like I said," he informed her as he swung around to scowl at her. Sydnie bent over, slipping her hands under Triumvirate's blade and neatly severing the cloth that held her tight. "Damn it!" he roared as she pushed off the ground and darted away again.

She didn't get far, though. Her gasp as he threw himself at her again veered into a groan as she took the brunt of the hit, smashed between him and the ground once more. He levered himself off her before she'd managed to catch her breath, hauling her to her feet and stooping so that his face was mere inches away from hers. Eyes blazing, every line of his countenance seething with rage so powerful that she could feel it singing the edges of her aura, he grimaced angrily, his fangs glinting in the rapidly waning light of day.

She swallowed hard, hating him for intimidating her; hating herself for feeling afraid of him, even if only for the moment. He bent down, jerking her foot off the ground to pull off her shoe before repeating the process with the other one before straightening up again, dropping Triumvirate into the scabbard hanging on his hip. Grabbing her arm roughly and tucking the shoes under his elbow, he grunted to tell her that she'd better start walking.

Unable to think of another means of escape, she went with him, consoling herself envisioning a million different painful demises for Bas the Hunter.

"You're not really going to leave her like that all night, are you?" Gunnar asked quietly.

Bas snorted and shrugged. "That was the plan, yes."

Gunnar sighed. "Bas . . ."

"Shut up, Gunnar. She's a menace."

"A menace? Oh, please! You shouldn't have lied to her."

Bas glared at his cousin as he reached for a slice of pizza. "Drop it."

"At least take the cuffs off her so she can eat."

Bas rolled his eyes and sighed. "You hungry, cat?"

She straightened her back but didn't bother to look over her shoulder at him. Sitting ramrod straight in the center of the bed, she didn't make any moves to indicate that she'd heard him. "I'm *never* hungry, puppy," she reminded him.

Bas waved his pizza at her. "Told you."

Gunnar made a face. "Come on. I doubt she'll try to run away again tonight, don't you?"

Bas snorted. "You going to try it again, cat?"

"Absolutely," she replied.

Bas rolled his eyes.

"She can't even drink anything that way," Gunnar pointed out.

Bas grunted. "You want some milk, Sydnie?"

She didn't even bother to answer him, and Bas shot his cousin a meaningful look.

Gunnar wasn't ready to admit defeat. "Okay, but you know, her arms will be hurting my morning – if she can feel them at all by then."

"You want them off, Sydnie?" Bas asked.

"Go to hell, hunter," she tossed back.

Gunnar sighed. "I'll take responsibility for her tonight," he offered. "Just give me the keys, Bas."

"Forget it," Bas growled, giving up on the pretense of eating as he dropped the untouched slice of pizza onto the table with a dull thump. "You've already underestimated her once."

"Give me a break . . . I didn't realize she'd take off out the window."

"I have to use the little kitty's room," Sydnie declared loudly.

Bas ground his teeth together. Gunnar sat back, crossing his arms over his chest, and watched as Bas stood up slowly, hobbling over to pull Sydnie off the bed and roughly propel her toward the bathroom.

"Are you going to pull my panties down for me?" she asked, tossing a scathing glare over her shoulder.

Bas blushed but shook his head. "Gunnar, go outside and stand under the window."

"I think you're being a little ridiculous," Gunnar grumbled.

"I didn't ask you, did I?" Bas shot back.

Gunnar stared at him for a long moment before slowly heaving himself out of the chair and stalking toward the door.

Bas waited until he heard Gunnar's voice outside before unlocking one of the cuffs and letting it drop free. Sydnie spared him a fulminating glower before slamming the door in his face. He tapped his claws on the wall while he waited, deciding that if she took even one second longer than he thought was necessary that he was going to break down the God-forsaken door.

She opened the door and turned around, holding her hands behind her back to make it easier for him to refasten the handcuff. After the last click, she stomped away from him, chin held high as she crawled back onto the bed, facing the wall once more.

The smallest twinge of guilt made him sigh as he shuffled back over to the table and sank down. He was tired; he hurt; and his head ached. All in all, he figured it couldn't be much worse.

Sydnie curled her legs beside her and rolled her shoulders. For some reason, the very real memory of her, cuddled against him in the morning, flashed through his head, and he winced.

Then again, maybe it could.

"How's everything going?"

Gunnar rubbed his forehead as he slumped against the wall outside the hotel room, contemplating the first question that Cain Zelig had asked the moment Gunnar had answered his cell phone. "It's . . . going," he allowed.

Cain paused for a moment. ". . . Going? Sounds cryptic, don't you think?"

Gunnar sighed, trying to decide what, if anything, he ought to tell Cain regarding Bas' disagreement with Sydnie. Bas knew Sydnie better than he did, sure, but Gunnar hadn't ever seen his cousin quite so irritated, either. Granted, it couldn't have been good on his already battered body to have to chase her down, and then to watch as she ground her heel into Bas' foot . . . He couldn't say he blamed his cousin, but he also had to admit that he thought that Bas was being a little extreme. "Bas and Sydnie aren't getting along very well at the moment," he hedged.

"Oh?" Cain asked.

"I don't think it's a huge deal," Gunnar admitted. "Bas is just overacting a little."

"Overreacting? How?"

He winced. Ordinarily, he would leave it alone since technically, this was Bas' job, and he really did know Sydnie better than Gunnar did, but . . .

But he couldn't shake the image, either, of Bas, towering over the girl, glaring down at her with a look on his face that would have made grown men stand down. Sydnie hadn't, though she had finally come back to the hotel with Bas. The thing was, she was so tiny, so fragile looking . . . and the entirely too-real knowledge that, while the girl might be strong enough to weather Bas' tirade, she wasn't nearly experienced enough with Bas to know that he might bark and bluster, but he really didn't have it in him to harm anyone he considered to be his responsibility. Then to see Bas jerk the girl around as though she were no more than a little rag doll while he forced the handcuffs onto her slender wrists . . . Gunnar trusted Bas, of course, but even he had to wonder just what his cousin was thinking . . .

"Sydnie found out that Bas lied to her, and she . . . well, she tried to run off. He tracked her down and brought her back, but . . ."

"But?"

Gunnar rubbed his forehead. "But . . . he's got her handcuffed and swears she can stay that way for the rest of their trip back to Maine."

"He's just blowing," Cain remarked, more to himself than to his nephew.

"That's the thing," Gunnar admitted. "I . . . well, I don't think I've ever seen him look more serious than he was when he said he was going to do it."

Cain sighed. "Let me talk to him."

"Cain . . ."

"Just let me talk to him."

Gunnar let out his breath in a whoosh. "All right." Opening the hotel room door, he peered inside. Sydnie was settled on the bed once more, and Bas was leaning back in a thick recliner. "Bas."

Bas opened his eyes and leveled a dark look at his cousin. "What?"

Gunnar held out his cell phone, and Bas grimaced but planted his hands on the arms of the chair to heft himself out of it. He stomped past Gunnar, snatching the phone out of his hand as he narrowed his eyes and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, 'fucking tattletale'.

"Hello?"

Gunnar pulled the door closed again and slouched against the wall, hands jammed into his pockets as he heaved a sigh and tried not to eavesdrop.

"Gunnar says you've had some trouble with Sydnie today," Cain began in a carefully neutral tone.

"Oh, did he?" Bas asked, shooting Gunnar a menacing glance. His cousin was staring at the ceiling, obviously trying not to draw attention. Bas sidled closer and slugged Gunnar's shoulder. Gunnar grimaced and scooted over, furiously rubbing the spot.

"Want to tell me about it?"

"No."

"Humor me?"

"Rather not."

Cain sighed. "Do it anyway."

"Not much to tell," Bas growled. "She took off; I chased her; she tried to maim me, so I brought her back and put her in handcuffs."

"Bas . . . you know, right? Sydnie's life depends on whether or not someone can get her to talk about why she killed Cal Richardson."

He grimaced. "I know."

"Are you sure that you can get her to do that? I mean, if you have a conflict in personalities . . ."

"It's fine, Dad. Just fine."

Bas could hear Cain's claws drumming against the desk blotter and braced himself for whatever it was his father was thinking. "Maybe you should let Gunnar take over," he finally said.

"Wh—? No. Absolutely not. No. *Fuck*, no!"

"Bas, there's nothing wrong with that. It doesn't mean you failed. Certain people just can't really get along, you know? Like you and Evan, for example . . ."

"Sydnie and I get along just fine," Bas growled. "I'm not leaving her."

Cain sighed. "I know what you're thinking, and you're wrong. I know you're doing the best you can, but—"

"No, Dad. *Hell*, no."

"Just hear me out, Bas. Right now Sydnie is the most important thing. Getting her to trust you; getting her to talk . . . Do you want to save her?"

Bas stifled a growl and raked a hand over his face in exasperation. "Yeah, I do."

"Then you need to think about what's best for her, don't you?"

Bas ground his teeth together so hard that his jaw ached. "Yes, sir."

"Just consider it."

". . . Yes, sir."

"All right," Cain relented. "Get some rest. You sound exhausted."

Bas clicked the phone off and slapped it into Gunnar's hand as he leveled a glare at his cousin. "Thanks, Gunnar, you bastard."

Gunnar shrugged and grimaced. "I'm sorry. He called and wanted to know about you and Sydnie . . ." He lifted his hand as though he were trying to explain something, only to drop it against his leg again. "Bas . . . that kitty is tiny, you know? She's tough, but . . . but she's still just a little kitten."

"Stop calling her that," Bas gnashed out. "She's not your kitten, damn it."

"I never said she was. Thing is, you want her to be *your* kitten, don't you?"

Bas blushed but grunted. "Don't be an ass."

"Well, you do, right?"

He grunted again.

"Are you really going to leave her in those handcuffs?"

". . . No."

Gunnar nodded. "Look . . . is there anything else you need to tell me so that I don't say something that you haven't told her?"

"No, I . . . yes."

"Okay . . ."

"One thing . . . I haven't told her who I am."

"Who you are?"

Bas nodded. "She, uh . . . she hates the tai-youkai."

"No one hates your dad."

He glared at Gunnar. Gunnar grimaced but held his hands up in silent surrender. "Okay, I'm listening."

"I don't know why she does, but trust me: she does."

"All right, but you know you'll probably have to tell her eventually. You're your father's successor, right."

He nodded. "I know."

Gunnar slipped the cell phone into his pocket again and opened the hotel room door, set to leave Bas alone with his thoughts. He disappeared into the room. Bas scratched the back of his neck and shook his head.

'Your father's right, Bas . . . if Sydnie doesn't feel like she can trust you, she's not going to tell you squat.'

'I know . . . I know . . .'

'Maybe . . . maybe you should consider leaving her with Gunnar then.'

Bas snorted. *'Never. Gunnar isn't a fighter; not really.'*

'He can do it if he had to. You know he can.'

'But he doesn't like to. He's always been that way, and even if he were . . .'

His youkai sighed. *'Even if he could, the idea of leaving Sydney . . .'*

Bas made a face. *'Yeah.'*

"Bas?"

Bas snapped out of his reverie and glanced at Gunnar, who was leaning around the door with a strange sort of expression on his face. "She's gone."

Pushing himself away from the wall, Bas shot Gunnar a dark look as he pushed him aside and strode into the hotel room. The moment of panic that gripped him subsided. He could feel Sydney's youki close, and with a grimace, he realized where she had hidden herself. Taking the few long steps that separated him from her chosen place of seclusion, Bas let out a deep breath as he pushed the closet doors open.

Sydney didn't even spare him a glance. Sitting with her back toward him facing the rear corner of the darkened closet, she sat on her knees.

Bas sighed and hunkered down behind her, trying not to think about why finding her in the closet could dispel all his irritation. "Give me your hands," he told her, his tone gentle, coaxing.

She ignored him. He'd figured she would.

"Come on, kitty. Don't be so stubborn."

She snorted.

"You don't want to stay in those all night, do you?" he tried again.

She didn't answer, but after a moment of deliberation, she did lift her hands behind her back, extending them to him just enough to show that she wanted him to remove them after all. It was enough for him, and he carefully dug the keys out of his pocket to unlock the errant cat. The handcuffs fell away with a loud clatter on the tile floor. Sydney folded her hands together, pressing them to her chest, slumping her shoulders as she leaned forward enough to shield them, should Bas change his mind about letting her loose.

He grimaced and stuffed the key back into his pocket before retrieving the handcuffs and pushing himself to his feet. Dropping the cuffs into the deep pocket of his duster, he grabbed the telephone and dialed the number for room service, ordering a gallon of whole milk and ignoring Gunnar's questioning gaze before he shuffled back to the closet once more.

"You going to stay in here all night?" he asked in what he hoped was a neutral tone of voice.

Sydney shrugged, rubbing her wrists and not deigning to as much as glance at him.

"Okay," he agreed, sitting with a grimace and leaning back against the wall. His legs stuck out of the closet in a somewhat farcical show of exaggerated size, but he didn't comment on it. Sydney shifted her weight to the side, untucking her legs and wrapping her arms around her raised knees. "If you're going to sleep in here, then I can, too," he declared.

Sydney laid her cheek on her knees. He could feel her gaze on him though he didn't look to confirm it. "You can't sleep in here," she whispered.

He sighed. "Listen, Sydney . . . I'm sorry."

"You should be."

Bas touched her shoulder. She stiffened, but she didn't pull away. "I'm really, *really* sorry."

"If you didn't like me," she began in a tone barely more than a whisper, "you could have just said so."

He grimaced. "It isn't about liking you . . . I—"

"Then what was it about?"

Bas let his head fall back against the wall, tamping down the acute embarrassment at being forced to admit things that he hadn't really wanted to face at all. "It's just . . . you . . . I . . ." He sighed and clutched his head between his hands as he struggled with what he was trying to say. "It was for your own good," he grumbled.

"My own good? Of course it was . . ."

He wanted to reach out to her, but he couldn't do it. Seemingly paralyzed by the misery that radiated from her aura, he couldn't do much more than shake his head, opening and closing his mouth as words failed him completely. "It's better this way," he finally said with a wry grin that felt more like a grimace. "Do you understand?"

Peering over her shoulder, her eyes glowing in the semi-darkness, she gazed at him in silence.

Bas could feel heat filter into his face, but he stubbornly refused to look away. "You've got to be safe, Sydnie. I *have* to keep you safe." He dragged his hands over his face and let his head thump against the wall. "Do you . . . do you want me to leave you with Gunnar?" he asked, praying that she refused, but entirely unsure what she'd actually think of the offer. Of course, even if she did choose Gunnar, there was no way that Bas was just packing it in and walking away. He'd follow along behind them, if he had to, but there was no way in hell he was going to leave her with Gunnar Inutaisho, either . . .

She shot him a quick glance, a scared sort of look, eyes flaring wide as she quickly shook her head. "Just think about it, Sydnie . . . If it would make you happier . . ."

She still didn't answer, but he couldn't shake the strange feeling that maybe she really did understand after all. She scooted toward just a little, letting her back rest against his shoulder.

A knock on the door announced the arrival of the bellhop. Bas sighed and pushed himself off the floor and out of the closet, striding past Gunnar to answer the knock. He tipped the boy and set the milk on the table after filling a glass. Gunnar cleared his throat.

Bas ignored him as he returned to the closet and set the glass of milk beside the obstinate cat. She eyed it suspiciously but finally, hesitantly, reached toward it. Snatching it off the floor, she spared him a warning glance but downed the milk in a series of gulps. She set the glass down and carefully slid it toward him. He tried not to smile as he nodded, retrieving the glass and pushing himself to his feet again.

"Are you hungry?"

She didn't answer.

"If I ordered something, would you help me eat it?"

She shot him a look.

"Think about it while I get you more milk, okay?"

He strode back to the table and refilled her glass. She blinked at the drink when he set it beside her.

“How about I order something for you, and if you don’t want it, you don’t have to eat it. Come out, if you want.”

Sydney shrugged, and he nodded. That was as close to a ‘yes’ as he was likely to get. It was enough. Wincing as his foot twinged in reminder that he’d do well to buy Sydney some soft soled flat shoes, he shuffled over, grabbing the laminated menu tucked neatly under the phone on the dresser and ignoring the odd look gracing Gunnar’s face. “You want steak tips, Sydney?” he called, glancing up long enough to see her peeking around the accordion-style closet door. She narrowed her eyes, and he finally grinned slightly. “I’ll eat your mushrooms, okay?”

She offered him a barely perceptible nod. He nodded back and picked up the phone as the soft scrape of Sydney’s glass on the floor told him that she also wanted another refill. After ordering food, he dropped the receiver back into the cradle, turning just in time to see Sydney’s chagrined expression as Gunnar picked up the empty glass and headed for the table. “I’ll get it,” he said, neatly swiping the glass from his cousin’s hand and choking back the irritation that Gunnar would try to do something that he perceived as something that he, alone, did for Sydney. Gunnar looked like he wanted to ask a question but wisely remained silent while Bas refilled the glass and returned it to Sydney once more.

‘It’s going to be a long night,’ he predicted with. Gazing at the cat-youkai who was still lingering near the open closet and looked like she might be ready to retreat at the slightest provocation, he sighed. *‘A really, really long night . . .’*

*Final Thought from Gunnar:
What the hell was all that stuff?*

Chapter 19

Unraveling the Mysteries

Gunnar groaned softly as he rolled his head from side to side and pushed against the raised footrest on the reclining chair. *'This . . .'* he thought, scrunching up his shoulders to dispel some of the stiffness that had set in overnight, *'sucks ass – a lot of ass . . .'*

Glancing around the quiet room, he blinked in surprise as his eyes lit on the bed. Bas and Sydnie were completely tangled up together, and if his cousin's ribs were still bothering him, Gunnar couldn't tell. Lying on his side with his body wrapped around the cat-youkai, he looked like he was shielding her from something, and Sydnie, who had started out curled up in a little ball on the far edge of the bed, didn't seem to mind being nestled so closely to Bas, despite her obvious upset with him.

He couldn't figure them out.

Bas had given her the plate of food where she still lingered in the closet. Half outside, half in, she hadn't taken the food he'd offered until he set it on the floor in front of her. She was a curious creature, Gunnar thought. Too full of pride for her own good, she had stubbornly refused to come to the table until midway through the meal, and even then, she'd spent a long time, scooting closer and closer while Bas had pretended not to notice at all . . .

And the milk thing . . . now that was strange. For reasons that Gunnar didn't really understand, Bas was the only one she'd allow to give her the drink when it was quite apparent that she had an affinity for it. Bas had taken a shower shortly after dinner, and while he was in there, Gunnar had refilled Sydnie's glass. She sat at the table staring at him in a strange sense of confusion and had simply refused to touch the glass. When Bas had emerged from the bathroom about fifteen minutes later, she'd looked at him, nodded at the still untouched glass, and had informed Bas that Gunnar had filled it for her. Bas had stood still for a minute; as though he were trying to figure out what it was she wanted him to do. In the end, he'd picked up the glass and offered it to her, and only then would she drink it. Strange, indeed, if you asked Gunnar . . .

Perhaps the most perplexing thing, though, was Bas' behavior. In the number of years that he'd known Bas, he couldn't remember even one time when he'd actually heard Bas apologize. He'd come close before, certainly, but to actually say the words, *'I'm sorry'*? Nope, Gunnar couldn't remember that one; not at all. Even then, Bas wasn't exactly known for his patience, yet there he'd been, coaxing Sydnie out of the closet and

trying to make amends. Bas wasn't known for his finesse with women, either, and yet he'd somehow known just what to do with her. Maybe Bas didn't understand Sydney. Maybe he never really would. Thing was, he seemed to want to, and Gunnar had to wonder if Bas had any inkling, just how it looked to an innocent bystander. The way Bas cared for Sydney . . . it was the way one mate cared for another.

Bas groaned quietly, opening his eyes and yawning as he pulled Sydney a little closer. She uttered a whimper of protest, tucking her head further into the crook of Bas' neck. "Sleep okay, kitty?" Bas mumbled, voice still bleary and tired.

"Mmm," she agreed. "Warm . . ."

Bas yawned again then grimaced. Obviously his ribs were still quite sore. Sydney stretched out her legs, rolling onto her back as she stretched. Bas' arm had been tucked around her waist. His palm rested on her belly, and he grunted something unintelligible as she slowly sat up. She blinked a few times and looked around, seeming more than a little surprised when her eyes lit on Gunnar. "Morning, puppy," she greeted.

Bas sat up with a wince, stifling a growl as he remembered a moment too late that they weren't alone. "Get dressed, cat," he growled.

Sydney stood on her knees and crawled toward the edge of the bed but stopped to peer over her shoulder at him. "Something the matter, Bas the Hunter?" she challenged.

Bas broke into a low growl. Gunnar coughed indelicately and forced himself to look away since he had a good idea what, exactly, was bothering his cousin. Sydney had taken off her skirt before crawling into the bed, and her tiny black g-string panties didn't provide as much in the way of coverage as they provided in the way of eye candy . . .

"Just do it," he grumbled, swatting Sydney's backside to make her get moving.

"Mee-ow," she nearly purred, bending over slightly to stick her rear out at Bas.

Gunnar didn't have to look to know that his cousin's face had to be crimson. He coughed again, covering his mouth with his hand to hide his amusement at Bas' expense.

"Now, Sydney," Bas demanded.

Sydney giggled and slipped off the bed. Gunnar didn't raise his eyes until after he heard the bathroom door close. "Holy dogs, Bas," Gunnar began. "You sleep with *that?*"

"Shut it, Gunnar, I'm warning you . . ."

"You need to get some of that pussy; I swear to kami you do."

With a low growl, Bas rolled to his feet and advanced on his cousin. Gunnar couldn't help but laugh at the acute embarrassment coupled with the obvious irritation that veiled Bas' eyes. Cracking his knuckles in warning, he stomped over to stand in front of the chair. Gunnar held up his hands in mock surrender but couldn't help but laugh a little louder.

"It'd improve your mood," Gunnar quipped, ducking to the side as Bas' fist set the chair to rocking.

"My mood's just fine, asshole."

"She'd let you, I think," he added, leaning the other way to avoid another flying fist.

"Gunnar –"

Gunnar slid off the chair and rolled to his feet to elude his cousin. "Bet she tastes as good as she looks, and she looks downright pussylicious in that teaser she calls panties, don't you think?"

Bas tried to corner Gunnar, who was smart enough to stay way from any corners in the hotel room. "Stand still, you little fucker," Bas growled.

"Oh, right, so you can pound me with those ham hocks you call fists? No, thanks . . . but you know, I noticed yesterday when she licked my cheek . . . she's got a bit of a textured tongue."

"Shut the fuck up, damn it!" Bas snarled as he threw another punch that Gunnar easily evaded.

"Bet she gives damn good head."

"That's it," Bas ground out, grabbing for Gunnar's shirt and missing. "As soon as I get my hands on you, I swear to God I'll kill you . . ."

"You won't kill me," Gunnar taunted, ducking another swing directed at his face. "You like my mother, remember? She's your favorite auntie."

"I like your mother just fine," Bas agreed. "They can have another son since you were a fucking accident, to start with."

"Oh, now that's just cold," Gunnar complained with a mock grimace.

"Cold but true," Bas shot back.

"Admit it: you want Sydney – unless you're gay . . . you're not, are you?"

"I'm about as gay as you are, you moron," Bas gritted out.

"You tell her yet that she's your mate?"

Bas stopped short and stared at Gunnar as even more color deepened the color in his cheeks. "Don't be stupid," he grumbled, letting his fists drop as he quickly turned away. "It's not like that."

"Really? Strange . . . the two of you act like it's a done deal, or didn't you know?"

"Shut up, Gunnar," he grumbled, stomping over to the telephone to order a gallon of milk for the cat.

Gunnar remained quiet while Bas made the call. "Tell me, then, Bas . . . if she's not your mate, why are you bending over backward for her?"

"I'm . . . not."

"Ri-i-i-ight." Sufficiently sure that Bas wasn't going to try to kill him again, Gunnar dropped into a metal chair at the cheap little table. "For the record, you could do a lot worse than her. You're right, you know. She's not a murderer."

Bas shot him an inscrutable look then shrugged. "No, she's not."

"Gotta tell you, though . . . if you screw it up with her, I'll be more than happy to take her off your hands."

"Don't make me regret letting you live."

Gunnar laughed. "You know better than anyone that I don't put much stock in the whole idea of mates. I mean, come on . . . do you really want to wake up with one woman for the rest of your life?"

Bas rolled his eyes. "You're a little stupid, aren't you?"

Gunnar shrugged. "Your father had it right, Bas . . . waiting almost three hundred years before finding a mate . . . I think he's my hero."

"You'll be waiting longer than that. I don't think there's a woman alive—youkai, hanyou, human—who will put up with your ration of bullshit, so the discussion of mates in conjunction with you is moot."

Gunnar grinned unrepentantly. "Why tie yourself down to one if you don't have to? Granted, if I had to pick one, I'd definitely pick a kitten like Sydnie . . ."

"Do you have some sort of death wish?" Bas grumbled.

"Come on, Bas . . . she's damn fine, you know."

Bas broke into a low growl.

Gunnar relented. "Okay, okay . . . women are a touchy subject for you, right?"

A knock on the door kept Bas from answering, and Gunnar wisely hid his amusement as his cousin took the milk from the bellhop and made short work of filling a glass for Sydnie since Bas was liable to light into him again if he pointed out just how it looked . . .

Gunnar stood up and grabbed the keys for the rental car off the table. "I'm going to go exchange the car," he told Bas. "We need to get out of Shreveport today."

Bas grunted in response as he headed over to tap on the bathroom door while Gunnar headed out.

As much as Bas would likely hate traveling by car for any length of time, Gunnar thought it would be best to distance themselves a little. It was bad enough that they'd stayed in the same place two nights in a row. Gunnar also had little doubt in his mind that the bounty hunters would find them sooner or later, and he only hoped that they could delay the next attack until Bas was recovered enough to fight.

The dull clunk of footsteps echoed against the black marble floor in the dimly lit passage. The building was empty, the hour late, and he didn't miss a beat as he strode toward the dim circle of light that siphoned from the doorway at the end of the hall. Squeezing the corner of his worn leather jacket, double checking to make certain that the mini-DVD was safe, he didn't miss a step.

He'd followed his orders to the letter. He hadn't been seen, and to his knowledge, he hadn't been sensed. He had been surprised, though—very surprised. He hadn't been sure what to expect, but the fight he'd witnessed . . . He gritted his teeth, a harsh growl slipping from him as he approached the doorway. Lessa and Tom had been good fighters, and that hunter, whoever he was, hadn't had much trouble dispensing with the both of them.

Raising his hand, he knocked on the doorframe. He couldn't see Jeb since the door was only partially open. He sensed his boss nearby, however, and he waited for the terse reply before he stepped inside the office.

"Come."

Glave Minor slipped into the room, locating Jeb in the shadows of the thick curtains that were drawn away from the windows. He appeared to be staring out at the lights of the city twinkling below. Glave knew better. Jeb was deceptive, and the perceived inattention had been the downfall of many a youkai over the years.

"Lessa and Tom failed, didn't they?"

The question sounded more like a statement. Glave strode over to the desk and dropped the mini-disc onto the PC tablet. "Yes."

Jeb nodded, jamming his hands into his pockets though he didn't turn around. "He is formidable, this hunter."

Glave clasped his hands together before him. "Yes."

"Did you recognize him?"

"No."

"No," Jeb repeated as he slowly turned to face Glave. "Weaknesses?"

Glave shook his head. "Not many to speak of."

"Everyone has a weakness," Jeb bit out tersely.

Glave shrugged. "When they found him, he was . . . kissing the target."

"Oh?"

"Took a hard hit from Lessa because of it . . . It wasn't enough, though."

"I see."

"He is dog-youkai," Glave supplied as Jeb wandered over, lifted the mini-DVD, turning the case over in his fingers.

"Hmm . . . Dog-youkai . . . now that *is* interesting, wouldn't you say?"

"My instructions?"

Jeb shook his head without taking his eyes off the disc. "Just wait . . . I want to see this hunter for myself."

Glave nodded.

Jeb dropped the case onto his desk and finally met Glave's gaze. "That's all for now."

Glave turned to go without a word, leaving the cougar-youkai alone with his thoughts – and the mini-DVD that Jeb believed would answer his questions.

Sydney turned the spoon from side to side, staring at the newest addition to her State spoon collection before slipping it into her purse for safekeeping as Gunnar pulled the minivan out of the truck stop parking lot. Bas grimaced when Gunnar hit a deep pothole. Stretched out on the bench seat behind her, he looked comfortable enough despite the discomfort from riding in a vehicle. He'd said that his ribs were feeling better, though in Sydney's estimation, they didn't look like they were healing very quickly.

She crawled out of her seat, along the narrow opening to carefully crawl onto the seat beside Bas' bent knees. "Thank you for the spoon," she said, her tone hesitant but friendly enough.

Bas lifted his arm—he had draped it over his eyes—and offered her a wan little smile. “You’re welcome.”

“How much further are we going?” she demanded, raising her voice so that Gunnar could hear her.

“Not that far,” he told her. “We’re almost at Morgan City.”

“Morgan City,” she repeated. “Is that where we’re stopping?”

“Sure,” he agreed. “I know the owner of a hotel there. We’ll be safe enough, at least for a day or two—until Bas can pull his own weight, that is.”

“You can suck it, Gunnar,” Bas grumbled mildly.

“Not me, Bas . . . maybe Sydnie . . .”

Bas erupted in a low growl. Sydnie giggled. He caught her amused gaze and blushed, mumbling something about moronic cousins who should have been drowned at birth. Sydnie giggled louder. Bas wrinkled his nose and took her unopened bottle of milk, popping the seal for her before handing it back and chucking the cap at Gunnar’s head.

Sydnie drank the milk quickly; tilting the bottle back to make sure she got all of it before licking her lips and smiling at Bas, who was staring at her with a strange sort of expression on his face. He looked fascinated—like he had just before he’d kissed her in the park, and she swallowed hard, her pulse racing wildly, as a hint of a blush rose in her cheeks.

“So tell me about the fight. Was there anything that either of you remembered? Even if it seems insignificant, the smallest detail might help for me to figure out who’s after you.”

Bas blinked and quickly forced his gaze away. Sydnie stifled a sigh as the moment passed.

“I already told you everything,” Bas grumbled.

Sydnie wrinkled her nose at the memory of the wind-youkai and her penchant of staring at Bas. “They didn’t say anything else . . .” she trailed off and bit her lip as she played the altercation back in her head.

The bat-youkai's words . . . "So sorry, hunter. Nothing personal, but the boss' orders, you see? Alive, maybe, but the boss didn't say we couldn't rough you up a bit, first."

She rubbed her arms as a distinct shiver ran up her spine. "They were supposed to . . . kill me and bring in Bas alive," she murmured.

"What was that?" Gunnar demanded, having not quite heard Sydnie's quiet admission.

She cleared her throat, casting Bas a surreptitious glance. He scowled at the back of the bench seat before him, as though he were pondering Sydnie's words, too. "I said that they were told to kill me and bring Bas in alive."

Gunnar's amber eyes met hers in the rearview mirror. She couldn't see any other part of his face, but she didn't have to. He looked alarmed – very alarmed. "I see," he drawled slowly. "Alive . . ."

"I forgot about that," Bas admitted.

"Fuck," Gunnar muttered. "Sounds like you pissed someone off . . . what *exactly* did they say?"

Bas shrugged. "Just said something about their boss wanting me alive."

Gunnar shook his head. "That can't be right . . . bounty hunters know the potential risks; the dangers. Anyone who does a job like that *has* to realize that if they screw up, the penalty can be death . . ."

"Yeah, well . . ."

"So he wants you alive . . ."

"Over my dead body," Bas snorted.

Sydnie set the empty milk container in the cup holder beside her before carefully pulling Bas' duster open to examine his bruised ribs. He grimaced but didn't try to stop her. She bit her lip, telling herself that she was just being silly despite the foreboding that she couldn't quite brush aside. She hadn't stopped to think about why the bounty hunters would have said such a thing, but she didn't have to be brilliant to know, too, that bringing Bas in hadn't originally part of their contract.

Gunnar shook his head. "I don't know, but I'd say that you got their attention."

"Shut it, Gunnar," Bas grumbled as he caught Sydnie's hand and gently squeezed her icy fingers. She glanced up at him, her eyes wide, her cheeks pale, and he offered her a hesitant, if not reassuring, smile.

Gunnar started to argue but must have thought better of it. He sighed and turned his attention back to the road once more.

"It's okay, Sydnie," Bas mumbled.

Sydnie shrugged. "I know."

"They're not going to hurt me, and I'm not going to let them hurt you, either."

She tried to smile, but it must not have worked because he grimaced. "I know."

"Do you trust me?"

"I..."

"It's alright, you know. It's okay to trust someone."

She pressed her lips together and jerked her head in a nod. "I... trust... you."

He smiled, nodded, squeezed her fingers again. "Good."

Blinking quickly, she turned her face away, dashing the back of her hand over her eyes as she heaved a heavy sigh. *'They won't hurt Sebastian,'* she told herself sternly. *'I... I won't let them...'*

Jeb slouched in the black leather chair, scowling at the widescreen television. "Back," he growled loudly enough for the voice sensor to pick up on the command. The image stilled then rewound. "Play." The video stilled once more before resuming the playback. Gaze narrowing as the hunter wheeled around, cutting down Tom Fulton, the bat-youkai, Jeb didn't hear the slight hiss that escaped him.

He'd watched the footage countless times. The hunter possessed an efficacy in his movements, a deceptive grace despite his huge physique. Aside from the first hit that he hadn't seen coming until too late, he hadn't been caught off-guard, taking hits only

when he couldn't avoid them, and taking them in an effort to shield the cat-youkai from the attacks . . . *'Damn him . . .'*

The flash of golden eyes . . . the bronze hair . . . the hunter was tall, broad, obviously well-trained, and entirely too recognizable – at least, to those in the know. Just what was the Zelig thinking, sending his heir off on a mission such as that?

'Fool . . . sending the next tai-youkai out on a hunt? Not very wise, Zelig . . . not wise at all . . .'

It was a good way to get killed . . . or perhaps it was simple arrogance. After all, who would dare defy the next tai-youkai? Then again, the Zelig was known for his propensity to guard his personal affairs. The artist might well be tai-youkai and famous for his work, but he also tended to be somewhat reclusive, as well. In fact, Jeb might not have known exactly who the hunter was had it not been for the uncanny looks he possessed. The Zelig was remarkably tall; 'golden' was how he'd been described by those who had seen him. There wasn't another clan of dog-youkai who looked like that. No, there was no mistaking the son of the Zelig . . .

A whisper of movement drew Jeb's attention. "Stop. Power off," he muttered, triggering the soft hiss as the flat-panel television slowly folded back where it stored itself flush against the ceiling before turning to glance at his mate. Serena Christopher slipped into the study with two mugs of coffee. She handed one to Jeb without a word and slowly sat on the sofa, leaving the chair beside Jeb conspicuously empty. "I'm busy, Serena," Jeb grunted, lifting the fragrant brew to his lips.

Serena stared at the empty chair, her eyes uncannily bright. "She's ready to die," she stated simply, the slight catch in her voice the only hint of emotion in Serena's dull tone.

Jeb nodded. "It's only a matter of time."

Serena sighed, shaking her head as she gripped her mug in both hands, fingers trembling, her claws clattering against the enamel cup. "But the baby –"

Jeb grunted, cutting off his mate's sentence. "Knock it off, woman! The kit won't have a chance without her anyway . . . best to let them both die."

Serena choked back a sob. "Jeb . . ."

"There's nothing I can do about it now," he gritted out. "Not. A. Thing."

"I could take care of the baby," she pleaded, though she didn't seem to know if she were pleading with her mate or with herself. "It's been done . . . it *can* be done . . ."

"Be realistic, Serena . . . Beth isn't even three months pregnant . . . there's no way she could hold on that long."

Serena flinched, shoulders slumping as she conceded Jeb's point. "I know," she whispered.

Jeb sighed. "Damn it . . . he said he was ready . . ."

Dark brown eyes lifted to glare at him, narrowing dangerously as a hint of redness crept into her sallow cheeks. "Why did you send him? Why? It's your fault! *Damn* you, Jeb!"

His own glare was fierce, defiant . . . and yet tinged with remorse. "Enough! Do you think I haven't cursed myself a thousand times? Do you think that it's easy for me? It was *my* order; *my* command!"

"And Cody never wanted to let you down!"

"I *know* that!"

She set the mug aside with a shaky exhalation of breath, tucking an errant lock of dull yellow hair that had escaped the low knot at the nape of her neck behind her ear. "I want him dead, Jeb! The one who did this . . . He deserves to die!"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, he does, Serena. Yes, he does."

Son of the tai-youkai or not, this hunter . . . he deserved to die.

Final Thought from Bas:
*I should just kill Gunnar ... I don't think his parents will miss him **that** much ...*

Chapter 20

Closer

Sydney grabbed a handful of strawberry blonde hair in each fist and pulled it apart, taking her time inspecting the spot with a thoughtful scowl. “You look so *different*,” she crooned, leaning back to glance into Gunnar’s face.

Gunnar wrinkled his nose. “Rub it in, Sydney,” he grumbled.

She giggled and resumed her perusal of his head. His long black locks had turned a lovely shade of gold touched with the barest hint of red. His cute little hanyou ears were gone, too – which was the reason she was currently searching his hair.

Bas rolled his eyes but chuckled. Sydney had never seen a hanyou during their period of vulnerability, and judging from the look on her face, she was enjoying Gunnar’s a lot.

“So you’re like this once a month?” she demanded, kneeling on the floor so she could peer up into Gunnar’s face. “Green eyes . . . who would have thought?”

“I have my mother’s coloring,” he told her with a scowl. “Would you quit it? I’m not a science experiment.”

Sydney peeked back at Bas, who was sprawled on the sofa. “And you used to do this, too?”

“Used to,” he agreed, “but it happened to me on the night of the new moon.”

Sydney pondered that for a moment before turning her attention back to Gunnar once more. “You’re so *pretty*!” she gushed. Gunnar grunted.

Bas shook out the newspaper he had been reading and scanned the sports page. He, like his oldest sister Bellaniece, hadn’t actually changed much on their human nights, unlike Gunnar, whose coloring changed completely. When they’d returned from exchanging the rental van, Bas had ordered food from room service while Sydney wandered around the hotel suite. Examining the interior of the armoire that held the television, she had reminded him of a cat checking out new surroundings, and the thought had made him smile. Sure, he was a dog-youkai, and there were moments when he couldn’t help certain compulsions, but Sydney . . . She was a cat, through and through, and he couldn’t help but find the mannerisms endearing.

"Where's Gunnar?" she asked finally, turning her back on the armoire.

Bas shrugged. "In his room, maybe?" he mused, dropping his leather duster over the back of a chair at the table and reminding himself that he really had to do something about his lack of clothing since they'd left all his clothes behind in Ardmore during their impromptu escape.

Sydney nodded, staring thoughtfully at Gunnar's door for a long minute before slowly sauntering toward it.

"What are you doing, cat?"

She shot him a quick glance. "Something feels weird," she told him.

"Well, Gunnar is a little strange," he deadpanned. "I'm going to go take a quick shower. If the food gets here before I'm done, have him get it."

She nodded as he headed off to take a shower before the food arrived, and she raised her fist to knock on his door.

Gunnar either hadn't heard Sydney, or he'd been trying to ignore her. She was still knocking when Bas emerged from the bathroom ten minutes later, striding through the room to answer the door since he knew that, if at all possible, she wouldn't. Sydney wrinkled her nose as she opened the door and let herself in, and her excited shriek made Bas cringe as he closed the door behind the bellhop. He started toward Gunnar's room but stopped when his cousin, with Sydney in tow, had stomped out. She was trying to touch his hair, and he looked quite out of sorts about the entire affair. She hadn't left him alone since.

"So you're always human on the night of the quarter moon?" Sydney demanded.

"The first quarter, yes," Gunnar replied with a sigh.

"Interesting," she drawled. "Very interesting . . ."

Bas grunted, scanning the football scores. *"Awesome," he mumbled. "Looks like the Patriots are going to make the playoffs."*

"I still don't get football," Gunnar remarked blandly. "I mean, the ball's not even round."

"You don't get it because you're not a real man," Bas shot back.

"You don't like football?" Sydnie asked.

Gunnar shrugged. "Nope . . . while Bas was busy chasing around a misshapen ball, I was too busy being chased by women."

"Shut up, you ass," Bas grumbled.

Sydnie giggled and rolled to her hands and knees, crawling toward the sofa. She climbed up beside Bas and leaned against his arm, letting her fingertips trace his bicep.

Gunnar stood up and stomped off toward the small kitchenette while Sydnie flipped through channels with the remote. Bas folded up the newspaper and snatched the control out of her hand, setting on the news while Sydnie sighed and let her head fall against his shoulders. "How are your ribs?" she asked.

Bas shot her a quick glance. "Better. A little sore if I move the wrong way, but all right otherwise."

She nodded. "Good."

Gunnar dropped into an overstuffed recliner off to the side with a bag of microwave popcorn. Sydnie leaned forward, peering around Bas, her eyes widening as she sniffed the air. Bas almost smiled. "Want some popcorn, kitty?" he asked.

Sydnie blinked and forced her gaze away from the bag lying casually in Gunnar's lap. "Maybe," she allowed.

Bas grinned. "Okay." He cleared his throat as he turned his attention on his unsuspecting cousin. "Hey, Gun . . ."

"What?"

"I left my cell in my coat . . . could you get it for me?"

Gunnar shot Bas a suspicious glance since Bas rarely asked anyone to do anything for him, and consequently rarely did anything for anyone when he thought that they could do it themselves. Of course there were some significant exceptions to that rule, namely his parents and Sydnie, but Bas tended to hate it when people were lazy, and Gunnar knew it. He nodded just the same and stood, setting the bag of popcorn on the coffee table before heading over to dig Bas' cell phone out of the duster slung over one of the wooden chairs at the table.

Bas lifted his eyebrows at Sydnie. She grinned and stood up long enough to grab the bag before dropping back onto the sofa beside him with a little smile on her face as she popped a few pieces into her mouth. "Thank you," she said.

He chuckled. "You're welcome."

Gunnar dropped the cell phone into Bas' lap and snorted. "Oi, my popcorn!" he exclaimed as he reached for the bag. Sydnie batted his hand away, uttering a low hissing growl. "Now listen here, kitten—"

"You abandoned it," she pointed out reasonably.

"I set it down to get Bas' stupid phone," Gunnar argued.

"Possession is nine-tenths of the law," she replied.

Bas sat back and watched the exchange with a very amused grin.

Gunnar flopped into his chair and shook his head. "Okay, cat, I got you."

She sighed happily as she continued to eat the pilfered popcorn while Gunnar stalked off, muttering under his breath. Bas reached for the bag. Sydnie slapped his hand away, too. "You know, I helped you get that," he remarked.

"I know you did," she agreed, "and I said thank you."

Bas shook his head. Gunnar sat back down and whistled, drawing Bas' attention just before chucking a piece of popcorn at him. Bas scowled but caught the food in his mouth. Sydnie giggled and sat back, watching with avid interest as Gunnar continued to throw popcorn at his cousin.

"Enough," Bas growled, catching yet another bite as he scowled at Gunnar.

"You're as bad as Ryomaru," Gunnar chuckled.

"Ryomaru?" Sydnie asked.

"My uncle," Bas mumbled around a mouthful of popcorn. "I can't help it! I'm a *dog*, remember?"

Gunnar laughed, probably since he was human and wouldn't be as compelled to catch anything that came flying at him, Bas supposed.

“He catches food, too?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, now *that’s* interesting,” she mused.

Bas sighed. Somehow, he had a feeling that he was going to regret arming Sydnie with that knowledge.

Sydnie bit her lip as she slowly paced around the foot of the bed, staring at Bas as he bent his knee and scooted down in the bed, making himself more comfortable. Propped against the wooden headboard, he was reading the newspaper, clad in the only pair of jeans he had and pleasantly bare-chested. Pausing for a moment to appreciate the solid configuration of muscles under his skin, she almost smiled as he turned the page of the newspaper. The action set off a reaction in his body, every muscle moving in accordance like a well-honed machine. She loved watching him, doubted she’d ever grow tired of doing it. She remembered a phrase she’d read before, and at the time, she’d thought it was cheesy and stupid. *‘Poetry in motion . . .’* she mused as she indulged herself for a moment longer. Funny how she remembered it now. Funnier still that she finally realized just what it had meant . . .

He didn’t give any indication that he noticed her rapt attention, and that was just as well. She turned and shuffled back across the floor, eyes trained on the hunter who looked so relaxed at the moment . . .

She stopped, grasping the end of the coverlet and kneading it in her hands. Bas glanced over the top of the newspaper and looked from side to side almost nervously. “Sydnie? What do – *oof!*” he grunted as she pounced on him, the sudden impact knocking the air out of him. Snuggling against his chest, she wiggled around for a minute until she was comfortably situated with her head tucked neatly under his chin, her ear pressed against him, close enough to hear his beating heart. “What are you doing?” he asked, his tone gentle, amused, as he dropped the paper on the bed beside him and clumsily stroked her hair.

She closed her eyes, sighing in complete contentment as she rested her hand on his chest. “Stalking you, puppy,” she told him.

“Really.”

“Yes, and I caught you.”

“Oh? So what are you going to do with me now?” he asked.

She yawned. “What do you think? I’m going to go to sleep.”

“You’re going to sleep *on* me?”

She nodded, struggling to answer him while the inviting lure of sleep beckoned her.
“Mmm.”

“Sydnie . . .”

“Hush, Sebastian. I can’t sleep when you’re talking.”

He sighed but slowly relaxed. She was almost asleep when she felt the soft brush of covers being pulled over her, and she smiled vaguely. The gentle pressure of his arms wrapping around her added to the feeling of complete security that enveloped her as she drifted off to sleep.

‘God, she’s beautiful.’

Bas smiled in the dim glow of the security lights filtering through the hotel room window as he stared at the sleeping cat-youkai curled up on his chest. He’d never seen her fall asleep so fast, but the subtle shift in her scent was enough to assure him that she was, indeed, sleeping. Her legs were bent, curled to the side, neatly tucked under his raised knees, and he held her, rubbing her back with one hand as she nestled closer to him.

Lifting a lock of her auburn hair to his nose, he shuddered as an entirely too-pleasant shiver raced down his spine. Breathing in the scent of her, he brushed her hair over his lips. *‘My . . . mate . . .’*

The words seemed strangely comforting in his mind. They felt natural, like opening his eyes in the morning, like drawing breath. She was mysterious yet familiar. He might not know some things about her, but the things he did know were enough for now . . .

A strange rumble cut through the silence in the room, and Bas blinked in surprise. It took him a moment to figure out what it was, and he shifted slightly so that he could

better see her face. She wasn't smiling but her face was peaceful. *'She . . . she's . . . purring?'*

"Do you purr?"

"Of course not."

"But you're a kitty, and kitties purr."

"Not this one, pretty boy. At least, I don't think I do."

"Ah, so you might."

"Anything's possible . . ."

He shook his head, slowly brushing her hair back out of her eyes. *'So . . . she does purr, after all . . .'*

'Maybe she didn't know she did,' his youkai pointed out reasonably.

'Maybe,' he agreed.

'Or maybe . . .'

'Hmm?'

'Maybe she's never had a reason to before.'

And that thought made him smile.

She wasn't purring loudly. Weak and faltering now and again, as though it wasn't a sound she made often, it was somehow reassuring nonetheless. A sudden surge of pride washed through him. She felt safe with him, didn't she? *'Safe enough to purr . . .'*

Frightening really, how perfect she felt in his arms. He wasn't sure he'd ever really bought into the belief that there was someone out there that he would consider his mate. He'd never honestly believed that he'd feel that way about anyone, and Sydney . . . He never would have thought that a woman like Sydney could turn him inside out with such flair. The difference was that he wanted to take care of her; he wanted to be the one that she relied on. She'd been alone for far too long, hadn't she? *'You'll never be alone again, Sydney . . .'*

She stirred slightly, a soft moan escaping her as she snuggled closer to him. He rubbed her back a little more, and the purring started up again.

Jillian had done the same thing, hadn't she? Crawling into his bed sometime during the night, his adopted sister had made herself at home in Bas' bed almost entirely from the start. Cain had sensed a youkai in the area, and when he'd found the woman deep in the forest on their estate, she'd asked him to take her daughter – she'd given birth in the woods – and to keep her safe. Cain had brought the infant home, and he and Gin had kept her despite the fact that Evan had only been about three months old at the time.

Bas distinctly remembered sitting up for hours with Jillian nestled in the center of his chest. She'd only sleep if she could hear a heartbeat, and while most nights were spent with the infant on Cain's chest, every so often, Bas would fall asleep with Jillian on him, and she'd still be there in the morning. As she got older, she never outgrew her penchant for slipping into his bed. Bas hadn't minded it very much until, at five and unceremoniously ousted from his parents' bed, Evan had started crawling into Bas' bed, too . . .

What he hadn't realized at the time, since most of his summers were spent in Japan, was that Jillian had started migrating in his summer absences. Latching onto Gavin Jamison, the son of one of Cain's hunters, she'd started sleeping with him – the first summer he'd come to visit. She had been four. He was nine at the time. Every summer after that, she slept with Gavin, going so far as to abandon Bas completely during the few summers when he had remained in Maine. Bas, though, had finally managed to kick Jillian out of his bed last year, citing that she was too old to be sleeping with him, which didn't mean she didn't still try – which also didn't mean that Bas hadn't given in more than once and let her, deciding that sitting up and arguing with her for hours on end while she whined and cajoled wasn't really worth the effort, after all . . .

He frowned. Two very different girls, sure; two entirely different feelings . . . Jillian felt safe with Bas because he was her big brother, he supposed, and Sydnie? Deep down, maybe Sydnie just desperately wanted to belong somewhere with someone, to know that she was loved and cherished . . . and maybe, in that, there wasn't really a difference between Jillian and Sydnie, at all . . .

A/N:

Interesting site on moon phases:

http://www.calculatorcat.com/moon_phases/moon_phases.phtml .

== == == == == == == == ==

Final Thought from Bas:

She ... purrs?

Chapter 21

Sydney's Game

Sydney sighed and cuddled closer, savoring the feel of Bas' arms wrapped snugly around her. Opening one eye, she blinked at the gray, overcast skies. Somehow the world seemed so far away, so insignificant. Something about the feel of Bas' arms chased away the nightmares, the darkness that she'd felt lingering over her heart for so long. He took care of her in a way that no one ever really had, at least not that she could remember. The security he offered her so freely . . . it was humbling and frightening even as it comforted and cosseted her at the same time.

She cuddled closer and smiled. He smelled nice, too—really, *really* nice. *'Earth and air and . . . pine trees . . . warm and comfortable and safe . . .'*

'Sydney . . . you know, right?'

'Know what?'

'These feelings you have for him . . . they're . . . nice . . .'

'Nice is good. Sebastian is good.'

'Good, yes . . . but you know what they mean, right?'

'Mean? Hmm, yes . . . they mean that he's my puppy . . .'

'Stop being catty . . . there's more to it than that.'

'Like what?'

Her youkai sighed. *'We . . . we could stay with him . . . couldn't we?'*

'Stay with him? I can't . . . stay with him . . . I can't stay anywhere . . .'

'Maybe we could, Sydney . . . maybe we could. He protects us, doesn't he? And he brings us milk . . .'

She sighed again, this one a little more hopeless – as Bas' arms tightened around her. *'It doesn't work that way . . . nothing good ever lasts, and Bas the Hunter – Sebastian . . . he's definitely one of those things.'*

' . . . Maybe we could stay with him till it ends, then?'

Sydney frowned. *'Yeah, I suppose . . . So long as he'll keep me . . .'*

"Morning, kitty."

She arched up to stretch, pushing her arms out straight on either side of his head and drawing her body back before snuggling against his chest once more. He chuckled as she stretched out her fingers and curled them, careful to keep her claws from cutting into his bare chest. "Morning, Sebastian."

He sighed. "Damn . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Never thought I'd like the sound of my name as much as I do when you say it."

"You don't like the name 'Sebastian'?"

"Not particularly."

"I do."

"I . . . like the name 'Sydney', too."

She grinned, savoring the feel of his hands rubbing her back. "Do you?"

"Mmm," he agreed. "You know, you lied to me."

"About what?"

He took his time stroking her hair, smoothing it back off her face. "You *do* purr."

"I do?"

He nodded. "Yes, kitty, you do."

"I wasn't purring."

"You absolutely were . . ."

"Did I keep you awake?"

"Never slept better."

". . . Really?"

"Yes, really."

"So you don't mind having a kitty sleeping on you?"

"Not so much, no."

She smiled. "Can we stay here all day? Like this?"

"I think Gunnar wanted to move again."

"But he was human . . ."

"Just for the night. I'm sure he's back to his obnoxious self now."

"I like Gunnar."

He snorted. "That figures . . . took you forever to trust me, then Gunnar shows up, and—"

"Jealous, puppy?"

"Pfft! Hardly . . ."

"You *sound* jealous."

"Not jealous . . . just . . . why do you trust him when you hated me?"

"I never hated you."

His grunt indicated that he thought she was lying. "Uh huh . . ."

"Shouldn't I trust him?"

"Why would you? You didn't know him from Adam . . . you sent him your picture . . . chitchatted with him on the phone . . ."

Sydney leaned up, propping herself on her elbows to look into Bas' eyes. He was scowling, and he turned his face away as a hint of color crept into his cheeks. "You trust him, right?"

"Sure," he mumbled. "Even though he is a little shit."

"Then I should trust him, too."

Bas digested that for a moment as Sydney carefully stroked his face. "You . . . you trust him because I do?" he asked.

"Yes."

He finally grinned – a lopsided little smile that was completely devastating and wholly endearing at the same time. "In that case," he drawled, wrapping his arms around her waist again. "I guess it's all right . . ."

"You're okay . . . for a puppy," she mumbled, leaning down to nibble the roughened skin of his chin.

He shuddered. "Sydney . . ."

"What's the matter, Bas the Hunter? Afraid of a little kitty like me?"

He growled low in his throat but let his head fall back. Sydney gently raked her teeth over the exposed flesh, taking her time as she carefully explored the area. Nibbling her way along the sharp line of his jaw, she flicked her tongue out as his arms tightened then released, tension rippling through his body and into hers. He moaned softly, one hand twining in her hair as he held her close. She kneaded his shoulders, feeling the rising tension that spiraled around them, secreting them away from the rest of the world, even if only for the moment.

Ducking his chin to capture her lips, he kissed her gently, sweetly. Lips molding against lips, the smoldering burn of burgeoning desire swelling inside her wrung a whimper from somewhere deep down as the steady pulse of rising need goaded her. His hair – silky strands wrapped around her hands . . . his body – a study of strength and quiet resolve . . . He reached out to her heart, touched her deep inside . . . The unsteady throb of his pulse resounded in her ears. The beat of her heart synchronized with his, and in her bemused mind, she understood what she couldn't voice out loud.

He brushed his lips over hers time and again; the tenderness of his actions culminating in a bittersweet ache as she reveled in a powerful warmth, a startling realization that he

was the one she needed – the one she wanted. He ran his hands up and down her spine, soothing her rioting senses . . .

Sydney sighed against his lips, the sound captured by his mouth and returned. Maybe he felt it too; the strange yet familiar pull . . . the frightening understanding that he was a part of her, and that she was somehow an extension of him, too. He caught her hand, dragging his mouth away from hers long enough to kiss her knuckles before pressing her hand against his heart. Somehow that one action calmed her, soothed her, wrapped her in a beautiful hope, the wildest wish that maybe – just maybe . . . Maybe the good things that she had always thought weren't meant to be . . . Maybe they *could* be, after all . . .

“Come on, you two! We've got to get moving!”

Bas growled in frustration and whipped the first thing he could lay hands on – a pillow – at his cousin's face as Gunnar stuck his head into the room. “Get out, Gunnar,” he snarled.

Gunnar chuckled. “Yeah, yeah . . . I'd want to stay in bed all day, too, if I had a kitty like her perched on my chest. Let's go.”

Bas snatched the clock off the nightstand and hurled it at Gunnar's head. The cord stretched tight then popped loose from the wall plug, smacking into the wall just left of the intended target. Gunnar laughed and closed the door before Bas got really angry and decided to try to heave the bed at him next.

Sydney giggled and snuggled against Bas' chest again. “I'd rather stay here,” she pointed out.

Bas grunted. “I would, too.”

She sighed as he hugged her then gently moved her aside. “Come on, cat, before he decides he needs to pester us again.”

She wrinkled her nose but complied, rolling off the bed and sashaying over to retrieve her skirt. She'd folded it neatly and set it on the dresser the night before. Bas watched her pull the garment on with a little smile toying at the corners of his lips.

“What's the matter, puppy? See something you like?” she teased.

“Maybe,” he agreed despite the dusting of pink on his cheeks. “I think I just might have . . .”

Sydney pulled her shoes on and smoothed her skirt over her thighs. "I guess I'm ready."

He made a face but nodded, holding out his hand as he reached for the door.

Sydney stared at his fingers for a moment before hesitantly slipping her hand into his. He gave her fingers a gentle squeeze before sighing heavily and pulling on the handle.

"Are we going somewhere in particular or just going?" Sydney asked, leaning on the back of Gunnar's seat in the rented Chevy Blazer.

"We have to go to Baton Rouge," Gunnar replied, glancing to the side to meet Sydney's gaze as she idly toyed with one of his ears. He flicked the appendage, and she giggled.

"Baton Rouge? Why?"

"I have to pick up a few things," Gunnar replied.

Sydney frowned at his evasive answer. "Sounds mysterious."

"Not really," he replied. "Just some information and stuff . . . nothing that would interest a cute little kitten like you."

Bas snorted. "Stay away from the kitty, you little shit," he growled without moving the arm that covered his eyes as he stretched out as much as he could on the bench seat behind them.

"You know, Sydney, if you get sick of that idiot, I'll be more than happy to let you sleep on me," Gunnar quipped.

"Oh, really?"

Bas growled and sat up, leaning over the seat to drag Sydney away from Gunnar. She giggled but didn't fight him, and when he flopped back down again, she happily stretched out on his chest, hands slipping under the shelter of the open leather duster. He snorted but grinned just a little.

"Kami, you two are just pathetic," Gunnar grumbled, peering in the rearview mirror in time to see Sydney close her eyes and snuggled closer to Bas.

Bas didn't answer as he tweaked Sydney's nose with his fingertip.

"You two realize, right? You're in a lot of danger . . . the bounty hunters are still after Sydney, and they don't seem to be huge fans of yours, either, Bas," Gunnar pointed out.

Sydney nipped at Bas' finger when he tweaked her nose again.

Gunnar rolled his eyes. "If they show up again before you're fully healed, it could be bad news."

Bas rumbled a low growl at the feline, and she giggled.

Gunnar sighed. "All right; all right . . . I warned you, though," he grumbled. "You two . . . ungh . . . that's just *wrong*, you know."

Sydney wrinkled her nose. "They're not in here, are they? And you're driving, so there's not a problem at all."

"That's got to be the most messed up bit of logic," Gunnar complained.

Bas sat up with a grimace. "Get over it, Gunnar. Everything's under control."

Gunnar snorted in reply.

"Why aren't you freaking out?" Bas demanded, ignoring Gunnar's commentary in favor of questioning Sydney's uncharacteristic calm.

She shrugged. "I don't freak out."

"You do. You hate cars."

"I don't hate them," she argued. "I just think they're moving death traps, is all."

"Yes, well, you're not acting nervous today," he pointed out.

She slipped him a sidelong glance as a secretive little grin surfaced on her face. "Maybe I'm distracted."

Bas grinned, too. "Oh?"

She tucked her head under his chin and sighed. "Yes."

“That’s not so bad,” he allowed.

Gunnar sighed again. “Just don’t let your guards down.”

Sydney closed her eyes. “Sebastian won’t let anything happen to me,” she informed him.

Bas blinked, staring at Sydney as a slow smile spread over his features. The absolute conviction in her voice warmed him. She really did believe that he could keep her safe from the bounty hunters, didn’t she? “*Nothing*,” he assured her, “will happen to you, kitty.”

She peered up at him through the thick fringe of her eyelashes, eyes sparkling as she stared gazed at him. “I know, Bas the Hunter. I know.”

Jeb Christopher paced the length of his office, hands tucked into his pockets as he stared at each of the bounty hunters he passed. Glave Minor – jaguar-youkai who had recorded the last altercation . . . Flap-Jack McGuinness – thunder-youkai . . . Darrian Snow – wolf-youkai . . . Shakes – earth-based-youkai . . . They didn’t blink or move as they waited for Jeb’s instructions.

“The hunter and the target slipped past intel after the last fight,” Jeb remarked quietly, irritation lending his tone a clipped, harsh edge. “Myrna’s working on locating them at the moment. Until we get word of a sighting, I want you all on stand-by, ready to be dispatched as soon as I give the word.”

The bounty hunters nodded but remained silent. Jeb clenched his jaw. “This hunter . . . I want him alive. He’s dangerous, he’s deadly . . . and he’s the son of the Zelig.”

An uneasy stirring erupted in the gathered youkai. Jeb didn’t blink, and he didn’t look away. “Yes, the son of the Zelig,” he repeated in answer to their unvoiced questions. “I don’t care *who* he is. I want him brought in.”

Darrian Snow was the first to clear his throat and step back slightly, eyes lowered as he shook his head. “I don’t know, Jeb . . . It’s not so smart, to tangle with the tai-youkai.”

“Good way to get yourself killed,” Flap-Jack mumbled.

“If we touch his son, Zelig won’t rest until he sees us all dead,” Shakes added.

Jeb leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest as he glowered at his bounty hunters. "Die by my hand or die by the hand of the tai-youkai . . . take your choice."

Darrian scratched the back of his neck. "Alive, you say?"

Satisfied that he'd made his point, Jeb relaxed a little bit. "*Alive*," he reiterated. "I want a completely synchronized attack. Kill the target, but bring me the son of the great dog. The bitch is of no use to us alive."

"Is this the Zelig's heir?" Flap-Jack demanded, his one good eye shifting to meet Jeb's gaze directly.

Jeb regarded the lumbering bulk that was Flap-Jack McGuinness. Though he was of the thunder-youkai classification, the brute's grandfather had been a very large bear-youkai, and Flap-Jack had inherited his grandfather's massive size. This son of the tai-youkai . . . he would not be taking Jeb's hunters down this time without a lot of help . . .

Glave shifted uncomfortably. "Does it matter? He's just a pup."

"A pup whose granddad took out Naraku," Flap-Jack growled. "The nephew of the Inu no Taisho . . . You can underestimate Sesshoumaru's kin. *I'd* rather not."

"And still just a pup, right?" Shakes interrupted. "Don't matter whose grandson, son, or nephew he is. None of them are watching his back, are they?"

"Just the hunter," Glave remarked. "Brute strength was what he used against Lyssa and Tom . . . He can't watch four of us at once."

Flap-Jack snorted at the mention of brute strength. "You don't say . . ."

"Be that as it may," Jeb cut in coldly, "just be ready for my orders. Understood?"

The bounty hunters nodded tersely. Jeb jerked his head toward the door in blatant dismissal. He watched as the hunters filed out of the office before pulling his cell phone from his pocket and dialing Myrna's number. Letting the son of Zelig and the cat-youkai out of their sight . . . Why did he feel like that was a huge, huge mistake?

Sydney wandered into the bedroom with a towel tucked neatly around her small frame while she dried her hair with a second one. Bas glanced up from the letter his father had sent when she closed the door then back down at the papers in his hand, but his gaze shot right back up and stayed there as Sydney neatly hung the towel over the back of a chair and crawled onto the bed. "Sydney? Where are your clothes?" he demanded, unable to keep the rasping quality out of his voice.

"I washed them, puppy," she replied, pulling her hair over her shoulder and dragging her claws through it.

"Listen, cat—" he began.

"Relax, Sebastian. I have clean panties on."

". . . Panties."

"Yes."

He shook his head and rolled off the bed, striding over to rummage through her purse for the brush he'd bought for her. She watched him but didn't comment as he held the brush out to her. She ignored it. He sighed and shook his head, pushing her hands away as he pulled her hair back and carefully pulled the brush through it. "You *are* going to put something else on to sleep in, right?" he asked with a pointed arching of one eyebrow.

"I'd love to," she remarked lightly, folding her legs and wrapping her arms around her ankles as she laid her cheek on her raised knees. "Too bad I don't *have* anything else to wear."

He stifled a snort since it was on the tip of his tongue to point out the times he'd tried to buy clothing for her. "Fine . . . I'll borrow one of Gunnar's shirts, but we're going shopping tomorrow . . . you need clothes, and so do I."

"I don't want to wear Gunnar's shirt," she argued, closing her eyes as he continued to brush her hair.

"Too bad."

"So you *want* me to smell like your cousin?" she challenged sweetly.

The brush paused mid-stroke. ". . . Damn it . . ."

"I would have suggested it myself," she went on airily, "but I really would have thought that you'd be a little irritated if I smelled like another man."

He dropped the brush into her lap and snorted. "Pfft! Fine, but you can't sleep in *that*."

She frowned and stood up to put the brush away. "Okay," she agreed. "I could take the towel off, if it bothers you so much . . ."

"Sydnie . . ."

She lit a cigarette and slowly turned around to face him again, leaning against the short bureau as she exhaled a puff of smoke. "You're really cute when you blush, Sebastian."

Bas stifled a growl as he strode over to pluck the cigarette out of Sydnie's hand before stomping over to the window and tossing the offending thing out into the night. "This is a non-smoking room, cat," he pointed out.

She wrinkled her nose. "It's rather mean of you to only rent non-smoking rooms, don't you think?"

He rolled his eyes and flopped onto the bed, snatching up the letter and burying his face behind it. "No, I don't. Smoke gives me a headache. Always has. Can't stand it when Dad smokes, either."

Sydnie stilled for a moment before slipping back onto the bed beside him again. "Your father smokes?"

He grunted. "Yes."

"Interesting . . ."

"Not really."

She crawled onto his chest and made herself comfortable. Bas shifted but didn't try to push her away. "What are you reading?" she finally asked.

"A letter."

"From who?"

He sighed. "The tai-youkai."

"Oh? Orders to kill me?"

"That's not even funny, Sydney."

She sighed, too. "It's just a matter of time."

"That's not true."

"It is . . . he wants me dead, remember?"

"He wants you brought in for questioning . . . that's all."

"Don't be stupid . . . of course he'll want me dead."

Bas sighed and crumpled up the letter, dropping it on the nightstand before wrapping his arms around Sydney. "He just wants to know why you killed Cal Richardson, I promise."

She stiffened but didn't pull away. "I . . . don't want to talk about it."

"I know you don't," he agreed. "If you'd just tell me, I could —"

"Could what? Help me? Save me? What would you do, Bas the Hunter? You can't do either . . . and I don't want to talk about it, okay?"

"It's not okay, Sydney . . . you have to tell me . . . you have to let me help you."

"I don't need your help!"

He held onto her when she tried to get up. She scowled at him, but he refused to let go. "Can't you believe that maybe I want to do this? I *have* to do this . . ."

"Why?"

He frowned, his gaze skittering away as he scowled at the walls.

"Why?"

"Because," he grumbled, cheeks reddening as he stubbornly refused to look at her, "I just do."

She shook her head, an odd sense of sadness filtering into her green eyes, clouding them with a strange melancholy that he didn't really understand. "I'm a nobody, Bas the Hunter. In the end, nobodies like me don't really matter."

"You *do* matter," he argued. "You matter to *me*."

She swallowed hard. "Then you're a fool."

"Maybe I am," he agreed. "I don't understand a damn thing about you, Sydney . . . because you won't let me."

"You understand enough," she whispered, relaxing against him again. "Just leave it at that."

He sighed. "All right, cat," he relented despite the irritation that creased his brow. "You win . . . for now."

She nodded vaguely as he pulled the blanket over her tiny frame and leaned over to shut off the lamp. "Good night, Sebastian," she murmured.

He sighed again. "Good night, baby. Sleep well."

She smiled moments before she started to purr.

Final Thought from Gunnar:
That's just ... wrong ...

Chapter 22

The Onyx

Bas yawned and slowly opened his eyes to gaze down at the cat-youkai still snuggled against his chest. Her shoulders were bare, pale in the wan light of the gray morning filtering through the rain-streaked window. Bending his knee, he shifted slightly, careful not to wake the feline. Sydnie uttered a little moan, the reassuring sound of her purr cutting off abruptly but resuming the moment he stopped moving.

He sighed, a small grin surfacing on his face as he gently smoothed her hair.

'Seven-fifteen,' he read, peering at the clock on the nightstand. He had very little doubt in his mind that Gunnar would want to get moving soon. He'd said as much before heading off to his bedroom last night. Obviously worried that the bounty hunters weren't far behind, Gunnar had been quiet, terse, almost pensive since Sydnie had told him about the order that the bounty hunters were to bring Bas in alive. Add to that the fact that Bas and Sydnie both sorely needed to go clothes shopping, and Bas figured that staying in bed all day was really out of the question . . .

'As if,' Bas snorted indelicately. *'I'd love to see them try it . . .'*

He rubbed her shoulder and pulled the blanket up to tuck snugly under her chin. She sighed happily and nestled a little closer. She shifted slightly as Bas' eyes widened. Sometime during the night, her towel had come undone, and there was nothing separating their bodies but her flimsy pair of panties and the jeans that he'd worn to bed. *'Oh, damn . . .'* he thought with a grimace as the heat of Sydnie's body on his shot through his system with a wicked abandon. *'Damn, damn, damn, damn, damn . . .'*

'Don't panic, Bas . . . So long as she doesn't move . . .'

The grimace shifted into a low moan. *'So long as she doesn't move? What the . . .? Of course she's going to move, and when she does—'*

'When she does, you'll . . . what?'

'Die,' he decided, closing his eyes tight. *'Absolutely die . . . Damn it . . . How stupid could I be? I should have known . . . and now I'm going to die . . .'*

"Morning, puppy," she mumbled as she stretched.

Bas stifled a groan as she rose up and leaned over him, her nipples dragging against the overheated skin of his chest as she rose on her knees and lifted her ass, hands clenching fistfuls of pillow on either side of his head. As languorously as she stretched back, she leaned forward again, her breasts sliding over him in a tormenting motion. "Something the matter, Bas the Hunter?" she asked innocently as she cuddled against his chest once more.

He shook his head quickly, refusing to open his eyes. Brain dangerously close to malfunctioning, he struggled for words that just wouldn't come.

She rested her hands on his chest and nipped his chin as he swallowed hard.

"S-Sydney . . . st-stop . . ."

She giggled huskily, flicking her tongue, lapping at the curve of his jaw. "Mmm . . . stuttering . . . Now that's nice . . ."

He gulped again. "You need to . . . stop . . ." he rasped out.

She drew her legs up, letting them fall open as she straddled him, as she pressed herself against his groin. Bas uttered a sound caught somewhere between a growl and a moan. She laughed softly, trailing the lightest of kisses over his face. Rising on her hands placed on either side of his head, she nibbled on his lips with a throaty purr.

"Damn," he muttered between feathery kisses. "Sydney, I . . ." He trailed off, forcing his eyes open moments before she ground herself against him. The shocking pressure built; the rampant desire surged . . . Arching away from him, she delved her tongue into his mouth, tracing his fangs with a wanton fervor that slammed through his body straight to his heart. Gasping at the sight of her dusty rose nipples, Bas couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't remember anything but Sydney's name, couldn't hear anything but the rush of his blood resounding in his ears. He felt the unrelenting throb as his body reacted to hers – the ache, the burn . . . the consuming fire that seared him. "Oh, *God* . . ."

"Holy *dogs* . . ."

The sound of Gunnar's voice cut through the haze of Bas' Sydney-induced stupor. Uttering a low growl, he held Sydney tight to keep her from doing something insane, like sitting up to greet his cousin. "What?" he snarled, grimacing at the heated flush that shot into his skin as he peeked over Sydney's shoulder.

Gunnar wisely looked away despite the obvious amusement on his features. "I take it you're not ready to go."

"Get the hell out, Gunnar," Bas growled.

Gunnar cleared his throat and shrugged. "I'll, uh . . . wait out here."

She drew back far enough to smile at him, her laughter shaky, husky, caressing. "Sebastian?"

"Huh?" he murmured, shaking his head to dispel the haze created by Sydnie's close proximity.

". . . You're poking me."

"Wha . . .?"

She giggled and ground her hips against him, eliciting a low, ragged groan from Bas. "You're poking me, puppy . . . and a quite impressive *poke*, it is."

Bas' mouth dropped open as even more color stained his cheeks. Shoving Sydnie off his chest, he rolled over and sat up, hunching his shoulders as he leaned on his knees, cupping his face in his hands as he stifled the desire to groan.

She giggled and sat up, too, pressing her breasts into his back and reaching over his shoulders to knead the muscles on his chest. "I hear that's a problem for men," she teased.

"Get off me, Sydnie," he growled.

Sydnie carefully brushed his hair aside, letting it trail over his shoulder as she kissed the back of his neck. "You don't really want me to do that, do you?" she pouted.

Gritting his teeth as he tried in vain to ignore the mischievous cat, Bas sighed. "Yes . . . no . . . maybe . . ."

She laughed softly, her breath fanning over the moistened skin and sending shivers down his spine. "Don't you want me?" she whispered, nipping his earlobe as his eyes drifted closed.

"Not . . . now," he told her, catching her hands and holding her gently but firmly as he turned to face her. "Just not now, okay?"

Sydney's eyes clouded in confusion. Shaking her head, she sat back with a sigh before curling up on her side. "Are you ashamed of me?" she asked quietly.

Bas scowled at her. "Don't be ridiculous!"

She stared at him sadly. "Am I?"

"Yes," he growled, raking his hands through his hair. "Absolutely ridiculous."

A little sound escaped her—a choked sort of whimper. "I see."

He made a face and heaved a sigh. "I . . . you . . . It's not . . . no Gunnar," he blurted. "Not while he's . . . here."

"This is about him? But—"

"Just not yet, Sydney . . . go get dressed."

She scowled at him. "Sebastian—"

He glared over his shoulder—a look meant to gain her compliance. "Move it, kitty," he said, words gruff despite the gentleness in his tone as he tried not to notice that she wasn't making a single move to cover herself. He turned away and stood up, striding over to the window.

She snorted but scooted off the bed. He could hear the whisper of her movements. Moments later, he heard a dull crash from the adjacent living room of the hotel suite. Wheeling around, his gaze swept over the bed and stopped. In the jumble of tangled blankets, he spotted the towel. He snatched it up as he strode past into the hallway, uttering a string of muttered expletives as the irrational woman stomped into the bathroom and closed the door.

"Oh . . . *kami* . . ." Gunnar choked out behind him. Bas whipped around in time to see his cousin leaning heavily against the wall with a stunned look on his face and a shattered coffee mug at his feet. "I think I just had a wet dream . . ."

Bas shot across the room, catching Gunnar by the throat and smacking him hard against the wall. "I'll fucking kill you, Gunnar . . ."

Gunnar groaned then chuckled. "If you can't figure out what to do with her, I'll be happy to take her off your hands."

“Damn you . . .” Bas growled, pulling Gunnar away from the wall and smashing him against it so hard that the wall trembled. “Keep your hands off her!”

“Did you see the way her ass moves when she walks? Holy *damn!*”

Bas slammed him into the wall once more. Gunnar grimaced when his head struck the doorframe. “I mean it, Gunnar . . .”

Gunnar groaned. “Want my advice?”

“No,” Bas snarled.

“You really need to fuck her.”

That comment didn’t deserve a reply, as far as Bas was concerned. Slamming Gunnar against the wall one last time, he turned and heaved his cousin across the room. Gunnar fell over the back of the sofa, clutching his stomach as he laughed even harder and groaned intermittently. Balling his hands into fists and reminding himself that he really didn’t want to kill Gunnar; Bas stomped off toward the bathroom, planting himself in front of the door, lest Sydnie should decide to come out in anything less than full coverage.

Gunnar’s laughter taunted him, and Bas stifled a frustrated growl. Either way he looked at it, he was a damned man, no doubt about it. Between Gunnar, Sydnie, and the bounty hunters, he was positive that he was going to be dead before the dust settled . . .

The hotel room was quiet—unnervingly so. They’d only traveled a few hours to reach Natchez, Mississippi, before stopping for the day. Gunnar hadn’t been pleased with the delay, but Bas had grumbled about not having any clothes at all, not to mention that he was absolutely not putting himself in another situation like he had been in earlier while his idiot cousin was still traveling with them.

Gunnar crossed his arms over his chest and scowled thoughtfully at his cousin. Bas was mirroring his posture but seemed preoccupied as he peeked over his shoulder toward the bathroom.

Gunnar sighed. “It had to have something to do with that first fight: the one where you killed the kid . . .”

Bas grunted. "I thought that, too."

"It's strange, though . . . in that sort of profession, death is a huge risk."

"I know that."

Gunnar shook his head. "Just a pup, you said?"

Bas nodded, dragging a hand over his face since they'd been over this a few times since Sydnie had announced that she was going to take a bath. Bas hadn't wanted to discuss anything in front of her. Gunnar had the distinct feeling that he was trying to protect her from the truth of the situation, not that he could blame her. He'd seen the panicked look on her face. It didn't surprise him at all that Bas would want to keep her from worrying any more than he had to. "Younger than me," Bas grumbled. "No more than twenty-two or twenty-three . . . too young to be a bounty hunter."

"Maybe . . . then again, the new Asian tai-youkai just turned twenty-two . . ."

Bas shrugged. "That's different. His father died, and he's been training all his life for it."

"True enough, but that doesn't mean that he's not going to get a lot of grief."

One of Bas' eyebrows lifted meaningfully. "Are the challenges being issued yet?"

Gunnar sighed. "Nope, but so far as Grandfather reckons, it won't take long before they do."

"Sesshoumaru said that?"

"Sure he did . . . he was telling Dad that the youkai in China are grumbling despite Faisama's support from the generals."

"He'll be fine. He's pretty tough," Bas insisted.

Gunnar rubbed his forehead. "Yes, well, that's my point. He is tough despite his age. Maybe this bounty hunter was, too."

"Not *that* tough," Bas grumbled.

"Or maybe he just made the mistake of underestimating *you*."

Bas snorted but didn't reply.

"What kind of youkai was he?" Gunnar asked.

Bas sighed. "A cougar."

"Cougar," Gunnar repeated thoughtfully. "Cougar . . ."

"Yes, a cougar." He threw his hands up and shook his head in disgust. "It just doesn't make sense."

Gunnar's amber gaze slowly lifted, brow furrowed as he pondered what he'd been told. It wasn't much, and not for the first time, Bas wished that he'd tried harder to get information out of the bounty hunters. Even then, he doubted that he'd have gotten anything substantial. Still . . .

Gunnar uttered a terse grunt.

"What?"

"Unless the boss thought very highly of the bounty hunter."

"Well, that makes sense. He sent the pup on a mission, didn't he?"

Gunnar nodded slowly, sucking in his cheek as he considered Bas' words. "Maybe, but think about it: if you weren't Cain's son, do you think that he'd have sent you out on a hunt of any kind?"

"You make it sound like I'm useless," Bas grumbled.

"Not useless, Bas, but not experienced at hunting, either."

Bas had to admit that it made sense. Maybe the boss thought highly of the bounty hunter's skills because he knew him well, and more importantly . . . "So you think that this pup I killed was, what? Related to the boss or something?"

Gunnar narrowed his eyes and leaned his elbow on the arm of the chair, propping his forehead on his raised fingertips. "I'm not sure; it's all just supposition, but . . . there are two factions who could be handling the bounty at this point, and of those two factions, there is one – the Onyx – that we've tangled with before over the assassination of one of Grandfather's generals. The problem was that we never could find any concrete evidence; no paper trails, no witnesses . . . Anyway, I seem to recall that the

leader of the Onyx is an old youkai named Christopher – an old *cougar*-youkai . . . You follow me?”

Bas sat up, digesting Gunnar’s words. “I follow,” he agreed. “You think I killed this guy’s . . . son?”

Gunnar shrugged and pushed himself to his feet, heading toward one of the two bedrooms in the hotel suite. “Let me look into it a little more: check my facts and all that.”

“All right . . . Gunnar?”

He stopped and glanced back over his shoulder. “What?”

“Don’t tell Sydnie any of this – at least, not until we know for sure.”

“All right.” Gunnar sighed, draping his hands on his hips as he looked around the room. “Listen . . . you’re feeling better, right?”

Bas nodded.

“I need to make a few calls, and if you don’t want her overhearing anything . . . There’s a mall a few blocks down. We passed it on the way here. You left all your clothes behind, right? Why don’t you take Sydnie shopping?”

He made a face. The last thing he wanted to do was take the cat shopping. Those trips never, ever turned out well.

“Shopping?”

Bas turned in time to see Sydnie slip out of the bathroom, toweling her hair dry as she wandered toward them. Dressed in the same black tank top and miniskirt she wore the first night he’d met her, she looked calm, relaxed . . . and very, very mischievous. “You *want* to go shopping?” Bas asked dubiously.

“Yes,” she agreed, slipping into the chair beside Bas.

“You hate shopping . . . you give me nothing but grief when I’ve taken you shopping,” he pointed out.

Sydnie giggled as she dug the hairbrush he’d bought her out of her purse. “That was before.”

“Before what?”

“Before I had money of my own.”

He frowned. “How did you get money, Sydney?”

She paused as she dragged the brush through the length of her hair. “Some guy named . . . Evan . . . Was that right, Gunsie?”

Bas blinked. “Evan? As in, my *brother*, Evan?”

“Oh, is that your brother?”

Bas’ incredulous gaze shifted from Sydney to Gunnar as he slowly rose to his feet. “What the hell is she talking about, *Gunsie*?”

Gunnar shrugged offhandedly and turned around to face them.

“He paid four hundred dollars for a picture of me,” she went on, ignoring Bas’ obvious irritation.

“He—*what*?”

“Well, he would have paid more, but that was all he had on him,” Gunnar added for good measure.

Bas erupted in a low growl as he shoved himself away from the table and strode toward his cousin. “What picture?”

“Oh, the one I took with your phone-thingy when you wouldn’t come out of the bathroom,” Sydney supplied.

“With my—” Bas cut himself off and turned on his heel, striding over to jerk his duster off the back of the sofa, digging for his cell phone. It didn’t take him long to find the image of Sydney, sprawled out by the foot of the bed in her tank top and g-string panties. “You fucking bastard!” Bas gnashed out, deleting the picture before tossing the phone onto the sofa and striding toward Gunnar with his hand out. “Give me your phone, damn you.”

Gunnar pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. Bas jerked it away from him and made quick work of scrolling through his pictures and deleting the offending one. “Evan still has it,” Gunnar pointed out reasonably, “and the tai-youkai does, too.”

"What?"

Gunnar shrugged. "The tai-youkai needed a picture for her file – *duh!*"

Bas stifled a frustrated growl and slammed his fist into Gunnar's arm. "Why the hell would you do that?" he bellowed.

"Now, Bas –"

"Aren't you the one who is always telling me I ought to share?" Sydney broke in, grasping Bas' forearm and tugging gently. "Besides, Gunsie-Wunsie wants to be my mate."

That stopped Bas cold. Blinking in silence as Sydney's claim sank in, Bas slowly shook his head. "... He ... *what?*"

Sydney smiled sweetly. "He asked me to be his mate," she replied.

Bas rounded on his cousin again, cracking his fingers as he slowly, methodically, stalked toward him. "Dead, Gunnar," he growled.

Gunnar retreated, holding up his hands in mock surrender. "Now, Bas . . . you can't *really* blame me, can you? I said it before I knew that you wanted her to be yours . . . No harm, no foul, right?"

"*Fucking* dead."

Sydney ran around Bas, planting her hands in the center of his chest as she pressed herself against him. "You want me to be your mate?" she asked quietly.

Bas grimaced, fighting down the blush that flooded to the surface of his skin. "That's not – I didn't – I never said – Oh, *hell!*"

Her skin was flushed though her eyes were uncannily bright, and she stared at him without blinking as he tossed a scathing glower at his cousin and refused to meet Sydney's gaze. "You're an odd puppy," she mumbled, dropping her hands and turning away.

Bas heaved a sigh, narrowing his eyes on his cousin before catching her arm and gently pulling her back. "Come on, Sydney. You need some new clothes, too."

She shot him an inscrutable look but finally nodded. "Okay," she agreed.

Bas shook his head as Sydnie wandered over to retrieve her purse from the table. Pausing long enough to grab his sword and pulling the duster on, he didn't glance at Gunnar again as he strode over and jerked open the door, waiting for Sydnie to pass.

He didn't miss Gunnar's soft chuckle as he pulled it closed.

Final Thought from Bas:
... Poking ...?

Chapter 23

Reinforcements

Cain Zelig scowled at the email displayed on the screen of his computer. His informants weren't any closer to gathering information than they were before. There were times when he hated being tai-youkai. This was one of them. Bound by the need to fulfill his obligations that couldn't be left unattended, he had a million little things to do that really didn't account for much but did thwart his desire to head out in search of information, and the knowledge that his eldest son was in danger only exacerbated Cain's mounting frustration. The tai-youkai in him didn't doubt for a moment that Bas could and would handle the bounty hunters, no matter what faction they represented. The concern was more of the father for his son; the futile wish that he had told Bas that he hadn't wanted him to go out on a hunt, in the first place. Logic told him that Bas was absolutely capable of taking care of the cat-youkai. Sentimentality, though, was much more difficult to reconcile.

Cain closed the email with a sigh and slumped lower in his chair. Gaze lighting on the manila file lying carelessly in the center of the blotter, he scowled. He'd been adding to his notes on Sydney as Bas had mentioned things. While Bas had said that the girl claimed that Kit was just an alias, Cain hadn't been able to dig up any information on anyone with the name 'Sydney Taylor', either.

Slapping his hand on the file to drag it toward him, he opened it and tapped the photograph stapled to the left side of the cover. He had cropped the image just below the girl's chin. *'She's trouble; I know it . . .'*

Gunnar sat in one of the overstuffed recliners across from the sofa in the living room, staring thoughtfully at his telephone as Cain read through the information that Gunnar had given him on the two bounty hunter factions that they were trying to research.

"You know, I think maybe Bas has finally met his match," Gunnar remarked with a smirk.

"Oh?"

"Bubby has a match?" Evan Zelig asked with a snort as he flopped down on the sofa, draping his forearm over his face.

"Shoes off the furniture," Cain grumbled absently as he waved a hand at his son's feet. Evan shifted his legs, letting his legs dangle, apparently too lazy to remove the offending shoes.

Gunnar glanced up from his phone and gazed at Evan speculatively. "How much money you got on you?" he asked.

Evan lifted his arm and turned to stare at his cousin. "Dunno . . . why?"

Gunnar leaned forward, extending his hand, palm up. "Hand it over, pup."

Evan let his arm drop over his face again and snorted. "Like hell, Gunnar."

"Just do it."

Evan heaved a sigh but sat up, leaning to the side so that he could dig a wad of money out of his pocket. He scowled at the money for a moment but finally slapped it into Gunnar's outstretched hand. "There, now suppose you tell me why I just gave you my money."

Gunnar counted the bills and shook his head. "I'm not stupid, Evan. I know you have more than a hundred bucks on you."

Evan growled but dug into his other pocket, producing another wad of money that he handed over, too. "Spit it out already."

Gunnar rolled his eyes. "Two-fifty? You can do better than that . . ."

"Not till you tell me what I'm paying for," he grumbled.

"Let's just say that I swear that you'll not be disappointed."

Evan stared at him for another moment but finally pulled one more wad of bills out of his back pocket, slapping it into Gunnar's hand before sitting back and crossing his arms over his chest. "That's it."

Gunnar grinned. "Four hundred dollars? You're losing your touch, Evan."

"What do you expect?" he retorted. "I just bought a new amplifier."

"Oh, God," Cain groaned. Evan loved music, and that wasn't a bad thing. That he loved to be as loud as he possibly could well into the wee hours of the morning, though . . . It wasn't surprising that Evan had moved into the basement of the house, as far away from the rest of the family, who much preferred to keep normal hours, as he could get.

Gunnar chuckled but tossed Evan his cell phone. Evan shot him a curious scowl before glancing down at the device. He started to look away only to jerk his head right back as his eyes flared

wide and a slow grin spread over his features. "Oh, damn!" he breathed. "Talk about an insta-bone . . . Who is she?"

Gunnar's chuckle deepened. "That would be Sydney . . . the cat-youkai Cain sent Bas out to capture."

Cain glanced up from the papers he had been reading. "What's that?"

"Send me that picture," Evan demanded as Cain reached over to snatch the phone out of his son's hand. "I want to go hunting, Cain!"

"The day I send you on a hunt is the day I die, and I'm 'Dad', remember?" Cain grumbled, eyes widening as he stared at the image on the tiny monitor. "That's her?"

"Can't blame Bas for being distracted, don't you think?" Gunnar quipped.

Cain snorted and handed the phone back to Gunnar. "Send it to me, too."

"Cain, you old dog!" Evan chortled as he stood up and tried to snatch the phone away from Gunnar.

Cain reached over and slapped his son across the back of the head. "For her file, you little pervert."

"You know, Gun, I'd have paid more than four hundred for that picture . . ." Evan added, still trying to grab the phone.

Gunnar laughed, trying to send the picture while evading Evan's nimble fingers at the same time. "Knock it off, Evan, or I won't send it to you."

Evan grinned when his cell phone beeped to announce the receipt of the image in question. "Brings a whole to meaning to 'getting some pussy', you know?"

"Where are you going?" Gunnar called as Evan ran toward the door.

"Where do you think?" the fifteen year-old tossed back without stopping. "I've gotta go do something about the full-on woody!"

Cain shook his head as the memory faded. He wasn't sure how his youngest son had ended up as bad as he tended to be. He should have known since Bas hadn't ever really given him or Gin any real trouble. That should have been warning enough, he supposed. Evan seemed to think that he needed to be bad enough for the both of them. Cain sighed, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose. Between Evan's

penchant for stating the outrageous to his youngest daughter's propensity for sleeping with whomever would let her crawl into their beds, he had to wonder if he had somehow been cursed . . .

At least Jillian adhered to the rule about leaving the bedroom door open. Cain had checked since Gavin Jamison—the young man who Jillian had proclaimed at the age of four would be her mate—had come back after better than two and a half years of college, completely grown up and not even close to the scrawny youth he had been. The last thing Cain wanted or needed, he figured, was for his daughter to end up mated at the tender age of fifteen regardless of Gin's insistence that Jillian wouldn't do any such thing . . . He grinned despite his abysmal thoughts. He'd made a habit of threatening Gavin's body parts about the time the boy should have hit puberty. He was pretty certain that Gavin would behave—that was, as long as Jillian didn't try to work any of her female wiles on the poor pup, because in the eleven years since Gavin had started coming to Maine to be trained, Cain had yet to see the boy say 'no' to Jillian—and mean it.

The telephone rang, and he leaned forward to snag the receiver. "Hello?"

"Cain . . . Gunnar here."

"If you don't have anything useful to say then you'd better hang up right now," he grouched.

Gunnar sighed. "Useful? I think so."

"Good. Let's hear it."

"I think I know which faction is handling the bounty."

Cain sat up a little straighter. "Oh?"

"Yeah . . . It's not good, though."

"Didn't figure it would be. Tell me what you know."

"I believe it's the Onyx."

Cain grimaced. "Why do you think this?"

Gunnar paused for a moment before answering. "I think the first youkai Bas killed . . . I'm pretty sure that he was the boss' son."

“Damn it . . .”

“And it gets worse.”

Cain gritted his teeth and furiously massaged his throbbing temple as a dull ache erupted behind his eyes. “Okay.”

Gunnar sighed again. “He said that Sydnie is expendable, but that Bas is to be brought in alive.”

“Over my dead body.”

Gunnar chuckled. “That’s what Bas said, too.”

“Are you sure?”

“About ninety-nine percent, yes . . . It’s too coincidental to be anything else. Bas killed the first bounty hunter – a cougar-youkai . . . and the Onyx’s boss is a cougar-youkai.”

Cain rifled through the stack of papers in the file and scowled at the statistics that Gunnar had compiled regarding the Onyx. “Jeb Christopher: cougar-youkai,” he mused, reading the only name listed in conjunction with the exclusive organization. “Shit . . .”

Gunnar grunted in response. “I had hoped that the bounties would back off when and if they figured out who Bas was. If this is the case, though . . .”

“It’s just adding more fuel to the fire.”

“Something like that.”

Cain grimaced, shoving the file away as he slumped back in his chair again. “And Bas?”

“What about him?”

“How are his injuries?”

“Better . . . Hopefully he can rest another day or two before anything happens. If he had to, he could fight now, but if Christopher sends more than two hunters – very likely, considering – I’m not so sure how he’d do. Figured I’d hang around for at least a couple more days to make sure, just in case something happens.”

Cain nodded. "Good . . . Gunnar?"

"Yes?"

Drumming his claws against the armrest did little to alleviate the sense of foreboding that gripped him. "That cat and my son . . . how close are they? Truthfully . . ."

Gunnar took a moment before answering, and when he did, he cleared his throat and sighed. "Truthfully? Well . . . how much do you like kitties, Cain?"

Cain grunted. "Really?"

"Really."

He stifled a low groan, feeling his burgeoning headache ballooning into a full-out aneurism. "That much? You're sure?"

"Absolutely . . . wouldn't surprise me if he's thinking about taking her as his mate – not that I blame him. Sydnie's *damn* hot . . ."

"Hardly a good reason for taking a mate," Cain grumbled. "You're positive you're not reading more into it than what's actually there?"

"Yeah, but it makes sex much more palatable, and yes, I'm absolutely positive."

"Put Bas on the phone," Cain gritted out, trying to ignore Gunnar's commentary.

"Love to, but he's not here."

"What do you mean, he's not there?"

Gunnar snorted. "I mean, he's not here. He took Sydnie shopping. He left all his clothes in the hotel back in Oklahoma, and she just doesn't seem to have much of anything, anyway. Bas didn't want me to call you about the Onyx while Sydnie was around. Seems that he doesn't want her to know anything until we're positive who we're dealing with."

"Protecting her."

"So it would seem."

"Pfft!"

"Anyway, I'll keep you posted should something else happen."

"Thanks."

Cain leaned forward and dropped the phone onto the receiver before flopping back once more. Smashing his hands over his face, he heard the door to his study open softly and close again. He didn't have to look to know that Gin had slipped into the office. Moments later, he felt her hands on his shoulders and sighed as she massaged the tenseness away. "Bad news?" she asked quietly.

He let his hands drop away and tilted his head back to gaze at his mate. "You could say that."

"Want to tell me about it?"

Cain shook his head. "Not really, but you'll hear about it, anyway."

"Sounds foreboding."

"Gunnar thinks we're dealing with the Onyx."

Gin flinched, alarm registering in the depths of her golden eyes. He'd told her about the two factions. She understood all too well, just what sort of threat the Onyx posed. "I see."

He winced. He always had hated to tell her things that worried her, even the smallest bit. "It's okay . . . He'll be fine."

"You're right," she agreed. "He's been trained, and he's smart . . ."

"But you're still worried."

She shrugged, wrinkling her nose as she tried to brush aside his concern. "Sebastian is my baby."

"Your 'baby' is twenty-five years old."

"I'll never stop worrying about my children."

Cain nodded. "No, I don't suppose you will."

Narrowing her gaze on him, she crossed her arms over her chest and stepped back. "Okay, Zelig-sensei . . . what else is bothering you?"

"Among other things . . ." He sighed. "Gunnar said that your son might have found his mate."

Gin's eyes lit up, and she squealed happily. "Really? That's fantastic!"

"Not as fantastic as you think, baby girl."

She waved a hand to shut him up. "Don't be silly! This is wonderful news! Who is she? Do we know her?"

"Gin."

She hurried over to fold the afghan that was askew on the couch. "Hmm?"

He stood up and stuffed his hands into his pockets. ". . . Where is Bas right now?"

"Didn't you say he was in Louisiana?"

"Yes, I did."

"Then why are you asking me?"

He blinked and pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. "And what is Bas *doing* in Louisiana?"

She slipped the blanket over the back of the sofa and straightened up, planting her hands on her hips as she leveled a disbelieving look at her mate. "You don't know why he's there?"

"Of course I do . . . I just wonder if *you* do."

Gin squinted at him, and he had the distinct feeling that she thought he was being simple on purpose. "He's bringing that girl in for questioning . . ."

He nodded slowly, pinning Gin with a knowing look.

"But what does that have to do with Sebastian finding his mate?"

Cain lowered his chin, curling his fingers over his lips as he continued to stare at Gin. "Do you honestly have to ask me that?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand . . . It's not like he's on vacation, right? When did he find time to meet anyone when he's been spending all his time with that cat-y – ?" Her eyes flashed open as her mouth rounded in wonder. "Oh . . . really?"

"So I've been told."

Gin looked stunned for all of thirty seconds before she grinned sweetly and hurried over to hug her mate. "Evan showed me that picture of her . . . she's lovely."

"I guess."

Gin leaned back to gaze up at her mate. "And you don't like this idea, do you?"

Cain sighed and grimaced. "It's not that," he allowed. "I don't care so much that he's found his mate, and I don't really care if he's chosen her . . . It makes everything that much more difficult, you know? I just don't want him to do anything . . . permanent . . . at least not until after he can help her clear her name."

"Sebastian said she's not a murderer. That's enough for me," Gin mused.

"Me, too . . . I don't have a problem with it at all. I just don't want him to have to deal with youkai asking questions after the fact."

She nodded. "He's smart, Cain."

Cain shook his head, brushed her bangs back out of her face. "I know he's smart, but sometimes even the most rational people do stupid things when it involves their mates."

Gin nodded slowly. "Like us, you mean?"

He finally smiled, though the expression was thin, weak. He hated reminders that he'd almost lost Gin, and while she maintained that she was fine, he knew in his heart that he had been the one to fail her all those years ago. "Like us," he agreed. "I was so busy trying to protect you that I completely messed it up."

She pushed herself up on tiptoe and kissed his chin. "Like that was completely your fault. Tell me: why do I think that there's still something else bothering you?"

Cain grinned ruefully. He didn't want to alarm Gin, but he couldn't really see a way around telling her everything he knew, either. He sighed and pulled away from her, wandering back to his chair before speaking again. "Gunnar said something else," he allowed. "He said that there's reason to believe that the first bounty hunter that Bas

fought was the son of the Onyx's boss. He said . . . He said that this boss handed down orders that Bas was to be brought in alive."

Gin sank into one of the chairs facing Cain's desk and shook her head. "Revenge, you mean?"

"Something like that."

"I'd try to pull him off the hunt, but if he knows that Sydnie is his mate . . ."

"He won't leave her," Gin concluded. "Of course he wouldn't."

"Exactly."

Gin frowned as she met Cain's gaze. "Papa said that Sebastian is a good fighter; a strong fighter . . ."

"It's not about strength, Gin. If Jeb Christopher sends groups of bounty hunters after them, they could overpower him. The last fight was two against one, and Bas defeated them. If Gunnar's right, and Christopher wants revenge, he'll just send more of his people after Bas. They're not going to fight fairly; not if they think there's a score to settle."

"Sebastian . . . is in danger . . ."

He winced but nodded.

Gin digested that, her skin pale, her eyes wide, confused. She stared at her hands, clasped demurely in her lap. When she finally lifted her chin, Cain wasn't surprised to see the determined light that brightened her gaze. "You can't leave Sebastian out there alone," she murmured.

Cain shook his head, rubbing his temple to alleviate the pain behind his eyes. "You think that he'd let me send in backup? Besides . . . I don't want him to think that I doubt his abilities."

"He wouldn't think that," she assured him.

"Wouldn't he?"

Gin scowled. "If they're not going to fight fairly . . ."

"What do you want me to do, Gin? He wanted to be a hunter. You said he'd be able to do it. I can't pull him off now."

"I know what I said," she assured him. "I'd just feel safer if there were something watching out for him, just in case."

"You mean like someone *trailing* him?"

"Just to make sure that he will be okay if they try to ambush him."

"Gin—"

"Someone who won't interfere unless Sebastian is in trouble."

He sat back and regarded his mate suspiciously. "What are you thinking, baby girl?"

Slowly, she finally broke into a little smile . . . a smile that made him feel even more uneasy than her upset had. Somewhere deep down he knew that he wasn't going to like whatever suggestion she was going to make. Gin stood up and brushed at her skirt—a gesture that escalated his rising trepidation. She ambled over to the desk, trailing her fingertips over the phone thoughtfully.

"What are you doing?" he demanded quietly.

Gin lifted the receiver but didn't dial a number. "I'm going to make sure our son comes home."

And suddenly, the pieces fell into place. Cain leaned forward, pressing down on the switch with his index finger to keep her from placing a call. "Oh, no . . ."

She tilted her head to the side and leveled a no-nonsense look at him. "Oh, yes, Cain Zelig."

"I don't think—"

"I don't *care!* This isn't an ordinary hunt; you said so, yourself. I believe in Sebastian as much as you do, but I refuse to take any chances when it comes to his safety!"

She didn't smile, but her expression seemed quite relieved, and there wasn't a doubt in his mind that, as much as she might wish it were otherwise, Gin really didn't believe that everything would be all right in the end. The look in her eyes was the unerring look of a mother who feared for her son, and he could absolutely understand that. Bas was a damn good fighter, but even the best fighter would have trouble if he had to face

more than one enemy at a time. Her fear was rational, grounded, and while Cain hated the idea that Bas might find out about the perceived interference and think that Cain doubted his abilities, maybe Gin was right. Maybe the need to make certain his son came home unscathed took precedence over the chance that he would find out and be angry. "He can't interfere, Gin . . . not unless Bas is in real danger."

"Okay," she agreed easily enough.

Cain scowled at her for another long moment before settling back with a longsuffering sigh and giving his permission with a curt nod. As much as he hated the idea of sending anyone in to shadow Bas and Sydnie, he had to allow that the peace of mind that their son would be safe far outweighed the off chance that Bas would find out that he was, in fact, being followed.

She shot him a solemn glance then dialed the phone.

*Final Thought from Gin:
He found his mate? Yay!*

Chapter 24

Clever

"I like this shirt," Sydnie commented, idly fingering Bas' soft cotton t-shirt in the dimly lit restaurant where she sat between the cousins. A waiter quietly removed the dinner plates and hurried away as she gazed up at Bas in obvious appreciation.

He snorted. "Pfft! I told you, it's too small."

She grinned. She'd chosen the shirt. Since she had shredded the only one he had, he'd sent Sydnie into the store to buy one with the explicit instructions that she should get a double-extra-large and tall shirt. She'd gotten the tall part right, but the plain black t-shirt had only been a single-extra-large, and when he'd asked her if they'd been out of the double-extra-larges, she'd just smiled and said that his other shirts had been too big, anyway. This one wasn't small, but it was snug across his shoulders and chest. She couldn't help but appreciate the way it had accentuated his trim waist, his broad shoulders . . . Sure, she knew that Sebastian had a hell of a body. *'Might as well show it off, right?'* she thought with a smirk. "I don't think it is," she argued. "I think it's just perfect."

He snorted again and made a face as embarrassed color washed into his cheeks.

"Don't know about *his* clothes," Gunnar remarked as he swigged his beer and made a face. "You look damn good, though, kitten."

Bas shot Gunnar a pronounced glower but didn't respond in kind.

Sydnie sat up straighter and giggled, glancing down at the pine green suede vest-skirt combo she'd talked Bas into buying for her. The skirt hugged her hips and was as short as her tube micro-mini, and when she'd stepped out of the changing room for his inspection, he'd looked as though he was about to tell her to turn right around and take the ensemble off. In the end, he'd given in when she had casually mentioned that she'd be happy to buy it, herself, with the money his brother had paid for her picture.

"You're such a sweet little puppy," Sydnie purred, grinning as Gunnar slipped his arm along the back of the booth behind Sydnie's shoulders. Bas uttered a low growl and pulled Sydnie closer to his side.

"Find your own kitty, you little fucker," Bas grumbled, cheeks pinking though he didn't relinquish his hold on Sydnie, either.

"That's okay, Bas. I'll just take that one."

"The hell you will," Bas growled.

Gunnar chuckled and sat back. "But she likes me," he pointed out.

"She *tolerates* you, you ass."

Sydnie glanced from Bas to Gunnar then back again, thoroughly enjoying the needling rapport between the cousins. She hadn't realized just how much the relationship between family members intrigued her. Having grown up without any family to speak of, she couldn't help but feel a certain compulsion to absorb every moment she could, and the feeling that she was somehow included . . . it added a sense of well-being that reassured her more than she wanted to admit.

Gunnar caught her gaze and winked. She giggled.

"When are you leaving, Gunnar?" Bas demanded, tapping his foot on the floor beneath the table as he shot his cousin a somewhat bored glare.

"As soon as you're healed," he replied. "At least, I was going to. Then again, maybe I should stick around . . ."

"If you do, I swear I'll kill you," Bas grumbled.

Sydnie leaned against Bas' arm. He glanced down at her and smiled bashfully. "You want more milk, kitty?"

She shook her head. "I don't need it."

He rolled his eyes and called out to the passing waiter. "Excuse me. Would you bring another glass of milk?"

The waiter nodded and hurried off. Sydnie scooted a little closer to Bas' side.

Gunnar sighed. "I'll probably be leaving at the end of the week," he remarked with a shake of his head. "Soon enough for you, Sebastian?"

"*Tomorrow* wouldn't be soon enough for me, Mamoruzen," Bas shot back.

Sydney blinked. It wasn't the first time she'd heard Bas call Gunnar by that name. "Mamoruzen?" she repeated, mangling the pronunciation but managing it well enough to get her point across.

Gunnar made a face. "Bas is just being an ass . . . oi, that rhymed . . ."

Bas snorted. "That's his real name – and he hates it."

"You hate it?"

Gunnar shrugged. "Let's stick to 'Gunnar', shall we?"

"His father's Japanese," Bas supplied when Sydney frowned. "His mom is American."

"Oh, that's what your accent is," she concluded. "I wondered."

"Born and raised . . . though I spent quite a bit of time here in the States for my training."

"Mamoruzen Gunnar," she mused. "So what's your last name?"

Gunnar glanced over her head then smiled. "Don't worry about it, Sydney. It's quite a bit harder to pronounce."

She rolled her eyes but shrugged. "What's *his* last name?" she questioned, jerking her head at Bas.

Gunnar's grin widened, amber eyes sparkling mischievously. "Bas'?"

Sydney shrugged. "Yes."

"I think you should ask him."

Bas snorted. Sydney giggled. "Is it hard to pronounce, too?" she questioned.

"Sure," Gunnar agreed as he dug into his pocket and pulled out a handful of change. "Here, Sydney. Why don't you pick some different music? Something that isn't . . . *country*."

She scooped the change out of his hand and slipped out of the booth after Gunnar stood up. She blinked in surprise when Bas followed suite, unsure why the sudden show of manners unsettled her. Smiling uncertainly, she smoothed her skirt before sauntering off toward the jukebox standing on the far side of the restaurant near the bar.

"Nice evasion," Bas remarked as they sat back down, his eyes following Sydnie's retreat.

"Wasn't it?" Gunnar quipped dryly.

Bas sighed. "God, she's going to hate me when I tell her . . ."

"Maybe not."

Bas snorted. "Pfft. You have no idea just how much she loathes the tai-youkai . . ." He trailed off, eyes shifting to narrow on Gunnar, who was busy watching Sydnie flip through the selections in the gaudily-colored jukebox. "Hmm . . . maybe I should tell her you're in line to be tai-youkai in Japan," he mused. "Bet she abandons the Gunnar fan club pretty quickly."

Gunnar chuckled. "Yeah, well, I figured that telling her my last name would do more damage than it was worth."

Bas nodded. "So you do possess some modicum of logic."

"Suck it, Bas."

Bas grinned. "I can't suck something *you* can't find."

"Ouch."

His smile faded, and he sat up straighter as the waiter set a full glass of milk on the table. Leaning to the side, Bas erupted in a growl as he scooted out of the booth and took a step toward Sydnie. Some guy was talking to her, and while she looked vaguely amused, she didn't seem to welcome the attention. She had a polite little smile plastered on her face, and when the man stepped closer, the smile disappeared.

Gunnar grabbed Bas' arm and pulled him back. "Don't make a scene," he hissed in Bas' ear.

Bas spared him a baleful glower and yanked his arm away but stopped, hands balling into tight fists, teeth gritted together so hard his jaw ticked. "Damn it . . ."

"The last thing you need is to draw attention to yourself, especially when Sydnie is obviously not interested in the guy. Hear me?"

Bas snorted but glanced back at the cat-youkai. The man leaned toward her, murmuring something that Bas couldn't hear. She smiled just a little and put her hand on his arm, bracing herself against him as she said something in reply. The man's face contorted in a pained grimace. Bas' scowl darkened until he saw the reason why. Grinding the heel of her stiletto heel into the man's foot, she was still smiling sweetly, and after sparing another moment to add extra emphasis to whatever statement she'd made, she turned her head and nodded toward Bas, who, for the most part, concentrated on glowering as fiercely as he could at the defeated human.

"Holy dogs, Bas . . . are you trying to scare the shit out of people?" Gunnar complained.

"Whatever works," he grumbled.

Satisfied that she'd made her point, Sydnie let go of the man's arm and wandered toward Bas, her smile brightening, her eyes softly glowing, and if she noticed anyone else in the restaurant, Bas couldn't tell.

"Changed my mind, kitty," he remarked as she kissed his cheek and slipped into the booth. "You can keep those shoes, after all."

She laughed as Bas sat back down, too. Gunnar chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Remind me not to tick you off, Sydnie," Gunnar said with an exaggerated grimace. "Damned if that didn't look like it hurt a hell of a lot."

"It does," Bas grumbled despite the hint of amusement lighting his gaze as he watched Sydnie down the glass of milk.

"That's right . . . you *have* had personal experience with her shoes, haven't you?" Gunnar added.

Bas grunted in reply.

Sydnie set the empty glass aside and shot him a catty sort of smile. "Don't worry, Sebastian . . . I have no intention of using my shoes against you ever again."

He grunted again and finally looked away. "Good."

"Which doesn't mean I won't."

"I didn't figure it did," he said with an exaggerated grimace.

She giggled.

“I swear there's something wrong with you,” Bas pointed out as he pulled the SUV out of the parking lot onto the street.

“There's nothing wrong with me,” Gunnar argued as he crumpled up a wrinkled napkin with a phone number scrawled on it and dropped it on the floor.

“Is, too.”

“Is not.”

“Telling me not to draw attention to myself and then going out and getting all . . . jiggy with the women.”

Gunnar laughed. “Wait . . . did you just say . . . `jiggy'?”

Bas snorted. “Shut it, dog.”

“Woof!”

Sydney turned around with a slight frown as she tried to brush aside the odd feeling that wouldn't quite leave her alone. She'd been watching the car that had been following them since they'd pulled out of the restaurant parking lot. Sure, it was possible that the people had gone there to eat and that they were heading home or something. Still it struck her as strange, and she just didn't know *why*. Instinct, maybe, she figured, and she had been a bit edgy all day. Unable to shake the strange feeling that something bad was coming, she sighed inwardly and forced a smile when Bas peeked into the rearview mirror to look at her.

“Can I help it that women think I'm irresistible?” Gunnar lamented.

“Go to hell, Gunsie,” Bas shot back. “You're such an idiot.”

Sydney giggled despite her foreboding thoughts. It had perplexed her, really. She'd danced with Gunnar – Bas claimed he didn't know how – while Bas sat in the booth, watching them. He'd smiled at her a few times, and it had been his idea that she dance with Gunnar, but when a slow song started, it hadn't taken more than a few seconds before she'd sensed Bas' approach and was pleasantly surprised to be pulled away from Gunnar and into Bas' arms. She'd reminded him that he said that he didn't know how to

dance. He'd blushed, telling her that slow dancing wasn't much more than swaying, really, and that any fool could do that.

When the song was over, Bas suggested that they get back to the hotel since Gunnar wanted to get moving again in the morning. Sydnie hadn't argued but she had sighed, and when she turned around to return to the booth, she'd stopped short at the sight of Gunnar, surrounded by four young women who were all too busy fawning over Gunnar to notice Sydnie and Bas' approach.

"Why are they doing that?" she demanded, leaning closer to whisper her question.

Bas shrugged. "What? That?" he asked, waving a hand at Gunnar and the women.

Sydnie nodded.

"It's always like that everywhere we go," he grumbled. "I guess they think he's cute or something."

Sydnie blinked. Something in Bas' tone gave her pause. He didn't sound jealous, exactly . . . more like resigned to it, she supposed. "Well, he's cute, sure," she agreed slowly, her frown deepening as she shook her head. "But he's certainly not you."

Bas stopped abruptly and stared at Sydnie. "Oh?"

"Of course not! Cute versus sexy as hell? I think I'll take sexy as hell, thanks."

She wasn't surprised to see the vivid blush that stained his cheeks almost instantly. "You . . . y-you think I-I-I'm . . .?"

She smiled and pushed herself onto her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "What do you think, puppy?" she murmured in his ear.

Bas could only smile bashfully, taking Sydnie's hand and pulling her back toward the booth once more.

"Like I asked for the attention," Gunnar remarked with a snort.

"Like you didn't," Bas shot back.

"I didn't," he argued. "What can I say? I just have loads of animal magnetism."

"You've got loads of something," Bas grumbled, turning the corner on the street that led to the hotel.

Sydney glanced over her shoulder in time to see the car that was still following them. Gunning the engine, the driver sped through the yellow light at the intersection, and she frowned. If she weren't sure before, she was now. They were definitely being followed . . .

"Yeah, yeah, you're just jealous, Bas . . . It's just a matter of time before I steal Sydney right from under your nose."

Sydney rolled her eyes. "Bas?"

He didn't seem to have heard her. "You're asking for a pounding," Bas remarked dryly.

"Gunnar?" she said a little louder.

"Bring it, bastard . . . I'd love to see you try."

She leaned forward and cleared her throat to garner their attention. "Sorry to interrupt, puppies . . . but I think we're being followed."

"What?" Bas demanded, glancing into the side mirror. He scowled at the car but shook his head. "You sure, kitty?"

Gunnar turned around, peering over the back of his seat and out the rear window. "How long?"

Satisfied that they were finally listening, she perched on the edge of the seat and shrugged. "Since we left the restaurant. They were already in their car, and they pulled out right after we did. They just blew that caution light back there, too."

Bas nodded. "Hold on, Sydney."

She reached out in time to steady herself on the armrest as Bas abruptly cut around the corner. The car followed suite, and he sighed. "Damn it."

He deliberately meandered through the city streets for twenty minutes to no avail. "Hand me Triumvirate, Sydney," Bas commanded, his eyes shifting from the street ahead of them to the rearview mirror and back again. Sydney did as she was told, reaching under the bench seat to retrieve both his sword as well as Gunnar's. She handed Bas' over first.

Gunnar grabbed it and sighed before taking his sword from her, too.

Bas leaned forward while Gunnar reached around him to strap the sword on his hip, carefully weaving along the city streets. "Watch where you're grabbing," he growled. Sydnie shook her head as Gunnar rolled his eyes.

"Like I'd be trying to grab anything on *you*, you ass," Gunnar shot back, fastening the strap and maneuvering in his seat to strap on his sword, too.

"Well, you tell me you want me to suck it often enough," Bas grumbled.

Sydnie rolled her eyes. "Focus, please! There are bounty hunters following us!"

"Maybe not bounty hunters," Gunnar remarked quietly.

"True enough . . . maybe it's the Gunnar fan club," Bas snorted sarcastically.

"Hmm, I think you're being a tad facetious this evening," Gunnar shot back.

Bas grunted as he turned again only to be followed in short order. He shot Gunnar a meaningful glance that wasn't lost on Sydnie. "Damn it."

"What are the odds they aren't the *Bas* fan club?" Gunnar muttered darkly.

"What do you think we should do about this?"

Gunnar narrowed his gaze on his cousin and slowly shook his head. "What do you mean, what should we do? Move it, damn it!"

"Move it? Move it, where?"

"Where do you think? Out of the city! I'd rather not get into this in the middle of a bunch of humans, and I'm pretty sure that your father wouldn't like it, either."

"Maybe not," Bas agreed, "but running isn't a great idea, either."

"Open to suggestions."

Bas shook his head. "Your logic is completely fucked up, by the way."

"Oh?"

"Uh-huh . . . even if we get them out of the city, we still won't have any sort of real advantage."

Sydney frowned. True enough, she figured. Their followers were much too close for them to be able to stop the car and formulate any sort of real offense before the hunters caught up with them. Still there had to be something they could do . . .

"Look . . . maybe they don't realize we know they're following us," Gunnar reasoned.

Bas glowered at him. "Have one too many beers, Gun? They've been following us for the last twenty minutes . . . If they don't realize we know they're back there, then they're fiercely stupid . . ."

"Stop at that gas station," Sydney interrupted before Gunnar could retort.

"Gas station?" Bas echoed incredulously, scowl darkening as he glanced in the rearview mirror to gape at her. "Listen, cat—"

"I need a pack of cigarettes," she maintained stubbornly.

"A . . . pack . . . of . . . *what?*" he growled.

Gunnar's eyes flared wide, and he nodded quickly. "Absolutely," he agreed. "And we can gas up the SUV."

Bas shook his head slowly. "Have you two lost your fucking *minds*? If those are the bounty hunters following us, do you really think that they'll just sit around and wait till you're done running your errands before they attack?" he snarled.

"No, she's right," Gunnar cut in patiently as he unfastened his sword. "They won't attack in plain view if they can help it . . . If they were going to, they'd have done it after we left the restaurant. If you want them to think we don't know they're there, then we need to act like we don't. In any case, we need to fill up the SUV so we can get the hell out of here when it's all said and done."

Bas scowled as he pondered Gunnar's words and heaved a frustrated sigh but did pull into the gas station, stopping in front of the pump closest to the building. The girl working behind the counter glanced outside at them. Bas turned to eye Sydney. "You stay down and out of sight," he demanded with a pointed lifting of his eyebrow.

"Well, I really *do* need cigarettes," she told him.

He snorted, opening his mouth to tell her that she really didn't need any such thing. Gunnar shook his head and opened the door. "Forget it. I'll take care of it."

Letting his head fall back against the headrest, he closed his eyes for a moment until Gunnar tapped on the window and pointed at the back of the vehicle. Bas released the door covering the gas tank and pushed himself up straighter, idly drumming his index fingers against the steering wheel.

Sydney slid off the seat and knelt on the floor, leaning on the center console between the seats to peer up into Bas' face. Half hidden in shadows, he stared out the window, his gaze lit by a strange sense of determination.

"Where are we going, then?" she forced herself to ask.

Bas' eyes narrowed. "Back to the hotel. We'll check out and get everything around . . . might as well be ready to run."

"They won't attack us around humans?"

Bas shook his head. "I doubt it. Bounty hunters might not be honorable, but they aren't stupid, either. They won't attack where they'd draw attention to themselves. It's bad for business."

She grimaced at his choice of wording and slumped against the seat. Bas reached back and held out his palm. She stared at it for a moment before slipping her hand into his. She could feel the steady strength in his grip, found his calm entirely comforting. He continued to stare out the window as he rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. A cold rain splattered the windshield, and the pinging droplets beat down on the vehicle in an ever-increasing tempo as the winds escalated.

"Don't be scared, Sydney," he told her at last, breaking the stilted silence.

"I'm not," she replied.

He nodded. "Good."

*Final Thought from Bas:
Sexier than hell, huh ...*

Chapter 25

Splitting Heirs

"I don't think this is going to work."

Gunnar shot Bas a perturbed glance and slowly shook his head. "It'll work," he argued. "I think it's a damn good plan."

Striding the length of the hotel room, Bas raked his hands through his hair and sighed. "No," he growled.

"It's only for a little while, Bas. We'll double back, but it'll give you time to see if you can't figure out how many we're up against."

"Think of something else, Gunnar. This one isn't happening."

"It'll be all right, Sebastian," Sydnie said quietly, staring at the little silver locket in her hands and refusing to meet his gaze.

Bas snorted. "I said no, Sydnie."

"Contrary to popular belief I'm not so inept that I would let something happen to her," Gunnar pointed out.

"It's not about what you may or may not be capable of," Bas grouched. "She's *my* responsibility, damn it, and I won't sit back and let you take her *anywhere*."

Sydnie shrugged and let her shoulders slump. "Gunnar's right," she added. "It's a good plan."

Bas draped his hands on his hips as he whipped around to glare at the cat-youkai. "The hell it is! You're the one they're after, and—"

"And you changed that when you killed the first bounty hunter," Gunnar cut in. "Face it, baka: they want you as badly as they want her."

Bas glowered at his cousin out of the corner of his eye but didn't turn to face him. The spike in Sydnie's youki bespoke her anxiety over the idea that he was in danger more

than mere words could have conveyed, and Bas had to squelch the urge to knock Gunnar upside the head for stating things so bluntly. "Shut up, Gunnar."

Gunnar slowly rose to his feet as he glared at Bas, all trace of his more playful nature gone. "I won't, damn it! Need I remind you that you have other responsibilities: ones that require that you *live* in order to fulfill them?"

"If you think I'm stupid enough to forget—"

"You want to protect her? Then this is the best chance we've got! You have no idea how many hunters were sent out this time, and neither do I! Stop trying to be the hero and think about what you're doing!"

Bas heaved a sigh and stifled a growl. He really wished that he could think of another plan; something that wouldn't involve letting Sydnie out of his sight, even for a moment. Unfortunately, Sydnie and Gunnar were right: this *was* the best plan. Of course, it didn't mean he had to like it, and the stubborn set of his features said that quite clearly as he glowered at his cousin . . . "If *anything* happens to her . . ."

Gunnar relaxed slightly, sensing that Bas was finally ready to admit defeat. "Yeah, yeah . . . if anything happens to her, you'll kill me. I got that."

He leveled a no-nonsense look at Gunnar but nodded before shifting his gaze to Sydnie. "You're sure about this?"

Slowly lifting her chin, she met Bas' concerned scowl and tried to smile. "It's a good plan."

He snorted.

Gunnar grabbed his sword and strapped it around his hips before reaching for the knee-length gray wool trench coat he wore to conceal the weapon. Sydnie closed her hand around the little silver locket she'd dug out of her purse just before Bas had taken it out to the waiting SUV. She squared her shoulders and shot Bas an almost nervous glance. He tried to smile, wanted to reassure her. She winced at the expression, and he heaved a sigh.

He caught her wrist as she followed after Gunnar. "You'll be fine, Sydnie."

"I know," she replied.

"Be careful."

She nodded. "You, too, puppy."

He could feel the erratic flutter of her pulse under his fingertips, could sense the anxiety that she tried to hide from him. With a wince, he pulled her close, wrapped his arms around her as he buried his nose in her hair. "Okay, kitty . . . it'll be okay, I . . . I promise."

She accepted the gesture, slipping her arms around him, her body relaxing against him, and she nodded.

Gunnar cleared his throat and sighed. "Come on. Might as well get moving, don't you think?"

Sydney swallowed hard as she forced herself to step away from Bas, and with one last, lingering stare, she slowly backed away from him to follow Gunnar out the door.

Bas waited until they were gone before grabbing the black leather duster and striding after them. He heard the soft hiss of the elevator doors closing behind Sydney and Gunnar as he strode toward the door that led to the stairwell and ran up the steps, taking them two at a time.

'Relax, Bas. Gunnar can handle things on their end.'

Scowling at the overly-reasonable tone of his youkai, Bas snorted. *'Sure, he can.'*

'He was trained, just like you . . . and you know the plan is sound enough.'

'Right.'

He sighed, smacking open the door and quickly casting his gaze around the dimly lit corridor. It looked like the floor below, but this one had another doorway at the end with a sign glowing above it: 'exit'.

Simple reasoning, he supposed. Gunnar had surmised that the best idea would be to separate the two targets: Bas and Sydney, forcing the bounty hunters to make a choice as to who they would follow. Thing was, Bas wasn't so sure that it was that great of an idea. Sydney was the ultimate target. She was the one they were hired to dispose of. Bas was secondary. Whether he'd managed to piss someone off or not, the fact of the matter was that the danger to Sydney was more important than the inconvenience of the bounty hunters to him.

'She has to be safe,' he told himself as he pushed the metal bar on the fire escape door. It opened with a whisper, and he strode through it, running up the metal stairs and slipping out the door on the roof.

From his vantage point, he could see all the area surrounding the hotel. Four stories off the ground, he crouched and scooted toward the low stone lip that ran around the perimeter of the roof just in time to see Gunnar close the passenger side door on the SUV before striding around the vehicle to get into the driver's side. The car was still parked in the row behind the rental, and when Gunnar started the engine, Bas wasn't surprised to see the car's headlights flicker to life.

'Damn, I knew it,' Bas thought with a grimace. Contrary to what they'd thought, Bas had believed that the bounty hunters wouldn't waste their time coming after him. If Sydney left with Gunnar, they'd follow them. Gunnar had been sure that they'd split up with some coming after Bas while the rest of them – however many there were – followed Gunnar and Sydney.

Bas started to stand up, ready to vault the side of the roof, but stopped. Two shadowy figures in the parking lot caught his attention. He could sense their youki, and he frowned. Malignant, dark, almost stagnant, it wrapped around Bas with an unwelcome grip. Dangerous, certainly, and older than the last two bounty hunters he'd faced, the pair skirted around the parked cars, blending into the shadows as they made their way toward the hotel, Bas grimaced and shook his head. He'd been certain that the hunters wouldn't dare try to stir up trouble where there were bound to be witnesses.

'Unless they're desperate.'

'Desperate . . .'

'Face it, Bas. You've already made a fool out of their organization. If you think that they're just playing around, you're a fool . . .'

'A fool, huh?' Bas' scowl darkened as he backed away from the edge of the roof and ran to the far end of the building. Dropping over the edge onto the ground and hidden in the shadows, Bas clenched his hands in tight fists as he sprinted toward the trees on the outskirts of Natchez, thankful that they'd chosen a hotel that wasn't in the center of town. Brushing aside the nagging feeling that he was running from the conflict, he concentrated instead on the plan . . .

Gunnar glanced in the rearview mirror and sighed. "Let's hope this works," he muttered, more to himself than to Sydney.

She nodded – more of an afterthought than a show of agreement – and fingered the locket in her hand.

'It . . . it has to work,' she told herself, squeezing the trinket as the solid metal bit into her palm. *'If Bas can just get away . . .'*

If he could get away from the hotel . . .

Sydney had nearly screamed when she'd seen the two skulking figures in the darkness of the parking lot as they'd pulled out into the winding driveway heading toward the main road. She'd hoped that the hunters would just follow her. She was the one they wanted, wasn't she?

It had seemed simple enough: drive back to the hotel, gather their things, pack up the SUV, and check out . . . From there, Sydney and Gunnar would leave in the vehicle, as though she were being removed from Bas' custody. Gunnar had thought that the bounty hunters would split up so that they could follow Bas and Sydney, both. She'd hoped he was wrong. She'd hoped that they'd all follow her.

Bas would exit the hotel via the roof, cutting through the woods behind the hotel where he'd wait for them, giving them the advantage when Gunnar stopped the car – unless Bas ended up having to fight the lingering bounty hunters, that was . . .

Closing her eyes, Sydney pressed the locket against her heart and swallowed hard. *'Be safe, Sebastian . . . you promised you'd be all right . . .'*

Gunnar pulled onto the street, checking the LCD monitor from time to time to make sure that they were on the right path. The access road where they'd meet up with Bas only had one entrance nearby, and for reasons that eluded Sydney, that one was nearly five miles away.

She glanced in the passenger side mirror and bit her lip. The car was still following them.

Gunnar sighed softly, understanding her unvoiced upset. He managed a weak smile and squeezed her icy hand. "He'll be fine, you know. Don't worry about Bas . . . he's trained with the best, or so I've been assured."

"And who would that be?" she demanded, unable to keep the sharp edge out of her voice. *'Whoever thought of the phrase, 'Out of sight, out of mind','* she mused with a grimace, *'ought to be strung up and left for the vultures . . .'*

"His grandfather," Gunnar went on, oblivious to the mutinous train of her thoughts. "One of the best, if not *the* absolute master . . . Bas will be just fine; you'll see . . ."

Sydney nodded, unsure why she felt like he was trying to convince himself of the same thing, too. She stole a glance at him. Eyes narrowed on the road ahead, his jaw ticked menacingly, knuckles white with the force behind his grip on the steering wheel, Gunnar's ears twitched, turning almost backward as he pushed the button to crack the window and drew a deep breath.

Gunnar chuckled softly when their pursuers were unceremoniously cut off by a truck that pulled off a side road. Taking the opportunity to buy them a little more time, he sped up, mumbling under his breath about being thankful for the oncoming traffic that would keep the hunters at bay and just might buy them a little time that they desperately needed.

Gunnar turned off onto the access road as Sydney slipped the locket back into her purse. Scanning the forest that lined the path, she knew that looking for Bas wouldn't do any good, and yet she couldn't help herself, either.

"You sure you want a mutt like Bas?" Gunnar asked, his teasing tone oddly strained.

Sydney couldn't muster the bravado to rise to the bait. "Even good fighters can be outnumbered," she whispered. "What if there were more than two left behind?"

Gunnar winced and sighed. "Then Bas can deal with that, too."

She didn't reply to that.

"You ready to run, Sydney?"

She swallowed hard and nodded. "I'm ready."

"All right," Gunnar agreed. "This looks like as good a spot as any. Remember: no matter what, you cannot let them touch you."

"I won't."

"Good, because Bas will kill me if anything happens to you."

"You're scared of him?" she couldn't help but ask.

"When it comes to you? Hell, yes," he quipped. The smile he shot her was a little closer to what a smile ought to be. It faded quickly, though, and he sighed as he pulled off the road in a small shoulder area that was partially obscured by trees that lined the road and stopped the vehicle. "You know what to do."

Sydney nodded absently, scanning the trees for any sign of Bas. Gunnar got out and loped around the SUV. The wind had picked up, and with a deep breath, she threw her door open. Gunnar grabbed her hand and sprinted into the forest.

'Where is he?'

Unable to catch his scent in the escalating gale, Sydney had to narrow her eyes to keep flying debris from blinding her. Gunnar growled low in his throat and stopped for a moment, dropping to his knees as he tried to catch Bas' scent. Sydney choked back the anxiety that rose inside her as she scanned the trees. "He has to—"

"He's close," Gunnar said as he got to his feet. "Come on."

Sydney followed Gunnar further into the forest, shielding her face with her hands. The wind had a bitter bite that whipped through her with a vicious abandon, and she had to turn her head to the side a few times so that she could breathe.

Glancing over her shoulder, she scanned the area for any sign of Bas or the bounty hunters she knew weren't far behind. *'He has to be close,'* she told herself stubbornly. *'Bas . . . where are you?'*

Gunnar grasped her hand and tugged her forward. Sydney followed, eyes trained on the darkness: the shadows that thwarted her. A sudden thump, a quiet growl, and suddenly Sydney felt herself jerked away from Gunnar's grip and pulled back against a very solid, very welcome body. "Bas!"

"Keep your damn hands off her," he growled, glaring over her head at his cousin.

Gunnar shrugged, but his grin was obviously relieved. "About time you joined us," he drawled.

Sydney shook her head. "Where . . . where were you?"

Bas jerked his head heavenward. "The trees."

"I saw two of them in the parking lot," Gunnar interrupted. "Where are they?"

Bas grunted. "They were going into the hotel when I took off. They can't be too far behind." Bending down long enough to scoop Sydnie up, he vaulted back into the trees as Gunnar followed suite. "You stay up here," he told her.

Sydnie made a face. "Are you *nuts*?"

"I mean it, cat. I can't concentrate on what I'm supposed to be doing if I'm all preoccupied, worrying about you!"

She opened her mouth to retort then snapped it closed again, whipping her face to the side as she scanned the forest below. "They're here," she whispered.

Bas uttered a low growl and let Sydnie's feet drop to the solid branch. "Stay here, Sydnie," he told her again. "I mean it."

She scowled at the stubborn dog but nodded. "Okay," she agreed. As much as she wished it were otherwise, she knew that he was right. If he ended up injured like he had been the last time because of her . . . Sydnie swallowed hard and hunkered down on the branch beside Bas as two bounty hunters—a wolf- and a jaguar-youkai—stepped out of the trees into the range of Sydnie's sight below. They were the ones she'd seen in the parking lot—the ones who had been following Bas. She dug her claws into the branch as two more youkai slipped into the area . . .

'Four bounty hunters?' Bas thought, cutting off another growl before he gave away their position.

The hunters were still looking around below, and not for the first time, Bas was thankful for the wind that was effectively carrying their scents away before they could be discerned. The four exchanged looks before continuing to comb the area. Bas glanced over at Gunnar, catching his cousin's eye. Gunnar pointed down then pointed behind him. Bas nodded, sparing a moment to place his hand over Sydnie's before silently maneuvering through the tree branches, circling around the bounty hunters while Gunnar did the same on the other side.

Crouching low, he dropped from the tree onto the soggy forest floor, the sounds of his movements lost in the rising winds of the storm. The two hunters didn't seem to realize that he was almost directly behind them, and, gritting his teeth hard, he drew his sword

and held it at ready. “Looking for someone?” he growled, his voice a low rumble underlying the distant thunder reverberating through the air.

The two swung around to face him, masking their surprise quickly but not quickly enough for Bas to miss the expressions. Before he let them gain any sort of advantage, he whipped around, hefting *Triumvirate* over his shoulder and bringing it down across the wolf-youkai’s chest. He howled in pain, the hot spray of his blood hitting Bas in the face. His body exploded in a wave of dust and light and wind before he hit the ground as Bas turned in time to smash an elbow into the jaguar-youkai’s stomach.

“You’re the one I sensed the last time,” Bas snarled, narrowing his eyes on the jaguar-youkai as he tightened his grip on *Triumvirate*. “Too afraid to come out of hiding, were you?”

“I had my reasons, son of the Great Dog,” the jaguar hissed, cracking his knuckles as he straightened up.

“Reasons . . . right . . .”

He lunged at Bas, claws flashing with an unearthly blue hue as they sliced through the air. Bas blocked him with *Triumvirate*’s blade and heaved the jaguar-youkai away. He slid across the forest floor, the stagnant scent of decaying leaves and molding wood rising from the earth.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Gunnar whip around, the blade of his sword whistling, catching the arm of one of the youkai as a fine sheen of blood arced through the air. The earth-based-youkai bellowed and stumbled back as the second one – a thunder-youkai – slammed his meaty fists into the ground. Gunnar sprang out of the way as a blast of thunder struck where he had been standing.

“You’d be better off to pay attention to me!” the jaguar growled, sprinting toward Bas. Bas leaned away in time to avoid the brunt of the attack, head snapping to the side when the jaguar’s razor-sharp claws grazed his cheek.

“Sebastian! *Look out!*” Sydnie shrieked. Bas growled, glancing over his shoulder in time to see the furrow of earth rippling toward him. Trees groaned and shook; dirt flew through the air. The earth-youkai stood gripping his arm while Gunnar crossed swords with the thunder-youkai. The torrential rain picked up, splitting the treetops and drenching the forest as the wind drove in more rain from the east.

Bas dove to the side moments before the ground shifted under his feet. The jaguar-youkai leapt at him, and he reacted on instinct, bringing his feet up, catching the miscreant in the gut, and shoved him away. Rolling to his feet as the jaguar smacked

into a gnarled tree trunk, Bas wiped the rain off his face and tightened his grip on Triumvirate.

“Don’t . . . kill . . . them . . . all,” Gunnar grunted. Standing his ground with swords crossed, he and the thunder-youkai seemed to be engaged in a battle of brute strength.

“Kill us all?” the thunder-youkai scoffed. “I’d like to see you try, puppy!”

Gunnar grunted again, regaining his footing on the slippery earth. “Bring it, old man.”

“Why don’t you give up? Tuck your tail between your legs, and I might let you run away.”

“This Mamoruzen will not run,” he growled.

Bas hefted his sword over his head and slammed it down on the ground. The shockwave shot out of the blade in waves, intercepting the earth-youkai’s attack in a violent collision of Bas’ yellow-white flames and the earth-youkai’s reddish hue. “Sure thing, *Mamoruzen* . . . I’ll have Mother invite them over for fucking tea,” he snarled back.

“Strong for a young’un,” the thunder-youkai mused with a grim smile, “but not strong enough.” With a growl, he shoved Gunnar hard. Gunnar stumbled back a couple steps before hurling himself toward the thunder-youkai again. The swords crashed as the two faced off, sparks flying as the scrape of the blades ignited in an eerie purple glow.

The jaguar-youkai sprang at Bas once more. Bas spun away to avoid the attack a moment too late. The youkai caught his right wrist, claws scraping against bone as he grunted in pain. The hit sent Triumvirate flying end over end, and it embedded itself in the earth fifty feet away, the blade resonating with the force of impact.

“Only as good as your sword, aren’t you?” the jaguar gloated. “Let’s see what you can do without it – if you can do anything at all.”

Bas clutched his bleeding wrist for a moment but let go, shaking the appendage and gritting his teeth against the searing pain. Cracking his knuckles, he blanked his features and narrowed his gaze on the youkai. “If you believe that,” he began, “then you’re stupider than I thought you were.”

“Don’t make the mistake of underestimating him, Glave,” the earth-youkai grumbled.

“I’ve seen him fight,” Glave scoffed. “He used the cat as a decoy, all because he lost possession of his precious sword. That’s what I saw.”

Bas didn't bother replying to the obvious taunt. The reason he'd relied so heavily on his sword in the last fight wasn't because he was weak. He'd been more dependent on it because he'd allowed himself to be caught off-guard, and with the injuries he'd sustained to his ribs, he couldn't fight without Triumvirate as well . . . Not that the bounty hunters needed to know that. On the contrary, he'd be the last one to tell any of them that crucial bit of information . . .

Glave leapt at Bas again, his claws whistling through the air as he recklessly swung his arm. Bas stepped to the side to avoid the brunt of the attack, left hand flashing out in a blur of motion. Catching the jaguar-youkai by the throat, he dug his claws into the vulnerable flesh. Blood dripped down his arm, spiraling in a hot wash of fluid. The jaguar's eyes flashed and flared, and he gasped as he clawed at Bas' hand. Tightening his grip, Bas gritted his teeth, and snapped his head to the side just in time to avoid the blast of wind and dust as the jaguar-youkai's body disintegrated.

The earth-youkai sent another furrow of earth after him. Bas pushed off the ground, evading the attack easily enough. Landing in a crouch, he spun around in a broad sweep of his leg, intent on knocking the earth-youkai off his feet. The youkai sprang back, taking a moment to gather his bearings before lunging at Bas. Bas hurled himself at the bounty hunter, arm stretched out behind him. The manic light in the youkai's eyes flashed in the illumination of lightning that split the night. The macabre light siphoning through the treetops . . . the hiss of the leaves in the bitter wind . . . the strange, almost dream-like quality that delineated his movements . . . It all combined in Bas' mind to create an unnatural sort of urgency.

Bringing his arm around in a semi-circle, he slashed through the youkai's thick leather jacket. The earth-youkai tried to spin away from Bas' claws. The pungent scent of his blood mingled with the blood already saturating Bas' hands, and with a grunt, Bas landed, flicking his hand to shake off some of the dripping fluid.

The earth-youkai stumbled, clutching his twice-injured arm. Bas strode forward, more than ready to end the fight. The youkai barreled into him, using his shoulder as a battering ram and sending Bas sliding back a few feet. He caught his footing, boots squelching in the thick mire of mud. The earth-youkai slammed his fist into the ground, sending a wall of mud straight up around Bas only to spill over him in a torrent.

"Don't kill him, Shakes," the thunder-youkai – still engaged in a pushing match with Gunnar – remarked as Bas wiped the mud off his face. "The boss wants him alive."

"Who *is* your boss?" Gunnar demanded.

“Doesn’t matter to you, pup,” the thunder-youkai scoffed. “You’ll be dead before this battle’s over . . .”

“That’s what you think,” Gunnar shot back. Jerking his sword back and whipping around in a circle, he brought the weapon down, aiming for the thunder-youkai’s legs. The youkai hopped backward but not fast enough to avoid the blade. It grazed his left hip, leaving a gash in the youkai’s jeans as a ribbon of blood welled from the wound, staining the dark fabric with an even darker shadow.

“First time you’ve taken a hit in *how* long, Jack?” Shakes asked with an incredulous expression on his face.

“Barely a scratch,” Jack growled. Gunnar snorted and slammed his sword into the ground, unleashing a wall of flames that surged over the sodden forest floor. Jack jumped out of the way, landing just below the tree where Sydnie was perched.

Bas opened his mouth to tell Gunnar to watch out as the earth-youkai shot forward, slamming Bas to the ground. Catching Shakes’ descending claws by the wrist, Bas grunted as he twisted the appendage with a sharp jerk. The sound of splintering bone collided with the earth-youkai’s screech of pain. Bas shoved him aside and rolled to his feet, catching Triumvirate’s hilt as he whipped around. The blade flashed in a blur of motion as Shakes lunged for Bas once more. Grimacing as the sickening scrape of the youkai blade against bone groaned loud in the night, Bas wrenched the sword, severing Shakes’ head with a single blow.

Breathing hard, he wiped his face with the filthy sleeve of his leather duster. Bas turned around, Triumvirate clenched tight in his fist as the fissure of light illuminated the forest. The fabricated wind died away, and Bas stopped short. Gunnar heaved Jack away, sending the huge youkai careening back against the tree trunk.

Sydnie shrieked as she toppled from the branches. He sprinted forward as Sydnie fell. Jack shook his head and glanced up, catching the cat as though she were little more than a feather on the breeze. “*Sydnie!*” Bas bellowed, skidding to a halt as Jack’s grin widened. With a stifled growl, Gunnar slammed his sword into the scabbard and crossed his arms over his chest.

“It’s raining cats and dogs tonight,” Jack mused, sensing that he had suddenly gained the upper hand.

“Let her go, damn you,” Bas snarled.

“Well, that would be stupid, wouldn’t it?” Jack pointed out.

Sydney uttered a sing-song wail; a vicious growl. Jack tightened his arms, and she winced.

Bas started toward the two. Jack lifted a hand to her throat, his claws grazing over the soft flesh in a warning. “Do you really want her dead that badly? Drop the sword, pup, or the cat dies now.”

Sydney’s hand shot out, slamming against the side of the thunder-youkai’s head. With a predatory howl, she pushed against him with all her strength as her claws raked over his ear, shredding the skin as he bellowed in pain. He dropped Sydney, who sat still for a moment, blinking almost incredulously. Gunnar grabbed her arm and pulled her back as Bas leapt over her, driving the blade of his sword straight into Jack’s chest—straight into his heart. The forward motion of Bas’ body drove the two back against the tree. Triumvirate trembled in his hands as the blade embedded itself in the wood.

Jack’s murky eyes glistened in the semi-dark. He wheezed out an incredulous chuckle that shifted into a groan of pain as Bas jerked his sword free then twisted the blade. The thunder youkai’s eyes dulled slowly as the rain beat down around them. The last blast of dirt and wind and light flashed through the trees as Bas turned around with a weary sigh just in time to see the blur that was Sydney.

She’d pulled away from Gunnar’s grip and threw herself against Bas’ chest, body quaking, breathing harsh, and even in the onslaught of the pouring rain, he could smell the salt of her tears. “It’s okay, baby,” he told her quietly, slamming Triumvirate, point down, into the earth so that he could wrap his arms around her. “It . . . it’s okay . . .”

*Final Thought from Gunnar:
He calls her ... baby..?*

Chapter 26

Wisdom

"I could have sworn I told you *not* to kill them all," Gunnar grouched as the trio trudged through the forest toward the waiting SUV.

Bas rolled his eyes as he shrugged off his jacket and grimaced at the mess his clothes had become. "Yeah, well, I'd have been happy to oblige, but I'd rather have kept Sydnie around a little bit longer."

"Baka," Gunnar mumbled, glancing back at his cousin.

Bas sighed. "Baka *this*, you dick-weed," he growled, grabbing his crotch and giving it a little shake.

"You know, there's a good chance the rental company is going to charge more for the interior cleaning they'll have to do," Gunnar remarked, ignoring Bas' show of vulgarity.

"So bill the tai-youkai for it."

Gunnar chuckled. "I think I will."

Sydnie slipped her hand into Bas' and peered up at him. The last thing he felt like doing was smiling, but the stricken, scared expression on her face was enough to draw a wan little grin as he squeezed her icy fingers and let go to slip an arm around her.

Unlocking the side door of the SUV, Gunnar turned around and made a face at Bas' filthy clothing. "Let me get you something clean," he grumbled, striding around the vehicle and opening the trunk.

Sydnie frowned as she stopped, head cocked to the side. "Are you hurt?" she asked, gingerly reaching out to touch Bas' filthy shirt.

"I'm fine," he told her, his tone gentle despite the underlying gruffness. "Why don't you get in the truck? You're cold."

She shook her head stubbornly and scowled at his chest. "Let me see, puppy."

"Sydnie –"

"Let me see," she repeated again, brushing his hands aside when he tried to stop her. Moments later, she rent his shirt with her sharp claws and pushed the ruined fabric aside impatiently.

"Syd-nie!" he complained, but didn't make a move to push her away.

She inspected his chest thoroughly before grabbing his arm and turning him around. She slipped the shirt off and dropped it onto the ground, repeating the examination process once more. "Good," she finally decided. "You look fine."

"That's what I *told* you," he grumbled, cheeks pinking. The only saving grace was that, standing as he was with his back to her, she couldn't see his ruddy complexion.

Gunnar cleared his throat to gain Bas' attention. "Here," he said, whipping a clean shirt at his cousin before slamming the hatch closed and heading around the vehicle for the driver's side door. Bas caught it and dropped it on the seat while Sydnie retrieved the stained remnants of his other shirt. He watched with a grimace as she dipped the still-clean portion that had covered his back in a shallow puddle of rainwater. She squeezed out the excess liquid and shook the shirt out as she hurried over to him once more, using the clean portion to wipe the mud and streaks of blood off him.

Bas heaved a sigh but waited patiently as Sydnie cleaned him up. Nothing could be done about the mud that was caked in his hair, and he shook his head, knowing that it was going to be a hellacious mess when it dried. Worst case, he'd end up having to cut off all his hair – a thought that didn't really amuse him since he'd never, ever cut his hair before. At least it would grow back quickly enough – one plus about being youkai, he supposed.

Grimacing as Sydnie carefully wiped the blood off his wrist and hand, Bas caught her troubled expression and reached out with his free hand, crooking his index finger and lifting her chin to make her look at him. "I'm okay, Sydnie," he told her gently. "Really."

Her nod was jerky, stilted. She licked her lips, eyes dark in the flash of the streaking lightning so high overhead. "You're filthy," she murmured.

Bas broke into a wan smile. "I know."

"Come on," Gunnar called, turning the key in the ignition as the SUV rumbled to life. "Let's get out of here."

Sydney dropped the ruined shirt into a plastic grocery store bag and tied it closed. Casting Bas another quick glance, she climbed into the vehicle and perched on the edge of the bench seat as Bas got in behind her and closed the door. She shivered in silence, curling her legs under her as she stared out the window into the stormy night. Bas stifled another sigh and leaned forward. "Find a truck stop," he grumbled. "I've got to get a shower."

Gunnar opened his mouth to protest. Bas' grunt cut him off. "Before I end up with adobe hair, if you please."

Gunnar flicked on the dome light and glanced into the rearview mirror. "Yeah, all right," he agreed with a grimace. "I should call Cai – the tai-youkai."

Bas shot Sydney a quick glance to see if she'd heard Gunnar's near-slip. She was still staring out the window, and Bas had to wonder if she were paying attention to anything at all . . . "Hey, kitty," he said, scooting closer to the cat-youkai. "You okay?"

She shook her head but didn't turn away from the window. "Fine," she assured him, her voice weary.

He didn't believe her, but he let the subject drop. Entirely too aware of the fact that Gunnar was listening to everything they said, Bas stifled a sigh and rubbed his eyes with a slightly trembling hand.

A huge crack of thunder reverberated through the vehicle. Bas lifted his hips to unfasten Triumvirate from his hip, dropping it on the floor with a dull clank, he maneuvered his body so that he could reach over the seat, grunting as he unzipped the leather suitcase he'd purchased to hold their newly-acquired clothes. He dug out a dark green sweatshirt and dropped it into Sydney's lap. She glanced quickly at him and shook her head in silent question. "Put it on, Sydney," he told her. "You're freezing, and don't even try to tell me you're not."

She stared at him for a moment before tugging the sweatshirt over her head without complaint. It was huge on her tiny frame, and she fussed around for a few moments before sticking her hands through the sleeves, pulling the green suede vest out, too. She laid it over the passenger-side front seat to air dry before settling back on the bench seat once more. Bas smiled wanly, watching her bring up her folded knees and pulling the sweatshirt over them, too. Satisfied that she wasn't going to freeze, he slumped back and closed his eyes, his entire body weary and strained. Casting her an enigmatic glance, her eyes glowing in the darkness, Sydney looked like she was concentrating; almost sad, a little wary . . . She looked away before he could question her.

He wasn't sure what Sydnie was thinking. He was too tired to try to figure it out. *'She's safe,'* he told himself, over and over. *'She's safe, and that's all that matters . . .'*

"I had my reasons, son of the Great Dog . . ."

That was what the bounty hunter had said, wasn't it? He'd called Sebastian the son of the Great Dog.

"I should call Cai – the tai-youkai . . ."

"What's his last name?"

"Bas' . . .? I think you should ask him . . ."

She brushed the memories aside and stubbornly tried to ignore the things she knew. They'd taken Bas' words to heart and stopped so that he could get cleaned up in one of the trucker's pay-showers. Sydnie had slipped out of the vehicle just after Bas disappeared into the building, and she was leaning against the SUV in Bas' huge sweatshirt with her purse slung casually over her shoulder and a burning cigarette dangling from her trembling fingers.

"You're awfully quiet, kitty," Gunnar remarked almost distractedly as he scanned the parking lot of the truck stop. *"What are you thinking?"*

Sydnie shrugged and drew another deep drag off her cigarette. *"Nothing,"* she replied.

Gunnar sighed. *"It's been a long night, hasn't it?"*

"You think so?"

Gunnar shrugged and took the cigarette from her slack hand, drawing a deep draught before letting his breath out in a long, slow gust. *"Sure . . ."*

"I didn't know you smoked, puppy," she mused as she took the cigarette back from Gunnar.

"I do, sometimes," he said. *"Anyway, Bas is fine, you know."*

"I know," she agreed. *"It's not that."*

Gunnar nodded. "You're good for him."

She shot him a quick glance. "How so?"

"Isn't it obvious? He cares about you."

Sydney didn't reply to that right away, staring off over the semi trucks and cars; the lights of the highway beyond. "How long are you staying?"

Gunnar stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat and slumped back against the SUV beside her. "Don't know. I was planning on leaving in the next couple days, but . . ."

He didn't have to finish his statement for his meaning to be clear. Bas was good — maybe the best fighter she'd ever seen, but if the bounty hunter organization kept sending more and more hunters after them each time . . .

"He's tough," she grumbled, staring at the ground as she shuffled her feet on the asphalt, dropping the cigarette butt and grinding it underfoot. "He can handle himself."

"He's tough," Gunnar agreed. "Probably the toughest of anyone I know, with a few notable exceptions. He's always been a little more ruthless than the rest of us, I suppose . . . Thing is, the Onyx isn't going to fight fair, and I'll be damned if I'll leave, knowing that they're targeting my cousin."

"Your cousin," she echoed wanly. "Because you're family . . ."

"Something like that."

She fell silent then, her thoughts returning full-circle. Swallowing hard and blinking quickly, she tried to ignore the overwhelming wash of panic that rose deep inside her. *'He really is the son of the tai-youkai, isn't he? The son of the Great Dog . . . Sebastian . . . Zelig . . .'*

The knowledge was a frightening thing. The words echoed through her head; spun around, twisting inside itself in a blur of noise and sound. *'Sebastian Zelig . . . his son . . . Sebastian Zelig . . .'*

She shook her head, as though trying to dispel her own dismal thoughts. She couldn't make sense of anything, and she fumbled around in her purse for her pack of cigarettes and lighter. Gunnar stooped down to retrieve them, shaking one out of the pack and slipping it between her fingers. "May I?"

She nodded, shivering as he stuck one between his lips and gently took her lighter. She let him light the end of her cigarette, exhaling softly as she lifted her gaze to the overcast night sky.

'Sydnie . . . you know, right? If he's Cain Zelig's son . . .'

Sydnie winced, dropping the cigarettes and lighter back into her purse before jerking the zipper closed. *'He can't be that,'* she argued. *'He . . . he just can't be . . .'*

Her youkai sighed. *'He could be. Don't fool yourself into thinking that he isn't the next one . . . you know that it's entirely possible.'*

'No,' she argued stubbornly. *'Not even he would be foolish enough to send his son out on such a dangerous mission . . .'*

"I was just sent to bring you in, not to kill you, okay?" he'd said, his eyes blazing with anger, daring her to gainsay him . . .

'Unless the tai-youkai didn't think that bringing you in would be a dangerous thing . . .'

Sydnie bit her lip and squelched the little moan that threatened to escape. *'No,'* she asserted a little more firmly. *'He has a brother . . . he said he does . . . Cain Zelig wouldn't send his oldest son out as a hunter . . . he wouldn't . . .'*

'Wouldn't he? He didn't do a damn thing for you when it would have mattered, or don't you remember? Cain Zelig is a monster – a horrible, awful monster . . . He's not kind and benevolent. He's the tai-youkai who only cares about those he deems worthy. You're letting your feelings for Sebastian cloud your better judgment when it comes to that man. Don't forget, Sydnie. Don't you ever forget . . .'

She shook her head, trying to refute her youkai's vicious words. Of course she didn't forget. She'd never forget any of that . . . but Sebastian . . .

'He . . . he's not the oldest,' she thought suddenly. He'd said as much, hadn't he? He wasn't the oldest; she was positive he wasn't. He wasn't the oldest, and that meant that he really wasn't Cain Zelig's heir – the future tai-youkai. He had a brother – Evan – and Bas wasn't the oldest . . .

'He's a nobody to his father, just like I am. That's why the tai-youkai sent Sebastian after me. He's expendable, in a way. He's not as important as an heir would be . . .'

“Why don’t you get back in the Blazer?” Gunnar suggested, jerking his head at the vehicle they were leaning against. “You look cold.”

Sydney blinked, tossing the cigarette away and nodded. Gunnar opened the door for her and closed it after she’d climbed back inside.

Gunnar turned around again, slumping back against the vehicle as he slowly dug his cell phone out of his pocket. She’d looked upset – more upset than she had the day she’d found out that Bas had lied to her about Madison being his girlfriend – and that spoke volumes. He sighed and shook his head. It could be that he was reading more into the situation than there actually was. Maybe she was simply upset about the fight. No matter what she said or what she told Bas, she cared more than she ever wanted to admit, and perhaps that was the real reason for her current upset. Gunnar frowned, deciding that it wasn’t really doing any good for him to try to analyze Bas and Sydney’s strange relationship, and dialed Cain’s number.

“Gunnar? Is everything all right?” Cain asked. He sounded wide awake despite the late hour.

Gunnar sighed and rubbed his eyes. “We’re at a truck stop,” he explained. “Bas needed a shower in the worst way.”

“What?”

“Four bounty hunters caught up with us,” he explained. “We took care of them, but the hot-head didn’t bother to leave anyone breathing so that we could ask some questions.”

“The hot-head would be my son?”

“Absolutely.”

“Four of them?”

“Yes.”

Cain sighed, the seat creaking as the tai-youkai sat back. “Hell.”

“I think I should stay here,” Gunnar finally said with a grimace. Cain might not mind so much, but Bas would. It was too bad, though. Bas might well be a damn howitzer, but even a howitzer could be brought down if the opposition wasn’t honorable, and sending four hunters after Bas and Sydney? That wasn’t honorable; not at all . . .

“You don’t have to,” Cain replied.

"Cain—"

"No, it's fine. I sent in someone to trail them . . . in case things get out of hand."

"Someone, huh?" Gunnar repeated with a slight grin. Something in the way Cain had said that . . . something in the man's tone . . . there was very little doubt in Gunnar's mind, as to who, exactly, had been called in, and as much as Cain might not like it, he had to know that there was no one better for the job, either.

"Yeah, someone," Cain agreed with an acquiescent sigh. "Anyway, he should be nearby soon enough. Find a place to hole up for a day or two, and he'll find you. You need to talk to him—don't let Bas know. Fill him in, then I want you back here. I want you to tell me everything you know about the situation."

"You got it," he agreed.

"Where are you now?"

"Mississippi, just over the Louisiana line."

"Can you make it to Jackson tonight?"

Gunnar rubbed his chin. "Sure."

"Okay. You'll be less conspicuous in a bigger area . . . harder to track."

Gunnar nodded. "Will do."

Bas stepped out of the building where the truckers' pay showers were located. He looked clean enough if not a bit like a drowned dog. He'd even managed to clean off his leather duster, for the most part. Gunnar shook his head. "Bas is done. Want to talk to him?"

Cain grunted. "All right."

Gunnar held out the phone as he pushed himself away from the truck. "Here."

Glaring rather dubiously at the device, Bas slowly lifted his gaze to meet Gunnar's. "Who is it?"

Gunnar snorted. "Keh! Who do you think?"

Bas grimaced but took the phone. "Yes, sir?"

Chuckling at the not-quite-humble tone of Bas' voice, Gunnar strode around the SUV and climbed into the driver's seat.

"Gunnar said you had another altercation."

"Yeah, you could call it that," Bas agreed.

"What happened?"

Bas shrugged. "We were on our way back to the hotel after dinner. Sydney noticed that there was a car following us, so we went back, checked out, and Gunnar took Sydney down around the back roads to the other side of a small forest behind the hotel. I hid in the forest, and we ambushed the hunters."

"Sounds like a good plan."

"Pretty much," Bas replied with a grunt. "I need to ask Gunnar exactly how many hunters work for this Onyx organization. Damn nuisance."

"That's pretty much what I thought," Cain allowed. "Anyway, I trust you're being careful. This cat-youkai—"

"Sydney," Bas corrected.

"Sydney," Cain amended. "Don't let her distract you too much, understand?"

"I understand," Bas sighed, tamping down the feeling that he was a pup being reprimanded for sneaking into the cookie jar that his mother always kept full and always kept on the counter in the kitchen—or worse: being caught sneaking a piece of one of Cain's special cakes. "I know; I know. I'm being careful."

"Were you hurt?"

Bas stared at his wrist. The laceration was already closing up nicely. "Nothing serious."

Cain grunted. "Meaning?"

"Just a couple scratches."

Cain paused, as though he were trying to decide whether or not to believe Bas. In the end, he must have. "All right. Get moving, will you? Sounds like you have things under control. I'd like to keep it that way."

"Yes, sir."

Bas snapped the phone closed and opened the passenger side rear door. He dropped the phone into Gunnar's lap and sat down beside Sydnie, pulling the door closed before digging a bottle of milk out of his pocket. "Here."

She blinked and looked a little surprised, but she took the bottle and let him snap off the cap. "How's your wrist?" she asked quietly.

Bas held out his arm for her inspection. "It's fine. See?"

Sydnie leaned closer and peered down at the healing wound. "Good."

"How far are we going?" Bas asked, not really caring but figuring that Sydnie would want to know.

Gunnar shrugged. "Jackson," he said simply. "Shouldn't take too long."

He slumped a little lower on the bench seat as Gunnar pulled out onto the road that led back onto the highway. "Drink your milk, kitty," he told her, eyes drifting closed as sudden fatigue washed over him.

She did as she was told, draining the milk bottle before she spoke again. "Sebastian?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I . . . ask you something?"

"Okay," he mumbled, forcing one eye open.

Sydnie slowly turned the empty bottle in her hands and shrugged. "You . . . you're not the oldest in your family, right?"

"Hmm? No . . ."

He felt her relax moments before she curled up against his side. "Good," she murmured, laying her head on his shoulder, twining her fingers into his damp hair.

He wanted to know why she'd asked that, but he couldn't get the words to come out, either. *'I'll ask her . . . later . . .'*

The soft sound of her contented purr resonated against his chest, and a vague smile lifted the corners of his lips as he drifted off to sleep.

Final Thought from Bas:
Why'd she ask that?

Chapter 27

Silver Spoon

"Wake up, kitty . . ."

Sydney moaned, burrowing her face deeper against the warm chest where she'd fallen asleep.

Bas chuckled softly. "Come on, baby. Wake up . . ."

"Uh-uh," she whimpered.

"I know . . . we got in late last night, but knowing Gunnar, he'll want to get moving again."

Sydney uttered a low growl. "Sometimes," she insisted, voice muffled by Bas' chest, "I *really* don't like him very much."

"Me, either," he agreed. "Anyway, better to get up now than to let him come in here to wake us up."

With a defeated sigh, Sydney stretched in her customary fashion, arching her back and sticking her bottom up in the air as she reared back, fists digging into the pillow on either side of his head – a gesture that both amused Bas as well as irritated him since he was almost certain that the only reason she did it was to drive him absolutely insane. "I don't want to go yet," she argued, curling up against his chest once more. "He can forget it."

Bas chuckled again and kissed Sydney's forehead. "Sydney . . ."

"Let me see your wrist."

He opened his mouth to protest but decided against it when she grabbed his hand and dragged his arm over for her inspection. "See? It's fine. I told you I would be."

"Good," she agreed, letting go of his hand so that she could nuzzle closer into the crook of his neck. "Night."

"Oh, no . . . you can't go back to sleep, kitty."

"That's what you think, puppy."

"You want some milk?"

"You're not very subtle, Sebastian."

"Do you?"

"Not if it means I have to move."

He sighed but grinned despite himself. "You're a bad little cat, did you know?"

"The worst," she agreed with a yawn.

"Are you hungry?"

"Of course not."

He sighed since her answer really didn't surprise him at all. "Humor me, then. I'm starving."

She leaned up, bracing her weight on her crossed arms. Her hair was mussed, spilling over her shoulder in soft waves, and her gaze was steady despite the sleepy slant of her eyes. Lips curving up in a drowsy grin, she stared at him for a few breathless moments before she nipped at his chin and uttered a playful growl.

"A *really* bad kitty," he mumbled, eyes closing of their own accord as she dragged her fangs along the line of his jaw, stopping now and again to kiss him before moving further on. A violent shiver raced up his spine. Sydney giggled, nipping at his earlobe and eliciting another round of shudders that he couldn't hide. Her body writhed, undulated, her hands opening and closing against his chest like a contented cat.

"We could stay in bed," she purred, her lips poised above his.

"Sydney . . ."

"What's the matter, Bas the Hunter? You're shaking . . ."

His answer was a low groan as she sat up, straddling his hips, grinding her body against his. The sensation was dulled by the thick fabric of his jeans, but that didn't matter. He could smell her deepening scent, and as much as he wanted to revel in the knowledge that she wanted him as badly as he wanted her, he couldn't quite forget that

Gunnar could easily walk through the door at any given time. “You . . . you have to . . . stop,” he gritted out, gasping as the dissipating strands of reason that were fraying too rapidly to grab.

Sydney fell forward, her lips brushing over his as her hair fanned over his shoulders. The lingering touch only served to stoke the rising flames. He reached out, sinking his hands into her hair as he held her to him, deepening the kiss she’d started. He parted her lips with his tongue, tasted the sweetness of her mouth. She wrapped her hands around his wrists, tugging at him and trying to push him away by turns. Her tongue stroked his, the roughened texture enflaming his nerves. Her scent wrapped around his mind, obliterating every thought but one. The need to touch her, to taste her, to merge with her . . . it was overwhelming.

She let go of his wrists, trailing her hands down his arms, over his shoulders. Traversing his flesh in a surge of fire and heat, her claws set off a chain reaction of rippling muscles. He let his hands snake around to rub her back, holding her close as the thunder of his uneven pulse echoed in his ears.

Her hands delved lower along the shallow vale in the center of his abdomen. She leaned on her elbow, her fingers dancing over his skin. Her touch was light, lingering, brushing over his body with an urgency that slammed straight through him. Sydney was a paradox in motion: bold and brazen yet wholly sweet in the surrender of her kisses.

She brushed over him, and he tore his mouth away, unleashing a harsh growl as his body jerked wildly: the shock of her touch, the pressure of her returning caress, shot to his brain; a riot of sensation. It registered that he ought to stop her. He just couldn’t remember why. She grasped him gently yet firmly, pumping him unmercifully through the fabric of his jeans. He grabbed her wrist but couldn’t push her away. Her touch was too welcome; too necessary . . . His arms fell to his sides as he shuddered. Sydney kissed him again, licking his lips, sucking on his tongue while her hand stroked him.

“S-S-Syd . . . nie . . .”

Her answer was increased pressure squeezing him then releasing over and over again. The pleasure bordered on pain, escalating higher and higher into an undeniable need and the unrelenting ache that grew worse and worse. The tension built deep inside, his control slipping away as the first pulsations of absolute pleasure surged through him, and he lifted his hips to meet her hand. His body taut, rigid, he rasped out a hoarse groan as he came completely undone. The hot stickiness of his orgasm seeped through his jeans. Sydney leaned away and blinked in surprise just before a sweet little smile lit her eyes, turned her lips. Leaning down, she whispered in his ear, soothing him as his

body convulsed, as he moaned quietly, the sound of his breathing heavy in the air. Her words were lost to him. He jerked once, twice, then relaxed, chest heaving, a sinful sense of lethargy seeping into his very bones.

She cuddled against his chest, stroking his cheek with her fingertips. It took a minute before Bas could even manage to open his eyes, and when he did, he couldn't help the crimson blush that shot into his skin as the full implications of what had happened washed over him. Turning his face to the side and refusing to look at her, Bas started to push her off. She wrapped her arms more snugly around him. "Just a few more minutes?" she whispered.

He grimaced. "I . . . you . . . get off me."

She heaved a sigh but let him sit up. He made a face and strode out of the room, praying that she hadn't seen exactly how embarrassed he was.

'Stupid . . . stupid! What was I thinking?' he berated himself as he closed the bathroom door and stripped off his clothes, making a face rife with self-disgust as he dropped the boxer shorts and jeans into the plastic bag lined trashcan. He hadn't been thinking, had he? Too caught up in Sydney, he hadn't been thinking at all . . . If she had wanted more, he would have let her do whatever she wished, wouldn't he? *'Damn it . . .'* he grumbled, face flaming so hot that he felt feverish. The last thing he'd wanted or needed was for that idiot cousin of his to know what was going on between him and Sydney, and now . . . He winced. Gunnar would smell it, he just knew it, and . . .

And then the teasing would start all over again.

Yanking the bag out of the trashcan, Bas tied it closed then repeated the process about four more times. He slipped into the shower and jerked the curtain into place, giving the water taps a vicious twist and heaving a sigh as the cold fluid rained down on him as he grabbed the bar of Ivory soap.

He'd always been sensitive about his size, he supposed. It couldn't be helped. He'd taken after his father, which might have been a good thing since his mother was barely over five feet tall, but the years that had seemed so long ago were still vivid in Bas' mind. If it hadn't been bad enough that he'd always been bigger than the other boys, he'd never forget the day he'd first discovered that he was getting his crests. Thing was, he hadn't realized what it was. All he'd noticed was that there were strange dark greenish blotches all over his penis. Barely more than odd shadows in the beginning, Bas had done what any normal twelve-year-old boy would have done: he'd hopped into the shower and scrubbed as hard as he dared, hoping that the color would wash off. It didn't.

He ignored it for the next week, trying not to worry about it too much, but every time he used the bathroom, he saw it, and every time he saw it, it seemed as though the green color was . . . spreading. Near panicked that there really *was* something wrong with him, Bas had gone to his father . . .

Peering around the door into the airy studio that Gin and Cain shared, Bas lingered in the shadows and wondered if his father even knew he was there. Whenever he was working, Cain had a habit of blocking out everyone and everything, holing himself up in this studio for days or weeks on end. He always maintained that Bas could interrupt him, should he need something. Still, Bas hated to do it, and that he was considering it really did speak volumes.

“Dad?” he mumbled, hoping that he wouldn’t have to raise his voice – and possibly the notice of his mother, who was sitting at a drafting table nearby, working on an illustrated children’s book.

Cain didn’t seem to have heard him. Bas made a face but cleared his throat. “Dad?” he repeated.

Cain glanced up, blinking a few times as his eyes slowly focused on his son. Bas waved his hand to beckon Cain over, shooting his mother a worried glance. Cain seemed to understand that whatever it was, Bas didn’t want Gin to know, and he wiped his hands on a clean towel and chucked it onto the table before striding over to his son. “Bas? What’s wrong?”

Bas shook his head and backed out of the studio. Cain scowled but followed.

“What’s this all about?” Cain demanded when Bas closed and locked the bathroom door behind them.

Bas bit his cheek and tried not to blush as he crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at the floor.

“Bas?”

“There’s something wrong with . . . it!” he blurted as a hot flush shot into his cheeks.

Cain blinked in confusion. “‘It’?” he echoed with a shake of his head. “‘It’, what?”

Bas sucked in his cheek and shook his head. “‘It’, Dad . . . you know . . . ‘it’!”

Cain’s eyes flared as slow understanding seemed to dawn. “Your ‘it’, you mean? Your . . . penis?”

Bas nodded miserably.

Cain cleared his throat. “What seems to be wrong with . . . ‘it’, Bas?”

He sniffled. "I think it's gonna . . . fall off . . ."

Cain choked back a chuckle. "Why don't you . . . show me?"

Bas shot his father a consternated scowl but slowly unfastened his jeans, shoving them down around his ankles and glancing quickly at Cain before slowly pulling the elastic band of his boxer shorts away from his waist. Grimacing as he stared down into his underpants, Bas' was horrified when his eyes filled with tears. He was positive now that something was really wrong. It was turning green, for God's sake! The next step, undoubtedly, was for his penis to shrivel up and fall off . . .

Cain paused but leaned over Bas' shoulder and peered down into his son's shorts. He stared for what seemed like forever though in hindsight, it was likely only a minute or so. "Wh-what's wrong with it, Dad?" he wailed, tears streaming down his face despite his efforts to stave them back.

Cain cleared his throat again and stepped back, a curious look on his face as he rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I don't think there's anything wrong with it, Bas. I think . . . I think you're just getting your crests."

"My . . .? On . . .? But I look like a freak!"

"I don't think you do," Cain said gently, patting Bas' shoulder in much the same way that Gin always pushed his hair out of his eyes and kissed his forehead. "It's different, but it's not bad."

Bas sniffled, taking the wad of tissues that Cain snatched from the box on the back of the toilet. "Will the concealment hide them?"

Cain shrugged and leaned against the counter around the sink. "Well . . . it should, but it's harder to control that when you're . . . if you're . . . during sex."

Bas grimaced and pulled his pants back up . . .

And he's vowed that he'd never, ever have sex if it meant that the girl would have to see his crests . . .

Unfortunately, that wasn't the worst of it, either. Since Morio, Gunnar, and he had basically been trained together, there were always the daunting threats of pantsing. His cousins were terrible about it, especially Morio, who had always been the undisputed prank-meister. Uncle Mikio hadn't been trained with them, exactly, but he had been a part of their group. His balance problems had precluded his training, so while the others were learning how to fight, Mikio was learning how to shoot a bow and arrow

with his mother and later, he was taught how to shoot a gun. Mikio had always been quieter, more reserved than the rest of them, and if he'd been around more often, Bas doubted that the pantsing problem would have been as severe since the hanyou had an uncanny way of calming the more boisterous of his cousins.

Still, those cousins – Gunnar and Morio – and later Evan, as well – had taken to teasing him unmercifully. He'd heard it all at one time or another.

"Kami, Bas! You're a fucking monster!" Morio had exclaimed.

"Holy dogs, Bas! How do you keep that in your pants?" Gunnar had said.

"When I grow up, I want to be just like you," Evan had added . . .

Bas grimaced as he shut off the taps and shook off the water that weighed down his hair. He didn't think that Sydnie would laugh at him, but she wasn't the main problem. Gunnar was. He'd said far too often over the years that Bas' size would kill any woman who he tried to sleep with, and whether he was joking or not, the end result was the same. Already overly-sensitive about that particular facet of his anatomy, the teasing didn't help at all, and the last thing he needed – the very last thing – was for Gunnar to find out about what had just happened, because Bas knew Gunnar well enough to know that Gunnar would have no qualms about teasing the hell out of Bas all over again . . .

Sydnie stepped out of the convenience store and stifled a sigh as she sauntered toward the SUV where Bas and Gunnar were waiting for her. At least they weren't going far today; just changing hotels to one across town. Bas had been oddly distant since he'd pushed her away, and Sydnie stifled a dejected sigh.

She had thought he'd liked it. He seemed to have enjoyed it at the time . . .

'What were you thinking, Sydnie? You know better than anyone that Bas tends to be a little shy about stuff like that. Never had a real girlfriend, or didn't you hear what he told you before?'

She wrinkled her nose and carefully dug a cigarette out of her pack. *'I wasn't trying to embarrass him,'* she insisted. *'I just wanted to make him feel as good as he makes me feel, even if it is in an entirely different way . . .'*

'You know what your problem is, Sydney? You come on too strong with him. You're going to chase him away, and then where will you be? He'll end up being scared of you because you can't keep yourself off of him . . . Just think about that, will you, the next time you're wanting to 'show' him how you feel . . .'

Sydney stifled a sigh and stopped long enough to light her cigarette. Bas glanced up and shook his head. "Come on, cat. We've got to get moving."

"In a minute, puppy," she insisted as she sauntered toward the cousins. "We're just going to a different hotel, right?"

Bas shrugged. "I don't like having you out in the open, Sydney, now come on."

Sydney wrinkled her nose but took one last drag off her cigarette before dropping it on the ground and crushing it under the toe of her shoe. Bas held the door open, and she climbed in. He got into the passenger side and fastened the safety belt while Gunnar started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot.

Leaning on the console between the two seats, Sydney peered up at Bas and frowned. "Why are we changing hotels but not going farther?" she demanded.

"Because I have a flight out of here tomorrow," Gunnar told her, "so it made little sense to go anywhere else."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes. Want to come with me, kitten?"

She grinned. "I think I'll stay with my puppy."

Gunnar chuckled. "Can't blame a guy for trying, can you?"

Bas snorted. "Pfft! Knock it off, already. She doesn't want to hang around with a bastard like you."

"Better a bastard than a grouch."

"That's what you think," Bas grumbled, "and I'm not grouchy . . . I'm easily annoyed."

"About as easily annoyed as your grandfather," Gunnar shot back.

"Leave the old man out of this."

"You're exactly like him, you know – just taller and . . . bulkier."

"Are you dogging my grandfather?"

Gunnar laughed. "Kami, no. He'd kick my ass . . . like I'd be *that* stupid."

"Your grandfather?" Sydnie piped up, resting her elbows on the console and glancing back and forth.

Bas grimaced. "The old man isn't exactly a 'people person'."

"He's one of the toughest there is. He doesn't *have* to be a people person," Gunnar argued.

"I'd rather have my grandfather than your grandfather," Bas pointed out.

"Mine?" Gunnar blurted. "What's wrong with my grandfather?"

"Nothing's *wrong* with him," Bas allowed. "You just never know what he's thinking."

"Ah, yes . . . he is rather stoic, isn't he?"

"That's a good word for it. I'd have said something entirely different."

"I'm sure you would have," Gunnar stated dryly.

Bas grinned as Gunnar pulled into the parking lot at the hotel. "Can't say I'll miss you," he commented.

Gunnar chuckled. "Yeah, I didn't think so. After check-in, we should go exchange the rental for you. I'll get one, too, so you won't have to worry about that in the morning."

"Why not grab a taxi?"

Gunnar shrugged. "Taxis offend me."

Sydnie hopped out of the SUV and waited while Bas retrieved the suitcase and laptop computer. Gunnar grabbed his bag and locked the vehicle via the keychain remote. She fell in step beside Bas. He didn't even spare her a glance as they strode toward the front doors.

“So where’s the kitty?”

Bas dropped into a chair at the small table and scratched his head. “Taking a bath.” Leaning back, he drummed his index fingers on the table and narrowed his eyes on his cousin. “Since when do taxis offend you?”

Gunnar glanced around the side of the newspaper he’d been reading and grinned. “They’ve always offended me,” he quipped. “They stink.”

Bas didn’t argue that since he happened to agree. Too many lingering smells from the people who had ridden in them before had always been an overwhelming thing, and he nodded slowly. “Why the hasty departure?”

Gunnar shrugged and carefully folded the paper, laying it on the table before he sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. “It’s not hasty . . . I wasn’t planning on staying that long. You’re fine, right? No need for me to stick around.”

“I’m surprised you think so. Figured you’d stay just to irritate me.”

Gunnar chuckled. “As much as I’d like to do that, Bas, I have to say that you’re being a little paranoid.”

“Am I?”

“Absolutely.”

Bas pushed himself out of his chair and strode over to the fifth-story window. The lights that illuminated Jackson, Mississippi seemed to shimmer in the darkness, casting a yellow glow to the skyline. High overhead, only the brightest stars could be discerned, and just for a moment, Bas couldn’t ignore the sharp stab of homesickness that washed through him. He missed the open skies of Maine; the lulling comfort of the ever-moving ocean. He missed the forest and the cliffs and crags he knew. He’d explored them all in his youth.

‘Idiot . . . you make it sound like you’re never going home again.’

‘That’s stupid. Of course I’m going home . . . and I’m taking Sydnie with me.’

‘You’re more like your father than you like to believe.’

‘Why’s that?’

'Maybe that's why Cain doesn't leave home often, either.'

Bas sighed. *'I'm not really like him. I'm not really like Dad, at all . . .'*

True enough, he supposed. He wasn't really like either of his parents. Both Cain and Gin Zelig were artists at heart. Sure, his mother chose to create illustrated children's books while his father dedicated himself to more serious endeavors, but Bas had far too many memories of spending time with his mother and father in the studio where they'd closet themselves away for long periods of time. It seemed to Bas that they'd stopped doing so as often after Evan was born and Jillian adopted, or maybe, as he'd gotten older, he'd simply broadened his horizons, preferring to spend time out-of-doors, hiking through the forest or climbing the white stone cliffs . . .

"Earth to Bas . . . are you listening to me?"

Bas shook his head, blinking as the city came into focus once more. "Huh?"

Gunnar sighed and stood up, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he ambled over to Bas' side. "I said that you should head out of here first thing in the morning."

"I know," Bas agreed, pulling the small plastic case containing a Mississippi state spoon out of his pocket and turning it over in his nimble fingers. He'd picked it up at the gas station while Sydnie was buying a pack of cigarettes. He'd forgotten to give it to her at the time . . . "The Onyx will just send more hunters."

"If you can get ahead of them, you might be able to take a break somewhere . . . if you hide yourselves well enough."

"Take a break? What for?"

Gunnar chuckled. "I'm not stupid, Bas. Tell me you don't want to spend some time with Sydnie . . . alone."

Bas made a face and grunted despite the tell-tale blush that filtered into his cheeks. "You're such a damn dog, Gunnar . . ."

"I'm not being a dog . . . Christmas is coming up, and if she's really been alone that long, don't you think that it'd be nice to have a real holiday?"

Bas' eyebrows shot up, disappearing under the thick fringe of his bronze bangs. "You're being sensitive?"

"I can be," he grumbled. "She's your mate, right?"

"She is," he agreed.

"You sound like you're worried about something."

Bas shrugged. "I have to tell her who I am."

"Yeah," Gunnar sighed, sending the bangs fringing his temple straight into the air. "She's not going to like that, is she?"

Bas shook his head. "No, she isn't."

Gunnar winced. "Well, if she dumps you, maybe she'll give me a chance."

"Hardly, fool. You're going to be a tai-youkai, too—a worse tai-youkai: the *Japanese* tai-youkai."

Gunnar's grin was tinged with regret. "Never thought I'd be sorry for that."

Bas grimaced. "Me, either."

"Have you told her? That you want her to be your mate?"

"Not . . . exactly."

Gunnar snorted. "Keh!" Shaking his head, he sighed again, casting Bas a troubled stare. "Why does she hate the tai-youkai so much? No one hates Cain . . . well, except for your grandfather . . ."

"The old man doesn't hate him, either. He just hates that Dad brought Mom to America." He made a face, turning his attention back out the window once more. "I have no idea," he grumbled. "She just says that Dad did *nothing*—I'm just not sure what that means."

Gunnar shrugged and clapped Bas on the shoulder. "Look, I'm going to bed, and I'll probably be gone when you get up. A word of advice?"

"Do I want to hear it?"

"Probably not."

Bas made a face, dropping his arms to his sides as he rounded on his cousin. "Then no."

"But I'll give it to you, anyway."

"I figured as much."

Gunnar grinned wolfishly. "If I were you, I'd just march in there, grab her by the shoulders, give her a good shake, and say, 'Listen, wench: I'm the next tai-youkai, and you're going to be my mate. There's not a damn thing you can do about it, so just get used to it!'"

Bas rolled his eyes but chuckled. "I *knew* I didn't want to hear it."

Gunnar chuckled, too. "It'd be effective, though, don't you think?"

"No, I don't think. Anyway, be careful, will you? It'd be a damn shame if you didn't make it back to Japan in one piece."

Gunnar's chuckle escalated at Bas' tongue-in-cheek tone. "You, too. Take care of her, will you?"

Bas' smile faded as his eyes took on a determined glow. "I will," he vowed. "Or I'll die trying."

Gunnar grimaced. "That's what I'm afraid of, Bas."

Bas didn't reply as he watched Gunnar disappear into his bedroom and quietly close the door.

'*She'll be safe,*' he told himself again. '*I'll keep her safe . . . and I'll make her understand that she's . . . my mate . . .*'

Final Thought from Sydney:
... So get used to it...?

Chapter 28

The Driving Lesson

Bas stole a glance at Sydney and grimaced when he noticed the way she was staring out the window, her thin arms crossed over her chest, and a sad expression adding a glossiness to her gaze. He knew she was upset with him, and truthfully, he couldn't really blame her. Tightening his grip on the steering wheel, he leaned his elbow against the window and heaved a long-suffering sigh. "You need to stop for anything, Sydney?"

She shook her head but didn't reply.

"Are you going to be mad at me all day?"

"Thinking about it," she replied lightly.

He stifled a sigh, not doubting for a moment that she was quite serious. She'd been growing more and more irritated with him in the few days since Gunnar's abrupt departure. She didn't understand his insistence that they had to keep moving, even when the reasoning should have been quite clear. Staying in one place was too dangerous. Bas had no idea how long it would take for the Onyx to figure out that their hunters had been killed, but the more ground they could cover before the next wave of bounty hunters arrived, the better . . .

"Christmas is coming up, and if she's really been alone that long, don't you think that it'd be nice to have a real holiday?"

Gunnar's words still echoed in his head. Bas had been thinking about it a lot in the last few days, and as much as he hated to concede to Gunnar's logic, he had to admit that the dog had a valid point. If he could make it to Chicago by Christmas . . . maybe they would be safe enough to spend a few days there . . .

He sighed. That was, if he could figure out how to get the stubborn cat over the threshold of the house that she was sure to view as enemy territory . . .

'You have bigger fish to fry, don't you, Bas?'

'Fish?'

'Yeah, you know it's just an expression.'

'Sure, sure . . .' He sighed inwardly. *'I know.'*

'She doesn't understand why you keep putting the freeze on her.'

'I . . . don't . . .'

'What would you call it?'

He made a face. *'Self-preservation.'*

'Yeah, of course . . . because Sydnie's just the devil, isn't she?'

'All right, you made your point.'

'Good.'

Bas scowled at the road. His youkai voice was right. He hadn't been trying to push her away, but he couldn't help it, either. Nothing like being face to face with a beautiful girl to make him realize just how pathetic he was when it came to women . . . when he wasn't worrying that she was going to think he was a complete and utter freak because of his strategically placed crests, he was worrying that he would disappoint her or worse: humiliate himself completely.

In short, it was a no-win situation.

'She's my mate,' he told himself. *'She won't think I'm . . . weird . . .'*

He stole a glance at her and sighed. She looked sad – entirely lost and alone – more alone than she had since he'd found her in Los Angeles, and Bas grimaced. "Here," he said, digging a Florida state spoon out of his pocket. "I forgot to give this to you yesterday."

She spared a glance at the offering. "You got that for me?"

"Yep," he replied, setting it on the seat beside her. "What do you think?"

"It's all right," she allowed, gingerly picking up the plastic case. She examined it from all angles before slipping it into her purse. "How long do we have to drive around today?"

Bas rubbed his temple. "Awhile longer. I want to get some more distance before we stop."

She sighed. "Of course you do."

He knew she hated the long hours in the car. He wasn't fond of them, either, but her safety had to come first, even if she didn't like it. To that end, they'd been traveling from before dawn until well after dusk for the last few days, zigzagging across states so that he could buy more spoons for her and to confuse the hunters, should any be trailing them, and as a result, Sydnie had grown increasingly restless and moody. "Just for a little while longer, okay?" he told her, his tone gentler than normal.

"Whatever, pretty boy," She wrinkled her nose and dug the psychology textbook out from under the seat. While he had stopped to exchange vehicles, she had gone into the second-hand store next door, emerging with the book. Bas had raised a brow at the purchase but remained silent. He'd almost forgotten that she'd bought it, in the first place . . .

"What did you buy that for?"

She clucked her tongue, burying her nose in the pages. "Why else? So I can diagnose you, puppy."

"Diagnose me?" he growled. "What's wrong with me?"

"Classic case of inferiority complex, I'd say," she replied, "though what you have to feel inferior about is entirely beyond me."

He snorted. "I do *not* have an inferiority complex, cat."

"Are you sure?"

Bas snorted again.

"Do you have some sort of repressed fears?"

"Repressed fears?" he echoed incredulously.

"Do you feel the need to overcompensate for your imagined physical shortcomings?"

Bas snorted a third time. "Pfft!"

"You meet the classic definition, puppy."

"Can it, Sydnie. I don't have an inferiority complex."

"Okay, okay . . . I'll leave you alone," she agreed amicably.

He heaved a sigh of relief that was cut short by her next question.

"Sebastian?"

"Hmm?"

"Can I drive for awhile?"

His eyes flared then narrowed, and he tightened his grip on the steering wheel. "I don't know, kitty . . . *can* you?"

"Well, no," she admitted, snapping the book closed. "I've watched you, though, and it doesn't *look* difficult."

"Because . . . you've . . . *watched* . . . me," he drawled slowly.

She nodded. "Yes."

He snorted. "No way in *hell* are you driving anywhere, cat."

Her eyebrows drew together, and she scowled. She seemed to be thinking it over, and suddenly she sat up a little straighter, squaring her shoulders as he stifled a rising groan. "But you could teach me," she insisted brightly.

"I could . . .? *No*," he snorted.

"But . . . why not?"

He could feel his right eye twitching, and he drew a deep breath to calm his nerves. "Because, Sydnie, you can barely tolerate *being* in a car, much less driving it."

"I'm not that bad anymore!" she protested.

"You don't like semis—you cringe and claw the door every time we pass one—"

"Well, they *are* a little excessive, don't you think?"

He sighed, dragging his hand through his hair and cracking the window when Sydney lit a cigarette. "And furthermore, you don't have a license or a permit . . . which would be really, really bad if we got stopped by the police."

"Incidentals, puppy . . . we haven't seen a police car in ages."

"Will you put that out?" he growled.

She shrugged. "Will you let me drive?"

"Heh . . . no."

"Heh . . . no, yourself."

He wrinkled his nose and rolled his window down a little bit more. "Why do you want to?"

Sydney sat back, exhaling a perfect smoke ring. She smiled proudly and shot him a quick glance. "I just want to . . . what if something happens to you? Who'll drive then? Though I suppose I could always call my Gunsie-Wunsie and see if he can come back . . ."

She was baiting him. He *knew* she was. Unfortunately, he couldn't help but bite at it, anyway. "The hell you will," he snarled.

"So are you going to teach me how to drive?"

Bas heaved a sigh, trying in vain to figure out a way to counter the troublesome cat. She had a valid point though, as much as he hated to admit it. If something happened, and he couldn't drive . . . that would be the same as leaving her unprotected, wouldn't it? "You have to be damn careful," he told her.

"I know," she replied. "Careful . . . I got it. What does this do?"

"Syd-nie!" he growled when she reached over and flicked the gear shift. Luckily she only managed to shift the car from drive into neutral. He put the car back into drive, casing Sydney a narrow glare. "That is the gear shift, Sydney. You don't need to mess with that while you're driving since this is an automatic car."

Her eyebrows shot up, green eyes sparkling mischievously. "Automatic? It drives by itself?"

He snorted. "Hardly, cat. That means that it isn't a manual, so you don't have to change gears every so often to keep it moving."

"Okay, okay. So you put the stick-do-hickie on the 'D' and push those footy-things down there, right?"

Bas grimaced at Sydnie's version of 'technical terms'. "Don't forget the steering wheel."

"Yes, all right. I got it, puppy."

Unsnapping her seat belt, she climbed over the console, setting herself on his lap despite his protests to the contrary. "Sydnie! What are you doing?"

She grinned. "Driving, puppy! Let go of the wheel."

He stifled a frustrated growl. "You can't sit on my lap and drive! You can't even reach the gas and brake! And will you stop fucking wiggling around? You're going to make us wreck."

"Then you work the footy-thingies," she insisted, laughing softly.

At least she did stop moving around, much to Bas' relief. She didn't act like she was going to get back in her seat, though, and he had to stifle another long-suffering sigh. "Stay between the lines," he told her, peering over her shoulder as he took his foot off the gas pedal and let the car coast with his foot hovering over the brake.

"This isn't so bad," she said with a giggle.

Bas' snort proclaimed his belief that she was dead wrong on that count.

"Okay, puppy, so the big footy-thingy is the gas, and the itty bitty one is the brake, right?"

He rolled his eyes but smiled despite himself. "Yes, Sydnie . . . also known as right and left, but yes."

"I think I should try it by myself," she remarked at last.

Bas wasn't in complete agreement, but he nodded. "Then pull over." She did as she was told, and he stopped the car. "Get off my lap, cat," he grumbled.

Sydnie pulled herself up by the steering wheel and wiggled her butt. Bas blushed but slapped her rear as she giggled and wiggled it a little more. He opened the door and

carefully stumbled out of the car. Sydnie sat back down, and Bas knelt, reaching for the levers that adjusted the seat. "Tell me when you can reach the footy-thingies," Bas told her, using the terms that she seemed to prefer.

Sydnie stretched out her right leg. Bas tried not to notice the gentle curve of her calf; the delicate contours of her lithe body.

"I can reach them," she informed him.

He let off the switched and sat back, letting his hands dangle between his knees. "Are you up high enough to see over the steering wheel?"

"Yes, puppy."

"Good." Bracing his hands on his knees, he pushed himself to his feet and stepped back. "Okay, kitty . . . Gas . . . brake . . . turn signal: up if you want to turn right, down if you want to turn left. Keep your foot on the brake until you've put the car into drive—"

"The big D?"

"Yes, the big D. Check your mirrors to make sure you're not pulling out in front of someone, and then take your foot off the brake and *slowly* push the gas pedal. Got it?"

"You seem tense, Bas the Hunter. Is something the matter?"

He sighed and closed the door. "Just be careful, Sydnie."

He started to stride around the car, but Sydnie had other ideas. The clink of the shifting gears registered in his brain moments before she revved the engine and took off in a screech of tires and the acrid stench of burning rubber. "*Fuck!*" he bellowed, dashing after the car.

She munched on the brakes, and the car squealed to a stop about fifty feet away before turning off the engine and casually stepping out of the vehicle. "How was that, puppy?" she asked, smiling proudly.

"Damn it, Sydnie! What the hell were you doing?" he snarled, grabbing her shoulders and glowering down at her.

She blinked innocently and shrugged. "I was driving, Sebastian, and I'm done now."

He didn't reply for a moment, too intent on trying to tamp down the desire to shake some sense into the feline. "That was dangerous," he growled. "Driving isn't some game, and you –"

"You're sexy as hell when you're disgruntled. Did you know?"

Bas snapped his mouth closed as heat shot through him. "I – you – that's not –" Letting go of her arm and stabbing a finger at her, he stopped abruptly and repeated the process before dropping his hands with a heavy sigh and pointing at the car. "Get in, Sydnie, and no more funny business."

"Aww," she whined, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face against his chest. "Please, puppy . . . can we just go for a walk or something? Please? Pretty please? Pretty, pretty please, with a –"

He grimaced. "Don't say it!"

" – Pussy on top?"

He heaved a sigh and flinched. "Sydnie . . ."

"Don't make me get back into the car yet," she begged, trailing her fingertips lightly down the center of his chest. The sensation was blunted by the thin fabric of his t-shirt, but it was enough to send a delicious tremor down his spine. "Just a short walk, and I swear I'll be good the rest of the day."

"I don't think you know the meaning of the word 'good', kitty," he rumbled, wrapping his arms around her waist and trying not to smile at her pouting. He narrowed his eyes as he studied the surroundings. The back country road was abandoned. They hadn't actually seen another car in quite some time. According to the television, Georgia was experiencing a milder than normal winter, and as a result, Bas' leather duster was carelessly strewn on the back seat of the car. It was easily over sixty degrees outside, and the early afternoon sunshine made it feel even warmer. Lifting his chin as he sniffed the air, he relaxed just a little. He couldn't sense anything out of the ordinary, and for that reason, he heaved another sigh, smoothing Sydnie's silky hair. "You promise, right?"

She nodded quickly, leaning back to stare up at him with her big, green eyes. "I promise."

"I'll hold you to it," he said, cocking a brow as he leaned back to stare at her. "Let me get Triumvirate and lock the car, okay?"

She squeezed him tight and stepped back, wiggling her shoulders in a silent celebration of her perceived victory as she turned her face heavenward and laughed. Bas grabbed the sword off the floor behind the driver's seat and snatched the keys out of the ignition, aiming the keychain at the car and pressing the 'lock' button to secure the vehicle.

He strapped on the sword and held out his hand. Sydnie slipped hers into his, and he pulled her down the slope beside the road and up the hill into an unfenced pecan grove. He wasn't sure if the small orchard was a part of someone's farm, but the trees hadn't been pruned, and the ground was littered with fallen nuts. '*Safe enough,*' he figured. Sydnie delicately picked her way through the grove, pulling away long enough to clasp her hands together and stretch them over her head. He stopped, leaning back against a tree, arms crossed over his chest as a little grin surfaced on his features. Sydnie let her arms drop to her sides as she wandered toward him once more, her eyes glowing with a mischievous glint. "What are you thinking, kitty?" he demanded.

She giggled. "This is nice, isn't it?"

"Is it?"

She nodded. "I like it here."

"Do you?"

"Yes," she decided. "Very much so."

Bas wrinkled his nose. "I don't know . . . it doesn't really feel like December to me."

"Because it isn't cold?"

He shrugged, pushing himself away from the tree and catching Sydnie's hand to walk a little further. Eyes sweeping over the area, he didn't let his guard down as they moved through the trees. "That, and because I miss the snow."

"Snow . . ."

"Yes, kitty, snow. It's . . . beautiful, I guess . . . quiet and perfect . . ." He grimaced. "At least until the plows go through . . . or until Dad starts yelling at me to shovel it off the driveway."

"He makes you shovel the snow?"

“Sure, and that wouldn’t even be so bad, but he always wants it done first thing in the morning in case Mom wants to go somewhere.” Bas chuckled suddenly, and Sydnie shot him a questioning glance. “I bought him a snow blower a couple years ago for Christmas,” he explained. “Evan thought it was cool, though, so now he takes care of it.”

“He likes using the snow blower?”

Bas rolled his eyes. “He likes anything that makes ungodly noise and annoys the hell out of everyone else.”

She laughed and glanced up at him just before her head snapped to the side, and she lifted her chin. “What’s that?” she asked vaguely, concentrating on whatever it was she smelled.

Bas sniffed the air, too, and scowled since he didn’t smell anything amiss. “What’s wh— *Sydnie!*” he hollered as she darted away through the trees. Shaking his head— he really ought to have known that the cat-youkai would pull some sort of trick— Bas strode after her.

Stepping out of the grove of pecan trees, Bas stopped short and cautiously looked around. It took a moment for him to find the wayward kitty. Sprawled comfortably in a shallow vale between two hills, she rolled onto her stomach, propping herself up on her elbows as she glanced at Bas and uttered a low sound caught somewhere between a purr and a mew. He blinked and glanced around, unsure why she’d make that sort of noise, and wondering, too, just what was so damn familiar about the rising smell emanating from the foliage under Sydnie’s body. As her movements released the fragrance into the air, she broke into a loud purr, her eyes heavy-lidded: sultry, inviting, almost intoxicated . . . Still nothing seemed amiss in the general vicinity other than Sydnie’s somewhat odd behavior, and, ignoring the small voice in the back of his head that whispered that Sydnie was definitely acting strangely, Bas wandered toward her.

“Come on, Sydnie,” he coaxed, reaching down to help her to her feet.

She grasped his hands and tugged, catching him off guard. He stumbled, knees skidding over the ground as she let go of his hands, throwing her arms around his neck. Rising on her knees, she pressed her body against his, her heart hammering so hard that he could feel the palpitations. Lips smashing down on his, she made the odd sound once more, pushing him back and crawling on him, straddling his chest as she delved her tongue into his mouth. His nerves frayed and tingled as her scent spiked in his head. The rising burn that flowed through him fed off the deeper instinct that was a powerful force that he fought to ignore. Her hands snaked under his shirt, her fingertips dancing on overheated flesh. The yearning grew into an ache; spiraled into

something far headier. Her breath was ragged, harsh, and she ground her hips against him in a rhythmic undulation that shocked him; that thrilled him . . .

Kissing her way along his jaw, she caught his earlobe between her teeth, flicking the soft skin with her tongue, she rumbled a low purr. He groaned softly, his will to fight the overwhelming lure of her wearing thin. His body reacted to her, throbbing painfully as his need to have her spun out of his control.

"It . . . hurts," she whimpered, nuzzling against his neck as she reached down, squeezing him through the rough fabric of his jeans. He growled sharply, catching her wrist and pulling her hand away. "Why . . .?"

"S-Syd . . . nie . . ." he mumbled, brain functioning painfully slowly. It wasn't right, was it? The strange sense of urgency in her every movement seemed to stem from something that he just couldn't understand. Unable to make sense of her sudden voracity, Bas forced himself to push her back despite the protesting of his body, of his youkai blood.

"What's gotten into you?" he demanded, his tone harsher than he intended for it to be. His hands were shaking, his body trembling, and he had to fight the desire to grab her and kiss her again.

Staring at him with a strange sort of vagueness in her gaze, she half-purr, half-mewled at him, her breasts straining against the flimsy fabric of her barely-there tank top with every breath she drew. He could see her hardened nipples, perfectly delineated by the sheer white cloth . . . Forcing his gaze off the entirely too provocative image of her, Bas drew a deep, ragged breath and closed his eyes. "I want you, puppy," she whispered with a throaty purr. "Don't you want to stroke the pussy?"

Ignoring the heated blush that crashed over him, Bas grasped her upper arms and held her back. "What . . .?" He trailed off and scowled as late realization of just what, exactly, they were sitting in dawned on him. "Catnip?" he mumbled, eyes widening as he stared at Sydnie. "All of this is because of the catnip?"

She blinked slowly, her cheeks flushed, eyes still bright, and she shook her head. "Catnip?" she repeated then shook her head. "Come here, puppy . . ."

'It is,' he realized with a sickened grimace. *'It's the catnip . . .'*

'Maybe,' his youkai agreed. *'Then again, maybe is a combination of you and the catnip.'*

He shook his head and sighed, standing up and pulling Sydnie gently to her feet. He let go of her long enough to scoop her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck and

contented herself by nibbling on his ear again. "Stop it, cat," he grumbled, quickening his pace as he hurried back to the car.

She moaned in dissent and kept nibbling, hands kneading his shoulders.

He winced. He hadn't wanted to stop early, but considering the smell of the catnip was all over him and her, both, he wasn't so sure he had a choice, either, because Sydney didn't seem to be able to stop herself . . .

Bas sighed, setting Sydney on her feet long enough to unlock the car and open her door. Extricating himself from her grasp, he gently pushed her into the vehicle and closed the door before she could wrap herself around him again.

'*Catnip, huh . . .?*' he thought as he strode around the car to get inside. "Damn."

His youkai sighed, too.

*Final Thought from Bas:
... Catnip ...?*

Chapter 29

The Big Game

“Oh, come on, puppy! You can’t *really* think I’m going to say I’m sorry for that, can you?”

Bas snorted and rolled his eyes but remained silent as he gripped the steering wheel a little tighter and fought down the rising surge of crimson that threatened to stain his cheeks for the duration.

Sydney didn’t miss the heightened color and wisely hid her amused grin. “Because that would be a lie,” she went on airily, “and lying is just *wrong*.”

“You could *pretend* to be a little sorry,” he grumbled as the first threads of color seeped into his skin.

“I could,” she agreed, “but that’d still be lying.”

He shot her a sidelong glance but didn’t reply to that.

“Anyway, you should have known that I’d get even eventually.”

He snorted.

“Putting me in those handcuffs wasn’t really very nice of you, don’t you think?”

“You wouldn’t stay off me long enough to get you to a hotel and cleaned up, cat,” he growled.

She wrinkled her nose. “Turn about is fair play, pretty boy, or hadn’t you heard?”

“So slapping me into the damn things while I’m sleeping was fair? Since when?” he shot back.

She giggled. “It was fair,” she assured him.

“Yeah? Well, you owe me for the damned bed.”

Sydney squirmed around to face him, drawing her knee up against her chest despite the restraining seat belt. "I didn't *make* you break the headboard," she protested.

He snorted again.

"Can't say I didn't like seeing you do it, though," she admitted.

He snapped his mouth closed on the retort he'd been forming as more hot color flooded into his face. "You . . . did . . .?"

She leaned toward him, running her fingertips lightly down the center of his chest. "Yes, I did."

He cleared his throat and fumbled with the radio station, studiously avoiding Sydney's gaze.

She giggled again.

'You're heartless, Sydney. You know that, right?'

'That's not true! I just thought that he should be taught what it's like to be put in those stupid things,' she argued.

'That wasn't heartless . . . what you were doing to the poor man after you had him at your mercy was, though . . .'

She grinned at the censure in her youkai's tone. *'That was just a little harmless teasing . . .'*

'Teasing enough to goad him into breaking the headboard . . .'

Her grin widened. *'Yeah, he did . . .'*

'Will you stop with the illicit thoughts and think about what you're putting the poor dog through?'

'Illicit? Hmm, I like that . . .'

'Oh, I give up . . . You're on your own, Sydney. Don't get us killed . . .'

She wrinkled her nose. Was it her fault that seeing every single muscle straining and rippling under his skin did strange things to her equilibrium? Could she help it that the idea of standing there, watching him as he fought against the desire to break free, was one that she couldn't quite ignore? Furthermore, could she *really* be responsible when

he was the careless one who had left the handcuffs sitting on the nightstand beside the bed after he'd finally unlocked her wrists the night before? 'Absolutely not,' she decided with a little snort. 'It's his fault – all his fault . . .'

He'd looked entirely apologetic when, after a few minutes of trying to push Sydney over onto her side of the car, he'd finally grabbed his duster and retrieved the much-loathed handcuffs. "Sorry, baby," he told her as he snapped them onto her wrists, "but you've got to stay over there while I find a hotel."

"Unlock me right now!" she demanded, cheeks pinking as she tugged at her hands in a vain effort to separate them once more.

Bas sighed as he reached over and fastened the seat belt for her then started the engine. "No . . . and remind me that you're never, ever allowed to be around catnip again."

"But I liked it!" she whined, rattling the handcuffs to emphasize her point.

He sighed. "I know you did."

"Sebastian?"

"Hmm?"

She leaned over, rubbing her temple on his shoulder. "I really, really want to fuck you."

"Dear God," he croaked out, pushing harder on the gas pedal to hurry them along their way.

It hadn't been much better by the time they'd reached the hotel. In fact, it had been worse. After being trapped in the confines of the car with the intoxicating scent of the catnip clinging on both her as well as on Bas, she was near panic; every nerve in her body completely sensitized to the point that she groaned softly when he grasped her arm to pull her out of the car. He must have been able to smell just how overwrought she was, because he refused to unlock her hands in the room, escorting her straight to the bathroom instead and basically hosing both her and himself down, using all the shampoo and body wash in the little complimentary bottles to get the smell of the catnip out of their clothes. Only then did he trust her enough to unlock the handcuffs, and while it took a bit longer for the inundation of the stimulus to go away, she had to admit that maybe she could understand why he hadn't wanted to take advantage of the situation.

Of course, that didn't mean that she appreciated being forced into the handcuffs, which was why she didn't think twice this morning when she picked up the cold steel things and threaded them through the spindles on the headboard before snapping them

around Bas' wrists. What she hadn't counted on was that Bas could and would break the bed before he deigned to beg her to release him . . .

"All right, you've had your fun, kitty . . . unlock me."

"You didn't say 'please', puppy," she teased.

He snorted, golden eyes darkening dangerously. "Now, cat."

Taking a moment to appreciate the hard lines, the rigid contours of Bas' large frame, she let her gaze sweep over him, and he blushed. "Give me the damn key."

"What? You mean this key?" she purred, holding up the tiny silver key, dangling the loop that held it from the tip of her crooked index finger.

He growled.

She met his gaze, and very slowly, deliberately stepped forward, crawling onto the bed and running the key down the center of his chest. The muscles jumped wildly; a ripple of strength that hung in the air. The way his body moved enthralled her; the cadence of motion; the ebb and flow like the waves on the sea . . .

"You want the key, puppy?" she crooned, rising up on her knees and staring down at him through half-closed eyes.

"Sydnie . . ."

Hooking the delicate fabric of her panties, she pulled them away from her body and dropped the key into them before letting the thin elastic snap back into place.

Bas sucked in a sharp breath; a choked resonance. "That's not . . . funny, damn it," he grumbled. "Unlock me – now."

"I don't think I will," she countered, slipping off the bed and retreating a few steps. "If you want it, come and get it."

His body tensed, hardened. Muscles bulging, he hooked his hands together over his head and jerked against the restraints. Sydnie gasped as the splintering crack echoed through the hotel room, and Bas sat up, bringing his restrained hands down before him as he rolled over and slowly got to his feet. Eyes darting from the broken spindle that hung precariously from the top rail of the headboard to Bas' face, Sydnie couldn't think that she really ought to run. Standing her ground, she stared at him, her breath shallow and uneven.

There was something entirely primitive in his movements, something completely intrepid in the way he stalked her. Stopping before her, he slowly reached out, hooking the elastic of her panties without letting his gaze drop away from hers. He fished out the keys with his other hand, his cheeks pinking but his expression carefully stoic. She couldn't suppress the softest whimper that slipped from her as his fingertips brushed against the tiny curls between her legs. "Unlock me, cat," he rasped out in a harsh whisper, grabbing her hand and dropping the keys into her palm.

And she'd done as she was told, though it took a few tries since her entire body had been trembling with such a voracity that she hadn't been able to fit the key into the lock. Luckily, he'd taken it after she'd finally managed the first one. After he'd stashed the cuffs back into the pocket of his duster, he'd yanked on a shirt, and, without looking at her, he'd told her that she had five minutes to get dressed before they left.

In any case, he'd barely said more than a handful of words to her since then, and not for the first time, Sydnie had to wonder if maybe—just maybe—she'd pushed him a little too far . . .

She blinked in surprise as she turned to scowl at Bas. He'd pulled into the underground parking lot beside a very large hotel. That wasn't surprising since he preferred to keep their vehicle out of view. She didn't understand why they were stopping so soon, though. It wasn't quite noon yet, and normally he'd be adamant that they press on 'just a little longer'. "Why are we stopping already?" she asked.

Bas shrugged as he parked the car and got out. "You don't want to?"

"Tell me why I think you've got ulterior motives, puppy?"

"Dunno, cat. Come on."

She let him open the door for her and stepped out onto the oil-stained concrete. He handed her the laptop case and grabbed the suitcase, locking the car and stowing the keys in his pocket before reaching for her hand. Following him toward the gaudily safety-yellow painted elevator, she didn't say another word.

Sydnie jerked awake and shot Bas an irritated glance, scooting away to avoid his swinging arms as he snarled curses at the television and leaned forward, apparently displeased with yet another call made by one of the squirrely men in the black and white shirts. "You call *that* 'pass interference'? It was a clean hit, you moron! *Clean!*"

She heaved a frustrated sigh. Having opted to nap instead of watch the 'big game' with Bas, Sydnie had curled up on the bed alone until Bas decided that he should sit with her. That had lasted all of twenty minutes before he'd inadvertently scared her, bellowing like a madman at the television. She'd gotten up and headed for the bathroom. He caught her hand and pulled her over to the bed, settling down on the end with a mumbled apology and something that sounded suspiciously like a promise that he'd be quieter. Satisfied that he would keep his word, she curled up beside him and tried to go to sleep only to discover that his version of 'quieter' and hers had to be completely different since he kept yelling off and on. Sydnie didn't know about his promise, but she did know that, in the course of a few hours, she'd developed an absolute loathing for all things 'football'.

"Hey, baby," he mumbled, turning his attention away from the television. Sydnie snorted and glanced at the set, not surprised to see that it was a commercial break – the only time that he seemed to recall that she existed at all. "Did you get a good nap?"

She narrowed her eyes and turned over, burying her face in the pillow she'd retrieved the last time he'd unceremoniously roused her. "Umph," she muttered, her voice muffled by the pillow.

He chuckled and rubbed her back. "Come on, Sydnie . . . watch the game with me?"

She pushed herself up, arching her back and glancing at the television. Her already mulish scowl darkened as the game broadcast resumed, and she shook her head. "Did they change their clothes?"

"Wha . . .? Oh, no . . . this is the second game."

Sydnie narrowed her eyes and slowly shifted them to the side to glower at Sebastian. "Second game?" she repeated incredulously. "You said you wanted to watch *the* game – *one* game."

He shook his head. "I said I wanted to watch the *Patriots* game," he argued distractedly, "and this *is* the Patriots' game."

She snorted. "Then what was the last one?"

"That was the first game . . . not a big deal."

She rolled her eyes. "You were *screaming* at the television. It *sounded* like a big deal."

"It's a double-header," he informed her. "But I have to watch both games! If the Patriots win this one, they'll be tied with the Jets in the AFC East since Buffalo just lost to the Dolphins."

"And not a single part of that made any sense," she grumbled.

Bas sighed and shook his head. "It just means – oh, *damn!* Roughing the passer, you bastard! Call the foul! *Call the foul!* Clean hit, my ass! Get some glasses, you nearsighted moron!"

Sydney rolled her eyes and pulled the pillow over her head as Bas leapt to his feet, bellowing at the television yet again. "And yet he somehow manages to drop even more IQ points in my estimation," she mumbled.

He dropped back onto the end of the bed, his weight jarring the mattress so hard that Sydney had to dig her claws into the coverlet to keep from rolling toward him. Heaving a thoroughly irritated sigh and casting Bas a baleful glower, she rolled off the bed and stomped toward the bathroom as Bas grunted something unintelligible. "Where you going?" he called after her, more of an afterthought than a real question.

"Taking a bath, puppy," she replied evenly, digging through the suitcase for a change of clothes.

"All right," he agreed. "Want some milk?"

She peered over her shoulder at him and nodded slowly. "Okay."

He glanced around quickly and grimaced since reaching the telephone would mean turning his back on the television. "I'll call in a few minutes. It's almost halftime."

Sydney bit her cheek, snatching the cream colored satin robe out of the suitcase and slamming it closed. She didn't trust herself to speak, and with a curt little grunt, she strode off to the bathroom and quietly closed the door.

'Stupid football,' she fumed, viciously twisting the faucet to turn on the flow of hot water. *'It would serve him right if I stayed in here the rest of the night.'*

She sighed, trying not to think about the idea that Bas had seen fit to stop early so that he could watch *football* when she'd been trying to talk him into stopping early for days. He wouldn't stop when she asked him to, but he'd stop so that he could sit around and yell at the television as though it would make a difference to the game . . .

'He said he'd order your milk,' her youkai pointed out reasonably.

'Yeah, he did,' she agreed, stripping off her clothes and pulling a couple towels off the high rack on the wall. She spread one on the floor and set the other on the toilet before stepping into the steaming water.

'At least there's that, right?'

Sinking down in the tub and willing the warmth to soothe her, Sydnie closed her eyes and scrunched down as low as she could. '*I can deal with football,*' she told herself as a violent stab of desperate hope shot through her, '*so long as I'm with Sebastian . . .*'

Sydnie felt a little better when she opened the bathroom door half an hour later. Relaxed from her bath and feeling quite a bit calmer, she stepped out of the sultry bathroom and shivered slightly as the cooler, drier air hit her moist skin. Bas was still watching the game, and he didn't acknowledge Sydnie's emergence as she stashed her clothes in a plastic bag.

Stifling a sigh, she wandered over to the bed, pulling the simple bow of her robe a little tighter, and sat down beside him. "Are we winning?"

Bas nodded vaguely. "Yeah. Up by ten."

She blinked. She wasn't sure what that meant, but the 'yeah' was clear enough. "Good." Looking around the room, she frowned. She didn't see milk anywhere. "Sebastian?"

"Hmm?"

She bit her lip, cheeks pinking. "Did you –?"

"*What the fuck!*" he bellowed, jerking his arm away from Sydnie as he leaned forward even further. "You have to *tackle* the guy with the ball, you dumb ass! Don't just stand there and let him run *past* you!"

Sydnie recoiled.

Bas snorted in obvious disgust and growled under his breath. His cell phone rang, and Sydnie glanced at him. He made no move to answer it. "Your phone," she pointed out, raising her voice just enough to be heard over the fuss he was making.

"Pfft! They'll call back," he grumbled.

Sydney wrinkled her nose. The ringing stopped after the fourth time only to start up again minutes later. Unable to ignore the incessant trill, Sydney scooted off the bed and ran over to the table. She had every intention of turning off the ringer until she noticed the name that appeared on the caller ID. 'Gunnar', it said. Sydney flipped it open and lifted the device to her ear. "Come get me," she demanded in lieu of greeting.

"Sydney? You want me to come get you. You and Bas not getting along?"

She shrugged and paced the floor near the table. "It's fine," she lied. "I'm just bored."

"Bored? What's Bas doing?"

"He's busy," she replied, plugging her ear when Bas started growling again. "Football."

"Oh, the game," Gunnar mused. "Yeah, he loves football."

"I see," Sydney remarked. "So will you?"

"Come get you?"

"Yes."

"I'll send you a plane ticket," he offered.

"I don't like to fly."

Gunnar sighed. "I'm not too fond of it, myself," he admitted. "Tell him to stop being stupid and pay attention to you?"

Sydney scowled. "He . . . he forgot my milk."

"Aww . . . did he?"

She nodded. "Yeah."

"Tell you what. Give me the name of your hotel."

"The Windsor," she replied.

“And the city?”

“I think we’re in Memphis, Tennessee.”

“Okay. I’ll call your hotel and have them send you some milk. How’s that?”

She shook her head. “You’d do that for me?”

“Sure, I would. If Bas is too busy to do it, then someone has to make sure you have milk, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hang up now, Sydnie. I’ll call back when I’m done, okay?”

“All right,” she agreed, then snapped the phone closed.

Her frown deepened. Somehow, the idea of someone else ordering milk for her . . .

She just didn’t like it; not at all . . .

Bas scowled at the television, trying to comprehend just how the Patriots could lose an early twenty-four point lead. It made no sense. Chalk it up to messy plays and inept refs, he supposed. *‘Just figures,’* he fumed. *‘The first time in twenty years we’ve got a decent shot to win the division standings, and the referee blows ass.’*

A knock sounded on the door, and Bas forced his attention off the game as Sydnie wandered over to answer it. “Sydnie, no! You don’t know who —”

She shot him a mulish glance and ignored him, deliberately grasping the handle and opening the door wide. “Room service,” the young man said. Sydnie stood aside, allowing the bellhop to step into the room. He deposited a gallon of milk on the table. She slipped a couple bucks into his hand, and he bowed before closing the door behind himself.

“Shit,” Bas mumbled, watching as she snapped the plastic cap off the gallon and lifted the entire thing to her lips. *‘Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit . . .’* He grimaced, realizing a little too late that he’d promised to order her milk awhile ago — and that he’d completely forgotten to do it. “You . . . ordered yourself . . .?”

"Don't be ridiculous, puppy," she shot back with a narrow-eyed glare, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. "You said *you* would."

"Yeah, well, I . . ." He winced then sighed. "I . . . forgot."

Sydney nodded slowly. "I know," she replied quietly, unable to mask the hurt in her voice at the perceived betrayal.

He winced again. "I meant to," he began.

"Don't worry about it, puppy," she forced herself to say. "I don't need your milk."

Bas glanced back at the television when the crowd erupted in a chorus of jeers. "Ah, son of a b—" he growled, shaking his head furiously as one of the other team's men intercepted a pass and sprinted down the sideline toward the Patriots' end zone. Catching sight of Sydney's disgusted expression, he cut himself off abruptly. "So you ordered it for yourself?" he questioned, jerking his head at the jug of milk in her hands.

"Nope," she responded, a tight little smile gracing her lips.

Bas blinked, shaking his head in confusion. "Then who did?"

The phone rang, and Sydney nodded. "Him."

"Him?" Bas echoed, slowly reaching for the device. "Fuck," he muttered, staring at the name on the caller ID before he heaved a sigh and flipped open the phone. "What do you want?" he snarled.

"Commercial break?" Gunnar quipped.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? I was going to get milk for her, damn it."

"She said that you said you'd get it for her awhile ago, and that you forgot, Bas-tard. Did you?"

Bas ground his teeth together. "Shut it, Gunsie."

Gunnar sighed. "So what the hell do you think you're doing?" he demanded.

"Look, smart-ass, I haven't watched a game since I came after her . . . Anyway, she was napping."

Sydney uttered a terse little 'hrumph' sound. Bas grimaced.

"Yeah, well, I've seen you while you were watching your 'games' . . . you tend to be a little involved, don't you think?"

"So?"

Gunnar sighed again. "So do you really think Sydney enjoys watching you make a damn fool out of yourself while you bellow at a television set?"

"Butt out, Gunnar," he snapped, cheeks pinking since he probably had sounded a bit like a raving lunatic.

"Turn the damn TV off and spend some time with your mate, baka – before she decides that she doesn't want to have an idiot puppy like you as her mate."

"I mean it, Gunnar: *butt – out.*"

"You're stupid, Bas – *really* stupid. No wonder she wants me to come pick her up."

". . . *What?*"

"You heard me. She asked me to come get her."

Bas' eyes widened then narrowed as he stared at the cat. "Sydney?"

"Hmm?" she replied, staring at her claws haughtily.

"Fix it before you dig yourself a deeper hole, baka," Gunnar grumbled. "I'll call you later to tell you what I've found out. Damn fool." He hung up, and Bas flinched inwardly as he snapped the phone closed and dropped it back onto the table.

"You . . . you really asked him to come get you?"

Sydney shrugged, striding away from the table and crawling onto the bed, tucking her legs to the side and presenting him with her back. "He bought me milk," she muttered with a sad shake of her head.

Bas glanced at the television. Two minutes left in regulation time, and the score was tied. With an inward sigh, he grabbed the remote and turned off the set, tossing it down on the table before stepping over to the bed and sitting behind Sydney. "I'm sorry, baby," he told her softly, hesitantly pushing her hair off her shoulder.

"I've asked you for days to stop early," she replied in a tiny voice. "You always said that we had to keep moving."

"Sydnie . . ."

"Then you finally stop so you can watch a game – a stupid football game."

"It's a big game!" he argued, tossing his arms up at his sides.

Sydnie turned her head enough to stare at him out of the corner of her eyes. "So you've said; so you've said."

"It's an important game," he grumbled, cheeks pinking as he tried to ignore the desire to turn the television back on to check the score again.

"More important than me; I got it."

Bas froze and blinked in surprise at the vehemence in Sydnie's normally melodic voice. "What? No! I don't think – I didn't . . . I didn't mean to," he told her. "I really –"

She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin proudly. "I don't need you, Bas the Hunter. *I don't.*"

He flinched, scooting toward her to pull her into his lap. She stiffened but didn't resist him though she didn't relax against him, either. "I want you to," he admitted quietly.

"You . . . want me . . . to?"

He nodded. "Yes, I do."

She shrugged. "Why?"

"Because I need you – I need you . . . a lot."

She ducked her chin, shoulders slumping as she let out a noiseless sigh. "You . . . do?"

"Yeah," he whispered, burying his nose in her hair. "More than I should . . . yeah."

"You forgot about me," she pouted.

Bas kissed her temple and held her a little closer. She leaned on his shoulder, content to let him hold her for the time being. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't mean to."

She sniffled. "Don't do it again, puppy."

He swallowed hard, stroking her hair, her back, trying to soothe her and feeling like a complete ogre in the process. He had to clear his throat before he could speak, had to force down the painful lump that swelled in his chest. "I won't."

*Final Thought from Sydnie:
Stupid football ...*

Chapter 30

Implicit Trust

Sydney paced the floor, casting Sebastian occasional glances as she pondered his offer. "Anything I want to do?" she finally asked, crossing her arms over her chest. "Anything?"

Lounging on the bed, propped on one elbow with his hand supporting his cheek, he nodded slowly. "That's right, cat," he reiterated with a grimace. "Whatever you want."

Sydney hid a smile. Two things were very apparent: firstly, Bas the Hunter felt completely horrible about his inattention during the game, and secondly, he was more than a little wary of the 'anything' that Sydney might come up with. "That's interesting," she allowed, not quite ready to let the dog off the hook just yet. "Anything, huh?"

He shifted, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Take it easy on me, kitty," he grumbled, only half-joking.

"You don't like the terms you set?" she purred, slipping onto the end of the bed and slowly crawling toward Bas. He swallowed hard, tearing his gaze away from the deep 'v' of her thigh-length robe. "Fine, fine . . . I suppose we could play a game of our own – your game."

"My game?" he repeated, a wry grin surfacing on his face. "You want to play football?"

"Football? No . . . that other game. What did you call it?" She sat up, tapping her chin thoughtfully. "Ah, yes . . . Truth or Dare."

He blinked and slowly shook his head. "You want to play Truth or Dare?"

She nodded. "It'll do for starters."

"Okay," he said, rolling onto his back and propping himself up on his elbows. "Ladies first."

She grinned. "Truth or dare, puppy?"

Scrunching his face up into a thoughtful little scowl, Bas finally heaved a sigh and grinned. "Dare, kitty. Do your worst."

Sydney laughed. "I dare you to order milk for me."

Bas snorted. "That was your dare? You know I'd do that, anyway," he pointed out.

"Put up or shut up, puppy."

Bas chuckled as he rolled over and grabbed the phone, dialing the number for room service and making quick work of ordering a gallon of whole milk for her. Dropping the receiver back into the cradle, he dusted his hands together and stretched out again, tucking his hands together behind his neck and shooting Sydney and entirely smug grin. "Truth or dare, kitty."

"Truth."

"Tell me, Sydney . . . Would you really have wanted Gunnar to come get you?"

Trying to ignore the hint of trepidation in Bas' gaze, Sydney stared at the coverlet and shrugged. "Do you really think I would?" she demanded softly.

Bas winced. "I'd like to *think* you wouldn't."

She shrugged, crawling toward him close enough to trace little circles on his chest. "I wouldn't have."

For some reason, her answer didn't seem to make him feel any better. "I'm sorry, kitty."

She smiled. "Truth or dare, Sebastian."

"Truth."

"Are you sure you're not just playing with me?"

He blinked. "Playing with you?"

She nodded. "You said that the reason you always stopped me before was because Gunnar was here," she pointed out. "He's gone now, you know. He's *been* gone awhile."

"I'm not playing with you, Sydney," he assured her, his cheeks pinking though his gaze remained steady. "I swear I'm not."

"Good."

He tried to smile but failed. "Truth or dare, kitty."

"Truth."

"Are you sure you're not just playing with me to drive me insane?"

She giggled. "Would I do such a thing, puppy?"

He narrowed his gaze on her. "Yes, Sydney, I believe you would."

She rolled her eyes but giggled louder. "You're so self-conscious, Sebastian."

"Yeah, whatever. Your turn, cat."

"Truth or dare?"

"Truth."

Her smile widened. "Do you really believe that the tiny men on the television can hear you when you yell at them?"

He snorted but his coloring darkened as he broke into a sheepish little grin. "Of course I do. Sometimes they even reverse their bad calls." A knock on the door interrupted the game, and Bas scooted off the bed to answer. Making quick work of taking the milk from the bellhop, Bas gave the boy a tip and poured Sydney a big glass before returning to the bed once more.

She accepted the glass and drained it in one long gulp before crawling over Bas' prone body to set the empty glass on the nightstand. Hiding her smile when he uttered a low groan, she sat back and smiled sweetly. "Your turn, Bas the Hunter," she reminded him.

He blinked a few times, the dazed sort of expression on his face slowly dissipating. He had to clear his throat before he could speak again, and Sydney laughed softly, unaccountably pleased with her ability to completely fluster the youkai hunter. "T-t-truth or dare?"

She thought it over. "Dare."

He chuckled, gaze lighting with sudden inspiration. Before he told her the terms of the dare, he sat up again and ambled over to the bureau where a small microwave stood. She watched as he dug a packet of popcorn out of the box they'd picked up earlier. He tore the plastic wrapper off and stuck the packet into the microwave, starting it up before returning to the bed once more. "I dare you," he began, a slow smile spreading over his face as a triumphant sort of light filtered into his gaze, "to share a bag of popcorn with me."

Sydney sat up. "What? That's silly! I can do that . . ."

"That means," he went on, "no growling, no scratching, no claiming the bag . . . it sits on the bed between us, and you can't even lift an eyebrow at me when I take some because we're *sharing* it."

Snapping her mouth closed and trying to resist the blush that rose in her own cheeks, Sydney's face shifted into a chagrined little scowl, and she snorted. "That's easy enough," she assured him. "Simple, puppy! A complete waste of a dare!"

"And if you so much as give me a look, cat . . . well, you'll have to abide by the consequences."

"Consequences?"

"Of course. That's the whole point of the game, isn't it? If you can't complete your dare, there has to be consequences, don't you think?"

"I can share, puppy," she bit out.

"I know you can, baby. I'm just encouraging you."

Wrinkling her nose as he wandered over to retrieve the popcorn, Sydney snorted, sitting up a little straighter as he shook the bag and carefully pulled the top seams apart. Dropping the bag onto the bed, he reached in and grabbed a huge handful of the snack. Sydney remembered just in time that she really didn't dare say a thing, even if she did think that Bas was being a pig. "Mmm," he moaned in an exaggerated show of happiness as he made a point of stuffing the entire handful into his mouth. "Wan' 'ome, 'itty?"

Sydney didn't answer, leaning forward and snatching a couple kernels. "Truth or dare, puppy."

He flopped onto his back and swallowed. "Truth."

She shot him a rather nasty grin. Bas paused with his hand in the popcorn bag. She had the feeling that he was dreading her question, and well he should. She let her gaze travel over him as his skin pinked a little more. "Tell me, Sebastian," she began quietly, "what color are your crests?"

"My . . .?" His face shifted from a light blush to a painful crimson stain, and he coughed. "My . . . crests."

She nodded, feeling much better as she popped a few pieces of popcorn into her mouth. "Yes, your crests."

"Ah . . . well . . . I, uh, they . . . I mean, it – them – they . . ." He drew a deep breath, scowling as he shot to his feet and snatched the glass off the nightstand before stomping over, his back to her, and poured her another drink. "Green," he mumbled, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Green?" she echoed, suppressing the exultant laugh that welled up inside her; the pleasure that she'd finally gotten some sort of answer out of him about the elusive crests. "I like green."

"Truth or dare, cat?" he growled, stomping over and shoving the glass under her nose.

"Truth, puppy."

He snorted, sinking down on the bed but careful to avoid her gaze. "What's your favorite color?"

She giggled. "Green," she insisted, blinking innocently. "Definitely green, puppy . . ."

He blushed even darker, and Sydnie laughed out loud. "I walked right into that," he grumbled.

"Yes, you did," she agreed with a shrug, forcing her eyes away as he reached for the bag of popcorn. "Don't blush, Sebastian. Red clashes with green . . ."

His answer was a loud '*pfft!*' as he jammed more popcorn into his mouth.

"Truth or dare?" she demanded.

"Oof," he mumbled.

"Do I scare you, Sebastian?"

He gulped and quickly shook his head. "N-n-no."

She rose on her hands and knees and leaned toward him. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. "Y-yes . . ."

"That's a shame," she relented, sitting back on her heels with a melodramatic sigh.

Bas snorted. "You smashed the popcorn, Sydnie."

"Did I? I'm so sorry . . ."

"I doubt that," he retorted mildly. "Truth or dare, cat."

"Truth."

He snorted. "Do you want some more milk?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not at the moment, puppy, but I'll keep it in mind. What a waste of a question."

He chuckled, grabbing another handful of popcorn. Sydnie couldn't help the little half-growl that slipped from her as she reached out to snatch the bag from him. Jerking her hand away at the last second, she bit her lip and bit off the growl, hoping against hope that he hadn't noticed the mistake. No such luck.

His eyebrows shot up as he slowly rolled over, pushing himself into a sitting position, an entirely triumphant grin surfacing on his face. "I knew you couldn't do it," he remarked without even trying to keep the hint of gloating out of his tone.

"I didn't!" she argued. "I stopped myself!"

"Ah, but you did it," he insisted. "Now you have to live with the consequences."

She glared at him. "That's rather mean, don't you think?"

"Nope," he told her. "You were warned."

Plastering on an exaggeratedly innocent expression, Sydnie batted her eyes and tilted her head. "Please, Sebastian? I won't do it again; I promise."

He snorted. "Nope . . . now you get to feed me the rest of the popcorn – without complaint."

Her mouth dropped open, and she scowled at him. He chuckled, obviously thinking he'd won. Sydnie started to say something then snapped her mouth closed, the thread of an idea blossoming in her mind. "Okay," she agreed, her voice dropping to a husky purr. "Your wish is my command, my puppy."

Gaze narrowing as he tried to figure out just what was going through her mind, Bas slowly shook his head as Sydnie picked up the bag of popcorn and scooted toward him. "Sydnie? What . . .?"

Straddling him, she took her time squirming around for a moment as she adjusted her position on his lap. He grimaced and opened his mouth to protest. Sydnie dug a few kernels of popcorn out of the bag and set it aside before leaning forward, slowly running it along the outline of his lips. "All of it, huh?"

"Damn it," he grumbled, turning his face away as his cheeks shot straight to scarlet, bypassing pink completely. "Get . . . off . . . cat."

"Oh, no," she insisted, patiently following his face with the food. "Consequences, you said, right? Far be it for me not to abide by the set rules of the game."

"You're bad," he rasped out, finally meeting her stare. His eyes were dark, veiled in a more turbulent emotion, and Sydnie caught her breath, forgetting for the moment, that she was supposed to be feeding him.

"Bad is a relative term, Sebastian. I prefer 'playful'."

He stifled a groan, closing his eyes for a moment as a violent shiver ran down his spine. "And I prefer 'trouble'."

"I like trouble," she assured him, slipping the popcorn into his mouth. "Oh, look . . . you're a mess . . . let me help you, shall I?"

He chewed almost absently, staring at her in a bemused sort of way. Leaning toward him, her tongue darted out, carefully licking away the sheen of buttery oil that glossed his lips. "God," he moaned quietly, his arms locking around her. "Sydnie . . . I . . ."

"Me, too," she whispered, slowly licking his upper lip. She could feel the trembling erupting in his body, and the curious sensation of light-headedness that swept through her in a brutal rush. Pulling another piece of popcorn from the bag, she repeated the process. He gripped her shoulders, pulling and pushing at her at the same time, unable

to decide what he wanted to do. The struggle between heart and mind was a palpable thing. Sydney leaned down, brushing her lips over his, returning once, twice only to draw his bottom lip into her mouth, bathing away the salty remnants of the popcorn with the stroke of her tongue.

"That's . . . enough," he murmured, eyes half-closed as his harsh breath ruffled over her cheek. "I . . . you . . . sharing lesson over."

"But I don't want it to be over," she argued, slipping her hand around his neck and burying her fingers in the silky strands of his hair. "You said the rest of the popcorn."

"The rest of the popcorn might kill me."

"You're stronger than that, Bas the Hunter," she murmured, leaning in, nipping at his earlobe. "Truth or dare, puppy?"

"D-dare . . .?"

She giggled, pressing her body against his, reveling in the sheer strength that exuded from him. "I dare you to show me your crests," she whispered.

Bas gasped, her words shocking him as his body stiffened. "I . . . *no!*" he choked, shoving her off his lap and shooting to his feet to stalk across the room.

Sydney sighed. "Why not?"

"Game over, cat," he growled. "Forget it, damn it."

She shook her head and adjusted the hem of her robe, scrunching up her shoulders as she tried to brush aside the hurt that surged through her. "You're a jerk, Bas the Hunter — a *huge* jerk!"

"Sydney —"

Untangling her legs and slipping off the bed, she strode over to him, planting her hands on her hips and glaring up at him. "You're a jerk and a hypocrite, and —"

"Hypocrite? How?"

She snorted, poking him hard in the center of his chest to emphasize her words. "You're the one who is always telling me that I should trust you, aren't you? 'Trust me, Sydney' . . . 'I promise, Sydney' . . . All your big talk, and the one thing that you don't *even* comprehend is that *you* don't trust *me*, do you? And that makes you a *hypocrite!*"

Bas stopped short, slowly reaching out to grasp Sydnie's shoulder as he bent down to look her in the eye. "That's not true," he told her. "I—"

"You can tell me, you know," she mumbled, glowering at the floor and blinking furiously.

"Tell you what?"

She shook her head, wrenched herself away from him with a vicious jerk. "You don't want me. I got it now. It's crystal-clear."

"That's not it!" he bellowed, catching her hand and pulling her back before she had a chance to get away. "Don't be stupid, Sydnie! It's not that I don't want you! I just . . . I . . ." he winced and squeezed his eyes closed then heaved a sigh. "O-o-okay."

She blinked and stole a glance at him. "Okay?"

He jerked his head in a curt nod, face flaming, a miserable expression on his face. "Okay," he said again. "Just . . . don't laugh. Please don't laugh . . ."

"Why would I laugh?"

He snorted, already acute embarrassment rapidly escalating into the desire to have the floor open up and swallow him, at least judging from the misery in his expression. "Because," he grumbled, cheeks darkening in color, "I look like a damn . . . barber pole."

Sydnie coughed but didn't laugh. "A . . . *barber* pole?"

He shot her a mutinous glare. "Yes," he gritted out. "Forget it . . ."

Sydnie caught his hand before he could stomp away. "I'm sorry," she told him, pulling him back. "That was just an amusing visual, but I won't laugh . . . I swear I won't . . ."

Bas stared at her for a long moment then finally nodded, backing up until his legs hit the bed and lowering himself down on it slowly. Stretching out without taking his eyes off her, he drew a deep breath and tried to smile. He gave up on the attempt and dragged a pillow over his head, instead. "Make it quick," he mumbled, voice muffled.

It seemed to Bas that Sydnie was taking her sweet time in doing whatever looking she wanted to do. Stifling a frustrated growl, he held the pillow over his head so tightly that he could feel the muscles in his arms straining. He felt the bed sag by his knees. He could tell that Sydnie was doing something, but he just couldn't make himself look, either.

After so many years of dreading this moment, he found that he wasn't nearly as prepared as he should have been. He'd come to terms with the idea that he would eventually have to find a mate, and that she would very likely end up seeing the crests that he took great pains to hide. Maybe he'd been teased one too many times. Try as he might, he couldn't really remember a time when he wasn't self-conscious about that particular facet of his anatomy. As much as he hated it, he also couldn't quite shake it off, either.

A gentle yet insistent tug pulled the pillow off his face, and Bas blinked as his eyes readjusted to the dim light in the hotel room. Sydnie was stretched out beside him—she must have cleaned up the popcorn mess—smiling at him in a sad sort of way, and he couldn't help wondering if she somehow understood his reticence better than he thought that she would.

"I won't look if you don't want me to," she said, her voice soft, kind.

Bas reached out, brushed his knuckles over her cheek as she leaned into his touch. "It's okay," he told her despite the wild wish that he could just tell her to forget it after all. "I do trust you, you know."

She nodded, catching his hand and twining her fingers with his. "You don't trust yourself."

He winced. It wasn't a question, and she . . . she was right. "Just . . . fast . . . okay?"

Her gentle smile was tempered by a certain sadness that he couldn't comprehend. Leaning down, she kissed him softly, her lips no more than a whisper against his. She let go of his hand so that he could slip his arms around her. Feathering kisses over his cheeks and forehead, his eyes and nose, his chin and jaw line, she calmed him, comforted him, almost made him forget the worries that plagued him.

Scooting closer, she pressed her body against his, kissing her way back to his lips, her fingertips stroking his face, tracing the contours of his shoulders, reaching down to tug on the hem of his shirt. He sat up, allowing her to pull it off him before lying back down, granting her the freedom to do what she would . . . Trailing kisses down his neck, along his collarbones, she fanned her fingers over the expanse of skin on his chest,

his abdomen. His body reacted in a riot of sensations, a thousand tiny flames igniting, converging, burning him from the inside out. The cool satin of her robe heated to his touch; the brush of her hair over his skin setting off a chain reaction that shot straight to his groin.

Digging his claws into the coverlet, he felt every muscle in his body tensing, straining. Unable to do much more than to lie there and take it, Bas felt as though every strand of his being was being wound tighter and tighter. She sighed, a throaty sound, a rusty purr, and he could feel sweat breaking over his brow, his chest. Fighting against the overwhelming desire to grab her, to claim her, Bas tightened his fists even more, rasping out a strangled sound as Sydnie's fingers slipped under the waistband of his jeans.

She sat up, biting her lip as she unbuttoned the last of his clothing. Unable to look at her, to watch her, he grabbed the pillow and dragged it over his face once more. She sighed softly but didn't try to take it away. Wrapping his arms over it so tightly that she likely wouldn't be able to pull it off him, Bas groaned as the deafening 'snick' of his zipper cracked like thunder in the room.

"Lift your hips, puppy," she crooned. He didn't want to help her, but he couldn't stop himself, either. She grasped the jeans along with his boxer shorts, pulling them down the length of his legs and dropping them off the end of the bed. "Oh, it's . . ." she trailed off. He grimaced at the odd note of wonder in her voice, then gasped sharply, his mind rebelling against the sensation that was both foreign and familiar at the same time as Sydnie's smooth, soft hands closed around him.

His body reacted, a powerful surge of inebriating desire pulsing through him from somewhere deep down inside. He could feel the rising urgency as she stroked him, her hands gripping him tight then releasing as she pumped the length of him. He tried to hold back; fought to contain the oblivion of pleasure. Her touch was too insistent, too demanding, and with a ragged cry muffled by the pillow, Bas' body stiffen, lifted his hips against her descending hands. The hot splatter of his orgasm shot onto his stomach, spilled over her fingers, dripped between her hands. She laughed softly, her hands letting go of him, and it took him a moment to register that she'd slipped off the bed.

Minutes later, as his breathing calmed, he felt the warm caress of a wet washcloth. Sydnie wiped him clean before stroking him to hardness once more. Feathering touches, the lightest of caresses, her fingers danced over his flesh as he trembled and shuddered, mumbling incoherent pleas, begging her to stop. If she heard him, she gave no indication, stroking him, her hand tight but gentle. Moist skin pulling against skin added an almost painful friction, and he groaned.

Bas couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't concentrate on anything but Sydney's attention and the madness that wrapped around his brain any time she was near. He wanted to stop her, wanted to make her understand that he just couldn't take it, wanted to beg her to keep going. The conflicting emotions warred within him, the rising temper of resurgent need swelling in the dim light. He felt the bed shift, trembling as Sydney knelt between his legs. In the incoherent state of his mind, the thread of a thought started to form only to burst in a searing syncopation of heat and light and blistering wetness. She drew him into her mouth, her teeth grazing over the length of him – as much as she could take in. He felt himself hit the back of her throat, and she gagged just a little but didn't stop. Roughened tongue stroking him, sucking him deeper – a little deeper – she moaned softly, the reverberation rocking straight through him as he involuntarily bucked his hips, sending himself impossibly deep as her hand wrapped around the base of him.

"God, Sydney, no," he choked out, body trembling as he tried to hold himself in check. Wrapping her fingers around his balls, she squeezed gently, and he rasped out a fierce groan.

He sprang free from the suction of her lips with a slurpy, wet 'pop', shivering violently as the cooler air hit his overheated body. Running the very tip of her tongue along the ridge below the head of his penis, she rumbled out a little purr. He could feel the uncontrollable spasms as he jerked around in her hands, and Sydney uttered a husky giggle as she sucked him into her mouth once more. The edges of her fangs raked against him, and he drew a sharp breath as she clamped her lips around him, creating a suction, a vacuum, a vortex that drew him deeper and deeper.

"Fuck!" he half-whimpered, half-growled, squeezing his eyes closed as the pillow covering his face ripped under the abuse of his claws. "Stop," he pleaded, whispering, body convulsing as the pulsing, throbbing flow of blood thundered in his ears. "Sydney, please, I . . ."

She drew him deeper, sucked him harder, her tongue raking over him; endless pleasure that bordered on pain. He could feel the surge of his orgasm rising higher, closer, harder to ignore. "I don't . . . I c-c-can't . . ."

Sydney's tongue flicked faster, goading him further, closer and closer to the edge of his control. His breath caught between his lips and lungs, and he smashed the remnants of the pillow tighter over his face. The bittersweet torment seemed to last forever as he fought against the perilous end. He swung his arms to push her away, but the action came a moment too late. One last stifling breath, one last insistent tug, the vortex of her mouth, of her soul, dragged at him, broke the last strands of control that he possessed. With a ragged cry muffled by the pillow, he called out to God, to heaven, to hell, damning himself as Sydney squeezed him, sucked him, drained him . . .

Somewhere in the distance, he heard her stifled cough. Moments later, the pillow lifted from his face, and he squeezed his eyes closed, face ruddy crimson, unable to look her in the eye as the warmth of her body covered his chest, as she tucked her head into the crook of his neck. Her body was quivering, but she pressed soft kisses on his throat and jaw. Bas grimaced, forcing his lethargic arms to move, to encompass her, to hold her close against his heart as he struggled to breathe, as he fought to form words, as his mind whizzed a mile a minute; far too fast to give voice to the million emotions that humbled him; that lifted him up.

"Baby," he mumbled, forcing his eyes open and staring at Sydney. "You . . . why did you . . .?"

Her smile trembled on her lips, her gaze full of a certain reverence; a heartfelt warmth. "I think you're beautiful, Bas the Hunter," she murmured. "Why were you hiding yourself?"

Flinching at her choice of words, Bas closed his eyes and hugged her tight. "I'm not . . . I'm a monster – a *freak*," he replied quietly. "I've heard it all before."

She shook her head, leaning up on her elbow to gaze down at him. Brushing his bangs out of his face, she clucked her tongue and sighed. "A monster?" she echoed. "Why would anyone say that?"

Bas' blush deepened. "Because I'm . . . big."

"Wha . . .? Oh," she replied, and he grimaced since he knew from the tone of her voice that she was smiling. "That's bad?" she teased.

He snorted. "Bad enough," he grumbled.

"I thought all men wanted to be big. You should be proud, I'd think."

That comment only served to deepen his blush. Bas shook his head. "Not when the girls are pointing and laughing," he admitted with a wince.

"They laughed at you?" Sydney wrinkled her nose then shrugged. "I, myself, would have just jumped on you, but . . ."

"Be serious, kitty?"

"And who says I'm not?"

He sighed.

“Why were your pants down around these girls . . . and what do they smell like?”

He chuckled despite himself at the unmistakable menace in Sydnie’s words. “Calm down, baby. It was awhile ago.”

She snorted but cuddled against his chest once more, wrapping strands of his hair around her fingers. “All right, what happened?”

Bas’ wry grin faded. “We were playing basketball at the park – Evan and Gunnar and another of my cousins, Morio . . . the high school baseball team had a game that day, and the park is right next to the school. Anyway, Gunnar and Evan were losing, so Evan – being a dumb ass – yanked my sweatpants down, along with my boxers, and . . . well . . .” He grimaced, wishing that the memory didn’t still have the power to make him blush. He sighed, kissing Sydnie’s temple as she smiled dreamily and closed her eyes. “The baseball game had just ended, and you’ve seen for yourself, what happens wherever Gunnar happens to be . . . So the captain of the cheerleading squad and half of her team were hanging around, watching us play when Evan did that . . . I guess I should have been thankful that I had a concealment on at the time.”

“So they saw your penis? Is that so bad?”

“They *pointed* and *laughed*, Sydnie . . . and I spent the rest of my high school career hearing whispers and being told that . . .” he trailed off with a wince, and he cleared his throat. “That I’d kill any girl I tried to sleep with.”

“Their loss,” she mumbled, smiling dreamily as she nuzzled closer. “Nuff talk, puppy . . . I’m sleepy.”

Bas scowled. “Wha – ? You can’t go to sleep now,” he argued.

“Why not?” she whined, her brows drawing together in a petulant little scowl.

“Well, I – you – we . . . You’re just not *supposed* to; that’s all!”

“Just hold me, Sebastian,” she whispered, the beginning of her purrs tinting the edges of her words.

He heaved a sigh, thoroughly irritated that she would do such a thing to him and then think that she would just go to sleep. She looked so content, though, so happy that he didn’t have the heart to wake her, even if he thought that she would ultimately enjoy his attentions.

Reaching over to turn off the lamp beside the bed, Bas tried not to disturb the sleeping cat-youkai. Pulling the blanket over her slender form, he smiled into the darkness as he closed his eyes.

“Tomorrow, Sydnie . . . We’ll stop early, if that’s what you want—whatever you want . . . my . . . mate . . .”

He thought that he could feel her smile as he drifted off to sleep.

Final Thought from Sydnie:
MY puppy ...!

Chapter 31

Darkness Falls

"Hello?"

"Got a minute?"

Bas stifled a yawn and rubbed away the lingering traces of sleep that blurred his vision.

"Sure," he replied, keeping his voice lowered, careful not to wake Sydnie just yet.

"Something happen?"

Cain sighed. "Not really. Just wanted to touch base with you. Where are you, by the way?"

"Tennessee . . . Memphis."

"You're making progress, then. Good. How's Sydnie?"

Unable to repress the little grin that broke over his features, Bas chuckled. "She's fine."

"Any trace of the bounty hunters?"

"Nope, not yet. I don't doubt they're looking for us, but they haven't caught up yet."

"And you're being careful?"

"Absolutely."

Cain let out his breath in a heavy gust. "You'd damn well better be, Bas."

Bas wrinkled his nose and shifted slightly, bending his knee and leaning his elbow on it.

"I know, Dad. I'm not stupid."

"Never thought you were," Cain remarked mildly, ignoring the irritation inherent in Bas' tone. "Your mother wanted me to ask what the odds were that you'd be home for Christmas."

"Slim to none," Bas quipped amicably enough. Dragging a hand over his face, he grimaced when Sydnie turned her face, her purring no longer muffled by Bas' chest.

"Yeah, I didn't figure you would be . . . What's that?"

Bas cleared his throat. "What's what?"

"That sound . . . it sounds like a motor or something."

"Oh, that," Bas said slowly. "Yeah . . . that's just Sydney."

"That's . . .? She . . . purrs?"

Bas snorted. "She *is* a cat, you know."

"Yeah, I know. I just didn't realize . . . Guess I should have, huh?"

"Gunnar hasn't found out anything else about the Onyx?"

"Nothing substantial, but he has a few leads—and don't think for a moment that I don't know you're changing the subject."

Bas grinned ruefully and sighed. "Don't evade the master of evasion?"

"Something like that, yes. In any case, just remember that we need to clear her name before you do anything . . . permanent?"

"Yes, sir," he promised with a grimace.

"I'll hold you to that," Cain remarked mildly. "How are you doing, money-wise?"

"Not bad . . . could use a little more. Trading off cars all the time gets to be rather expensive."

Cain grunted. "I'm sure," he agreed. "Necessary expense, if you ask me. Find a place where you can stay put for a day or two, and I'll wire you more."

"Okay," Bas agreed. "I might have enough to get us to Chicago . . . not positive, though."

"Why Chicago?"

Bas idly stroked Sydney's back. She smiled in her sleep but didn't wake up. "Seems like as good a place as any to spend Christmas," he hedged.

“You staying at the mansion?”

Bas scowled thoughtfully at the sleeping feline atop his chest. “I was hoping to, yes,” he admitted. “If I can convince Sydnie it’s safe. Security’s good there, and I think she’d like to spend a couple days in one place.”

“If she’s been alone since she was three, as you’ve said, then she hasn’t really had a Christmas, has she?”

Bas sighed. “That’s what I was thinking; show her what a real holiday is, right? Let her forget about everything else, even if it is only for a couple of days.”

“You’ll probably be safer at the mansion than you would be anywhere else,” Cain allowed, “but don’t let your guard down, got it?”

“Yes, sir,” he replied. “Oh, hey . . . who won the game last night?”

Cain grunted. “The Patriots did by a safety . . . triple overtime; thought your mom was going to break my hand. You didn’t see it?”

Bas sighed then grinned as a little blush crept over his skin. “No.”

“Ah, well you missed one hell of a game, then. Anyway, you’d better let me send you money sooner, unless you’re not planning on buying her anything for Christmas?”

“You’re right,” Bas said, wincing inwardly. “Guess that would be pretty bad.”

“Just a little,” Cain allowed with a soft chuckle. “All right, then. Keep me posted.”

Bas nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Snapping the device closed, he closed his eyes for a moment, content to hold Sydnie, to feel her heart beat in time with his before he woke her up so that they could get moving.

‘A Christmas present, huh?’ he mused.

His youkai sighed. *‘Yeah . . . too bad you have no idea what to buy a woman – and neither do I, so don’t ask.’*

‘So I’ll get someone else’s help,’ he decided.

‘Oh, yeah? Who?’

'Who else? Bitty Belle . . .'

Bas yawned, wrapping his arms more securely around Sydney's shoulders for a moment before kissing her forehead and carefully maneuvering her onto the mattress so that he could slip out of the bed without waking her. After making quick work of getting dressed, he paused long enough to fill a glass with the last of the milk before chucking the empty plastic carton into the trash can and setting the glass beside the bed before swiping up the cell phone and striding toward the bathroom.

Absently glad that he'd downloaded the contents of his regular cell phone's directory onto this unit before leaving Maine, he scrolled through the numbers until he found the one he wanted. Deciding that he wasn't going to wake her up, Bas dialed the number and waited for an answer.

"Moshi moshi."

"Hey, Bitty. Got a minute?"

"Bastian!"

He grimaced at the shortened form of his name that his darling cousin-slash-niece insisted on using. "Just 'Bas' is fine."

"To what do I owe the honor of your impromptu phone call?" she asked, her alto voice smooth, silky, and she spoke in perfect English despite the hint of an accent inherent from her native Japanese upbringing.

He sighed. "I need some help."

"And that's what I'm here for! Help with what, angel-face?"

Bas rolled his eyes. "I want to buy a Christmas present, and I don't know what to get."

"Depends on who you're buying a present for."

He grimaced. "A . . . girl."

"Oh? Oh! Your little pussy cat? Sydney? That's her name, right?"

"Yes," he admitted, unable to keep his face from shooting up in flames at Isabelle's wording. "How do you know about her?"

"Oh, please! Gunnar sent me a picture of her. She's gorgeous!"

"Is there anyone he didn't send that damn picture to?"

"Well, I don't think he sent it to his grandparents, but Sierra might have . . . I'm pretty sure that everyone's seen her . . . Alexandra thinks that she's hot, too."

"Oh, hell," he groused with a grimace since he knew that if Bitty showed her younger sister, Alexandra, then there was no way in hell that he was going to escape teasing from the well-intentioned, if not completely bothersome girls.

"It's not so bad, you know. She's beautiful. Have you slept with her yet?"

"The Christmas present, Isabelle," he reminded her.

"All right; all right . . . you're pulling the shy act again; I get it." Isabelle giggled. "Hmm . . . lingerie is always nice, and then you get to enjoy it, too!"

"Be serious, Bitty."

"I am, Bastian."

"Fine . . . anything else?"

"Let's see . . . there's the old standby: jewelry . . . Papa always gets Mama jewelry just before he says something entirely trite and somewhat droll about tolerating her . . ."

"Jewelry."

"Yes. A pretty necklace or a nice little bracelet . . . even a pair of diamond stud earrings . . . or an *engagement* ring?"

Bas grimaced. "I don't know if that would be a good idea. She doesn't even want to admit that she's my mate yet."

"Really? But you know it, right?"

He sighed. "Yeah, I know it."

"Then that means that she knows it, too."

"Sure," he agreed, unable to keep the hint of frustration out of his tone. "She won't admit it, though."

“You’ll get her to admit it, Bastian. I have every faith in you.”

“Yeah, thanks . . . and Bitty?”

“Hmm?”

“Would you mind not telling anyone that I called you?”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Thanks.”

“Any time, darling.”

He chuckled as he clicked off the phone, thoughtfully tapping it against his chin. Isabelle, the oldest of his sister’s children, was only a couple weeks younger than Bas, and because of the odd relation to her father, Kichiro, she was both Bas’ niece as well as his cousin, and having grown up with two very open-minded parents, it wasn’t surprising at all that Isabelle – Bitty Belle to most of the family since she was named after Belle’s mother – was quite frank about sex, in general, and her propensity to state things so bluntly had always made Bas a little uncomfortable.

Though she tended to be closer to Gunnar, she’d always enjoyed needling Bas, trying to set him up on dates with friends of hers and basically asking more questions than Bas was willing to answer – all of them pertaining to sex in some way or another. When Bitty had found out about Bas’ stripes, she’d pestered him all summer to let her see them. Bas winced, recalling just how much he’d hated his trip to Japan that year. Bitty had been sure that all of her friends would line up to see them, as if he were going to put himself up as a side-show freak or something . . . It had seemed to him that Bitty and Alexandra were more concerned about his lack of a sex life than he was . . .

Still, she was the best person to have asked about what to buy for Sydney, and while jewelry seemed like a rather clichéd gift, Bas had to wonder if cliché might be the best course to take. After all, jewelry was absolutely useless, and Sydney . . .

He broke into a little grin as memories of the night before invaded his mind. The things she’d done, she’d done for him, because she cared about him more than she wanted to admit, even to herself.

‘Sydnie . . .’ he decided with a soft sigh, ‘*she deserves beautiful things – things as beautiful as she is.*’

"Damn him!"

The crash of a crystal glass echoed through the silent office as it shattered against the wall, but the outburst of violence did little to dispel the anger that ran hot through his veins. Jeb clenched his fist and relaxed his grip a few times.

All four of his hunters had failed?

It was unfathomable; absolutely unbelievable. How could this hunter — this son of the tai-youkai — kill four of the best bounty hunters that Jeb had in his employ?

"Damn him!" he snarled again, his voice quiet despite the absolute vehemence in his tone.

There was no mistaking it, though. He knew it was true. Nearly a week had passed since he'd last heard from them. At the time, they'd located Zelig and the cat-youkai who had been targeted for termination and were following them. Glave had mentioned a third person — a hanyou, but whether the third had helped Zelig or not, Jeb wasn't certain. At any rate, too long a time had passed without word from any of his bounty hunters. One way or the other, Zelig had apparently eluded them again.

Pushing back the flap of his black jacket to stuff his hand into his pocket, Jeb yanked his tie loose with his free hand. The funeral had been a quiet affair. There hadn't been many in attendance since Serena had wanted it to be kept private. Though he'd expected that Beth would follow Cody in death, he had hoped until the end that he was wrong; that Beth would find the strength to live. She hadn't, and in the end, the blame for that rested squarely on Zelig's shoulders, too. Yes, he'd known that there was always a risk in sending out a bounty hunter, no matter how well-trained the hunter might be. Cody had been ready, and what was more, he had insisted on going.

"I can do it, Dad!" Cody insisted, eyes flashing with irritation at the perceived unfairness afforded him.

"It's not a question of what you can and cannot do, Cody," Jeb explained quietly. *"You're still an apprentice."*

"And I'll stay an apprentice so long as I'm working under Byrne," Cody grumbled. *"I'm sick of doing grunt work. I'm ready."*

Sitting back in his chair, Jeb narrowed his eyes on his son. Ready, perhaps, but he'd promised Serena that Cody wouldn't be in danger . . . Still, Jeb knew that he'd sent other, much less experienced bounty hunters out on jobs. Gaze shifting to the manila envelope lying on the desk, he nodded. The cat-youkai wouldn't be much trouble. If Cody could get to her without drawing

the notice of the Zelig's hunter, she'd be easy pickings. It would be a pretty easy job, Jeb figured – the perfect first job.

“Cat-youkai believed to have killed Cal Richardson. Rumor has it she's on the move and in the company of one of the Zelig's hunters. He wants her brought in for questioning, but we've got a bounty on her. Find her and eliminate her.”

Cody nodded, light brown eyes igniting with a fierce determination. “Yes, sir,” he replied. “You won't be sorry, Dad . . .”

Jeb blinked away the lingering memory, an ironic smile that was devoid of humor illuminating his gaze. ‘I won't be sorry . . . That's right . . . not sorry in the least . . .’

“The hunters you called in are here.”

Jeb grunted in response, not bothering to look at his second-in-command. Myrna Loy bit her cheek, deep brown eyes awash with unspoken concerns. It wasn't her place to question Jeb's orders, but she couldn't help but wonder if Jeb wasn't taking things a little too far this time. Summoning the remaining hunters at his disposal . . . Myrna had to wonder about the sanity of Jeb's situation . . . She stifled a sigh, smoothing the sleek black leather jacket she always wore over the slim lines of her lanky frame.

“Send them in,” Jeb said quietly.

Myrna nodded and turned away to fetch the hunters. “Right away.”

“Myrna.”

She stopped and slowly pivoted to face her boss once more, crossing her arms over her chest as she waited for whatever it was Jeb wanted to say.

“The son of the tai-youkai . . . what do you know about him?”

Myrna sighed. “The Zelig's heir, you mean? He has two sons, I've heard . . .”

“Two sons . . . the eldest – the one that looks like the Zelig. He's the hunter: the one with the cat.”

“There's not much to know, I suppose. The Zelig keeps things quiet, but I remember something I heard about the time he took his mate. She's the daughter of the hanyou of legend, or so they say.”

“The hanyou of legend? InuYasha . . .”

Myrna tilted her head to the side as she tried to discern just what Jeb was thinking. “Which would mean that there are ties to the Inu no Taisho, as well.”

“Sesshoumaru,” he muttered, jaws bulging with the force with which he gritted his teeth. “Damn the Zelig . . . there’s too fucking much power in that one family.”

“The son—Sebastian—he’s the one who killed Cody?”

Jeb’s head snapped to the side, his glower dark, menacing. “Sebastian Zelig . . . the next tai-youkai . . .”

“Jeb . . . Cody knew the risks . . .”

“Cody knew that the job should have been simple,” Jeb shot back. “Cody knew that I told him that it was a simple task—nothing more than offing the cat who’d killed Cal Richardson.”

“Tangling with the tai-youkai isn’t a wise thing to do.”

He tossed his head proudly. “Neither is tangling with me.”

Myrna nodded. Arguing with Jeb Christopher was futile, and she knew it. He’d never admit to being wrong, especially on this; not when Sebastian Zelig had cost Jeb not only his son, but his daughter-in-law and their unborn child. Vengeance wasn’t a simple thing, and in the end, maybe it was easier to be angry than it was to try to pick up the pieces and move on.

“Send in my hunters,” Jeb ordered.

Myrna nodded again, turning on her heel and exiting the office in a series of crisp steps, heels echoing in the dimly lit corridor of the hallway.

‘Eight hunters,’ she thought wryly, her discerning gaze flicking coolly from one hunter to the next: Byrne Bine—rattlesnake-youkai . . . Cavalle Cade—poison-youkai . . . Dren Morgan—eagle-youkai . . . Brenna Cruz—fire-based-youkai . . . Vince Thetwhile—spider-youkai . . . Datte Voight—kitsune . . . Keith Frem—bobcat-youkai . . . Trent Smith—chameleon-youkai . . . they stood up, one by one, rising from the cold metal chairs arranged in the office foyer. Myrna remained stoic as they passed. *‘How many of these hunters will make it back this time?’*

No, there wasn’t a doubt in Myrna’s mind that the hunters would be able to capture Zelig this time. Sheer numbers were on their side, and yet . . .

And yet sheer numbers had been defeated the last time. The failure of the four hunters that Jeb had last sent hadn't even seemed like a possibility . . .

'Stop that, Myrna!' she told herself sternly. 'No matter what, Sebastian Zelig is not a god . . . Even the son of the tai-youkai isn't invincible, and even the mighty have to fall . . .'

Eight against one . . .

She sighed again, wishing she could shake the feeling that the entire thing was nothing but a huge mistake.

Eight against one . . . those were good odds . . .

Sydney emerged from the bathroom with a cloud of steam and a waft of moist air, toweling her hair dry and humming a song under her breath.

Bas was propped up on the bed, one knee bent with his other leg stretched out as he scowled at the new almanac he'd purchased when they'd stopped at a gas station after crossing the boarder between Kentucky and Illinois. Tapping an ink pen against the paper, he seemed lost in thought. Sydney grinned to herself, spreading the towel over the back of a metal chair at the rickety old table before digging the hairbrush out of her purse.

To her surprise, Bas hadn't done more than smile at her when she'd asked if they could stop early for the day. More out of habit than because she really expected him to comply, she'd asked while expecting him to grumble at her; to come up with excuse after excuse to keep moving. She sighed as a little grin surfaced. Sure, she understood why he felt the need to keep going. Afraid that the bounty hunters were lurking just out of view, he did the only thing he could do: stay on the move in the tireless game of cat and mouse . . .

'Sebastian is in danger . . . because of me . . .'

The bubble of contentment that had carried her through the day burst like an over-inflated balloon. Stealing a surreptitious glance over her shoulder, she carefully brushed the snarls out of her hair while eyeing Bas' relaxed pose. A surge of irrational panic swept through her. The fear that something would happen to him precluded rational thought. He was precious to her, necessary to her . . . Somehow, in the space of a few weeks . . . She shivered.

'He's the one, Sydney. He's your . . . mate.'

Wincing at the words of her youkai blood's voice, Sydnie shook her head, trying desperately, pathetically, to refute the truth. *'He . . . no . . . I can't . . . he can't . . .'*

'You can, and he does. Is that really so terrible?'

Sydnie swallowed a suspect lump that choked her, blinked to alleviate the sting behind her eyes. *'But . . . I'm going to die, in the end. I killed someone, didn't I, even if he deserved what he got?'*

'Sebastian wants you to trust him. He could help, couldn't he? If his father really is Cain Zelig—'

'That's not even a question. He is the tai-youkai's son . . . and even if he could help me, he won't be able to; not in the end . . .'

Her youkai sighed. *'It's too late for that, you know. His youkai blood has already acknowledged you. There's really nothing left you can do about it, and deep down, you know I'm right.'*

'Why worry about it now? Can't I just enjoy what we have? Can't I just let that be enough?'

'But it isn't enough, Sydnie. It's not something that'll just go away.'

'No, I didn't suppose it would.'

'In any case, Sebastian is a good man. Would it be so bad to let him know you think that?'

'Yes . . .' she allowed then wrinkled her nose, replacing the brush and rubbing her forearms with her bare hands, *'and no.'*

Pushing away the nagging doubts, Sydnie shuffled toward the bed. Bas didn't look up when she crawled between his legs, nor did he notice when she cuddled against his chest. Wiggling around to make herself more comfortable, she rolled over onto her back, her eyes darting back and forth as she watched the end of the pen thump against the paper. Before she could think about it, she batted at it. Bas chuckled softly, kissing Sydnie's forehead as the pen stopped moving so that she could unhook the tips of her claws from the cap. "Hey, kitty. Have a nice bath?"

"I suppose," she allowed. "I was hoping you'd come in and wash my back."

She wasn't surprised to see him blush. He dropped the almanac on the coverlet beside him, wrapping his arms around Sydnie's shoulders. "I was planning our route," he told her.

"Route? You mean we have an actual destination in mind?"

"Sure," he agreed, bending his other leg and causing Sydnie to slip between them. She gripped his shoulders and leaned up to kiss him. His lips were warm, moist, soothing, scattering the unpleasant thoughts that had plagued her mind with a gentleness that she could barely credit. His fingers stroked her back; he bent his body to shelter her, lending her a sense of security that she so desperately needed. She reveled in him, lost in the tenderness that he freely offered. The soft hesitation in his kisses – his unspoken fear that he would somehow disappoint her . . . Sydnie twined her fingers into his hair, holding him close, unwilling, unable to let him go.

Deepening his kisses, alternating between the sweetest caress of his lips and the teasing nibbles of his teeth, of his fangs that sent shivers up Sydnie's spine as she tightened her fists around handfuls of hair, Bas shifted, lowering Sydnie onto the mattress and leaning over her, tossing his leg over her as though to keep her from bolting. *'I wouldn't,'* she thought wildly. Too inviting to ignore, the feelings that swelled within her . . . the ferocious tide of a more primitive need . . . she wanted him, needed him, craved him . . .

The flimsy tie holding her robe closed worked itself loose as she writhed against him. Unable to repress the burgeoning need to feel his body against hers, she arched her back, tugged on his shoulders, kissed him with all the desperation that she felt inside. Gasping as her overheated skin touched the smoldering flesh of Bas' bare chest, she uttered a harsh little mew. His gruff growl came in reply. She could feel her nipples contracting, her skin breaking out in a rash of goose bumps. His hand trailed the curve of her body, resting on her hip, squeezing, kneading, unleashing a wave of consuming fire that fanned outward only to converge again in the depths of her belly, in an ache that spiraled through her body.

He leaned away, his breathing harsh in the silence. Gazing down at her with a fierce intensity, he swallowed hard as he kissed her forehead. "God, Sydnie . . ."

She bit her lip and sighed. "Don't stop, Sebastian," she whispered, searching his face for any trace of what he was thinking.

"Sebastian . . .?" he echoed, his brows drawing together in a slight frown. "I need to tell you who I am . . . You . . . you deserve to know."

A surge of panic ripped through her. Sydnie shook her head. "I already know," she admitted, unable to bring herself to hear him say it. "I know who you are," she repeated. "Don't say it."

He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. "I'm sorry, baby . . . My father —"

"Your father is Cain Zelig," she bit out, placing her fingers over his lips to silence him. "I told you I know, Bas the Hunter . . . Sebastian . . . Zelig."

He blinked in surprise, his face contorting just a little as he scowled at her. "You . . . know . . ."

She nodded. "I know. Can we just leave it alone? Please?"

"And you're okay with it?"

She sighed. "No . . . but I'm okay with *you*."

He stared at her for a long moment, as though he were trying to decide if she was lying to him. "Good," he finally said, a thin little smile dispelling his scowl as his gaze brightened in palpable relief. "I thought you'd . . ." he trailed off, shaking his head quickly. "It doesn't matter what I thought . . . I just wanted you to know."

Sydney ran her hand down the center of his chest and smiled when his entire body trembled. "I want you to — damn it!"

Bas' eyes widened as Sydney pushed him aside and sat up, face scrunching up as a disgusted scowl twisted her features. "What's wrong?" he asked a little reluctantly, leaning up on his elbow and hooking her chin with his index finger, forcing her to look at him.

"I left that box of condoms at the hotel," she pouted.

Bas digested her complaint, cheeks pinking as he let his hand drop away. "Oh," he replied, swinging his legs off the bed and slowly getting to his feet. "I, uh . . . picked them up. They're in the suitcase."

Sydney sat up, tucking her legs under her as she leaned forward to watch Bas. He unzipped the side compartment — one Sydney hadn't checked — and pulled out the condoms. She couldn't help the little grin that spread over her face, but just as suddenly as the expression surfaced, it dissipated again, and she bit her lip as he tossed the box onto the nightstand and sank down on the bed beside her. "Sydney? Something wrong?"

She shot him an almost fearful glance and tried to smile. His worried frown deepened, and she knew that her effort to fool him had failed. "I . . . Do you think it's true? That it hurts the first time?"

Bas sat still for a moment then leaned back, eyes widening in alarm. “What do you mean? You’ve never . . .? You haven’t . . .?”

She shook her head, her gaze dropping to the coverlet, and she shrugged. “Is that a problem?”

He snorted. “No! I just didn’t think . . . I mean, I thought you’d . . . Oh, hell, I thought you had, damn it!”

She shot him a sidelong glance. He was glowering in the direction of the window; not angrily, exactly, as much as deep in thought. He slowly shook his head, shifting his gaze around the room, and suddenly he shot to his feet, snatching the box off the nightstand and striding back to the suitcase where he grabbed the first things he laid hands on—a short taupe suede dress—and tossed it in her general direction before snatching a white t-shirt and jerking it over his head. “Get dressed, Sydnie,” he ordered, plopping into a chair as he tugged on a pair of socks and his boots.

“What?” she demanded, staring at the dress in disbelief but not reaching for it. “Sebastian—”

“Come on. It won’t take long. Just get moving, will you?”

“But—”

“We’re not staying here,” he reiterated. “Let’s go.”

Sydnie snapped her mouth closed on the retort that was forming on the tip of her tongue. Narrowing her eyes and grabbed the dress, she discarded the robe and stuck her feet into the dress before standing up stiffly and pulling it over her shoulders. “Fine,” she bit out, giving the zipper a vicious yank. Pausing long enough to slip on her stilettos, she snatched up her purse and stalked out the door without waiting to see if Bas was following or not.

A/N:
Moshi moshi: standard Japanese telephone greeting.

== == == == == == == == == ==

Final Thought from Bas:
She knows ...

Chapter 32

Just Before Dawn

With a sigh, Bas turned off the back road onto the graveled path that led to the bed and breakfast inn. The analog clock on the radio panel read nearly four-thirty in the morning. Sydnie slept fitfully in the passenger side bucket seat. Curled as tightly as she could into a startlingly small, unobtrusive little lump, she was shrouded in the darkest shadows where even the wan light of the dashboard lights didn't reach her.

'Damn, Bas . . . you've got some serious amends to make.'

He winced. He'd been in such a rush to check out of the hotel that he hadn't really taken any time to explain things to Sydnie. In fact, he'd been so caught up in the desire to find a nicer place for her, that he hadn't realized until well after they were moving that she was teetering on the brink of losing her temper.

'I'll explain it to her,' he told himself. *'She'll understand.'*

At least, he *hoped* she would. Caught off guard by her admission, the only thing he'd been able to think was that, while he hadn't much cared if *his* first time had been in a ratty little motel room, he didn't want *hers* to be. There was an anime convention nearby, so finding accommodations for the night had been harder than usual. In the end, he'd settled for an out of the way motel that hadn't even been equipped with a television, and after gazing around at the faded curtains, the stained brown, threadbare carpet, the dingy grayed walls that should have been white . . . Bas rubbed his forehead and sighed again. No, that wasn't the place that he wanted Sydnie to remember.

"Do you think it's true? That it hurts the first time?"

The wince deepened into a full-blown grimace. *'I . . . I can't hurt her . . .'*

'Even if it does hurt the first time, you can show her later that it's not always going to be that way.'

'And yet that just doesn't really make me feel any better.'

'Suck it up, Bas. You're worrying about this too much. Sydnie wants you; you know she does. She probably loves you, even if she is too stubborn to admit as much.'

He sighed, cracking his window and breathing in the crisp night air.

Finding the bed and breakfast had been a stroke of luck, actually. He'd stopped to grab a container of milk for Sydnie – an offering to appease her that hadn't really worked – but the older man standing behind the counter had eyed him rather cautiously before asking if he was lost.

Bas blinked and shook his head, cheeks pinking when he thought about what he was actually trying to do. Finding a place that could make Sydnie's first time memorable? Why did it sound more perverse in his head every single time he thought about it?

"I, uh, no . . . not exactly," he grumbled, setting the milk on the counter and digging out his wallet.

"You aren't from around these parts, are you? You got an eastern accent."

"Do I?" Bas asked with a lopsided little grin. Funny. He'd never really thought about that before . . .

"Yep. My brother lives in Connecticut. They talk a lot like you do."

Bas nodded, glancing outside to make sure that Sydnie was still safe enough in the car. "Uh, maybe . . . could I ask you something? You're right; I'm not from around here. My . . . my girl and I are a little tired, and with the convention, we haven't been able to find any good places to stay. Can you recommend anything? Somewhere . . . nice?"

The man turned thoughtful, stroking his goatee and leaning back against the counter behind him. "Nice, you say? Your girl . . . you newlyweds or something?"

Bas flinched inwardly. For reasons he didn't want to consider, the idea of telling this man that he and Sydnie weren't married or even really engaged . . . why did that feel as though he were besmirching her? "Something like that," he lied.

The man smiled. "Not sure if you're interested or not, but my sister-in-law has a bed and breakfast. Just outside the city and across from a small dairy farm."

"A bed and breakfast? That sounds perfect. Do you have her number?"

He chuckled. "Never mind, son. I'll give her a call for you. She's always saying that business is slow this time of year, anyway. I'm sure she won't mind. Just take the main drag straight north, turn right on the first road after you get out of the city limits. Head out about three miles, and look for a sign: Hawethorn's Bed and Breakfast. Take that gravel road on down a mile or so, and there you'll be."

Bas nodded, pulling the almanac from his pocket and leafing through to find the county map. "Would you mind marking it down for me?"

"Sure thing," he agreed. Highlighting the route with a blue ball-point pen, he handed the almanac back and took the twenty-dollar bill that Bas handed him for the milk. "What's your name?"

"Bas Kaemon," Bas replied, using the name he'd been using since leaving home on this mission. "Thank you."

"Wait! Your change!" he called out as Bas pushed the glass door open.

"Keep it, and thanks!" Bas replied, loping across the parking lot as he studied the marked route.

The porch was illuminated in a calm yellowish light that mingled with the strings of blue Christmas lights that lined the railings and banisters. Soft light spilled from the large picture window, and Bas stopped the car in front of the winding sidewalk that led to the porch. Sydnie was still sleeping as he got out of the car, and he strode up the path as a short, plump middle aged woman stepped outside, wrapped in a heavy woolen shawl. "You must be Mr. Kaemon," she greeted.

Bas nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. "I'm Betty Hawethorn, and welcome to Hawethorn's Ben and Breakfast. My brother-in-law, Marty called me a few minutes ago; said you needed a place to stay?"

"Please."

"Certainly," she assured him. "It's our slow time around here, and I don't have any reservations all week, so you're welcome to stay as long as you'd like."

"Thank you."

"Where's your wife?"

Bas grimaced inwardly. "She . . . fell asleep in the car."

"Oh, well . . . here." Slipping a key into his hand, the woman's smile widened as she pointed behind herself. "There's a separate entrance out back. Just take the stairs up, and you can't miss it. It's the first door on the landing. "Ordinarily I try to have dinner waiting for my guests, but since I wasn't really expecting you . . ."

"That's fine," Bas assured her. "How much do I owe you?"

She waved away his question. "Don't worry about it tonight. You can settle up before you leave."

"O-okay." The lowing of a cow drew Bas' attention, and he glanced around. "He said there was a dairy farm nearby?"

"Yep. My brother owns it, actually."

"Really . . . I don't suppose he'd mind if I took Sydnie over there tomorrow? She's never been out of the city."

The woman laughed. "I don't suppose he would. If you'd like, I can bring you up some milk and cheese and bread . . . not really a meal, but the milk's fresh from the dairy, and the cheese and butter came from there, too."

"That'd be great," Bas said then grinned. "Sydnie . . . loves milk."

"Why don't you go on and get settled in? You can pull your car into the barn, if you'd like. We're supposed to get snow, come morning."

Bas thanked her and ran back to the car.

Sydnie didn't stir when he stopped in front of the wooden staircase that led to the room. She didn't wake up when he laid her on the bed in the midst of a cloud of downy white comforter and lacy white throw pillows. He spared a moment to smile down at her before heading off to pull the car into the barn. Strapping on Triumvirate and grabbing the suitcase out of the trunk, he closed the barn doors and hurried back to the room. The place was more perfect than he could have imagined. Set back well away from the road with the car safely concealed in the barn, Bas wondered if he dared to let Sydnie stay here for more than a day or two before they had to move on again.

Betty knocked on the door as Bas set the suitcase down. He strode over to answer it, and stepped back to allow the woman to enter. The pale wood tray was laden with a pitcher of milk and a plate of sliced cheeses, a couple baskets of fluffy, crusty white bread and a ball of light, creamy butter. "It's not much, but I'll make up for it come breakfast time. What time would you like that?"

"Uh, any time is fine," he assured her, stealing a glance at Sydnie when he heard the soft rustle of her movements. She sat up slowly, blinking away the cloudy, dreamy look that lingered after sleep. She rubbed her eyes and glanced around, spotting Bas

quickly enough before she curled up on her side once more, lost in the puffy, thick blankets.

"Oh, she's lovely," Betty murmured, setting the tray down and squeezing Bas' forearm.

"She is," he agreed with a grateful smile. "Thanks again. I-I-I was starting to think I wasn't going to find anything tonight."

"Glad I could help," she said. "I'll leave you two alone now, and I called over to the dairy. He's up doing the milking already. Said to come on by whenever you want. He'd love to let you have a look around."

Bas nodded and closed the door after Betty stepped back outside. Taking his time locking the door, he shrugged off his leather duster and hung it on the wooden hook beside the door.

"Where are we?" Sydnie asked quietly.

Turning to face her as he unstrapped Triumvirate and stowed his beside the hulking wood wardrobe, Bas shot her a shy little smile and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "A bed and breakfast inn. What do you think?"

Pushing herself up once more, she slowly took in the surroundings. "It's nice," she finally said then scrunched up her shoulders, staring miserably at her hands as she shook her head. "I don't understand why . . .?"

"Sydnie . . . I didn't want your first time to be in that seedy little hotel room," he admitted, staring at the floor as he shuffled his feet.

"But that would have been okay for you?"

He shrugged. "I'm a guy," he said quietly. "Besides . . . anywhere is good enough for me, so long as I'm with you."

Sydnie didn't reply right away, but he didn't miss the trembling little smile that finally lightened her expression. Bas wandered over to the table and poured her a glass of milk. "Here . . . it's fresh from the dairy."

"Dairy?" she echoed, green eyes rounding in wonder.

He nodded. "Yep . . . there's one across the way . . . the guy said that I could take you there, if you want. I thought . . . I thought maybe you'd like to see the cows."

A strange sort of sadness filtered through her gaze. As though he had said something that had somehow hurt her, she blinked quickly and forced a wry little smile. "I'd like to see the cows," she said almost bashfully.

"Yeah? Well, here . . . it's a little different from the milk you're used to . . . I think you'll like it, though." He chuckled. "There's a small farm back home . . . it's about the only milk my mom will drink willingly. She says it doesn't taste as bad as the store-bought stuff. Anyway, Mom always says that fresh milk is a lot richer."

Sydney slowly took the glass and frowned as she stared into it. "It's got stuff on top," she said.

Bas shrugged and sat down on the edge of the bed, levering off his boots and setting them aside. "It's cream," he told her. "They skimmed it, I'm sure, but it's hard to get all the cream."

Sydney eyed it another minute before cautiously dipping the tip of her finger into the milk and licking it clean. Her already round eyes grew even rounder, and she giggled softly before draining the entire glass in one long gulp.

Bas took the empty glass and refilled it without a word. Sydney repeated the process and handed it back before snuggling into the covers once more. "I take it you like it?" he teased with a lopsided little grin.

Sydney giggled and nodded, curled up on her side with a secretive grin on her face. Hair shining in the ambient light of the table lamp, she was surrounded by a fiery glow. Bas' breath caught in his throat as he gazed at her, and he had to wonder if she had any idea how very precious she was to him . . . *'Sometimes,'* he mused with a smile, *'she looks just like a little kitten . . .'*

"You tired, baby?" he asked at last, breaking the companionable silence that had fallen between them.

She shook her head slowly without taking her eyes off him.

"You sure?"

"I took a nap in the car, remember?"

He grinned, scooting closer, running his fingertips along her cheek. She closed her eyes, leaned into his touch, her smile turning wistful. "So you did . . ."

She giggled softly, pushing herself up again, rising on her knees as she stared at him. The brightness in her gaze held him spellbound, her lips parting as her breathing quickened, as she slowly lifted her hand to tug at the heavy silver zipper, revealing the deep vale between her breasts, the trim flatness of her belly, lower and lower until he could see the delicate black satin of her tiny panties. She let the dress fall off her shoulders; let it slide down her arms. It clung to her hips, and she dropped her shoes off the edge of the bed before standing up, hooking her panties, and slowly pushing them down the length of her legs, riding behind the skirt.

The demure tangle of deep auburn curls – no more than a perfectly symmetrical little trail – held his attention. Standing with feet splayed to retain her balance, her scent was dizzying, intoxicating, and he opened his mouth to speak but couldn't seem to form coherent words. The trim lines of her hips that flared gently from her tiny waist flowed like waves on the ocean, and with a soft moan, she dropped to her knees, wrapped her arms around his neck, seared his lips with hers in a kiss full of desperation, full of need.

He slipped his arms around her, groaned as she pressed herself against his body. Straddling his hips, she ground her hips against his stomach. He could feel the absolute heat of her permeating the thin fabric of the t-shirt he wore, his body reacting to hers, throbbing painfully, deliciously. "Kitty," he muttered between kisses, "we . . . need . . . to . . . stop . . ."

"Why?" she whined, the underlying hint of panic in her voice digging at him.

"C-con . . . doms . . ." he rasped out, shuddering when she reached down to fondle him.

She squeezed him tightly then sat back on his knees with a sigh. "Oh, those," she muttered, cheeks flushed. "Where?"

He swallowed hard, stripping off his shirt and dropping it carelessly on the floor. "My coat," he told her.

She scooted off his lap, sauntering over to retrieve the box of condoms. Lost in the contemplation of the gentle sway of her hips, Bas gulped again, light-headed, almost forgetting the necessity of breathing. He watched her rummage through his pockets until she found the box. Tapping it against her palm as she slowly crossed the floor, Bas stood up, fingers shaking as he worked the fastenings of his jeans, discarding them as Sydnie slit the box open and pulled a packet out. With a sly little smile, she dropped the box onto the nightstand before shoving the throw pillows off onto the floor and peeling back the blankets, her ass wiggling in the air as she crawled across the bed.

Bas watched her movements, mesmerized by the easy dexterity that she possessed. Tugging on his hair, pulling him down to kiss her, Sydnie pushed herself up on her

toes, slowly bouncing on the balls of her feet, rubbing her breasts against his bare skin in a heated caress. He moaned softly, his body jerking wildly, seeking the heat of her that he could feel but couldn't quite reach; not yet.

She pushed against him until he tumbled back on the bed. Nibbling on his lips, his chin, she whimpered, legs parting, falling on either side of his hips, and after one last, lingering kiss, she sat up, breasts heaving, skin pink, nipples hard and puckered. The dusty pink flesh had darkened even more. Bas lifted his hands, cupping her breasts, squeezing them gently as her head fell back, exposing the creamy skin of her delicate neck. Rasping out a strangled purr, she braced her hands on his abdomen and pushed herself back. He couldn't do more than watch as she ripped open the small packet and carefully extracted the condom. She tossed the empty packet onto the floor before rolling the condom into place. He squeezed his eyes closed, fidgeting when she crawled over him again, the head of his penis trailing along her skin, between her breasts, down her belly, into the radiant heat that beckoned him.

She rose on her knees, leaned back enough to grip the base of him, positioning her body over him. Bas was too bemused to think, too bemused to stop her, his mind barely registering just what she was doing until it was too late. Sydnie slammed herself down on him, crying out as her body stiffened and shook. The heat – the consuming heat and the absolute tightness that surrounded him was just too much. Instinct took over, and he grabbed her hips, jerking her back down hard once, twice, a handful of times. She was too tight, the friction was too much, too incredible, and with a ragged entreaty, he felt the world explode.

It took several minutes before Bas could think, before he could even open his eyes. When he finally did, it was to find Sydnie gently wiping him off with a warm washcloth. She must have discarded the used condom because he didn't see it anywhere. She caught the tender look in his eyes, the almost apologetic grin that he offered her, and she smiled. Dropping the washcloth onto the floor, she leaned down and kissed the tip of his penis before crawling back up to snuggle against him, her contented sigh a sharp contrast to the ragged sounds of his respirations. "Baby," he murmured, kissing her forehead, smoothing her hair as she cuddled into the crook of his neck.

"I'm sleepy," she whispered, her fist opening and closing against his chest, carefully keeping her claws from cutting him. "Just hold me."

Bas' smile widened as he pulled her closer. "I'll hold you, kitty," he promised, closing his eyes as the first wan rays of gray dawn light filtered through the windows. "I'll hold you . . . forever . . ."

Sydney awoke to a gentle tickling sensation against her shoulder. Leaning back slowly, she couldn't help but smile at the somewhat smug grin on Sebastian's face as he idly rubbed her shoulder. The tickle, she supposed, was from the trace touch of his claw. Giggling softly, she kissed his cheek before snuggling against him again.

"Morning, baby," he told her without opening his eyes.

"Mm," she half-purred, basking in the warmth he offered, the incredible sense that she was entirely safe. "Morning, puppy."

He chuckled. "Want to go see the cows today?"

She sighed. "Does that mean I have to move?"

"I'd think so, yes . . ."

She shook her head. "Then, no."

His chuckle escalated. "You want to stay here a couple days?"

She sat up, bracing her hands against his chest. "Can we?"

He nodded. "I think so . . . the car's in the barn, so it's out of view, and this place is about a mile or better off the main road . . . Safe enough, at least for a couple days, I'd say."

She grinned. "Yeah?"

He tweaked her nose. "Yeah. Why don't you go get dressed, and I'll take you to see the cows. Besides, it's supposed to snow, or so Mrs. Hawthorn said."

"Okay," she agreed happily. Rolling over and tossing back the blankets, Sydney winced as she shot to her feet. She didn't hurt a lot, but the sudden movement reminded her that her first experience with sex hadn't exactly been great – not even *good*, truthfully, and there was no way that she'd ever, ever let Bas know that . . . Thankful that he hadn't seen her face, Sydney hurried to the bathroom, pausing long enough to smile at Sebastian before quietly closing the door.

'*Not good, huh?*' her youkai mused.

Sydney pulled the lever to stop the tub and turned on the taps and caught her hair up in a loose chignon. *'It's supposed to hurt the first time,'* she argued.

'Hurt, maybe . . . you damn near died, remember?'

She grimaced. *'That's not true,'* she protested. All the same, she couldn't brush off the disturbing memory of the searing pain of the act, itself. Yes, she had to admit, it hurt—a lot. In fact, she'd thought that she was going to die. Thing was, she didn't think that Bas had realized it, and she'd be damned if she'd tell him. He was far too sensitive about sex and his own body that the last thing she would ever do would be to add to his feelings of reticence. No, best not to tell him that it had hurt. She was youkai, wasn't she? She was tough. Bas had loved it, and that was enough. Besides . . .

'Besides,' she rationalized as she stepped into the tub and stretched out a little more slowly than normal, *'she said it was something that men liked, right? And I don't remember . . . if she ever really enjoyed it, either.'*

True enough. Sydney had seen it a few times, the act of having sex. She'd seen it often enough to know that, while the men always seemed to enjoy it despite the almost tortured expressions on their faces when they came, *she* never really had. Sydney had been too young to understand it at the time, but now . . . now maybe she did.

And it wasn't as though Sydney hadn't enjoyed it at all. She'd enjoyed everything before the actual sex part, and she loved the cuddling afterward. It was a small price to pay, wasn't it, to have those feelings again. She'd never felt so close to someone before, an absolute synchronization of her heart and his . . . in those moments, she felt as though she knew everything there was to know about him, and maybe for an instant, she'd believed that he really could redeem her . . .

She smiled sadly and sighed. What was a little pain as long as Bas was satisfied? It was enough. It was all she had to give him . . .

'Think about it, Sydney . . . I don't think it's really supposed to hurt – at least, not like that.'

'Maybe,' she replied dubiously. That was one thing that she'd never bothered to find out about, though. In her sordid pursuit of knowledge, she hadn't thought to look into sex. Until she'd met Bas, she hadn't actually believed she'd ever do it, anyway. Aside from a few blow jobs she'd given ultimately to gain information from the target, she hadn't even kissed a man before Sebastian . . . other than Cal Richardson, the bastard . . . Maybe she was just very good at assimilating various disguises – in giving the illusion that she was exactly what men wanted in order to manipulate them into giving her what *she* wanted.

Except . . .

'Except I've never really done that to Sebastian . . . I've never really wanted to . . .'

'Just think about it, Sydney . . . of course you don't want to manipulate Sebastian. He adores you, don't you know?'

She smiled to herself, the warmth that the words inspired in her rivaling the overwhelming sense of belonging that had wrapped around her before she'd fallen asleep. *'I . . . I like him . . . a lot.'*

The hot water was doing the trick, relaxing away the lingering stiffness, dispelling the soreness between her legs. Settling back against the tub, she shut off the water with her toes and closed her eyes. *'A nice, long soak,'* she decided. *'That's all I need . . .'*

Bas watched Sydney shut the bathroom door and sighed, unable to keep the smile off his face as he rolled his head back and closed his eyes.

'Well, it wasn't awful, I guess,' his youkai piped up, *'but it could have been better.'*

'No, not nearly as horrible as I figured it might be,' he agreed.

'Yeah, well, just do better the next time . . . Bas?'

'Hmm?'

'I don't think she enjoyed it nearly as much as you did.'

He frowned but didn't open his eyes. *'I don't know . . . she didn't seem to mind it at all, did she?'*

'Still . . .'

A knock on the door drew Bas out of his musings. He snatched his jeans off the floor and quickly jerked them up, fastening them as he strode over to answer the knock. Mrs. Hawthorn smiled pleasantly, holding up a tray of assorted breakfast goodies. Bas blinked. "Thanks," he remarked, stepping back to allow the woman to enter the room.

She carefully set the tray down and took the one from the night before. "I heard the pipes gurgling, so I figured you'd be awake," she informed him with a bright smile. "How long have your wife and you been married?"

Grimacing inwardly at the bald-faced lie, Bas rubbed his knuckles along the vale in the center of his chest and shrugged. "Not long," he replied, tamping down the blush inspired by the untruth.

"Newlyweds? That's so romantic! On your honeymoon, are you?"

He smiled weakly. "Uh, yeah . . . sure."

"Your wife is just the sweetest looking thing . . . reminds me of my daughter when she got married. Would you like me to tidy the room now, or I could do it later, if you're planning on stepping out to see the dairy? It's just started to snow, so I reckon the weather reports were a little off."

"Snow," Bas repeated, stepping over to the window and pushing the gauzy curtain aside. Huge flakes were falling softly, blanketing the ground in a fluffy white cloud, and he smiled. "She's never seen snow," he mused quietly.

"You're kidding! Not ever?"

He shook his head, letting the curtain fall back into place. "Nope . . . she's from the west coast. Guess it's pretty warm there."

"There's a nice little trail that circles through the forest," she said, nodding at the woods behind the house. "Plainly marked, too, if you'd like to go for a walk."

"Thanks," Bas replied again. "I'll let you know when we leave the room."

"That's fine, dear," she assured him. "If you want lunch, just let me know then, too. Lots of people go into town to eat, but you don't have to. It's covered in the price of your room. Anyway, I think a nice chicken corn chowder sounds good on a cold day like today. It's really good, if I do say so, myself . . . home made with fluffy buttermilk biscuits . . ."

"That sounds great," he told her. "I think Sydnie would like it."

Mrs. Hawethorn laughed, eyes crinkling at the corners in an entirely pleasant way. "I'll leave you alone, then. The kitchen number's next to the phone, so just let me know if you need anything else."

"Thanks. I will."

She slipped out of the room, and Bas smiled, swiping up the clothes that littered the floor and carefully folding them to put back in the suitcase again. Sydnie was taking her time, and that was fine. He felt pretty lethargic, too, and with a sigh, he shuffled toward the bed, pulling back the covers and stopping dead in his tracks. "Good God!" he rasped out, eyes widening in shock as he stared at the huge stain on the bed. He wasn't sure why he hadn't realized it sooner. He should have been able to smell Sydnie's blood. Then again, he realized with a wince, he had been so wrapped up in what he was feeling he hadn't even noticed . . . With a sickened groan, he sank down on the edge of the bed, hand hovering over the stain that was easily as big as his palm. He'd thought that her cries, that her body's responses were normal, but maybe . . .

He swallowed hard, uttering a low half-growl, half-whine. Maybe he had hurt her, after all . . .

The trill of his cell phone cut through his recriminating thoughts with the vindictiveness of a knife, and Bas snatched the device, flipping it open and bringing it to his ear as he stared in horror at the crimson stain. "What?" he snarled.

"Wow, now that's a nice greeting, Bas. What's crawled up your ass and died?"

Bas grimaced, rubbing his face as he heaved a self-disgusted sigh. "What do you want, Gunnar?"

Gunnar clucked his tongue. "Really, really crabby, I take it. I was just calling to make sure that you're both safe."

"I'm safe enough," Bas grouched. "Damn it . . ."

"That sounded cryptic. What's going on?"

Bas squeezed his eyes closed and heaved another sigh. Gunnar wasn't exactly the first person he'd think of calling about this, but he really needed answers before he panicked too much. "Gunnar . . . you ever . . . sleep with a virgin?"

"A virgin? Once . . . why?"

Bas winced. "If you say anything to anyone, I swear to God I'll kill you," he threatened. "I mean it."

"I won't; I won't . . . wait . . . are you saying Sydnie was a *virgin*?"

Bas gulped. "Yes."

"Congratulations, buddy . . . you don't sound too good for a man who finally got some ass."

Wrinkling his nose at Gunnar's vulgar choice of wording, Bas had to count to ten before he dared to answer. "How much . . . bleeding . . . is . . . normal?" he forced himself to ask.

Gunnar sighed. "Bleeding? Not too much . . . why?"

"Define, 'not too much'," Bas reiterated.

"Ehh, trace amounts, really . . . a few drops . . . maybe the size of a half-dollar, if that."

Bas flopped onto his back, draping his arm over his face. "Shit."

"Why?" Gunnar asked again.

"She bled . . . a lot."

"Okay, okay. Calm down, Bas . . . how much is a lot?"

Bas pushed himself up on his elbow and winced at the stain again. "About the size of . . . my palm," he grumbled. "A little wider . . ."

Gunnar paused as though he were considering something. Clearing his throat, he released a deep breath and clucked his tongue. "Send me a picture."

"What? Hell, no! You damn pervert, I—"

"Don't freak out on me, Bas. I just want to make sure you're not exaggerating."

Bas snorted but lowered the phone, making quick work of snapping a picture and sending it through. "Well?" he grumbled, skin growing hotter by the second.

Gunnar whistled low. "Holy dogs . . . can she walk?"

Bas clenched his jaw and snorted. "Pfft! Yes, damn it!"

"Well, wait . . . before you get all ticked off, you didn't just jump on her, did you?"

"No!" Bas snarled, face flaming as he struggled to keep from hanging up on his cousin.

"Well, what *did* happen?"

Bas shook his head. "I . . . we . . . she . . . she put the condom on me, and . . . you know . . . sort of . . . sat down . . ."

"Oh, hell, she did that to *herself*?"

"Gunnar —"

"Sorry . . . listen . . . it sounds to me like she just wasn't ready for you; that's all. If she's not showing signs of being uncomfortable, then I'd say she's all right. I mean, hell, Bas . . . just take it easy the next time. It gets better."

Bas snorted again, not sure whether to believe Gunnar or not.

Gunnar sighed again. "If you don't believe me, just go see if she seems all right to you. If she does, then I'd say you're fine. She's not mad at you, is she?"

Bas winced, recalling Sydnie's complete contentment earlier. "No, she's not."

"Then I'd say you're not doing so badly. Let's face it: if you'd really hurt her, don't you think she'd have told you?"

"I don't know."

"She's not averse to letting you know when you've upset her otherwise. I'd say that if you did hurt her, she definitely would have let you know."

Bas flopped onto his back once more. "But it's only the first time, right? She shouldn't bleed again . . .?"

"Nope, you're home free. Now, if she bled the next time? Then I'd be worried, but for now, I'm inclined to think that maybe you two just rushed things a little."

Bas rolled off the bed and caught the phone between his ear and shoulder, freeing up his hands so that he could fill a glass with fresh milk. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, you ass."

"Any time, Bas. Just go make sure she's okay, and stop worrying. She's youkai, right? She's tougher than she looks."

Bas nodded, hoping that Gunnar's assessment of the situation was correct. "Yeah, okay . . ."

"Anyway, let me know if the Onyx shows up again. Your dad's spies say that the office has been unusually quiet the last few days."

"Didn't know you'd found the office."

"Yeah, well, we're about ninety-nine percent positive that it is. I saw Jeb Christopher going in there, myself."

"I'll call if I see them," Bas assured him. "Oh, and can you tell Dad to wire money? We're in a small town just outside of Harrisburg, Illinois – Cicily."

"Yep. Bas?"

"Hmm?"

Gunnar sighed. "I'm sure she's fine."

Caught off guard by the compassion in Gunnar's tone, Bas blinked and stared blankly at the window for a moment. "I hope so."

Gunnar hung up, and Bas snapped his phone closed, tossing it onto the table and picking up the glass of milk before heading for the bathroom. "Sydnie? You okay?" he called through the door after tapping lightly.

"Just fine, puppy," she replied, voice muffled by the door though she sounded happy enough. "Why don't you come in here and wash my back?"

Bas drew a deep breath and opened the door, smiling despite himself when he spotted her, covered to her chin with a thick froth of bubbles. "I brought you some milk."

She smiled at him, eyes reflecting the light filtering through the window as she held out her soapy hands for the glass. He chuckled, retrieving the towel off the floor so that she could dry her hands off before giving her the milk. "Mmm," she moaned. "This is *so* good . . ."

"I'm glad you like it," he said, hunkering down beside the tub and letting his fingers dangle in the water. "Sydnie . . . tell me something?"

"Hmm?"

He reached out, hooking a strand of hair behind her ear before leaning in to kiss her temple. "Last night . . . did you . . . are you . . . did I . . . *hurt* you?"

She didn't answer right away, pushing herself up and letting her head fall against his shoulder. He rubbed her back, traced the pale pink crescents that circled her thin shoulder blades—her crests. She sighed in complete contentment as Bas grabbed the washcloth and carefully soaped her back. "You can't hurt me, Sebastian," she insisted. "I'm fine."

He grimaced, taking his time rinsing the suds away. "You bled, kitty . . . you bled a lot."

"So women bleed the first time. It's not a big deal, right?"

His scowl insisted that he didn't believe her. She scooped up some bubbles on the tip of her finger and smeared them onto his nose.

Bas chuckled softly, unable to remain stern when she was determined to be so playful. He caught her hand and kissed her knuckles. "You'd tell me, right? If I did hurt you?"

"Of course I would, puppy," she replied, the glint in her eye convincing him that she was absolutely just trying to placate him.

He sighed. "It'd kill me to hurt you, you know it?"

Her smile faltered but didn't disappear. "You haven't, so don't worry."

He shook his head, letting his cheek rest on her forehead. "Come on, baby. You're going to turn into a prune, and . . . and I want to take you to see those cows."

Sydney grinned and kissed his cheek. "Cows," she repeated with a little giggle.

He gave her a quick squeeze before grabbing the towel off the toilet. She stood up, and he caught his breath. If he really had hurt her, she didn't show any signs of it. Carefully keeping his face turned to the side, Bas blushed when Sydney laughed at him. He wrapped her in the towel and grabbed the glass, mumbling under his breath about getting her a refill while she dried off.

'Holy hell, Bas, we're in trouble.'

'Trouble?' he echoed as he pulled the bathroom door closed behind himself and strode over to refill the glass.

*'If she's comfortable enough to run around naked all the time? Damn straight, we're in trouble .
..'*

Bas grimaced then grinned as the bathroom door opened with a soft click. Moments later, he felt the clammy moisture of Sydnie's body pressed flush against his back. Sydnie hugged him tight before letting go to retrieve her clothes while Bas told his body that he did not – *did not* – want to drag her right back to the bed.

'Yeah, okay, I see your point.'

His youkai heaved a longsuffering sigh.

Final Thought from Gunnar:

... Holy dogs, Bas ...

Chapter 33

Milk and Honey

Sydney laughed softly, the white fur lining the hood that framed her face making the green of her eyes stand out in stark contrast as she stared up at the falling snow. He'd managed to talk her into letting him buy her the fawn colored suede, knee length 'tulip' style coat when they'd gone shopping to replace Bas' clothing. That she'd left the hood on after he'd playfully pulled it over her head and adjusted it surprised him. He'd figured that she would take it off since she'd maintained that it distorted her hearing, but she hadn't, opting instead to slip her hand into his and let him lead her out into the falling snow.

"It's beautiful!" she exclaimed quietly, holding her arms out and turning around in a circle. The widened skirt of the coat flared around her, and Bas smiled. Her small feet barely seemed to touch the ground as she twirled, the fur lined cuffs of the matching booties whispering on the fresh snow. Catching her around the waist, he pulled her into his arms and chuckled. "I never imagined . . .!" she told him, barely able to keep her eyes on him. "It's so . . . so . . . *amazing!*"

"I think so, too," he replied, staring at her instead of at the falling snow.

She glanced at him and bit her lip, cheeks flushed from the brisk winter cold. "It snows like this where you're from?"

He shrugged, shuffling his feet as he stared around at the falling snow. "Well . . . I suppose . . . it looks different in Maine."

She laughed. "I'm glad you brought me here, puppy."

He grimaced but smiled. "Am I ever going to graduate from 'puppy'?"

She shook her head, leaning up on her toes to kiss his chin. "No, you'll always be my puppy."

"And you'll always be my kitty."

She giggled. "I told you: it doesn't work that way. I *own* you, remember?"

He sighed. "That's fine. I don't think . . . I don't think I'd want to own you."

"Why not?"

He shrugged again and, resting his chin on her hair. "After all this . . . I want you to stay with me because it's where you want to be, Sydnie."

She sighed, slipping her arms under his jacket and around his waist. "I like being with you."

"Good."

She fell silent for a moment, content to lean against him, he supposed. His hair whipped around in the brisk winter air, tossed in his face, wrapped around Sydnie like a blanket. "You want to go see the cows now?" he asked finally, breaking the quiet with his softly uttered question.

"Okay," she agreed, letting her arms drop. She slipped her hand into his and let him lead her across the field and toward the driveway. Stopping at the next to the huge barns where the sounds of lowing cows could be discerned, Bas rang the doorbell and stepped back. Sydnie pulled away from him, wandering to the edge of the wraparound porch to gaze at the snow again.

An older man with a weathered brown face and deep creases that bespoke more character than hardship opened the door and smiled warmly. "Hello . . . I'm Bas, and this is Sydnie . . ."

"Oh, that's right. Betty said you were wanting to see the cows, right?" he asked. "John Martin. Nice to meet you."

"Thanks." Bas nodded, glancing at Sydnie and grinning. "If it's not any trouble."

He grabbed a thick, wool-lined suede coat from just inside the door and stepped outside as he pulled it on. "Sure thing. The girls are just having their afternoon milking."

Bas took Sydnie's hand and followed the man off the porch and toward the barns.

"Don't often get visitors who want to tour the place," the man said as he opened the door and stepped back for Bas and Sydnie to pass.

"Sydnie likes cows," Bas replied as Sydnie pushed the hood off her head and pulled her hair free. John chuckled, stopping beside Bas to watch as Sydnie pulled her hand away and wandered down the long aisle between stalls where cows were lined up, eating out

of the troughs while machinery hooked to their udders carried the milk down a long series of tubes that disappeared through a hole in the far wall.

"Can I touch them?" Sydnie asked quietly, turning around to face the farmer.

"Sure . . . they're gentle enough."

She giggled and gingerly reached through the bars of the stall.

"Pretty girl," John commented, faded blue eyes bright as he watched the cat-youkai.

"She is," Bas agreed. "I think it's the first time she's ever seen a real cow before."

"Not from around here, I take it."

"Uh, no . . . she's from Los Angeles."

"Pretty far from home."

"Yeah."

Sydnie hurried back, a bright smile on her face as she slipped her hands around Bas' arm but looked at the farmer. "Do you ever milk them by hand?"

John grinned. "Not often, no . . . the machinery is faster. Anyway, I've got a few things I need to get done. Feel free to look around if you want."

Bas nodded, shaking John's hand as Sydnie giggled and wandered back toward the cows again. John strode down the length of the aisle and disappeared through the door at the far end of the barn. Bas shuffled after Sydnie, leaning his forearms on the stall wall as Sydnie slowly stroked a cow's head, carefully scratching behind the ears. The cow lowed appreciatively, and she giggled. "They're so big," she murmured.

Bas smiled. "Kind of clumsy-looking," he allowed.

"You take that back, Bas the Hunter! They're *beautiful* creatures."

He wrinkled his nose as his smile widened. "If you say so, kitty."

She sighed softly, the happy little smile slowly fading. Blinking, she sighed almost sadly, and Bas scowled at the sense of melancholy that surfaced in her gaze. 'Why?' he asked himself. 'Sometimes she looks so lost, so alone . . . but . . . why?'

Her words were soft and somehow that much more poignant for him, partially because of the desperation in her tone, and partially because, as much as he would love to give her whatever she wanted, he simply couldn't give her this . . . "Can I stay here, Sebastian? You could leave me . . . I think . . . I could be happy here . . ."

"Baby," he whispered, straightening up to pull her back against his chest. "I'm sorry . . . I can't leave you here."

She sighed, letting her head fall back against his chest as she closed her eyes, as a trembling little smile turned up the corners of her lips and managed to break his heart just a little more. "I know. I just thought . . . it doesn't really matter, what I thought."

"Sydnie . . ."

"You could stay here, too," she insisted, struck by sudden inspiration. "You could . . . be a cattle doggie."

He rolled his eyes but grinned. "You're kidding, right?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

"Yeah, I didn't think so."

"Tell me what else you have planned for the day?" she coaxed.

He shrugged. "Nothing, really . . . whatever you want. We could go for a walk or something . . ."

She sighed, stepping away long enough to pet the cow again. "Okay," she agreed, grabbing his hand and tugging. "I like walking."

Bas chuckled softly and let her pull him out of the barn into the clean, white world of falling snow.

"It's so cold!" Sydnie exclaimed, rubbing her arms through the sleeves of her coat. Fitting so tightly that it looked like a second skin, the coat seemed to be tailored just for her though Bas knew that it wasn't. Snug to the waist where it flared gently into a full skirt, the supple suede leather flowed with her movements. She laughed softly, linking her arm around his as they wandered through the forest. Flakes of falling snow stuck in

her hair, but if she were suffering from the chill in the air, she didn't remark on it. The afternoon skies were overcast and dull. Being with Sydnie made it all seem brighter . . .

"Tell me, Sydnie," he began, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he broke a path in the snow for her. "Did you really want to stay with the cows?"

Sydnie sighed, pulling away from him and veering off the path to dust the snow away from a fallen log so that she could sit down. "Yes . . . no . . . I don't know."

Bas followed, sitting beside her and shaking his head at her confusing answer. "That was a weird answer."

"You have to take me to *him*, right? To the tai-youkai . . ."

Bas grimaced at the abrupt reminder. Sometimes it was easy to forget, just why he was ultimately traveling with her . . . He sighed. "There's that, too," he agreed. "You know I'd miss you, right?"

"I don't know," she disagreed. "Seems like things would be simpler for you if you didn't have to worry about me."

"I *like* worrying about you," he pointed out. "You're my kitty."

Leaning against his shoulder, Sydnie sighed and smiled wanly. "For now, puppy?"

'Forever . . .'

He smiled, too. "For as long as you'll have me."

She sat up, scrunching up her shoulders as she stared at her clasped hands, a hint of pinkness filtering into her cheeks that didn't have a thing to do with the cold winter air. "You . . . you brought me milk," she said. "How did you know?"

Bas blinked and frowned slightly. "You're a cat," he explained. "Cats like milk. Your parents probably brought you milk, too."

Her bashful expression melted into a perplexed scowl. "They didn't want me," she murmured so quietly that Bas had to lean toward her to hear her words.

"What? No . . ."

Sydnie shrugged. "That's what . . . *she* said . . ." She ducked her head a little further.

“‘She’? ‘She’, who?”

“It doesn’t matter . . . I just . . . I remember asking, and *she* said that they left.”

Bas didn’t know what to say. The upset on Sydnie’s face dug at him, tore at him, and he sighed, slipping his arm around her and drawing her closer to his side. “I’m sorry, baby . . . I can’t believe that your parents didn’t want you . . . Do you remember anything about them?”

Sydnie thought it over, slipping her arm under his duster and around his waist. “No . . . nothing. I just remember . . . I missed her . . . my mother . . .”

He couldn’t wrap his brain around it. He couldn’t reconcile himself to believe that Sydnie’s parents wouldn’t want her; that anyone would be able to resist adoring her. Unable to do more than just hold her, he winced as the pain in her youki spiked. Pulling her into his lap, he did the only thing he could do. Holding her, rocking her gently, wishing that there were more he could do, something he could say to alleviate the hurt that seemed so raw to her. Kissing her forehead, he closed his eyes, feeling completely helpless despite the way she cuddled closer, as though he really were soothing her. The secrets she guarded so jealously . . . just how much were they costing her inside? And yet he couldn’t deny the surge of satisfaction, no matter how bittersweet, that she trusted him enough to tell him anything at all . . .

“I’m okay now,” she finally said though she didn’t even try to move away from him.

Bas tucked his arms more securely around her. “You can tell me things, Sydnie . . . you know that, right?”

“I know,” she agreed.

“Good.” He breathed in the clean scent of her hair and sighed. “Things like . . . why you like closets so much?”

“I don’t, particularly.”

He snorted but didn’t argue with her. “Or why you killed Cal Richardson.”

“I told you –”

“I know what you’ve said, Sydnie. I also know there’s more to it than that.”

She grimaced and bit her lip but shook her head, burying her face against his chest. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

"Baby —"

"Maybe someday," she whispered. "Just . . . not now; not here."

He made a face but nodded, letting her have the perceived victory, at least for the moment. "You cold?"

She shook her head, closing her eyes and burrowing a little closer. "Uh-uh."

"Hungry?"

"Uh-uh."

"Want some milk?"

She hesitated before answering, and he smiled. "That might be okay."

Slipping his arm under her knees to pick her up, Bas started to stand. "Ready to go back, then?"

She sighed. "Wait . . ."

He sat back down. "All right . . . what?"

"Thank you," she whispered, leaning back and clasping his cheeks in her hands.

He frowned thoughtfully, unsure just what she would be thanking him for. "Why?"

She pushed herself up on her toes, pulling him down to kiss him gently. "For bringing me here . . . for showing me the cows . . . for . . . everything."

"I don't mind," he mumbled, trying not to blush at the warm praise.

"You're a good man, Sebastian . . . Zelig."

"Am I?"

She nodded.

He sucked in a sharp breath as he stared into her eyes. He could see it: all the things she just couldn't say. The understanding, the knowledge that she might try to deny . . . she knew as well as he did that they were mates; that they belonged together. He made

a lifetime of promises in those moments; an uncompromising vow spoken without words, and he knew that she understood it, too. He offered her forever. All she had to do was take it.

He could see the traces of fear lingering in her gaze, the faint ghosts that still haunted her . . . things that he wasn't sure he'd ever understand. A dim light flickered, sputtered, but grew the tiniest bit as he gazed at her. Despite her insecurities and the unspoken secrets, somewhere deep down, she hoped. That faint hope lent him strength, the determination to try to convince her.

'You'll believe it, Sydney . . . you have to. You have to believe in us . . .'

He stared in silence as tears pooled in her eyes. She blinked, a vain effort to stave them back as a solitary tear spilled over, slipping down her cheek in an icy streak. He caught the tear on the tip of his index finger and licked the moisture away. She frowned slightly, shaking her head as she watched him. "Why'd you do that?" she finally asked.

Bas tried to smile then sighed. "My mom says . . . she said her mother used to do this. If you catch the first tear and make a wish, the wish will come true."

"What did you wish for?" she asked almost breathlessly.

Bas' smile grew despite the soberness in his gaze. "That's easy, kitty . . . I wished . . . I wished that you'd be happy."

"Sebastian . . ."

The smile finally filtered into his eyes, and he stood up, carrying Sydney through the forest along the path that hadn't been broken yet. "It's all right to dream, Sydney. Do you believe me?"

She linked her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder. "I . . . I want to."

"Then do it."

She sighed and drew a deep breath. ". . . Okay . . ."

*Final Thought from Sydney:
Okay to dream, huh . . .*

Chapter 34

Setting Her Straight

“Why don’t you put that stuff away and pay attention to me?”

Izayoi Kichiro peered up from the research file he was looking over to meet the deep blue gaze of his mate. Propped up on her elbow as she lay provocatively on her side, she smiled sweetly and reached out to run a finger down the center of his chest.

“Okay,” he agreed simply. “That’s enough research for me.”

Izayoi Bellaniece giggled softly, her hair falling around her in a golden bronze wave. Kichiro set the file on the nightstand and rolled over, grabbing his wife and forcing her back, his knee slipping between her bare legs. “Something you wanted, lover?” she asked, her eyes narrowing as a coquettish grin surfaced.

“Oh, I can think of a thing or two,” he parried, nipping her earlobe playfully

She shivered, gasping as his teeth razed her senses. “I’ll be your bitch, Kichiro.”

“Damn straight, you will be . . .”

The trill of Kichiro’s cell phone broke the pleasant idyll. Heaving a sigh, he reached for the device, glancing at the clock and heaving a sigh. ‘*Eleven at night, and the phone’s ringing?*’ He snorted. “It damn well better be an emergency,” he growled, frowning at the caller ID screen. “Balls . . . it’s your brother.”

“Evan?” Belle questioned. “He ought to know better . . . call him back later. Music questions can wait. *I can’t.*”

Kichiro shook his head and caught Belle’s roaming hand, bringing it to his lips to kiss her quickly. “Nope, it’s Bas.”

“Bas?” Belle echoed, sitting up straight, her attention peaking. “Oh, you have to answer that, then.”

Kichiro nodded as he hit the ‘connect’ button. That particular brother was much more reserved than Evan was, and maybe even a little afraid of Belle and her penchant for saying outrageous things. While obvious that he held his family in the highest of

regard, Bas also tended to have a lot more of his father in him than Belle ever had, and because of that, he hardly ever called them. No, there was no mistaking his intention, either. Had he wanted to talk to Belle, he would have called her cell phone instead of Kichiro's . . . "Bas? Everything all right?"

"Yeah, sort of . . . not really."

Frowning at his brother-in-law's elusive answer, Kichiro cleared his throat. "What's up?"

"Well, see—" Bas cut himself off and snorted. "Wait . . . Belle's not listening, is she?"

Kichiro glanced at his wife, who was still sitting up straight, staring at him rather expectantly. "Nope."

"Are you *sure*?" Bas demanded.

Belle reached for the phone. Kichiro waved her off, smashing his finger against his lips, warning her to be quiet. "She's . . . sleeping," he replied, slipping an arm around his naked wife and covering her mouth with his hand.

Bas sighed. "Good . . . I, uh, had a question about, um . . . sex . . ."

Kichiro hid his surprise under a strategically placed cough. "Okay, let's hear it."

"You . . . you're a doctor, right?"

"Last time I checked," he teased. "Tell me what you need."

Bas sighed again. "Is it . . . how much . . . women shouldn't . . .?"

Belle reached up and turned the cell phone so that she could eavesdrop better. Kichiro shook his head at her but didn't readjust the receiver. "Women shouldn't . . .?" he prompted.

"They . . . shouldn't . . . *bleed* . . . after . . . sex . . . should they?" Bas finally mumbled.

"Bleed?" Kichiro echoed. "Depends . . . was she a virgin?"

"Yeah," Bas admitted. In his mind, Kichiro could almost see Sebastian's face, all contorted in a self-conscious grimace. With as quiet as he tended to be, the fact that he was asking Kichiro anything pertaining to sex meant that it really was bothering him,

after all. "She . . . was, but . . . I mean, she bled a lot the first time, and now . . ." He sighed for the third time. "She . . . bled . . . again."

"How much blood are we talking here?" Kichiro asked carefully, waving a hand at Belle, who was trying to tug the phone out of his hand. "A few drops? Sometimes a woman might bleed the second time, but that's fairly rare . . ."

"More," Bas grumbled miserably. "Damn it."

"How much more?"

"I don't know . . . a lot more . . ."

Kichiro grimaced, loathe to ask yet needing more knowledge than Bas was giving. "Look, Bas, I want to help you, but I need a little more information here."

"Well, you know-*more*." Bas let out a deep breath. "Wait, I have a picture . . ."

Kichiro frowned. "You have a picture of the stain?"

Bas snorted. "Gunnar . . . I was asking him, and he wanted to know . . . anyway, hold on."

"Bleeding?" Belle whispered. "Well, most women *do* bleed the first time."

"Quiet, you," Kichiro mouthed back, covering the receiver with his hand. "If Bas knows you're listening, he'll never talk to me again."

Belle made a show of rolling her eyes but snapped her mouth closed before rummaging around in the drawer of her nightstand for a small tablet of paper and a black ink pen.

A little beep from the phone announced the arrival of the picture. Kichiro lowered the phone to examine the photo only to suck in his breath and grimace at the image of the blood-stained sheet. "Balls," he muttered. "No wonder he's concerned . . ."

Belle leaned over and wrinkled her nose as she stared at the picture, too. Another picture came through, and Kichiro sighed. The stain wasn't quite as big, but it was still more than should have been there for a first time, let alone a second, in his estimation.

"Is he rushing her?" Belle asked automatically.

"Was that my sister?" Bas demanded.

"Talking in her sleep," Kichiro lied glibly, waving a hand at his mate with a scowl. "Bas . . . I have to ask . . . are you taking your time with her?"

Bas growled. "Taking my time?"

Kichiro scowled, unable to think of a delicate way to phrase his next question. "Yes, taking your time. Do the two of you engage in foreplay before you try to enter her?"

Bas' inhalation was so sharp, it whistled. "I don't . . . I mean, she . . . she won't wait, and . . . it's *not* normal, is it?"

"No," Kichiro admitted slowly. "It looks like . . . Listen, Bas, just hear me out. Did she seem . . . *ready* . . . both times you had sex?"

"I thought she was," he mumbled. "I thought . . . oh, hell."

Kichiro grimaced. "No, I mean, was she—for lack of a nicer term—*wet* when you made your move?"

"That's just it," Bas grumbled. "She . . . gets impatient, and—"

"You mean *she* rushes *you*?"

"W—I—she . . . yes."

"I see . . ." Kichiro frowned, lowering the phone again to stare thoughtfully at the pictures. '*She's doing this . . . to herself? Why?*'

'*Slow her down,*' Belle scribbled on the tablet and poked Kichiro's shoulder. He nodded, bringing the phone up to his head again. Belle reached over and tilted the receiver once more. Kichiro shot her another warning glance.

"Listen, Bas. You need to slow her down. I'm not sure why she'd trying to rush you, but it sounds to me like she'd just not wet enough to receive you. You're a big boy, so—"

Bas' growl cut him off. "Damn it . . ."

Kichiro slowly shook his head. "Hold on; don't get angry, okay? You *are* a big boy, and because you are, you have to make sure that she's really, really ready for you. I'm assuming you're using condoms at the moment, and condoms tend to be a little more abrasive for a female than not using one. If you're not careful, you're just going to keep hurting her. You don't want to hurt her again, right?"

Bas erupted in a fierce, albeit low, growl. "*Fuck*, no."

"Well, then take your time with her." Kichiro waved a hand a Belle, pushing her notepad away despite her irritated scowl. "Look, a female body is engineered to be beautiful. You think she's beautiful, right?"

"Of course I do."

"Then take the time to show her. Women are designed to attract men, and all those things that attract you should make you want to explore them. All those parts you like looking at? Touch them . . . kiss them . . . lick them."

Belle scribbled words onto her tablet and shoved it under her mate's nose. '*Nibble them,*' she mouthed. Kichiro shook his head.

"It's not that," Bas grumbled. "It's just . . . she . . . touches me, and I . . . well, I can't *think* when she does."

Kichiro nodded slowly. "Yeah, I think most of us have problems with that, to start with. Anyway, think about it: you like it when she touches you, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then it stands to reason that she would like the same, don't you think? In fact, I'd say that women need to be touched *more* than men do, and *longer* than men do. If you can't think when she's touching you, then you need to ensure that you *can* think. I assume we're discussing the cat-youkai? Sydney?"

"Yes," Bas ground out.

'*She's gorgeous!*' Belle scrawled then uttered an involuntary squeal of delight.

"Belle's listening, isn't she?"

"Belle? Nope . . . out like a light," Kichiro remarked, slapping his hand over Belle's mouth again. "Is she as small as she looks?"

Bas grunted. "Taller than Mom . . . maybe a little skinnier."

"I thought so. Look . . . women's tissue is much more delicate, especially the tissue in her vagina. If she's not completely ready, she'll tear, and it sounds like that's what's been happening."

"Tear?" Bas rasped out, the recrimination heavy in his voice.

"If she's ready for you, you won't have to worry about that. Take your time, and once you're inside her, give her a minute or two to accommodate you. Her body will loosen up a little – enough to ensure she won't be hurt, but for the first few times, just take it slowly."

"Take it slowly. Okay, I can do that." He sighed. "If I can get her to hold still . . ."

"Yeah, well . . . you're definitely stronger than her, right? Just *make* her hold still, if you have to. You can be forceful without being overbearing."

'*Tie her up!*' Belle wrote. Kichiro narrowed his eyes at her and shook his head.

"But how would I know if she's ready?"

Kichiro finally grinned, pulling Belle closer against his side. "Make her beg."

"What?"

"Make her beg for you. Instinct should let you know when she's ready enough . . . or you could touch her. If she's wet enough, you'll be wet, too. You'll feel it. Hell, you'll *smell* it. Call it natural lubrication, if you want. That's all it is."

Bas sighed again.

"Just touch her and touch her and touch her some more. There's no shame in enjoying her body. Make her enjoy the act as much as you do."

"Yeah."

"Oh, and Bas?"

"Hmm?"

Kichiro took his time, deliberately choosing his words. "You might want to try to find out why she would think that being hurt is normal, because it sounds to me as though she might believe that."

"Yeah," Bas mumbled. "I sort of thought that, too."

"She your mate?"

"She will be."

"Then you definitely want her to enjoy sex."

"I know."

"My best advice?"

"Okay."

Kichiro broke into a wide grin, tugging the notepad out of Belle's hand and tossing it across the room. "Follow your nose. If it smells good, it tastes good, and if it *tastes* good to you, it *feels* good to her. Oral sex is a wonderful thing. I highly suggest you try that."

Belle cuddled against him, her hand stroking him in silent approval of his advice. He slipped his hand behind her head and gently pushed her down. She shot him a sly grin as she gripped him and slowly ran her tongue up and down the length of him.

"Thanks, Kich . . . would you mind . . .? I mean, could you just not . . .?"

"I won't tell Belle a thing," he agreed. "Call me back if you need anything else."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks again."

Clicking off his phone, Kichiro let it drop from his fingers over the side of the bed.

Belle leaned up on her elbows to look at him. "My poor baby brother!" she crooned.

"He'll be fine," Kichiro insisted. "Now, where were you?"

Belle giggled, wrapping her hands around him, pumping him up and down. "I believe you were about to fuck me, lover."

Kichiro grinned then groaned as she slid her mouth over him, sucking him gently as she massaged his balls. "You suck my cock, and then we'll talk, princess."

"Can you think when I'm touching you?"

He chuckled. "Oh, *hell*, no . . ."

She giggled. "Good . . ."

Frowning slightly as he stared over Sydney's head at the crackling logs charring on the huge brick fireplace, Bas pondered Kichiro's advice for what had to be the thousandth time since he'd gotten off the phone with his brother-in-law-slash-uncle hours ago.

"Follow your nose. If it smells good, it tastes good, and if it tastes good to you, it feels good to her. Oral sex is a wonderful thing. I highly suggest you try that."

Sound advice, he figured. Truthfully, he'd *wanted* to touch Sydney more. Trouble was, as he had told Kichiro, he just couldn't think when she touched him, even if she were only touching his shoulders or chest. She made him feel so good that conscious thought was damn near impossible. Thing was, how to get her to stop, at least long enough for him to make sure that she enjoyed making love as much as he did?

'Damn it . . .'

'Come on, Bas, it's not that difficult. You can hold her down, can't you?'

His frown darkened. *'Hold her down? Yeah, but . . .'*

'It's not forever, you know. Just long enough to show her what it really ought to be. You want that for her; you want that for you. Even if she doesn't like it to start with, she will, in the end.'

"Do we have to leave here?" Sydney asked quietly, snuggling against Bas' chest.

He sighed. "Yeah . . . we should get moving in the morning."

"I knew you'd say something like that," she grumbled.

"How are you feeling?" he asked gently, stroking her hair, smiling at the way it cascaded around her, pooling on the crisp, white sheets and veiling her naked body in the warm glow of the dancing flames.

"Fine," she assured him with an impish smile. "You know, you could sleep naked, too."

He grimaced when she slipped her hands under the waistband of his boxer shorts. "Sydney, stop," he said, carefully grabbing her hands to pull them away and kissing her knuckles.

"Kitty wants to play, puppy," she purred.

Bas shook his head and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her securely against his chest. "Not this time, baby."

Grimacing at the upset that flitted across her features, Bas kissed her forehead and sighed. "I mean, this time, we're doing things my way," he explained. "Okay?"

"Your way?" she echoed, shaking her head as confusion clouded her eyes. "What do you mean, your way?"

He smiled shyly, a little apologetically. "I mean I want you to let me touch you, and I don't want you to move."

"But . . . I don't understand," she murmured, cheeks pinking as she shook her head.

"Sydney . . . baby . . . I want you to enjoy this as much as I do," he insisted. "And you will, I promise."

"I already do," she said quietly. "I like being with you."

Bas' gaze narrowed, and he winced. "You don't," he replied, "but you will. I just don't want to hurt you again, okay?"

"You can't hurt me, puppy."

"That's a lie, and we both know it. Let me do this *my* way."

"Your way? What does that mean?"

Catching her fingers as she traced little circles on his chest, Bas sighed. "That means I don't want you to touch me. Just . . . lay here and let me touch you . . . okay?"

"You . . . don't like it when I . . . touch you?"

"No, no . . ." He grimaced at the instantaneous flash of hurt that registered in her expression. "I love it when you touch me, but I just can't think straight when you do. Sydney . . . you're supposed to enjoy this. That's all. Do you understand?"

She wrinkled her nose and scrunched up her shoulders. "I do enjoy it, silly."

"You don't," he countered softly.

"I—"

"You *bled*, Sydney! You're not *supposed* to bleed! I don't want to hurt you, damn it! I *can't* hurt you like that!"

"But—"

Bas snorted belligerently and stubbornly shook his head. "If you can't keep still, cat, I swear to God, I'll . . . I'll . . . I'll slap the handcuffs on you. See if I don't."

Her mouth dropped open as a gasp escaped her. "You *wouldn't!*"

He quirked an eyebrow. "Try me." Sparing a moment to kiss her forehead, he pushed her aside and stood up, crossing the floor to dig the condoms out of his coat pocket, and grabbing the handcuffs for good measure.

Sydney's eyes flared at the sight of the handcuffs dangling from his fingers and scowled. "You keep those away from me, Bas the Hunter!" she warned.

He dropped them along with the condoms onto the nightstand. "All right, kitty . . . just keep your hands to yourself, and I won't use them."

Her expression shifted into a petulant pout. "I don't think I like you very much," she whimpered.

Bas sank down on the edge of the bed and pulled her into his lap. "I know, baby, and I'm sorry."

Still she allowed him to tilt her chin up, didn't try to fight him when he slowly kissed her lips. Stroking her cheekbones with the pads of his thumbs, Bas brushed his lips over hers in a delicate whisper of a tender caress. She sighed softly, her hands balled into fists that she obediently kept in her lap. Gently sucking her lower lip, Bas felt her shudder in his arms. Her mouth fell open as her head rolled back, exposing the softest skin of her neck. The submissive gesture was not lost on Bas, and he stifled a sharp growl, a predatory sound—the sound of inu-youkai domination. Kissing his way along her jaw line, down the soft incline to settle over the fluttering pulse in her throat, he couldn't resist the desire to kiss her, to touch her, to taste her.

Sucking on her soft skin until the flesh took on a rosy hue, he uttered a low growl. She whimpered in response. Catching her wrist as she tried to slip her arm around his neck, Bas kissed her hand, her wrist, her forearm. Her pulse raced in his ears; the soothing sound of her rapid respirations echoing in his ears, burning in his veins. Letting go of

her hand, trailing his claws along the sunken flesh above her collarbones, he took his time, reveling in the compelling velvet of her skin, reeling in the knowledge that every goose bump, every shiver, every little mew that slipped from her lips were because of him: his touch, his attention.

The gentle slope of her breast . . . the flushed peak of her nipples . . . Catching her under her arms, he lifted her up, supported her, held her close as her knees slipped down on either side of his thighs. Flicking out his tongue, tentatively tasting the hardened nub, he could smell the deepening of her scent as she cried out, her fingers biting into his shoulders, claws digging into his flesh. An innate knowledge shocked him even as he grimaced, letting her nipple spring free from his mouth. He wasn't hurting her; this he knew. The scent of his blood burned his nose, and with a sigh, a grimace, he laid her on the bed.

The click of the handcuffs on her delicate wrists echoed in the quiet like the report of a shotgun. Sydnie gasped, tugging at her hands, but he'd looped the chain through the spindles on the headboard. She whimpered softly, pulled against the restraints. Bas leaned over her, bearing his weight on his elbows, his hands wrapped around her breasts. Squeezing gently, he groaned, closing his eyes as he let his mouth fall over her nipple again. She sucked in a sharp breath, her body arching off the mattress. Bas' body pinned hers in place, holding her still despite her whines of protest. The heat of her seared through his abdomen as she opened her legs, wrapped them around him, pressing herself against him, her body undulating, shivering; pushed to the cusp of her shaky control.

Kissing his way to her other nipple, Bas licked it, sucked it, long, slow strokes of his tongue. The smoothness of her skin erupted in goose bumps. He soothed them away with balmy kisses, with gentle insistence. Dragging his hands down the length of her body, feeling the contours: the hollows, the rises, Bas groaned softly, breathing harsh, heavy, living and dying by the sounds of her quiet entreaties. Her skin seemed to leap under his touch, demanding then retreating, her body desperately trying to contain the rioting sensations caused by his touch.

Moisture, heat, a visceral burn singed him deep as the throbbing in his body soared into a painful ache. Reaching back to stroke her leg, he coaxed her into relaxing them as he trailed lethargic kisses down her breasts, down her belly. Delving the tip of his tongue into her belly button, dragging his teeth over the taunt flesh, he savored the feel of her as she mewled, keening softly, the rattle of the chain harsh in his ears. His body shook, the edges of his self-control fraying. Her scent beckoned him closer, drawing him in on invisible strings, a vortex of desire wound so tightly that any sudden movement could shatter him completely.

Kissing his way along the sharp angle of her hips, down along the shallow vale that converged in the thin line of auburn curls, Bas let his tongue dart out, tasting the salty flesh, inhaling the scent of her that was driving him insane. Slipping his arms under her thighs, lifting her pelvis off the bed, Bas lowered his face, kissed her deep, his tongue parting the satiny folds of her overheated skin. She gasped, bucked, cried out his name, her body trembling, shaking, her knees falling open wider, inviting him deeper as he breathed her in, his body tense, straining.

She babbled incoherent words, the sounds of her laughter mingled with the stilted sound of her tears. Rising against him, thighs wet, slick, she thrust against his lips, his tongue, the chain straining hard enough to make the headboard creak. Searching out every secret part of her, reveling in the taste of her, he felt the surge of pride, the inebriating realization that Sydnie was touching the moon . . .

“P-please,” she gasped, half-sobbing, half-demanding. “Please . . .”

Bas ignored her pleas, his finger sliding deep inside her. She whimpered and thrust against him, her body convulsing around her as he flicked the tip of his tongue over the swollen bud that seemed to call out to him.

She jerked, her body rigid, tense. Back arching, letting her head fall against the pillows, she gasped, cried, whined. Bracing her feet against the mattress, she rose, higher and higher, only to collapse once more, trembling, sobbing.

Pausing long enough to press one last kiss on her, Bas sat up, discarding his boxers and reaching for a condom. Sydnie whimpered at the loss of his body heat, and with a tender little grin, he smoothed the condom down before carefully positioning himself over her again.

“Open your eyes, Sydnie,” he whispered. She shook her head but finally managed to do as he said. Eyes half-closed, green darkened to a smoldering burn, she gazed at him, her breathing heavy, her breasts heaving as he leaned down to kiss her. Cradling her leg, rubbing her thigh, Bas shuddered as the head of his penis slipped between her folds of skin. She gasped, body tensing, and he drew back with a frown. She thought he was going to hurt her, didn’t she? Bas nearly whined as the knowledge solidified. Every muscle in her body was tight, strained, and he had to bite the inside of his cheek to keep from pulling away.

Telling himself that he wouldn’t hurt her, chanting it over and over again like a mantra, Bas shushed her quietly, gently rubbed her hips as he nuzzled against her neck. Uttering a low wuffing sound, he felt her slowly relax. If she understood the sound or simply reacted to his touch, Bas wasn’t sure. In the end, it was enough. Making sure that she was thoroughly relaxed, he pressed himself into her with maddening slowness

and absolute ease. It hadn't been that way before, had it? The fluid motion that seemed so right hadn't been there the other times. Sydnie gasped, eyes flashing open, staring at Bas with something akin to wonder.

Holding himself completely still, he closed his eyes, letting his forehead fall against hers. She lifted her pelvis, ground them against his. With a ragged groan, he grasped her hips and held her still, gently but firmly. She growled in protest, and he shook his head, wondering just how long he could stand to be still while her body convulsed around him.

"It . . . hurts," she whimpered. "Please . . ."

He winced and pushed himself up on his elbows, scowling at her in the semi-darkness. "Hurts?" he echoed, immediately starting to pull out of her.

She locked her feet around his waist, drawing him back in a sudden thrust. She groaned quietly and shook her head. "Don't stop," she whispered. "Oh, God, don't stop . . ."

And he understood. He wasn't hurting her, not really. She was talking about that ache, the consuming ache that was ravaging him, as well. Extending his hands over her head, twining his fingers with hers, he swallowed hard, drawing on the last of his tattered resolve, slowly thrusting inside her, kissing her softly, completely. Her body moved against his, matching his rhythm with one of her own. Her heart hammered against his chest, her fingers tightening on his hands.

She opened and closed around him, drawing him deeper into her heat, her moisture. She moaned, the purr he knew so well surging out of her in ragged uneven rasps. Her tongue stroked his as her body locked around him, goading him to quicken his thrusts in a powerful syncopation of tactile sensation. Arching against him, breasts crushed under the weight of him, she strained against him, her legs falling to his sides. Bracing herself against the bed, she lifted her pelvis, crying out when the power of his movements slammed her down against the mattress only to rise again to meet him halfway.

He hung on as long as he could. The desire to make it last just a little longer dissipating as the last threads of his control snapped and dissolved. Tearing his mouth away from hers, he called out her name as the violent explosion of heat and light and energy spun away from him, obliterating everything except her — how much she meant to him, how much he loved her. Somewhere in the back of his mind he understood as she tightened around him, as she shuddered beneath him, that this time had been different: beautiful. With one last thrust, one ragged cry, he collapsed against her, gathered her close, throbbed inside her; completely spent and yet somehow entirely content.

The soft tick of the clock on the nightstand was the first thing to register in Bas' addled brain. The second thing was the metallic rattle of the handcuff chains, and Sydnie's stifled whine. Rolling over to grab the key off the nightstand, Bas made quick work of unhooking the cuffs and letting them fall away. Almost immediately, she was wrapped around him, burying her face against his chest as she sniffled and babbled words he couldn't make out. Grimacing as he realized that he really needed to get rid of the condom, he gave in, letting her have her way, at least for the moment as he rubbed her back and stroked her hair. "You okay, baby?"

She nodded, clutching his shoulders and heaving a sigh. "I guess I can like you again now, puppy," she allowed. He grinned at the slightly sulking tone in her sing-song voice.

"I'm sorry, kitty," he said with a wince. "You know, right? You're supposed to enjoy making love . . . you're supposed to enjoy it a lot."

"I did," she allowed almost grudgingly. She snuggled close for a moment then sat up.

"Where are you going?" he called after her as she darted toward the bathroom.

Sydnie waved her hand over her shoulder but didn't answer.

Leaning up on his elbows as he scowled at her hasty retreat, Bas' eyes widened when she re-emerged moments later with a wet washcloth and a brilliant smile. The smile widened as she carefully slipped the used condom off him and carefully washed him clean.

Bas grinned and let her do as she pleased, waiting until she slipped back into the bed before he pulled her into his arms again, kissing her forehead, her cheeks, her nose as she snuggled against him. "You want a bath, baby?"

She yawned and cuddled closer. "In a bit," she agreed.

He chuckled. "Sydnie . . . why would you think that you weren't supposed to enjoy it?"

She stiffened slightly but didn't try to pull away. "I did enjoy it," she maintained.

"Sydnie . . ."

"No, I did . . . the beginning was good, and the after was great . . . and you enjoyed the rest of it. That was enough, wasn't it?"

Bas snorted. "No, cat, it wasn't. I want you to like being with me. Don't you understand that?"

"I . . ." She sighed. "I do."

He sighed, too, but relented. Unwilling to ruin the feeling of closeness, he pushed aside the rest of his questions. They could wait, couldn't they?

He yawned. Sydnie snuggled closer, the first rumbles of her contented purring bringing a smile to his lips.

"One day," he murmured, closing his eyes as sleep beckoned. "I'll understand you."

"Maybe," Sydnie agreed absently. "Maybe."

Final Thought from Sydnie:
... *Wow* ...

Chapter 35

Altercation

Bas glanced up from the map and slowly shook his head as Sydnie peeked into the rearview mirror before shifting her attention back to the road again. She was doing well, he had to admit. She seemed to feel better, driving as opposed to riding. Maybe it was the feeling that she had more control over the situation. "We're going to be close to Chicago soon. I'll drive when we get there."

She nodded and shot him a cursory glance. Bas intercepted the look and smiled. "What's on your mind, kitty?"

She shrugged. "How are your shoulders?"

He grimaced at the reminder. She'd been beside herself when she had seen the deep lacerations that she'd inflicted on him just before he'd handcuffed her. Spending a good ten minutes thoroughly cleaning the wounds that had almost been healed when she'd discovered them this morning, she'd curled up on his lap, telling him over and over that she wouldn't complain ever again, if he wanted to handcuff her all the time. It might have been a little more humorous, he supposed, if she hadn't been so close to tears . . .

"Can we stop for awhile?"

"Stop? What for?"

"I need to stretch my legs, puppy."

Bas tucked the almanac into the middle console between the seats and sighed. So far as he could tell, they weren't anywhere near a rest stop or gas station. She had been cooped up in the car all day, and while she hadn't seemed to mind, he knew that she was probably feeling restless. "All right, kitty, but just for a few minutes."

She pulled over after carefully checking the mirrors and turning to make sure that everything was clear. Bas smiled despite the nagging feeling that something was entirely off; not with Sydnie, no . . . just an odd feeling that something was . . . strange.

"Good?" she asked, shifting the car into 'park' and turning off the engine.

Bas reached over and ruffled her hair. "Perfect," he assured her.

She giggled softly, the throaty sounds of a burgeoning purr coming through in the sound. Bas grinned then sighed. "Stay here, baby. Let me look around first."

She wrinkled her nose but nodded as he climbed out of the car, pausing long enough to grab his sword before slowly staring at the empty road. A dilapidated old work truck clattered past. He didn't have to look to know that Sydnie was likely shying away from the door. A tap on the glass beside him drew his attention. Sydnie had crawled over the console and held her hands up at her sides in silent question.

Bas shook his head and narrowed his gaze, surveying the landscape once more. Dense trees on one side of the road stood quietly, the skeletal branches covered in undisturbed snow made all the starker in contrast with the dark shadows underneath. The barren field behind him still held the stubble of cut-off corn stalks behind a waist-high barbed-wire fence. So far as he could tell, there was nothing amiss, yet he still couldn't shake the unsettling notion that someone somewhere was watching them.

Sydnie tapped on the window again, a frown furrowing her brow. Bas opened the door and grabbed her hand. "Come on, kitty," he said, striving for a neutral tone despite the sense of urgency that was steadily growing stronger. He couldn't keep moving. Driving into a city would only make it worse. The last thing he wanted was to draw attention to themselves, and if his instincts were right, then best to get the altercation out of the way before they got to a place where youkai-style fighting would only more noticeable.

Sydnie saw right through his forced bravado. He took the keys and locked the car as he hurried her across the road and into the cover of the trees. He could feel the shift in the air; the stroke of foreign youki coming closer. The thing that bothered him most was that it wasn't a singular sense. No, it felt as though it were closing in on them, and if that were the case, then it meant that there were certainly more than one or two.

"They're coming, aren't they?" Sydnie asked softly, her fingers twitching nervously in his firm grip.

"It's okay," he told her, his voice vague as he tried to pay attention to the area as well as reassuring Sydnie that everything would be all right. "You trust me, right?"

"Yes," she answered a little breathlessly. "Sebastian—"

"I'll protect you, Sydnie. Don't worry."

She bit her lip but didn't argue, glancing around nervously as he dragged her deeper into the trees. They were getting closer which meant that Bas didn't have much time to hide Sydnie . . . "Take to the trees, baby," he told her softly, rounding on her, gripping her shoulders. "You stay up there, no matter what. Understand?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "No. I'm staying with you."

"Sydnie—"

"I can fight, too!"

"You're the one they're after!" he argued. "You're the one they want!"

"They want you, too!" she insisted. "I'm staying with you, puppy!"

"Damn it, I—"

"You promised!"

Snapping his mouth closed on his arguments, he heaved a sigh and glowered down at her, wondering how she could remember something like that when she chose to ignore other things he'd told her. He could see it in her stubborn gaze, though. It didn't matter what he told her. She wasn't about to comply with his wishes on the matter . . . "Then stay behind me," he commanded.

She nodded.

Bas took her hand again, darting through the forest. The trees thinned, and they skidded to a stop on the edge of a large pond. He could see smoke rising over the horizon on the other side of the water. '*Far enough from prying human eyes,*' he supposed. It wasn't the best set-up, but it was probably the best he'd be able to find.

Sydnie gasped softly, her grip on his hand tightening. Four shadows shifted in the forest, slowly drawing closer into the watery, gray light of the late afternoon sunshine. Discernable footsteps crunched through the snow as Bas pushed Sydnie behind his back and flexed his fingers. '*Kitsune . . . fire . . . rattlesnake . . . bobcat . . . and there're more . . . I can feel them . . .*'

"You're outnumbered, son of the Zelig," the rattlesnake-youkai pointed out, his voice more of a hiss, golden eyes narrowing to mere slits. "Best to just give up, don't you think?"

Bas didn't answer, shifting his gaze from one to the other. The bounty hunters didn't look all that tough. He didn't doubt that they could fight, but they didn't look any tougher than the last bunch that he'd fought. The only thing that really worried him was the feeling that there were more lurking in the shadows.

"He's protecting his bitch . . . or would that be his pussy?" the female—a fire-based-youkai—spoke up. Bright red hair sticking straight up in sharp spikes all over her head, she looked like some old-style punk-rocker—or Evan after letting Jillian and Madison 'style' his hair . . .

"She's none of your concern," Bas growled, refraining from reaching for the hilt of his sword.

"She'll be easy enough prey once we deal with *him*," the kitsune remarked.

"If you think so," Bas began in a bored tone, "then you're really, *really* stupid."

The kitsune made an exaggeratedly low bow, gaze mocking as he stiffly rose and faced Bas. "I don't think so, runt-puppy. You've made enemies of the Onyx, and that was a fatal mistake on your part."

"Enough talk, Datte," the bobcat-youkai grumbled, throwing his elbows back and swinging his arms forward a few times. "We gonna talk all day, or are we gonna do this?"

"Where are the rest of you?" Bas asked casually, affecting a bored stance as Sydnie held tight to the back of his leather duster. He didn't miss the glances exchanged by the bounty hunters.

"Around," Datte remarked with an arrogant wave of his hand.

Bas grinned. *'Sending a kitsune? Must be getting desperate . . . tricks and illusions . . . not much more than that.'*

"Don't underestimate me, pup!" Datte growled, hurling a ball of white light directly at Bas' chest.

Grabbing Sydnie around the waist, he sprang out of the way, landing on a fallen log that extended out over the water. "Stay here, Sydnie," he commanded before letting go and slipping off onto the ground.

The rattlesnake-youkai launched himself at Bas, who managed to duck the elongated arms of the creature. The deadly sound of the rattlers fused onto the youkai's wrists

had the ability to lull the unwitting victim into a near-comatose state, Bas knew. Struggling to block the sound from his mind, Bas drew his arm back, cleaving through the air with an arced hand as he shot forward.

Catching the kitsune – Datte – straight down his back, Bas grimaced when the kitsune's pained screech pierced through his brain before the eruption of light and wind announced the kitsune's untimely demise. With an outraged cry, the fire-youkai shot spears of flames from her outstretched hands. The first two spears whizzed over Bas' head, exploding in a huge ball of fire when the spears hit the water's surface, and he dodged to avoid the remaining projectiles. Bas lunged again, but the rattlesnake youkai was too fast, spinning away, though not before Bas' claws connected with the youkai's left arm. Howling in abject rage, the creature carted around, swinging blindly as Bas landed on the ground in a crouch and pushed off with his hands to flip back out of harm's way.

Another volley of fire spears whistled through the air. Bas dove to the side, landing hard on his shoulder and rolling to his feet with a grunt. A searing jab erupted in his thigh, and he gasped. The rattlesnake-youkai had sunk his venomous fangs into Bas' limb, and reacting on impulse, he swung his good leg in a broad arc. The heel of his boot smashed against the rattlesnake-youkai's head, and the creature let go, hissing angrily as he staggered back a few paces before dropping to his knees, vigorously shaking his head to dispel the fog of pain.

Bas pushed himself to his feet, dragging Triumvirate from its scabbard and brandishing the weapon before him. Casting a quick glance in time to see Sydnie slide off the log, he grimaced and raised the sword over his head, unleashing a primitive snarl as he slammed the blade into the earth. Furrows of greenish flame shot out of the weapon toward the fissure where the energy of Bas' youki met that of the rattlesnake-youkai. In a blinding flash of light, the explosion rocked through the earth, forcing a deep groan from the ground as the youkai's haunting shriek died out, stifled by the fabricated wind that died just as suddenly as it had been created.

Another wave of flaming spears jettisoned from the fire-youkai's hand. Bas knocked the first three away with the blunt side of the blade. The fourth one grazed his cheek before he could dodge it. More concerned with the bobcat-youkai than the woman, Bas barely had time to swing around, hefting Triumvirate to block the bobcat's descending claws. Gritting his teeth as the youkai struck wildly at the sword, he could feel his feet slipping on the melting snow. Another flame spear shot past him as his right foot slipped. The bobcat gave him a mighty shove sending Bas sprawling back.

A white-hot pain erupted in his right shoulder as his body was caught and tossed across the shore. Smacking into the base of a gnarled old elm tree, Bas growled in pain,

staring rather dumbly at the glowing flame spear that had embedded itself through his shoulder and into the stout tree trunk.

"Sebastian!" Sydnie screamed. She seemed to be flying, she was moving so fast. Straight at him, she ran, barely stopping at all when she wrapped her hands around the red-hot spear and jerking hard despite the tears that sprang to her eyes; despite the acrid stench of her burning flesh as she stubbornly freed him from the tree.

He jerked away with an agonized hiss. *"Stay back, Sydnie,"* he told her, unable to take the time to assess her injured hands as he stepped in front of her. He'd dropped his sword when he'd lost his footing, not that it mattered since his right arm wouldn't move quite right. Thankful only that the flaming spear had cauterized the wound enough that he wasn't losing much blood, Bas shook his hand and stalked forward.

"No!" Sydnie pleaded, grabbing Bas' left arm and trying to tug him back as four more youkai stepped out of the forest. She uttered a stifled little sob. *"You can't! You're hurt!"*

He shrugged her off and shook his head. *"I told you to stay back, damn it!"*

"No! I—"

"Fucking hell, cat! Do you think they'll let us walk right out of here?"

She flinched, but stubbornly stood her ground. *"You're hurt,"* she maintained.

"I . . . won't . . . run," he gritted out, sparing a moment to glower down at her.

She narrowed her eyes. *"Fine, then I will!"*

And before he could stop her, she ran. Diving headlong into the tangle of undergrowth and gnarled tree roots, she ran. *"Sydnie!"* Bas bellowed. She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment and kept moving.

Into the forest as the sickening sound of an explosion echoed in her ears, as the very earth trembled under her feet, she sprinted. She could hear the youkai giving chase. That was what she had wanted. She wasn't sure how many had opted to come after her. It was enough that he wasn't being forced to fight six youkai at once . . .

'Stupid Sebastian! He's not a god, damn it! He's not invincible! Arrogant, stupid dog!'

A painful shriek echoed through the trees, closer than it should have been since she'd left Bas behind by the pond. She didn't stop to look but stumbled slightly when a harsh

wind smacked into her, only to release her just as quickly. She nearly fell but caught herself in time, her fingertips brushing the earth floor as she ran faster.

She could feel the rapid approach of a strange youkai – no, not quite youkai . . . A strangled whimper slipped from her as she shook her head and darted to the right. She didn't have time to analyze her feelings other than the deep-seated knowledge that someone was too close for comfort, and it certainly wasn't Sebastian . . .

Faster and faster she ran, darting through the tangled roots and gnarled, low-hanging tree limbs that threatened to trip her up. She had no idea where she was going. Bent on leading some of the youkai away from Sebastian, she pushed herself faster, harder, her heart thumping heavily as she tried not to think about the eerie silence that had fallen over the trees.

'Someone's just behind me,' she realized with a sickened lurch of her stomach. She didn't have time to look back or to pause. Another shrill shriek split the quiet, rang in her ears as she dared a peek over her shoulder. It was close behind, the scream. Unsure where it had originated from, Sydnie winced and stumbled again as another wave of unnatural wind struck her back and shoved her forward. Again she caught herself, pushing herself without breaking her stride. The watery, pale light of the clearing wavered ahead of her, and she burst from the cover of the trees with a strangled gasp, eyes widening as panic surged through her.

Bas had managed to recover Triumvirate and stood in the midst of the three bounty hunters that surrounded him. He lowered his shoulder and bumped the spider-youkai back while barely avoiding the descending claws of an eagle-youkai. Whipping around in a circle, he slashed through the air, cleaving through a chameleon-youkai's reptilian flesh. The creature howled in agony, the blood flowing from the deep laceration traversing his chest staining the dingy snow an ominous rusty, brackish color as steam rose thick and heavy. Bas raised his sword over his head, both hands gripping the hilt before driving it down hard through the spider-youkai's hunched back.

The shrill cries of abject pain cut through her senses, and Sydnie stumbled back a few steps. Shielding her face as a violent burst of reddish light exploded, obscuring the view of the combatants, Sydnie gritted her teeth and blinked furiously. A ball of energy flame whizzed across the clearing from the flame-youkai's outstretched hands, straight at Bas as the eagle-youkai unleashed a disorienting cry. Bas staggered as the sound permeated the area, shaking his head as though to dispel the debilitating noise. The energy blast hit him square in the chest, sending Bas flying back, his body tossed like a rag doll. He landed on the ground near Sydnie, his head smacking against a boulder half buried in the snow. Triumvirate sailed end over end, embedding itself in the frozen earth beside him, the blade humming with a dull reverberation as the hilt trembled and shook.

She didn't think about her actions. She didn't have to. Bas' motionless body was too easy a target. Darting forward, she jerked hard to pull the sword loose and heaved the surprisingly heavy blade over her shoulder, wrapping her hands around the hilt in much the same way that a baseball player would hold a bat. Planting herself over Sebastian, she glanced around fiercely, wildly, glaring at the eagle-youkai as he rose in the air. Another voice echoed through the clearing – angry, determined.

“Kongousouha!”

Sydney squeaked out a surprised sound as huge shards of diamond spears shot across the earth. Steadily rising higher, they flew straight toward the eagle-youkai. The creature tried to roll to the side but couldn't get out of the way in time. An unearthly wail shattered the forced calm as the spears shot through the youkai's chest, followed closely by another explosion of wind and light and dust. Sydney turned her head in time to see the solitary figure of a silver haired hanyou as he slammed a rusty-looking sword into the scabbard that hung carelessly from his lean hips, uttering a sound suspiciously like *'keh!*' as he glowered at the dirty mound on the snow where the fire-youkai had stood.

So shocked at the intrusion, unable to grasp whether or not the hanyou was a friend or another foe, Sydney was caught off guard when powerful arms locked around her, hefting her off her feet and holding her so tightly that the breath rushed out of her. The terrified scream that she couldn't contain spilled out, only to be cut off when the arms tightened. *“For fuck's sake, wench! Shut the hell up, will you? And put that down before you hurt yourself!”*

Sydney gasped at the gruff voice as Triumvirate was jerked out of her grip. It fell haplessly on the ground as the first threads of panic snaked around the pit of her stomach. The voice was tinged with an accent that she didn't recognize. She dug her claws into the arms that held her, only to be rewarded with another huge squeeze that drew a whimper from her.

“Yeah, that ain't gonna do much damage,” the voice told her. *“Stop it and listen: you need to get *him* the hell out of here. Do you understand?”*

“Wh-who? Who are you?” she whispered as a curiously safe sort of feeling flooded through her.

“Don't matter . . . just get him outta here. Are you done trying to skin me?”

“Are you done trying to scare the crap out of me?” she countered hotly.

The arms released her, and she whipped around to stare at the silver haired . . . hanyou? Little dog ears perched neatly atop his pristine hair, he looked almost exactly like the other hanyou – the one who had taken out the eagle and fire youkai – he grinned at her. Something about the strange hanyou’s eyes gave her pause – golden, glowing in the darkness . . . she couldn’t help but think that they were familiar to her. “Yeah, sorry ‘bout that. Anyway, the old man’s waiting. Move it.”

‘The old man?’

Shaking her head, she shot the hanyou a curious glance before kneeling beside Bas’ immobile body. “Sebastian?” she whispered, patting his cheek in an effort to rouse him. “Bas?”

“Outta the way,” a second voice growled, pushing her aside firmly but gently. Peering up into the face of the first hanyou, she blinked in surprise as she glanced from one to the other again. Family, certainly; that much she could discern. She thought maybe they were father and son, but maybe it didn’t matter. They were helping, and that was all Sydnie really needed to know. The two picked Bas up with a grunt.

“Kami, he weighs e-fucking-nough,” the one who had snuck up on her grouched.

“Just move,” the older one gritted out.

The younger one grunted in response. “Better grab that sword, Sydnie. He’ll want it later.”

Sydnie narrowed her gaze but did as she was told, hugging the heavy weapon against her chest with both arms. *‘How does he know my name?’*

Brushing off her questions, Sydnie hurried after their would-be rescuers.

They stopped beside the car, and she dug the keys out of Bas’ pocket. In the waning light, she could discern the thin trickle of blood that had streaked down his temple and was drying on his cheek. Stifling a little whimper as the scent of his blood invaded her senses, she unlocked the car, opening the passenger side door and stepping back to allow the hanyous to put Bas into the vehicle.

“You can drive, right?” the younger one asked.

Sydnie nodded vaguely, stowing the sword in the back seat of the car as the older hanyou fastened the seatbelt over Bas’ hips.

“Good . . . you’re near Chicago. Don’t stop till you get there. His family has a house. It’ll be the safest place for him to recover.”

“Chicago,” she repeated. “Okay . . .”

“Got something I can write on?”

Leaning over Bas, Sydnie dug a napkin out of the center console, handing it to the hanyou before retrieving a pen, as well. He took it and quickly scrawled the address. “Key this address into the automap, and take him there,” he commanded gruffly, slapping the napkin back into her hand. “His mama keeps poison salve in a cupboard in the bathroom. Get him to wake up after we’re gone, and keep him that way for twenty-four hours after putting the salve on his leg. Rattlesnake poison ain’t pretty.”

She nodded, gaze shifting to the older hanyou who hadn’t spoken since telling his son to get a move on. “Who are you?” she asked quietly.

“Don’t matter,” the older one growled. “Get him the fuck outta here. Now.”

Sydnie didn’t have to be told twice. Dashing around the car, she got inside and started the engine. *‘Who were they?’* she wondered as she fastened her seatbelt and willed her breathing to return to normal.

‘Who cares who they were? Get him out of here, Sydnie . . . and you heard them. You have to wake Bas up, too.’

‘Wake him up? Right . . .’

“Get him to wake up after we’re gone . . .”

She started to reach over to try to rouse the unconscious man. Gently slapping his cheeks with the back of her hand did nothing to bring Bas around. Biting her lip, stifling the little whine that rose in her throat, Sydnie blinked quickly, forcing down the choking panic that surged through her as she steeled her resolve and tapped his cheeks a little harder.

Those strange hanyous . . . If they hadn’t come along when they had, Bas might have been . . .

Grimacing as she slammed the door on those thoughts, Sydnie swallowed hard and shook her head. *‘Best not to think about what might have happened,’* she told herself. That wouldn’t help, not at all . . .

They didn't want Bas to know they'd helped? But . . . why?

Sparing a moment to check the mirrors and lock the doors, she frowned. The trees stood, empty and still. She couldn't see any traces of their rescuers. '*Golden eyes,*' she mused as she craned her neck to survey the area. '*Like Sebastian's eyes . . .*'

She shook her head and stifled a sigh. The mysterious hanyous were gone.

A/N:
Kongousouha: Diamond Spear Blast.

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Final Thought from Sydney:

Who were they?

Chapter 36

Damning Evidence

Bas groaned and jerked his head to the side in a vain effort to avoid the gentle yet stinging slaps that kept trying to jar him out of his forced incoherence.

“Come on, Bas the Hunter . . . you’re stronger than that . . .”

‘Sydnie?’

He could hear the worry tingeing her voice, could sense the underlying panic. ‘Panic? Worry? Why . . .?’

“Fine, then I will!” The angry flash of her brilliant green eyes burned into his skull as he watched her glare at him just before carting around and dashing into the trees . . .

‘The bounty hunters . . .’

Bas’ eyes snapped open as he jerked upright, grabbing Sydnie’s wrist as he glanced around wildly. She gasped but didn’t try to pull away. Bas winced, temple protesting the jarring motion as the slow realization sank into his confused brain. They were in the car, weren’t they? They were in the car with the engine running though they weren’t moving. “Wh . . . what happened?” he whispered, unable to bear the idea of raising his voice.

Sydnie choked out a little sound and tried to throw herself against Bas’ chest. The seatbelt caught her and held her back. She unfastened the latch with a frustrated little growl and leaned over the console to hug him. “You’re okay?” she demanded, her voice thick, breaking.

“Yeah, fine,” he grumbled despite the nagging ache in his head, the pervasive pain in his thigh. His stomach felt queasy, and his back and chest hurt, too, but he wasn’t teetering on the brink of death. “Where are we?”

She sniffled. “I had to wake you up,” she babbled. “You have to stay awake until we reach Chicago.”

“Awake?” he echoed vaguely, eyelids drifting closed as he slumped back against the seat. “All . . . right . . .”

Sydney sat up, brushing his bangs out of his face as she stroked his cheek and grimaced. "No, Sebastian . . . don't close your eyes," she demanded.

He thought he nodded.

Sydney tapped his cheek again. "I mean it, puppy!"

"Okay," he mumbled, forcing his eyes open. She bit her lip and scowled at him before settling back into the driver's seat and tugging the seatbelt back into place.

"I set the automap," she went on as she put the car into gear. "At least, I think I did."

Bas nodded, unable to summon the strength to answer her properly. Sydney shot him another worried glance and sighed. "Talk to me, Sebastian. Just talk."

"Talk . . . about what?" he asked, his voice thick; his words slurred.

"Anything, anything . . . whatever you want . . . Tell me about your family?"

"Family . . ." he repeated. "Got lots of . . . family."

"Does everyone in your family look like you?"

Bas forced his eyes open again. Sydney reached down to hit the selector button on the automap monitor. He wasn't sure what sort of course she'd set, but the left turn signal flickered to life, and she slowed the vehicle to turn at the next crossroad.

"No," he replied. "Just my sister and Dad and me . . ."

"Oh?"

"Ev'ryone else looks . . . like Mom . . . Mom's side of the family."

"What does your mom look like?"

Bas heaved a sigh, wondering vaguely why Sydney was being so insistent that he keep talking. "Mom? Silver hair . . . dog ears . . . hanyou . . ."

"Silver hair?" she asked sharply, casting him a curious glance.

Bas smiled wanly. "They say I have her eyes . . ."

“She has golden eyes, too?”

He missed the calculated casualness in her tone as a fine sheen of sweat broke out on his brow. “All of ‘em . . . same eyes . . . like the old man—m’ grandfather . . . and Uncle.”

“Golden eyes . . .”

Bas winced as a stabbing pain shot down his leg. “Mmm.”

Sydney didn’t respond right away. Lost in thought, she drove in silence. Bas was almost asleep again when he heard her voice—gentle yet insistent—calling out to him. “This grandfather of yours . . . he’s youkai?”

“N-n-n . . .” He trailed off. Talking took too much effort.

“Don’t go to sleep, Sebastian . . . you can’t go to sleep.”

Bas opened his mouth to answer but yawned instead.

“Don’t make me pull over, Bas the Hunter!” she said sharply, her voice cracking as it rose in pitch.

He grimaced but sighed, forcing his eyes open again. “I-I-I’m awake, Sydney,” he muttered, lifting his right hand to rub his temple and being rewarded with a stabbing pain in his shoulder for the effort. *‘Damn fire-youkai . . . fire spears . . . what a bitch . . .’*

Bas frowned as another thought permeated his sluggish mind. Forcing himself to turn enough to stare at Sydney, Bas shook his head and gritted his teeth. “What happened to the rest of the bounty hunters?”

Sydney shot him a cursory glance before turning her attention back to the road once more. “Don’t worry, puppy. I took care of them.”

Bas blinked. “You did.”

She nodded. “I did.”

Craning his neck despite his body’s fierce protests to the contrary, Bas surveyed the area then growled in frustration. It was too dark to see anything, and even if he could, the car was moving much too fast for him to discern any real movement. Settling back with a worried scowl, Bas reached out, catching Sydney’s icy fingers and giving them a little squeeze. “You got me out of there, didn’t you?”

"Of course I did, puppy. Did you think I'd just leave you?"

He sighed. "Tired," he mumbled, eyes drifting closed once more.

"Don't go to sleep, Sebastian," she said quietly. "You can't . . . the rattlesnake-youkai bit you. You can't go to sleep . . ."

"No sleep . . . poison . . . right," he murmured. "Damn it . . . so that's why . . . I feel like . . . shit."

"Just don't go to sleep, puppy," she said, her voice low, raw with unvoiced emotion. "Please don't go to sleep."

"How's the arm?"

Izayoi Ryomaru glanced up at his father and shrugged. "I'll live. She's just a little thing," he replied evenly. "Everything look okay?"

InuYasha grunted as he crouched on the branch of the tall tree just outside the high wall that surrounded the Zeligs' Wake Forest estate. "He's sleeping now. Looks like hell, but he'll live."

Ryomaru nodded sagely. "Good."

"Crazy wench . . . just what the fuck did she think she could've done with his sword, anyway?"

Shaking his head, Ryomaru let his legs dangle on either side of the branch where he'd been waiting for InuYasha's return. "What do you think, old man? She was protecting her mate."

"Keh! Mate, eh? A dog and a cat . . . that's just wrong."

"Wrong or not, I'd say it was pretty evident, wouldn't you?"

InuYasha shrugged, stuffing his arms together under the sleeves of his old fire-rat haori. He'd taken to wearing the youkai garments after they'd located Sebastian and Sydnie, not that Ryomaru blamed him. The clothing was basically like armor, and since they'd

been sticking to the areas outside of the towns where Bas and Sydnie stopped, they had been relatively unnoticed, anyway, which was how Gin and Cain had wanted it. The few times Ryomaru had ventured into civilization, InuYasha had stayed behind.

“Anyway, does it matter if she makes him happy?”

“Matters,” InuYasha grunted, golden eyes casing the surroundings for any trace of potential threats. “She’s accused of murder.”

Ryomaru shrugged. “Bas says she ain’t a murderer,” he contended. “Cain trusts his judgment.”

“Maybe; maybe not. Why ain’t the human authorities looking for her?”

Scratching his neck, Ryomaru grunted. “Cain’s like Sesshoumaru, I’d guess. Got spies in places to cover things up so he can deal with certain things without involving humans.”

“Deal with stuff? He didn’t even come after his own pup, damn it.”

Ryomaru didn’t reply to that. InuYasha had been overly irritated when Gin had explained that Cain couldn’t trail Bas. Having too many other things that needed his attention and not wishing to draw undue attention to Bas’ situation, Cain had also been afraid that Bas would find out and think that he didn’t trust his son, and as much as it might irk InuYasha, Ryomaru had to concede to Cain’s logic. His own son, Morio would have been livid if he had been the one sent out on a hunt only to find out that anyone had doubted his abilities.

In any case, Ryomaru had been the one who had called to tell Cain about the bounty hunters’ latest ambush. It had been close – too close. InuYasha and Ryomaru had decided to try to intercept and take care of the hunters without Bas being any the wiser. At least, that had been the plan until Bas had decided to stop in the middle of nowhere. As it was, InuYasha had been sorely put out that he couldn’t do much more than stand around and watch while Bas took on the bounty hunters, and he hadn’t done badly, either, taking down four of the eight of them single-handedly. Ryomaru had taken care of the two who had given chase when Sydnie sprinted into the trees, and InuYasha had cut down the remaining two after Bas had been knocked out cold.

She was smart, that cat-youkai. Whether she realized how much she had helped Bas or not, she’d gained Ryomaru’s grudging respect with her actions. Taking off by herself might have seemed a little foolhardy, but standing her ground over Bas’ fallen body with a sword that she obviously didn’t know how to wield . . . Ryomaru didn’t have a doubt in his mind that she would have fought tooth and nail to protect Sebastian, even

from them. What was more, InuYasha had even given his grudging approval of the feline later. Watching the car slip back onto the road and disappear in the distance, InuYasha had grumbled that Sydney 'had guts', which, in the hanyou's terms, was high praise . . .

InuYasha heaved a sigh and pulled Tetsusaiga, the legendary Sword of the Fang, from his waistband and wrapped his arms around it, obviously settling in for the night's vigil. Ryomaru followed suite with his sword; two sentient beings perched in the high branches of the tallest pine tree.

"We'll make sure he comes home," Ryomaru had promised Gin just before he and InuYasha had set out to trail the future tai-youkai.

Gin had smiled sweetly, her eyes bright, clear. "I know you will. I trust you both."

It was a promise that they intended to keep.

Sydney slept fitfully in the hard wooden chair beside the huge bed in the silent room. She'd lost count of the numbers of times she'd woken up during the day and night. Afraid to disturb Sebastian by lying beside him, she had pulled the chair across the room from the desk near the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side of the room after listening to him babble incoherently for nearly twenty-four hours. She'd rifled through the tidy bathroom adjoining the bedroom for the poison salve that the younger hanyou had told her to find.

Opening her eyes when Bas groaned softly, Sydney leaned forward to touch his clammy skin. *'The fever's broken,'* she thought with a sigh of relief. *'Thank God.'*

She'd never been so scared in her life. Sparing a moment to stroke Bas' cheek, she pushed herself out of the chair and hurried into the bathroom for a cool washcloth, ignoring the throbbing ache in her burned hands.

The two hour car ride had felt as though it had taken forever. Sydney hadn't been prepared for the drive around Chicago, and she had to struggle to retain a semblance of calm while the traffic had surged around her. Telling herself over and over that Bas just wasn't in any condition to drive, she had done it with the help of the automap. Bas rarely used the feature though it was standard in all the vehicles they'd rented. All she had to do was key in the physical address of their destination, and the navigational system—she wasn't sure exactly how it worked—took over, indicating directions both

on the LCD monitor built into the dashboard as well as activating turn signals and such things via satellite, she supposed. In any case, all she had to do was stop at lights and make sure she turned where she was told to, and they'd reached the house on the outskirts of Chicago – Wake Forest, to be exact – safely enough.

Getting Sebastian out of the car had been another ordeal, entirely. It had taken nearly half an hour to rouse Bas enough to coax him out of the vehicle since he was just too large for her to pick him up, and even after she'd managed to help him stand, his left leg was almost entirely useless. She could have lifted him, she supposed, if he weren't almost seven feet tall. His weight coupled with his towering height made it simply impossible for Sydnie to negotiate without his aid, but he'd finally regained enough composure that he could make it inside the door and up the stairs under his own steam though leaning heavily on her for support.

She later regretted his having to move himself. Traveling in the car had been enough to spread the rattlesnake-youkai's poison through his system. The fifteen minutes it took to get from the car to Bas' bedroom on the third floor of the mansion had done much worse. By the time he'd collapsed on his bed, his skin had been burning to the touch, face pale and drawn. Shivering profusely, he'd sweated under the covers that she'd carefully tucked around him, mumbling incoherent words and sentence fragments that made little sense. She'd hurried off to find the salve, returning just in time to shove him onto his side to keep him from choking helplessly on his own vomit.

It had been a long night. After the tenth bout of vomiting, she'd given up changing the sheets. He only had one clean set left in the air-tight, thick plastic bags stacked inside the closet on the shelf. She'd finally changed them that a few hours ago, just after his fever had finally broken. Opening the windows a crack to air out the stagnant space, she'd run downstairs long enough to locate the washing machine, and despite the ten minutes it took to figure out how the thing worked, Sydnie was relieved to find Bas sleeping comfortably, his coloring slowly returning to a normal shade as the dark circles under his eyes diminished. He hadn't stirred while she'd carefully wiped him off as best as she could. He'd need a shower, certainly, but for now, at least, he was clean enough. That done, she'd curled up in the wooden chair as best as she could, napping off and on while trying to keep an eye on Sebastian, too.

His wounds weren't healing the way they ought to. Sydnie frowned, carefully pulling the blanket back with a shaking hand. The hole in his right shoulder, while not bleeding, wasn't closing up, either. Clear fluid seeped from the wound, and Sydnie had to wonder if the poison weren't retarding the healing process a little, and she winced when she peeled back the gauze she'd carefully taped over the puncture wounds on his left thigh. The skin around the holes was greenish-black, but the coloring was a little paler than it had been when she'd first cleaned it.

Biting her lower lip, Sydnie gently wiped the residual salve off the wound. Bas' leg jerked though he didn't wake, and Sydnie made quick work of applying more salve to the punctures before applying clean gauze from the first aid kit she'd found under the sink in the bathroom.

The handwritten instructions taped to the white plastic jar had explained how to mix the powder with water to create a salve that could draw poison out of an open wound. Sydnie had followed the instructions to the letter then had reread them for good measure before applying it to Bas' leg.

Deliberately ignoring the surge of late panic that welled up inside her every time she remembered seeing Bas flying back from the impact of the energy blast, Sydnie swallowed hard and blinked back the burning sensation prickling her eyes and nose. He was fine now, wasn't he? He was safe, and he was going to be all right.

She sat back with a heavy sigh, closing her eyes for a moment as she thought fleetingly that she really ought to go check on the sheets. The house, itself, bothered her. It was *his* house, right? The tai-youkai's house . . . Bas' room didn't upset her so much. It smelled like Sebastian—*felt* like Sebastian. The rest of the house, however . . . it frightened her. She'd forced herself to find the laundry room, true enough, and she'd poked around the kitchen long enough to find a glass to get Bas some water though he hadn't been coherent enough to try to drink any of it. Still the place was too overwhelming with the scent of so many people who smelled like Bas yet didn't, and knowing that Cain Zelig was one of the scents . . . it just didn't sit well with Sydnie at all . . .

The idea of leaving the sheets in the washer wasn't good, however, and she sighed. Leaving them there would only make them smell dank and musty, and the last thing she wanted to do was ruin his sheets since that particular stench, she knew, was one that was much, much harder to wash out later. *'I'll check them in a few minutes,'* she told herself, leaning her forehead on her propped fingertips but careful not to touch her still-sore palm.

The sound of Sebastian's light, even breathing soothed her, and Sydnie crossed her arms on the bed, resting her head on her forearms. *'Just . . . a few minutes . . .'*

Bas groaned and pushed himself up on his left elbow, blinking rapidly to dispel the lingering traces of foggy that clung to his mind. Sydnie slept in a chair beside the

bed, slumped over and so forlorn looking that Bas grimaced just before he reached over and tapped Sydney's knee. "Sydney?"

She jerked upright and quickly shook her head, her startled gaze clouded with concern as she shot to her feet. "Are you okay? Do you need something? Water? Washcloth? Trash can? You're not going to puke again, are you?"

"Puke?" he echoed weakly. "Sydney . . . what?"

She sank down in the chair as though her legs had suddenly given out on her. Shoulders slumping, chin dropping as she stared at her hands, clasped in her lap, Sydney heaved a weary sigh moments before – and to Bas' absolute horror – the cat-youkai burst into a very loud wail.

"Wh—? Hey . . . it's okay . . . don't . . . don't cry, all right?" he muttered, rubbing her knee since it was the only part of her he could comfortably reach.

Sydney sniffled loudly and shot him a fierce glower. "You *jerk!*" she screeched, half-sobbing, half-yelling, dashing the back of her hand over her eyes. More tears washed into her gaze, completely undermining the mutinous expression that she was so obviously striving for. "You're stupid, did you know? Just stupid! I *hate* you sometimes; I really, *really* do!"

Bas drew away from her, her anger crackling in the air surrounding her. Wincing as she slowly stood, Bas dropped onto his back, unable to do more than blink at the angry woman. "Now, Sydney . . . calm down . . ."

"Calm down?" she sputtered indignantly. "*Calm down?* How *dare* you tell me to calm down! I was calm, you dog! I got you out of there, didn't I? I drove you here, didn't I? I made sure you didn't choke, and I cleaned your wounds, and –" She cut herself off abruptly and planted her hands on her hips. "And just what do you think you're doing? Lie down before you hurt yourself again!"

Heaving a sigh as he complied with her order, Bas obediently lay back, knitting his hands together atop his chest as he waited for her irritation to subside. Oddly enough, he had a feeling that she wasn't mad at him in the least. No, his instincts told him that she was more relieved than anything, and that maybe it was just her overwrought emotions that were airing themselves at the moment.

" – Scared me half to death, and I'll have you know that I just spent eight of my nine lives worrying about you! Don't you do it again, Bas the Hunter! Don't you *dare* make me worry like that *ever* again!"

"Sydnie," he murmured, refusing to raise his voice or antagonize the cat in any way. "I'm sorry."

She sniffled, scowling at her feet before slowly sinking onto the edge of the bed. "You should be," she grumbled haughtily.

"I am."

She sniffled again. Bas reached over and gently took her hand. "Come here, kitty."

She shook her head mulishly, stubbornly refusing to let him pull her close. Bas gritted his teeth and forced himself to sit up, ignoring the various pains that shot through his body in lieu of making sure that Sydnie wasn't upset anymore. "You scared me, you know," she whispered.

Bas nodded as he pulled Sydnie against his chest. "I know," he told her, kissing her temple. "I really am sorry, baby."

"You should be," she said with a defeated sigh, letting her temple fall against his shoulder. "I didn't know . . . you got sick . . ."

"It's okay. I'm fine now."

She shook her head but let him hold her close. Slipping her arms around his waist, she sighed again and relaxed a little. "I just kept thinking," she finally admitted.

"About what?"

She shrugged, her face nearly crumpling despite the stubborn resolve not to let anything of the sort happen. "Who'd get me milk if you weren't here? Who would buy me useless spoons?"

"I told you," he assured her, glad that she couldn't see the grimace that he couldn't hide. "I'll never leave you. You believe me, right?"

She didn't answer, but she did relax completely, content to let him hold her, at least for the moment.

"How are your hands?"

She blinked and shook her head. "My hands?"

"Yes, your hands. You burned them, pulling that spear out of my shoulder, didn't you?"

She grimaced then shrugged in a show of more bravado than actual nonchalance. "They're healed."

He narrowed his eyes on her. "Let me see."

She snorted indelicately but held out her hands. The flesh was still a little reddened, but there didn't seem to be any real damage. "Satisfied?" she demanded.

"Yes," he replied, kissing her temple as he pulled her close and ignoring the twinges in his shoulder that protested the movements. "So tell me, kitty . . . how did you get me out of there?"

She sat back far enough to grin up at him though he could still see the vaguest sense of worry behind her crystalline gaze. "I scared them off, puppy."

"You . . . *scared* them off?" he echoed, careful to keep his expression blank.

Nodding, she cuddled against his shoulder again. "Yes. I'm fearsome; didn't you know?"

"Okay, I'll bite. How did you scare them off?"

"Easy, puppy . . . I threatened them with your sword."

He blinked in surprise and bit his cheek. "Really . . . you mean you can lift it?"

She wrinkled her nose and snorted indelicately. "*I am* youkai, Bas the Hunter," she reminded him.

"Yeah, yeah . . . you know how to hold a sword?"

"Sure . . . I've watched you enough times."

He chuckled. "Okay, warrior-woman . . . let's see it."

"See what?"

He rolled his hand and nodded. "Show me how you threatened them."

He didn't think she was going to comply. Scrunching up her face in a determined little scowl, she rolled onto her knees and crawled off the bed, sauntering over to retrieve Triumvirate.

She had to wrap both hands around the weapon's hilt and strained just to get the blade onto the bed. Bas jerked his feet out of the way before it smashed his toes. With a loud grunt and a great heave, she swung the sword up over her shoulder, letting it rest there as she refreshed her grip, holding Triumvirate like a baseball bat instead of a sword.

Bas coughed indelicately into his fist and thoughtfully scratched his chin. "Oh, yes, now I see it . . . completely fearsome, Sydnie."

"Isn't it?"

"Did you smack one out of the ballpark?"

She blushed but uttered a terse 'hrumph'. "It worked, didn't it?"

He grinned as she leaned to the side, allowing the blade to fall against the floor with a loud 'thump'. "I suppose it did, Sydnie," he said, holding out his hand to her once more. She leaned the sword against the bed and slipped her hand into his, letting him tug her back onto the bed and against his chest once more. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it, puppy."

He kissed her forehead as the soothing sound of her purr surrounded them.

*Final Thought from Bas:
... Interesting form, kitty ...*

Chapter 37

Broken Promises

"So you're really going."

Jeb glanced up from the grim task of polishing his sword, meeting the stony gaze of his mate for only a moment before resuming his task once more. "Of course I am. Did you think I wouldn't?"

Serena pushed away from the doorframe and heaved a sigh, rubbing her forehead with a weary hand as she wandered over to Jeb's side. Dull eyes staring at the spot where they normally set up the huge, fat Christmas tree, she blinked quickly to dispel the tell-tale moisture that gathered. Neither of them had felt the desire to celebrate a holiday that was meant to share with family when their family was long gone.

"You'll come back, right?" she asked, her voice as dry and brittle as the winter winds outside.

"Doesn't matter," he replied in a monotone. "I'm a dead man, either way. At least this way I can avenge Cody's death."

Serena nodded wanly. She agreed with him; of course she did. Revenge was the only thing they had left. The pain of losing her son and unborn grandchild was just too much to bear. In her dreams, she still saw Cody's face; could hear his voice. Shuffling over to the occasional table nearby, she picked up a photograph. Taken on Cody and Beth's wedding day, she couldn't reconcile what she knew now with the smiling faces in the picture. She wanted to cry. She could feel the thickness of tears stinging her nose, pressing against her eyes. They wouldn't come.

"You find him," she bit out, her voice harsh, rasping. "You find him, and you make him pay."

Jeb nodded without looking up from his task. "Planning on it . . . but you know . . ."

Serena shook her head stubbornly, the picture in her hands crashing to the floor, the glass shattering in a thousand pieces—a million shards. "I know well enough, Jeb Christopher," she maintained. "I know and I damn well don't care. My life . . . my life ended the day he took my son away from me."

"He's killed all my bounty hunters. He's killed them all, one by one. What the hell is he? Some god? Some monster? Who the hell is this son of the Zelig?"

"He's neither," Serena growled, her gaze crackling with outrage, with pain.

"My hunters were the best of the best," Jeb pointed out in a clipped tone of voice.

"And he has been lucky, hasn't he? Well, his luck can't hold out forever!"

Jeb set his sword on the coffee table and shot to his feet, stalking around the study like a caged beast. "Eight of my best hunters, Serena. *Eight* of them, and Myrna hasn't heard a thing from them in days. I'm finishing this, damn it, and I'm finishing it now."

"Do you know where he is?"

The stubborn set of Jeb's jaw, the light that blazed behind his gaze . . . Serena knew that look well. She'd seen it many times over the years. When they'd migrated from their native England nearly two hundred years before, he'd promised her that he would build a good life for them, and he had. Yes, he had. He'd worked hard to build what amounted to a small empire for the two of them, and only after he felt as though they were safe enough had he allowed Serena to have a child. Now that child was gone, and the dreams and hopes were gone, too. Revenge was a bitter thing, wasn't it? Too bad it was the only thing that Serena had left . . .

"The last contact we had from the hunters indicated that Zelig was heading north through central Illinois. I think it's safe to assume that he was heading to his father's house."

Serena nodded slowly. Having overheard countless discussions between Jeb and his bounty hunters, she knew as well as anyone that Cain Zelig had a mansion in Wake Forest, Illinois. "The one outside Chicago?"

"That's the one," Jeb agreed. Strapping his scabbard on, he dropped the sword into the sheath and shot his wife a fierce glower. "I'll come back, Serena. Be ready to run when I do."

She nodded again, refusing to believe that Jeb would fail.

'*Soon,*' she told herself, rubbing her frail arms as the sound of the front door closing echoed through the silent house. '*Don't fail us, Jeb . . .*'

Bas stared out the window at the falling snow in the gray afternoon sky, grimacing slightly as he rotated his right shoulder to alleviate the stiffness that had set in since the fight near the pond. Cain had called awhile ago to make sure that everything was all right, which would have been much better if Bas hadn't been in the middle of trying to coax Sydnie out of the bedroom to show her the rest of the house.

He'd been surprised to wake up and find them here, of all places. She'd said that Gunnar had mentioned the Wake Forest house to her, but she hadn't looked him in the eye, and while she hadn't said that she wanted to leave, Bas could tell from her uncharacteristic skittishness that she hated being here; hated being reminded of whom, exactly, Bas was.

Still, he reasoned, if he could get her to accept the things he couldn't change, maybe he could convince her that she really would be fine. All she had to do was tell him why she'd killed Cal Richardson . . .

"You're feeling better now?"

Bas turned and smiled at Sydnie. She'd been napping. Gazing at him with such a solemn air, she sat perfectly still in the center of the bed. "Yes, actually . . . quite a bit better. Got a shower . . . shaved . . . I'm a little stiff, but otherwise, I feel fine."

She wrapped her arms around her ankles, resting her chin on her raised knees as she glanced around the room, almost as though she expected someone or something to jump out of the shadows at her. With a sigh, Bas pushed himself away from the window and slowly wandered over to sit on the edge of the bed. "What's the matter, kitty?"

Sydnie shrugged and tried to smile. It was more like a grimace, though, and Bas winced. "Nothing," she maintained quietly. "You look better."

"Why don't you come downstairs with me? You can look around and stuff . . ."

She shook her head quickly, burying her face deeper against her knees. "Uh-uh . . . Do you think we could go soon? To a hotel or something?"

Bas reached out, brushing her hair out of her eyes and cast her an apologetic little grin. "Sorry, baby . . . it's safer here. Dad's got security in place. No one—and I mean no one—gets in or out of here without their knowledge."

She nodded. "I know . . . they let me in. They brought food."

He snorted. They'd also called his father. Kingsley, the head of Cain's Wake Forest security, had done the honors, or so Cain had said. In any case, he ought to be thankful. Because of Kingsley, Bas hadn't had to go far to get milk for Sydnie this morning. The irony of that wasn't lost on Bas. No one in the Zelig family was big on drinking milk. That there had been three gallons sitting in the refrigerator . . . that had to have been his father's order . . . "Just give me a few days, okay?" He made a face, carefully rubbing his right shoulder. "Then I'll be as good as new. I promise."

Sydnie made a face but conceded. "All right," she agreed. "I want you to be okay."

"I know you do. Come on . . . bet Mom's got some embarrassing pictures around here."

"Embarrassing?"

He shrugged, standing up and grasping her hand and tugging until she scooted off the bed. "Sure . . . Mom loves baby pictures, and those are always a bit humbling."

He could feel her reluctance, but she did follow him. Pulling her into the dim hallway and down the corridor that led to the stairs, Bas gently squeezed her icy fingers and led the way.

'You'll go to hell for lying, Bas.'

Bas wrinkled his nose at the cryptic words of his youkai voice. *'I'm not lying,'* he maintained. *'I do still feel a little off. Damn rattlesnake-youkai . . . I'd kill him if he weren't already dead . . .'*

And that was true enough. The poison had seeped through his body faster than he'd been able to combat it. The result had been the horrible fever that had ravaged his body and had scared the life out of Sydnie. No, staying here for a few days would be good for him, and since it was one of the few places that he knew was secure, there was no reason to move to a hotel where he'd have to deal with the constant, nagging worry that they really weren't safe, even if he wanted to believe that they were.

'Admit it, will you? The real reason you want to stay here is because Christmas is just a couple days away.'

'There's that, too,' he allowed as the barest hint of a smile surfaced. Glancing over his shoulder at Sydnie, he had to smile as she gnawed on her lower lip and peered up at him. The reluctance in her gaze was impossible to miss, but the absolute trust in her expression gave him hope. *'She deserves a Christmas worth remembering,'* he decided. *'She deserves . . . everything.'*

He let go of her hand to turn on the lights, letting the warm glow envelop the room. Though the family wasn't often in residence in any of the houses outside of Maine, Gin had made it her mission to make sure that every single one of them felt like home, even to the point of having duplicate prints of pictures made so that she could decorate the houses with her family's faces, or so she'd said. She'd even shipped many of Cain's paintings to the houses, every one of them unique since getting Cain to repaint something he'd already done was impossible. Gin tended to keep her favorite ones at the Maine house, but every single place was adored with paintings and sculptures from their private collection. This room was the worst, Bas figured. The casual living room was decorated with paintings and photographs and even Bas' threadbare baby blanket was carefully folded and lying over the back of the overstuffed tan suede sofa . . .

Sydney touched the blanket lightly, fingertips dragging over the soft, faded fabric. "This is yours?" she murmured quietly, lifting the blanket and burying her nose in it.

Bas nodded. "Yep . . . my favorite baby blanket, according to Mom."

"It smells like you," she told him.

"Yeah, well . . ."

She laughed suddenly, eyes twinkling with a devilish light. "I can't picture you as a child, Sebastian, much less a baby."

He snorted. "I was actually a little baby," he admitted. "I just didn't stay that way, I guess."

She carefully refolded the blanket and arranged it on the back of the sofa before slowly, haltingly wandering over toward the hulking brown marble mantle that stretched about a third of the length of the room. Arranged on the deep shelf was an assortment of framed snapshots, and Bas stuffed his hands in his pockets as he watched her. "Who's that?" she asked, fingering one of the ornate frames.

Bas shuffled over and peered over her shoulder and smiled. It was a snapshot of InuYasha and Kagome, his grandparents. She stood beside him wringing her hands while the hanyou crouched on the ground with the signature scowl on his face. "That's my grandfather – the old man – and my grandmother."

"The old man?"

He nodded. "He prefers to be called that. He can't stand to be called 'father' or 'grandfather'. He's always been like that."

"Your grandfather . . . what's his name?"

"InuYasha. InuYasha Izayoi. My grandmother's name is Kagome."

"InuYasha . . . that sounds familiar."

"Well, sure . . . he's the hanyou of legend; the one who defeated the great evil—Naraku—years ago . . . he and my grandmother."

"The angry hanyou?"

Bas wrinkled his nose. "I prefer 'hanyou of legend' . . . besides, he's not *always* angry."

She giggled. "And this?"

Bas slipped an arm around Sydnie's waist, drawing her back against his chest as he breathed in the scent of her hair and smiled. "That's my half-sister, Bellaniece and her husband, Kichiro. He's Mom's brother . . . I told you about that, didn't I?"

"Oh, yes, you did," she mused. "The ass-monkey, right?"

Bas chuckled. "Yeah . . . he's a nice enough guy, though. I think he and Dad like to argue. Kind of demented, if you ask me."

"And this is your mother?"

Bas nodded. "Yep . . . Mom and the old man . . . she's the only girl, you know. Dad . . . the old man . . . my uncles . . . they all call her 'baby girl' . . . Well, all except my uncle, Mikio, but he's only a couple years older than me."

"She's so *little*."

Bas chuckled. "Yeah . . . she's just over five feet tall. We all outgrew her—physically, at least—long ago."

"And who are they?" she asked, pointing at a picture of Jillian with her arm slung casually over the thin shoulders of her best friend.

"My baby sister, Jillian and Gavin—*Gavvie*—her best friend. She's been telling him for years that he's her mate, but he's never really believed her. Then again, might be because he's been told that he could lose certain facets of his anatomy that he is rather attached to if he tried anything . . ."

"That's not very nice," she chided. "You've not been threatening him, have you?"

"Who? Me? Absolutely. She's my baby sister, remember? Besides, he's, like . . . five years older than her."

"He is?"

"Yup."

Sydney shook her head. "I'd have said that he looked younger. She's taller than he is."

"I know. He's always been scrawny like that."

"And this?"

Bas shifted uncomfortably, unsure how she was going to react to his answer. "That's . . . Madison."

"Madison."

"Yes."

"The pole-cat-youkai?"

"Yes."

"Your *fake* girlfriend."

He grimaced and forced himself to answer her. "Yes."

"She's just a *baby*."

He sighed. "Yes."

"You're kind of sick, Sebastian," she teased.

Bas chuckled, relieved that Sydney wasn't going to overreact. "Yes."

She giggled and leaned back to kiss his cheek. "And there? I recognize you and Gunnar . . . who are those other two and the girl?"

Bas pointed to the hanyou on the far left in the snapshot. "That's Mikio—I told you about him, and that's Morio beside him. The girl is my cousin—niece—whatever—Isabelle. Everyone calls her Bitty Belle, though."

"Morio?"

He nodded. "Morio's kind of the jokester. I think he'd just gotten done pantsing Gunnar in that picture. See? Gunnar's hiking them back up."

"So you weren't the only one who had to deal with that sort of thing?"

Bas snorted. "Nope."

"Are you all the same age?"

"Pretty much. Mikio's a couple years older than all of us, and Morio's a couple months older than me. Gunnar's actually the youngest."

"Really?"

"Uh huh."

"Your family is close."

"Yeah, we are."

"And that's . . . your *father*."

Bas followed the direction of her gaze, scowling at the derogatory way she'd said 'father'. She was staring up at the huge portrait hanging over the mantle. One of the few traditional pieces Gin had painted, it was a portrait of Cain standing in front of an open window while an unseen breeze blew the floor-length sheer curtains. Cain held Bas in his arms, and was staring down at him with a little smile on his face. Bas grimaced. "Yeah. That's . . . my father."

Her back stiffened, and she nodded. "And the baby?"

He winced. "That's me."

She sighed and slipped out of his arms, wandering across the room to look at another painting. "Your mother? And the boy?"

Bas blinked and narrowed his eyes at the portrait she was staring at. Gin was walking along the beach holding his brother's hand. Evan wasn't more than three or four in the painting, and judging from the angle of it, Bas could tell that Cain had captured the image out of the window in their studio. Cain's ability to look at something and remember it well enough to reproduce it perfectly had always been something that Bas envied. Evan was the same way, though his interests lie in music instead of art. "Mom and Evan," he replied quietly.

"Your brother."

He nodded. "My brother."

She rubbed her arms as she moved on to the next painting. Bas grimaced, since it was one of the ones he really, really disliked. Lying in the middle of his bed in a mess of tangled blankets, he slept with Jillian sprawled on his chest and Evan lying perpendicular to him, his legs draped over Bas' waist. Evan and Jillian were just toddlers at the time, and Cain, apparently, had found the image too irresistible to ignore. Bas, on the other hand, had been nearly thirteen at the time, and that he shared his bed with his siblings just wasn't something he had wanted everyone to know about at the time.

Is that . . . you?" she asked hesitantly.

"Yep."

"And the children?"

Bas snorted. "Who else? Jillian and Evan . . . it was shortly after Dad had ousted Evan from sleeping with him and Mom, so the little brat decided to take up residence in my room. Took forever to get rid of him. He's kind of like a leech that way . . ."

She shook her head, casting him a confused sort of glance. "That . . . that can't be right . . ." she mumbled, her gaze clouding over as she slowly turned to face him.

"What do you mean?"

"You . . . you're not the oldest, you said . . ."

Bas shrugged, frowning at Sydnie's strange commentary. Waving his hand at another portrait, Bas sighed. "I'm not . . . see? Bellaniece is the oldest, then me, then Evan and Jillian . . ."

She shook her head again, stepping back in retreat as the confusion gave way to a shocked sort of panic. Bas took a step toward her but stopped when she jumped and skittered away. "Sydnie?"

"No . . . *No!* You . . . that means you . . .?" She choked out a little half-sob, half-laugh, smashing the back of her hand over her mouth. "You?"

"Sydnie . . . what . . .?"

"You *can't* be . . . you just *can't* be . . ."

"Can't be, what? What are you talking about?"

"You're the next . . .? No . . . no, no, no, no!"

Bas grimaced as slow realization swept over him. She really hadn't realized that he was the next tai-youkai, had she? He stepped toward her again, but she withdrew, throwing her weight against the huge glass door and fumbling with the latch before casting him one last, scared glance before darting outside and disappearing into the trees surrounding the house. *'Damn it . . . Fuck!'*

He followed her out of the mansion, down the deck's wide stone steps and through the yard toward the trees. She was running, but he wasn't. She wouldn't be able to get off the estate without drawing the notice of the security Cain had put in place regardless of whether the family was in residence or not. Either way, Sydnie was safe enough, and Bas, loping along through the woods, really couldn't run much faster. Thigh still affected by the rattlesnake-youkai's bite, he hurried after her as best he could. He didn't have to see her to know that she was close.

'Damn it, damn it, damn it . . . I thought she knew . . . She said she knew . . .'

Berating himself for hurting her, for not having realized that she really *hadn't* known, Bas gritted his teeth and kept moving. *'How could I have been so fucking stupid? Of course she hadn't known . . . with as much as she hates the tai-youkai – Dad – how could I have believed otherwise . . .?'*

'You believed her because she told you she knew . . . you believed her because she's your mate, and you're supposed to believe your mate – everything she says.'

He winced. Somehow that didn't make him feel any better . . .

Crashing through the trees into the clearing near the small stream that eventually emptied into Lake Michigan, Bas stopped short when he spotted her. Scrunched low

where she sat on a smooth boulder, she looked so sad, so alone, so lost that Bas grimaced, a quiet whine escaping him as he sought to find a way to make her understand.

"Sydney," he said, his voice soft, choked. He took a few tentative steps toward her. She wiped her cheeks, heaving a tumultuous sigh, and she refused to meet his gaze. "I thought you knew," he forced himself to say, hating how lame it sounded in his own ears.

"Go away, Sebastian," she whispered. "Leave me alone."

"I can't," he admitted, hunkering down before her.

She choked out an incredulous laugh—a hysterical laugh. "Sure, you can . . . just turn around and walk away."

He shook his head. "No, baby, I can't."

"Don't call me that!" she blurted, chin snapping up, eyes blazing with absolute misery, absolute rage. "I'm not your baby! I'm *nothing!*"

"You don't believe that," he insisted. "Sydney . . . you're everything to me."

"Leave me alone; just leave me alone! Can't you just . . . just . . . leave me alone?"

For an agonizing second he almost wished he could. Bas sighed and shook his head. "You know I can't."

"You could, you know . . . it's easy. Stand up and turn around and . . . and let me walk away."

He grimaced. "I'm sorry, Sydney . . . you know I can't, and even if I could . . ."

"Don't say it," she cut in coldly. "I hate you. I *hate* you."

He flinched. Her words were all the more painful because of the harsh whisper she'd used. He swallowed hard, blinking rapidly as his eyes burned. "I know," he agreed, clearing his throat.

"Did you have a good laugh at my expense? Laugh at the stupid little cat, right? You and your *father* . . . did you think it was funny?"

"I'd never laugh at you, kitty."

"I guess I deserve it," she went on. "I should have known . . . maybe I *did* know . . ."

"Knew what?"

She gulped, shoulders slumping even more. She didn't answer for a moment. Bas was starting to think that she wouldn't. Ever so slowly, she met his gaze, eyes bright with unshed tears, a bitter light blazing behind her gaze. Full lips pursed in a petulant little frown, she sniffled, chin trembling, nostrils quivering as a single tear slipped down her cheek. "Good things never last, Sebastian Zelig. They never last, and you . . . you're really no different."

"That's not true."

"Isn't it?"

Raking his hands through his hair, Bas struggled to find a way to make her understand. "Nothing's changed, Sydnie! The way I feel . . . the way you feel . . . it's all the same!"

"It's not the same, puppy! Can't you see that? You changed everything—*everything!* I *hate* you!"

He grimaced and shook his head, brushing aside the venom in her words, knowing in his heart that she really didn't mean it at all, even if she did want to believe what she was saying. "You *want* to hate me, but you know you don't, and I lo—"

She barked out an incredulous laugh as dry and brittle as the winter wind that stirred her hair. "Don't say that to me . . . don't you *dare* say that to me!"

He sighed, biting his lip and slowly shaking his head. "What do you want from me?" he asked quietly.

"Nothing."

Reaching out, catching her hands, he held her tight despite her resistance. "I'll . . . I'll call him," he told her. "I'll call Dad." Sydnie shook her head in confusion but stopped trying to pull her hands away, at least for the moment.

"What?"

"Sydnie . . . you're more important to me than anything, and if you can't deal with me being the next tai-youkai . . ." he trailed off, closing his eyes and drawing a deep, steadying breath. "Dad . . . has Evan. He's been trained, even if he is a little ass."

She shook her head, brows knitting together in silent confusion.

Bas dug the cell phone out of his pocket and dialed Cain's number.

"Bas? Is everything all right?"

Bas gulped and heaved a steadying sigh. "Dad, I, uh . . . I'm not coming back."

"What?"

Gripping his temple with his free hand, Bas sighed again. "I relinquish my position as your heir."

"What? Wait, son—"

Bas blinked in surprise when Sydney's hand shot forward to snap the phone closed. "Are you *crazy*?" she demanded, cheeks blossoming in indignant color. "Have you lost your *mind*?"

"No, I haven't," he shot back. "I don't care about any of that shit! Don't you get it? Don't you understand? Damn it, Sydney—"

The phone rang, and Bas flipped it open, dealing Sydney a fierce glower as he lifted it to his ear once more.

"Bas, what the hell's going on?" Cain demanded.

"Sorry . . . I just . . . some things are more important, Dad. That's what you've always told me, right?"

"Sebastian—"

"No. Would you tell Mom I—"

Sydney snapped the phone closed again, jerking it out of his hand for good measure. Bas sighed and narrowed his gaze at her, trying to discern what was going on behind those turbulent eyes of hers. "You can't do that," she murmured. "You can't change who you are any more than I can change who I am. It never would have worked."

"It could work, Sydney . . . you just have to want it to."

She shook her head sadly, ignoring the ringing phone in her hands. "That's where you're wrong. Don't you see? If you did that . . . if you turned your back on your family . . . Well, you'd blame me for that, and then you'd resent me for it, too."

He sighed, rubbing his temples as he sought to find a way to make her understand. "I'd never resent you. Listen . . . I didn't tell you at first because . . . because I was instructed not to tell anyone, and then . . . I swear it, Sydnie . . . I thought you knew. You said you knew . . ."

"I knew you were *his* son! I didn't know —" She winced, unable to restrain the tiniest sob that slipped from her lips. "I didn't *want* to know."

Bas nodded slowly and stood, reaching down for Sydnie's hand to help her to her feet. She ignored the gesture, rising stiffly, brushing past him as she strode back the way they'd come.

The entire world was silent, as though the very forest sensed Sydnie's upset. She walked ahead of him, back straight and proud, and through the space that separated him, he could feel her pain. It stung him, cut him deep, her anguish over his perceived betrayal shattering him like crystal on a marble floor. The need to protect her was fierce, consuming. The trouble was that the thing that threatened to harm her . . .

He grimaced, a low keen welling up inside him, the sound of desperation a repulsive thing. He bit it back, digging his claws into the palms of his hands, struggling in vain to refute the knowledge that this thing — this terrible, awful thing that threatened to hurt Sydnie . . .

It was him.

*Final Thought from Bas:
Sydnie ... I'm sorry ...*

Chapter 38

Skeletons in the Closet

Bas set the glass of milk on the nightstand and stuffed his hands into his pockets, scanning the room and not surprised to realize that she had retreated to the sanctuary of the closet in his absence.

She'd told him that she wanted some time alone to think, and that she wouldn't try to run away if he'd give her that. The very last thing he'd wanted was to leave her, but in the end, he had been able to give her that much. He'd ventured into town long enough to buy her a few little gifts for Christmas; nothing more than silly little presents that might have been better suited for a preschool child instead of a full-grown woman, with the exception of the little pinwheel charm necklace that spun when he blew on it.

'How do I convince her? How do I make her want to stay with me?'

Bas sighed, shuffling toward the closet as he pondered those questions – the same questions that had been plaguing him ever since he'd followed her back to the house hours ago.

"Fancy meeting you here. I brought you some milk. Come out and get it?" Bas coaxed, gazing at Sydnie as she rocked back and forth in the corner of the closet. Thin arms wrapped so tightly around her shins, chin resting on her knees as her dull eyes saw nothing – everything . . . "Kitty . . . what do you want me to do?"

"Where did you go?"

He blinked at the almost conversational tone in her voice. "Well, Christmas is just a few days away . . ." he hedged, nervously scratching the back of his neck.

"Christmas," she repeated, her gaze clouding over in a dull sort of way again. "I hate Christmas."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Not all of us had the perfect existence with the perfect family and the perfect friends."

"I know," he replied. "You just haven't had a good one yet; that's all."

She shook her head. "You can't fix me, Bas the Hunter. I'm not broken."

"I'm not trying to fix—" Cutting himself off abruptly with a wince—maybe he really had been trying to fix her all along—Bas sighed and shook his head. "Tell me why you hate Christmas."

"Bad things happen on Christmas."

"Like what?"

Sydney shrugged imperceptibly; more of a shifting in her youki than an actual movement. "Bad things . . . terrible things . . . scary things . . ."

He scowled into the darkened closet, tried to make sense of what she wasn't saying. "What sort of things, Sydney?"

"If I tell you, you can let me go, right? If I tell you what you want to know . . ."

"Kitty . . ."

She closed her eyes, turning her face so that her cheek dropped onto her knees. "I will, you know? I'll tell you . . ."

"Tell me? Tell me what?"

"Why I did it. Why I killed Cal Richardson."

Bas sucked in a sharp breath but shook his head. "Even then, you know I can't let you go."

"Yeah, I . . . didn't figure you could."

He sighed. "Tell me? Please? Baby . . ."

She shook her head slowly, wrapping her arms around herself a little more securely. The past and the present warred inside her in a place that he couldn't even imagine; in a prison that had somehow become something that she couldn't contain any longer. Whether it was simply the toll of a burden that shouldn't have ever been hers to bear or the weight of secrets that she'd kept for far too long, the alienation of a broken heart reached out to him, stung him, made him want to scream. The bond between them was too solid, too real. It didn't matter that the physical act had yet to be complete. Her

youki had merged with his, and her sorrow was too bitter, too poignant. He had to take it away from her if he possibly could.

“Sydnie . . . please . . . I want to help you. I want to *save* you . . . please.”

“Save me?” she echoed, her voice dull, dry. “Save me . . . I don’t know if that’s possible.”

“Come out of the closet?”

She hugged her legs tighter. Bas sighed and scooted closer – as close as he dared before she scrunched up her shoulders, her youki constricting around her as if it were trying to protect her. Bas only wished he knew what it was protecting her from.

“The truth is never as glamorous as the illusions, Sebastian.”

“I didn’t expect it would be.”

She smiled sadly; an expression full of a lifetime of sorrow, and maybe, just maybe, a little regret. “I don’t know where to start,” she admitted, glowing eyes meeting his with a directness that startled him.

“Start at the beginning.”

“Hmm . . .”

Bringing her hand up to her face, she opened her fist and stared at the tiny silver locket. Slowly reaching out, she grasped his hand; turned it, palm side up, and lowered the locket until it touched his skin before letting the chain drop into a pitiful heap in the center of his palm.

He shook his head as he frowned at the bit of costume jewelry. “Your locket?”

She shrugged, wrapping her arms around her shins once more. “Your answers.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Open it.”

“Sydnie . . .”

“You wanted answers, right? Go ahead. I won’t stop you. Everything you need to know is right there.”

He still didn't understand what she was trying to tell him. Slipping his claw into the tiny seam on the narrow edge of the rectangular charm, he grimaced as it popped open. He carefully unfolded the pieces and held it up to catch the wan light.

A faded photograph was carefully mounted in the left panel of the locket. He stared at the image of a young youkai with her arm slung around the shoulders of a tiny little girl. The older of the two looked exactly like Sydney. His scowl darkened. "Who's the baby?" he asked quietly.

Sydney uttered an ironic chuckle as she shook her head. "That's me," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You?"

She nodded. "Yes, me."

"Then . . ." he grimaced. "The other girl . . . she's your sister?"

Sydney nodded again. "Kit."

"But you're Kit?"

"She was the first Kit; the *real* Kit. I was just a reasonable facsimile."

"Hardly that."

"All the same, that's Kit."

"So you really *are* Sydney . . ."

"Something like that . . . it doesn't really matter now."

He scowled at the girl in the picture. "How old was she?"

"I don't know . . ."

"She looked young."

Sydney shrugged. "I remember . . . she talked about getting her license. She was almost old enough, she said."

"So she was almost sixteen?"

Sydney shrugged again. "I suppose."

"Why did she want her license?"

The look in her eyes haunted him; the steadiness behind the crystalline glow seemed ancient, timeless . . . and so very old. "She wanted to get me out of LA. She wanted . . . to take me to see the cows."

He grimaced, remembering all too vividly, the odd flash of sadness on Sydney's face when they'd visited the small dairy farm. "*Can I stay here, Sebastian? You could leave me . . . I think . . . I could be happy here . . .*"

He clenched his jaw and closed his eyes. "What happened to her? What happened to . . . Kit?"

She shot him an incredulous glance, as if she thought he was being dense on purpose. "Cal Richardson happened to her . . . Cal Richardson and another man."

"Oh, God . . ."

She heaved a sigh and looked away, her eyes clouding over as she stared back over time, into a place and into a world that Bas couldn't see. That place was entirely too overwhelming, and for a moment, Bas had to wonder if pressing her for answers hadn't ultimately been a mistake.

"It was Christmas Eve," she began quietly, her voice dropping to a listless monotone. The only sign of emotion was the sudden brightness that shimmered in her eyes. "I was three . . . I *think* I was three . . . I don't remember for sure. Kit wanted me to see Santa Claus, so she took me to the mall . . ."

"Sounds like a good sister."

"She was . . ."

He winced as she gulped and shook her head again, lost in her memories; lost in the shadows.

"Thing was," she went on, her voice a little steadier, "we didn't have very much money. She couldn't pay the admission to let me talk to Santa. It was enough, I guess, to see him . . . I knew back then that I wouldn't get anything on Christmas morning."

"Sydney . . ."

She shook her head to silence him. "We stood there for the longest time. Kit told me that she'd make sure that I had a Christmas dinner, and not one from the homeless shelter: a real one with turkey and dressing and—" She cut herself off and swallowed hard once more. "And milk."

He let out his breath in a ragged exhalation, reining in the desire to reach for her, knowing that she'd still pull away from him, even now.

"Anyway, she saw one of those photo booths—the ones you sit in and it takes a strip pictures for a few bucks. She tickled me so I'd laugh, and then she bought me this locket from one of those cheap, trendy stores . . . We sat on a bench while she cut out the pictures. She put that one in my locket, and one in the locket she'd bought for herself."

"I see."

Her hands were shaking as she groped for her purse. Understanding what she was after, he pulled the bag over and rummaged for her cigarettes, carefully lighting one before offering it to her without saying a word. She drew a long drag off it, hands trembling as she propped her elbow on her knees, resting her forehead on the heel of her hand, cigarette dangling from between her slender fingers. "She took me home—you've been there."

Bas shook his head. "I have?"

She nodded. "That abandoned building . . . I took you there from the bar . . ."

"That was your home?"

"It didn't look much better back then," she said with a grimace. "Sagging ceilings . . . holes in the floor . . . but see, Kit had made a bed for me in one corner . . . in a . . . closet . . ."

"God, Sydnie . . ." he rasped, his voice breaking with the force of his turbulent emotions.

She went on as though he hadn't interrupted her, her tone evening out into a monotone once more. "She put me to bed—it was still a little light outside—gave me my doll—she was missing an arm and a leg, and one of her eyes wouldn't open—weird, isn't it? The things I can remember . . . and yet I can't remember my real name or my birthday . . . or how old I was at the time . . ."

Bas scooted over until he was sitting beside her. She gazed up at him, eyes sad, solemn, full of dread at the story she was telling—her story. He slipped his arm around her, pulled her into his lap, cradled her against his chest. She let him soothe her, smoothing her hair for a moment before she sighed and cleared her throat. “She had to go to work so she could buy me the dinner she’d promised. She told me to stay in my closet no matter what, said that she’d be home soon. She always said that, and she always came home.”

“Where’d she work? What was open on Christmas Eve?”

Sydney choked out a bitter laugh. “She was too young for a real job . . . she needed a license to get one, you know?”

“What did she do?”

She leaned back to gaze up at him, lower lip trembling as her eyes bored into his. “What do you think?”

Bas shook his head, unable to comprehend exactly what Sydney was telling him. The image of his younger sister came to mind. Jillian was fifteen . . . only fifteen . . . “She . . . she couldn’t have . . . she was youkai . . . youkai’s mate for life . . . you know that.”

“But that really doesn’t matter when you’ve got a little sister to feed, does it?”

The same image of his sister’s face made him grimace, and he knew Sydney was right. Wouldn’t he do anything for his siblings, even if they annoyed the hell out of him at times? He stifled a sigh and tightened his arms around her. “I guess not.”

She heaved a tumultuous sigh, bringing the stump of a cigarette back to her lips, her hands shaking so hard that he worried for a moment that she’d burn herself. “I must have fallen asleep . . . It was a long walk to the mall and back. I woke up in the dark, but I could hear . . . things.” She shivered at the memory that haunted her. Bas kissed her forehead and remained silent. “She was crying . . . sobbing . . . and she kept saying one word over and over and over . . . ‘Please, please . . . please . . . stop’ . . .”

“Cal Richardson,” he whispered, taking the cigarette butt and tossing it into the empty metal trashcan nearby.

Sydney nodded, drawing a ragged breath and taking a moment to compose herself before continuing. “My closet wouldn’t close all the way. I sat up, and I peeked through the crack. Two youkai stood there beside Kit. They had her cornered. One reached out and tore her dress. He cut her skin with his claws, and she screamed. They *laughed*. I couldn’t understand how they could laugh.”

"Sydnie . . ."

She shook her head stubbornly, her expression closing as her voice shifted into a near-monotone. "They told her to run. They *wanted* her to run. They wanted to chase her, I guess. She wouldn't, and the other one . . . punched her in the face. I heard her bones breaking, but she didn't scream. She fell, and one of them kicked her in the head hard enough to daze her. The other one pulled his pants down and raped her before she could fight back. He just . . . grunted and groaned as if it was the best fuck of his life and she . . ." She cut herself off, swallowing hard, closing her eyes just for a moment as she gathered her composure to continue. "She must have come out of it in the middle of the attack. She clawed at him and pushed at him . . . he wouldn't stop. He finally shoved her away, and the first guy caught her. He . . . flipped her over and grabbed her hands in one of his, bringing her to her knees, and he held her like that while he raped her . . . while the other man held her by the hair and . . . and shoved his fucking prick into her mouth . . . Kit . . . was crying . . . and . . . and . . ."

She couldn't finish. It was enough. Bas ground his teeth together as she groped for another cigarette. Her entire body shook in his arms, her breath harsh and stilted. He wanted to make her stop, didn't want her to say any more when nothing she could say would offer her any sort of comfort. He couldn't stop her. In his heart, he knew. As painful as it was for her to tell, he knew that this macabre story was something that she had probably never said out loud. She needed to do it. After all those years of bottling it up inside, it was something she had to do, and even if it killed a part of him, he would listen. He owed her that much.

"They did it over and over for hours. I saw the sun coming up through the windows, and they just kept hurting her. When they got bored with fucking her, they used . . . whatever they could find . . . a glass soda bottle . . . sticks she'd gathered for firewood . . . She was hoarse from screaming and crying. I could smell her blood . . . so much blood . . . and finally she stopped crying."

"Baby, I'm sorry," Bas murmured, wishing that his words were more than just words, burying his lips in her hair.

"They got dressed; tossed a few bucks on her body, and they left her there . . . broken . . . bloody . . . As they turned to go, I saw their faces. I'll *never* forget their faces . . . I see them in my nightmares. They never go away."

"I don't imagine they would," he allowed softly.

She shivered. He tightened his grip on her, willing her to understand that she wasn't alone anymore; that she'd never *be* alone again.

"Never . . ." she murmured, her body listless, entirely spent.

"And that's why you hate Christmas."

She nodded; smiled almost apologetically; a cynical little expression that cut him through and through, a sadness that he was only beginning to comprehend – a sorrow so deep that he just couldn't reach her. "Nothing beautiful ever lasts. That's how I knew that you and I . . ."

"Sydney . . ."

Shaking her head, refuting his claim, she didn't try to move away from him, and for the moment, that was enough. "I waited and waited. I thought she was just sleeping. I didn't want to wake her up. So I waited until the sun was setting, then I crawled out of the closet, but something was wrong with her. She hadn't moved. They left her lying in the middle of a pool of her own blood with condom wrappers all over the floor. I guess they took the condoms with them. Didn't want to leave any DNA . . . Kit had her eyes open. She was staring at the ceiling, but her eyes looked . . . dull. I didn't understand that. I just . . . sat beside her, and I waited for her to wake up."

Bas heaved a sigh and held her close, hoping she was finished but knowing that she was not.

"I sat there for a few days. I didn't understand the smell, couldn't understand why Kit never woke up. I recognize the scent now. It's the stench of death, but back then, I didn't know, and I really . . . I wanted to believe that she was just sleeping . . . I got really hungry, and I thought –" her voice broke, and she uttered a small sob, clenching Bas' shirt in her fists for a moment before composing herself enough to go on. "I thought maybe she'd wake up if I brought her some food . . . I thought she was sleeping . . . just sleeping . . ."

Rocking her gently, rubbing her back, stroking her hair, he tried to tell her though his actions that she really wasn't as alone as she felt. *'I'll make it better; I promise . . . Sydney, you just have to believe . . .'*

"Some cops found me rummaging through the trash cans in an alley behind a restaurant. They took me to the station and fed me junk out of the vending machines. I kept trying to tell them that I needed to go home; that I needed to go back to Kit. They kept saying that she was coming to get me, so I sat there, waiting. The only 'she' that came after me was a woman from social services. I tried to tell her, too. I tried to tell them all. No one listened to me. They just wouldn't listen . . ."

"You told them," he said softly, ruffling her hair and shaking his head. "You told them . . . and no one did a damn thing."

"They took me to a home, and there were . . . lots of children. There weren't any others like me, though, you know? I was . . . the only one—the only youkai . . . I felt . . . lost . . . maybe a little angry . . . It wasn't a *bad* place. I just . . . I didn't belong there. They were kind, I suppose. The woman tried to hug me a few times. There were just too many children, and I was just a face in the crowd. I kept talking about Kit, and the more I talked, the more they'd . . . *look* at me, and then . . ."

"Then, what?" he coaxed gently.

She sighed. "Then they started feeding me pills. They said they'd help me, but I heard them talking when they thought I wasn't there. They said that I was hallucinating. Can a three year-old hallucinate?"

"I don't know," he agreed. "I know *you* weren't."

She uttered a terse laugh: a sound devoid of any real humor. "And where was your father; your benevolent tai-youkai? Where was he, Sebastian?"

He shook his head.

"I told you before . . . he doesn't give a damn about the nobodies. Kit had a name and a face and someone who . . . loved her . . . Cain Zelig did nothing. He just didn't care."

"He didn't know . . . he *couldn't* have known . . . Sydney, you have to believe me . . . My father is a good man—the *best* man. He's fair, and he's strong, and if he had known . . . He would have done something, I promise you."

She sighed and shook her head, her melancholy taking on a resigned sort of air. "I thought you'd say that. You heard the story. You know everything now, and still you defend him. Of course you do. He's your . . . *daddy*."

"You don't understand. My sister, Jillian . . . She was orphaned. Dad and Mom . . . they couldn't stand the idea of her being sent to live in some home, and most youkai aren't interested in adopting someone else's baby, but Mom and Dad . . . they did, and Jillian . . . she's every bit a part of my family, just as much as Evan or me . . . or my half-sister, Belle."

"That's nice, Bas the Hunter," she said with a grimace as she slowly shook her head. "Sebastian Zelig. Nice, but it . . . well, it doesn't really make me feel any better. You'll understand."

“Sydnie . . .”

She swallowed hard and heaved a heavy sigh, letting her temple rest on his shoulder, letting the subject of Cain Zelig drop since they simply weren't going to see eye-to-eye. “Anyway . . . I ran away from the foster home. It wasn't so hard. Just a house, you know . . . It was easy to escape. I left in the middle of the night, and I managed to find my way back home. When I got there . . . When I got there, Kit was gone. The doors were blocked off with that hideous yellow tape—like that was going to keep anyone out, right? Ugly yellow tape, and nothing left of my sister but a white chalk outline on the blood-stained floor . . .”

“And you were alone.”

“I was alone. There was . . . an old bag lady. Sometimes she gave me food. She died later.”

“How could you . . .? You were three . . .?”

“You do what you have to do,” she replied enigmatically, her eyes darkening, glistening, her voice hardening just before she heaved a short little sigh and quickly shook her head. “I don't remember how old I was when I saw Cal Richardson's face again. I was walking down the street, and I stopped to watch the news on the huge television in the window of an electronics store. They showed him. I heard his voice, but I couldn't read his name. So I . . . worked for the pastor at a local church, filing and cleaning, and delivering things . . . running errands. In exchange, he taught me how to read and how to write.”

“Didn't he try to get you to go to school or help you?”

“No one knew. I never told anyone how old I was. In LA, it's easy to get lost in the crowd. I suppose in his own way, he *was* helping me. He asked, sometimes, about my family. I just never answered. He was killed later. A local gang broke into the church. He tried to reason with them, and he got a bullet in his brain for his efforts.”

“So that's how you found Cal Richardson? On television?”

She nodded. “I saw him again later, and then I could read his name. I researched him on the internet—it's amazing, the information you can gather there . . . all it takes is the right word, and one of the librarians . . . he liked me. I spent . . . hours . . . reading things. Everything, really, and nothing at all. I learned that Richardson didn't trust many people, and I wanted him to suffer. I wanted him to hurt as badly as he hurt Kit.

I thought . . . I thought that if I could make him see how much pain he caused . . . I thought it would matter, but in the end, I just felt . . . emptier."

"Baby . . ."

She leaned away, staring at him as though she wanted him to understand something . . . something that mattered to her. "She speaks to me in my dreams. She's lonely where she is. All she wants is for me to find her. I don't know where they took her. I've never known where she is. In those dreams, I see it over and over, and I can't do a thing about it. It's like I'm a child . . . always a child . . ."

"Your nightmares."

Sydney tried to stand up. Bas tightened his arms around her, and she relented without much of a struggle. "You chased them away, but I wonder . . . What'll happen now?"

He shook his head, rubbed her back, stood without relinquishing his hold on her. Striding over to the bed, he stretched out, settling her against his chest. She didn't complain, simply curled up against him. Whether she was done fighting or was just too exhausted to keep it up, she didn't resist him at all, accepting the comfort he offered her, at least for the moment. Eyes closed, hands balled into tight little fists that she held close to her heart, she let out a deep breath and slowly relaxed in his arms.

It was unfathomable – unbelievable. How had she been able to live with the memories without going insane? He blinked quickly, sinking his fingers into her hair, stroking her cheek with the pad of his thumb. Maybe the desire to avenge her sister was enough, and maybe Sydney desperately needed to understand that there could be a future after all was said and done: a future with him – a future filled with smiles and laughter and all of the things that she'd missed in her lifetime; the things she should have had but didn't.

"There were two youkai . . ."

Bas flinched. *'Two . . . youkai . . .? Then that means . . .'* He grimaced, knowing full well what it meant. "Sydney . . . baby . . . tell me something?"

She sighed, knowing that it wouldn't do any good to pretend that she was sleeping. "Haven't I told you enough for one night?"

He nodded. "I know, and I'm sorry . . . I just have one more question."

" . . . Okay . . ."

"You said . . . there were two youkai."

She stiffened slightly; the only testament to her unease. "Did I?"

"Yes, you did . . . Do you . . . know . . . who the second one is? Do you know his name?"

"Does it matter?"

He closed his eyes. "I think it does."

"It doesn't. It won't change anything."

Bas shifted to the side so that he could look at her face, scowling at the stubborn set of her features. "You're planning on going after this other man, too, aren't you?"

Her only answer was the slight shrug of her thin shoulders; the mulish frown on her face.

"You can't . . . You have to tell me his name."

She ignored his demand, and Bas heaved a sigh. "His name, Sydnie. Tell me his name."

"It's *my* responsibility."

"It was never meant to *be* your responsibility. Can't you see that? Tell me his name."

"No . . . No . . . I don't want you involved."

"I'm already involved, damn it."

"What would you do if I gave you a name?"

He shook his head and shrugged, letting Sydnie wiggle close to him once more. "I'll fix it," he assured her quietly. "I'll make sure you never have to think about it again."

"I can't tell you," she insisted.

"Can't or won't?"

"Fine, then. I won't."

“Sydnie—”

“No. Can we drop this? Please?”

He sighed. “For tonight,” he agreed. “Just for tonight.”

That must have been good enough for her. She relaxed against him again, her soft breathing pounding in his ears like thunder. Scooting to the side far enough to reach the full glass of milk he’d left sitting there before he’d crawled into the closet with her, he shook her shoulder gently, helping her sit up so she could drink it before she fell asleep.

“I have to tell Dad,” he said, breaking the companionable silence. Sydnie blinked at him over the brim of the glass, and for once, she didn’t try to play coy. Nodding once before draining the last of the milk, she snuggled against him as he took the glass and set it aside.

He held her until she was fast asleep, staring at the message light blinking furiously on the cell phone. He’d catch hell, he supposed, for turning off the ringer. ‘*Some things,*’ he thought as he brushed Sydnie’s hair out of her eyes, ‘*are more important . . .*’

Grabbing the phone, he flipped it open, careful not to disturb Sydnie. Sure, he’d told her that he was going to call his father, but she was so exhausted . . . He didn’t want to wake her. Cain had called a total of seven times since Bas had rushed him off the phone. Bracing himself for his father’s tirade, he dialed the number and grimaced.

“Bas? Is everything okay? What the hell’s going on?” Cain demanded, dispensing with any sort of pleasantries that should have been forthcoming.

“Yeah, Dad . . . everything’s fine . . . at least, it will be.”

“You’re sure? What happened?”

He sighed, idly smoothing Sydnie’s hair, blinking quickly as his eyelids stung, as his nostrils prickled. She looked so forlorn, so lost . . . so very, very lost . . . “Dad . . . we fucked up. We fucked up bad.”

“How so?”

“Sydnie told me . . . Cal Richardson killed her sister, Kit—the *real* Kit. Raped her, beat her, tortured her . . . and in the end, he and another youkai killed her.”

“ . . . What?”

Bas let out a deep breath, shaking his head as he struggled to make sense of it, himself. "In an abandoned building in south LA . . . Sydnie took me there right after I met her. She said Kit was there; that she'd take me to her. Dad . . . she was three, and she . . ." he sighed again, grimacing and drawing a steadying breath. "She saw the entire thing."

"Three?" Cain echoed incredulously.

"Yeah, three . . ."

"Oh, God . . ."

"I know what you mean."

"So she had damn good reason to kill Cal Richardson."

"Yeah, she did . . . and that's why she hates you. She thinks you ignored her on purpose. She thinks . . . she thinks you failed her."

Cain sighed. Bas could hear the soft snick of a lighter just before his father exhaled. He could see him, slouching in the thickly cushioned chair behind the hulking cherry desk that encompassed one end of Cain's study. He heard the soft clink of his father's claws hitting the crystal ashtray that Gin complained about but left on Cain's desk. Bas wondered if Cain's fingers were shaking as he drew a deep drag off a cigarette and exhaled before answering. "I think I failed her, too," he agreed. "Cal Richardson . . . damn it . . . Damn it, damn it, *damn it* . . ."

"That's not the only problem, Dad," Bas forced himself to say. Sydnie stirred in his arms but didn't open her eyes. Catching the phone between his ear and shoulder to free up his hand, he reached over, dragging the coverlet over her, and she snuggled down with a soft sigh.

"Let's hear it."

Bas swallowed hard, smiling sadly as the illumination from the revolving security lights mounted on the poles that surrounded the estate shone through the windows, danced over her features only to dissipate as quickly as they had appeared. "There were two men. Cal Richardson was one. There's another."

"I was hoping I'd misunderstood that part. Did she tell you the other guy's name?"

"No, and she says she won't."

"Unacceptable. Get that name. I want it."

Jaw ticking, Bas' jaw hardened as he gritted his teeth and tamped down the bitter rage that surged in him. "No, Dad. *I* want it."

"Sebastian . . ."

"No . . . and there's something else . . ."

"Good God, what now?"

Bas grimaced since telling his father the next part . . . it just wasn't quite as easy. "I'm going to protect her."

Cain took a moment before answering. "You are."

"Yes, sir."

"Just . . . protect her?"

Bas rubbed his forehead. "No . . . I'm going to make her my mate . . . she already *is* my mate . . ."

"Bas—"

"I mean, I don't have a choice; that's all."

Cain breathed a sigh of relief. "Just don't do anything . . . irrevocable until your mother meets Sydney, okay? We won't stop you, but . . . well, you know Gin . . ."

"Yes, sir," he repeated again.

"Get the name, Bas. She can't be responsible for two deaths, even if they are warranted . . . for her own peace of mind."

"I don't want her to be, either."

"I'll see if there's anything in the unsolved case files . . . maybe her sister is one of those."

Bas nodded. "All right. Are you going to tell the generals?"

"I want to talk to her first. I want to make sure I have all the facts, and I want to see if I can find anything to substantiate her claims."

"Sydnie is no liar."

"I'm not saying she is. I'm simply saying that I don't want to go in there half-cocked."

"All right."

Cain fell silent for a moment before speaking again. "Take care of her. Sounds like she's already been alone for far too long."

"I will, Dad," he promised.

Cain sighed. "You'd better, and about that stuff you were saying earlier? That you weren't coming home and that you were relinquishing your right to be the next tai-youkai?"

Bas grimaced. "Yeah?"

"I'll pretend you didn't say it. Just get her back here. I'd like to tell her I'm . . . I'm sorry."

*Final Thought from Cain:
... Damn it ...*

Chapter 39

Christmas

Sydney peeked over the top of the psychology book, grudgingly watching as Bas carefully wrapped a long silk holly garland around the overly-fat pine tree he'd set up by the glass doors in the living room. Sparing a glance over his shoulder, he caught her eye and smiled shyly. She bit her lip and jerked the book back over her face. He heaved a sigh and started to hang blown glass ornaments from the tree branches.

'What do you expect, Bas? She's told you she hates Christmas.'

'I know,' he allowed. 'Anyway, whose side are you on?'

'I'm not taking sides, 'puppy' . . . I'm pointing out the obvious.'

'Et tu? You're my youkai blood, aren't you? Stop calling me 'puppy'.'

'Entirely off topic, Sebastian. Besides, you should have known that the last thing Sydney would want to do is to deck Ye Ole Tannenbaum with you.'

'Shuddup . . . this'll work.'

'What? You think that showing her that Christmas isn't a horrible thing will make a difference in the end?'

'Sure . . . in any case, it can't hurt.'

'Wishful thinking, if you ask me.'

'Yeah? Good thing I didn't ask.'

'In a bit of a mood, are we Bastian?'

Bas snorted, retrieving another box of glass ornaments. *'This was more fun back home.'*

"Course it was. Your mom made sure that everyone was laughing and joking, singing cheesy Christmas carols and plying the family with hot cocoa . . . I swear she spiked the cocoa . . . your father was entirely too goofy when you were setting up the tree. It was unnatural.'

Bas smiled despite himself. That was true enough. Cain did tend to lean toward the ridiculous on the day they set up the tree back home. Dragging Bas out of bed well before the crack of dawn so that the two of them could go stumble around the forest in order to find what Cain always referred to as ‘the perfect tree’, it had taken years before Bas was fully able to grasp the significance of the gesture. After finally locating said-tree, Cain had cut it down carefully and tied the branches so that he and Bas could drag it back to the house with minimal damage.

Evan always waited by the sliding doors with Jillian since their mother had insisted that it was too cold for Evan to run around outside, which, in Bas’ opinion, was complete bunk since *he’d* been doing the tree run with Cain ever since he could remember. Then again, maybe it was something that Gin just viewed as special between Cain and Bas. Maybe that was the real reason that Evan never accompanied them. In any case, they spent the rest of the day drinking Gin’s special hot cocoa – spiked or not, it was always more than enough to warm him up after the hours spent in the cold – while setting up the tree and painstakingly decorating each branch.

Bas frowned as an odd sense of loss surged through him, and he had to wonder if Evan had gone with Cain this year since he wasn’t at home . . .

At least Gin was still thinking of him. A box had arrived via UPS second day air earlier in the day. Stuffed full of wrapped packages with Gin’s hand-painted little name cards attached to each one, Bas had smiled to himself. Gin had sent plenty of little gifts for Sydnie, and for some reason, the idea of his mother buying presents for the girl she had yet to actually meet was a huge thing to him. She’d also enclosed a letter, telling him to expect the caterers to stop by early on Christmas day to drop off a ready-to-eat meal for the two of them – Christmas dinner with all the fixings, even if they didn’t taste quite the same as the dinners that Bas remembered best.

“Why are you going to all the trouble to set up a Christmas tree when we’re the only people here?” Sydnie finally asked.

Bas shrugged. “Because the presents I bought you would look pretty stupid if I just set them on the floor, don’t you think?”

She wrinkled her nose but couldn’t help the interested glance she shot him. “You . . . bought me presents?”

He nodded. “Sure . . . did you really think I wouldn’t?”

“I don’t like Christmas, remember?”

Bas grabbed another box of the delicate ornaments. “You said Kit did, though, right?”

She flinched at the ease with which Bas used her sister's name. "I suppose," she allowed. "That doesn't mean I have to."

"Listen, Sydnie . . . I thought about that last night."

"Oh?"

"Yep, and as I see it, you've just never had a really good Christmas to make an educated comparison."

"And you're suffering from 'do-gooder' syndrome," she grumbled. "Can we just drop it?"

Bas dropped the empty box into the wooden crate that he'd dug out of the basement. "Never heard of that one. Is it in your book?"

"I'm sure it is," she quipped. "I can look it up, if you want."

"Never mind, kitty. Why don't you help me hang these ornaments?"

Lifting a hand to wave away his question, Sydnie deliberately kept her eyes trained on the book. "I'm busy, puppy. Besides, you're doing just fine without my help."

Bas snorted. "Pfft! Everyone knows that decorating a Christmas tree takes more than just one person."

"I'm helping," she countered. "I'm *watching*, aren't I?"

"That's not really helping," he pointed out with a crooked eyebrow.

"It's helping," she argued, "and if you keep talking, I can't read my book."

"I hate that book," he grumbled since she had just gotten finished telling him earlier that she thought he was exhibiting the early signs of dementia.

"I'm educating myself," she said.

He sighed and rolled his eyes but wandered back over to her. "Here, cat. You put this one on the tree."

"What's this?" she echoed, staring at the nondescript white box he handed her.

"I picked it up in town yesterday. It's a keepsake ornament. I got it for you."

Sydney stared suspiciously at him before slowly letting her gaze drop to the box once more. Opening it and carefully pulling the porcelain ornament out, she turned it over in her hands and shot Bas a confused glance before staring at the little depiction of a cat snuggled with a sleeping dog before a roaring fireplace. "Do you think this is us?" she questioned.

Bas shrugged. "Sort of. I thought . . . I thought maybe we could collect these, you know? One every year for every good Christmas memory you make."

Sydney shook her head slowly, struggling to gather her waning bravado. "I see. Puppy –"

"We're meant to be together, Sydney . . . you want that, don't you?"

"Sebastian . . ."

"Don't over-think it, okay? Just . . . let your heart decide."

Sydney smiled sadly, turning the ornament over in her hands. "Let my heart decide?"

"Yeah."

"It's not that simple."

"It can be."

She shook her head again. "I don't think it can. You're . . . you're . . . It's different now."

"Not really."

"But it is."

"It doesn't have to be! Nothing's changed, Sydney . . . I still feel the same, and you –"

"We're too different, you know. They'd never allow us to stay together. You're the next . . ." she swallowed hard, ". . . the next tai-youkai, and I'm nothing."

Her softly uttered words ignited a hot rush of irritation, and he swung around, draping his hands on his hips to pin her with a menacing glower. "That's stupid! Damn it . . . do you think I care who you think you are? Do you think that really matters to me?"

"It should," she argued. "Can you honestly think that it won't matter to your parents? To your *father*? Of course it will! You think they'd want you – their precious son – to be with me – a nobody – a *murderer*?"

"You're not a murderer, Sydnie . . . the tai-youkai . . ." Bas trailed off, unable to meet her gaze for a moment as the implications of what he was trying to admit sank in. Heaving a sigh, he knelt beside her and shook his head. "The tai-youkai . . . failed you."

"You . . . you believe me?"

Bas swallowed hard and nodded. "Of course I do. I told you that last night."

Sydnie smiled slightly – a sad, almost forlorn sort of smile – as she stared at the ornament still resting on her hand. "That's all I wanted," she admitted quietly. "Back when it might have mattered, that's all I really wanted."

Bas grimaced. "I know, baby. Cal Richardson can't hurt anyone again. You know that, right?"

"I know that."

"Sydnie . . ."

She shook her head quickly, as though she knew what he was about to ask, and she probably did. "So where do I hang this ornament, puppy?"

Bas sighed but let it go, at least for the moment. True, he wanted – *needed* – the second name. At the moment, though, it was enough for him that she was willing to concede to a little victory on his part. "Wherever you want it."

Sydnie stood up and wandered toward the tree, examining it closely. He shifted slightly to watch her, letting his forearms rest on his knees, hands dangling between his legs as a slow smile spread on his features. Wearing one of his bulky sweaters that had been folded in the closet, she looked even tinier than normal. It had surprised him this morning when she'd selected the garment though maybe it shouldn't have. In this place where he knew she felt completely out of sorts, the familiarity of his scent comforted her even if she did swear that they couldn't be together.

Slowly, carefully, she reached up, hooking the ornament's silver cord over an empty branch and adjusting the way it hung before stepping back and glancing at him a little uncertainly. "How's that?"

Bas' smile widened. "Perfect, kitty."

She blinked, her cheeks pinking just slightly as she stepped back to get the full effect. "Maybe. . ."

Chuckling softly as she moved the ornament closer to the front of the tree, Bas wisely remained silent until she had repeated the inspection process once more. "There . . . much better," she decided.

"Absolutely."

She nodded. "Yeah?"

He grinned. "Yeah."

Sydney tilted her head to the side, regarding the tree with a critical eye. "Okay."

Moaning softly as Sydney felt the gentle but insistent shake of her shoulder, she squeezed closed a little tighter and burrowed deeper under the warmth of the blankets. Bas chuckled and shook her again. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

"Don't wanna," she mumbled, burying her face against his chest.

"Come on, baby . . . It's Christmas."

Sydney whimpered and tried to ignore his efforts to rouse her.

"Don't you want to see if Santa Claus brought presents?"

That got her to sit up. Scowling at the puppy in such a way so as to let him know that she truly wondered if he had lost his mind, Sydney wrinkled her nose and slowly shook her head. "There's no such thing as Santa Claus, Sebastian. Aren't you a little too old to believe in fairy tales?"

His smile dissipated but his eyes still glowed with his amusement. "You're never too old to believe in Santa Claus *or* fairy tales, Sydney."

Her expression stated quite plainly, exactly what she thought of that, and he rolled his eyes, bestowing an entirely loud, obscenely slobbery kiss on her cheek. "Puppy!" she protested just before she dissolved in a fit of helpless giggles.

"Come on, Sydney. Don't you want your presents?"

She heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Presents?" she asked grudgingly.

"Yes, presents. What's Christmas without presents?"

"Hmm, I don't know . . ."

"All right," he gave over with a mock grimace. "I'll just go downstairs . . . *alone* . . ."

"You really think that's going to work on me?"

He grinned unrepentantly. "Can't hurt to try, can it?"

She smiled despite herself. He was absolutely incorrigible this morning. In fact, she couldn't remember seeing him quite like this before . . . "What's gotten into you, puppy?"

"I got gifts for you, kitty, and I wrapped them myself."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "Yep. Mom sent you some presents, too."

Sydney stiffened and slowly leaned up to look at Bas. "Why would she do that?"

He shrugged. "Guess Gunnar told her that you're my mate."

She opened her mouth to argue with him. He pressed his index finger over her lips to shush her. "Not today, kitty, all right? Today's Christmas, and Christmas is supposed to be magical."

"Magical?"

He nodded again, wrapping a long strand of her hair around his finger. "Yep . . . you never know what'll happen on Christmas day . . . and I won't even try to watch football."

"No football? That *is* magical," she retorted dryly.

Bas opened his mouth to complain but the chiming of the doorbell cut him off. Squeaking indignantly as Bas shoved Sydnie off his chest, she sat up, hair tousled lost in the copious folds of the blankets. "Where are you going?" she demanded, leaning forward to catch his hand as he tugged a pair of jeans over his boxer shorts.

"Caterer," he explained. "You wanted a real Christmas dinner, right?"

She wrinkled her nose but scooted off the bed, pulling a thick, dark green blanket closer around her as she padded out of the bedroom on his heels. "Do you have catered dinners at home?"

"Nope," he replied, running down the stairs. "But it was kind of short notice to get Mom to fly in to cook it, don't you think?"

"You can't cook?"

"Ha! No."

"So there *is* something that the great Bas the Hunter can't do?" she teased.

"Oh, there're lots of things I can't do, kitty." Bas jerked on the deadbolt lock and grimaced since it seemed to be quite stuck. "For example, I can't get this door open, damn it."

"No swearing on Christmas," she told him, gently pushing him aside and fiddling with the door. The lock finally snapped open, and she raised her eyebrows as she stepped back to let him open it.

Bas wrinkled his nose and jerked his head toward the archway that led into the living room. "Go on in, Sydnie. I'll be there in a minute."

Sydnie bit her lip before whipping around and darting back up the stairs. She hadn't decided for sure, whether or not she really ought to give Bas a present since she was so adamant that she despised all things Christmas, but for some reason, she really, really wanted to give him something, too.

Discarding the blanket on the bed, she grabbed her purse and dug for the small, black velvet box. She'd bought it the day they'd gone clothes shopping while he'd been having the battery in his watch replaced. She hadn't taken the time to wrap it, but she didn't think he'd mind too much. Pausing for a moment to open the box and scrutinize the howling dog standing on a cliff etched in graphic relief onto a backdrop of a full

moon, the platinum keychain had reminded her of Bas, and she hadn't thought twice about purchasing it despite the huge dent it had made in her savings.

She set the box down long enough to pull another of Sebastian's huge sweaters – this one a cream colored fisherman's style – over her head. It almost reached her knees, and she closed her eyes as the soothing scent of him lent her a small sense of security. Grabbing the gift box off the bed, she hurried back out of the room and down the stairs as Bas was closing the door behind the departing caterers.

"I knew there was a reason I never got rid of those stupid sweaters," Bas murmured as he turned away from the door and grinned at Sydnie. "They look better on you than they ever did on me."

She blushed but smiled slightly as he slipped an arm around her shoulders and led her into the living room.

Sydnie stopped short and blinked in surprise, staring at the tree, glowing in the soft illumination of the hundreds of lights that Bas had wrapped around it. Presents were arranged under the low branches, and when she glanced up to see Bas' face only to find him staring back down at her in a way that made her heart skip a beat. He didn't smile, but his eyes were shining brightly, a thousand emotions there for her to see. Sydnie tried to smile, but the gesture just didn't seem like it was enough. Bas leaned down, kissing her forehead and squeezing her shoulders. "Merry Christmas, baby."

"Puppy . . ."

"Let's get your presents, Sydnie."

She let him take her hand and pull her toward the tree. He let go and knelt down, rummaging through the gifts and handing her a beautifully wrapped box. Sydnie took it slowly, turning it over in her hands. The paper seemed to be hand-painted, and she frowned. "What's this?"

Bas spared her a glance before settling on the floor and crossing his legs. "Dunno . . . it's from Mom."

"But the paper . . ."

"Mom and Dad always make their own paper," he explained. "At least, most of the time. They've been known to use store stuff, though, if they run out of that."

She bit her lip. "It's too pretty to tear."

Bas chuckled. "It's just paper."

She didn't know how to explain what she was thinking. To have put that much time and effort into something that she was just using to wrap a gift, and then for Bas not to understand what it should have meant to him . . . Sydnie shook her head. Maybe she was reading too much into things. Untying the plain brown raffia ribbon, Sydnie was relieved when the paper fell away without tearing. Bas' mother hadn't used tape to secure the paper, and Sydnie smoothed it carefully and set it aside.

The brown wooden box was plain yet beautiful, with the only embellishment being the scrolling vines that were intricately carved on the lid's smooth surface. The inside of the box was lined with deep red velvet, and Bas chuckled as he leaned over her shoulder to look at it. "It's a jewelry box," he told her.

Sydnie blinked and glanced at him. "A jewelry box?"

He nodded. "You can put your locket in there, if you want."

"So I could."

He slipped another present into her hands. "Looks like Mom sent you more presents than she did me," he remarked.

"I . . . I'm sorry."

He chuckled. "Don't be. I don't mind."

She shot him a tentative smile. "I'd like to thank her."

Bas stared at her for a long moment then nodded. "You can do that. I'll call her later."

Sydnie lowered her gaze, a strange sense of shyness shooting to the fore. Bas sighed softly before tearing the paper off a gift that his mother had sent for him.

'Magical, huh,' she thought as she stared at the jewelry box. *'Maybe . . .'*

Bas leaned back against the sofa, gazing at the pathetically wrapped present in his lap—the last one: the one he'd waited to give Sydnie. She was preoccupied with a plastic bottle of bubbles. Sitting on her knees, she blew bubbles into the air and giggled softly

as they shot out of the pink plastic wand only to drift slowly to the thickly carpeted floor. He wasn't sure why he'd bought her the childish present, but she seemed to love it anyway.

He'd bought her all of those things he remembered best from his childhood: the nasty smelling plastic compound that could be blown into oddly misshapen balls . . . packages of balloons of every shape and size . . . rubber jacks with a ball that flew into the air when it hit the floor . . . a paddle with a rubber ball attached to the center of it via an elastic string and an industrial staple . . . He'd felt rather foolish last night when he'd sneaked out of bed to wrap everything. Sydnie, however, didn't seem to mind the juvenile gifts. In fact, she looked like she was having the time of her life, and that, in Bas' opinion, was more than worth the frustration he'd endured in trying to wrap everything.

His gaze fell on the wooden jewelry box, and he smiled. Sydnie didn't know, and at the moment, he was loathe to tell her . . . That box, he knew, had been made by Cain; carefully constructed from a sturdy branch from the white ash tree that stood in their back yard in Maine. Bas, himself, had helped his father cut the branch last spring. He'd wanted to make something for Gin – something simple yet beautiful – to hold all the shells that InuYasha still brought her every time he came to visit. Cain had carved the intricate design with his claws, not trusting a knife or a tool to do what he could better achieve with his hands. That his father had wanted Sydnie to have it . . . In Bas' mind, that spoke volumes.

"You've got one last present, kitty," he said, breaking the companionable silence in the room.

Sydnie spared him a momentary glance before turning her attention back to the bubbles once more. "Oh?"

"Yep," he told her, shaking his head since she seemed to be much more interested in the bubbles than she did in getting one last gift.

"You open it for me, puppy," she told him. "I'm busy."

He snorted. "No way. I already know what it is."

"Okay, okay," she agreed with a sigh as she screwed the cap back onto the container of bubbles and set it aside before turning her attention to Bas. "You're not going to try to steal my bubbles, are you?"

Bas snorted. "Pfft! No, kitty." He held out the last package and made a face. The box, itself, was heart-shaped, which had been damn near impossible to wrap. After nearly

half an hour of trying to wrap it, he'd finally given up and gone in search of a box to put the box in. He'd ended up tearing the paper a few times, though, and in the end, the tape-covered paper just looked, well, sad in comparison to the meticulously wrapped gifts that his mother had so painstakingly wrapped. Bas grimaced. "Never mind the paper," he told her. "I'm not so good at that sort of thing."

She grinned at the sorry-looking gift and giggled. "It's not so bad," she assured him, shaking the box and holding it up to listen. The dull thump gave away nothing, and Bas smiled at the consternated look on her face.

"Just open it, kitty."

Sydney wrinkled her nose but tore into the paper. It didn't take long for her to drop the cardboard box to the side as she eyed the heart-shaped, black jeweler's box that was hidden inside. "What's this?"

Bas shrugged. "Open it. It's not much . . . I just thought . . . well, if you don't like it, I can take it back."

Sydney didn't comment other than a little snort at the idea that he would be getting that particular present back to exchange. He hid his smile as she slowly lifted the lid. The amusement that had lent her eyes the happy little sparkle that had been there most of the morning faded, and Bas flinched. "You . . . you bought me a pinwheel?" she asked quietly.

Bas tried not to look disappointed. "I just . . . I thought . . . you liked the one I bought you at the carnival . . . It really spins if you blow on it," he went on, feeling lamer by the second. "You . . . don't like it . . ."

She shook the box slightly, the tiny gold pinwheel reflecting the light filtering through the glass doors behind her. The reflection caught in her eyes as she slowly lifted her gaze to meet his. "Will you put it on me?"

Bas blinked but nodded. Sydney handed him the box and turned around, holding her hair up with one hand. Bas pulled the delicate chain from the securing slits in the foam that held the necklace in place and fastened it around her neck. "There."

She reached up, fingering the charm with trembling fingers, and when she craned her neck to look back at him, he caught his breath at the unmasked emotion writ in the depths of her gaze. He reached out, brushing his finger along her cheek as a tender smile twitched at the corners of his lips. "I'm glad you like it," he told her.

Sydney nodded vaguely, her gaze dropping back to the tiny pinwheel once more.

Bas sighed, wishing that he dared to pull her into his arms. True, she still slept huddled on his chest, but there was a certain sense of distance that he just couldn't breach. Resigned to letting Sydnie indicate the intensity of their relationship, Bas stood up and started gathering trash.

"Sebastian?"

"Hmm?"

Sydnie grabbed his hand and tugged. "I . . . I have something . . . for you . . ."

He stopped abruptly and stared at her. "You do?"

She nodded, cheeks pinking as she held out a black velvet box.

Bas took it, casting her a cursory glance before flipping the lid back and staring at the platinum keychain. The dog standing on the cliff seemed majestic, powerful, proud . . . Was that how she saw him, too? Bas swallowed hard. "Sydnie . . ."

"You . . . like it?"

"Uh . . . yeah . . . thank you . . ."

Sydnie smiled shyly. "Merry Christmas, Bas the Hunter."

Bas smiled, too, tucking Sydnie's hair behind her ear with a gentle hand. "Merry Christmas, kitty."

*Final Thought from Bas:
Magical Christmas ...*

Chapter 40

Standoff

“So this brother of yours—Evan . . . he’s a little different?”

Bas shrugged as the two crunched through the freshly fallen snow surrounding the Wake Forest mansion. “Yep. Then again, maybe I’m the one who’s different. Mom and Dad are both pretty artistic, and Evan is, too, in his own way. Even Jillian’s into doing stuff like drama club and all that. I’ve just never really been like that.”

Sydney stuck her hands into her pockets and ambled along side him. “Not in the least?”

“Nope.”

“Never wanted to be a rock star or an actor?”

Bas chuckled. “Nope. I thought about trying to play football professionally for awhile.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I played a couple years in college. Seemed like it was more about winning than anything else, though. It didn’t seem like the game was really a *game* anymore. Anyway, I was studying pre-law at the time, and that was a fairly heavy major. I didn’t have time to study and play ball, and I figured that studying was more important.”

Sydney digested that for a moment then sighed. “You know what they say about all work and no play.”

Bas rolled his eyes and grinned. “Yeah, well . . . it’s weird. Dad, you see, has this photographic memory. He has to. I mean, he can glance at something for a moment then paint or sculpt it later, and he gets it perfect every time—every little detail . . . Evan’s like that, too. The only reason he gets bad grades is because he wants to, if you want my opinion.”

“Because he wants to? Why would he do that?”

Bas shrugged again. “Who knows? No one’s ever figured out how Evan’s mind works, least of all me. I just know that he’s never really had to sit down and study anything,

ever, and his music? I gotta tell you, as annoying as it is to hear him playing the drums at all hours of the night, he's got a gift for it. I lost track of the number of instruments he can play. Dad said that he used to sneak away when he was in Japan during the summers so he could go to my brother-in-law's house. Kichiro taught him how to play the piano."

"You sound proud of him."

"A little," Bas allowed, "when he's not being a pain in my ass, that is."

"Are you so sure that he tries to get on your nerves?"

"Of course he does," Bas grumbled. "Everything Evan does is designed to get on my nerves. I'm pretty sure that Mom and Dad just thought it'd be funny to have him just to torment me when they should have known that I was so good that Evan was bound to be nothing but trouble from the start."

"So you're the good child."

"Absolutely. You can't tell?"

Sydney giggled but kept walking. "If you say so, puppy."

"Yeah, well, if Dad knew half of the things I know about Evan, he'd be dead by now."

"Oh? Anything good for blackmail?"

Staring up at the overcast skies, Bas narrowed his gaze. "Sure."

"Like what?"

"Like that I walked in on him having sex with his best friend a few months ago."

"What?"

He snorted, recalling all-too-well, the image of Evan doing Madison doggy-style as he held onto her hips as the girl hung onto the end of the bed when he'd gone to Evan's room to tell him that dinner was ready. His perverted brother hadn't even stopped as he'd shot Bas a cursory glance and told him to close the door. Bas had flat-out refused to deliver any kind of message to Evan's room after that. Seeing his fifteen year-old brother having sex with his fourteen year-old best friend was just not something that Bas cared to see again. "Scarred for life," Bas complained.

Sydney laughed. "Okay, then I'm sorry I asked," she assured him. "What about your sister? Jillian?"

Bas' smile returned. "Jilli? She's okay. Her taste in guys stinks, but hell . . ."

"What's wrong with her taste in guys?"

"Nothing, really, but she's stuck on this guy who hasn't ever really given her the time of day. They're friends, sure, but other than that, Gavin doesn't really seem to notice that she actually exists."

"Wait . . . the boy and girl from the picture? I don't know . . . he seemed happy enough to be with her."

Bas snorted. "Pfft! 'Happy' doesn't *begin* to describe Gavin. I swear the boy's scared of his own shadow. Weird, too, because his father's one of Dad's top hunters."

"Gavin's father is a hunter?"

Bas nodded. "Yep."

"Oh . . ."

Sensing her upset at the inadvertent reminder, Bas grimaced. "Dad never would have sent one of his regular hunters after you, you know," he said gently.

"Wouldn't he?"

"No, he wouldn't."

"Look Sebastian—"

"I'm serious, Sydney. Dad's always thought that there was something odd about the Cal Richardson case. That's why he sent me . . . that, and I asked to go."

"You did?"

He nodded. "Surprise you?"

"A little. Why would you want to do that?"

Bas shrugged. "I wanted to be a hunter."

“And now?”

Stopping in the midst of the trees, Bas slumped back against a stout trunk and let his head fall back against the rough bark as he pondered her question. “Now? That’s simple. How would I have found you if I hadn’t taken the assignment?”

“And finding me was a . . . good thing?”

“Finding you was the *best* thing. You’re my mate, you know.”

“Bas . . .”

“No, you are, and one of these days, you’ll accept it.”

She didn’t argue with him, but he wasn’t fool enough to think that she agreed with him, either. Flicking some imaginary lint from the sleeve of her coat, she deliberately ignored his statement.

‘Someday, Sydnie, you’ll believe me,’ Bas vowed as she turned on her heel and started back the way they’d come. He knew that she wanted him to stop saying that they were destined to be mates. He knew that the idea of something that permanent scared the hell out of her, and he had to admit that it was more than a little daunting to him, too. He’d also had years and years of hearing his father telling him over and over that finding one’s mate was not something that he dared mess around with. In the past, Cain came much too close to losing Gin, and as a result, he’d made damn sure he’d explained the entire situation to his children. Bas, Evan, Jillian . . . they’d all heard the tale, and they’d all been told that it wasn’t something that could or should be ignored. Bas frowned, staring at Sydnie’s retreating form. *‘Somehow, kitty . . . I’ll find a way to make you understand . . .’*

Gin hovered in the doorway of the airy studio that Cain had built into the mansion for the two of them.

He was standing at near the wall of windows, staring outside into the falling night as snow drifted down from the darkening sky. The thin, wispy trail of smoke rose from the end of his cigarette, slowly dissipating into the air, and while the scent of it lingered, Gin didn’t remark on it. He only smoked when he was worried about something, and she knew it. She also knew what he was thinking. She’d thought the same thing a million times over the course of the day.

"You miss him, don't you?"

Cain didn't turn around to acknowledge his mate's question.

"Papa said he's fine," she pointed out as she quietly padded across the floor to slip her arms around Cain's waist, leaning her cheek against his back.

"I know what he said, baby girl," Cain stated. "That's not the issue."

"He called a little bit ago. He said he'd call you later."

"Oh?"

She nodded as Cain turned around, hugging her with one arm as he snuffed out the cigarette butt. "Yes. He said that they had a really nice Christmas and that Sydnie liked her gifts."

Cain grimaced. "Yeah?"

Gin nodded, tugging on Cain's arm to make him bend down so that she could kiss his cheek. "He also said that Sydnie really liked that jewelry box."

The grimace shifted into a sigh. "Good."

"Poor girl."

Cain shrugged, turning his attention back out the window once more. "Yeah."

"How could it happen, Cain? How could she have just slipped through the cracks? Your network—"

"—Isn't perfect," he cut in with a tired sigh. "Nothing ever is."

"What'll you do?"

Cain shook his head slowly, blue eyes serious, sad. "I've got Ben looking into it. He's trying to figure out exactly who she is because if she really *is* Sydnie Taylor, there would be record of her somewhere. Trouble is, the only Sydnie Taylor we were able to find is most definitely not her."

"You're positive?"

Cain dragged a weary hand over his face. "Unless she's a ninety year-old human woman living in the Catskills, yes, I'm positive."

"I see."

"It just doesn't make sense."

"Unless someone else was hiding her?"

He blinked and seemed to ponder Gin's question. "But why?"

"I don't know, but you said so: you'd have known otherwise."

"That might be," he allowed, "but to hide a youkai child? Why?"

Gin shook her head and hugged Cain again. "You'll figure it out, Cain Zelig. You're a good man."

"A good man who let a child fall through the cracks," he mused ruefully. "Doesn't sound like such a good man to me."

"But you are," she argued. "If you'd have realized, you would have done something. You can't blame yourself for something that you couldn't have known."

"It's not that simple, Gin. I'm tai-youkai. That means . . . that means that I can't afford to let someone slip through the cracks."

"And that's what makes you a good man."

"It's not enough."

"It's enough for me. Sydnie will understand one day. Bas will help her; you'll see."

"Think so?"

Gin smiled sweetly, nodding slowly as she tugged on his hand. "Come on, Zelig-sensei. It's time for bed."

Cain grinned slightly, momentarily resisting before allowing Gin to tug him toward the stairs that led to the bedroom loft of the studio. "Back to 'Zelig-sensei', huh?"

She giggled softly. "Yes, and you know what they say, right?"

"What's that?"

"Things always look different in the morning."

Cain let out a tired sigh, but she could hear the smile in his voice. "You're right," he agreed. "They do."

"I believe in you."

"Yeah . . ." he said as his smile faded. "I'm glad one of us does."

Bas handed Sydnie a warmed mug of milk and sank down with a heavy sigh on the sofa beside her before reaching for his sword. "So what'd you think, kitty? Christmas isn't so bad."

"I can't believe you ate that much turkey," she remarked with an artful arching of a dark eyebrow.

Bas grinned unrepentantly and shrugged. "It was good," he replied.

"You're not a puppy – you're a piggy."

"Maybe," he agreed.

"What are you doing?"

Bas glanced up from his task. Carefully unbending the large key ring, he threaded it through the small hole in the gold trim on the end of Triumvirate's hilt. "Giving myself a reminder," he said mysteriously.

"A reminder? What sort of reminder?"

His eyes were serious, bright, and he gazed at her with a steadiness that disarmed her. "A reminder of what I have to protect."

"Sebastian . . ."

He stared at her for another long moment before turning his attention back to the keychain. He fastened it securely to the hilt and jiggled the scabbard, idly watching the round, flat moon sway back and forth. "There."

"It's just a keychain," she reminded him, her cheeks pinking as she pulled the magazine she'd been reading over her face.

"Not to me."

"Well, you're crazy."

"Maybe."

"You are."

He leaned his sword against a nearby chair before turning on the sofa, pulling his knee up and leaning on the back of the sofa as he gently tugged the magazine away from her. "Sydney, we have to talk."

Unbridled panic surged through her, and Sydney winced. "Can we not do this?"

He sighed and slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry, but . . . this isn't going to go away. You know that, don't you?"

Sydney sighed, rubbing her temple with a slender hand and closing her eyes. "Listen, Sebastian . . ."

"No, you listen. You're my mate, and I know you don't want to hear it, but you have to, and don't say that we're too different because that's not a bad thing, either. You want to be with me. I know you do, and regardless of what you want to believe, you have to know it because I do."

"I don't know a thing," she countered, grimacing inwardly as her voice thickened on the absolute lie. "You're crazy."

"Crazy? Sydney . . . my parents told me that if I find my mate and know it that somewhere deep down, you know it, too. That's how it works."

She shook her head slowly, unable to meet his gaze. "I don't know a thing."

"That's a lie."

"Is it?"

"You know it is."

Sydney shot to her feet and strode the length of the room, needing to put a little distance between herself and Sebastian. "It can't be," she mumbled, more to herself than to Bas.

"Why can't it? Because you don't want it? Because I'm the next tai-youkai? Do you think that'll mean a damn thing to me without you? Do you think —?" he cut himself off with a frustrated growl and slowly shook his head. "Can't you believe me? Please?"

"I believe you," she said softly. "I believe you think you're telling me the truth. I know you *think* you mean it, but you really are being short-sighted. You're going to be the next tai-youkai . . . you should have a mate who deserves you; one you can be proud of. Your family won't accept me. Can't you see that?"

"What I see," he argued, "is you being stubborn — *again* — for no good reason, damn it! What I see —"

"— Is what you *want* to see!" She covered her face with her hands and heaved a loud sigh. "I'm not stupid, puppy. I knew what it meant for me before I ever thought about killing Cal Richardson. It's youkai law, isn't it? A life for a life . . . that is the price of murder. I planned it. I plotted it. I *wanted* it. Don't think that I don't know that I'm living on borrowed time."

"That won't happen, Sydney. Dad believes you. You had reason. He wronged your sister, and no one did a thing; you're right. Cal Richardson got what he deserved."

"And when the tai-youkai — your *father* — tells you to kill me? What will you do? What will you choose?"

"That won't happen!"

"You don't *know* that! You don't know *anything*! You can't make me promises that you know you can't keep! If he told you to do it, you would because he's your boss, your hero . . . your *daddy*."

Bas shot to his feet, strode across the room, staring out the glass doors with his hands on his hips, glaring at the night sky. He didn't speak for several minutes, and maybe he just didn't know what he could possibly say to make her listen, to make her understand.

Sydney rubbed her arms then carefully picked up the blanket that had fallen off the back of the sofa – Sebastian’s baby blanket – and refolded it before draping it over the furniture once more.

“He won’t ask me to do that,” Bas finally ground out, his voice careful, controlled.

“You don’t know that.”

“Yes, I think I do.”

“That’s the price for murder, isn’t it?”

“In some cases, yes. Do you really believe that my dad goes around, indiscriminately ordering death in every single instance? He doesn’t. I told you, he’s a fair man.”

“Of course he is, Sebastian, and rainbows are made by leprechauns who set pots of gold at the end of the trail. Be realistic, won’t you?”

“I am, Sydney, damn it! You can’t judge a man you’ve never even met!”

“Can’t I?”

Bas whipped around, strode across the floor to grasp Sydney’s shoulders and give her a rough little shake. “Knock it off, will you? Can’t you just listen to me – believe in me? Can’t you just trust me?”

Sydney licked her lips and heaved a sigh, casting him a sad sort of smile as she slowly shook her head. “It’s not about you, Sebastian. It’s *him* I don’t trust – I can’t believe in the tai-youkai.”

“Don’t be stupid, Sydney! Do you think he’s a god or something? He’s not. He never has been. He didn’t choose to ignore you. He never meant for that to happen!”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” Sydney said miserably. “Please . . .”

“Damn it,” Bas growled but heaved a sigh. “I can’t let you go, Sydney . . . I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Take your choice.”

“Why do you have to be so stubborn?”

Bas finally let go of her arms, pulling her close to his chest. She didn't resist him despite the rigidity in her stance, and he accepted that. It was enough for the moment.

"Because you're my kitty," he told her gently. "Because I need you . . ."

"You don't know what you're saying."

"I think I do."

"Bas?"

"Hmm?"

She squeezed her eyes closed and buried her face against his shoulder. The idea of being without him frightened her; scared her more than she could credit. Despite what she said, the thought of being left alone again . . . it was more than she could stand. "I . . ."

"I know, baby," he murmured, kissing her forehead and smoothing her hair. "You won't have to be alone ever again."

*Final Thought from Cain:
Hiding Sydney? But ... why?*

Chapter 41

Leaving Home

"Looks like they're leaving."

InuYasha sat up from his slouch in the branches of the tree that offered the best view of the mansion, narrowing his gaze as he spotted the cat-youkai and his grandson packing things into the trunk of the rental car. "About fucking time," he grumbled, snapping his flip-phone closed.

"How's Mother?"

"Tellin' me to hurry it up . . . what do you think?"

Ryomaru grinned. "You mean she really misses you?"

InuYasha grunted. "Keh!"

They had been out for quite some time. InuYasha hadn't really expected the mission to be easy. The most irritating facet of their quest, however, wasn't the task, itself. No, it was the constant waiting and watching. He was of the opinion that they should have just located the Onyx's headquarters and busted in with all guns blazing. Cain, however, had wanted Bas to take care of things, himself. Bas wouldn't have known if they had gone in and taken care of business InuYasha's way. Too bad Gin had agreed with her irritating mate, damn it all to hell . . .

Bas stopped suddenly, holding the passenger side door open for Sydnie. Glancing around carefully, he looked as though he sensed something. InuYasha retreated further into the cover of the tangled branches. Bas couldn't see them, he was sure, and the wind was carrying their scents away. Ryomaru noticed it, too, and he gripped the branch he was straddling, leaning forward to better scan the area. "Old man . . ."

InuYasha's eyes flared wide, and he nodded. He sensed it, too. Coming from the east, the obvious presence of an unknown youkai tinged with a bitterness so strong that InuYasha had to grit his teeth to keep himself from growling out loud. The unmistakable youki surged and flowed with an electric force.

"Damn it," InuYasha ground out, teeth clenched and fingers tightening around the branch where he was perched.

“There’s another,” Ryomaru said quietly. “I can feel it.”

“Me, too,” InuYasha replied. Not nearly as angry, not as much of a threat, the second youki was dulled by the malignant rage in the first.

“Bounty hunters?”

InuYasha nodded without taking his eyes off the far edge of the trees – the same place where Bas was staring, Triumvirate clenched tight in his hand. “You know the drill,” he growled, tamping down the absurd surge of irritation inspired by the notion that he didn’t dare interfere. Sure, he understood the logic, and on some level, he agreed. Still it grated on his nerves, the encompassing feeling that he couldn’t do a damn thing when all he wanted was to charge in and protect one he considered his own. *‘Bas ain’t a baby any more,’* he reminded himself. In the last battle, the pup had more than proven himself, as far as InuYasha was concerned. Eight against one wasn’t good odds, and despite the outcome, InuYasha had been proud to see his grandson fight so well.

Ryomaru nodded and dropped to the ground to skirt the perimeter of the high security wall. InuYasha sprang to the branches of a nearby tree, opting to take the high route instead of the safer, less conspicuous ground.

‘Musta taken out the guards,’ InuYasha thought with a snort as he vaulted through the trees. *‘Two on one? Better odds . . . Bas’ll be just fine . . .’*

The cougar-youkai swaggered out of the trees, brandishing a blood-stained sword in the watery winter sunlight. “Your father’s security is lax,” the youkai called out.

Bas mumbled something to Sydney before stepping away from the car and striding toward the bounty hunter. “Who are you?” he demanded, his tone careful, calculated.

“I am Jeb Christopher, son of the Zelig – your judge, your jury, and your executioner.”

“Leader of the Onyx?” Bas replied. “You can’t have her.”

Jeb snorted derisively, casting Sydney a scathing glance before turning his glower on Bas once more. “I couldn’t care less about her,” he growled. “You’re the one I want.”

“And why is that?” Bas countered. “Because you sent your pup to do your job? Did you really think I’d let him take her? You’re not really stupid enough to believe that.”

“He was doing his job.”

Bas narrowed his eyes, gripping his sword tighter and bringing it before him in a ready stance. "As was I."

"Yes, well, not for long."

InuYasha sprang to the next tree, intent on locating the second youkai, as Jeb unleashed his first attack. Slamming his sword into the ground, the shockwave of crackling blue light streaked across the ground. Bas blocked the wave with one of his own, and the conflicting attacks exploded in an earth-shaking blast of white light and the bite of a fabricated wind. From his vantage point, InuYasha gritted his teeth and dug his claws into the branch, waiting for a moment to make sure that Bas was all right before leaping to the next tree.

Bas lowered his sword though it was still high enough to fend off any impending attacks as Jeb smiled – a grim visage of mocking insincerity. "Your father is a fool . . . sending his heir to do his dirty work. Surely he realized that there might be danger. An awfully big risk to take with the future tai-youkai," Jeb sneered.

"Same could be said for you," Bas pointed out. "Sending your son after Sydney? You're a bigger fool than my father, I'd say."

Jeb growled in reply – a sound more akin to a caterwaul – as his youki spiked and crackled. InuYasha leapt to the roof of the mansion. Ryomaru could take care of the second youkai, and he'd be damned if he'd let Bas out of his sight. A promise was a promise, after all, even if he hated the idea of sitting back and watching . . .

Sprinting forward, sword drawn back, Jeb's face was contorted in absolute hatred and consuming rage. Bas raised *Triumvirate* in time to block the descending blade, and with a mighty shove, he sent the cougar-youkai sliding back. He regained his footing well enough as Bas leveled *Triumvirate* straight at Jeb's chest. "Walk away and call off your hunters," Bas warned quietly. "She is under the protection of the tai-youkai now, and you can't have her."

"I've told you, Zelig: I don't want her. She's nothing but a paycheck to me, but you . . . This is personal . . ."

"There's nothing personal in hunting – for the tai-youkai or otherwise. Surely you know that?"

"Don't tell me what I know, and don't try to lecture me! Just shut up and *die!*" Lunging at Bas once more, Jeb swung his sword with a loud grunt. The whistle of the blade slicing through the air was cut off as Bas met the weapon with his own. Jeb flicked his wrists, bringing his sword lower. Bas blocked the attack, wrenching *Triumvirate's* hilt

in an effort to disarm Jeb. Letting go with one hand, Jeb let Bas' action roll the blade of his sword in a compact circle before righting his grip. Bas jumped back to avoid an upward thrust of Jeb's sword, whipping around in a tight circle to meet the blade and knock it away.

Bas grimaced, lowering his sword and squaring his right shoulder before barreling into Jeb's chest. The youkai skidded back, the heels of his boots leaving tracks in the snow. Bas strode toward him, extending Triumvirate, letting it hover inches away from Jeb's jugular with one steady hand. "I told you once; I'm telling you again: get out of here. Go home to your wife, and leave it alone."

Jeb narrowed his gaze, his wiry frame doubled over. He slowly stood up, hair whipping in the wind. InuYasha crouched low on the roof, hand resting lightly on Tetsusaiga's hilt. From his vantage point, he could see the youkai's grim determination. He could appreciate what his grandson was trying to do, but Jeb Christopher wasn't about to turn around and walk away. InuYasha grimaced. As much as he hated to admit as much, he could understand Jeb Christopher's determination. He'd felt much the same way, years ago when Nezumi had been kidnapped; when Ryomaru had been in trouble . . .

"InuYasha," Kagome called after InuYasha, stopping him as he headed for the door. "Take Tetsusaiga. Don't ask me why. Just . . . Just do it."

An unmistakable chill ran up InuYasha's spine. He couldn't remember the last time she'd asked him to carry his sword, not in this world. In Sengoku Jidai so long ago, Tetsusaiga had become an extension of him. He had used his father's sword to protect Kagome and their friends. When he used Tetsusaiga now, it was in practice, with his pups, teaching those skills he hoped they'd never have to use.

Kagome knew and understood this, and if she was asking him to take Tetsusaiga with him, then maybe the fear in her mind was larger, more ominous than even Naraku. The fear of one of their children in trouble . . .

The dank, dusty building . . . the stench of decaying wood and the reek of the errant youkai . . . Nezumi started to dash toward Ryomaru only to be intercepted by a horde of youkai. Ryomaru unleashed a savage growl and lurched forward. InuYasha caught his arm. "Don't be stupid, pup! That's what they want."

InuYasha had to stand back and watch as Ryomaru stood his ground against the assembled youkai . . . They'd found out somehow that Ryomaru had just marked Nezumi and was weakened by the significant loss of blood. "As long as they have Nezumi, they have the upper hand," InuYasha muttered under his breath. "Damn them . . ."

InuYasha blinked away the lingering memory. Yes, he knew the desire to protect his own. Yes, he understood the pain that losing someone that close would bring. In both cases where he'd intervened, first with his son years ago and now with Bas, the cowards had chosen the dishonorable path, sending their numbers after their intended targets without concern for fairness or that what they were trying to protect ultimately was the wrong thing.

The difference was that Jeb had stupidly sent his son out on that mission, and he should have realized that there was always a certain level of danger in that sort of mission, and even Bas was playing by the rules. He fought his own battles unless the odds were stacked against him. That was more than could be said for Jeb Christopher and his band of thugs . . .

Jeb spun around, his sword forcing Bas' away. Bas allowed the contact and followed it through so that he didn't lose grip on his sword. He'd learned his lessons well, hadn't he? Blades crossing with the screech of metal grinding against metal, yellow-white sparks spilled like a waterfall from the seam where the swords collided. It had become a battle of strength; a show of control and endurance. Bas' eyes glowed in the sparkling light as Jeb's face contorted into a grimace of complete concentration.

"Grandpa giv' me a bokken," three-year old Bas had said solemnly, holding the wooden practice sword out to show his mother and father. InuYasha stood, arms crossed, trying not to smile at the pride that was unmistakable in the young boy's expression.

"So he did," Gin agreed, gently ruffling her son's golden bronze hair. Light spilled in the huge glass doors in the living room of the mansion in Maine, bathing his daughter and his grandson in an ethereal sort of glow.

Cain shot InuYasha an inscrutable glance before lowering his gaze back to his son. "You learn how to use that, Bas," Cain had said. "You've got a lot of things to protect."

Kagome rested her hand on InuYasha's forearm. "You'll teach him, right?"

InuYasha snorted. "Keh! Of course I will!"

And he had. Damn straight, he had. It had seemed to InuYasha that every generation had one who was better at fighting than the rest, and while the others were good enough to be considered formidable, one always seemed to stand out. In the first generation, it had been Ryomaru. In the second, well . . . InuYasha doubted that anyone could actually take down Bas without dealing him dirty, as Christopher had tried to do when he'd sent out eight hunters . . .

Jeb shoved Bas hard enough to make him stumble. Claws flashing, moving so fast that they were little more than a blur of motion, he caught Bas' cheek. Bas hissed in pain but stood his ground, blocking the descending blow of the sword with Triumvirate. Jeb kicked out, catching Bas in the gut, and Bas slipped on the snow, landing in a crouch: one hand on his sword, the other wrapped over his stomach.

Christopher wasted no time. Dashing forward, he raised his sword. Bas blocked the attack and slowly forced himself to his feet once more, slipping on the snow as he dug his heels in and braced his stance. Bas had pure size on his side. Towering over the cougar-youkai, his presence seemed to engulf the area. Jeb, however, wasn't above fighting dirty, and with a fluid jab of his balled-up fist, he snapped Bas' head to the side, whipping around, dislodging his sword, and cleaving a clean arc through the air.

Bas spun away in time to avoid the brunt of the youkai's attack but not fast enough to elude it completely. The sword's sharp point sliced through Bas' leather duster, drawing a fine spray of crimson blood that stained the pristine white of the snow. Triumvirate clattered to the ground as Bas clutched his right bicep and staggered back. Sydnie screamed his name and darted forward, stopping only when he held up his hand and uttered a terse little growl—a warning.

Jeb tossed his sword to the side, holding his hands before his chest as a malignant black ball of energy started to grow. "You're formidable," he allowed in a condescending growl, "but not nearly formidable enough."

InuYasha dug his claws into the roof and gritted his teeth. Bas glanced down at his blood-covered hand and shook his head. Flicking his wrist, unleashing five crimson blades, Bas yelled the name of the attack that InuYasha had taught him years ago: "*Hijin-ketsusou!*"

The blades of blood whipped past Jeb's face, forcing him to let go of the energy blast. The ball of black light zipped past Bas, well off the intended target. It slammed into the ground with a force that shook the earth. InuYasha nodded his approval though he refused to relax until the fight was over.

Bas dashed forward, drawing his left arm back, cracking his knuckles. Jeb vaulted off the ground to meet him halfway. He screeched in pain as Bas' claws shredded the flesh of his chest. Reaching, struggling, grabbing . . . the youkai dug his claws into the left side of Bas' throat. With a grunt of pain, Bas shoved Jeb away, using him as a springboard, leaping backward out of the range of the cougar-youkai's arm.

He was losing a lot of blood from that wound. InuYasha grimaced and bit into his cheek, digging his claws deeper into the roofing to keep himself from entering the fray. '*Bas' fight, damn it . . .*' he reminded himself furiously. '*Bas' fight . . .*'

Jeb sensed that he had Bas cornered. With a loud wail, he sprang again. Bas smashed his hand over his throat to staunch the flow of blood, raising his elbow to fend off the youkai. Jeb pulled his hands back, throwing all his weight at Bas with the force of his strike. Bas tumbled to the ground, landing flat on his back about ten feet away. Jeb raised his hands again, summoning another energy ball and unleashed it as Bas managed to stumble to his feet.

The blur of movement was almost too fast for him to discern. InuYasha shot to his feet as the cat-youkai darted forward into the path of the coming blast. She didn't even scream as the energy ball erupted around her, blasting her backward, tossing her body as though she were little more than a rag doll. Bas screamed her name as she struck against the corner of the mansion and crumpled to the ground. For a split second, InuYasha thought that Bas might give in to the need to check on Sydney.

Dashing forward, though, he stooped long enough to retrieve his sword without missing a step, hefting Triumvirate over his head with a grunt of pain as his arm protested the motion. The crackle of energy that ignited around the blade of the sword signaled that he'd located the fissure between his youki and Jeb's.

Smashing Triumvirate into the ground, Bas grunted as the force of the impact reverberated up his arm. The flames of Bas' version of the Kaze no Kizu shot out, engulfing Jeb in a violent explosion of heat and light and wind. The youkai's scream of agony lingered long after his body disintegrated in ashes.

Bas dropped his sword, chest heaving as he struggled to breathe and ran to the fallen cat-youkai.

InuYasha glanced around for a moment before dashing across the roof once more, intent on finding Ryomaru to make certain that he'd located the second youkai. *'Keh! Of course he did! He's the best hunter in Japan – and he's my son, damn it . . .'*

Still he had to make sure . . .

Ryomaru was easy to find. On the other side of the estate near the back entrance, he found his son. Leaning lazily against the askew gate, Ryomaru nodded at the nearby female – a hawk-youkai. She stood rather docilely, her hands confined in handcuffs made with ofuda to seal her. Though she stared at InuYasha with a wariness that bespoke her reluctance, she didn't actually seem afraid.

"Bas okay?"

InuYasha nodded, crossing his arms over his chest as he eyed the hawk-youkai. "Who's she?"

"Myrna Loy – Christopher's second-in-command, she says. She's agreed to give up the names of the ones who ordered the bounty in exchange for her life."

InuYasha snorted. "For him to decide, ain't it?"

Ryomaru nodded, understanding that the 'him' InuYasha was speaking of was Bas' father, who InuYasha never deigned to call by name. "She says that Jeb was the last of the hunters. Bas should be home free now."

"Good," InuYasha grumbled. "We need to get the hell outta here before the pup realizes we were watching him."

Ryomaru shoved himself away from the wall, grabbing the youkai's arm and propelling her toward the forest beyond the estate walls. InuYasha closed the gate and ducked into the guardhouse, grimacing at the blood splattering the surveillance equipment and master control panel. He could hear Ryomaru's voice – muffled by the stout cinderblock walls. He'd probably called Zelig already. InuYasha hit the button that locked the gate and stepped back outside, pulling the door behind closed after turning the deadbolt lock.

He could leave Ryomaru to explain things to Zelig. Catching his son's eye, InuYasha nodded, leaping up onto the guardhouse before vaulting into a tree nearby. Satisfied that everything was under control, he just had one more thing to check on. He was safe enough, under the circumstances. He knew from personal experience that the scent of *her* blood would preclude anything else that lingered nearby in Bas' mind. He could easily check to make sure that Sydnie was okay without drawing Bas' notice . . .

"Sydnie? Baby? Wake up . . ."

Sydnie moaned softly, brows furrowing together as she tried to bury her face against Bas' chest.

Bas grimaced and gently tapped her cheek. "Come on, kitty . . . open your eyes . . ."

She whimpered and burrowed closer. "N-n-n . . ."

He could feel the panic subsiding but couldn't quite brush aside the fear that nearly choked him. Carefully maneuvering her so that he could locate the source of the smell of blood, Bas kept talking, blinking back the burn that stung his eyes. "Wake up, please? Look at me . . ."

"Sebas . . . tian?" she mumbled weakly, waving her hand to try to brush him aside. "Wh . . . what?"

"God, baby," he rasped out, crushing her against his chest as he closed his eyes. A surge of relief shot through him. He swallowed hard, unable to repress the terse bark of choked emotion that raged through him. "You're so stupid! How could you be so stupid? Damn it, I—you—we . . ." He winced. "I'm sorry, kitty . . . I'm so sorry . . ."

"M-my head," she whispered. "Where is—?"

"He's gone," Bas assured her, kissing her forehead, stroking her cheek, holding her close. "Don't ever do that again, kitty . . . God, you scared the shit out of me."

"Bas?"

"Hmm?"

"Why are you . . .?"

Bas sniffled and shook his head, but couldn't summon the will to smile. Impossible to find the words to explain just how his heart had slammed to a halt. Seeing her body flying through the air . . . she was too precious to him, and the fear that had choked him—the need to get to her . . . He'd never forgive himself for letting her be in any kind of danger . . . It had been pure rage that had lent him the strength to take out Jeb Christopher. Now that it was over, and he knew that she'd be safe . . . The late emotion was too much, and the tears that streaked down his cheeks couldn't be staunched. Forcing himself to his feet without letting go of her, Bas carried her into the house and up the stairs to his room. She reached up, clumsily wiping his tears away before sighing softly and snuggling closer to him, content to let him take care of her.

He sat on the bed, dragging his cell phone out of his pocket and scrolling through the numbers before finding the one he wanted. Unmindful for once of what time it might be in Tokyo, Bas dialed the number and gently shook Sydnie to keep her awake.

"Bas? Something wrong?"

Bas grimaced at the note of concern in Kichiro's voice. "Sort of."

"Yeah? Okay, what's up?"

"Sydnie . . . she took a hit, and it knocked her out . . . a little bleeding, but nothing serious . . ."

"It knocked her out?"

Bas nodded. "Yes."

Kichiro sighed. "Is she having trouble focusing on things?"

"No."

"Okay, good. Listen, I'd say she's okay, but keep her awake for a couple hours, if you're worried. You can't really tell with bumps on the head, so . . ."

"Yeah, okay," Bas agreed. "Thanks, Kich."

"Not a problem. Call me back if you need anything else."

"Will do." Bas hung up the phone and gently shook Sydnie again. "Hey . . . wake up, baby . . ."

"Tired," she whispered, closing her eyes. "So tired . . ."

Bas grimaced and squeezed his eyes closed, resting his cheek on her hair. "Don't go to sleep, baby . . . Just don't go to sleep . . . not yet."

"Is this payback for me not letting you sleep the other day?" she asked, her tone sulky.

"You could call it that," he agreed. "Just . . . stay awake, okay?"

She nodded and heaved a sigh. "He's really gone?"

Bas sighed, too. "Yeah."

"And he was the last one?"

"I won't know until I talk to Dad and Gunnar, but I think so . . . he was the boss, anyway."

"I'm sorry," she mumbled as her eyes drifted closed. "I don't want you to be in danger anymore."

"I know," he assured her, grimacing as some of his hair that had dried on the blood staining his neck pulled free. He sorely needed to clean up and check his wounds. At the moment, though, Sydney was far more important. "It's over now, kitty. You're safe."

A/N:

*Flashback sequencing taken from **Purity 3: Forever**, Chapter 40: Pact with the Devil, and adapted from **Purity 3: Forever**, Chapter 41: Splintering the Sun.*

***Bokken:** wooden practice sword.*

***Hijin-ketsusou:** Blades of Blood.*

***Kaze no Kizu:** Wind Scar.*

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Final Thought from Sydney:

Safe?

Chapter 42

Sydney's Request

Sydney slipped out of the bathroom and shivered slightly. Stretched out on the bed without his shirt, Bas was staring at the ceiling. He'd wrapped his bicep with a clean bandage while she was bathing, and the lacerations on his neck seemed to be healing nicely. Slipping onto the edge of the bed, Sydney drew up her legs and held onto her ankles, resting her chin on her knees.

"So you called him?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

Bas sighed and nodded absently, letting his gaze linger on the ceiling before slowly shifting his eyes to the side, pinning her with a serious expression. "Yeah."

"And?"

Bas pushed himself up on his elbows, grimacing as his injured arms contested the movement. "And he said that Jeb Christopher was the last . . ."

Trying to ignore the sense of giddy relief that surged through her, Sydney closed her eyes for a moment and pressed her hand to her chest. Hard to fathom, the idea that there would be no more bounty hunters coming after her — coming after *them*. She wouldn't have to sit back and watch as Bas fought to protect her. Standing so tall, so strong, legs askew, clutching the cumbersome youkai blade . . . hair blowing around him as the fiercest light blazed in his eyes . . . in those moments, she'd seen it, hadn't she? She'd borne witness to the future tai-youkai, and she understood why he'd always grumbled about people finding him intimidating. She wasn't intimidated, exactly, but the unmistakable pride that surged through her was something that had taken her breath away, and she understood at last, this thing he had been trying to tell her.

"I'll protect you, kitty . . ."

No, it was more than that, wasn't it? It wasn't simply that Bas was obligated to protect her because he was ordered to bring her in. He protected her because he felt compelled to do so, just as she had felt compelled to take the hit from Jeb's energy blast, to save Sebastian and to give him a few precious seconds to recover his composure . . .

The tears on his face, the misery writ in the depths of his gaze . . . Sydney had hated to see that. The proud hunter she knew so well, reduced to quiet tears as recrimination dug at his very soul because of her . . . all because of her . . .

'Mates,' she mused, the heat of a light blush suffusing her cheeks at the mere thought of being with Bas. 'He's said it, hasn't he? But he can't . . . he really, really can't . . .'

'He could be . . . you could be . . . He wants to help you. He said his father understood why you did why you did. It might not make it right, but given the circumstances, don't you think it is something that you can be forgiven? Bas believes . . . Bas believes in you.'

Sydney scooted closer to Bas, slowly, hesitantly lifting her hand to push his bangs out of his eyes. He looked so lost in thought that she had to wonder whether or not he realized that she was touching him at all. "What are you thinking about, Bas the Hunter?"

He blinked and shook his head to clear his gaze as he forced a half-smile. "The last group of hunters . . . how'd you get rid of them?"

Shifting uneasily, she shrugged and tried for a nonchalant air. "I told you, puppy: I scared them away with your sword."

He narrowed his eyes, regarding her carefully for several minutes before slowly nodding. "Really."

"Yes."

"You could barely heft it over your shoulder," he pointed out reasonably enough.

"Maybe," she agreed carelessly. "Call it adrenaline."

"Why do I get the feeling that you don't want to tell me what happened after I was knocked out?" he asked, stroking her hair with an idle hand.

Sydney smoothed the dark green comforter and shrugged. "Isn't it enough that I got you away from there?"

Bas heaved a sigh and sat up. "Thing is, if there are still some of the Onyx still around, I'm not so sure you *are* safe. Just because their leader was killed doesn't mean that they won't still want the paycheck."

She grimaced at his choice of words and bit her bottom lip. Lying to him didn't sit well with her, but telling him the truth just wasn't something she could do, either. For

reasons she didn't understand, the hanyous who had been following them didn't seem to want Bas to know of their presence. Though she was almost certain that they were family – his grandfather and uncle, she supposed – they'd made it clear in their actions that they didn't want her to tell Sebastian anything at all. "We're safe here, though, aren't we?"

Gazing around the room, Bas slowly nodded. "As safe as we can be," he allowed. "My father's house . . . my father's land . . . then again, Jeb found a way in, didn't he?"

Sydney nodded. "What about that?"

"Dad said that he thinks Jeb must have killed the guards at the back gate. Anyway, there are a couple new ones in place now. Don't worry, okay?"

Sydney stood up, restlessly pacing the floor. The lump on her head still ached, but she felt much better after Bas had finally left her alone to sleep for awhile. Waking her up every couple hours, he'd been so gentle with her that despite the irritation of the interruptions, she hadn't been too upset with him. It had been obvious to her that he was simply concerned, and that concern was enough to temper her irritation over the disturbances. Wandering over to the small desk near the windows, Sydney picked up the football off the stand that held it upright. "You've even got a football on your desk?"

He stood up and came to her, turning the football in her hands so that she could see the scrawled signatures on the reddish-brown pigskin. "Not just *any* football, kitty. This one was signed by most of the Bears after they won the Super Bowl a few years ago."

"Oh, so it's a special ball."

"Yep, a very special one."

She let him take it from her and watched him carefully set it back in place. "You're such a funny puppy," she decided.

Bas made a face and shrugged, his expression darkening as his brow furrowed in a show of grim determination. "I told Dad, you know."

Sydney shot him a curious glance. "Told him what?"

"That you're my mate."

"Sebastian –"

He shot her a stubborn glower – a no-nonsense, ‘*Don’t-Fuck-With-Me*’ sort of expression. “No, Sydnie, I mean it. You’re the one – the *only* one, no matter what you say, you know it’s true.”

“I know you *want* it to be true,” she said softly, unable to meet his gaze. “You understand, right? They’ll never let us be together . . . I’m not good enough for you, even if I wanted to be.”

Glowing at her for a moment, Bas clenched his teeth so tightly that his jaw ticked. He opened his mouth to say something, but must have thought better of it. Whipping around on his heel, he stomped over to grab the cell phone, dialing a number and holding the device to his ear as he stared at her out of the corner of his eye.

“It’s me,” he said tersely, crossing his free arm over his chest. “Yeah, everything’s fine . . . I was wondering . . . those pictures of Mom? The ones you sketched before you were married? Yeah . . . can you send those to me? E-mail’s fine . . . something like that. Thanks, Dad.”

Snapping the phone closed, he dropped it back onto the nightstand before brushing past Sydnie to boot the laptop on his desk.

“What pictures?” she asked as he flopped down in the desk chair.

“Proof.”

“Proof?”

“Yeah, proof. Proof that I’m right. Proof that no one is going to tell you that you can’t be with me.”

Sydnie rubbed her arms while Bas opened up his email. It didn’t take more than a minute for him to open the pictures his father had sent. “Look.”

Scowling at his no-nonsense tone, Sydnie leaned to the side to take a look. What she saw made her grimace, and she couldn’t help the harsh little sound that escaped her. She recognized Bas’ mother’s face from the paintings and pictures she’d seen, but the frail little hanyou in the sketches didn’t seem like the woman at all. Cheeks sunken, body wasted away, she didn’t resemble the smiling mother in the pictures. Bas wasn’t looking at the images. Staring at her, willing her to acknowledge what he was trying to tell her, Bas’ gaze didn’t leave Sydnie’s face. She blinked and shook her head, not wanting to understand what it meant.

The pictures – sketches, really – were hideous, frightening. The painful thinness of her hands . . . the gauntness of her face . . . she looked completely lost in the folds of the blankets that covered her bed; this tiny being – Sebastian’s mother. “Sebastian? But they were mates, right?” she murmured.

Bas shook his head slowly and heaved a long sigh. “No . . . See, Dad almost lost her before they were real mates. He thought he owed his life to his first wife because she’d died having my half-sister, Belle. Mom didn’t tell him that her youkai blood had chosen him, and Dad . . . didn’t really know how it worked. His parents died when he was young, and no one really explained all that to him. See . . . All my life, I’ve been told to listen to my youkai. It doesn’t matter if you argue it or not. In order for me to know that you’re my mate, you’ve got to know it, too. There’s no choice involved. Don’t you see?”

“But . . . I . . .”

He shook his head; poked a finger at the images as he slowly let out a deep breath and glowered at her. “Sydney . . . I don’t want this to happen to you. Please, baby . . . can you understand?”

“You’re going to be the next tai-youkai . . . you should be with someone who’s all the things I’m not.”

He caught her hands and gently pulled her into his lap, locking his arms around her waist and kissing her forehead as he held her close. “I think *you’re* everything *I’m* not,” he mumbled. “You’re my kitty.”

She leaned away from him to stare into his eyes. Begging her to listen to him; pleading with her to understand, there was something else in his gaze; something far more frightening than she could credit. He was daring her to hope, wasn’t he? Willing her to understand that maybe it would be okay to dream.

And yet . . .

Swallowing hard, she pursed her lips together and cupped his face in her hands. “I’m a murderer, Sebastian. I can’t change that.”

“You’re not a murderer, Sydney.”

“And I have to do it again.”

“Not if you give me the other name.”

She shook her head, closing her eyes, struggling desperately not to cry. “No one will let you be with a murderer.”

“Do you think my father has never killed anyone? Or my uncle, Sesshoumaru – the Inu no Taisho . . . the old man has killed countless youkai – even my grandmother has! Uncle Ryomaru is a youkai hunter, and I . . .” he trailed off with a rueful smile, “I’ve killed, too. Do you think I’m a murderer? Do you think they are?”

“That’s different . . . you were doing what you needed to do, right?”

“It’s no different. You were doing what you needed to do, too. Thing is . . . you never should have had to do that, in the first place. It was my father’s job to protect you . . . and it is mine, too. Let me do that? Let me protect you?”

Grimacing at the gentle pleading in his voice, Sydnie slipped onto his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck as she buried her face against his shoulder. “Stop talking?” she pleaded quietly. “Please . . . please don’t talk anymore.”

“I’m sorry, baby,” he told her, holding her close, rocking her gently as the chair creaked in an entirely soothing way. “You have to understand,” he pressed. “You have to listen to me . . .”

She gripped his shirt, claws poking through the thin fabric to stab the palms of her tight fists. “I’ll stay with you,” she agreed, trying not to think about just what she was promising. “I’ll stay with you if . . . if they’ll let me.”

He seemed to relax then, his body slouching in the chair as a sense of overwhelming relief infiltrated his system. Nuzzling her cheek, kissing her time and again, he murmured things that she didn’t really hear. Fighting for control over the overwhelming sense of fear that she couldn’t ignore, Sydnie squeezed her eyes closed, concentrating on the feel of his lips, the warmth of his embrace. As if she could take his power, his resolve, and make it her own, she tried not to dwell on the things that she couldn’t understand. Future tai-youkai . . . hunter . . . lover . . . he was all those things, wasn’t he? And yet he meant so much more to her, as well . . . Losing him . . . Sydnie whimpered.

Gently rubbing her back, he held her impossibly close – closer than his own heartbeat. “Stay with me,” he whispered, his lips brushing over her temple in the softest of caresses. Bas trembled under her fingertips; his body seized by emotion that she was starting to understand. In that moment, that instant, he was as afraid as she was – frightened of losing something so very precious that the very thought was enough to wring a gasp, a sob as Sydnie squeezed her eyes closed a little tighter.

"I . . ." She trailed off, leaning away far enough so that she could look into his eyes, studying his face, imploring him to give her the reassurance that she so desperately needed. *'Beautiful things . . .'* she thought fleetingly, dizzily, *'they can't last . . . can they?'*

A million emotions were there in the depths of his gaze. The ferocity that she knew so well . . . the intuitive belief that he belonged with her . . . even his compelling desire to protect her . . . it was all there, wasn't it? Lost in the flickering burn of something far headier, Bas' golden eyes seemed to penetrate her very skull, leaving her stripped bare, bleeding, raw . . . and yet completely cosseted and sheltered, too.

Slowly, he brought his hands up, cradling her face in his palms. He was asking her, wasn't he? Demanding answers to questions that she wasn't sure if she could answer. Too long a time spent alone, maybe . . . too many nights spent in shadows and fear . . . and somehow Bas had driven the demons back into the recesses of the darkness, hadn't he? Somehow, he'd managed to set her free . . .

Sydney uttered a low whimper, a quiet entreaty. Bas nodded just a little, stroking her cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. He understood her, didn't he? Knew her better than she knew herself . . . It didn't have to make sense. In her heart, she knew . . .

His lips were gentle on hers; a loving touch, a whisper, a flutter of breath. The image of him, of his tears, flickered to life – a poignant memory . . . something she'd rather not remember. Bas kissed her with a restrained tenderness, a hesitance that cut her deep down. There was something entirely beautiful in his touch; a swell of feeling that transcended the physical. Unable to lend voice to the tide of emotion that rose inside her, Sydney slipped her arms around her neck, held him tight, kissed him back with all the feeling that she just couldn't put into words.

Her actions lent him the reassurance he had needed, and he moaned softly, deepening the kiss with an urgency that she felt in the depths of her soul. Her lips parted, his tongue tracing the contours of her teeth, accepting the caress of his tongue. Reverberations shot through her, giving rise to a conflagrantly hot heat that surged and welled, a throb of need tempered by the fanciful wish to show him the things that she wanted to tell him.

Sydney leaned against him, her flesh erupting in a riot of goose bumps, as though her skin were trying to reach out for his touch. His hands slid down her shoulders, her sides, slipping under the hem of her tank top, pushing it up with agonizing slowness, the heat of his hands scalding her. She leaned away long enough to lift her arms over her head. The stretchy fabric slipped over her breasts. They sprang free, the cooler air welcome on her overheated skin. Bas groaned as he tugged the shirt off her and dropped it onto the floor. Sydney shifted her weight, straddled his thighs, her legs dangling by his sides, tips of her toes brushing the thick carpet below.

Slipping his arms around her to offer support, he lowered his mouth over her hardened nipple. The consuming heat of his ardent attention wrenched a loud moan from her, and she let her head fall back, her arms encircling his neck. Pure sensation surged through her, culminating in a tumultuous ache as Bas' tongue bathed her flesh, the insistent draw of his desire reaching out to her, willing her to submit to him.

She held onto him, clung to him as he continued his slow inspection. His touch was electric, shooting straight through her to the throbbing pulse that was growing stronger by the second, the startling burn that plagued her. He kissed his way between the peaks of her breasts, suckling the flesh, teeth grazing over her sensitized skin as she shivered in his arms. He growled low in his throat, the predatory sound of the inu-youkai – a sound only ever heard by the youkai's mate. Sydnie mewled softly, the noise more of an instinct than a conscious thought. Bas must have understood it, his growl escalating into a far more visceral snarl. His erection pressed against her, rubbed her through the flimsy barrier of her panties. His jeans chafed her inner thighs, unforgiving fabric harsh yet somehow welcome. Undulating her hips, grinding her pelvis against him, she panted for breath as Bas groaned out loud. "I want you," he mumbled, his voice husky, rasping.

Struggling for a semblance of control, Sydnie forced her eyes half open, her gaze alight with a smoldering burn. "What are you waiting for?" she purred back.

His answer was another predatory growl as his mouth descended on hers again. Fierce, demanding, he was relentless, taking no prisoners as he took then gave, his kiss unrelenting, his need feeding hers. Crushing her against his body, he gasped as her scent filled the air, the rise of passion in the gathering dusk.

The dizzying flow that precluded her thoughts left her mind reeling. The taste of him, the feel of his hands gliding over her back . . . those things culminated in her mind, swelling into the insistent demand for something much more intoxicating, much more necessary than breath. He scooped her up, carried her to the bed. She uttered a proprietary little growl when he relinquished his hold on her to step away.

She opened her eyes, scowling at the wide expanse of his back as Bas rifled through the suitcase for a condom. Reveling in the way his muscles moved just below the surface of his skin, she rose up on her knees, pushing her panties down before dropping back and lifting her legs to finish removing the last of her clothes. Bas turned in time to see her lower her legs, her knees bent, feet askew. Slowly, deliberately, she let her knees fall open, and her breath caught as the heightened glow in his eyes ignited in a haze of fire and light. He stared unabashed at her, gazed at the secretive folds of moist skin and shadows. He stumbled toward the bed, the condom slipping from his slack fingers as he fell to his knees, grabbing her ankles and jerking her toward him. He let go of her

long enough to slip his hands under her bottom, lifting her pelvis off the bed as the back of her legs rested on his shoulders, her feet flattened against the small of his back.

Another primitive growl issued from him as he buried his tongue deep inside her. Sydney gasped, moaned, brought her hips up to meet his mouth. He squeezed her ass in response, lifting her higher, opening her further, delving his tongue deeper and deeper into her. His teeth grazed her scorched flesh. Her body trembled in his hands. Pressing his lips closer around the very core of her, he sucked gently, his low growl a constant that rattled through her body, igniting nerves that shot straight to her brain. Pushing with her feet, she tried to propel herself away from the rampant ache that tormented her.

She couldn't think, couldn't breathe, could only feel as he decimated every last bit of her will. He held her steady, surging forward as his broad shoulders forced her legs apart even further, lifting her off the bed once more, his tongue stroking in a rhythm that her body craved. The resurgent need built around her. He opened his mouth a little wider, closed it over the tiny bud that quivered, ached for him. Sucking hard enough to make her gasp before releasing only to do it again and again, Bas was relentless. Sydney's fingers tangled into Bas' hair, holding him close as she rocked her hips against his voracious mouth. His tongue slipped out of her only to stroke her gently, flicking over the swollen nub of flesh that he'd discovered.

Her cry echoed loudly in the room. Her body convulsed as she arched her back, eyes closed, as absolute pleasure washed over her in wave after sinful wave. His finger slipped into her, prolonging the sensation as he continued to assault her with his tongue. She felt the shift on the end of the bed but couldn't gather her wits enough to even attempt to make sense of it. Moments later, she cried out, a plaintive little whine as he pulled away from her.

Opening her eyes long enough to watch him suck his finger, she uttered a soft whimper as his gaze locked with hers. Unfastening his jeans, he pushed them down and stepped out of them before retrieving the condom and making quick work of opening the packet and rolling it into place. Holding his twitching penis in his hand, he stroked it a few times as he tilted his hand to the side and slowly brought his eyes up to meet hers once more.

She opened her mouth to call out to him. Her throat was too dry to speak. Raising her arms, parting her legs, she beckoned him silently, and he groaned in response, catching her behind the knees once more and pulling her to the edge of the bed. Her eyes slipped closed as the thick tip of him slipped inside her, as he slowly eased himself deep into her. The sensation was too beautiful; too magical . . . She felt the warm moisture of his lips pressing kisses against the soles of her feet. His teeth raked over the curve of her instep, and he groaned softly as he throbbed in her. She moaned,

whimpered, tried to get him to understand. He was too far away for her to reach, intent on driving her mad . . .

With agonizing slowness, a lethargy that pushed her to the brink of her sanity, he slid out of her, keeping only the head of his cock inside her. She whined, digging her heels into his shoulders in an effort to make him understand. Pulling her toward him, sheathing himself deep inside, Bas growled. He supported her completely, used his position as leverage as he teased her with the slow stroke of his body inside hers. Half off the bed, Sydnie dug her claws into the blankets beneath her, lifting her shoulders as her head fell back, her breathing coming in abbreviated pants and harsh gasps. Bas caught both her ankles in one of his hands, held onto the bedpost with the other, gradually increasing the tempo and strength of his thrusts, burying himself in her repeatedly, almost savagely, with a measured brutality that sent her tumbling over the edge. Her breasts lurched with every thrust. The bed creaked as he slammed into her. Grunting, growling, body taut, rigid, he drove into her hard and fast with an insatiable need, a primitive desire.

Too many sensations warred for domination in her muddled head; too many conflicting emotions . . . giving herself up to the complete control of sheer lust, she reveled in the strength of the man; of Sebastian. Plunging into her with a force so hard that she could feel his balls slapping against her ass, Sydnie's abbreviated purr became something more of a half-growl. Every nerve in her body centered on Sebastian and what he was making her feel. The insistent stroke of his shaft sliding in and out of her so quickly that she didn't have time to complain before he buried himself inside her once more drove her further, goaded her passion as it fed his own. The feel of completion surged into something more powerful. She felt as though she were dying only to be reborn in him – the rise of the phoenix complete . . . and maybe in him, she really could be reborn . . .

She heard his voice as though from a distance; the agonized entreaty to God and to heaven. He throbbed inside her, thicker, harder . . . the temerarious hold she had on the last strands of her sanity snapped. Her body constricted almost painfully as her need broke wide, as pure sensation exploded deep inside her. Laughing, crying, soaring, falling, and somewhere in the haze of her pleasure, she heard Bas calling her name. He slammed into her once more, his body racked with tremors. He let go of her ankles, dropping to his knees at the end of the bed, his cheek resting on the tangle of damp curls between her legs. Turning his head, he kissed her gently, tenderly, before pulling her off the bed, cradling her against his chest as he collapsed back against the end of the mattress. He let his head fell back, his eyes closed, with Sydnie snuggled closer than his own heartbeat.

She didn't notice that he'd pulled the blanket off the bed, covering her carefully as he struggled to breathe. She opened her eyes and slowly leaned away, stroking his cheek

with her quivering fingers. He didn't open his eyes right away though he did manage a weak sort of smile. He caught her hand, kissed her knuckles, and pulled her against his chest once more. "Baby . . ."

Sydney winced as the realization finally sank in. She needed him desperately, blindly, and yet . . . the tiny seed of doubt remained. She knew what he'd said, knew that he believed it, too. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't. Being pragmatic was a hard thing to shake. Still, the one fear she held to wasn't logical, wasn't rational. The one fear she'd always had despite the path she'd chosen for herself . . .

"Bas?" she whispered, blinking back the tears that gathered in her eyes. He still had his eyes closed. He didn't see them, and with any luck at all, he never, ever would.

"Hmm?"

She swallowed hard, wishing that she could force her question out of her mind but knowing that it would just continue to plague her. She sighed and let her cheek fall against his chest once more, selfishly allowing herself to revel in the warmth of his embrace, in the safety he offered her, before drawing a deep breath and finally giving voice to the one thing she desperately needed to know. "Will you . . . do it?"

He stroked her hair, pulled her a little closer as he shifted to make himself more comfortable. "Will I do what?"

She cleared her throat. "If the tai-youkai says I have to die . . . will you do it?"

He stiffened, hand stilling as he sucked in a sharp breath. "*What?*"

"It'd be okay," she whispered, refusing to meet his gaze. "If you did it . . . I'd want you to."

Bas pushed her aside and staggered to his feet, stalking across the bedroom to drop the used condom into the small metal trashcan beside the desk before raking his hands through his hair as he erupted in a fierce growl and continued to pace the room. "*Sydney!* What the . . .? *Fuck*, no!"

She sat up, wrapping her arms around her ankles and resting her chin on her knees. "Please, Sebastian . . . Don't you —?"

"How the hell can you ask me something like that? I told you, damn it! There's no way in hell my father will order any such thing! Kill you? *Are you insane?*" he bellowed.

The tears she'd been trying to stave back filled her eyes, slipped down her cheeks. "You don't understand," she whispered. "I knew when I went after Cal Richardson . . . I knew . . ."

He stalked over to her once more, and for a moment, Sydnie wondered if she'd pushed him just a little too far. Heaving a sigh, he dropped to his knees, grasping her shoulders and pushing her back against the bed, forcing her to meet his fierce gaze. "How could you ask me that after what we just did? How could you *possibly* think I could . . .?" he trailed off with a grimace, ducking his head for a moment as though the very words he'd been about to say had hurt him. Maybe they had. When he lifted his chin once more, his eyes were burning with an intense fire, but masked in the depths of his gaze was the underlying pain she'd caused him, and she slowly shook her head. "I could never hurt you, Sydnie – and I won't let anyone else do it, either: not my father . . . no one . . ."

"The penalty for murder –" she recited in a monotone.

" – Does not apply to you! You didn't murder him! You avenged your sister, and that is completely different! You did it because no one else would . . . But to ask me to . . . to kill you . . .? How could you ask something like that of me?"

"It's only . . . it's just . . . you . . . care about me, right?"

Bas heaved a sigh but nodded. "Yes, damn it, I do, which is why –"

"That's why I knew . . ."

"Knew what?"

She sniffled, dashing the back of her hand over her misting eyes. "You'd make sure it didn't hurt, wouldn't you? You'd make sure that . . . that death wouldn't . . . hurt . . ."

"God," he rasped out, falling back as his hands dropped away from her. Skin pale, eyes bright, he slowly shook his head as a look akin to complete horror surfaced on his features. "Oh, my God . . ."

"Please, Sebastian, I –"

"No," he growled, casting her a pained glance. "No! You're not going to die, damn it!"

"How do you know?"

"I just do!"

“How?”

“Because! Can’t you leave it at that?”

“No, I can’t!”

Bas smashed his hands over his face as he struggled to contain his turbulent emotions. “Because my father will never, ever condemn me to die with you!”

Sydney flinched and shook her head. “O-of course he wouldn’t,” she allowed. “That doesn’t matter when—”

“After everything I told you,” Bas interrupted, rising to his feet and wandering toward the window, “and you still don’t get it . . . My youkai blood has chosen you. It’s told me as much, and that means that if I know it, then on some level, you do, too, and *that* means that your death means my death, and that mine would mean yours. My father knows this, too. *Do you understand me now? Do you believe me?*”

“But . . .”

He slowly turned around, pinning her with a sad sort of expression—an apologetic little half-smile. “That’s what it means, and . . . and that’s how I know.”

Sydney grimaced, squeezing her eyes closed for a moment as she tried to deny his claims. It made sense to her, didn’t it? Despite what she wanted to believe, it all made sense . . .

‘Mates protect each other, don’t they? Because if they didn’t, it would . . . it would mean death . . .’

He turned away, staring out of the window, arms crossed over his chest and a faraway sadness in his gaze. Sydney swallowed hard, pulling the blanket closer around her shoulders as she got to her feet and slowly made her way toward him. He didn’t look at her as she stood there, but he did catch her, pulling her into his arms in a fierce hug when she had finally turned to go.

“That’s how I know,” he allowed quietly, staring over her head at the falling night sky.

Sydney stared out the window, too, but didn’t see anything; not really. Too lost in her own misery, in her own disjointed thoughts . . . Everything and nothing made sense, and everything and nothing led back to him . . .

With a strangled sob, she turned slightly, burying her face against his chest. He heaved a sigh but held her close: the only thing he really knew to do for her.

The ignoble pain . . . the sense of desperation . . . the flickering, stuttering desire to believe . . . Sydnie shook her head, held tight to Bas' shoulders. *'Oh, Sebastian . . . what have I done . . .?'*

Final Thought from Bas:
... She has got to be joking ...

Chapter 43

Reticence

Serena stared out the window at the falling dusk that settled over the city with a quiet sort of awe that did little to raise the flagging hope that Jeb would walk through the door.

Did it matter? Did anything really matter anymore?

Dragging a trembling hand over her gaunt face, Serena heaved a tumultuous sigh and slowly shook her head.

She could feel it in her heart, couldn't she? The vast sense of emptiness . . . the terrible void of intuition that spoke clearly, concisely: Jeb wasn't coming home.

He'd taken every solitary thing that had ever mattered to Serena; this son of the tai-youkai. *'The Zelig's son has cost me everything – everything – and yet he lives, doesn't he? And yet he lives . . .'*

It was supposed to have been a simple assignment: track the woman who was responsible for Cal Richardson's death and dole out the justice that Zelig had seemed reluctant to enforce. Never had Jeb thought that the unseasoned hunter that the tai-youkai would see fit to send would be Zelig's son – his heir, for the love of God.

And maybe that was the biggest joke of them all.

Serena's harsh laughter filled the silent room. The grating sound – cynical, jaded – welled up from somewhere deep inside her; spilled over in gales of hysterical noise. Jeb had promised that he would make all of their dreams come true, hadn't he? He'd made that vow so long ago, and he had made good on his word, as well. Of course he had . . .

Trained in the ancient ways; the more archaic means of fighting and of assassination, Jeb had taken the tasks that others had shirked. In a day and age when guns and easy kills were simple, he had striven to maintain a certain level of integrity in the organization he'd founded. How often he'd told her that there was no honor to be found in the use of firearms amongst youkai. He'd said it, hadn't he? Still . . .

Still, if he'd used a gun instead of his strength, maybe things would have been different now. If he'd let go of his damnable pride – if he'd taught Cody in the beginning that there wasn't a youkai alive who could outrun a bullet . . .

Serena had listened in silence. Lost in shadows, always alert, she had heard the things that Jeb hadn't realized that she knew anything about. She knew all of it. She'd made it her mission to know. She was dead, one way or the other. Only time was left, and that was cruel, too.

She wanted him to suffer, didn't she? She wanted him to understand just what he had done. This hunter – this son of the Great Dog . . . he'd decimated her family. He'd taken everyone that Serena had ever loved.

Turning away from the window, Serena shuffled across the floor; out of the barren living room, through the foyer, the hallway, draped with pristine white sheets – ghosts of a life best left forgotten. It wouldn't have mattered if Jeb came back or not, would it? Even if he had, the Zelig wouldn't have let the slight pass, and why should he? He, like Jeb, would have been avenging his son.

Her purse sat on the sheet-covered bed beside a framed photograph of a family. The mother's bright golden hair shone in the sunshine, the feline grace of the man beside her evident even in the still image. A tall young man stood beside the woman, his arms draped around her as well as around the dainty little slip of a girl on his other side. He was smiling, laughing, his hair blowing in his face. Hard to believe that the picture was taken less than a year ago, Serena mused. The young man and his beautiful bride, and they hadn't realized then that everything was poised to change. Not one of them had known, had they? Back then, they'd all believed that the future was bright, shining, full of promise yet to be explored.

Serena brushed a single tear away, her hands shaking as she pressed the frame against her chest. Sinking down on the end of the bed, she set the picture aside and checked her purse. The sight of the flat black gun nestled so neatly beside her alligator skin wallet made her flinch, and she carefully dug the weapon out of her purse and checked the ammunition clip.

One bullet. It was all she needed. One bullet would bring an end to the pain her life had become. One bullet, and Sebastian Zelig . . .

'Let it go, Serena . . . can't you just let it be over?'

She winced and carefully stowed the gun into her purse once more. *'Let . . . it go?'*

Yet she couldn't do that, could she? The anger, the bitterness . . . it was all she had left along with the consuming questions; the morbid need to question God and the heavens. A barter with the devil, maybe, and if it only bought her a few more days . . .

Maybe it would be enough.

Sydney drummed her claws on the Formica tabletop and wrinkled her nose as she shifted her baleful glare around the small diner. It was not to be borne, really, the ease with which Bas tended to draw undue attention from anyone of the female persuasion. She'd heard the excited twittering coming from the end of the counter where the waitresses were congregated. A surreptitious glance later, and Sydney had been gritting her teeth since every one of the five girls over there were staring unabashedly at *her* puppy. The only consolation, however small, was that Bas never, ever seemed to notice the attention that he garnered. If only *she* didn't . . .

Bas set his knife and fork on the empty plate before him and pushed it away before leaning his forearms on the edge of the table and eyeing Sydney carefully. "Want to tell me what's on your mind, kitty?"

Giving up the pretense of eating, she dropped her fork with a loud clatter and sat back against the padded vinyl bench seat. "Nothing," she drawled, pinning on a tolerant little smile that felt more like a grimace.

His frown darkened. "Nothing, huh?"

Sydney dug in her purse for a cigarette then grimaced. She hated the anti-smoking laws, especially when she was grappling for control over her rising irritation. "What ever happened to manners?" she demanded, narrowing her gaze on Bas. "Isn't it *obvious* that we're here together? Isn't it *obvious* that you're quite taken?"

Bas blinked in surprise and slumped back in his seat as a slow grin spread over his features. "Jealous, kitty?"

She snorted. "Do we *have* to go over this again, puppy? I own you, and —"

"Own me, huh?"

"Yes, *own* you, and since I *own* you —"

“Do I call you ‘master’?”

Sydney rolled her eyes. “ – There are certain things that I shouldn’t have to put up with, not the least of which are nasty waitresses who – ”

“Mistress?”

“ – Think that they have the right to gawk at you as though you’re little more than a bit of meat on a string created for their sordid amusement.”

“You’re right,” he agreed, his tone indulgent at best. “I’m just here for *your* sordid amusement, right?”

She snorted again, cheeks pinking despite the haughty tilt of her chin. “That’s right.”

“All right, kitty, if you say so.”

“I do,” she insisted. “Anyway, aren’t we almost finished yet?”

“You barely touched your food.”

Sydney shrugged and uttered a terse little grunt. Bas grinned at her again before digging out his wallet and trying to decide how much of a tip he should leave. Taking advantage of the momentary lapse in his scrutiny, she scooped up the packets of sugar and salt and pepper off the table and into her purse. Bas dropped some bills on the table and stood up, offering Sydney a hand to help her to her feet.

She didn’t speak as they left the restaurant and headed for the car. They weren’t too far from New York City, and Bas had said that they might as well keep driving. His father, he explained, had a townhouse in Manhattan, and while Sydney wasn’t keen on the idea of staying in another of Cain Zelig’s homes, she couldn’t seem to think of a single thing to talk Bas out of it, either.

‘Face it, Sydney . . . it’s not the idea of staying at the Zelig townhouse that has you up in arms. What’s bothering you most is what you know is waiting for you there, in New York City . . .’

She bit her lip and slipped into the passenger seat of the rental car while Bas strode around to the driver’s side. She’d been trying not to think about it too much, hadn’t she? She’d tried not to think, not to worry . . . She’d tried not to dwell on the things left to be done.

Bas climbed into the car, casting Sydney a quick little smile.

She returned the gesture despite the feeling of absolute foreboding that she couldn't mask completely. He didn't miss her reluctance, and he reached out to brush her hair out of her face. "What are you thinking about, kitty?"

Sydney leaned into his touch and closed her eyes, savoring the feel of his caress. "I'm fine, puppy," she lied. "Did you get a spoon for me?"

Bas chuckled and dug another chintzy silver spoon out of his inner pocket. Sydney took it, a small smile tugging at the corners of her lips as she turned the plastic case over in her hands, examining the latest addition to her growing collection.

Staring at the utensil, she couldn't help the tiny grimace that furrowed her brow as Bas started the car and put it into gear. The sooner they got to New York City – the sooner she took care of the things that she needed to do . . . She bit her cheek. After that, her fate would be sealed, wouldn't it? There'd be no going back; not ever. Bas would understand what she'd been trying to tell him. He had to. There was no other way . . .

"Where is she?"

Ryomaru fell into step beside Cain as the tai-youkai strode into the nondescript building. "Where else? In containment."

Cain nodded without breaking his stride. It'd been a long time since he'd been inside this place. Used for inquisitions ever since the altercation that had brought Cal Richardson to his home, Cain had purchased the vacant building to keep the more unsavory elements away from his family. Since his oldest daughter's birth so long ago, Cain had made a point of not allowing captured youkai to be brought to his estate by the ocean, and this place served his purpose well.

He'd gotten the call less than an hour ago. Ryomaru and InuYasha had brought in Jeb Christopher's right hand, a hawk-youkai named Myrna. Though they said she seemed cooperative, Cain would be damned if he'd take any sort of chances when Gin and his youngest children were home. In any case, he'd told them to bring her here.

InuYasha paced around the windowless room – a larger supply closet with only one door. Cain grunted and nodded in greeting. InuYasha's welcome was much the same. Ryomaru closed the door and leaned against it, arms crossed over his chest, his sword strapped almost carelessly to his lean hips. InuYasha stomped over to the far wall,

sinking down as he folded his arms over his chest under the billowing sleeves of his fire rat haori. Cain stopped before the hawk-youkai and stuffed his hands into his pockets.

"Tell me what you know," he demanded without preamble.

The woman blinked and licked her lips, nodding slowly as she tucked her feet beneath her chair. "I carry no grudge against you," she stated quietly, her golden gaze direct, unafraid despite the worried creases at the corners of her eyes. "I'll tell you what you want to know, but I beg you for mercy."

Cain's expression didn't change as he eyed the youkai carefully. "Names," he finally said. "Give me names, and then we'll talk."

She swallowed hard, her eyes shifting from side to side as she scanned Cain's face for any traces of understanding. "I . . . I'm not sure, but I know where Jeb kept that kind of information."

He narrowed his gaze, careful to keep his expression blanked, impassive. "Do you."

"Yes . . ." Biting her lip for a moment, she sat up a little straighter and cleared her throat. "There's a locked file cabinet in his office—in New York City. It's a bio-lock."

Cain sucked in his cheeks as he pondered the hawk-youkai's claim. "A bio-lock? So in other words, completely useless to us."

She shook her head quickly, nervously flicking out her tongue to lick her lips again. "It was set to accept Jeb's DNA sample or . . . or mine."

"Yours."

"Yes . . . just in case . . . in case something happened to him."

"How big a DNA sample?"

"A hair would do, providing you have enough of a root sample to get the DNA match."

Cain thought that over for a moment before nodding slowly. "Are you really so anxious to turn on your organization?"

Myrna sighed, her chin dropping as she frowned at Cain's question. "Anxious? No . . . I don't have an organization left. Jeb's dead, and I've seen . . . I've seen more than I ever wanted to see."

He could see it in her eyes: her weariness, the sadness that delved deeper than any physical wound ever could. He understood that, didn't he? After the death of his first wife – a death he'd blamed on himself for far too long – hadn't he felt the same way? Saw too much . . . lived through too much . . . terrible things; things that had the power to haunt one's dreams and turn them into nightmares . . . This woman: this youkai . . . She understood a little too well, just how precarious life really was. The pain of the loss of those she worked with every day; the knowledge that nothing on earth could have saved them once the tremulous hand of fate intervened . . . and maybe she really did want to end it all, and maybe there was some honor in that wish. "And you'll give up a DNA sample so that we can access those files?"

She nodded. "I will."

Cain shifted his gaze to meet Ryomaru's. Still lounging against the door, the hanyou nodded, and Cain stepped back. "I trust you and your father can take care of this? I want the names of those who hired the hit on Sydney."

Ryomaru nodded again. "Need a collection kit," he grumbled.

"I'll have one sent over," Cain assured him. "I'll call in one of my hunters to watch her. You'll make sure that there's not another hit issued for Sydney?"

"Not a problem," Ryomaru said. "Ain't Bas in New York City, though?"

Cain sighed and rubbed his eye. "He's heading that way, yes. Said he should be there by nightfall."

"We'll take care of it."

Casting a quick glance over his shoulder, Cain's eyes locked with InuYasha's. The hanyou didn't blink as he slowly pushed himself to his feet, nodding curtly at the taiyoukai. Cain nodded back, allowing that the two could take care of the nasty business of finding and stopping the threat to Sydney. Ryomaru, after all, was Sesshoumaru Inutaisho's most feared youkai-hunter in Japan, and despite Cain's personal feelings toward InuYasha, he had to admit that the hanyou – his father-in-law – was a force to be reckoned with.

Ryomaru stepped away from the door, and Cain slipped out of the room as he dug his cell phone from his pocket and dialed the eleventh number on his speed-dial. The first nine were reserved for family with Gin's number programmed in first. The tenth number was that of his most trusted general, Ben, who had served as interim tai-youkai while Cain was being trained before he'd reached his majority. The eleventh number was the first – the oldest – of his hunters. Deke Cartham answered on the second ring.

"Zelig?"

In the background, Cain could discern the sounds of Kelly Cartham's laughter as she talked with their only child, Madison. He grimaced. "Hey, Cartham. I have a job for you."

"Hold on."

Cain kept walking as he waited for Cartham to duck out of the room. He heard the soft click of a door closing and figured that Cartham had closeted himself away in his gun room. "All right."

"Gin's father and Ryomaru brought in the last surviving member of the Onyx . . . I need you to come down here and keep an eye on her while we find out whether or not the information she provided is accurate."

"All right."

Cain paused, his hand on the glass door that led onto the sidewalk. "They need a DNA kit, too."

"DNA? The tester or the preserving kit?"

"Preserving kit. She says that the files are stored in under bio-lock."

Cartham grunted. "Makes sense. Dunno if I have preserving kit left, but I can get one."

"Thanks."

"No-kill?"

"No-kill . . . I've not decided what I'll do with her yet."

"Understood. HQ?"

"Yes."

Cartham sighed, and Cain could hear the snick of a zipper. Cartham was packing up his gear. "Give me an hour."

Clicking off his cell phone, Cain stepped onto the street, scanning the area more from force of habit than because he sensed any real danger.

He didn't doubt that the hawk-youkai's claims were grounded; not at all. No, the vexing question was what he should do with her. She was one of the higher-up members of the Onyx, after all, and as such, she'd been directly or indirectly responsible for the deaths of countless youkai. Depending on her level of involvement, granting her a pardon might prove to be a little trickier than it would in Sydnie's case. Sydnie . . . what she'd done, she'd done because the system had somehow failed her, and when she had no one else she could turn to—no one who believed her, and providing she didn't do anything stupid, Cain could pardon her for killing Cal Richardson . . . Thing was, he couldn't say he wouldn't have done the same damn thing if he had to endure what she had, but the hawk-youkai . . .

He sighed as he slipped behind the steering wheel of the late-model Ford Bronco—Bas' vehicle. It hadn't been driven in awhile and needed to be, which was why Cain had taken it.

The trouble with pardoning the hawk-youkai was that money was her motivating factor. There wasn't a sense of righteous vengeance, of a system that failed to deliver. The Onyx was, after all, a clandestine organization of well-trained assassins who killed because it filled their pockets. Letting her off the hook was something that Cain wasn't sure he could do. Vigilante justice was still exactly that, and despite the knowledge that many of the Onyx's victims were likely renegade youkai who would have eventually come to light in the eyes of the tai-youkai's office, it certainly didn't exonerate their collective actions; not by a long shot.

Maybe Gunnar had some information; something to fill in the rest of the cracks to help Cain figure out just what to do with Myrna Loy . . .

Bas stood at the window, staring out into the night as he tried to make sense of Sydnie's strange behavior that had steadily gotten worse since they had stopped for lunch at the small diner. Anxious, skittish, she'd nearly jumped out of her skin when he'd touched her shoulder in the car. Her eyes had been wild, frightened, and that had worried him even more than the slight mewling, the trembling he could sense as she had dozed in the passenger seat of the car. '*The nightmare,*' he'd come to realize; the one he'd thought she didn't have anymore . . . it had managed to haunt her just one last time, and Bas had pulled over so that he could wake her.

She'd blinked a few times before fumbling with the seat belt and ferreting her way onto his lap. Her heart was beating so hard that he'd winced as he stroked her hair, as he'd

murmured nonsense in an effort to calm her, to soothe her. She'd clung to him, her breath strangled and harsh while he tried not to feel completely helpless in the face of her consuming fear. When she'd calmed down enough to ask him to stop for the night, he'd agreed without hesitation despite their being less than an hour away from New York City. Unable to do more than nod, he'd ignored the tiny voice whispering in his head that something was just not right with her, opting instead to shift her to the side far enough that he could drive without interference. She'd huddled against his shoulder, burying her face against his chest, and he'd stopped at the first hotel he could find . . .

Bas sighed and shot Sydnie a surreptitious glance. She was rubbing her forearms as though she were cold, her gaze darting around almost nervously, as she paced the floor, her eyes darting to every darkened corner of the room and finally coming to rest on the closet.

He frowned. She hadn't tried to retreat to the closet since she'd told him the tale of her past. Something really was bothering her, but every time he asked her, she forced a smile and shook her head. *'As if I can't see right through that,'* he thought with an inward snort. Still, he couldn't bring himself to demand for more information. The terrified look on her face was enough to silence his tongue before he could even think to ask.

Pushing himself away from the window, Bas shuffled over to her and held out his hand. "Come on, baby . . . you look tired."

She stared at his hand for a moment then nodded, and he winced as her icy fingers touched his palm. Turning off the bedside lamp, Bas stretched out on the bed and pulled Sydnie close. She crawled onto his chest, settling herself with her cheek against his heart. Bas rubbed her back, stroked her hair, wished that he could comprehend the demons that were chasing her now.

'You know, Bas, I wonder . . .'

Listening to the slight tremor in her breathing, Bas winced but remained silent.

'The second one . . . the other youkai . . . do you suppose . . .?'

Bas grimaced, eyes scanning the yellowed ceiling, watching as the headlights of passing cars chased one another across the expanse of the room. He'd already wondered that.

"Sydnie?"

"Tired, Sebastian," she murmured, cuddling closer, squeezing her eyes closed tight.

He kissed her forehead. "He's close, isn't he? The second one . . ."

She didn't answer, gripping the blanket he'd draped over her so tightly that her arm shook.

Bas tried again. "You can't go after him, baby . . . you can't."

"G'night, puppy," she mumbled, ignoring his line of questioning.

Bas didn't press her further. He'd ask her again in the morning. He didn't have a choice, damn it, because if she did go after the second youkai; if she succeeded in killing him, too . . .

It was something Bas didn't even want to consider.

*Final Thought from Bas:
... Dominatrix...?*

Chapter 44

The Moon and New York City

Bas set the suitcase in the middle of the huge bed that encompassed almost the entire wall of the room and nearly half the floor, as well. The dark green hues of the room reflected Bas' affinity for the color. It couldn't be helped, he figured absently. Pine green was his ceremonial color, after all, and while his mother had fussed and maintained that the color was just too dark to be healthy, she had given in and had decorated all of Bas' bedrooms in the deep shade, and his bedroom in the Zelig townhouse was no different . . .

Sydney paced the room distractedly though it was impossible to tell whether her distraction stemmed from the idea of being in New York City or because they were once more in what she perceived to be 'enemy territory'.

He hadn't gotten any answers out of her today, either. In fact, aside from a certain level of preoccupation, she had seemed to be back in complete control of her faculties once more. He couldn't figure her out. Surely one nightmare couldn't have been responsible for her uncharacteristically afraid behavior the night before . . .

He sighed. Sure, it could. He knew that those dreams bothered her, and rightfully so. It couldn't be easy, reliving those last few hours of her sister's life over and over again. Taunted with the knowledge that she hadn't been able to do a thing to save Kit, just what had that done to Sydney's psyche over the time and space of years?

Still, he couldn't quite shake the feeling that Sydney was hiding something from him. It didn't matter whether or not he had a solid reason to back his intuition. She said that she was fine, after all. There had to be more to it, though, and as Bas turned his head to steal a glance at her only to find her standing off to the left of the window, leaning to the side enough to peer outside while obviously not wishing to be spotted from the other side, he couldn't help the trill of uncertainty that raced up his spine and back down once more.

"Suppose you tell me what's wrong?" he drawled, turning away from the bed and crossing his arms over his chest as he schooled his features to hide the reluctance that warred in his mind.

Sydney jumped slightly and whipped around to face him. "What's that?"

"Sydney . . ."

"I'm fine," she assured him, flashing him a nervous sort of smile. Bas grimaced, slowly wandering over to her and slipping his arms around her, pulling her back against his chest. Her whole body was tense, stiff, and she shot him a cursory glance before uttering a soft little sound – a quiet sort of whimper that cut him to the quick.

"You can tell me anything you want," he told her. "You know that, right?"

"I know," she agreed, wrapping her hands over his arms and leaning against him.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "Of course I am."

"Then are you going to tell me what's on your mind?"

She shrugged and leaned forward to get a better look at the world outside. "You're imagining things, Sebastian. There's nothing on my mind – except that I think I'd like a bath."

He sighed. "A bath."

She gave an emphatic nod. "Yes, a bath."

Bas relented with another loud sigh designed to let her know that he was letting her have her way, at least for the moment, giving her a quick squeeze before letting his arms drop and stepping back from her. "Want some milk, kitty?"

She smiled. "I don't need it," she drawled.

Bas snorted. "I know you don't, but I'd be happy to get you some."

She strolled over to her and slipped her arms around his waist, giving him a tight little squeeze before kissing his cheek. "Thank you, puppy. I think I'd like that."

"Good," he assured her, kissing the tip of her nose, unable to resist the smile that surfaced. "Go start your bath while I get your milk, baby."

She nodded and let go of him, sauntering over to the suitcase to retrieve a change of clothes. Pausing in the doorway, she winked at him before slipping into the adjacent bathroom and closing the door behind herself.

Bas' smile faded as he turned toward the doorway. He'd just have to keep an eye on her, he supposed, and that wasn't really a problem, after all. He loved to keep his eyes on her, didn't he?

'It really isn't as simple as that, Bas . . . For as much as you trust her, you know she really could slip through your fingers if you aren't careful. If you let your guard down, she could easily do just that. Remember, will you? She's damn good at slipping away and blending into the shadows. She's done it for years, hasn't she?'

Bas made a face as he ran down the flight of stairs to the main level of the townhouse. *'She trusts me. She won't do something stupid enough to put herself in jeopardy.'*

'Won't she? Were you listening to what she was trying to tell you the other night? Yeah, so she stung your pride, asking you to be the one to kill her, and in your heart you know you couldn't do it, even for her, but the thing is, why did she ask that of you; of us? If she didn't really still believe that she was going to die, why the hell would she ever ask such a stupid thing?'

'Why else? To be morbid.'

'Morbid? You don't really think —'

'You're right,' he cut off his youkai voice, slamming a glass onto the counter and striding over to get the gallon of milk he's bought before reaching the townhouse. *'I don't know what to think. Sydnie knows, damn it! I've told her! I have showed her! If something were to happen to her, she knows . . .'*

'And does it really matter what she knows if she thinks she's protecting you, in the end?'

'Protecting me? From what?'

'I don't know, but . . .'

Bas sighed, dumping milk into the glass and stowing the carton back in the refrigerator before glowering at the frothy white liquid. *'But what, damn it?'*

'But . . . unless she thinks that the truth is worse than what she's already told you . . .'

Gritting his teeth, Bas snatched the glass off the counter. Milk sloshed out of the glass, spilling over his fingers, running down his arm only to drip off his elbow, landing on the slate floor with a dull, well 'plop'. Seconds later, the glass shattered in his hand, and he winced as stabbing pain erupted in his palm. Broken glass smashed on the floor, and Bas blinked, raising his injured hand before his face as he watched his blood

pool in his palm, following the trail of milk down his arm with a macabre sort of fascination. *'Worse . . .? What could possibly be worse . . .?'*

He barked out a terse laugh as he bumped the faucet handle with his forearm and stuck his hand under the tap, hissing sharply as the flow of water stung the lacerations. Using his claws to gingerly pick the shards from his hand, he grimaced, opening and closing his fist a few times to make certain that he hadn't cut any tendons. Blood spurted from the wounds, and he sighed.

'Get control over your emotions, Bas. It won't do any good to lose your cool now.'

'Right,' he mused, shaking his head slightly. *'Lose my cool . . .'*

'Sydnie needs you now, you know. If you want to keep her – if you really want to keep her . . .'

Bas nodded, wrapping one of his mother's pristine white kitchen towels around his hand. *'I know.'*

The trouble was that Sydnie had a tendency to retreat within herself if he pushed too much. Too stubborn, too proud . . . she'd rather delude herself into thinking that she really could take care of everything alone, and nothing he could say or do ever seemed to get through to her.

Bas cleaned up the mess and refilled another glass, taking care to control his irritation this time so that he didn't end up with another cut hand for his troubles.

He had to get her to talk to him. He had to make her understand that whatever it was that was bothering her, he wanted to help her. He *had* to. She was his mate, his world, his *life* . . .

'Make her understand that, Bas.'

'You think I'm not trying to do that?'

'No, you're trying, but you know, you let her get away with her habit of secreting herself away from you, don't you? You let her do that, and you can't . . .'

Bas sighed as he started up the stairs once more, his expression hardening as grim determination settled over him. His youkai blood was right. He had to get her to understand that she just couldn't take chances anymore. It wasn't simply about her: it was about him, too . . .

"All right, kitty," he mumbled as he strode into the bedroom once more. "It's time . . ."

Sydney slipped in and out of the shadows in the wake of the darkly clad figure ahead of her. It had been pure luck that she'd found him. His number wasn't listed in the phone book, and she hadn't been able to find him during the hasty online search she'd done, either. No, she'd happened to see his picture in the newspaper that was lying on the desk near Bas' laptop computer. The accompanying article had said that he would be attending a charity function in Manhattan tonight, even going as far as giving the address of the hotel where the soiree was to be given. Piece of cake, wasn't it?

She'd waited outside until he'd emerged. Apparently showing up only long enough to make an appearance, he'd stepped back outside quickly enough, and alone, too, thank God. *'A charity function? Isn't that ironic,'* she'd thought as she memorized his stench, as she stared at the license plate number on the back of the sleek black Mercedes Benz that the valet delivered without a scratch.

Following him home had been the easy part. While she'd stood outside on the cold cement slab of a porch pondering just what she would do, she had memorized his scent. It wasn't so difficult to do. The bastard reeked, and his stench was startlingly familiar, bringing to mind a time and a place that she would just as soon forget.

A shuffling sound, a scrape from within, caught her attention, and she'd darted off the porch into the deep shadows of the bushes that lined the path. He reemerged from the house, pressing his fingertips to the touchpad to lock the door behind himself. Jogging lightly down the steps, he adjusted the neck of his pristine white dress shirt though he'd abandoned the dinner jacket and tie in favor of a hopelessly stuffy tan trench coat-style wool jacket. He buttoned one of the middle buttons as he strode along the sidewalk. Sydney slipped out of the shadows, trailing after him as he meandered through the streets of the city. It was longer than she'd wanted to be gone, but she couldn't leave; not until she'd done what she'd come to do . . .

'If you're gone too long, Bas is going to wake up and realize you're not there.'

Sydney grimaced and bit her lip but didn't falter as she trailed behind the youkai. *'It won't take much longer.'*

'Think about it, Syd . . . he's going to be furious when he realizes what you've done.'

'I have to do this,' she argued stubbornly. *'I have to . . . Sebastian . . . he'll understand . . .'*

'That's not what I'm talking about, and you know it. You deliberately fucked him, just so you could slip away. You did everything in your power to make sure that the man was sleeping like the dead before you left.'

She scowled, slowing her pace as her target disappeared inside a small shop. True enough, she had emerged from her bath, had walked out naked knowing that it was something that Bas wouldn't be able to ignore, and he hadn't. He'd fallen asleep right afterward, and she . . . she'd spared a moment to kiss him gently before donning her clothes and slipping out into the night . . . *'That's not exactly what I did,'* she insisted. *'I only . . . I wanted . . . just one last time . . .'*

'Be reasonable, can't you? If you go through with this—'

'If I go through with this, then it's the end; I know. I'm not stupid . . . but Kit . . . the men responsible for her death shouldn't be allowed to live, should they? This is what I came to do. It's my task . . . it's my responsibility.'

'Bas was right, Sydnie. It never was meant to be your responsibility. So no one listened to you back then, and yeah, that really, really sucked, but you know, you have Bas now, and he listens . . . Bas believes you . . . he's always believed you.'

Sadly, so sadly, she shook her head, rubbing her forearms against the cold night air. In her haste to slip out unnoticed, she'd forgotten her coat, which was just as well. She needed the freedom of movement for what she was about to do. She closed her eyes, and for a moment, the image of Bas' face flickered to life. He was smiling at her in that shy way of his, and she dug her claws into her arms as the first waver in her resolve dug into her heart. *'But I've come too far to back out now . . . haven't I? In for a penny, in for a pound, right?'*

'Can't you let Bas take care of this? Don't you think he would? You told him the story; you saw his reaction. He was appalled . . . and disgusted . . . and do you really think he'd let a scum like him get away with what he and Cal Richardson did?'

'It's not that simple,' she argued.

'It could be.'

'It can't, and you know it, or did you forget who this man is?'

'I didn't forget, no . . . but you've said you trust Bas – were you lying?'

'I trust Sebastian,' she insisted hotly. 'I trust him with my life . . . but I don't trust his father. I can't trust his father – Cain Zelig, the great and powerful tai-youkai . . . He'll never believe me, and in the end . . .'

'Didn't you hear a thing that Bas was telling you? You don't have to be mates to be mates in your hearts. Bas has filled all those empty places inside you, hasn't he? Let him fix this for you . . . or do you really want to destroy him, too?'

Sydney didn't answer. The man stepped out of the store, heading toward her with a newspaper tucked under his arm. She shrank back into the shadows once more until he passed her before slipping into the ever-moving crowd of pedestrians as she followed him back to his home.

There was a certain irony in it all, wasn't there? They'd killed Kit in the building that she called home. Cal Richardson and now this man . . . maybe he would come to understand what it was like, to fear the very place where he should have felt the safest . . . or maybe he just wouldn't care. If he cared, he wouldn't have done what he'd done to Kit so many years ago, would he? But Sydney cared – she cared too much – and maybe that was the biggest irony of them all . . .

Bas yawned and rolled onto his side as he tried to hold on to the last remnants of sleep that dissipated faster than he could stop them. The nagging feeling that something wasn't right, however, grew stronger in his head, and when he finally opened his eyes, he scowled when he realized just what that was likely to be.

Sydney was gone.

Sparing a moment to glance at the clock, Bas growled in abject irritation. Just after midnight . . . where the hell was she?

Tossing back the covers, he grabbed his jeans off the floor and jerked them on, muttering harsh maledictions as he groped for his shirt and tugged that on, too. The air in the townhouse felt stagnant, stale, and he didn't even try to delude himself into thinking that she was still there.

'Damn it . . .'

He had no idea when she'd slipped away, no idea how long she'd been gone. Bas growled low in his throat and pulled on his boots. He must have fallen asleep shortly after making love to Sydney, and that had been a few hours ago . . .

'Why does she do these insane things right after we make love? Asinine questions . . . this disappearing act . . . holy hell, where did she go?' he fumed as he smacked open the bathroom door, knowing she wasn't there but checking just the same. He repeated the process at every door that lined the hallway, and by the time he hit the stairs, he'd surpassed 'irritated' and was well on his way to 'beyond the realm of reason'-angry.

Grabbing Triumvirate from the hooks above the dormant fireplace, Bas spared a moment to strap the weapon around his lean hips before snatching his duster off the back of the sofa and striding toward the door.

So preoccupied in his mutinous thoughts, he didn't stop to let the familiar aura register in his mind as he reached for the knob then jerked his hand back as the door swung open; as Sydney blinked and stared up at him, an inscrutable sort of confusion in her gaze. Skin pale, peaked, eyes huge, she didn't seem to recognize him for a moment, and she shook her head slowly, in an almost frightened sort of way. Her crystalline eyes roamed over her features as she struggled to find a semblance of recognition. With a strangled sort of sob, she threw herself against his chest, her breathing harsh and grasping as she trembled in his arms, quaked beneath his touch, and all traces of Bas' irritation melted in the face of her obvious fear.

Bas cupped her cheeks in his hands and leaned away to frown at her. "Sydney? Baby? What happened? Where'd you go? God, I was so worried . . . don't you ever disappear on me like that again; do you hear me?"

Sydney shook her head miserably, tears welling in her still-frightened gaze though they didn't spill over. "H-hold me, Sebastian?" she whispered. "Just hold me?"

Bas crushed her against his chest, complying with her wishes as he struggled to make sense of her upset. Breathing deep, he couldn't discern any foreign scents on her, and the relief that washed through him was hard to ignore. "Baby, what happened?" he demanded gently.

She shook her head again, her heart hammering so hard that Bas could feel it. He grimaced, slowly rubbing her back, stroking her hair. "I can't do it . . . *couldn't* do it . . . I went there . . . I found him . . . I couldn't do it; I couldn't do it . . ."

"Couldn't do it?" Bas echoed, bending down to catch Sydney's knees, carrying her over to the sofa and settling there with her, cradling her against his shoulder as though she were little more than a child. "Sydney . . ."

“Damn it, he should die! He shouldn’t be allowed to live, right? He *killed* her – my sister! He killed her, and he didn’t even *care!*” she railed, smashing her fists against Bas’ chest. He let her temper have sway, realizing on a purely instinctive level that her anger was too much for her to bear. Hating that she couldn’t do the one thing that she felt was her responsibility, battling the recriminations that gnawed at her soul and wouldn’t let go . . . Bas sighed softly, let her have her tantrum as he waited for it to pass, too.

“He’s here in the city, right? Tell me his name.”

She didn’t act like she heard him. Using her fists to push feebly at his shoulders, she held herself still for a moment before collapsing against him as though she’d spent all of her emotion. “He killed her; he killed her . . . he killed her . . .”

Bas smoothed her hair, kissed her forehead, grateful for the reprieve – she hadn’t been able to do it, but worried nonetheless at the very idea of giving up the name to him. “Give me his name, kitty . . . just tell me his name.”

“You won’t believe me if I tell you,” she admitted, shaking her head as her scared eyes flickered over his face. “No one will . . . *he* won’t – your father . . . he’ll never, ever believe me . . .”

“I’ll believe you, baby! I promise you that I will! Can’t you tell me? Just tell me? Trust me? Please?”

“I . . . I trust you,” she whispered. “But –”

Bas shook his head, held her close. “No ‘buts’, Sydnie . . . you have to trust me. If you’d done it – if you had killed him . . .”

“I know,” she bit out tersely. “I know.”

“Sydnie –”

“He won’t believe me! I know it, and then *he’ll* get away with it! He’ll get away with what he did to her!”

“My father will believe you, Sydnie, because he believes *me!* Damn it, can’t you have a little faith just this once?” he begged.

Sydnie squeezed her eyes closed, buried her face against his shoulder. “He’s too important,” she mumbled as her youki spiked with a harsh surge of pain; pain that

gripped her; something far worse than any physical thing. It was cruel, it was excruciating, and it was something fabricated entirely in the prison of her mind.

"There's no one more important to me than you!" Bas argued fiercely.

"No . . . no, no, no, *no!*"

He gripped her shoulders, forced her back to make her look at him. The desperation in his heart enveloped his mind, and in that instant, he knew. If he didn't get the name from her now, she'd never tell him, would she? She'd kept the secret far too long, and it was consuming her. In the end, it would destroy her, whether she killed the man or not. '*No!*' he thought fiercely, willing her to see the determination in his gaze, '*she'll tell me . . . she has to . . . she must!*' She tried to look away from him. He shook her gently but firmly. "I need the name, Sydnie, please! My father – no, not him; his office . . . The tai-youkai . . . failed you once . . . I don't want to fail you now!"

She bit her lip, scowled through the wash of tears heavy in her eyes. Bas clenched his jaw; glared at her, daring her to lie. "I . . ."

"The. Name."

"What'll you do with it, Sebastian? What'll you do with his name?"

The directness of her question startled him. Her gaze was shocking, bright despite the moisture that spiked her eyelashes. His hold on her loosened though he didn't let go, and he shook his head as he heaved a sigh and licked his lips. "What do you think I'll do? I'll make sure he can't hurt anyone else, ever again. Let me fix this, baby. Let me fix it for you – for your sister."

She stared at him, her eyes full of sadness, her aura tinged with a pain so acute that it stung him deep down. "I'm just a nobody, Bas the Hunter . . . and so was Kit."

"That's not true, Sydnie. You're *everything* to me . . . trust me in this, can't you?"

She swallowed hard, her gaze skittering away to the side, scowling as she warred with the past that was entirely too real in her mind. "What if I told you it was your father?" she challenged, her anger resurging as her head snapped back to face him once more.

"Damn it, Sydnie! My father wouldn't –"

"It might as well be him!" she spat.

Bas flinched, but stubbornly shook his head. "Fuck the riddles, cat! I want an answer! I *deserve* an answer!"

"He's a general!" she yelled, reacting to his anger in kind.

Bas stopped dead and blinked, his mind freezing with the information that she'd blurted. "Wh-wh-*what?*"

She winced and stumbled to her feet, backing away from Bas with her hands wrapped around herself in a purely protective sort of way. "You don't believe me, do you? I knew . . . I knew . . ."

Bas shot to his feet, prowling the length of the living room once – twice. "Which one?" he rasped out, swinging around to face her. "Which –" He trailed off, eyes flaring wide as understanding dawned. Aside from Ben Philips, Cain's most trusted general, there was only one other who lived in New York City; divided his time between his office in Montreal and his residence in New York City . . . Bas gripped his forehead, rubbing furiously. "Jared Brantley . . . It's him, isn't it?" he demanded quietly.

Sydney's choked sob was muffled by the back of her hand, and Bas didn't have to look at her to know that he'd just gotten the name he'd been after. Without a word, he strode into the kitchen, filling a glass of milk for her before returning to the living room and pulling her into his lap. "I have to call him: I have to call Dad."

She looked like she wanted to argue with him, but in the end, she just nodded as he slipped the glass into her hands. He steadied it carefully, kissing her forehead as he closed his eyes for a moment and cleared his throat. "Drink your milk, kitty. I believe you . . . I believe you."

His words seemed to calm her, and she slowly stopped shaking. Drinking her milk slowly, sniffled quietly and nestled closer to his chest. Bas kissed her forehead before scooping her up and carrying her to the bedroom. "Stay here, baby. I'll be back as soon as I call Dad."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but in the end, she nodded, draining the milk glass and handing it back to him before curling up in a tiny ball in the center of the bed. He spared a moment to kiss her cheek, forcing a tiny smile for her benefit before striding out of the room and back down the stairs, grabbing his cell phone before heading into the kitchen to refill the glass for Sydney.

The grandfather clock in the living room chimed one, and Bas grimaced as the phone rang.

"Bas? Something wrong?" Cain's sleep-bleary voice answered.

Bas sighed. "I got the name, Dad: the second youkai."

That got Cain's attention. Bas could hear the bed creak as his father sat up; the thump of his feet on the stairs as Cain descended from the loft bedroom of the studio. "Tell me."

"Wait . . . I've got to know . . . you'll believe her, right?"

Cain heaved a sigh, and Bas heard the scrape of the door. Cain was heading down to his office, Bas figured. "What? Believe – why?"

Bas winced, glowering out the window as he opened and closed his fist around the hilt of Triumvirate, still strapped to his hip. "Humor me, Dad. You'll believe her, right?"

Cain paused a moment while Bas discerned the unmistakable click of Cain's silver lighter. "Okay, I believe her. She doesn't have a reason to lie . . . I found her sister's case file. Her account checked out with the information we could glean, aside from the fact that we didn't realize there was a child there in the building, too . . . It was one of the unsolved ones . . ."

"Dad . . ."

Cain exhaled loudly. "Sorry. Go on."

Bas rubbed his eye and sought a way to tell his father what Sydney had claimed. '*Best just to do it,*' he decided with an inward sigh. "Jared Brantley."

Dead silence greeted Bas' words. Cain barked out an incredulous laugh. "Sorry, Bas. I thought you'd said Jared Brantley."

Bas grimaced. "I did."

"Wha—? *No-o-o-o* . . ."

"You said you'd believe her," Bas reminded him.

"I know; I know . . . damn it! She's sure?"

"Yes, Dad, she's sure."

"Shit."

“Dad—”

“Shit, shit, *shit, shit!*” Cain growled, his voice starting out low enough only to reach furious proportions by the time he was done with his tirade. “The times I’ve let him into this house with your mother and sister . . . and your brother and you . . . *Damn it!*”

Bas slumped back against the counter, closing his eyes as the trepidation drained out of him. He’d never have admitted as much to Sydnie, but he hadn’t been entirely certain that Cain really would believe her. Jared Brantley was a trusted general, and as she’d said, too, it was her word against his, and while Bas believed her completely, he hadn’t been sure that Cain would or could. That he did . . . Bas swallowed the lump in his throat that threatened to choke him.

Cain heaved a sigh, breaking through the silence that had followed his outburst. “Okay, okay . . . just get her back here. I’ll send one of the hunters to bring him in. I think Moe’s available. He’ll be there in a day or two.”

“No, Dad. I want him.”

“Bas—”

“She’s my mate, and it was the office of the tai-youkai that failed her. We owe her. I owe her.”

Cain was silent a moment, deliberating Bas’ demand. In the end, he let out a deep breath. “All right, but you listen to me. Your grandfather and uncle are on their way to the city. They’re looking into who ordered the hit on Sydnie. I’ll call them and have them meet you. Don’t you dare go in there alone. Jared Brantley isn’t a slouch, and I know you’re good, but . . . Anyway, don’t go until they’re with you, and when you do, you make damn sure you try to get a confession out of him.”

“I will,” Bas agreed, his golden gaze darkening as his determination grew stronger. He didn’t want to wait for backup, but he understood his father’s concern. The generals were considered the elite, weren’t they, and to be the elite, they had to be able to substantiate their claims, one way or another.

“And Bas?”

“Hmm?”

“Make sure you do it in the name of the tai-youkai.”

“Yes, sir.”

The line went dead, and Bas snapped the cell phone closed with a sigh, dropping it onto the counter before retrieving the glass of milk for Sydnie off the counter and striding from the room again.

‘In the name of the tai-youkai . . .’

Those words were not to be uttered lightly, and Bas knew it. Cain’s official business was always conducted as such, but to hear them now and in this context . . . In North America, there were only two men who could use those words and the power that came with them: his father was one of them. Bas, as the next tai-youkai, was the other. That Cain wanted Bas to use them spoke volumes for his feelings on the matter. Jared Brantley was as good as dead.

The only thing that struck Bas as odd, though, was Cain’s warning not to go in without InuYasha and Ryomaru. Bas hadn’t realized that his grandfather and uncle were in the States . . . and yet . . .

He scowled as he trudged up the stairs. And yet, maybe he *did* know, after all. The fight with the eight bounty hunters when he’d been knocked out . . . Sydnie claimed that she’d been able to scare them away, and at the time, Bas had doubted that despite her insistence to the contrary. *‘They’ve been here all along, haven’t they? The old man and Ryomaru . . . They’ve been trailing me . . .’*

Before Bas had gone out on this hunt, such interference would probably have bothered him. Now, though, he couldn’t help but be thankful. Had they not been trailing him, the outcome of that fight would have been vastly different, wouldn’t it? Sydnie’s life meant more to him than anything, including his pride. In the end, did it matter if they had interfered after all? No, he decided, it didn’t; not really. Having Sydnie beside him . . . that was the only thing that really meant a damn thing . . .

Sydnie sat up in the middle of the bed when Bas opened the door and walked inside. She looked a little calmer, and when he shot her a wan grin, she almost smiled back. He sat on the edge of the bed and watched as she took the glass of milk and swallowed it in one gulp. Then she handed the glass back and crawled into his lap, huddling against his shoulder with a tired little sigh. She was exhausted: mentally, physically. Asleep within moments, she relaxed in his arms.

Bas sat there for a long time, stroking her hair, breathing in the comforting scent of her. With every breath he drew, though, his anger grew a little hotter, burned a little brighter. About three in the morning, he carefully set her aside, tucking her in gently and kissing her cheek as she slept. She didn’t stir though she uttered a soft little

whimper. Bas straightened up, staring at her for a long time while he tried to figure out just what he ought to do.

Sydney didn't wake as he slipped out of the room again. The townhouse was silent as he grabbed his duster and strode toward the door. His grandfather and uncle could find him easily enough. Weren't they the ones who had taught him everything he knew about hunting and tracking?

Bas locked the front door behind himself, satisfied that Sydney would be safe enough here. He couldn't rest until Jared Brantley was taken care of. He owed that much to Sydney, and moreover, he owed it to himself.

*Final Thought from Cain:
Jared ... Brantley...?*

Chapter 45

Final Confessions

Bas pressed the doorbell once more and tapped his foot, grinding his teeth together as he waited for Jared Brantley to answer. Just after three in the morning – it hadn't taken him long to find Brantley's home – and Bas just wanted to get this over with, to make certain that Brantley could never hurt anyone, ever again.

Sydney's face flashed through his mind. Her eyes clouded with fear, with pain that delved far deeper than a simple cut or scrape. Because of Jared Brantley and Cal Richardson, she hadn't had even the simplest comfort of growing up with someone who loved her; because of them, she had been left alone for far, far too long . . .

"Trust your instincts," Cain had always told Bas. Instilled in him from a time and in a place that Bas couldn't really remember having not known, he'd grown up knowing his duties, his responsibilities. *"Care for those who are too fragile to care for themselves,"* Cain had said. *"Protect the weak from those who would prey on their vulnerabilities. Hold your head high and fight only when necessary: to defend the honor of the meek; to defend those you hold dear . . . these are your responsibilities as the next tai-youkai, Bas. Take care to always remember them . . ."*

He sighed. Cain had told him to wait for backup, hadn't he? And yet Bas just couldn't do that. Sydney's fitful slumber weighed heavily on his mind, and he'd known that he wouldn't be able to rest until everything was resolved, after all. He owed her because he loved her; because she'd seen the ugliest aspects of life and because she desperately wanted to believe that there might really be a future ahead of her – one that she'd never really believed she could have. Bas owed her that, didn't he? He wanted her to know what it was like, to wake up in the morning and to know that nothing could ever really hurt her. The longer he'd sat there with her as she slept, cuddled against him, the more he'd understood that it wasn't just the need to right something that should have been taken care of so long ago. No, he needed to fix this for her as her mate because it never should have been hers to deal with, in the first place. He didn't delude himself into thinking that Cain wouldn't be furious, but he also knew that his father better than anyone would understand just why Bas had to do this; why he couldn't wait.

Ringling the doorbell yet again, Bas fingered Triumvirate's hilt. The keychain Sydney had given him for Christmas jingled softly as it bounced off the gold end-cap, offering Bas a tattered semblance of calm with the reminder of what he was fighting to protect: Sydney, the mate of his heart, of his youkai, if not in fact . . . Forged from the fangs of his

father, his grandfather, and his great uncle and undisputed Inu no Taisho, Sesshoumaru, Triumvirate was one of the most powerful youkai weapons in existence. Tetsusaiga and Tenseiga – the Twin Swords of the Fang – the absolute power of those ancient swords was legendary . . . Ryoteishuseishu – Ryomaru’s twin-bladed sword . . . Nishuto – Kichiro’s sword that was hardly ever really used . . . Triumvirate; Keppanshuto – Gunnar’s guardian blade, forged from InuYasha, Sesshoumaru, and Toga’s fangs; and even Ternion, Evan’s sword . . . Collectively, they were the most renowned of the youkai blades, and Triumvirate – Bas’ sword – had served him well in the recent weeks while he’d fought to protect Sydnie. *‘One more time,’* he thought as he tamped down the desire to break down the door. *‘If I never have to fight again, let this one last time matter . . .’*

The grating scrape and snap of the dead-bolt lock snapped Bas out of his reverie. The electronic keypad lock beside the door beeped softly seconds before the door swung open, revealing the sleep-disheveled youkai general who was tying his robe closed as he blinked quickly, his eyes slowly focusing on Bas’ grim visage. “Sebastian? What’s wrong? Is your father all right?” he demanded.

Schooling his features, blanking his expression, Bas nodded curtly and tried to make sure that his voice didn’t register his emotions. “Fine. He’s fine, but I need to talk to you.”

Jared Brantley looked duly confused but stepped back to allow Bas entry. He waited while the general closed the door and led the way through the darkened house to the study. It was in the basement and had no windows. The dusky room didn’t hold light very well. Brantley turned on a solitary light on the prodigious desk. The soft light didn’t travel far, only serving to cast even darker shadows in the corners of the room. The bookshelves that lined the furthest wall were a study of murky obscurity. *‘No windows, one door . . . no escape . . .’* Bas carefully stepped over to block the doorway should Jared Brantley think to escape the questions that Bas was about to put to him.

If Brantley discerned anything, he didn’t show it. Smiling cordially enough despite the hint of worry in his pale gray eyes, the jaguar-youkai leaned against his desk, crossing his ankles and resting his hands on the edge of the desk. The lamp behind him lent him an eerie sort of glow, darkening the planes of his face in such a way that lent the pinpoint glimmer of his steely gaze an unearthly air. “Surely something important brings you out this late, young Zelig . . . weren’t you bringing in that cat-youkai – that girl?”

Bas shrugged. “That’s why I’m here,” he admitted, narrowing his gaze so that he could better gauge Brantley’s reactions. “How well did you know Cal Richardson?”

Brantley seemed surprised by Bas' candid question. "Cal Richardson? I . . . I didn't . . . Not really. Why do you ask?"

Bas forced a tight little smile, hand itching to reach for his sword. He didn't. "I think you and I both know that you're lying. I'll ask again: how well did you know Cal Richardson?"

Finally realizing that Bas was much too serious to be making small talk, Jared shifted slightly – a distinctly nervous sort of shuffling, in Bas' estimation. "I really didn't," he maintained, slowly shaking his head. "What's this all about?"

Bas leveled a no-nonsense look at the youkai. "She says you knew him. She says you knew him really well."

"Sebastian, I have no idea what you're talking about," Jared maintained quietly, holding his hands out to his sides as though he were explaining something to a small child. Bas gritted his teeth. "She – I'm assuming you're speaking of this cat-youkai? She's mistaken – or lying."

It took everything within him to keep from lighting into the general for the slight. "Be careful, Brantley. You're treading on very thin ice."

"I apologize," he added smoothly. "Suppose you tell me what it is she's accused me of? I am right, aren't I? It is an accusation, isn't it?"

Bas didn't blink as he scrutinized the general. Brantley was playing it cool, waiting to hear what Bas had to say before committing himself, one way or the other; not that Bas could fault him for that, he grudgingly supposed. Ties with Cal Richardson weren't something that one of Cain's generals really wanted to be known for, given that Richardson had spent years trying to undermine Cain, using subversive tactics instead of issuing a blatant challenge. The odds that Brantley was going to fess up were slim to none, considering. "I've heard a few things, and I've informed the tai-youkai of them, as well. I'm here to get answers," Bas replied.

"Answers? And these things you've heard, Sebastian? Care to enlighten me as to what, exactly, I've been accused of doing?"

Bas crossed his arms over his chest and nodded at the chair between himself and the youkai general. "It's a serious enough charge," he allowed.

Jared didn't seem surprised by the admission, and he didn't reply to that right away. "Why don't you sit down?"

"I'd rather stand, thanks."

"Suit yourself," Jared said smoothly. "A drink? You look a little out of sorts."

"Out of sorts?" Bas repeated acerbically, identifying the subtle power-play for what it was: a blatant attempt to hold whatever edge Brantley felt he had in what amounted to home-field advantage—his turf, so to speak. Bas managed a tolerant little smile and nodded. "Tell me . . . was Kit Taylor the first woman you and Richardson killed? The only one? Or was she, as I suspect, one of many?"

Even if the name didn't ring a bell, the momentary shock that Jared Brantley hid quickly enough didn't slip past Bas unnoticed. Cheeks blossoming in a surge of outraged color, Jared pushed himself away from the desk with an indignant bark of laughter that sounded rather shaky to Bas' ears as the general prowled the floor, gathering his waning bravado before launching into a round of blustering rebuffs. "That's preposterous!" he scoffed, fumbling in a box on the cold marble mantle above the dormant fireplace across from the wall of bookshelves. "What sort of blasphemy is this?"

Bas quirked an eyebrow and leaned back on his heels. "A God complex? Makes sense, then . . . was that the reason you chose to prey upon a woman—a girl, really—who didn't have a chance in hell of fending one of you off, let alone two of you?"

He whipped around, jamming his glasses onto his face as his face deepened to a purplish hue. Gray eyes flashing dangerously, Jared stalked over to turn on another lamp without looking away from Bas. "I have done nothing wrong!" he insisted, drawing himself up proudly, chest heaving as he proclaimed his innocence.

Bas wasn't impressed. "How many, Brantley? How many women did you and Cal Richardson kill?"

"We didn't—I never—I don't know what you're talking about, but mark my words: your father will hear of your insolence!"

"Save your breath. I know you did it," Bas cut in, turning halfway to push the door closed quietly. "I know it; you know it . . . and the cat . . . she knows it, too. As for my father . . . by whose authority do you think I'm here, anyway?"

Brantley's eyes narrowed to slits, pupils dilating as he flexed his claws in a futile gesture of impotent outrage. "So I've already been tried and convicted without a chance to plead my case? On the word of what? A ragtag little street urchin of a cat? A nobody?"

Bas' temper snapped. Hearing Sydnie's voice in his mind, saying time and time again that she was a nobody . . . and then to hear it from the general . . . in a streak of motion too fast to be discerned, Bas shot forward, grabbing Brantley by the throat and digging his claws into the tender flesh as he dealt him a firm shake. "Don't you ever call her a nobody again, you bastard . . . You've got two seconds to give me one good reason not to snap your fucking neck – *right – now.*"

Brantley's eyes flared wide, his claws digging at Bas' wrist, a futile attempt to break the hold that suspended him off the ground. "You . . . you're sleeping with her, aren't you? That's how she . . . was able . . . to convince you . . ." he wheezed as Bas' grip tightened.

"Damn you, Brantley! My father trusted you, and this was how you repaid him? Tell me the truth!" He heaved the general away, sending Jared careening back. He hit the wall so hard that the house shook precariously as Bas grimaced, shaking the general's blood from his claws.

Jared clutched his throat, his respirations wet, gurgling. No permanent damage, Bas was sure. He hadn't lost his wits completely, after all, and Cain wanted a confession . . . "I'm not telling you a damn thing, Zelig . . . I watched you grow up! I've known your family longer than you've been alive! I owe no explanations, least of all to the likes of a miserable hanyou like you!"

Bas drew back, blinking in surprise at the angry hiss – the words that cemented Jared's fate. If there ever was a doubt in his mind, it was gone. The bitterness, the animosity, the hatred . . . how long had Brantley been hiding that? Cal Richardson was another – one of the few – who had openly argued Bas' right to succeed his father as tai-youkai since he was hanyou, at least technically. So what that he couldn't transform into a dog-form and he couldn't transform into an energy-based-form, either? Bas was still stronger than most youkai – certainly stronger than a bastard of a general who got off on hurting those who weren't even close to being a match, strength-wise. Narrowing his gaze to a menacing glower, Bas opened his mouth to demand an answer. Brantley cut him off, throwing his head back as he sank to his hands and knees on the floor, as the sound of his hysterical laughter colored the air in a perfidious hue.

Sydnie woke up to the sound of thumping resonating through the townhouse from somewhere downstairs. Sitting up quickly, glancing at the clock, she threw the blankets aside and scooted off the bed. *'Just after three in the morning? Who is pounding on the door at this hour, and . . . where is Sebastian?'*

Stumbling through the townhouse, Sydnie blinked as she stepped into the foyer. Bas wasn't here; that she knew. Where he was, however . . .

'Where do you think he is, Syd?'

She frowned, but nodded, acknowledging the truth in her youkai's words. *'He's gone after him, hasn't he . . .?'*

'Of course he has . . . because he believes you, and you know, right? That's all you ever really wanted. You just wanted someone to listen to you and believe you.'

Was that true? Would that have really been enough? To know that someone – anyone – believed her? *'Yes,'* she supposed. Maybe it would have been.

Sydnie cautiously opened the door, barring her weight behind it and leaning to the side to peer out the crack. Frowning in confusion, she stepped back, recognizing the two silver-haired hanyous standing on the porch. The older one – Bas' grandfather – snorted indelicately, pushing past her in his impatience as the younger hanyou smiled at her. *"'Bout time,"* he grouched despite the grin on his face. *"Where's Bas?"*

She shook her head and stepped back. She hadn't changed before she'd fallen asleep. Still dressed in the skirt and tank top that she's worn when she'd trailed Jared Brantley all over the city, she rubbed her arms against the bitter wind that blew in behind the men and closed the door. *"He's not here,"* she whispered, her eyes darting from one hanyou to the other.

The older of the two snorted indelicately. *"Keh! Tell me something I don't fucking know . . . Thought his old man told him to stay put, damn it . . ."*

"You can't really say it surprises you," the younger hanyou remarked, rolling his eyes. His smile had disappeared, and he cocked his head to the side as he carefully regarded Sydnie. *"He went after Brantley, didn't he?"*

"Well, hell's fucking hounds," InuYasha grouched. *"Get moving, Ryomaru."*

Ryomaru made a face, scratching the back of his head as he heaved a heavy sigh and turned toward the door. *"Tracking in the city sucks balls,"* he grumbled. *"Doable but still a pain in the ass."*

InuYasha curt nod indicated his own distaste for it, as well. Sydnie didn't really have a problem with it though she supposed that was likely because she'd grown up in Los Angeles and had been forced to deal with the myriad of scents that tended to obscure the more organic scent of most youkai. They were from Japan, however, and Tokyo

was huge, or so she'd read. "Why do you have to track him?" Sydnie asked as InuYasha jerked the door open.

He shot her a condescending sort of glower. "How the hell else am I gonna find him?"

She shook her head. "I know where he is . . . at least, I know where . . . where *he* lives. I could take you there."

"I don't know . . ." Ryomaru drawled, casting his father a meaningful glance.

"Keh! Better than spending longer than we got to, finding the pup."

For some reason, hearing Bas' grandfather calling Bas a pup bothered Sydnie, but she brushed the irritation aside as she slipped her shoes on and pushed past them. "It's not far," she explained as she yanked the door open and strode outside. "Just a few blocks, actually . . ."

She didn't bother to wait for them, either. Running down the steps and onto the sidewalk, she heard them directly behind her though she didn't look to verify it. The streets and sidewalks were too busy to be practical, and she ducked into an alley before vaulting to the top of a two story building. Expediency was the issue, and trying to blend into a crowd of milling humans would end up taking way too long . . .

If he had been told to wait for his grandfather and uncle, why didn't he?

Sydnie grimaced as the trio streaked across the rooftops, cutting across the area in the most direct route to the general's house.

'Don't be stupid, Sydnie . . . you know why he didn't. After seeing how shaken you were, did you honestly think he'd just sit back and wait?'

No, she didn't. Wasn't that why it hadn't really surprised her, to wake up in the bed all alone? Somewhere deep down, she'd known the moment he'd slipped out of the room . . .

'Because he's your mate, Sydnie . . . you're his equal, and that's what he's been trying to make you understand.'

She shook her head but kept moving, her footfalls synchronizing with the hanyous who were following: Bas' family.

Dropping to the alley behind the house, Sydnie picked up Bas' richer scent still lingering in the area. InuYasha lit beside her, and Ryomaru landed on the other side.

Both stared at Sydnie for a moment before exchanging glances. Ryomaru cleared his throat and grimaced. "Stay here, Sydnie. I doubt Bas wants you to see what's going on in there."

She opened her mouth to protest. InuYasha's fierce scowl stopped her. "Go back to the townhouse, cat. Let the pup take care of his business."

They strode away from her, leaving her in the shadows of the alley. Rubbing her forearms against the cold night air, she bit her lip and scuffed her toes on the stained asphalt. *"Go back to the townhouse, cat . . . Let the pup take care of his business . . ."*

She frowned as she gazed into the shadows. A stray cat dug through a dumpster behind an Italian restaurant. Somewhere in the distance, a dog let out a lonely howl. In the elusive darkness, she could feel the surge of millions of people. New York City was more compact than Los Angeles; grayer, dirtier, grungier . . . colder. An odd sense of resignation ebbed through her. How ironic was it, really? To have started this mission under the bright lights of the California skies and to have it all end here? From one coast to the other, and yet the task was still the same. Even the knowledge that it would soon be at an end did little to dispel the sadness, the melancholy that had been Sydnie's entire world; at least until she'd met Sebastian.

"Go back to the townhouse . . ."

She wrinkled her nose, balling her hands into tight little fists as she strode toward the unnatural yellow glow of the streetlamps illuminating the sidewalk beyond the alley. "The hell I will!" she spat indignantly, quickening her pace, breaking into a sprint.

InuYasha growled in frustration as Ryomaru fiddled with the keypad. He missed the days when most everyone used keys to lock doors. Those were easy enough to pick. These damn innovations could go straight to hell, as far as he was concerned. After a minute of tapping his foot while Ryomaru plugged the little hand-held deciphering device into the side of the key panel, he shoved his son aside and drew Tetsusaiga with a flourish. "Move it, pup. I got my own fucking key right here."

"Like hell you'll do that, old man," Ryomaru growled, rolling his eyes as he pressed the button to begin the deciphering sequence. "Don't really want the cops involved, do we? And they're gonna show up if you run around, blowing open doors with that."

"Then get a move on, Ryo," InuYasha snarled.

A soft beep signaled the release of the security alarm, and Ryomaru jerked the cord loose before gesturing at the door. "After you, old man."

InuYasha snorted and smacked the door open with his fist, striding inside with Ryomaru close behind. Neither bothered to close the door, either, too intent on locating the idiot hot-head who didn't have the sense to wait for the backup that they were providing.

Following Bas' scent was easy enough. Down the long hallway and then descending a flight of stairs, InuYasha scowled as high-pitched, almost desperate laughter shattered the stillness.

Bas glanced over his shoulder, nodding almost imperceptibly as InuYasha and Ryomaru strode into the room. The jaguar-youkai – Jared Brantley – sat huddled on the floor by the wall. Bas stood in the center, his claws tipped in blackened blood. Brantley held his throat as he laughed, but when he spotted InuYasha and Ryomaru, he sobered up quickly enough. Ryomaru dug a tiny digital recorder out of his pocket and pushed the button before setting the device on a small table and crossing his arms over his chest.

Bas straightened his stance, glowered at the youkai general. "Jared Brantley, you are charged with the murder of Kit Taylor – you and Cal Richardson. You raped her; you tortured her . . . you beat her, and you killed her in a derelict building in Los Angeles seventeen years ago. Do you deny it?"

Jared slowly got to his feet, bracing himself against the wall for support. "I don't know what you're talking about, Sebastian," he countered wearily, his tone almost placating, as though he were speaking to a mere child instead of the next tai-youkai. "I never raped anyone, and torture? You know me better than that!"

Bas shook his head, cracking his knuckles, flexing his claws. "I thought I did – so did my father. I know you're lying."

"Lying? Please! On the word of some woman who could very well be making all of this up, just to benefit her own sordid agenda?"

"She has never lied to me. She'd never lie to me; not about this. I'll warn you again, Brantley: you're treading on very dangerous ground. I highly suggest you consider your words carefully."

"Sebastian . . ."

Bas whipped around at the sound of that voice. InuYasha gritted his teeth as the stubborn cat-youkai darted past him, straight into Bas' arms. Burying her face against his chest, she peered over her shoulder for just a moment when Jared Brantley rasped out a choked sound.

InuYasha narrowed his gaze on the general. The man looked like he was seeing a ghost. Nudging Ryomaru, he nodded at Brantley. Ryomaru uttered a terse little grunt; acknowledging InuYasha's unspoken observation.

"Y-you . . . you're not real . . . you're . . . *dead* . . ." Brantley whispered.

Sydney gasped softly as Bas' arms tightened around her. "Come on, Sydney. You don't need to be here."

Without a word, he escorted her out of the room. InuYasha shifted slightly, blocking the doorway lest Brantley get any ideas to run.

"Dead . . . dead . . . she's dead . . . dead girl . . ." Brantley babbled, sinking to his knees once more. Gripping his forehead in his hands, he crossed his arms over his stomach, leaned forward his nose nearly touched the floor before rocking back, his head thumping dully against the wall. "She was . . . the first," he went on, claws digging into his hair. "My first, anyway . . . Cal . . . he'd done it before, but . . . but she's dead—*dead!* She can't come back . . . *she can't come back!*"

InuYasha ground his teeth together, stifling the growl that welled up in his throat. He doubted that Brantley realized that he was talking out loud, confessing to things that he'd just sworn never happened.

"I didn't want to . . . he said . . . it was sport . . . like hunting, he said . . . hunting girls—worthless girls, you see? Prostitutes . . . wouldn't be missed . . . They wouldn't be missed, would they? No one cares about prostitutes . . . filthy, dirty prostitutes . . . a favor to our kind . . . get rid of the riff-raff . . ." His voice cracked, and he kept rocking to and fro. "If he took over, I'd have lost my position . . . if Richardson got rid of Cain . . . He wanted to restore the glory of the youkai! Wanted us to stop hiding in the shadows as though we'd done something wrong! That's what he wanted—what *I* wanted! To remain a general . . ."

Ryomaru grunted out a harsh little snort. InuYasha glanced at him long enough to see the absolute revulsion in his son's expression. He agreed. Brantley was playing both sides of the fence; refusing to challenge Zelig, knowing he would lose, so he'd latched onto someone he perceived could rival Zelig, instead, and then he'd hidden his true motives, protecting his top-lofty position in the upper echelons of youkai society. One way or the other, he had thought, he'd remain a general . . . Peering down long enough

to make sure the recorder was still picking up the makeshift confession, InuYasha narrowed his gaze on the pathetic youkai once more.

“The hunt . . . the hunt . . . but she can’t be . . . we killed her — *killed* her! So much blood . . . I loved the blood! The scent, the feel . . . Needed it; needed it . . . the power — such power!” Lifting his chin, he leveled a look at InuYasha, his gray eyes flashing with an insane sort of light, a maniacal sense of sheer madness. Fangs flashing in the dim light, he bared his teeth in an exaggerated grimace. “I was *God!* Don’t you see? Cal and I — gods over all youkai!” He gave a high-pitched little giggle. InuYasha gritted his teeth harder. “Addicting; so addicting . . . the screaming and begging and the scent of fresh blood . . . but I . . . I didn’t *want* to do it . . . I didn’t *want* to kill her . . . I never meant to kill her. *Cal* was the killer! I’m innocent! He was the . . . Oh, God . . . oh, God — *oh, God!* She’s back, and she’s dead, and she’s going to kill me! She’s going to do it because I killed her first!”

Bas strode back into the room, his eyes stony, impassive.

“That’s enough,” InuYasha muttered, nodding at Bas as he brushed past. “You have your confession.”

Bas paused for a moment, nodding slowly. Jaw tight, ticking, he turned on his heel and faced the pitiful general. “What you’ve done with Cal Richardson is unforgivable. For crimes against youkai and humans, your punishment is death.”

InuYasha wasn’t sure if the general even heard Bas’ words. Sobbing pitifully, he rocked back and forth, hair hanging over his face, bringing to mind a man on the gallows. InuYasha had often thought that the archaic form of justice was odd in the sense that the hangman would invariably slip a hood over the criminal’s head. Now he understood. Seeing the youkai doubled over on the floor; knowing that his grandson was being forced to do something that turned InuYasha’s stomach . . .

There was no honor in cutting down someone who didn’t fight back, and even if the punishment was deserved, it didn’t really lessen the feeling of dishonor that accompanied the doing. He didn’t know if he had it within him to do it. He’d cut down so many youkai during their quest to find the shards of the Shikon no Tama, hadn’t he? The difference was that they had fought him; of course they had, and the one time that he’d lost himself to his youkai blood and cut down the bandits . . . InuYasha swallowed hard, grimaced at the memory, still vivid even after the passage of so many years, the blood that didn’t want to be washed away . . . They’d begged for their lives, and while Jared Brantley wasn’t asking for mercy, the sound of his broken sobs echoed in InuYasha’s ears.

Bas drew his sword; held it up, resting the flat of the blade against his forehead as he inclined his head and closed his eyes. InuYasha had seen his grandson fight; he'd trained him for years in tracking, in defense . . . He'd taught Bas everything he knew, and he'd taken pride in the man that Bas had become. Standing there, watching his grandson do what needed to be done, InuYasha saw it: the integrity of the next North American tai-youkai – the one being who couldn't shirk his responsibilities because they found it unpleasant or distasteful, and the grim sense of pride that brought a tightening to InuYasha's chest overpowered the absolute horror of the task to which he was forced to bear witness.

Bas didn't take his eyes off Jared Brantley as he lowered the sword and squared his shoulders. Closing the distance between the general and himself, Bas hefted Triumvirate over his head, gripping the hilt with both hands, and still Brantley refused to look up. Seconds ticked away on the clock sitting on the fireplace mantle; the last moments of a life lived in shadows and treachery.

"You will never hurt another person, ever again, Jared Brantley. In the name of the tai-youkai – for the women you killed; for the lives you destroyed, you cannot be forgiven." With an angry growl – a frustrated sound – Bas drove the sword down . . .

A/N:

Tetsusaiga: InuYasha's sword (duh!).

Tenseiga: Sesshoumaru's sword (another duh!).

Ryoteishuseishu: Ryomaru's double-bladed sword forged from Sesshoumaru and InuYasha's fangs.

Nishuto: Kichiro's sword forged from Sesshoumaru and InuYasha's fangs.

Ternion: The number three; three things together; a ternary. Evan's sword forged from Sesshoumaru, InuYasha, and Cain's fangs.

Keppanshuto: Blade (of the) Blood Seal: Gunnar's sword forged from Sesshoumaru, InuYasha, and Toga's fangs.

Triumvirate: Bas' sword forged from Sesshoumaru, InuYasha, and Cain's fangs.

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Final Thought from InuYasha:

Damn keypad locks ...

Chapter 46

Ramifications

Bas woke up with a groan, grimacing at the ache that throbbed behind his eyes. He felt like hell – like complete and utter hell.

Sydney still lay curled against his chest, her cheek pressed to his heart. Smiling a little sadly, he carefully brushed the hair out of her face, running his thumb along the soft angles. She didn't stir, and he allowed the sound of her purring to comfort him.

In the end, he'd stood over the Jared Brantley's dead body, wondering why the youkai hadn't disintegrated, as most greater-youkai did when they died. Lesser-youkai tended to leave behind remains unless they were killed in such a fashion that dissipated their bodies, but the greater-youkai . . . InuYasha clapped a hand on Bas' shoulder as he stared at the body; at the blood pooling on the floor. "He died a dishonorable death," InuYasha said quietly though his tone held no recrimination; no regret. "That's why his body wasn't taken to the other plane. There is no room in the afterlife for anyone who lives a dishonorable life."

"Dishonorable death," Bas repeated, unable to summon the basest of emotions. No sadness, no satisfaction, no nothing . . . just the emptiness of an act that never should have been forced upon anyone. "So that's it . . ."

Ryomaru stepped up on Bas' other side, mirroring the stance and grim visage of his father. Shaking his head, he bent down to examine the fallen general, and when he spoke, his tone was angry, almost belligerent. "To die fighting . . . to practice seppuku . . . to die of natural causes . . . those are honorable ways to die. He chose his death – the coward's way out. Don't take it with you, pup."

"Don't take it . . . with me . . ."

Ryomaru stuck the recorder in Bas' hand before grasping his shoulder and propelling him toward the door. "Take your mate home, Bas. We'll take care of this."

Nodding in reply, Bas strode from the room, finding Sydney exactly where he'd left her: in the foyer, hidden in the shadows. She was huddled on the floor, her hands over her ears, and when she saw him, she slowly pushed herself to her feet. "Sebastian?"

He didn't have time to answer as she launched herself against his chest. Unprepared for the sudden assault, he stumbled back a couple of steps, hesitantly bringing his arms up to hug her

and grimacing at the blackened blood that stained his hands. "Sydnie, no," he mumbled, carefully stepping away from her. "Don't . . . please don't . . ."

She did as he asked, though her expression bespoke her confusion as she slowly shook her head and let her arms drop. "O-o-okay."

He flinched. "Come on . . . let's go. I need . . . I need to get cleaned up . . ."

Sydnie nodded, wrapping her arms over her chest as she followed him out of the house and into the inky black night.

She hadn't said anything on the return trip over the rooftops of the city. She hadn't commented as Bas closed the door and strode past her, stopping only long enough to hang his sword over the fireplace before striding away to take a shower: to wash the blood off his hands. He couldn't stand the idea of touching her with his soiled claws, didn't want to see Jared Brantley's blood on his claws, an unsettling contrast against her California-girl skin.

What he hadn't expected was for her to slip into the shower with him, wrapping her arms around his waist as she pressed herself against his back. There was nothing passionate in her embrace, nothing untoward in her actions. As though she understood his emotions, she simply sought to offer him a measure of comfort – something that he so desperately needed.

Sighing softly, he opened his eyes and glanced at the clock. It was almost nine in the morning, and as much as he'd love to stay in bed, he needed to call Cain, to tell him that Jared Brantley had confessed.

The tiny silver recording device sat on the nightstand beside the clock. It didn't require the old tapes or even a CD, and the unit was compact enough to easily remain hidden though he doubted that his uncle or grandfather would have bothered with such a subtle ploy. It held the confession that he'd missed while he'd escorted Sydnie upstairs to wait. Even now, he wasn't sure he wanted to hear what was on the recorder. It was enough that Brantley had confessed, after all.

'Don't take it with me . . .?' Bas mused, idly stroking Sydnie's hair as watery light filtered in the window. The light was pale enough that it fell onto the bed in a subtle shade of whiter gray without any real sense of definition from the window pane it shone through. He frowned. How the hell was he supposed to separate himself from what he'd done, no matter how deserving the punishment was? Wouldn't that somehow succeed in making him no better than Jared Brantley and Cal Richardson? To have no regrets, no remorse . . . how could he do that?

'Maybe it isn't about not having regrets, Bas . . . maybe it's about dealing with them, in knowing that you did what was just despite the ramifications . . . you didn't damn yourself with your

actions. You did what was right, what was just, whether you really wanted to or not. You did it so that Sydnie would know what it was like, to sleep easy in the knowledge that no one really can hurt her again. You did it for her; you did it for the two of you . . . You did it to set her free . . .'

He was tired – weary . . . the cycle of violence was finally over, wasn't it? The bounty hunters were gone – he had yet to confirm his suspicions about Ryomaru and InuYasha trailing them – and that made him sad, too. It was simple enough to say that he hadn't had a choice. They'd come after Sydnie, and letting them have her never had been an option. Still he wasn't fool enough not to realize that the youkai had probably had families – at least some of them . . . He hadn't simply killed the bounty hunters, had he? No, he'd killed their mates, too, since true mates were inexorably bound, one to the other, and yet he couldn't quite regret his actions, either, could he? Admitting that he did . . . wouldn't that be the same as saying that he wished that he hadn't met Sydnie?

'Damn it,' he growled in his head, willing away the questions that were set to drive him mad. Carefully shifting Sydnie aside, he paused long enough to kiss her forehead before scooting off the bed and padding out of the room, grabbing the recorder and his cell phone and grimacing at the blinking red light. He'd switched it off before stretching out with Sydnie, having figured that InuYasha or Ryomaru had probably already contacted Cain. Hitting the button to retrieve his voicemail, his grimace shifted into a low groan as the digital voice intoned that he had no less than ten messages waiting his attention, and as expected, they were all from his father.

Deleting the memory without bothering to listen to them, he dialed Cain's number instead. He answered on the first ring, and he sounded like he hadn't gotten any sleep at all. "Bas? Damn it, where the hell have you been?"

Wincing, Bas heaved a sigh and trudged down the stairs. "Sleeping, Dad . . . it was late – early – whatever . . . I just woke up . . ."

Cain sighed, too, and the relief in his tone was unmistakable. "Your uncle told me that you took care of Brantley. He said you got a full confession, too . . ."

"I did," Bas acknowledged, slipping the recorder into the pocket of his duster before continuing on to the kitchen. "At least, that's what they said."

"You didn't hear it?"

Bas craned his neck from side to side, stretching the overwrought muscles that seemed coiled a little too tightly. "Nope . . . Ryomaru and the old man did, though. Sydnie brought them to Brantley's house, and I took her upstairs before –"

"Yeah, about that. I could have sworn I told you to wait."

"I couldn't wait, Dad . . . you didn't see her face. You didn't see how . . . how . . . I don't know how to explain it. You just didn't see."

Cain sighed again. "You okay? Ryomaru said you were pretty . . . shaken."

"I'm fine," Bas lied as he strode into the kitchen and dug a glass out for Sydnie. "We'll get moving tomorrow; I'll bring her home."

"Take your time, son. Stay there a few days . . . a week . . . give her some good memories to hold on to."

Bas smiled a little sadly. "Good memories, huh?"

"Sure . . . She deserves some, don't you think?"

"Yeah, she does."

Cain exhaled slowly. Bas heard the sound of claws on crystal as his father snubbed out a cigarette. "I can pardon her," he allowed. "From what your uncle told me, Brantley's confession corroborated her story completely – that he admitted he and Richardson were responsible for her sister's death, after all . . . I'm just thankful that she didn't take matters into her own hands the second time."

Bas grimaced but understood. He'd thought as much, hadn't he? Sydnie had done what she felt she had to do the first time, and though it might not have been the right thing, it was the only recourse she thought she had, given that no one had ever really listened to her. If she'd killed Brantley, though . . . that was entirely different. "So she's free."

"Free, yes, but I still need to talk to her. I need to grant her official pardon; that sort of thing. It can wait. Just . . . show her the city . . . take her to FAO Schwartz or the zoo or both . . ."

"The toy store?" Bas asked, lifting an eyebrow as a soft chuckle escaped him.

"Don't knock it . . . your mother still loves to go there."

"All right," he relented. "Good memories . . . I can do that . . ."

"Good . . . call me if you need anything, and let me know when you're coming back. I'll send Ben over in a bit. Give him the recorder, will you?"

"Sure," Bas agreed. "Bye, Dad."

Snapping the phone closed, Bas dropped it onto the counter and popped the tab on a can of soda. Draining it in one long gulp as he stared out the window at the snow falling from the slate gray sky, he rubbed the vale in the center of his chest. *'Give her good memories, huh? Good memories . . . I could do with some of those, myself.'*

Tightening his fist, he crushed the can and tossed it toward the empty recycling bin beside the trash can. Letting out a deep breath, he grabbed her glass of milk and headed out of the kitchen once more.

'Good memories for Sydney . . . I . . . I can do that . . .'

Bas sat back and narrowed his gaze on the oldest and most trusted of his father's generals. Ben Phillips had been apprised of the situation and hadn't wasted any time in showing up at the townhouse just after noon. Peering at Bas from behind the wire-rimmed glasses that were always slipping down his nose, the panther-youkai didn't look much different than he had when Bas had been nothing more than a child. After Cain returned from his training in Japan, Ben was the one who had taken the time to explain the complexities of North America, and the unique problems that the fledgling country presented. Ben had served as interim tai-youkai while Cain was being fostered, and he was probably as close to a father figure that Cain had ever really had.

"Dad sent you over here, didn't he?" Bas asked, breaking the silence that had fallen.

Ben smiled slightly and shrugged. "Actually, no. He said you'd probably be busy with this girl—Sydney, right?"

"Yes, Sydney."

"Where is she? I'd love to meet her."

"I think she's taking a bath," he explained.

Ben grinned, his jewel-like eyes sparkling as Bas braced himself for whatever teasing the old youkai was getting ready to throw at him. "Your mate, huh?"

Bas nodded. "My mate," he agreed.

Ben chuckled softly, drumming his claws on the arm of the chair, but his smile faded quickly enough, his gaze darkening as he stared at Bas. "The whole thing bothers you, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," he admitted, "it does."

"Taking a life is never a simple thing, Bas. Whether or not you had a choice, it still isn't an easy decision to make, and one that I've never envied your father for having to deal with it."

"Yeah."

Ben leaned forward, took a deep drink of water before settling back in the chair again. "You'll be all right, you know, so long as you remember the things your father has taught you."

Bas nodded slowly.

A subtle presence filtered over him; the softest scent of a familiar comfort. Ben lifted his chin, peering over Bas' shoulder, his gaze focusing on something further away. He broke into a little grin as he uncrossed his legs and stood. "You must be Sydnie," he remarked, negotiating around the coffee table to offer his hand in greeting.

Bas stood, too, hiding his amusement as Sydnie blinked in surprise and hesitantly shook Ben's hand. "Ben, this is Sydnie Taylor . . . Sydnie, this is Ben Philips – Dad's head general."

Her eyes narrowed slightly at the introduction. Bas chuckled. "I see . . . pleased to meet you," she managed though she didn't actually sound pleased at all. No, she actually sounded more horrified than anything else, and Bas couldn't really fault her that, given her general distrust of authority figures.

"Bas tells me you're to be his mate," Ben went on.

Sydnie's eyes rounded as the barest hint of a blush crept up her cheeks. Bas stifled a groan and wondered just how much trouble he'd be in with his father if he gave in to the desire to kick Ben in the shin . . . "Did he . . .?" she intoned, bright green eyes flashing to meet Bas' gaze.

If Ben noticed Sydnie's discomfort, he didn't remark on it. She pulled her hand away and sashayed over to Bas' side. He quirked an eyebrow, finally noticing that she had her purse slung over her shoulder. "Going somewhere, kitty?"

"I wanted to go for a walk," she explained.

Bas nodded. "Okay . . . just let me finish up here with Ben, and we can go."

She placed a hand on his chest to stay him. "I mean, I want to go on a walk – by myself."

"Sydnie –"

"A short one," she assured him. "I won't go far; I promise."

He scowled, not entirely comfortable with the idea of letting her go anywhere alone. He didn't think for a moment that she wouldn't come back. She smiled at him, but the smile was tempered by the lingering worry in her gaze. Maybe she just needed some time to think. He couldn't really blame her if she did. She'd been through a hell of a lot in the last few weeks, hadn't she?

Pulling his cell phone from his pocket, he programmed in the number for the land line at the townhouse before snapping the phone closed and holding out to her. "Okay, but take this. Call me if you need me."

Sydnie took the phone and pushed herself onto her toes, leaning on his forearm to kiss his cheek. "I'll be back, puppy," she said, her eyes brightening as her smile widened.

He nodded. "Don't forget your coat."

She rolled her eyes but giggled as she headed for the high archway that led to the foyer. "I'm youkai. I'm tough," she reminded him.

"All the same . . ."

Sydnie wiggled her fingers and blew him a kiss before disappearing into the foyer. He heard the sound of the hall closet, followed a minute later by the sound of the front door opening and closing.

"Never thought I'd see it," Ben mused with a soft chuckle.

Bas leveled a look at the older youkai and snorted. "Is it that hard to believe that I'd find a mate?" he grumbled, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he shuffled his feet uncomfortably.

"What? No . . . not at all. I never thought I'd see the day when a dog-youkai chose a cat-youkai to mate. Surely you see the irony . . .?"

Bas snorted and sank back down on the sofa. "Yeah, yeah . . . it's not that funny."

"She's a lovely girl," Ben allowed.

"She's twenty . . . hardly a girl," Bas pointed out.

Ben chuckled again. "When you're as old as me, any woman under a hundred seems like a girl . . . for that matter, you're still a pup to me . . ."

"Pfft."

Ben sat down again, his smile turning bittersweet as his eyes glazed over just a little. "You remind me of him, you know," he said quietly. "So much like him, it's a little frightening."

Bas frowned and shook his head. "Him? Who?"

Ben's gaze cleared, and he nodded. "Your grandfather – Sebastian . . . the first Sebastian."

Bas was taken aback by the admission. It was the first time he'd heard Ben speak of his grandfather, though Bas knew that Ben had been his grandfather's best friend. Normally given to practicality over reminiscing, the panther-youkai smiled indulgently. "I'm like him?" Bas asked quietly.

Ben barked out a terse laugh, the hint of sadness still lingering in the depths of his eyes. "You are. Cain . . . your father . . . has always been more like his mother. Quiet, reserved . . . almost shy . . . You . . ." he sighed and held his hands out. "You've always been more serious, almost to a fault – so much like Sebastian, it's almost uncanny, and you look just like him, too . . . right down to your crests, from what I've been told . . ."

Bas grimaced at the reminder but couldn't help the little grin that surfaced. "Really."

Ben chuckled. "Yes, and he, too, hated them with a passion."

Bas did laugh at that. It was nice to know, he supposed, that he wasn't the only one with crests in questionable places. "Thanks . . . I think . . ."

Ben nodded, steepling his fingertips together. "He'd have been proud to have a grandson like you."

Bas' smile dissipated, a surge of pride, of humble reverence washing through him.
"You think so?"

Ben nodded once. "I know so."

Sydney frowned as she wandered along the city streets without an actual destination in mind. She'd just needed to be alone.

It was a strange feeling, not having to look over her shoulder every few steps to see whether or not anyone was following her: scary, and a little daunting – something she wasn't certain she'd get used to at all . . .

They were dead. For so long, she'd wanted it: revenge for Kit; justice for the men who killed her. Cal Richardson and Jared Brantley . . . names she hadn't dared speak aloud; afraid that no one would believe her, and yet . . . and yet the fear that Bas wouldn't believe her had been the worst of all.

'But he did, Sydney . . . of course he did.'

'I wasn't lying . . .'

'No, you weren't. All he's ever wanted was for you to trust in him. He's worth the risk, isn't he?'

Sydney smiled wanly. An old man standing on the corner of Broadway and West 86th Street selling flowers stuck one under her nose. She blinked in surprise and hesitantly took the delicate blossom. It seemed oddly out of place in the frigid chill on this; the last day of the year. "It's a paperwhite narcissus," he told her, his face contorting in an oddly pleasant smile.

"How much do I owe you?" she asked.

"You looked like you could use a friend, girly. It's on the house."

Sydney nodded and lifted the flower to her nose, closing her eyes for a moment as she breathed in the heady fragrance before continuing along the sidewalk, carried away in the milling crowd.

'You'd better get back soon. You promised Bas you wouldn't be gone long.'

She glanced around quickly, a sudden warmth siphoning through her. He wasn't there – she couldn't sense his youki – but just the thought of him was enough to bring a secretive little smile to her lips. *'Sebastian . . .'*

She understood now, didn't she? The feeling of protection that he gave her, the peace of knowing that she was completely safe when she was with him . . . How had he done that? How had he managed to ingrain himself so deeply in her life that the thought of being without him scared her senseless? She'd seen for herself, the toll that taking care of Jared Brantley had taken on him. He hadn't complained, had he? He hadn't done a thing but smile at her as he held her tight, as he tilted her chin up and forced a smile entirely for her benefit. In the darkened foyer of Brantley's house, he'd taken the time to kiss her cheek, to tell her that he'd take care of everything; that he'd make it all right for her, and she loved him for that, didn't she? She loved him . . .

'Nothing good ever lasts,' the tiniest voice whispered in her mind. That was what she was afraid of, wasn't it? That someone as good as Sebastian Zelig would wake up one morning and realize that she wasn't even close to good enough for him. Then again, didn't he already know that? He knew everything about her: who she was; where she'd come from, and yet he didn't seem to care at all . . . and if she could hope – if she dared – then maybe Bas really could fix things for her; fix everything . . .

It was easy for her to understand his reluctance when he'd emerged from his grim task. He'd looked disgusted and somehow sad; and though he'd understood the necessity of what he'd taken upon himself to do, that didn't make the job any easier. She'd watched him hang his sword above the fireplace when they'd reached the inner sanctum of the townhouse. In those moments, he'd seemed so much older than the hunter she'd first encountered back in Los Angeles. It was there in his eyes, wasn't it? So she'd done the only thing she could do: she'd tried to comfort him, to assure him that he really wasn't alone because he'd done that for her so many times . . .

He'd done it for her; for her peace of mind, and maybe he'd done it for himself, too. No, the reason he'd done what he'd done was . . .

'Because he . . . loves me?'

The words frightened her as much as they thrilled her. The idea of being with Bas forever . . .

She smiled – a real smile: one full of stuttering hope. She wanted to stay with him, and he wanted to stay with her. The only thing left to frighten her was the small but nagging worry that his family wouldn't approve . . .

But for now, it was okay, wasn't it? Maybe she'd just let herself believe that Sebastian Zelig really could fix anything.

Bas rubbed his temple as he stared out the window, trying not to worry about where Sydnie was.

She'd been gone a couple of hours.

"A short one. . . I won't go far; I promise."

He slowly shook his head. *'Damn it, where is she?'*

'She's fine . . . Stop worrying . . . she'll call if she needs you.'

He sighed. She would, wouldn't she?

The harsh trill of the doorbell jarred straight through Bas, and he grimaced as he strode over to answer it. "May I help y—?" Cutting himself off as he stared blankly at the woman standing on the cement porch, Bas frowned. He'd never seen her before; he knew that much. Still, there was something familiar about her . . . Yellow hair hanging in limp tendrils around her, surrounding her like a shroud, she stepped back, her eyes dull, listless. Two pinpoints of light—an unnatural brightness . . . her owl-like gaze penetrated his skull as she clutched her purse to her chest, her knuckles white, her hands shaking. Her scent was thin, thready, and startlingly familiar. Youkai, certainly, and very recognizable . . . *'But . . . why?'*

'You know why, Bas . . . think about it . . .'

Scowling as he tried to place the scent of her, he shook his head. *'Do I . . . know her?'*

He *did* know her, didn't he? *Too* familiar, she was. Her scent was too real . . .

"Don't tell me what I know, and don't try to lecture me! Just shut up and die!"

His eyes widened, and he knew . . . "You're his mate, aren't you?" Bas asked slowly. "Jeb Christopher's mate."

She winced at the name that had fallen so easily from his lips. Recoiling for a moment before she tightened her grip on her purse, she nodded once, eyes darting behind him

before shifting to meet his gaze once more. “Serena Christopher, if you please. I’d like a word,” she whispered, her voice as dry as the winter wind.

He nodded curtly and stepped back, allowing the woman to pass. Wincing at the diminished youki surrounding her, Bas closed the door and swallowed hard. “This way,” he said, moving past her and into the living room. She stopped in the archway, staring at the sword suspended over the fireplace; staring at the pewter keychain that dangled from Triumvirate’s hilt. Bas pretended not to notice as he crossed the floor and poured a generous amount of Cain’s best single malt scotch into a crystal scotch glass before turning back to the woman again. “Here,” he told her, slipping the drink into her shaking hand.

She seemed surprised by his gesture but drank the liquor down, grimacing slightly at the burn—she obviously wasn’t used to alcohol. Bas took the glass back and refilled it. She drank that, too, then set the glass on the heavy trunk behind the sofa. “You killed my family,” she said, more matter-of-factly than anything, her voice cracking, shattering. “Did you know that? Do you care?”

Bas couldn’t meet the woman’s gaze. She was angry, bitter, and he couldn’t blame her. She’d lost it all, hadn’t she, and while he knew that hunting wasn’t a personal thing, he couldn’t brush off the pain in her voice, either. “I did, and I do,” he allowed quietly.

She sucked in a sharp breath. Bas stuffed his hands into his pockets, staring at the floor. He heard her opening her purse but didn’t look up. He could smell the woman’s pain—raw, fresh, blinding—moments before he heard the distinct ‘snick-snick’ of a gun being cocked to fire. “*Why?*” she hissed, her voice trembling. Bas grimaced as the smell of tears filled his nose. “Tell me why!”

“I’m a hunter,” he replied softly, “same as they were . . . I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? Don’t tell me you’re sorry! I don’t want your pity! I want your *life!*”

Slowly Bas lifted his chin, watched as her resolve wavered with her unsteady hands. He didn’t doubt that she knew how to fire the gun, but practicing on targets was a far cry from taking another life. There was little doubt in his mind that she meant to use the weapon. “If my death would bring them back, I’d let you kill me,” he said. “Your son . . . did he have a mate?”

“Don’t you ask me questions about my son!” she growled as the gun wavered just a little bit more. “You have no right to wonder about him! You *killed* him! You killed him, and you killed Beth, and you killed their child, too!”

Bas nodded. “His mate was pregnant.”

"She was pregnant," the woman spit out. "Damn you, Sebastian Zelig! You should not be allowed to live!"

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I couldn't let them kill Sydnie."

"You couldn't let them . . . Of course you couldn't, and I couldn't stop Jeb. I *wanted* him to kill you; don't you see? You've taken my entire family – everyone I've ever loved! You took them all . . . you took them *all!*"

Bas grimaced, forcing his gaze away from the gun. "It wasn't their place to mete out justice. It wasn't their job."

"And most of those that they hunted were scum . . . lowlifes who would have ended up dead, anyway. They . . . they helped you . . . your *father* . . . They did what needed to be done."

"Do you really believe that? Do you really think that killing for money is right or decent?" He sighed. "There couldn't be any winners in any of it . . . and I'm sorry for that."

The gun wavered precariously. He could smell the rise of the woman's tears. They hadn't spilled over before, but Bas had been acutely aware of them. They pooled in her eyes but didn't fall. She steadied her grip on the weapon and leveled it straight at Bas' chest. "I want to kill you," she whispered, the lack of conviction in her voice entirely at odds with the steadiness in her hands. Steadier than she had been, Serena's resolve seemed to have strengthened. Nostrils quivering, lip trembling, she cradled the butt of the grip in her left hand, her right index finger poised to fire. "I want revenge."

"I'd want revenge, too, if someone killed those whom I loved," Bas admitted. Unable to summon a token show of resistance, he let his hands drop to his sides as the images of the hunters passed through his head. How many of them had families of their own? How many of them had he destroyed? He hadn't had a choice, had he? Protecting Sydnie . . . it was what he was sent to do. He'd done that and then some. She would have her pardon, one way or the other, and, he was certain, she'd have the unerring protection of the tai-youkai for the rest of her life. Standing before the mother, the wife of two of the youkai he'd killed . . . It was the hardest thing he'd ever done. The quiet voice in his head that reminded him that he'd tried to walk away from her son did little to alleviate the overwhelming sense of guilt that he'd never fully been able to shed.

"Why can't you yell at me? Why can't you tell me that they deserved what you did to them? Be a bastard, can't you? Why won't you give me that much?" Serena gritted out.

Bas shook his head but offered no explanations, simply waiting for her next move. He might be able to move fast enough to retrieve his sword, but to what avail? Serena . . . her anger . . . he understood. She, like Sydnie, had watched from the deepest recesses as everyone she loved was taken from her. Did it matter if Bas was working under the direction of the tai-youkai? No, he supposed it didn't. The end result was the same, and maybe he really wasn't any better than Cal Richardson or Jared Brantley. If Serena Christopher wanted his life, then maybe he owed her that, too.

"He—Cody—was married less than a year ago," Serena finally said. Her voice was paper-thin, and the barrel of the gun quivered once more. "He was twenty-five."

Bas grimaced inwardly. *'Same age as me . . . damn it . . .'*

"He'd dated Beth in college, you know? Such a pretty girl . . . a pretty girl . . ."

"And they were going to have a baby?" Bas forced himself to ask.

"Yes, yes, yes . . . yes . . . a baby . . . my grandchild. Beth wanted a son, but Cody . . ." Her voice faltered, and she cleared her throat. "Cody just wanted a healthy baby," she rasped out. "'As long as he or she is healthy,' he'd said . . ."

"I'm sorry," Bas muttered, hating how lame the words sounded to his own ears.

Serena cleared her throat. "Jeb was so excited. He rushed out and bought things for the baby. We'd talked about having another, but . . . well, we just never did."

"I'm . . . sorry . . ."

Choking out a harsh laugh, Serena slowly shook her head. "Of course you are. You should be."

Bas nodded, stuffing his hands into his pockets once more.

"You killed Jeb, and you killed my son . . . I gave *birth* to him! My son . . . my Cody . . . you took him away from me, but . . ." She winced, her expression breaking just for a moment before she got herself under control once more, but the tears slipped over, streaking down her sallow cheeks in silvery trails of moisture. "Your mother . . . she loves you, doesn't she? She loves you like I loved my Cody . . ."

The gun trembled for another moment. Serena's resolve wavered between her desire to make him pay for his deeds and the realization that Bas' mother, too, would hurt as she did. She choked out a small sob, her hands dropping as she released the hammer on the gun and covered her face with her left hand.

"Damn you," she whispered. "*Damn you!*"

Bas blinked quickly, trying to restrain the moisture that misted his gaze. "I've damned myself, too," he admitted.

Serena sniffled loudly, fumbling with her purse. Dropping the gun into the bag, she fished around for something else. Bas waited, watched as she pulled a small silver frame, staring at the picture with a sad sort of smile—a smile as full of sorrow as it was full of love. The expression was enough to rip the last of Bas' soul to shreds as a single tear slipped down his cheek and he ducked his head.

"You . . . you want to see them?" she asked quietly.

Bas cleared his throat and nodded just once. She hesitated but stepped toward him, extending the frame almost grudgingly.

Bas took it reluctantly, stared at the frozen image of the family she'd lost. The son—Cody—with his arms around both his mother and his bride, and they were all smiling. Jeb stood on Serena's other side, his smile bright. Bas swallowed hard. "Can I . . . May I . . . keep this?"

Serena seemed surprised by Bas' question. He opened his mouth to take it back. It had been more of an impulse than anything else. He didn't even understand why he felt compelled to keep the picture. Serena's voice was thick with emotion when she spoke. "You'll remember them? Always remember them?"

Bas jerked his head in agreement. "I will," he promised her.

Serena nodded, dashing her hand over her eyes. "Then they won't really die."

Bas lifted his chin, watched in silence as Serena turned to go. Her shoes whispered softly on the thick carpet, and she stopped in the doorway to cast him one last, long look. "I only have one bullet," she told him. "I convinced myself that it was meant for you, but . . ." She swallowed hard and smiled. Her eyes were brighter though not by much, and Bas had to wonder if she had managed to find a measure of peace with something that couldn't be reckoned. "But maybe it never was."

He watched her go then. She slipped out of the townhouse and disappeared amongst the people passing by on the street. Glancing down at the picture frame in his hands, he scowled and asked himself just how could it be that the little slip of a woman could muster more dignity, more grace than a man who had lived his life in the direct service of the tai-youkai? There wasn't a doubt in Bas' mind that no matter how she chose to

finish her time, Serena would die with honor while Jared Brantley had hidden his true nature, unwilling or unable to assume the full measure of responsibility for what he'd done.

He stared at the smiling family in the picture and swallowed hard. *'I won't forget, Serena . . . and for what it's worth, I'm sorry . . .'*

A/N:
Seppuku: often called hara-kiri. Ritualistic suicide practiced by samurais and originating in feudal Japan, developed as an integral part of the code of bushido and the discipline of the samurai warrior class.

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Final Thought from Bas:
To die an honorable death ...

Chapter 47

Hesitation

Sydney bit her lip and stared out the window at the passing countryside as she tried to ignore the rising sense of anxiety that threatened to choke her.

He was taking her home with him to Maine.

After spending the rest of the week in New York City doing all sorts of odd things—Sydney's favorite had been their trip to Rockefeller Center to be on national television during the taping of the *Today* show, complete with wearing the cheesy t-shirts she'd bought that proclaimed, 'I heart NY' while Bas said that he'd enjoyed their sojourn to FAO Schwartz best—he'd finally maintained that they had to go home.

Less than a day's travel, or so he'd said.

She made a face. True, Bas said that his family wouldn't try to separate them. She trusted him well enough, sure. She wasn't so positive she could afford to trust anyone she hadn't met, though . . .

"You'll like them, baby, and they'll adore you," Bas said, reading her reluctance without any real trouble at all. "My mom's great, and my sister—you'll like her. Evan . . . I don't care if you *ever* meet Evan, and Dad—"

"—Is the last one I want to meet," she grumbled.

He sighed, casting her an apologetic sort of glance as he gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. "They're my family," he said quietly.

Sydney winced. She wasn't being entirely fair, and she knew it. Still, she couldn't ignore a lifetime of disappointment; of being left completely alone. The idea of losing Bas scared her silly, and yet . . . and yet he was so confident, wasn't he?

"You'll see," he finally said with another sigh, raking his fingers through his hair in a defeated sort of way. "They'll love you. They won't be able to help it."

He sounded so sure, didn't he? Sydney bit her lip and turned her attention back out the window once more.

Bas heaved a deep breath and pulled the rental car over, letting the engine idle as he slammed it into 'park' and turned to look at her. "Baby, how can I convince you that no one is going to hurt you?" he demanded gently.

"I . . ." she trailed off, shaking her head, unable to lend voice to the fears that just wouldn't let go of her. "Could we just . . . could we stop somewhere? Anywhere . . ."

"We're almost there," he told her. "Only a couple hours away."

"Please? I won't . . . I won't complain in the morning . . . I'll *try* not to complain in the morning . . ."

Bas rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand and nodded slowly. "Okay, baby," he agreed. "Whatever you want."

And yet his agreement didn't make her feel any better; not really.

'Because you know that he's missed his family in the last couple months.'

Drumming her claws on the door handle as Bas pulled back onto the road once more, Sydnie smiled sadly and tried not to feel guilty for asking him to stop again. *'What if they try to separate us? What if they tell him that I'm not good enough for him?'*

'Bas said they won't, or didn't you listen? He's bent over backward for you, little cat, and this is how you repay him? Whining and growling and asking him to stop early? All you're doing is prolonging your worries when maybe he's right, and there's nothing to be scared of . . .'

Sydnie grimaced. Opening her mouth to tell him that it was okay; that they might as well get it over with, she couldn't quite manage it around the fist-sized lump that blocked her throat. Bas telegraphed her a wan smile that she supposed was meant to reassure her. It left her feeling a little emptier and a lot more unreasonable in the face of her fears.

It didn't take him long to find a decent hotel. Sydnie waited outside, smoking a cigarette while he paid for a room. He wandered out of the hotel with a bashful sort of smile on his face, and digging his hands into his pockets, he ambled over to her. "You ready to go inside, kitty?"

She shrugged, dropping the cigarette and crushing it under the spike of her stiletto heel. "Sure."

He chuckled and headed around the car to retrieve their suitcase, leaving the laptop for the moment. "Come on. I already ordered some milk."

Smiling despite the feeling that she was being a complete and utter baby, Sydnie slipped her hand into his. Letting him lead her into the hotel, she intercepted the bright smile of the girl behind the raised desk poised just beside the entry. Catching Sydnie's eye, the girl's grin broadened. Sydnie tightened her grip on Bas' hand possessively.

He didn't seem to notice her show of jealousy as he escorted her up the wide staircase since she loathed elevators. The room was on the third floor, and Sydnie blinked in surprise. There were only four doors running the length of the wide corridor. She shot Bas a questioning look. He grinned almost sheepishly as he set the suitcase down long enough to swipe the hotel keycard and open the door for her.

Staring at the suite, Sydnie slowly walked inside. Fresh cut flowers perfumed the air but weren't so overpowering that they bothered her. The light, airy feel was aided by the gauzy curtains that were caught back with lacy ties. A silver pitcher stood on the highly polished pale wood coffee table, and the two crystal glasses winked in the thin sunlight filtering through the windows. Sydnie turned to face Bas once more, her questions awash in her gaze. He shrugged almost self-consciously. "It's . . . nicer," he explained quietly. "Our last night alone . . . I just thought . . ."

Crossing the floor, she slipped her arms around his neck, tugging gently to bring his head down for a kiss. He amazed her, didn't he? His thoughtfulness touched her deep, and she couldn't help the little sigh that escaped her as he wrapped his arms around her. "My puppy," she murmured.

Bas blushed but didn't deny her claim. "My kitty."

She acquiesced to him; let him support her as the sweetness of his kisses comforted her. Suspended in the moment, lost in his kiss, Sydnie's fingers tangled in his hair as her body trembled against his—so alive, so vibrant, so real.

"How can I convince you that my family will love you?"

Sydnie cuddled against his chest and sighed. "And they won't ever try to separate us? You're sure?"

"I'm sure," he said with a little chuckle. "Don't worry, kitty. Mom said the room she's fixing up for you is right across the hall, and—"

Jerking back, Sydnie gasped sharply, her eyes widening with fear. "Across the hall?" she echoed incredulously.

Bas nodded. "Well, just for a little while. If you don't like it there, I've got some money saved up . . . I'm sure we can find another place."

The tightening in her chest was painful, and Sydnie shook her head as she drew away from him, slowly backing up until she bumped into the wall. "But you said . . . you *promised!*"

He seemed confused by her upset, and he frowned as he gazed at her. "I . . .? I never —"

"You did!" she exclaimed hotly. "You said they wouldn't try to separate us!"

Bas blinked at her show of absolute defiance. "They won't," he maintained. "It's just a room. It's not —"

"Forget it, puppy! I'm not going!" she insisted.

"Baby . . ."

"Don't you 'baby' me, you dog! You *lied* to me!" she blasted. "I won't go; not if they're going to separate us!"

Bas grimaced. "They won't; I swear! I—" Cutting himself off as he pinched the bridge of his nose in his fingertips, he drew a deep breath and scrubbed at the back of his head. "Do you . . .? You wouldn't want to . . .? I mean, uh . . ."

She shook her head, her scowl deepening as she tried to make sense of Bas' garbled words. "What?"

He blushed deep crimson and wouldn't meet her gaze. Crossing his arms over his chest, he drew a deep breath before blurting, "You-could-become-my-mate—They-couldn't-separate-us-then—'Course-you-don't—Why-would-you—You-hate-that-I'm-going-to-be-the-next—"

Her brain seemed to slow to a crawl as she gazed at him. He was serious—absolutely serious. He wanted it, didn't he, and not just to reassure her. He wanted to be her mate, regardless. That it would help to convince her that they couldn't and wouldn't be separated . . . well, that was just an added bonus, she supposed. "Is . . . is that what you want, Sebastian?" she asked, unable to keep the breathy quality out of her tone, unable to keep the hopeful expression out of her eyes.

His face reddened a little more, but he jerked his head in a curt nod. "More than anything, baby," he mumbled.

Sydney bit her lip and swallowed hard. "I-I . . . Me, too . . ."

He held his hand out to her, and she stared at it a moment before hesitantly reaching out. The warmth of his fingers closed over hers, and she blinked as unbidden moisture gathered in her eyes, clouding her vision as he stroked her cheek with his knuckles. The look in his eyes was solemn, serious, but the tell-tale light that brightened his gaze was enough to make her breath catch in her throat. "Forever, Sydney," he whispered.

She thought maybe she nodded. Then again, she wasn't sure. Bas lowered his lips to hers, the soft caress blending with the beat of her heart that hammered wildly against her ribs. His youki seemed to merge with hers into an electric aura that protected them both. The heat of passion was tempered by the gentlest sense of completion. Bas really was her mate. As if every moment of their time together had led to this one, she moaned softly as he crushed her lips under his; as he coaxed her mouth open with the tip of his tongue.

The dizzying feel of floating on air didn't really make sense. Lost in the sensations inspired by his kiss, she slipped her arms around his neck despite the lethargy that clung to her. She felt the disjointed jarring movement but didn't dwell on it. Unable to do more than revel in him, she gasped and whimpered when he laid her on the cool silk coverlet. Leaning up on his left elbow, he pushed her hair out of her face as the tenderest expression filled his gaze. "I love you, kitty," he whispered.

Eyes half-closed, she rumbled out a roughened purr. "Then show me, Sebastian."

He groaned, his forehead falling against hers as her words shot through him more powerfully than a caress. His mouth scorched hers, the moist heat sending a bolt of need straight to the center of her. A throbbing ache built, antagonizing her as his clothes chafed her bare belly. His hand massaged away the irritation, his claws grazing over her flesh, unleashing a rising surge of goose bumps. She arched into his touch, reveled in the consuming fire that blazed deep inside. He scooped her up, pushed her shirt up her body and breaking the kiss just long enough to discard the garment on the floor. Shivering in an entirely delicious way, she slipped her arms around his neck, pulling herself up against him as she straddled his legs, as she sought out his mouth once more. The taste of him was thick on her lips, and she groaned quietly when he slipped his hands up her thighs, cradling her bottom as he kneaded the taut skin under her tube skirt.

Delving his tongue in and out of her mouth as he ran his claws lightly, deliberately, along the flimsy material of her thong panties, Bas growled low in his throat, the visceral sound swallowed in the undertone of a purr that was growing more ragged by the second. His fingers slipped under the thin strip of her panties, idly exploring the

depths of her. She rose up on her knees, let her head fall back, rasped out a sharp cry as his finger slipped into her. The shocking invasion felt perfect to her. His husky half-bark, half-whine was both demanding and soothing.

Bas pulled her close with his free arm, his lips scorching a path along the hollows of her throat. She let her hands trail down his chest, fingers pushing up under the hem of his shirt. The heat of his skin beckoned her, drawing her closer to the power, the strength that surged around her. He let his finger slip out of her long enough to discard his shirt before jerking her roughly against him once more, catching her, his hands supporting her as he let his mouth drop over the flushed peak of her breast. Moisture, intensive heat, the undeniable surge of pure sensation slammed through her in a violent wave. Her body shook, her limbs heavy, lethargic. She wanted to touch him, to hold him, to show him how she felt even if she wasn't quite brave enough to say the words out loud.

He calmed her with his terse sounds; the feel of his tongue soothed away the harsh tremors brought on by the scrape of fangs over her skin. She sighed, whimpered, arms dangling helplessly by her sides. Unable to summon the strength to do anything but revel in the consuming need that he inspired, Sydnie succumbed to the torrent of tactile sensation; the inebriating sense of fulfillment as he broke her will; as he reminded her of what it was to truly live. The gentle prompting erupted in fire and heat. The unsteady beat of her heart synchronized with his; the fluctuations of time and space seemed to stutter then still as everything faded away, leaving only a sense of desperate need, the rising passion of a bittersweet moment.

Lowering her down on the bed, his hands brushing over her skin, Bas caught the tube skirt and panties, carefully tugging them off her before taking a minute to discard his jeans and boxers. Sydnie stared at him through heavily-lidded eyes, and when he met her gaze, he choked out a ragged groan. Hands stroking the smooth curves of her belly, breathing harsh and labored, she slowly lifted her arms to him, and he fell on her, bracing the bulk of his weight on his forearms. Mouth hungry, demanding, he kissed her with a fervor that wrung a hiss, a growl from somewhere in the depths of her. She could feel him trembling, could hear the uneven palpitations of his heart. His hands shook as he sank his fingers into her hair, locking her head in place as he stroked her tongue, suckled her lips, as the thickness of him parted her, slipped inside her. He threw his head back with a formidable growl, his body tensing as she braced her feet on the mattress and lifted her hips, taking him in completely.

The thrust of his hips against hers was met by the welcome rise of her body. The tension thickened, tightened around her – need and desire warring against the ache that rose and spread. With every surge of his body in hers, the sensations built. The slow grind, the steady heat, the absolute power of him consumed her. Feeding off the passion that drove him, she ran her fingers up and down his spine, wrapped her legs over his. His mouth dropped to her neck again, his ragged moans reverberating against

her skin in an entirely delightful way. She mewed happily, contentedly, kneading his back muscles with careful fingers.

Lost in the realm of the senses, inundated by the scent of him, the overwhelming knowledge that he wanted her – just her – Sydnie rose time and again, meeting him halfway, sheltering him as he sheltered her. Emotions converged deep within, creating a comforting sense of urgency. Every thrust of his hips spoke to her; every whisper, every beat of his heart. He rolled over, dragging her with her, and just for a moment, she huddled close to him, letting him cosset her in the warmth of his embrace. She sat up slowly, bracing her hands in the center of his chest. Golden eyes burning with the fierce light of possession, he uttered a clipped growl, and she nodded. Rising on her knees, she whimpered as he slipped out of her only to cry out as he jerked her hips back down again. Shockwaves pulsed through her. The thickness of him throbbing with a barely contained power. “Oh, God,” he mumbled, closing his eyes as though the sight of her was too much to bear. She whimpered softly, grasping his hands and placing them on her breasts. He squeezed them gently, tugging on them, encouraging her movements as she rocked against him. “Sydnie, baby . . . I . . .”

“My puppy,” she purred, eyes drifting closed as she ground her hips against his. “All mine . . .”

“F-forever,” he promised. “God, kitty . . . help me . . .”

She felt the tremors increasing in him. She couldn’t quite help herself, though. The need that drove her was purely instinctual, goading her further, faster, harder. Bas pushed her aside, and she fell back, screaming his name as he hooked her leg behind the knee and drove into her hard. Sweat beaded on his forehead, streaked down his temples, his cheeks. Squeezing his eyes tight as he gritted his teeth, he thrust into her time and again. She purred, she cried, she moaned as he pushed her closer and closer to the edge. The unnerving ache that swelled inside her demanded much, much more than he was giving her. “Sebastian . . .”

He understood. Holding her hips, lifting her off the bed, he jerked her toward him as he plunged into her. Violent tremors shot through her with every thrust, and she dug her hands into the pillow as she cried out again, as her world exploded in a brilliant flash of pleasure. Bas’ harsh growl joined her as the wicked sensation of a shattering orgasm rocked through him. The combined heartbeats throbbed together, punctuated by the ragged groans; the sweetest purring, and he collapsed on her; completely spent and wholly content.

Seconds ticked away, growing into long minutes as he rolled to the side, carrying Sydnie with him as he cradled her against his heart. His heart hammered at a dizzying pace under her fingertips, and she couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up and spilled

over. In the quiet of the hotel room, she couldn't quite believe that he really was hers; that he'd be with her forever. He laughed, too, though his laughter was a little shaky. Kissing her forehead, he caught her hand and squeezed her fingers gently. "Forever, baby."

She giggled and finally managed to open her eyes. "Forever? I like that."

"Good."

Sighing happily, she tugged his hair playfully as he kissed her forehead again. "So you really are my puppy," she gloated.

"Hmm, yes, and you're my kitty."

"And they can't separate us now?"

He grimaced at the trace amount of anxiety that she couldn't hide. "No, baby. I won't let them."

Wiggling around so she could lean on her elbows, Sydnie nipped Bas' chin and grinned. "And that's it? We're mates now? Really?"

He nodded, his expression serious despite the amused glint in his eyes. "Yes, we're mates now, really."

She couldn't help the smile that started small but spread over her features. "Mates . . ."

"Yep, you're stuck with me. Want some milk?"

She giggled, snuggling against his chest for a moment as she tried to comprehend the novel idea that he really was hers and hers alone. "I could force myself," she allowed.

"Okay. Let me get some for you."

She wrinkled her nose as he carefully extricated himself from her and scooted off the bed. Sydnie dropped onto the dampened pillows and smiled as she watched him go before heading for the bathroom to rinse herself off. Dampening a washcloth, she made quick work of the clean up before grabbing a clean cloth and running it under the tap for Bas. '*My puppy . . .*'

'*Your mate.*'

'*Puppy will do,*' she decided.

Her youkai voice sighed then chuckled. *'Maybe it's the same thing?'*

'Maybe,' she agreed noncommittally. *'They can't separate us now . . . no one can separate us . . .'*

Bas was whistling slightly off key as he strode back into the room with a glass of milk in one hand and his cell phone in the other.

"What's that for?" Sydnie demanded, eyeing the cell phone with obvious distrust.

"I should call Mom and Dad . . . let them know that we'll be there tomorrow," he explained.

She reached over to snap it closed when he flipped it open to dial. "We just became mates, and you want to call your parents?" she complained with a hurt frown.

Bas grimaced and set the phone aside. "Okay, okay. You win, kitty."

"Hrumph."

"Here," he said, slipping the glass into her hand. "Here's your milk."

She took it and drank it down. He chuckled as he took the glass and set it on the nightstand beside the cell phone. "Thank you."

Bas stretched out on his side, propping his head on his hand. "You're beautiful. Did you know that, kitty?"

She bit her lip and smiled a little shyly as she tucked a strand of hair behind her ears. "Am I?"

He nodded. "Yes."

She wiped him clean, too, and dropped the cloth on the floor beside the bed before cuddling up against him, Sydnie let her fingertips trail along his hip, down the curve of his lower stomach, tracing the contours of his abdomen, tangling her fingers in the hair coarser hair between his legs. He shuddered as her fingers brushed against him. It jerked uncontrollably, and she giggled. "Do you want me again so soon, puppy?" she teased.

Bas chuckled huskily, flicking his thumb over her nipple. "I think I do."

She grinned. "Just think," she purred, grasping him firmly, rubbing her thumb over the head of his penis. He shivered. "Now you can tell everyone that you've got a pussy."

He rolled over, pinning her against the mattress. "Can I?"

She nipped his bottom lip. "I insist."

He kissed her gently, teasing her with the softest brush of his lips on hers. "If you don't stop, you'll be sorry," he groaned, letting his forehead drop against hers.

"What's the matter? The big puppy can't control his urges?"

Bas groaned as Sydney pushed him over onto his back before kneeling between his legs, staring unabashed at the length of him. Jerking wildly in her hands, he squeezed his eyes closed and dug his claws into the coverlet; muscles straining as he fought to control his body.

Sydney stroked him gently; leaned in, flicking the tip of her tongue out along the rim of the head of his penis. He growled rather viciously. Sydney giggled, her breath fanning over his skin in a ripple of moist air. Gripping him in both hands, she lowered her mouth over him slowly – painfully slowly. He sucked in his breath, thrust his hips toward her. She drew him in deeper, her cheeks collapsing as her lips tightened on his thickening shaft as her head slowly bobbed up and down; as her hair spilled over her shoulders onto his hips, onto his thighs. His fingers delved into her hair, tangled into the strands as she stroked him with her roughened tongue. He gasped and groaned, body quaking as she sucked harder, deeper.

The cell phone rang. Sydney growled low in her throat. Bas ignored it, a deep scowl of concentration contorting his handsome features. Pulling away from him, Sydney crawled over, shot a playful glance over her shoulder. "Come get it, puppy," she purred.

Bas sat up with a frustrated growl as the cell phone rang again. Rolling to his knees, he moved in behind her, pushed her higher as he bent down, his tongue flicking out, parting the folds of skin between her legs. She gasped softly as he lay down and drew her open with his fingers. Mouth gently sucking, tongue running along the length of the opening, his fangs grazed against her as her body erupted in a riot of gooseflesh. The burn was back with a vengeance, and the fierce desire that ripped through her was rivaled only by the heat of his mouth as he invaded her; as he tore down her defenses. Catching the tiny bud between his lips, he kissed her deep, sucked her gently. The sensation was a beautiful torment; the raging fire that couldn't be ignored. She collapsed face down on the pillows. Bas held her up as she quivered around him.

Unable to do more than revel in the absolute perfection of blissful sensation, she shook, she cried, body wracked in the insane web of pleasure that he spun around her.

She felt the bed shift, shivered as the heat of his mouth left her. Keening softly, her voice muffled in the down of the pillow, she whimpered, whined, protested the loss of his attention. Gasping as the thick head of his penis parted her folds of skin, she reared up, thrusting back against the welcome pressure. He met her halfway, growling viciously as he plunged into her. His hands dug into her hips but didn't hurt her. Reveling in the fullness, the completeness of his body, her growl rivaled his in the otherwise silent room.

The trill of the cell phone cut through the haze of desire that surrounded her. With a frustrated growl, Bas leaned to the side, slamming his fist down on the device and sending the crystal glass flying. The glass shattered somewhere in the distance as broken bits of plastic hit the floor. Sydnie almost laughed – until Bas slammed his hips against her ass.

The swell of need was too great; too powerful. Meeting the voraciousness of Bas' thrusts with her body, Sydnie couldn't stop the predatory noises that tumbled from her lips. The incredible fullness completed her, and yet the need grew larger, stronger, more consuming. Balancing on the edge of a precarious bliss, she trembled and shivered as he nipped her shoulder before leaning away to regain his leverage. Every nerve in her screamed for him; every fiber of her being ached desperately for the elusive tip of the precarious balance.

Closer, closer he drove her, his body crashing into hers in a fissure of heat and viscosity. Crying out his name, shattering the harsh breathing, the groans that bore a slight resemblance to words, Sydnie reared back as the tension in her body broke loose, and in the waning light, she felt herself coming undone.

Bas rasped out a savage growl; the instinctive sound of the inu-youkai. Slamming her back against him one last time, his body gave way to the spire of pleasure. His weight bore her down on the bed, and he cradled her close as he struggled to breathe. Sydnie half-laughed, half-sobbed, overcome by a feeling that both thrilled her and scared her. She loved him – really loved him . . .

And she knew that he loved her, too.

*Final Thought from Sydnie:
My puppy!*

Chapter 48

A Small Affair

Bas stifled a sigh as Sydnie worried at her lower lip, staring at the familiar landscape of his childhood home. The long, twisting driveway was lined by trees that obscured the view of the mansion, and while she seemed calm enough on the surface, he knew that she wouldn't really be easy until after she'd been reassured that his parents wouldn't try to separate them.

'As if they could,' he thought with an inward snort.

'As if they would,' his youkai blood countered. *'They wouldn't separate mates, though I have to wonder if they're going to be pleased with your impetuous behavior . . . not to mention that you didn't even bother to call them back last night . . .'*

He grinned sheepishly. *'Well, that would have been hard since I smashed the phone to bits.'*

'Yeah, and I doubt your father is going to be impressed with that . . .'

Rounding the bend in the trees, Bas' grin widened as the mansion finally came into view. The solid stone edifice was somewhat intimidating though his memories of happy times precluded the resurgent awe that otherwise would accompany the first glimpse of the Zelig estate. Maybe it used to be a colder place before Mom had come. His father had said often enough that Gin had made the mansion into a home. The sprawling, four story house was situated near the beach with majestic trees that lined the perimeter of the rolling yard. The windows glistened in the weak winter sunlight, and he smiled when he caught sight of the little, fat snowman that was leaning to the side. The snowman wore one of his father's scarves – his mother normally called the chubby figure the 'Abominable Snow Cain'. Beside him was another shorter, fatter snowwoman – quite obviously his father's form of retaliation for the annual slight. It felt like a lifetime since he had last seen the place, and now that he was here, he couldn't help the feeling of satisfaction that ebbed through him. Had he ever thought that he'd be bringing home his mate after all was said and done? He shook his head just a little. No, he supposed he hadn't . . .

"That's your house, Sebastian?" Sydnie blurted incredulously. Bas shot her a quick glance and chuckled at the absolute horror written in the depths of her wide eyes.

"Yes, kitty . . . we're big – well, all of us except for Mom . . . what did you expect?"

"Big, huh?" she muttered, cheeks pinking as she quickly shook her head. "Cute, puppy . . ."

"It's not so bad, Sydnie; I promise. Maybe you'll even like it here."

She shot him a quelling glance designed to let him know just what she thought of the idea of 'liking' the Zelig estate. "We shall see."

Bas chuckled again and let off the gas pedal as they neared the circle in the driveway in front of the mansion. "I can't wait for you to meet Mom. I think you'll like her. I think it's damn well impossible *not* to like her . . ."

Sydnie uttered a low mewling sound as he stopped the car and turned to face her. "You've lived here all your life?"

He nodded. "Yep." Pausing long enough to squeeze her icy fingers in gentle reassurance, Bas got out of the car and strode around to open her door. "Ready?"

"In a minute," she hedged. "Don't rush me, puppy."

Hunkering down beside the car, Bas took her hand and kissed her fingers. "There's nothing to worry about, Sydnie. They're going to love you. They won't be able to help it."

She forced a tight little smile that looked more like a grimace and nodded. "Yeah . . . of course they will . . ."

"Come on, baby," he coaxed.

Sydnie winced. "I could just wait out here," she offered.

Bas offered her an encouraging little grin. "Okay . . . I'll stay out here with you."

"But—"

"But, nothing. If you won't go in, neither will I."

"Puppy . . ."

"Kitty . . ."

She pressed her lips together but finally nodded. Bas braced himself against his knees to push himself to his feet, pausing long enough to kiss her cheek before he straightened his back. Letting him pull her to her feet, Sydnie shot him a nervous glance as she let go of his hands and straightened her green suede miniskirt.

Bas smiled again, wondering vaguely if she knew just how beautiful she really was. Somehow he wasn't sure she did, even if she teased him about it a little. No, he didn't think she had any real clue. The wind blew her hair back from her face, kissing her cheeks with a hint of a flush. Her eyes were wary but shone when she looked at him, and when he started toward the porch, she ducked behind him, clutching his shirt as she buried her face against his back. Stifling the urge to laugh at her late show of nerves, he slowed his pace and reached behind him, catching her hand and tugging. "Come out, baby. We—"

A loud bark cut him off, and Bas laughed as Badd, his huge dog, came tearing around the side of the mansion. Sydnie uttered a little squeak and hopped up on Bas' back. He choked a little when her arms tightened, blocking his windpipe for a moment. Prying his hands between her arms and his neck, he cleared his throat loudly. "It's okay, kitty. That's my dog."

"Your . . . dog?" she echoed, tightening her knees around his waist. "I don't like him! He wants to *eat* me!"

Bas chuckled and shook his head. "He's fine, Sydnie," he assured her, letting go of her so that he could fend off the hysterical mutt. "You don't eat kitties, do you, Badd?"

Badd barked and jumped to lick Bas' cheek. Bas laughed out loud and grabbed the dog's ruff. "Go on, you horse. Leave my kitty alone."

The dog stretched out, his rear end high in the air as his tail flashed back and forth in a blur of motion. He barked once, twice, then bounded away again. Sydnie refused to get down until after the dog was out of sight once more.

"He likes you," Bas explained as Sydnie straightened her skirt once more.

Sydnie shot him a fulminating glare and snorted. "With salt and pepper, maybe," she grumbled.

Bas wisely hid his amusement as Badd came lumbering back once more, this time with a stout stick clenched in his maw. "He wants to play," Bas explained, taking the stick from the dog and tossing it into the air a few times. "Here. Throw the stick for him."

She shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest as she leaned to the side to peek around Bas. "He's really ugly," she informed him.

"Ugly? Badd? Pfft! He's not ugly!"

She wrinkled her nose. "Whatever you say, puppy . . ."

Badd stared up at Sydney for several long seconds before nudging his head under her hand. She squeaked and jerked her hand away. Bas shook his head but grinned before whipping the stick across the yard. Badd barked and dodged after it. "It's okay, kitty. He just wanted you to pet him."

"The only puppy I pet is you, Sebastian. That . . . *thing* . . . can stay away from me."

He sighed but let it drop since convincing Sydney that Badd really wasn't planning a menu with a side of cat-youkai wasn't going to work. "All right. Come on. Mom's probably all anxious to meet you."

"Bassie!"

Snapping his head to the side long enough to see the blur of bluish-silvery hair and the streak of color that was his youngest sister, Bas barely had time to let go of Sydney and brace himself as Jillian launched herself into his arms, locking her spindly arms around his neck as she laughed out loud and hugged him tight.

"Jilli, what are you —?"

A low hissing growl erupted behind him, and Bas grimaced. He didn't have to look to know that Sydney wasn't happy about Jillian's show of exuberance. Jillian stopped laughing and hauled herself up against Bas' shoulder to get a good look at the cat-youkai. "That's Sydney?" she mumbled though Bas doubted that Sydney had missed it.

"Get down, you brat," he grumbled, tugging on Jillian's arms in an effort to get her to let go.

"She's so *pretty!*" Jillian added with a bright smile.

"Yes, well, maybe not so pretty if you don't let go, Jillian. Get off me."

Jillian wrinkled her nose but dropped to the ground once more before leaning around to get a better look at Sydney. "I'm Jillian, Bassie's younger sister."

Sydney snorted. "Oh? Well, I'm Sydney — Sebastian's *owner*."

"Jilli, why don't you go tell Mom we're here?" Bas cut in to forestall the altercation that he was certain was looming on the horizon.

"Okay!" Jillian gushed, clapping her hands as she spun around to run back inside.

Bas waited until she was out of view before turning on his heel to regard his new mate. Standing with her arms crossed over her chest and a mulish expression contorting her features, Bas heaved a sigh and pulled her against his chest. "You know, kitty, you really can't go around threatening my family just because they hug me."

"She didn't *just* hug you," Sydnie grumbled. "She was *all over* you. Need I remind you that you're *my* puppy? Tell your sister to get her own."

Bas did chuckle at that. "As true as that may be, they're still my family. There's a very good chance that my mom is going to hug me, too. She might even *kiss* me, and you can't hiss at her, Sydnie. Promise me?"

"*Re-e-eally.*"

He sighed. "Yes, really . . . my family tends to be rather affectionate," he admitted.

"They can be affectionate somewhere else," she maintained stubbornly, "so long as they stay away from you."

"She's my mom."

"And I'm your mate."

"She hasn't seen me in weeks," he went on. "Surely you can appreciate that."

Sydnie wrinkled her nose. "Fine, fine . . . I'll *try* not to hiss at your mother, even though you're *my* puppy now."

Bas let it go at that, figuring it was as close to a promise as he was likely to get. In any case, he grasped her hand again and pulled her along behind him as he climbed the porch stairs and opened the front door.

"Sebastian!" Gin greeted, tearing through the living room from the kitchen. She slipped her arms around his waist, hugging him tight for a moment before tugging him down to kiss his cheek, holding his face in her hands to give him the once-over. "I'm so glad you're home! We were so worried! Why didn't you call us back last . . .?" Gin trailed

off, her eyes widening as she stepped back, as she lifted a hand to flutter over her lips. "Oh . . . *oh-h-h* . . ."

Bas cleared his throat and tried not to blush. "Uh, Mom . . . this is my mate . . . Sydnie," he said, grabbing Sydnie's hand and drawing her forward. She tried to pull away, but he held onto her shoulders, keeping her before him as his mother sought to cover her initial surprise. "Sydnie, this is my mom, Gin Zelig."

Recovering quicker than Bas had predicted, Gin smiled brightly and hugged Sydnie, too. "Welcome to the family, Sydnie!" Her golden eyes darted over Sydnie's head to meet Bas' amused gaze. "She's lovely."

"I know."

Gin laughed. "I just made lunch, and . . ." she snapped her fingers. "You know . . . why don't you eat and then take her on a walk around the grounds?" Gin suggested, casting Bas a meaningful look. "*All the grounds?*"

Bas blinked. "Oh . . . I could do that."

"Good, good," Gin mumbled. "Go on, and I'll tell your father you're back." That said, she shot the two another reassuring smile before hurrying to Cain's study and slipping inside. Closing the door before leaning back against it, she cleared her throat to gain his attention.

Cain glanced up from a paper he had been reading. "You all right, baby girl?" he asked as he lowered his eyes once more.

Gin smiled weakly and nodded. "Just fine, Cain . . . I thought I should tell you, though . . . Sebastian's back, and he brought home his *mate*."

Cain grunted in response. "Oh? Did he bother to explain why he shut off his cell last night?"

Gin shook her head. "Sure, sure . . . but you know, he just got here— with his *mate*."

"Well, yeah. He told us that he wanted to make Sydnie his mate, didn't he?"

Gin laughed almost nervously. "Oh, yes, he *did* do that, didn't he?"

Cain scowled at her as he dropped the paper and slowly stood up. Jamming his hands into his pockets under the untucked shirttails of the rumpled white linen, button-down

shirt that could use a good ironing since Cain staunchly refused to let Gin do any such thing to his clothes. "All right, baby girl . . . what are you trying to tell me?"

Gin's smile widened a little. "I'm just telling you that Sebastian's brought home his *mate*."

"Is she pretty?"

Gin nodded. "His *mate* is lovely."

Cain heaved a sigh. "Good, good . . . I suppose she doesn't want to meet me, huh?"

"His *mate* didn't really say, but she looked a little freaked out, yes."

Cain narrowed his eyes on his wife. "Why do you keep saying that?" he demanded. "I mean, we knew that he—"

Gin rolled her eyes, pinning Cain with a look that proclaimed his perceived ignorance. "Listen to me, Zelig-sensei. Sebastian—*your* son—*your* pride and joy—brought home his . . . *ma-a-a-ate*."

Cain's eyes widened in shock then narrowed as apprehension dawned on him. "No-o-o-o . . ."

Gin nodded enthusiastically. "Yes."

"No!" Cain insisted.

"Oh, yes," she replied.

"Pfft! I could have sworn I told him not to do anything permanent until after he brought her home to meet you! Damn it, I'll—"

"You'll ask him when he plans on marrying her," Gin interjected, "and then you'll leave them alone."

"The hell I—leave them alone? Right, Gin, right . . . they've been alone the last couple months, and you see what came of that, don't you?"

"If she makes him happy, then that's all that matters."

"Pfft!"

Slipping her arms around Cain's neck, Gin stood on tiptoe, leaning against him for support. "I had a thought, Zelig-sensei."

"Oh?" he asked grudgingly.

"Yes," she insisted. "It's about their living arrangements."

Cain snorted. "Wasted all that effort redecorating that room for her, did you?"

Gin brushed off his blustering with a soft giggle. "She seems so skittish, you know? I don't blame her . . . she's never had a large family, poor thing."

"And what are you getting at?" he demanded tightly, cocking an eyebrow as Gin's smile widened.

"There's the studio," she drawled.

"The studio?" he echoed blankly.

"Yes . . . the apartment studio . . ."

Cain's mouth dropped open as an indignant sort of sputter escaped him. "Wha—? No!"

"You've still got your regular studio, and it's just for awhile, right? I mean, do you really think they'll want to stay here with us old people?"

Cain snorted again. "Pfft! Speak for yourself, old woman. I'm still in my prime."

"Your prime, huh?" She giggled when he inclined his head in silent argument.

"Anyway, what do you say? We could let them use the studio for now. It'd just be temporary . . . unless they want to live here!" Ducking under Cain's arm, Gin twirled around the floor. "Do you think they would? They *could* stay here! They could stay here and have babies and—"

Cain groaned and let out a deep breath. "—And hate living with the in-laws? It's fine . . . they can use it, I suppose."

With a happy little squeak, Gin darted over to hug her mate. "Thank you, Cain. Now I think Gunnar is here somewhere, and Evan's downstairs . . . Gavin's at the university for placement testing, but I'm sure that the three of you can take care of moving all of Sebastian's things—"

“Wait a minute . . . I don’t remember saying anything about doing manual labor,” he countered.

Gin shook her head. “Well, how else will you get Sebastian’s bed up there and ours out? There’s no such thing as magic, Cain . . .”

“I have to *move* our bed out of there?”

Gin shot him a disbelieving glance. “Of course . . . you don’t really think that she wants to sleep in *our* bed, do you?”

He heaved a sigh, conceding her point. Gin shot him a quick grin and tried to brush past him to let herself out of the room. He caught her arm and pushed her back against the door, pinning her there with a hand placed on either side of her. “And what’s in this for me, Gin?” he asked, his voice dropping to a husky whisper as his gaze roved up and down her diminutive frame.

“Umm . . . hero points?” she hedged with a bright smile, using their youngest daughter’s terminology.

Cain snorted. “I had something else in mind, baby girl.”

“What’s that?” she asked breathlessly.

His chuckle sent tremors through her body, and she couldn’t help the blush that rose to stain her cheeks. “I’m sure I can think of something, Gin.”

She swallowed hard but giggled. “Like . . . what?”

His grin turned a little nasty, and he crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back against the desk as a soft chuckle escaped him—one that Gin recognized . . . one that Gin relished. “One.”

“But I didn’t do anything to need to be punished!” she blurted, holding her hands up in an unnecessary effort to keep Cain at bay.

“Two.”

“Now, Cain . . .”

“Three.”

“Be reasonable! I’m being good, I swear!”

He glanced at his watch. "Four."

Gin backed up a step then carted around, grabbing the door handle and jerking on it.

"Five."

Shrieking as Cain smashed his palms against the door, effectively blocking her only retreat, Gin whipped around, bringing her hands up to push on his chest, knowing in her heart that she couldn't hold him back – and not really wanting to do any such thing, anyway.

With a rumbling growl, Cain let his head drop, mouth latching onto the silky skin of his mate's throat as she gasped softly, her protests dying before they could be voiced.

"What . . . what are you going to . . . do . . . to me?" she breathed, eyes drifting closed as he turned the lock on the door.

"What am I going to do?" he echoed. "Well, now . . . I'll just have to show you . . ."

"I've got to hand it to you, Bas . . . that was one hell of a fucked up mess," Gunnar drawled as the two strode down the hallway toward the studio.

Bas grimaced. "Yeah, well, it'd done now."

Gunnar nodded, raking a hand through his hair. "Your father's got the last of the Onyx in custody. He's not sure what to do with her, I don't think, but your uncle and the old man are tracking down the ones who had hired the hit on Sydnie, to start with."

"Dad said as much," Bas intoned.

Having just finished talking to Cain, all he wanted to do was to find Sydnie and spend some time with her. Talking about the hunt and subsequent fighting had taken its toll on him. He'd entrusted Ben with the confession Ryomaru had caught on his pocket-corder when the panther-youkai had come to visit in New York City. The generals had met with Cain before Bas and brought Sydnie home, and his father had explained the entire situation to them, including the truth behind Jared Brantley's betrayal and Bas' actions to rectify it all. In the end, Bas suspected that to be the real reason his father had told him to linger in New York City. He'd wanted to square everything away on that end. Just after they'd returned from the tour of the estate, Cain had sent Gin to find Bas

so that he could debrief him before allowing Bas a moment to breathe. Sydnie, it seemed, had the support of the remaining generals. The official pardon was just a technicality now.

As he'd stood to leave, his father had stopped him. Staring at him with that knowing expression in the depths of his gaze, Cain had asked the one question that Bas had known was coming. "Refresh my memory, Bas . . . Did I or did I not ask you not to do anything permanent until after you'd brought her home to meet your mother?"

Sinking back into the chair he'd been starting to rise from, Bas schooled his features and tried not to feel like a mere pup caught with his hand in the cookie jar . . . "You did, sir," he allowed.

"So you made her your mate anyway."

"She was scared, Dad. She thought you were going to try to separate us, and when I mentioned that Mom had prepared a guest room for her, she flipped. It was the only way to get her here, and besides . . ." Lifting his chin defiantly, Bas willed himself not to blush as he straightened his back and met his father's direct gaze. "It doesn't change anything. She was already the mate of my youkai blood."

Cain sighed heavily, half sitting on the edge of his desk as he slowly shook his head. "You're going to marry her, aren't you?"

Bas opened his mouth then snapped it closed. Sure, he'd thought about that, but he had to admit that he hadn't quite gotten around to asking Sydnie yet . . . "Yes," he replied.

Cain nodded. Deliberating for a moment, he sighed again then pushed himself to his feet before striding over to the wall. Moving the painting aside, he keyed in the combination on the safe and pulled out a small, dark green velvet bag that he chucked over his shoulder without glancing at his son. Bas caught it and weighed it in his hand while Cain closed the safe and replaced the painting. "Then you'd best pick out a diamond for her, don't you think?"

Bas grinned. "Yes, sir. Absolutely."

"Earth to Bas . . . are you listening to me?"

Bas blinked and shot a glance at his cousin. "I'm sorry . . . what was that?"

Gunnar shook his head. "Nothing important," he stated. "Just glad you're home."

Bas nodded and grasped the doorknob, only to stop short at the sight that greeted him. Sydnie stood near the wall of windows on the far side of the studio with Evan, whose arm was slung casually around her shoulders as he muttered something that didn't

carry across the expanse of the room. Bas smothered a derisive snort as he strode over to the pair, stopping beside Cain's work table in the center of the studio.

"Aww, come on, Sydnie! I can make you happier than Bubby ever could," he maintained. "What's he got that I don't?"

Sydnie giggled. "You're just a puppy," she countered.

"Ahh!" Evan grumbled. "I might be smaller than Bas, but I'm a better fuck than he'll ever be."

Bas could feel Gunnar's amused gaze on him. Bas ignored it. "What the hell do you think you're doing, you little punk?" Bas growled.

Evan shot a cocky grin over his shoulder. "Nothin'," he drawled. "Just trying to set the pussy straight."

"Get the hell away from her or I swear to God I'll kill you," Bas retorted, cracking his knuckles as he advanced on his brother.

Evan held his hands up in easy acquiescence, his grin widening slightly as he chuckled. "Calm down, Bassie-boy . . . I was just teasing, after all . . ."

Bas snorted, ignoring Evan's claims as he stepped in front of Sydnie to block her from Evan's view. "Get out of here, Evan," Bas warned. "Don't let me catch you anywhere near her again."

"Chill, man," Evan countered. "It's cool . . ." Sauntering toward the door, he stopped before he crossed the threshold. "Gotta say, though . . . if I'd met her first, she'd have been mine."

Bas erupted in a low growl. Sydnie's hand on his back silenced him. Crossing his arms over his chest, he waited in stony silence as his brother cracked his shoulders and disappeared into the hallway. "He should have been drowned at birth," Bas grumbled.

Gunnar chuckled. "Be that as it may, you should know that if I couldn't convince Sydnie to come with me, Evan sure as hell wouldn't be able to do it." Gunnar leaned to the side, peering around Bas at the girl in question. "Oi, kitten . . . How about it?"

Sydnie giggled softly, darting around Bas to hug Gunnar. Gunnar's chuckle escalated when she rose on her tiptoes to lick his cheek. "Hmm, tasty as ever, puppy."

Bas rolled his eyes, grabbing Sydnie's arm and gently pulling her away from Gunnar. "Back off, Gunsie," he growled.

Sydnie cuddled against Bas' chest, slipping her hand up to rest over his heart. "I was just saying hello, Sebastian."

"You can do it from over here, kitty," he pointed out.

"Can I?"

"Yes."

Gunnar rolled his eyes, but his smile didn't diminish. "I'm heading out of here," he remarked. "I'll see you later."

"Oh? Why are you leaving so early? It's time for dinner."

Gunnar's grin widened. "Well, if you must know, I have a date."

"Yeah? Who'd be stupid enough to date a dog like you?"

"No one you know."

Bas wrinkled his nose, watching his cousin's departure.

"Do you always threaten your brother?" Sydnie asked quietly, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room in the wake of Gunnar's hasty departure.

"Threaten him? Only when he deserves it. What did that little fucker say to you?"

Sydnie shrugged. "He's just a puppy," she insisted, "a baby . . ."

"Maybe."

"Besides, why would I want a little boy like him when I already have a puppy?"

He sighed but wrapped his arms around her. "Yeah?"

She nodded.

He finally smiled. "Dinner's ready. You feel up to going downstairs?"

Sydnie bit her lip but nodded slowly. "I think so."

"Yeah? Good, because Dad would love to meet you, and —"

"Your father? Know what, Sebastian? I think I'd rather stay up here."

He grimaced. "Kitty . . ."

She turned away, wrapping her arms over her stomach protectively as she wandered toward the windows. "I just don't want to, okay? Not . . . not tonight."

Bas sighed, rubbing his forehead as he tried to make sense of Sydnie's irrational behavior. "Sydnie . . ."

'What do you expect, Bas? She's spent her entire life hating the tai-youkai, and while you might be able to separate your father and his title, she can't do the same; not yet. Anyway, you have to admit it: today's been hard on her. A new place, new people . . . and very little that's familiar to her. Just give in on this, can't you? For Sydnie?'

He sighed again. Yes, he supposed he could do that. His youkai blood was right, wasn't it? Sydnie . . . Well, she had dealt with everything quite admirably thus far. Besides that, there was the important thing that he really had to discuss with her, and to be truthful, he wasn't entirely sure she'd agree to it . . .

"Okay, kitty . . . how about I go get a dinner tray and bring it up? Mom said she bought a few gallons of milk, just for you . . ."

Sydnie shot him a sidelong glance and bit her lip. "For . . . me?"

He nodded. "Yep . . . no one else in the house likes milk very much . . . Evan drinks it sometimes, but he doesn't really count."

"I could drink some milk," she grudgingly allowed.

He smiled. "Okay . . . and, uh . . . well . . . there's something else we need to talk about."

Her crystal green eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What's that?"

"Nothing bad . . . I hope . . ." Wincing at the momentary spike of panic that surged in her youki, Bas pasted on a tight little smile and shrugged. "Let me get dinner, and then we'll talk."

Bas scowled as he scanned the studio for any sign of his mate as he balanced the dinner tray on one hand and closed the door behind him. She was there; he could sense her. He just couldn't *see* her . . .

Following her aura up the stairs into the loft, he grinned. The lump in the middle of the huge bed wasn't very well delineated. Lost in the folds of the blanket, she moved around, pulling the covers away from her face enough to peer at him. He set the tray on the nightstand and pulled the blankets back to climb into the bed beside her. "What are you doing?" he asked gently.

She curled up beside him, burying her face against his chest with a stifled moan. "Just hold me, puppy," she whispered.

Stroking her hair, he sighed and did as she requested. "Is it so bad here?" he questioned, unable to keep the hint of upset out of his tone.

"No . . . no . . . I just . . . I . . ."

"It's a lot to take in, isn't it?"

She nodded.

Bas pulled the covers off her head and kissed her. "It's okay. You're right; it is."

She scowled and sat up, drawing her legs up and wrapping her arms around them. "Did I . . . did I do something wrong?" she muttered.

"What?"

She shrugged. "You said we had to talk. Did I do something wrong?"

He grimaced. "Not at all, kitty . . . There's just something that I need to ask you . . ."

"Okay," she agreed slowly.

Bas sat up and handed her a plate. Gin had outdone herself, it seemed, cooking four different entrees in the hopes that one of them would please Sydnie. Bas had given her a little bit of everything, and she pushed the food around her plate with the fork as Bas scratched the back of his neck and tried to figure out just how something like this was supposed to be asked.

"I should've asked you before, I guess . . . I'm not real good at this sort of thing, but . . ." Trailing off for a moment, he grimaced and shrugged. "I just . . . that is, we . . . well, I . . ." Drawing a deep breath, he cleared his throat and took the plate from her since she didn't seem very interested in the food at the moment. After setting it aside, he handed her the glass of milk that she promptly drained. He replaced that and turned back to face her, holding out his hand, palm side up. She stared at it for a moment before slipping her hand into his. He kissed her knuckles and rubbed his thumb over them. "Do you – would you – want to . . . marry me?"

She blinked in surprise, staring at him in quiet wonder. "You want to marry me?" she repeated.

He jerked his head in a curt nod, struggling to keep his face from shooting up in embarrassed flames. "I . . . I'd love that."

Her smile started out little more than the marked brightening behind her gaze. Gradually it spread, lending her expression a breathtaking sort of radiance. "So then I'd really, *really* own you!"

He chuckled, his body tingling from the surge of instantaneous relief that flooded his limbs. "Yes, kitty, I suppose you would."

She threw her arms around his neck, launching herself against him. The unexpected move bore him down against the mattress, and he laughed outright as she showered his face with light little kisses. "Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine!" she gushed between kisses.

"Wait . . . kitty . . ." Bas muttered. "You – need – to – pick – a – diamond."

Sitting up, she cocked her head to the side and frowned. "What do you mean, pick a diamond?"

Bas dug the velvet bag out of his pocket and dropped it on Sydnie's lap. "There, baby. Just pick the ones you want in your ring."

Sydnie narrowed her eyes on him and weighed the bag in her hands. "You have diamonds?"

He nodded, leaning up on his elbows. "Sure . . . I made them."

"You . . . made . . . them?"

Smiling at the dubious tone in her voice, Bas nodded. "Yes, Sydnie, I made them."

Shaking her head, she carefully untied the suede strings that held the pouch closed and peered inside. "You can't make diamonds, puppy," she said with a scowl as she dumped the rough diamonds onto the coverlet and sifted through them.

"Sure . . . The old man's sword has the ability. He taught me how to see the fissure that appears when youki meets youki. Then he taught me how to use Triumvirate to cut through that fissure . . . as I got older, he let me use Tetsusaiga – his sword – to master a few of his attacks, including the Kongousouha – the Diamond Spear Blast. That's how I made those."

She nodded absently. "So you can use his sword?"

Bas grimaced. "Yes and no . . . I can use it to an extent. He has other techniques I haven't mastered, but then, I don't think I can . . . See, Tetsusaiga isn't an ordinary youkai weapon. It broke once, and when that happened, the master sword-smith Totosai used the old man's fang to bind it – to re-forged it. When he did that, the sword became more of an extension of my grandfather than a simple weapon. Because of that, the old man was able to acquire more skills until it reached the level of power that was on par with that of my great-grandfather."

"The Inu no Taisho," she whispered.

Bas nodded. "The Inu no Taisho . . . But see . . . since the sword isn't really a part of me, then I cannot master the sword's strongest techniques, either."

Sydnie looked thoughtful for a moment. "What about your sword, Sebastian? Is it a part of you?"

He nodded. "Yep."

"But your fang wasn't used, was it?"

He shrugged. "That's different. Triumvirate was forged *for* me. It'd be different if I had inherited the sword. That's how Tetsusaiga was."

"How do you know?"

Bas flopped back, tucking his hands behind his head and frowning at the ceiling as he thought about how to explain everything to Sydnie. "I was the first one to use it in battle. Granted, it was a mock battle with my uncle, Ryomaru, but it was still a battle. A youkai weapon bonds with the first person to wield it in a battle situation."

"I see."

He smiled at the consternated look on her face. She probably had understood his explanation on some level. Still it was something that was difficult to understand since she'd never received any kind of formal training. "So what do you think, kitty? See a stone you like there?"

Sydney picked up a small diamond – much smaller than he would have chosen. "I like this one," she informed him.

Bas wrinkled his nose and pulled his hand free. Sydney dropped the diamond onto his palm and scooped the remaining stones together before neatly dropping them back into the sack and securing the tie once more. "You sure? They're yours, you know. You can have them."

"Mine?"

He nodded. "Yes. I kept them to for my future mate – my future wife . . . you." A sudden smile spread over his features, and he couldn't help the slightly arrogant chuckle that escaped him. "Sydney Zelig . . . I like that."

Her chin snapped up at that; her eyes rounding in near panic as she dropped the bag of diamonds on his chest.

"What?" he asked, shaking his head as his smile dissolved only to be replaced by a worried frown.

Sydney grimaced. "I . . ."

"Baby?"

"I . . . I don't want to be a Zelig," she blurted, cheeks reddening as she scooted away from him in retreat.

Bas gritted his teeth. He hadn't thought of that, but he should have. As much as Sydney disliked his father, Bas ought to have realized that she wouldn't like the idea of having his last name, but damned if he liked the idea of her retaining her maiden name . . . "I know you don't, but –"

She shook her head stubbornly and scowled at her hands. "No, Sebastian . . ."

"Sydnie, listen . . . I want the world to know that I'm protecting you, and the easiest way to do that is for you to be a Zelig. Can you understand that?"

"No! I don't want *his* name!"

"It's not just *his* name!" Bas insisted. "It's *mine*, too . . ." Heaving a loud sigh, he sat up slowly, raking his hands through his hair in complete exasperation. "You're not marrying my father, baby . . . you'd be marrying me. Isn't that good enough?"

She shot him a quick glance – a frightened glance; one that tore at his heart. "Can I . . . could I keep my name?" she asked.

Bas opened his mouth to growl at her; to let her know that he didn't like that idea in the least. Seeing the hopeful expression on her face, however, stopped him. He knew deep down that she really wasn't trying to hurt him. Sydnie never tried to hurt him. Still it took a minute for him to brush off the feeling that he was being rejected. Forcing a smile that he hoped would suffice, he shrugged and let out a deep breath. "Would you just think about it?"

She bit her lip but nodded. "All right." Her smile was as thin as his as she knotted her fingers together in her lap. "Sebastian?"

"Yes?"

"It doesn't . . . it doesn't have to be a big wedding, right?"

"You don't want a big wedding?"

She shook her head quickly, unable to mask the abject horror that filled her eyes at the thought of a big wedding. "No."

He nodded. "Okay, baby. Whatever you want. I'll just tell Mom that you want something small because I think she's all excited about helping you plan the damn thing."

She snorted but remained silent. Her expression didn't look any less foreboding, but she finally crawled back over to him and let him draw her into his arms. "It's been a long day, hasn't it?" he asked quietly.

Sydnie nodded as Badd poked his head under her elbow and uttered a low whine. She scratched the dog behind the ears and smiled.

"Come on, you," Bas said, scooting off the bed and slapping his thigh for the dog to follow him downstairs. Badd stared at him for a moment before resting his head on Sydnie's leg. She giggled, and Badd shot her an adoring glance. "You stole my dog," Bas grumbled though his tone lacked any real irritation.

"Of course I did, puppy," she remarked. "Don't you know? I have a way with dogs."

Bas chuckled as he sank back down on the bed once more. "So you do, kitty," he said, slipping his arm around her waist and pulling her close. "So you do."

A/N:
Kongousouha: Diamond Spear Blast.

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Final Thought from Bas:

At least she said 'yes' ...

Chapter 49

Family

It seemed to Sydnie that the first couple of weeks following their arrival in Maine flew by. Spending most of her time with Gin and Jillian, she hadn't gotten much time alone with Bas though he tended to show up at odd times during the day just to smile at her or to hug her, to make sure that she was all right.

She had to admit that she rather enjoyed spending time with both Gin and Jillian. Bas had been right: it was impossible not to like Gin Zelig. So bright and bubbly, there was a certain air of naiveté surrounding the woman, too. Always ready with a warm smile or an encouraging word, it was easy for Sydnie to see why everyone adored Gin, and Jillian . . . Well, with her effervescent personality, Jillian had managed to ferret her way past Sydnie's defenses, too. She even liked Madison Cartham despite her initial resolve that she would do better not to meet that particular person.

As it was, Bas had managed to coax her downstairs two days after their arrival only to come face to face with the girl. Sitting on the sofa in the living room, she hopped up and ran over to hug Bas. Sydnie stepped into her path, glowering at the overzealous girl before she got a chance to latch onto *her* puppy. Blinking in surprise as Sydnie erupted in a menacing growl, Madison offered her a hesitant smile and stepped back. After a rather stilted introduction, the girl reached over, grabbing a fistful of Sydnie's hair just before launching into an animated description of hair styles that would look good on Sydnie. Apparently Madison wanted to be a beautician, and she was 'dying' to get her 'hands on' hair as pretty as Sydnie's.

In fact, the only real argument that she and Bas had was the morning after their arrival. Waking up to a certain man's roaming hands, she was more than happy to oblige him. She'd been so engrossed in what they were doing, however, that she hadn't realized that someone had intruded until Evan's voice had cut through the lust-induced haze enveloping her mind. With a savage growl, Bas pushed Sydnie off of him, tossing a blanket over her as he shot to his feet and jerked on a pair of jeans before taking off at break-neck speed with every intention of maiming his brother. Sydnie dressed quickly and had given chase. It was her considered opinion that Evan was harmless enough, and worse, Bas was so much bigger than the teenager that she really was worried that he'd cause permanent damage if he wasn't stopped.

As it was, she'd skidded to a halt just inside Cain Zelig's study – enemy territory, as far as she was concerned – in time to see Gin, who was almost in tears, tugging at Bas' arm as the elder

brother pinned Evan against the wall with a hand to his neck. Evan must have been suffering oxygen deprivation because he was laughing rather insanely. The tai-youkai was resting his elbows on the desk with his face buried in his hands.

She could understand Bas' upset, sure, but the absolute rage in his expression was a lot more foreboding. She'd never seen him so close to losing his temper, even during the altercations with the Onyx, and to be honest, it frightened her.

She'd railed at him for an hour or more over that incident. "You could have hurt him!" she'd yelled.

"Yeah? Good, because I meant to!"

"That's not even slightly amusing," she bit out, narrowing her eyes on him.

"He saw you naked!" Bas snarled back.

"That doesn't matter! Do you honestly think that I want anyone but you, you territorially-challenged dog?"

He snapped his mouth closed on his retort, cheeks pinking as he snorted. "No," he admitted.

"Good, because I don't," she grumbled. "Anyway, you should be glad that you have a brother; not fight with him."

"Damn it, you don't get it! Evan doesn't do anything but push me! He's always done it, and he's doing it now! That's all he's ever wanted to do!"

"And at least he's here to do that!" Smashing her hand against her lips, Sydnie turned away and shook her head. Her anger seemed to drain away from her, expelled with the words that had spilled over. "Never mind, puppy," she murmured. "It isn't my place to interfere, is it?"

"Sydnie . . ."

Gunnar had interrupted then, dragging Bas off to talk to his father. By the time he came up to the studio later, they'd both calmed down. Bas had offered her a tentative smile and assured her that he was sorry for upsetting her. Sydnie had cuddled on his lap, telling him that she was sorry for butting in.

Sydnie shook off the memories and crossed her arms over her stomach, pacing the length of the floor that spanned the wall of windows. Nearly seven . . . where was Bas?

The wedding was planned out, for the most part. Gin said she would take care of sending out the invitations as soon as the final guest list was approved. Sydnie had a final fitting for her dress early next week. The trouble was that she still hadn't asked anyone to stand up with her, and she didn't have anyone to give her away, either. Gin, however, seemed to be in a hurry to see them married, and to that end, Sydnie hadn't complained since she viewed it more as something they were doing to please Bas' mother than anything else. She'd been meaning to ask Bas for his advice on those things, but it always seemed that talking was the last thing on either of their minds when they were finally left alone for the night . . .

Shooting a quick glance at the table, Sydnie cringed. Gin had left a copy of the guest list for Sydnie to look over with Bas. Either he hadn't told his mother that she wanted a small wedding, or Bas' idea of 'small' was light years away from hers . . .

Worse, the guest list had brought home another painfully obvious thing in her mind; something that she'd forgotten until earlier today.

With a sigh, she rubbed her face but whipped around in time to see Bas closing the door behind himself. "You're a sight worth seeing," he murmured, leaning back against the door and casting her a lopsided little grin. "Mom said dinner's about ready. You want to go downstairs for it?"

Shaking her head, she didn't even try to smile since he asked her the same question every night, and every night her answer was invariably the same: no.

Pushing himself away from the door, Bas wandered over to wrap his arms around her, drawing her back against his chest. "Okay," he agreed, "but you know you'll have to meet Dad sometime."

She shook her head again. "Not now, puppy," she whispered. "I just . . . I can't . . ."

He nodded slowly. "All right . . . suppose you tell me what's really bothering you?"

She shrugged and tried to hide her upset. Bas' frown deepened, and she knew the feeble attempt didn't work. "Sebastian, you said that it'd be a small wedding. You promised . . ."

"Well, yeah," he remarked with a confused frown. "I told Mom that . . . she said it was fine."

Breaking away from his hold, Sydnie stomped over to the table and snatched up the guest list before stomping back over and jamming the list under his nose. "A hundred people is hardly 'small', puppy!"

Bas winced and hesitantly took the paper, giving it the once-over before heaving a sigh and grimacing. “This *is* small,” he maintained. “Baby, I’m the next tai-youkai . . . There are certain people I’m expected to invite . . .”

“You really don’t have to remind me of that,” she bit out. “Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“Kitty . . .”

“No . . . you’re right. Expectations . . . you’re right.”

“I can ask her to cut some people,” he offered. Sydnie could sense his discomfort at the idea of asking any such thing.

“Don’t you see anything wrong with that list other than the number of guests?”

Bas read the list again. “Uh . . . well . . . we don’t have to ask the generals . . . Ben, probably. He’s an old family friend, but the rest of these people – most of them – are family, and –”

“You don’t get it, do you?”

“I guess I don’t.”

She sighed, gripping her temples and rubbing furiously to dispel the pounding in her skull that was growing steadily harder to ignore. “Like I said: just forget it.”

“Baby, I can’t read your mind.”

She shot him a consternated glance before heading for the staircase that led to the loft. “Can’t we just . . . we could go to Vegas. They do quickie-weddings all the time, right?”

Bas caught her shoulder and forced her to look at him. “Sydnie . . . my mom and dad . . . they’ve been looking forward to this, you know?”

“Your dad,” she mumbled, eyes narrowing dangerously. “Your *dad*? That’s it, isn’t it? It’s all because of your *father* expects this, right? That’s the real reason you want this stupid wedding!”

“No, I –”

"I don't want it!" she yelled, grasping her temples and doubling over in a purely protective manner. *"I don't want this wedding! I don't want to meet the rest of your family! I don't want any of this! All I ever wanted was just to be with you!"*

He drew back. She heard him gasp. Steeling herself against the surge of regret for the callousness of her words, Sydney didn't back down. It seemed like forever before he spoke, and when he did, his voice was soft; sad. *"It's just one day, Sydney. Just one day, and that'll be it; I swear."*

"Just one day," she repeated incredulously, her voice a ragged whisper. *"This time, maybe. I've done nothing but change things about me for you since the moment I met you, Bas the Hunter. How many more times do I have to give in?"*

Bas winced at that, the truth in her words striking him deep. He stood there for a moment, hands clenched tightly at his sides. With a curt nod, he finally turned to go. *"I'll be back,"* he mumbled, taking the stairs two at a time.

'Don't be stubborn, Sydney! Call him back! You're just upset; that's all, and you're taking it out on him – again.'

Sydney flinched but remained silent, unable to do more than watch as Bas stomped out of the studio again.

'How could you do that to him? You ought to be grateful that someone like him wants to be with you; not doing your damndest to chase him away.'

Sinking down on the bed and drawing her legs up to her chest, she buried her face against her knees and sighed. Wasn't that why she'd kept quiet for this long? Because somewhere deep down she knew she ought to be ecstatic that a man like Sebastian Zelig really did want her as his wife and mate. Still the truth of the matter was much more difficult to admit, even to herself.

'You might as well come clean, Sydney. The size of the guest list didn't really bother you, especially after Gin explained that most of the guests were family. What really bothered you was that there wasn't a single person on that list just for you.'

She winced, tightening her arms around her legs as she scrunched up her shoulders. *'If you try to tell me that I don't have a right to be upset about this, I swear I'll –'*

'No, no . . . I wasn't going to say any such thing, but you really shouldn't let yourself think that it means there's something wrong with you or that it's your fault because it isn't.'

That might be true. It didn't really make her feel any better, though, and that was the real reason she hated to say anything to Bas about it. It sounded so . . . pathetic, didn't it? She had chosen to be alone, she supposed. Deluded for so long into thinking that it was what she wanted; knowing that in the end, it would be better that way . . . She'd understood that the price of her actions was death; that in order to avenge her sister, she'd be forfeiting her own life. It hadn't seemed like a high price back then. She hadn't thought that she'd meet someone like Bas, had she?

And the concessions she'd allotted him weren't really so bad. His family – at least, most of them – were good folks. They really had opened their home to her without question and without reservations, and while Sydnie wasn't overjoyed with the idea of the big wedding, she had known all along that Gin was.

So lost in her bleak thoughts that Sydnie didn't hear the door open below, and she didn't notice the intruder until she cleared her throat to draw Sydnie's attention.

"I knocked," Jillian explained quietly, biting her lip and sitting gingerly on the edge of the bed. Her pale blue eyes were tinged with concern as she gazed at her would-be sister-in-law. "Is everything okay with you and Bassie? I saw him in the hallway . . ."

"It's fine," she lied, forcing a smile for the girl's benefit. "It's nothing."

Jillian didn't look like she believed Sydnie, but she nodded. "I've never seen him as happy as he has been since he brought you home," she said quietly. "It's like he's a completely different person now."

"Really?"

Jillian nodded. "Yes . . . he smiles more, and he laughs more . . . It's nice to see him being less serious all of the time."

Sydnie tried to smile. To her absolute horror, she couldn't help the tears that sprang to her eyes. "You think so?"

"Of course I do!" Jillian scooted closer and gave Sydnie's shoulders a quick squeeze. "I just wanted to tell you that I'm glad you came home with him, too. I mean . . . my older sister and I aren't really that close." She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "That's not exactly what I was trying to say . . . I'm not so good with words, you know? Belle and I are close, I guess, but she's always lived in Japan. She comes here to visit and stuff, but . . . two of her daughters are older than me, and she treats me like I'm still a little girl. That's not a bad thing, really. I suppose it's natural, right?"

Sydney nodded though she didn't entirely understand what Jillian was trying to say. "I guess so."

Jillian picked at a loose string on the coverlet, pulling it up and using her claw to cut it as close to the fabric as possible. "I was adopted, you know? Daddy found me in the forest near here. He says that my mother asked him to take care of me. Don't get me wrong, because I love Mama and Daddy . . . I just wonder sometimes . . . and I thought that maybe you did, too."

Sydney didn't respond right away. She hadn't realized that Jillian, with her happy smile and her youthful optimism, could really understand how Sydney often felt. How often had Sydney laid awake at night, wondering what her family had been like; wondering why they hadn't wanted Kit or her? It might not have been the same. Jillian knew that her birth parents were both dead. Still . . .

"I do," she replied softly.

Jillian drew a deep breath and smiled before ducking her head and shrugging self-consciously. "Um . . . I feel kind of silly, saying this, and if you don't want to, I understand, but . . . if you don't have anyone else in mind, I'd love to be your maid of honor," she blurted, cheeks pinking as she studiously avoided Sydney's gaze.

Sydney blinked in surprise and slowly shook her head. "You . . . would?" she asked.

Jillian jerked her head once in agreement. "I mean, I just thought . . ."

"I'd like that," Sydney said when Jillian faltered. "I'd like that a lot."

Jillian's smile was instant and radiant. With a happy little squeak, she threw her arms around Sydney and hugged her. "Really?"

Sydney laughed. "Yes, I would."

"I wasn't sure if I should offer," Jillian admitted. "I was afraid you'd think I was being pushy or something."

"I'm glad you did," Sydney assured her.

Jillian giggled and clapped her hands together. "That means I get to plan your bachelorette party! I wonder if I can convince Gavvie to jump out of a cake . . ."

Sydney couldn't help the swell of laughter that spilled over at that. She'd spoken to this 'Gavvie' just once thus far. The poor puppy seemed to get rather flustered when faced

with other women aside from Jillian. Even blushing profusely any time Gin spoke to him, the idea of Gavin Jamison jumping out of a cake at a bachelorette party was just something that Sydnie couldn't see happening. It had been explained to her that Gavin and Jillian had been the best of friends for years, and in the course of those years, Jillian had always stubbornly maintained that Gavin was her mate despite Gavin's staunch insistence that he wasn't. He was staying at the Zelig estate because he'd opted to transfer to the University of Maine at the semester break and hadn't been able to find any housing on campus.

"Poor puppy . . . I don't think he's over the shock of Sebastian's threats," Sydnie mused.

Jillian made a face. "Bassie *always* threatens Gavvie," she said with a shake of her head. "Even before, when Gavvie was so small . . ."

Which was another thing that Sydnie had heard, too, and accounted for why Bas was so stunned when he'd finally come face-to-face with the young man. After he'd managed to calm Sydnie down enough that he wasn't worried that she was really going to cause bodily harm to Madison, he'd noticed the very large dog-youkai who was sitting in a chair with his baby sister. With a low growl, Bas strode over to the couple, tugging Jillian to her feet before leaning over and bearing his fangs at the younger youkai. After making no bones about what, exactly, Bas would do with crucial parts of Gavin's anatomy should the young man try anything untoward with his sister; he'd glowered at Jillian before grabbing Sydnie's hand and dragging her through the living room into the kitchen.

It had amused her, seeing Bas behaving in such a protective manner toward his sister, even though she had a feeling that Jillian didn't feel quite as benevolent toward her brother.

"Is he really your mate?" Sydnie asked, voicing the thoughts that Bas had mentioned shortly after ensuring that Gavin had a healthy respect for the next tai-youkai. "I mean, are you certain that he really is your mate? Sebastian said you were four the first time you said it."

Jillian giggled and shrugged. "He is; I know it. I've always known it." Her smile faltered but didn't disappear, and she sighed. "If I could just convince him, I'd be one step ahead of the game."

Sydnie nodded slowly, wishing she could offer the girl a modicum of reassurance. As it was, she didn't know the situation well enough to do that, so she settled for the next best thing: smoothing Jillian's hair back from her face and pasting on an encouraging smile—the same sort of smile that Kit used to give her whenever Sydnie asked about their parents.

"Mama says that if it's meant to be, it will be," Jillian went on, her voice steady despite the hint of sadness lingering in her gaze. "What's that old song say? '*You can't hurry love*', right?" She smiled wanly. "I wish I could."

Sydney smiled and nodded, unsure what else she could possibly say.

Jillian laughed softly, brushing the melancholy thoughts aside. "Gosh, there's still so much to do, you know? Have you two decided where you're going for your honeymoon? I think you should insist he take you someplace warm . . ."

"Jilli, could you leave us alone?"

Sydney glanced over Jillian's head in time to see Bas trudge up the stairs. His eyes were bright though his expression seemed stony, and Sydney couldn't help but wonder just what he had told his parents.

"Okay," Jillian agreed, quickly hugging Sydney once more. "I can't wait to tell Mama! She'll be so excited! Good night!"

Sydney couldn't help but smile as Jillian stopped long enough to kiss Bas' cheek before flitting down the stairs and out the door, pausing only long enough to wiggle her fingers in farewell. Stealing another glance at Bas, Sydney stifled a sigh. "She offered to be my maid of honor," she explained, breaking the tense silence that had fallen.

"Did she?"

She nodded, shifting her legs to the side and shrugging. "I'm sorry," she whispered, scowling at the coverlet, unable to meet his gaze. "I . . . I shouldn't have—"

"No, it's okay. You were right. I knew you didn't want to come here, and I haven't spent much time with you—at least, not as much as I did before . . . I just thought—" Cutting himself off abruptly, he sank down on the edge of the bed with a sad little smile. "It doesn't matter what I thought. You said you didn't want a large wedding, and I should have explained that to Mom better than I did . . . I'm sorry, kitty. Mom said she'd cut down the guest list to just family and Ben . . . Is that better?"

Shaking her head, she held out her hand in a confused sort of gesture. "It's not that, puppy; not really . . . The guest list—"

"Dad said that if it would make you feel more comfortable . . . he said he'd stay home."

Sydney blinked and smothered a shocked little gasp. She hadn't really thought that Bas' father would offer any such thing, and while she understood why he'd think that maybe her reluctance was because of him, she couldn't help but be appalled at the idea that Bas' father would miss his son's wedding . . . "That's not . . . it isn't . . . You don't understand, Sebastian . . . it isn't about him, and –"

Bas shook his head, stripping off his shirt and unbuttoning his jeans before shuffling over to his side of the huge bed. "Maybe not, but he thinks that maybe you'll change your mind about marrying me if he doesn't go."

"Did you look at the list, Sebastian?" she asked gently, hating the upset on Bas' face that he desperately tried to hide from her. The idea that his father wasn't going to attend his wedding really hurt him a lot more than he was willing to let on. "I mean, *really* look at it?"

"Of course I did," he grumbled. "That's why I talked to my parent, wasn't it?"

"Were there any names that you didn't recognize on that list?"

Bas shook his head, his frown shifting into a darker scowl as he struggled to comprehend what Sydney was trying to say. "No . . . should there have been?"

"*Shouldn't* there have been?" she countered.

Bas stopped abruptly and grimaced as comprehension finally struck. "*Fuck* . . . I'm stupid – really stupid . . . and really thoughtless, too . . . I'm sorry, baby. I didn't realize . . ."

"It's okay," she forced herself to say. "It's not your fault, is it?"

He slipped into the bed and pulled Sydney in close, kissing her forehead and sighing softly as he stared into her eyes. "I'll be there for you," he ventured, giving her a little squeeze. "Does that count?"

"It counts," she assured him.

"I just want to marry you," he said with a bashful grin. "I don't care if we have a big wedding or a small one . . . whatever you want, Sydney. Oh!"

She sat up as he leaned over the side of the bed to retrieve something off the nightstand. He shot her an inscrutable glance then turned to face her once more, holding out a small black velvet box for her inspection. "What's that?"

“Open it,” he told her, setting the box on the bed beside her.

Sydney hesitantly reached for it, casting Bas a sidelong glance before lifting the lid. The polished diamond glittered in the ambient lighting, and she couldn't help the smile that tugged on her lips. “For me?”

Bas smiled. “Well, sure . . . who else would it be for?”

“It's so *useless!* I love it!” she assured him.

He chuckled as he pulled the ring from the foam that held it securely in place, pausing a moment to kiss the diamond before gently slipping the band over her finger. “It looks good on you,” he murmured.

Sydney hugged him, knocking him back against the mattress in her exuberance. “Thank you, puppy.”

“I'm glad you like it.”

She sighed and let him cuddle her close. Her happiness was tempered, though, as the memory of Bas' sad expression filtered through her mind. “Sebastian?”

“Hmm?”

“About your father . . .”

He sighed. “Forget it, Sydney. Maybe it's better this way.”

“But—”

“Listen, he won't come. Even if I told him that you'd changed your mind, I know my father. If he thinks that it's better this way, then it won't matter what I say.”

“And you think *I'm* stubborn?”

Bas didn't even try to smile. Reaching over to push the button on the console built into the nightstand, he shut off the lights in the studio, leaving only the lamp beside him burning. “Don't worry. It's your wedding. It should be the way you want it to be.”

Sydney sighed and bit her lip.

'You should feel bad, Ms. Bitch. You saw how upset Bas was with the idea that his father wouldn't be at his own wedding.'

She didn't even try to argue with her youkai. *'Maybe if I talked to him; maybe—'*

'And you'd do that? You'd talk to Cain Zelig? I think Bas is right. Just leave it alone. You've done enough, haven't you?'

Sydney grimaced as Bas' arms tightened around her. *'I should try, shouldn't I? For Sebastian?'*

'Just be careful not to make it worse.'

'Understood.' Brushing aside the twinges of guilt, she promised herself that she'd find a way to convince Bas' father that he should be at the wedding.

"It's been a long day, hasn't it?" he said with a sigh.

Sydney forced a smile and leaned up to kiss him. "I missed you."

Bas rolled over, pinning her against the mattress as the kiss deepened. "How *much* did you miss me?"

She giggled. "Come here, puppy, and I'll show you."

"Oh?"

She nodded, letting her hands trail slowly down the center of his chest.

And she did.

Final Thought from Sydney:
Now if I can just find someone to give me away ...

Chapter 50

Kissing Cousins

Bas rolled over and leaned up on his elbow, peering over Sydnie's shoulder to stare at the hanyou who did not belong in their bed. Sparing a moment to narrow his eyes on his cousin, Bas gave up without a word and flopped back down, opting instead to ignore the interloper.

Sydnie craned her neck to peer at the hanyou before slowly casting Bas an amused little grin. "Who's that?" she asked, jerking her head to indicate the unwelcome guest.

"That? That's Morio, my cousin. Ignore him, kitty. He'll go away."

Morio heaved a heavy sigh, tucking his hands behind his neck and staring up at the ceiling.

"I don't think he's going away," Sydnie commented a few minutes later.

"Poke him. See if he's still breathing."

Sydnie held the sheet against her naked breasts and rolled over, poking Morio in the side and drawing another melodramatic sigh from him though he remained staring off into space otherwise. "I think he's dead," Sydnie stated, sitting up as Bas pulled the sheet closer around her.

"Hmm, well, I'll get rid of him before he starts to stink," Bas grumbled. "Maybe after breakfast . . ."

Morio sighed for the third time and finally rolled onto his side, leaning on his elbow and blinking lazily at his cousin and Sydnie. "Nice to meet you, Sydnie," he commented before shifting his golden gaze back. "Bas, you've gotta help me."

"I'll help you," Bas said with a loud snort. "I'll help you get the hell out of my bed, Morio."

"In a minute," Morio went on, waving a hand to shut Bas up. "I've got a problem, and I need . . . *her* help."

"Tell her about your boner, and I swear to God I'll kill you."

"My . . . wha . . .?" Morio glanced down at his crotch then shook his head in confusion. "No, no! Nothing like that! She doesn't give me a boner – well, she *might* have if I hadn't met *her* first, but damn it, the only boners I pop lately are aimed directly at *her* . . . now just to get her to *see* my boner, and we'd be in business."

"Her?" Bas echoed with a slow shake of his head. "Who is 'her'?"

Morio sighed dreamily, his statement coming out with the expulsion of breath so that it sounded even more wistful than should have been possible. "Me-e-eara."

"Meara."

Morio nodded, flopping onto his back and grinning in what could only be described as an idiotic manner. "Meara, Meara, Meara, Meara, Meara . . . ah . . . It's true love, Bas. She's my mate."

"Your mate, huh?"

"Absolutely. Too bad she won't give me the time of day . . . but she will."

"She will."

"Yes, yes . . . she definitely will. We're meant to be. I've seen it in the stars. It's been prophesized. It's like . . . *fate*."

"Did your father whack you upside the head recently? You really ought to start paying more attention when you're practicing," Bas added dubiously.

"I like him," Sydnie commented to Bas.

Bas rolled his eyes, wrapping a lock of her hair around his index finger. "Don't get too close to him, kitty. He might be contagious. I'm not sure . . ."

Morio sat up quickly, eyes igniting in a thoughtful light. "You're a girl!" he exclaimed, grabbing Sydnie by the shoulders and giving her a little shake. "You can help me!"

"Help you do what?"

Morio lay back again, this time pulling Sydnie down with him, nestling her in the crook of his arm. "Here's the thing, Sydnie . . . I can call you Sydnie, right?"

"Sydnie's fine, puppy," she giggled.

Morio grinned and nodded. "See, nothing I've tried has worked so far: serenading her, walking her home from class . . . waiting for her outside the library . . . bringing her flowers . . ."

"Stalking . . ." Bas added.

"Not stalking," Morio snorted. "Wooing. *Huge* difference."

"Wait . . . did you just use the word . . . 'wooing'?"

"Yes, I believe I did."

"Wo-o-ow."

"Hush, puppy," Sydnie said, covering Bas' mouth with her hand. "I'm trying to help your cousin—you could take a few lessons from him, I think, on wooing."

Bas snorted loudly and rolled over onto his side. "I don't woo," he grumbled.

"I know," she retorted dryly.

"Anyway," Morio interrupted, "she's just gorgeous, you know? Just . . . Wait! I have a picture . . . wanna see it?"

"Okay," Sydnie agreed.

Morio rolled his hips to the side far enough that he could fish his wallet out of his back pocket. "See?" he said with a dramatic flourish, holding the wallet open so that Sydnie could examine the picture.

Sydnie grinned at the dark haired girl in the picture. She wasn't smiling, but her silver eyes glowed softly in the natural light of the snapshot. "She *is* pretty."

"Damn straight, she is!"

"Lemme see," Bas said, reaching over to snatch the wallet out of his cousin's slack fingers. He scowled at the image and slowly shook his head, moving his hand to elude Morio's attempts to reclaim the wallet. "She looks familiar," he finally stated. "What's her last name?"

"MacDonnough," he supplied with a wolfish grin. "Meara MacDonnough is her name . . . stealing my heart is her game!"

"Stick to drawing cars," Bas retorted with a grimace. "Your poetry sucks. MacDonnough? As in, *the* MacDonnough?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah . . . her father's the European tai-youkai."

Bas winced and let Morio grab the wallet back. Eyes widening as Morio plastered a wet, sloppy kiss on the plastic sleeve that held the image, Bas sighed but refrained from comment.

"Good grief, how many stupid tai-youkai are there?" Sydnie grouched.

Bas chuckled. "Not that many, kitty . . . we just happen to know most of them."

She snorted and shook her head, her disgusted sigh saying it all, as far as she was concerned.

"If I were you, Morio, I'd forget her. Her father's a nasty one, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, but this is totally different."

"How do you figure?"

Morio shrugged. "It's *me!* *Everyone* loves me!"

"She won't give you the time of day, right? That ought to tell you something."

Morio winced and heaved another loud sigh.

"You be nice, puppy," Sydnie admonished, tapping her index finger against the tip of Bas' nose in gentle reproach. He snorted. "You've really serenaded her?"

Morio nodded enthusiastically. "Sure! Love songs all the way, baby!"

"Did you consider the fact that you're tone-deaf when you thought that serenading her would be a *good* idea?" Bas parried.

"Incidentals! I've been taking lessons."

"You have?"

"Absolutely . . . they have 'em on public access television every evening at seven o'clock."

"Good God," Bas groaned.

"I think it's sweet," Sydnie piped up. "Why don't you ever serenade me, puppy?"

"Same reason *he* shouldn't," Bas remarked before turning his attention back to his cousin once more. "Anyway, you've already proven that you're a glutton for punishment. Ian MacDonnough hates hanyous. There's no way on earth that he'll sit back and watch his daughter marry one, you ass."

Morio looked downright hurt by Bas' cryptic commentary. Ears flattening against his skull, he flinched slightly, and Sydnie shot Bas a doleful glare. "Well, *she* isn't like that," Morio grumbled.

Bas sighed. "Maybe — maybe not."

Sydnie carefully wrapped the sheet around herself since she was pretty sure that Bas would have a fit if she ran around naked in front of his cousin even if it wouldn't bother her in the least. She crawled over Bas and ran lightly down the steps, heading for the bathroom.

Bas watched her go before shooting Morio a significant glance. "Look, Ri, I'm not trying to rain on your parade. I just think that you'd be better off forgetting about her; that's all."

"You think I haven't tried that?"

Bas rolled over and sat up, scratching the back of his neck. He glanced over his shoulder and sighed inwardly. Morio was frowning at the high ceiling, hands tucked casually behind his head with a stubborn scowl on his face. "Have you?"

Morio grunted in response.

"All I'm saying is that you're going to end up in the middle of a family squabble if you're not careful, or worse: *she* will. Ian MacDonnough won't accept you for his daughter, and if that's the case, you'll be forcing her to choose between you and him. How fair is that?"

Morio sighed. "Sydnie still doesn't like Cain, you mean."

Bas nodded and stood, striding over to rummage through the bureau drawers to locate a pair of jeans. "Something like that."

"But you'd choose her, right?"

That earned him a momentary glower before Bas shook out his jeans and jerked them on.

"Holy balls, Bas . . . you've gotten even bigger!" Morio blurted.

Bas rolled his eyes but couldn't quite contain the rampant blush that rose to the surface of his skin. "Sydnie doesn't complain about it," he growled.

Morio finally broke into a wolfish grin. "Don't suppose she does."

"Get out of here, will you? I'll come down in awhile."

Morio rolled off the bed onto his feet and shrugged. "Yeah, okay . . . you want Sydnie all to yourself . . . selfish if not completely understandable. She's—what's the word? Ah, yes, a hottie."

Bas chuckled as he tugged a t-shirt over his head. "Damn straight, she is."

Morio headed for the stairs but stopped, glancing over his shoulder as his easygoing smile faltered then disappeared. "Okay . . . hey, Bas?"

"Hmm?"

"Could you . . .? Would you mind not saying anything to Gunnar about Meara right away? I don't care what he says, but . . ."

Bas sighed, his expression foreboding despite the curt nod he offered.

"It's not that I'm afraid of what he'd say," Morio went on, "but . . . Well, you know Gunnar."

And he did, didn't he? Gunnar, in his no-nonsense way, would be more than happy to go into detail as to why he thought that Morio was setting himself up to play the fool. Thing was, Bas couldn't say that Gunnar would be wrong, either. Ian MacDonnough, it was safe to say, was just not a nice person, but as much as Bas wanted to tell Morio that there really wasn't a snowball's chance in hell that things would work out with the MacDonnough's daughter, he couldn't seem to find the words to crush his cousin, either.

"All right," Bas agreed slowly, tucking the shirt into his jeans. "If that's what you want."

Morio shrugged. "Thanks, Bas, and, uh, congratulations."

"Yeah. Thanks."

Morio grinned again, loping down the stairs and striding toward the hulking doors of the studio, whistling a painfully off-key love song under his breath.

"She'll never go through with it, you know," Gunnar pointed out with a grin as he jerked open the sliding glass door and strode out onto the patio with Bas right behind him.

Bas snorted and closed the door after following his cousin outside. "Pfft! You're such an ass, Gunnar, just so you know."

Gunnar chuckled. "Maybe, but you know she'll dump you – leave you standing at the altar."

"You wish."

"Hell, yes! She's better off with me, and she knows it."

"*Such* an ass . . ."

Gunnar's grin faded, only to be replaced by a little scowl as he lifted his chin and surveyed the sprawling yard of the Zelig estate. "I *smell* 'em, but I don't *see* 'em."

Bas glanced around, too, absently scanning the freshly fallen snow. A good two feet of snow had fallen overnight, adding to the blanket that was already there, and Bas grunted, nodding at the two sets of footprints that led toward the old stone stairway on the edge of the yard that descended to the pebbly beach and the ocean beyond.

Gunnar grimaced as he and Bas drew closer to the stairs. Having figured that Morio and Mikio had gone down to the beach, he spotted the darkened leather of Morio's coat sticking up above the blanket of snow. "Suppose Mikio fell down again?" he muttered under his breath.

Bas shrugged offhandedly. "Dunno . . . either that or one of Morio's lamer pranks."

Gunnar grunted.

Bas agreed, really. Chances were good that Mikio had fallen down again, and Morio had done what he always did – what the other three *always* did at times like that: he'd flopped down beside Mikio, pretending that he wanted a breather, too. It had become an understood thing over time. Mikio's balance was bad – so bad that there were times when he'd simply fall down, even if he weren't moving at all. He hated it when the others would make a fuss or try to help him stand up again, so they would sit down – or lie down, as the case was now – pretending as though they were all just taking a breather. Mikio never commented on it, but it was in his eyes, how much he appreciated the gesture that gave him time to regain control of his equilibrium at his own pace.

Gunnar draped his hands on his lean hips and tilted his head to the side as he stared down at the two silver-haired hanyous lying in the snow, both of them seemingly unaware of the cold. Mikio was staring at the thick clouds overhead while Morio had his forearm draped casually over his face. "Nice day for a lie-about, don't you think?" Morio deadpanned.

"I think you've spent too much time in Scotland," Gunnar shot back just before stretching out in the snow beside Morio.

Bas shuffled over and sank down in the open spot between Gunnar and Mikio. "How was the flight, Uncle?"

He didn't have to see Mikio's face to know that the hanyou was rolling his eyes and making a face. "It was a flight, *Nephew*."

Bas chuckled. Mikio was only two years older than Bas and wasn't overly fond of being called 'Uncle', in any case. "Glad you could make it."

"Yeah, well, Mikio's just irritated because the stewardess thought he was cute," Morio added.

"Baka," Mikio mumbled.

"What's this?" Gunnar demanded. "You didn't take Grandfather's plane?"

"He needed them both since he and Toga are flying in later in the week," Mikio explained.

Bas grimaced. Mikio hated flying, not that anyone blamed him. No one in their family was fond of it. The changes in cabin pressure were lessened since the Inutaisho planes

had more sensitive controls, but Mikio, who seemed to have more trouble than most with those changes in pressure, probably felt worse for having made the international trek on public transportation, no less, which would also account for his inability to control his balance, if that had been the case. Mikio didn't fall nearly as much as he used to when they were younger, but flying in general tended to throw him off-balance often enough and seemed to affect him for weeks afterward, as well. "I'm glad you could make it, Mikio," Bas mumbled.

"I can't believe you're the first one to get married," Morio grumbled.

Bas lifted his head to peer over the crust of snow in an effort to see just what was making the dull thumping sound that punctuated his remarks. Morio's boot kept knocking against Gunnar's, and Bas let his head fall back, figuring that it was only a matter of time before Gunnar smacked Morio for the irritating display. "Why's that?" Bas demanded.

"Because," Morio explained in a tone that implied his belief that the answer should have been obvious. "You're a grouch."

"Sydnie likes him grouchy," Gunnar remarked with a snort.

"Too bad she doesn't like *you* dead," Bas shot back.

"It's the ears," Gunnar quipped with an exaggerated sigh. "Sucks to be you, not-quite-hanyou?"

"She doesn't complain," Bas growled.

"I wish I had your ears," Mikio mumbled. "I can't ever keep my concealment on right."

Bas sighed. That was true enough. Mikio tended to wear a bandana to supplement the concealment spell that should have hidden his hanyou ears from unwitting human eyes—at least, he did when he could get away with it—not an easy thing for a corporate attorney. Kagome could have put a concealment on him, but Mikio was too stubborn to let her, and that was one of the few things that Kagome didn't press. Everyone at the mansion was either youkai, hanyou, or mated to one, so the lack of a concealment here wasn't something to worry about. Since Bas could see through Mikio's concealment, though, he hadn't bothered to remark on the ever-twitching ears on Mikio's head. He didn't have to look to know that Mikio was twiddling his left ear—the one that ticked the most.

"Bite your tongue, Mikio! The chicks love the ears!" Morio pointed out.

"You'd better not be running around showing 'chicks' your ears," Gunnar grouched.

"I'm not, but it stands to reason. Look at Mama . . . and grandma . . . and your mom, too, Mamoruzen."

Gunnar grunted since it was a well-documented fact that his mother did, indeed, love his ears, so much so that she never let an opportunity to play with Gunnar's ears pass without indulging herself.

"So the stewardesses were hitting on you?" Bas spoke up, mostly to stave back the altercation that would come from Morio's injudicious use of Gunnar's given name.

Mikio groaned. "No."

"Yes," Morio countered. "He's got the shy act down pat, you know."

"Shut up, Morio," Mikio grumbled.

"They eat it up with a *spoon*, I tell you!"

Mikio reached over and smacked Morio in the center of his chest. Morio chuckled but smacked Mikio back.

Gunnar grunted again and balled up his fist, smashing it into Morio's arm. "Stop kicking me, baka."

Morio half-laughed, half-groaned since Gunnar had hit him a lot harder than Mikio had. "I'm not kicking you, Mammie."

"Oi, you're dead," Gunnar warned.

Bas sighed and shook his head as he listened to the sounds of Gunnar and Morio's little scuffle that basically amounted to little more than a series of lazy punches – Gunnar punching Morio, and Morio retaliating in kind.

"Have you met Sydnie yet?" Bas asked, kicking Mikio's foot to gain his attention.

"Uh, no," Mikio admitted. "Didn't figure you'd like waking up with Morio *and* me in bed with you two."

"So long as it isn't *Gunsie* or Evan, I don't care," Bas grumbled.

". . . Gunsie?"

Bas snorted. "Don't ask."

"What are they doing?"

Isabelle glanced up from the magazine she'd been leafing through long enough to peer over Sydnie's shoulder at the strange tableaux laid out in the yard below the window. Sydnie had been tugging on her only pair of jeans since she had every intention of hunting down her mate and making him spend the day with her. She'd been sidetracked by the sight of him, sprawled in the snow in the yard below with Gunnar, Morio, and a third hanyou who seemed vaguely familiar to her. Bas looked like he might be smiling just the tiniest bit while Gunnar was busy thumping his fist into Morio's arm while Morio laughed heartily, hitting Gunnar back. The third hanyou was fiddling with his left ear and grinning slightly. '*Mikio,*' she realized as a grin quirked the corners of her lips. '*Sebastian's told me about him . . .*'

"Hmm . . . looks like Mikio fell down, and the others are just going along with it," Isabelle explained as a little smile surfaced on her pretty face.

"That's strange," Sydnie finally decided, crossing her arms over her chest despite the amused light in her gaze.

"Not really . . . Mikio has balance issues, and the guys have always been rather protective of him."

"So they're all lying in the snow?"

"Yep."

Sydnie turned away from the window and grabbed her coat. She wanted a better look at just what the men were doing, and she had to admit that watching Bas' interactions with his cousins was something that fascinated her. Isabelle followed Sydnie onto the balcony, rubbing her arms against the clean, crisp air.

Isabelle scooped up a glob of wet, sticky snow and packed it between her bare hands. "I don't think they'll ever grow up," she commented with a soft giggle.

"You grew up with them, right?"

Isabelle nodded. "Sure did . . . I was always a little jealous, though. They were always closer, I guess, being guys."

"They left you out?"

"Not exactly. I guess I got more attention since I was the only girl. It just wasn't quite the same."

Sydney giggled, glancing at Isabelle long enough to see the dog-hanyou breathe onto the snowball she was making before rubbing it between her hands for a little longer. Setting that one aside, she scooped up another handful of snow.

Sydney followed suite. "Sebastian makes the others look like puppies," she mused.

Isabelle laughed. "Bastian's always been a big boy," she agreed. "Funny, since the others aren't really that much shorter than he is."

No, Sydney had to agree. Bas was the tallest, sure, but that wasn't what made him seem so much larger than the others. He was definitely wider than the others, too, and that gave him the appearance of being larger than life. Gunnar, she knew, was only an inch or two shorter than Bas, but Gunnar was lithe, sinewy; strong certainly but lacking the powerhouse physique that Sydney adored. Morio, too, was tall enough—well over six feet tall—but he also tended to seem lankier—wiry was a good word for it. Mikio, from what she could see, was nearly as tall as Gunnar though he also seemed to be the least muscled of the men. She didn't doubt for a moment that even Mikio had his fair share of bulk. Maybe it was simply that Bas was just bigger than the others in every single way that made Bas seem so much more powerful than the others . . . Broad shoulders, lean musculature, they were all fine looking men, but they simply didn't compare in Sydney's mind to *her* puppy; not at all . . . *'Of course,'* she had to allow, *'the hanyou ears . . . those certainly work to level the playing field. They are awfully cute, after all.'* Luckily for her, she was already quite attached to Sebastian. So long as he smiled that bashful little grin at her, she'd make do without the dog ears . . .

"Do you have a puppy?" Sydney asked, forcing her gaze off the men sprawled in the snow.

Isabelle giggled and mashed together another snowball. "A puppy? No . . ."

Sydney lifted her eyebrows, smiling at the telling blush that stained Isabelle's cheeks. "Someone else?"

Isabelle's smile widened. "Sure . . . maybe . . ."

“Oh?”

“I asked him to come with me, but just sort of looked at me then shook his head. Even if he did like me, he probably had stuff to do for class, anyway.”

“He’s still in school?”

Her blush deepened as she tucked a long strand of golden bronze hair behind her ear. “Uh, no . . . he’s my . . . professor.”

“Oh . . .” Sydnie giggled. “Your professor . . .”

“I mean, he *was* my professor last semester. He’s not now, but . . .” she shrugged. “I *really* like him. His name is Griffin . . . Griffin Marin . . . Dr. Griffin . . . He’s going to be my mate . . . He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“You’re not dating him?”

She wrinkled her nose and grinned. “Well, I couldn’t date him last semester. That might have been a little unethical, don’t you think? Anyway, no, I waited until the last day of classes . . . then I strolled right up to him and told him that I wanted a private class in Griffin-ology. Too bad he turned me down flat then, too.”

Sydnie giggled. After their initial meeting when Bas had to pull her away from this particular cousin to explain that she *was* a cousin, Sydnie had to allow, however grudgingly, that she actually liked Isabelle Izayoi quite a lot. She would have figured it out eventually. After all, Isabelle’s coloring was exactly like Bas’ . . . it was simply the shock of seeing him with her draped around him like a second skin that had prompted Sydnie’s instinctive desire to protect what was hers. “Is he human?”

Isabelle ducked her head almost shyly as she packed another snowball. “No, he’s youkai.”

“Not a dog?”

“He’s a bear – a Kodiak-bear-youkai . . . a *teddy* bear.”

Sydnie laughed. “Are you serious about him?”

“He’s my mate . . . well, he *will* be. He’s just a little shy – at least, that’s what I’ve been telling myself. It makes no sense, really. He’s such an intelligent man – brilliant, actually . . .” She sighed, scooping up the snowballs and stuffing them into the

generous pockets of her winter coat before offering Sydnie a bright smile. “Anyway, I think those four are looking a little *too* comfortable down there, don’t you think?”

Sydnie nodded, gathering the three snowballs she’d made before leaping over the banister and dropping onto the ground below right behind Isabelle, who carefully dusted off her hands and sauntered over to the men, stopping when she was beside the one that Sydnie had yet to meet: Mikio. “Having fun, boys?” she drawled, leaning over and tilting her head as she stared at the hanyou stretched out at her feet.

Mikio’s hand rose from the indentation in the snow, snaking around Isabelle’s ankle before neatly jerking her feet out from under her. She shrieked so shrilly that three sets of dog ears flattened at the sound and landed hard on her bottom before scrambling to her knees, scooping together a huge pile of snow that she promptly smashed into Mikio’s face. The hanyou came up sputtering, wiping snow off his face with a good-natured grin lighting his expression. Isabelle ran backward, pulling a snowball from her pocket and whipping it at Gunnar, who had just sat up.

“Holy dogs, Izzy!” he complained, gripping his arm where the snowball had struck.

“Get her!” Morio hollered as he rolled to his feet and darted after Isabelle.

Bas got up, brushing the snow off his pants before straightening up. Sydnie threw a snowball at him, and he slowly turned his head, hand shooting out in a blur of motion as he caught the snowball and quirked an eyebrow.

“Kami, she throws like a *girl*,” Morio snorted in obvious disgust though he winked at Sydnie as he packed a snowball and ducked his head to avoid taking one in the face from Isabelle.

Mikio was the slowest in standing up, only to be smacked dead center in his chest by one of Gunnar’s flying projectiles. “Speaking of throwing like a girl,” Mikio grumbled, methodically packing a snowball and chuckling as Gunnar sputtered indignantly.

Sydnie threw another snowball at Bas. It fizzled out halfway between them, landing harmlessly in the unbroken snow as Bas shook his head and grinned at her. Whipping the intercepted snowball at Gunnar’s head, Bas chuckled at the round of expletives that Gunnar mumbled as he flicked snow from his ears and stooped to scoop up another handful of snow. She bit her lip, concentrating on hitting the intended target, and Sydnie hurled the last of her snowballs, watching in dismay as it sailed to the right. Bas shot her a lopsided little grin before stepping into the path of the last snowball. It hit him cleanly in the chest though not hard enough to break apart. He caught it before it fell and whizzed it at Morio, who spun around in time to avoid it, catching Isabelle and locking his arms around her as he swung her around in a circle.

"Oh for the love of — that was just sad!" Gunnar grouched, rolling his eyes as he packed another snowball and shook his head at Bas.

"What?" Bas demanded, loping over to Sydnie and smiling as she slipped her arms around his waist under the cover of his leather duster.

"You moved so that she *could* hit you?" Morio added, kicking Isabelle's legs out from under her and bringing them both down in the snow.

Mikio shook his head and chuckled. "That's not so bad," he allowed.

"The hell it isn't," Gunnar snorted. He tossed a snowball at Bas, who didn't even try to avoid it as he hunched his shoulders forward, carefully sheltering Sydnie from the flying snow. "You're a pussy!"

"No, well, he *has* a pussy," Morio mused.

"Supposed to *marry* that pussy," Mikio added.

Sydnie giggled, leaning to the side to peer around Bas' wide body. He leaned, too, just in time to protect her from another volley of snowballs.

"They're just jealous, kitty. Ignore them," he said loudly enough that his voice carried across the backyard. He grinned at her then frowned, shaking his head slightly as another round of snowballs smacked into his wide back. "What the hell are you wearing, cat?" he growled.

"Hmm? My jeans?"

Bas wrinkled his nose. "I like your dresses better."

"You like it when I show off my legs, you mean?" she parried.

Bas shook his head. "I'm used to your dresses. Those draw a little too much attention to your legs."

Sydnie shook her head but kissed his cheek, unable to fathom some of Bas' more insane ideas, like this one. "You're a funny puppy, did you know?"

He opened his mouth to retort then snapped it closed, ducking his head and curling himself more securely around her as another bout of snowballs rained down on them unmercifully. "I'm glad they could make it for our wedding . . . doesn't mean I'm not

going to clobber 'em, though." That said, he scooped Sydnie up and pushed off the ground, landing near the patio and setting her back on her feet. "Stay here, baby. I'm going to go maim those guys."

She leaned up and kissed his cheek. Bas grinned, pausing long enough to give her a quick squeeze before sprinting after his cousins once more. Said-cousins, however, were busy trying to bury Isabelle, and Bas zipped past them, shoving Gunnar face-first into the snow, knocking Morio on his rear, and stalking Mikio, who had smacked Bas with a well-placed snowball upside the head in the commotion. Isabelle sat up, chucking a snowball at Bas, and he changed direction, scooping up an immense blob of snow that he neatly deposited down the back of Isabelle's sweater and coat.

She screamed but laughed, contorting her body as she tried to shake the snow out of her clothing. "Back off, boys, or I'll kiss you! Every last one of you! I swear I will! Don't tempt me!" Isabelle proclaimed.

"Now you know, that's just wrong," Gunnar pointed out. "That's like . . . incest . . . or something."

"Or something," Morio agreed with a wolfish grin.

Mikio shook his head, idly toying with his left ear again. "Kiss . . . them . . . not me. I'm your uncle, and that'd be even worse."

Sydnie giggled, slipping her arms around Bas again. "I'll kiss you, puppy," she offered.

Bas grinned a little shyly but chuckled. "Yeah?"

She nodded, and he leaned down to kiss her, his lips cold but warming quickly enough as the kiss deepened.

"Oh, kami! Make them stop!" Gunnar grumbled, tossing a snowball at Bas and hitting him in the shoulder. Bas ignored him as he pulled Sydnie a little closer.

"Well, they are engaged," Mikio reasoned.

"Makes me want a kiss, too," Morio announced. "You'll do!"

Bas broke the kiss, and Sydnie blinked in shocked silence as the silver haired hanyou grabbed his cousin's face, smacking his lips against Gunnar's cheek soundly.

Gunnar growled in annoyance, shoving his cousin away before lunging after him. Morio cackled as he stumbled but kept moving.

Mikio shook his head. "That was . . . worse than Bitty," he decided.

"That was disturbing as all hell," Bas allowed.

"I just don't have anything to say about that," Isabelle remarked.

"I thought it was sweet," Sydnie added.

Bas grunted but hugged her close, watching in silence as Gunnar sent Morio sprawling face down in the snow.

Final Thought from Sydnie:
... A bear-youkai?

Chapter 51

Who's Your Daddy?

"Get the fucking sword up before I hack a piece outta you," InuYasha snarled as Bas spun away to avoid the heavy blade that whistled through the winter air.

Gritting his teeth and wondering why fighting his grandfather never failed to make him feel like a novice with Triumvirate, Bas blocked Tetsusaiga moments before the old man made good on his threat. Grunting with the effort he expended in trying to push InuYasha back, Bas slipped on the snow but didn't lose his footing. "This was your way of greeting me?" he demanded, jerking Triumvirate away and spinning in a circle, building up some momentum that barely moved the hanyou.

"Maybe you'll think before you make your mother worry," InuYasha growled as he pushed Bas' blade to the side and hopped back a few feet. "Fucking stupid . . . You coulda kept Mamoruzen with you, but you were too damn proud to do that, weren't you?"

"Mamoruzen –"

InuYasha snorted, cutting Bas off as he tightened his grip on Tetsusaiga. " – Was trained with you, baka! Just as hella stupid as your old man."

Bas grunted as he blocked InuYasha's sword with Triumvirate again. Bracing the blade with a hand against the flat of it, he tried to hold his ground – no small feat when facing the one that legend had named 'the angry hanyou'. Disengaging the swords long enough to cleave another wide arc at his grandson, InuYasha grimaced when Bas blocked him again. "I was just supposed to pick her up and bring her back," Bas explained.

"Keh!" he growled, hopping back once more though this time he dropped Tetsusaiga into the scabbard. Breathing hard, Bas followed suite, satisfied that his grandfather was finished trying to beat him into submission. "You didn't do too badly," InuYasha allowed, crossing his arms over his chest and giving Bas the once-over. "At least you didn't die."

Bas bowed slightly, acknowledging InuYasha's sparse praise for what it was. "Thank you for watching out for us."

InuYasha snorted again. "Figured it out?"

"Well, considering Sydnie said that she scared the other youkai off with Triumvirate then held it like a baseball bat . . . I sort of thought that maybe there was more to it than that."

InuYasha nodded before leaping up into the tree branches overhead. Settling himself in the fork created by two adjacent limbs, he leaned over, peering down at Bas before jerking his head in silent invitation.

Bas sprang up after him with a little smile, sitting on a sturdy branch and leaning back against the tree trunk. "You took care of the youkai who hired the hit on Sydnie?"

Folding his arms together under the cover of the flowing fire rat haori's sleeves, InuYasha nodded, ears twitching as he shifted his gaze over the expanse of the yard. "Damn cowards, the lot of 'em. One of them broke down, sobbing like a wench. Ryomaru took care of *him*. Anyway, we did what we needed to do. They won't be taking out another contract on your mate."

Bas nodded, pondering his grandfather's claim. After seeing the absolute disdain on InuYasha's face as he glared at the body of Jared Brantley, Bas had to wonder just how his grandfather was able to carry out such a task. "Thank you."

"Keh."

Staring out over the landscape as the wind off the ocean picked up, Bas smiled a little sadly. Something about this time of day – the moments when the daylight thinned and wavered only to be kissed with the slightest hints of tawny golds, of subtle reds and the pastel shades of the descending night – had always touched him, lent him a quiet sort of respect. So many times he'd stood beside his father, both lost in thoughts of their own while they observed the magical reprieve.

"Less than a week, huh?" InuYasha muttered, breaking the companionable silence as he slowly shook his head.

"Yup," Bas agreed. The wedding was less than a week away, and to be honest, Bas wished it was over. While he enjoyed seeing his family, he had to admit that he didn't like sharing Sydnie quite so much. All too often of late, they'd been hard pressed to steal a moment alone during the day. It seemed like there was always something that needed Sydnie's immediate attention, and whoever came to get her – normally either Gin or Jillian though Isabelle had entered the rotation easily enough – would promise to return her in 'just a few minutes'. Funny how his idea of 'just a few minutes' and theirs always seemed to differ . . .

"Too much of a fuss, if you ask me," InuYasha said with a marked snort.

Bas sighed. "I think so, too."

"Yeah, Kagome bought a fucking tuxedo for me to wear. Like I'd be caught dead in something like that."

Bas tried not to smile at the idea of his grandfather wearing a tuxedo for the occasion. "Yeah, well, I figured you'd just wear that," he remarked, nodding at the fire-rat clothing. "I'm not even wearing a tuxedo."

That was true enough. Sydnie, it seemed, wanted to see Bas in his traditional dress, much to his irritation, and she'd basically cajoled him into agreeing to it, too.

"Your old man says that you've taken an interest in those old cases of his," InuYasha went on, changing the subject in the same abrupt fashion that he did just about everything else.

Bas sighed, rubbing his forehead in a tired sort of way. "Yeah . . . There's so many of them, and . . ."

"And you think that there's another Sydnie lost in those files?"

Bas blinked and nodded, surprised at how easily his grandfather was able to completely comprehend his motives. "Something like that."

InuYasha nodded slowly. "She's all right," he finally stated. "She ain't alone anymore."

Something in his grandfather's tone made Bas frown as he lifted his chin and stared at the hanyou. He understood Sydnie, didn't he? On some level, InuYasha knew the loneliness that she had suffered for so long because InuYasha, too, had felt that way, hadn't he? Sometimes it was easy to forget the stories that he'd been told though never from his grandfather's lips. Gin had told him stories—the same stories that Kagome had told her when she was a child . . . the search for the Shikon no Kakera . . . InuYasha had been alone, hadn't he? Ostracized because he was a hanyou, he hadn't fit in with humans or youkai, and after his mother died . . . Yes, if anyone could understand Sydnie, Bas knew that InuYasha would be the one.

"No, she isn't," he agreed quietly.

InuYasha nodded. "And you think that you can help someone else like her? That it?"

“Is that so wrong?”

InuYasha grunted. “Wrong? Hell, no . . . There’s more than one Jared Brantley in the world. You ready to deal with a bastard like him again?”

Bas had wondered that, himself. He had yet to formally ask that Cain turn the files over to him, but he’d hinted about it in the time since he and Sydnie had returned. Cain hadn’t looked overjoyed at the idea of letting Bas have the cases, but he didn’t seem completely opposed to the idea, either. Bas was still trying to figure out the best way to present his idea, both to his father as well as to the remaining generals. As it was, Cain had alluded to the idea of turning over the Canadian region to Bas, and to be honest, Bas wasn’t sure if Cain would think that he was ultimately biting off more than he could chew . . .

But the sense of peace that had surrounded Sydnie since the altercation with Jared Brantley was impossible to ignore. Maybe he couldn’t really help anyone in the end, but he also couldn’t quite believe that Sydnie was the only person who had somehow fallen through the cracks in a system that was made to catch children like her before they were left alone. If he could help to bring a sense of closure to some of those cases, then it would be worth it, wouldn’t it?

“Dad said that being tai-youkai isn’t about being popular or taking the easy way out.”

“Keh! If it were about that, then your fucking uncle wouldn’t be the Japanese tai-youkai,” InuYasha snorted.

Bas smirked. “Even then, it’s our — *my* — responsibility to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves.”

“Sounds like you’ve got your mind made up.”

“I do . . . it’s just . . . it won’t be easy.”

“And it’d be worth it if it was?”

Bas couldn’t help the smile that spread over his features. “No, it wouldn’t be.”

“Then stop your bitching and just do it.”

Laughing at InuYasha’s no-nonsense approach to life, Bas nodded and settled back to scan the horizon once more. “You’re right,” he agreed. “Absolutely.”

“Oi, kitten . . .”

Glancing up from the book she’d been reading, Sydnie smiled as Gunnar stepped into the room. “Puppy!”

Gunnar chuckled. “Is Bas around?”

Sydnie made a face and heaved a dramatic sigh as she tossed the book onto the coffee table and stretched out on the couch, leaning her head on the armrest. “No . . . Is he always so busy?”

Lifting her feet so that he could sit beside her, Gunnar idly rubbed her instep and grinned. “Nope . . . I think his mother told him to stay out of the way while you’re planning this whirlwind wedding of yours. He was outside with Uncle Yasha, but that was awhile ago, so I figured maybe he snuck back up here to hog you for awhile.”

“I’ve lost count of the people in this freakishly huge place,” she admitted, wrinkling her nose and shaking her head as she wiggled her toes happily. “And why do they all look the same? They’re all silver haired and stuff . . . I mistook one of Sebastian’s uncles for Evan yesterday . . .”

Gunnar barked out a terse laugh. “Did you? Which one?”

“I couldn’t tell . . .”

“Yeah, but Evan doesn’t have the dog ears.”

“True enough. Too bad. They’re awfully cute. Anyway, I didn’t have time to see that much. He was coming around the corner out of that room—the one with the castles painted on the walls—”

“Must have been Uncle Kichiro.”

“That sounds about right. I ran right into him. He just laughed at me . . .”

“That sounds about right, too,” Gunnar agreed. “Uncle Kich doesn’t take much of anything too seriously.”

Sydney sighed and fell silent, staring at Gunnar for several long minutes. She had to admit that she was more than a little glad that he'd been at the Zelig compound when she'd arrived. Seeing a familiar face had helped a lot, though she'd been rather disappointed when he'd informed her that he was renting an apartment in Bevelle instead of staying at the mansion. She knew him best, aside from Sebastian, and with the wedding less than a week away, the thought had occurred to her more than once that since she didn't really have anyone else, maybe, maybe . . .

Narrowing his eyes, Gunnar seemed to realize that something was bothering Sydney. "What's on your mind, kitten?" he drawled, his eyes brightening as a lazy little grin surfaced.

She sat up, drawing her legs to the side and tilting her head to one side as she carefully regarded the hanyou and tried to swallow the suspect lump that suddenly threatened to choke her. "It's like this, Gunsie . . . I don't have anyone to give me away at my wedding."

His grin widened as he slowly nodded. "Go on."

Twisting her fingers together in a knot in her lap, she cleared her throat and shrugged in what she hoped was a nonchalant way. "So I was wondering if you would . . . if you'd do it."

Gunnar blinked as his smile turned a little hesitant, but his eyes were shining. "Really? You know, kitten . . . I'd be hon—" Cutting himself off abruptly, his expression clouding over with a suddenness that shocked her, Gunnar looked absolutely affronted as he drew away, as his mouth dropped open in shock. "Holy dogs, no! Why the hell would I want to *give* you to that damned cousin of mine?" he growled.

Sydney laughed out loud, unable to control her amusement at the complete derision on Gunnar's features. "But I'm already his mate," she pointed out.

Gunnar snorted. "Incidentals, that . . . I refuse to believe you're *really* his mate until he marries you. There's no way in hell I'd aid and abet him in that, thank you very much."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Aren't you supposed to be his best man?"

"There's that, too," he admitted.

"But wouldn't you rather be at the wedding for me instead of for him?"

He snorted.

She sighed. "All right . . . If you really don't want to . . . I didn't think you'd pass up the chance to tell everyone that you're my . . . *daddy.*"

He barked out a terse laugh at her reasoning then made a face, heaving a pronounced sigh. "You have a point . . . You're much prettier than Bas is, anyway."

She smiled. "Am I?"

"Kami, yes." He sighed again. "All right, kitty; you win. You realize, right?"

"Realize what?"

He chuckled again. "That Bas'll hate it."

She smiled, too. "You think so?"

"Sure . . . I get the pleasure of asking you who's your daddy; don't you know?"

Sydney giggled and leaned forward to hug Gunnar. He rubbed her back and kissed her cheek before letting her go and sitting back. "I can't think of a better daddy," she quipped.

Gunnar just snorted and shook his head. "Yeah, yeah . . . sometimes being a nice guy really sucks, which is why I don't do it very often." He stood up and headed for the door, pausing with his hand on the handle and peering over his shoulder at her. "If you see Bas, could you tell him I'm looking for him?"

Sydney nodded and wiggled her fingers. Gunnar grunted and nodded before slipping out of the studio.

Amazing, how much lighter she felt. Just one more thing on her mental to-do list, and she'd be all set for the wedding. Her smile faded as she reached for the book again. Too bad she had no idea just how she was going to manage that last thing . . .

Cain crossed his arms over his bare chest, curling his hands into fists and rubbing his biceps with the heels of his hands to keep from smearing paint all over himself as he stepped back and narrowed his gaze, giving the painting the critical once-over.

'It's good, Zelig, but you knew that already.'

'Good? Sure . . . it needs to be perfect though . . .'

He'd been working on it night and day for the last couple days. He wanted to have it finished in time for Bas and Sydnie's wedding.

'A wedding you're not going to attend, remember?'

Cain scowled, stepping over to the painting once more and dipping a size "0" brush into the burnt umber paint on the pallet. *'It's not my wedding: it's Sydnie's . . . It should be the way she wants it, shouldn't it?'*

'So you'll miss your oldest son's wedding? And just how do you think Bas feels about that?'

'Shuddup, you . . . He understands. He's all right with it.'

'Careful of that line, Cain. Your hand's shaking . . .'

Heaving a sigh, Cain tossed the brush down on the worktable and reached for a towel. Shaking hands . . . Taking his time as he rinsed the acrylic paints off his hands and dried them, he glanced around the brightly lit studio.

"You've been scarce the last couple days."

Cain dropped the towel beside the rinse bucket and smiled as Gin stepped into the room. "You know where I've been," he remarked.

Gin nodded, her eyes lighting up as she inspected the painting. "You've truly got a gift, Zelig-sensei."

He snorted and shrugged, leaning on the table as he watched his wife scrutinize his work. "What's that?" he asked, nodding at the white air courier's envelope she held in her hands.

"Oh yes . . . this just came for you. It's from Ben."

"From Ben? Good . . ."

She handed it to him and turned her attention back to the painting once more.

Cain slit the cardboard mailer open with his claw and pulled the file out. As expected, it was the last of the information that he'd been waiting for: the last bit of the puzzle; the mystery that was Sydnie Taylor. As relieved as he was that he had more answers

than he'd suspected he'd find, he still couldn't quite manage a smile. The story wasn't a happy one, as far as he could tell. Explaining all of this to a young woman who couldn't stand him . . . He grimaced.

"Was that what you needed?" Gin asked, breaking through his reverie in her ever-gentle way.

"Yeah," he said, heaving a long sigh. "Yeah, it is."

"She'll come around," Gin insisted. "And for the record, what you're doing . . . I'm sure she'll appreciate it."

Cain wasn't as certain as Gin. Still he forced a little smile and wrapped his arms around her when she slipped hers around his waist. "I'll talk to her tomorrow," he promised.

"Good!" She sighed, resting her cheek against Cain's chest and closing her eyes as he smoothed her hair back out of her face. "I feel for her . . . she's been alone for so long, and been through so much . . . When I look at Jillian and think . . . it just makes me sad, I guess."

"Me, too," Cain allowed, sighing softly and staring over her head at the darkness outside the windows. "I never meant to fail her . . ."

"Of course you didn't," Gin insisted. "You're a good man, Cain Zelig."

He snorted. "Pfft! That and a buck-fifty'll buy me a cup of coffee, baby girl," he grumbled sarcastically. "She thinks I failed her, and I can't really say that I didn't."

"Blaming yourself isn't really helping, is it?"

Cain nodded, drawing comfort from Gin's gentle demeanor. It was one of the things that had drawn him to her at the start. No matter what was troubling him, her sweet smile, her shining eyes never failed to calm him in a way that he couldn't quite credit. He needed that calm more than ever, especially after his last conversation with Bas . . .

"Something else is bothering you, isn't it?" Gin asked quietly.

Cain grimaced and brushed aside the twinges of guilt. '*Sometimes,*' he thought dourly, '*she's a little too perceptive . . .*'

"It's nothing," he lied, hoping she wouldn't press the matter. He should have known better . . .

"Don't you lie to me, Zelig-sensei," she admonished.

Cain shrugged. "Just something Bas said," he admitted.

"Oh? He didn't try to say that he and Sydnie aren't going to get married again, did he?"

Cain chuckled at the agitated spike in Gin's youki. "No, no . . . nothing like that."

"Then what?"

Letting his arms drop away, he stuffed his hands into the pockets of his rumped khaki slacks and shuffled over to the window. The nearly full moon hung low in the sky, casting a silvery glow on the hills and vales of snow that blanketed the landscape as the dormant world rested. "He mentioned looking into the unsolved cases," Cain said at length.

"And you don't want him to do that," Gin concluded. He could hear her approaching him; her feet whispering against the worn wooden floor. She stopped behind him.

"Those cases aren't pretty," he told her. "They're about as ugly as you can get."

"But if he can help, shouldn't you let him?"

Cain fumbled in his pockets for his crumpled pack of cigarettes. Gin made a face but remained silent while he lit one and lifted his face to blow the smoke toward the high ceiling. "It's not that . . . it's just . . . it's a hell of a lot of work, especially for one person. He'd be running himself ragged, and since he's about to get married . . ." Cain shook his head. "He *could* do it. I know he could. I just don't know if he *should*."

"Well, can it wait until after the wedding?"

"I don't know, but it's going to. Sydnie should be his top priority."

"Of course she is. Do you doubt that?"

"No," Cain relented. "Not for a moment."

"Good."

He couldn't help but shake his head when Gin smiled happily and gave him a quick squeeze before skittering toward the door. "I've got to check on dinner. Mama's down there keeping an eye on it, but I need to help her."

Cain nodded slowly, turning away from the window, watching his mate's hasty departure. Gin possessed the uncanny ability to view everything with a certain level of innocence, and in so doing, she invariably helped him to believe that things would be all right in the end . . .

Bas rounded the corner, stepping into the recreation room with a scowl as he listened to the raised voices drifting to him. Stopping in the doorway and crossing his arms over his chest, his scowl shifted into a raised-eyebrowed expression as he stared at the confrontation that greeted him. Gunnar was slouching against the wall with a glass of what appeared to be water in his hand and looking somewhat bored while Morio glowered at him, arms crossed over his chest, spine straight, and an uncharacteristically fierce glower on his normally good-natured countenance. Mikio sat on the sofa, his eyes shifting back and forth between the two, and when he caught Bas' eye, he shrugged almost imperceptibly in a *'What can you do?'* sort of way.

"Listen, Morio, I'm not trying to be the ass here, I swear I'm not, but you really are setting yourself up for a huge disappointment if you don't give up on her," Gunnar explained dryly, lifting the glass to his lips.

Morio snorted. "Keh! Shows what you know – *nothing!* Meara's not like that!"

"And I say the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Gunnar maintained.

"Sure, it does," Morio shot back. "I don't recall Uncle Toga being as much of an ass as you are."

Gunnar sighed. "Her father despises hanyous, Morio. Do you really want to put the girl into a situation where she has to choose between family and you?"

"I'd never make her do that!" he snarled, cracking his knuckles as he glowered at Gunnar.

"And I'm not saying you would, baka, but her father might. Did you ever stop to think about that before you started stalking this girl?"

Morio snorted. "Keh! I'm not stalking her, damn it!"

"Then what would you call it?" Gunnar shot back.

"Not everyone is as jaded and cynical as you are, Mamoruzen. Meara's a good person, not a judgmental old bastard like her father."

"Yeah, well, that 'judgmental old bastard' is also the European tai-youkai. Don't underestimate his influence."

"Thought you weren't scared of anyone," Morio remarked, left eyebrow arching in challenge.

Gunnar narrowed his eyes. "I don't fear him. I just don't *like* him. There's a difference."

"There isn't! It isn't even an issue! I'd never ask her to choose between her father and me! No one would! As for him, you think I couldn't hold my own against him? I could if I had to."

"In what world can you not see that fighting her father would be the same as making her choose? Baka."

"You know, some people actually don't live and die without ever changing their opinion."

"Yeah? You think so? Fine, then, but I'm telling you, you're being a fool. He's almost as old as Grandfather, and while Grandfather changed his mind, that doesn't mean that the MacDonnough ever will."

Morio rolled his eyes. "It doesn't matter, you know. I want to be with her, not her old man."

"They go hand in hand, Morio. Don't be stupid."

"Stupid? That's rich . . . you're the baka who can't seem to understand that not everyone thinks like you do. Just because you can carry a grudge till the cows come home doesn't mean that everyone can or should. Just back off, will you? I didn't want to hear your ration of shit . . . why do you think I didn't tell you?"

Gunnar drew himself up straight and shot Morio a scathing glower, assuming a stance that reminded Bas a little too much of Gunnar's esteemed grandfather. "Fine, then. If you want to be an idiot, what do I care? You'll be the pup running home with his tail tucked neatly between his legs, seeking the comfort of Mama since you can't get it through your thick fucking skull that you're wasting your time on something that will *just – never – happen.*"

Morio stomped over to the window, turning his back on everyone in the room. "Keep your opinions to yourself, Gunnar. I don't give a rat's ass."

Gunnar didn't look like he was going to comply. Eyeing Morio for several seconds, he finally relented, shaking his head slightly before glancing at Bas and nodding. "So there you are."

Bas nodded. "Sydney said you were looking for me. She also said that you're not going to be my best man, after all."

Gunnar chuckled, obviously opting to dismiss Morio completely. "Sorry, Bas. She's a lot prettier than you."

"God, I hope so."

Morio glanced over his shoulder, his darkened mood dissolving as quickly as a summertime storm. "Don't worry about it, Bas. I'll be happy to be your best man."

Mikio snorted, idly twiddling his left ear. "You're not best man material, Morio," he pointed out.

"Oi! What's that supposed to mean? I'm the perfect choice – the *logical* choice!"

"Yeah," Mikio agreed mildly, "if you want to mess up Bas' wedding like you did your own parents' one."

"He's got a valid point there," Gunnar remarked quietly as Bas stopped beside him.

Bas chuckled. He remembered the debacle well enough. Morio was given the diamond ring to hold onto during the ceremony. He'd always had a habit of fiddling with whatever was in his hands, especially when he was nervous, and since Kichiro had spent better than an hour telling Morio how important his role as ring-bearer in the wedding was while Morio's father, Ryomaru was getting dressed, Morio had been more than a little nervous. In so doing, he managed to get his claw stuck in the tiny opening at the base of the mounted diamond. It had taken nearly forty-five minutes to get his claw loose, and during those forty-five minutes, the cousins and Mikio had learned more profanities from the various men of the family than they'd ever heard before or since. "Good thing they were just renewing their vows," he added, "otherwise he'd have ended up married to his own father, and that's just not right."

Gunnar snorted. "Nope."

Morio rolled his eyes. "Give me a break! I was *three*, and it's not my fault the ring got hooked on my claw."

Mikio chortled, tugging on his ear and shaking his head slowly. "You cried like a baby," he pointed out.

Morio made a face, flopping down on the chair beside Mikio. "You'd have cried, too, if you thought you'd ruined your parents' wedding."

"Nah, you're just a girl."

Morio narrowed his gaze on Mikio but chuckled. "The old man said that he knew that having that wedding was a bad idea. I don't get it, anyway. I mean, he and Mama were already married . . ."

Gunnar snorted. "They did it for your grandfather, baka. Aunt Nezumi thought that it'd make him happy."

Morio's grin faded slightly, and he nodded. "That's true," he admitted. "Grandfather died soon after that."

"Anyway, Bas came in here to ask me to be his best man," Mikio remarked. "I'd be honored."

Bas opened his mouth to speak but snapped it closed again when Morio turned on his uncle and started listing reasons why he was the much better candidate.

"I say we give them swords and whoever is left alive can be your best man," Gunnar deadpanned.

Bas nodded slowly. "'Cept Mikio would wipe the floor with Morio."

Gunnar laughed outright since they both knew that the odds of that happening were slim to none. Even if Mikio could fight, he wouldn't. He was far too gentle for that, anyway, and Morio normally spent more time joking and laughing than he did actually fighting. "You could douse them with tuna water and see who gives first."

Bas snorted. "They're already friends. That won't work."

Gunnar nodded, conceding that point. "A battle of wits?"

"That wouldn't even *be* a contest."

Gunnar scratched his chin. "Right, right . . . Mikió's got that down, too. Maybe you should just ask Mikió . . . after all, he did have a valid point about Morio's last wedding fiasco . . ."

"Yeah, but maybe Morio should get another shot to redeem himself."

"You want to take that chance?"

Bas grimaced then grinned as Mikió reached over to smack Morio upside the head. Morio growled and retaliated in kind though not nearly as hard as he would have hit Gunnar or Bas. "Good point."

"What are you doing?" Sydnie asked as she slipped into the rec room and wandered over to Bas' side.

Gunnar was faster, intercepting Sydnie and drawing her into a hug. "Sydnie!" he greeted.

Bas narrowed his eyes at the two. Sydnie giggled and hugged Gunnar tight. "Gunsie!"

"Who's your daddy, kitten?"

She laughed and cuddled against Gunnar's chest. "Why, you are, puppy!"

Bas growled menacingly, wrapping his hand around Sydnie's upper arm and dragging her out of Gunnar's grasp. "That'll be enough of that," he grouched, much to Gunnar's undisguised amusement. "Help me out here, baby. Which of those two losers should be my new best man?" Bas asked her.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Morio hollered, waving his arm in the air. "Pick me! Pick me!"

"Pick you?" Mikió shot back, arching an eyebrow as he crossed his arms over his chest. "What are you? A booger?"

"Pick me or I'll have to sing at your wedding to honor the happy couple," Morio threatened.

"Oh, God . . ." Bas groaned, rubbing his forehead.

Sydnie glanced back and forth between the wrestling hanyous. "Oh, no, puppy . . . I'm not getting involved in this one."

"Coward," he shot back with a smile and a quick kiss on her forehead.

She giggled. "Well, duh, Sebastian . . . I told you, didn't I? I'm a pussy, remember?"

He blushed slightly but smiled.

Evan sauntered into the room, rubbing his knuckles down the center of his naked chest as he yawned wide and watched the altercation that was unfolding. "What's going on?"

Bas shot him a dismissive glance and shrugged. "They're arguing over who gets to be my best man."

"Oh? Thought Gunsie-wunsie was gonna do that."

"Change in plans," Gunnar remarked.

"Don't sweat it, bubby," Evan remarked with a cocky grin and using the pet name for Bas that he'd used as a child – one that Bas sorely despised now. It had been cute when Evan was small and couldn't pronounce 'Sebastian'. Now, though, Evan only used the name to irritate Bas, and Bas knew it . . . "I'll be happy to be your best man."

Bas barked out an incredulous laugh. "The day you're my best man is the day I die," he grumbled.

Evan's face contorted in an exaggerated show of upset. "Ouch. I'd ask you to be my best man."

Bas snorted. "Like hell, you would! *If* you could find a woman stupid enough to marry you – and that's a huge 'if' – then I'd be the last person you'd ask."

"Yeah, yeah," Evan drawled, waving a hand to brush off his brother. "You'll see, bubby . . . I'll ask you when the time comes, and then you'll have to eat that slice of humble pie . . ."

Bas rolled his eyes as Evan strolled out of the room once more. "Pfft! He'll never, ever find a woman who'll be willing to put up with his bullshit," he maintained.

Gunnar shrugged. "If you can find one who is willing to put up with your grouchiness, then I'd say he has a shot."

Bas snorted again. "You're a fine one to talk. The odds that you'll find a woman who can live up to your standards are even slimmer than the chances that Evan has."

"That's entirely different," Gunnar went on. "I don't *want* to get married. Ever."

"Yeah? Bet Uncle likes that," Morio piped up. Sprawled half off his chair with his hand extended to fend off Mikio, he grunted moments later when Mikio bit into his finger that had strayed a little too close to Mikio's mouth. "Ouch, damn it! Did you get your rabies shot lately?"

Mikio chuckled as Morio jerked his hand away and sat back, crossing his right arm over his stomach and lifting his left hand to tweak his ear absently.

"Father can get over it," Gunnar maintained. "I'll find a mate someday. Responsibility, of course. As for marriage? Keh!"

"You're such a romantic," Morio grumbled sarcastically before throwing himself onto the sofa and catching Mikio in a headlock. Mikio grasped a thick handful of Morio's hair and jerked. Morio howled and tightened the hold around his uncle's neck.

Bas made a face. "This is getting ugly."

Gunnar nodded then grunted before stepping over to grab Morio and shove him away from Mikio. "All right. We'll do this my way. Since I was going to be the best man, I get to decide who takes my place." Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a quarter and tossed it to Bas, who caught the coin in his mouth with a scowl and spit it out into his hand.

"Asshole," Bas grumbled, clicking his tongue a few times to dispel the metallic taste of the coin.

Gunnar grinned unrepentantly. "Okay, Bas is going to flip that coin—then he's going to keep it, because I certainly don't want it back after he's sucked on it . . . Anyway, heads is Mikio, and tails is Morio."

"Oi! Why am I tails?" Morio demanded.

"Because you're an ass," Bas and Gunnar shot back in unison.

"Oh. Okay," Morio agreed pleasantly enough.

"Flip the coin already," Mikio interrupted.

Bas laughed and tossed the quarter.

"Well?" Mikio demanded.

"Yeah! Who will it be?" Morio added, chucking a wad of paper at his uncle. Mikio hadn't seen it coming, and it bounced off his head.

Bas lifted his hand to peer at the coin and winced. "Best two out of three?" he asked.

"No," Morio and Mikio grumbled.

"It's Morio, isn't it?" Gunnar speculated. "Just don't let him hold the ring, and you'll be fine."

"Oi!"

Bas grinned. "All right. You just don't want him to be *your* best man; I get it."

Gunnar chuckled but didn't deny it as Morio stood up to gloat. Mikio rolled his eyes and snatched the paper wad off the floor before whipping it back at his nephew. Morio caught it in his teeth and spit it out before flopping down on the sofa beside Mikio and seizing Mikio's face to plant an obnoxiously loud kiss on the older hanyou's cheek. Mikio grunted and shoved Morio away as Sydnie giggled and slipped her arms around Bas' waist.

Bas grabbed her hands and pulled her out of the room behind him. "What's the matter, puppy? Don't feel like talking?" she asked with a quirked eyebrow.

Bas shrugged and grinned. "Let them finish fighting it out. I just want to spend some time with my kitty."

Her smile brightened considerably. "I looked for you earlier," she informed him. "Where were you?"

"Before or after the old man tried to knock the shit out of me?"

"Either."

He grimaced. "Mom said if I bothered you while you were finalizing plans for the wedding that she'd take her Kusarigama after me. I'd rather not see if she was being serious."

She made a face but laughed. "Your mother wouldn't hurt a hair on your head, Sebastian," she pointed out.

Bas snorted, pulling Sydney along the hallway toward the studio apartment. "You've never seen her mad, then."

A/N:

Shikon no Kakeru: Shards of the Shikon no Tama (Sacred Jewel of Four Souls).

Kusarigama: Kohaku's weapon... also Gin's weapon...

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Final Thought from Sydney:

She threatened him ...?

Chapter 52

Making Amends

Cain sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, trying his damndest to keep from losing his temper in the face of his youngest son's perceived nonchalance. *'If he ever took anything seriously, I think I'd die of shock,'* he mused.

Evan slouched down in the chair across from his father, drumming his thumbs on the wooden armrests in a careful cadence. If Evan heard him at all, he would be amazed. Stifling a sigh, Cain rubbed his forehead and counted to twenty, then on to fifty for good measure.

"This is serious, Evan," he finally said, carefully keeping his tone even.

Evan didn't miss a beat as he glanced at his father, cocky grin in place as he slowly blinked and slumped a little lower, stretching out his long legs and crossing his ankles atop the wide antique desk. "You think I wasn't being serious? I was about two seconds from coming."

Cain grimaced. "Spare me the details, you little debaucher," he growled. "Haven't you ever heard of discretion?"

"Sure," Evan shot back, his grin widening into a self-satisfied smirk. "That's why we were behind the bleachers."

"For the love of—" Cutting himself off, Cain drew a fortifying breath and pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes as he felt his fleeting sense of calm slipping further and further out of his grasp. "You didn't even stop when the principal caught you," he pointed out in what he could only hope was a reasonable tone.

"Hell, no, I didn't! I was about to shoot my load!" Evan chuckled. "And may I remind you that you never do, either. I can't count the number of times I've seen your ass, Cain."

"Dad," Cain corrected, "and we're in our own home, so that's not even an issue."

"Relax, will you? You sound like I raped Candy, and I didn't . . . she just wanted a taste of The Heaven—is it my fault that women can't resist me?"

Cain sighed. "Be that as it may, Evan, you've gotten yourself kicked out of school for the next week –"

"As if I actually learn anything there, anyway."

"– And you're in danger of flunking out completely, from what Mr. Hensley said."

"Hensley's a prick," Evan grumbled. "I hate school! It's a waste of time and effort, not to mention taxpayers' money . . . might as well send kids to the zoo. If I can't get pussy at school, what's the sense of going?"

"Yeah, you're not scoring points with me, *son*," Cain pointed out.

"Didn't know I was trying, *Cain*," Evan growled under his breath.

Resisting the desire to smack his son upside the head, he opened his mouth to reiterate just how precarious Evan's situation really was when the curt knock on the door interrupted him. "It's open," he called out instead.

"Saved by the bubby," Evan intoned as he started to rise.

"Sit," Cain commanded. Evan sighed but did as he was told.

Bas stuck his head in the office and frowned. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"In a minute," Cain replied, jerking his head at the other empty chair facing his desk before turning his attention back to Evan once more. "Look. Your mom and I have talked it over, and she's not thrilled about all this, either, but . . ." Standing up, Cain turned around and strode over to the long windows, staring out at the crisp winter morning. The view calmed him, and he stuffed his hands into his pockets before wandering over to the desk once more and pulling two pieces of paper out of the folder lying atop the desk calendar. "We all think you're doing this on purpose – bored, I suppose? Or maybe it's just not cool to do well in school. In any case, Mr. Hensley was genuinely upset when he gave me the results of your examinations and a copy of the answer sheet you submitted." He flipped back the first sheet and held out the paper for Evan's inspection. "What, may I ask, is this?"

Evan's grin widened even more. "It's the logo from my favorite band, RLF!"

"RLF?"

"Yeah! Raunchy Little Fuckers!"

"I should have known," Cain grumbled, tossing the papers down before whipping around to face the windows once more.

Bas coughed. "That's your favorite band? They blow!"

"As do you," Evan shot back calmly.

Cain didn't have to see the brothers to know that, judging from the 'thump' that Bas had just smacked Evan or that Evan was probably grinning like a fool for it.

"You could have passed that test. I know you could have," Cain finally said.

Evan sighed. "I hate school! It's a waste of time! If it weren't for the girls there, I'd —"

"Spare me," Cain and Bas growled.

"I don't see why I have to go. There's so much stuff I could be doing instead of being cooped up all day in that hellhole."

Cain turned around again and pinned Evan with a calculating stare. "You want out of there?" he finally asked.

Evan looked a little surprised, but he masked it quickly enough, reassuming his casual pose in the chair as he scratched his bare chest since he'd shed the garment about the moment Cain had escorted him to the car after the visit with the guidance counselor. "What's the catch?"

"The catch," Cain repeated, satisfied that Evan was finally listening as he sat back down again, "is that you'll have to stop screwing around. You want out? Fine. You'll play it my way, then."

Evan thought that over and shrugged. "Okay, let's hear your spiel."

"Your guidance counselor told me that the state offers a test every summer. If you pass it, you will be allowed to graduate from school. Then you'll spend a year or two at the University of Maine, at least until you would have normally graduated from high school. If you want to transfer after that, fine, but one way or another, you're going to finish school."

"College? I don't fucking need college." He sat up a little straighter, his cocky grin widening even more. "I'm gonna be a rock star!"

"And if that doesn't work out, Evan? What then?" Cain countered.

"It'll work out."

Cain sighed. "Humor me. If it doesn't, what'll you do?"

"Way to be supportive, Cain," Evan grumbled.

"I'm *being* supportive, Evan. I'm also being realistic. Sometimes things don't work out, even if you have more talent than anyone else. You've got to have something else to back you up—or do you really want your mother worrying that you're lying dead in an alley somewhere?"

"Mom knows better."

"Get your BA in whatever makes you happy so long as you get one so your mother can sleep at night without having to worry about you. You do that, and then I'll help you. If you want to be a musician, that's fine. I'll pull whatever strings you want me to pull so long as you get your education *first*."

Evan blinked, obviously surprised at his father's offer. "You don't care if I study music?"

Cain shook his head. "No, Evan, I don't care if you study music. I don't care if you study the mating rituals of the great horned owl so long as it is something you want to do—and so long as you don't make your mother worry about you living on the streets or in some box under some bridge with a guy named Larry . . ."

Evan winced. "Now that was a little low, don't you think?"

Cain cocked an eyebrow. "Did it work?"

Evan heaved a sigh. "Yeah, yeah . . ."

"Then no, not low at all."

"Way to go, Dad," Bas mumbled.

Evan kicked his brother. "Oops. Daddy's boy's got some big shoes to fill there, huh, *bubby*?"

Bas stretched his arms out and offered an exaggerated yawn, smacking his brother upside the head in the process. "Oops . . . Mama's boy's got a fucking big head, huh, *Evvie*?"

Cain rolled his eyes. "If you flunk the test, you'll finish school the old fashioned way, Evan. The choice is yours. Now get out of here, and don't you dare tell your mother why you got suspended this time."

Evan shot Cain a saucy grin and hefted himself out of his chair, pausing long enough to snap a salute at his father before ambling out of the study.

Bas watched his brother go before shooting Cain a dubious glance. "If you think Mom doesn't know that Evan'll sleep with anything that has a—"

"Good God, I think I need to keep you away from your brother," Cain groaned. "It doesn't matter what Gin knows or doesn't know. In her heart, she believes that Evan is a good boy, and I think I'll let her think it awhile longer."

"Evan got a tattoo?" Bas mused with a shake of his head and a thoroughly disgusted scowl. "What'd Mom think of that?"

Cain snorted. "Pfft! What do you think she thought? It says, 'Mama's Prized Pup', for God's sake."

Bas grimaced, shaking his head in dismay, which was much the same reaction that Cain had when he'd first clapped his eyes on the tattoo. "You wanted to see me?" Bas finally asked.

Cain nodded. "Yes . . . I need to talk to Sydnie."

Bas sighed. "You do."

"Yes."

"Dad . . ."

"I have some information for her, and I trust you'd rather have her pardon out of the way before the wedding?" he asked pointedly since the wedding in question was only days away.

"Right," Bas agreed slowly. "Sure . . . Would it be okay if I sat in on it? She . . . she's not going to like it."

"Talking to me, you mean?"

Bas nodded. "Yeah."

"Okay," Cain agreed. "Go get her. Ben'll be here this afternoon, and Gin said that Toga, Sierra, and Nezumi will be arriving sometime this evening, so . . ."

"Gotcha," he said, pushing himself to his feet. Cain watched him go. He stopped on the threshold and scowled back at his father. "I wish you'd change your mind," he mumbled. "Sydnie . . . she understands. She'll be okay if you are at the wedding."

Cain forced a wan smile and shook his head. "It's all right, Bas. It's her wedding. She should have good memories of it, don't you think?"

"Yeah, well, it's my wedding, too," he grumbled.

"It's all right," he said once more. "Besides . . . been awhile since I've spent any real time by myself."

"Dad . . ."

"Go get your mate, Bas."

Bas didn't look happy, but he nodded and disappeared into the hallway.

Cain sighed, his smile fading as his son exited the room.

'That was a lie, wasn't it?'

'Better a white lie than to let Bas feel bad over it.'

'But it really wasn't your fault. You like guilt way too much, Zelig.'

'No,' he argued, pulling the file out of the top desk drawer. He'd stayed up well into the night preparing the documents in the folder. Pitiful, wasn't it? Over twenty years of life condensed down in less than ten pages, all in black and white.

Sparing a moment to scowl at Evan's failed test once more, Cain heaved a sigh and rubbed his jaw. The rows of circles were darkened to replicate the insignia of that band he'd been talking about. Slowly, the corners of his lips turned up in a grin that he couldn't hide. Evan might be infuriating, and Cain didn't profess to understand his son, but he couldn't say that the young man ever failed to make him laugh. Cain was just cautious about letting Evan see that since it usually fell on his shoulders to set Evan straight when he stepped over the line.

Thing was, Evan seemed to enjoy pushing that line a little too much. Cain had pulled Evan's fat out of the fire a few too many times for his own liking, and the hell of it was, Evan would nod and smile, and then he'd go right back and do whatever it was again. The best case-in-point was Evan's interesting friendship with Madison Cartham. Though he'd never mentioned as much to Evan, Cain knew that the two were having sex, and he'd known it for a long time. He'd almost said something to Evan about it before, but knowing his son, he'd do worse things, just to spite his father. It was Cain's considered opinion that if Evan lived through the beating that he'd doubtlessly get at the hands of Madison's father, Deke Cartham—one of Cain's top three hunters—for the discretion, then his son would probably end up taking Madison as his mate eventually, whether by accident or design . . .

He should have known, shouldn't he? Evan had been tested early on. The boy was something of a prodigy with a photographic memory and an IQ that was almost off the scale. After spending a month disrupting kindergarten, he'd tested out and had been bumped up to first grade, which was why, at the age of nearly sixteen, Evan was a junior in high school who was in danger of flunking all because he thought it was 'boring'—when he bothered to *attend* school, that was . . .

He sighed again, patting his pockets for his cigarettes. The pack he retrieved felt empty, and he couldn't help but smile at the note he found wrapped around the single cigarette inside.

'Smoking is bad for you, Zelig-sensei . . . and I fully intend to get more babies out of you before you succumb to cancer.'

*Your,
Baby Girl.'*

He chuckled but rolled his eyes, dropping the empty pack and the last cigarette into the trash can. Gin knew well enough that youkai didn't get cancer . . .

The door opened again, and Bas pulled Sydnie into the study. She looked about as freaked out as it was possible for her to look, Cain supposed. Bas put his hands on her shoulders, and she jumped, glancing back at him and backing up toward the door as he tried to give her a reassuring smile.

Cain cleared his throat. "Sydnie . . . thanks for meeting with me. I have a few things for you. Would you sit down, please?"

She didn't look like she wanted to comply. Casting Bas another worried glance, she let him tug her toward the seats and perched nervously on the edge of one while Bas sat back in the other. Cain opened his mouth to speak but stopped when she launched herself out of her chair and onto Bas' lap, wrapping her arms around his neck and curling herself up against him as though she were trying to crawl under his skin. Bas slipped his arms around her and leaned down to whisper something in her ear. Cain didn't hear the exchange, but Sydney seemed to relax just a touch as Bas shot his father an apologetic glance over her head.

Cain sighed. "You're a hard girl to get information on, Sydney," he remarked with a tentative little smile.

Sydney shrugged almost imperceptibly. "Oh?"

"Yes. See, I couldn't find any information on a 'Sydney Taylor' . . . *Nothing.*"

She stiffened, indignant color filtering into her cheeks. "I wasn't lying," she maintained haughtily.

"I didn't think you were," Cain explained. "But it did occur to me that maybe Sydney wasn't really your name."

She shook her head. "Of course it is! I think I'd know my own name, don't you?"

"Calm down and listen, baby," Bas said in a tone that Cain had never heard before. Gruff yet gentle, he seemed to soothe her with the simple sound of his voice.

Cain smiled. "Anyway, I gave up the search for your name and concentrated instead on cases where the family fit with what you told Bas about them, but that came up blank, too. My head general, Ben suggested that I run a more thorough search for your sister, instead, so I did. Did you know her real name was Katherine? Kathy, I guess, and then she shortened it to 'Kit'."

"Katherine . . ." Sydney repeated, scowling at the name she didn't recognize at all.

"Anyway, that came up empty, too. Ben was reading over some old reports, though, and something caught his attention: a report of a family believed to have been killed in the earthquake that hit the outskirts of Los Angeles nearly nineteen years ago – you would have been two. It was assumed that you were all home when your house was destroyed, but there were never any bodies found, which is not uncommon in youkai situations." Cain grimaced. "We thought everyone had died, including your sister and you."

“Wh . . . no . . . there was no . . . an earthquake?” she mumbled.

Cain sighed. “The family’s name was Tucker, and they were cat-youkai with two daughters: Katherine, age thirteen – nearly fourteen at the time, and the baby, a girl named Cynthia – *Cindy* – age two.”

Sydney frowned and shook her head, unable to understand just what Cain was saying.

“From what we can tell, your sister was scared. Maybe she thought that the two of you would be separated in foster care; I don’t know. In the chaos after the earthquake, she took you and ran, changing your names, I suppose, to keep from being found.”

Sydney shook her head, her face clouding over with confusion, with pain. “She wouldn’t have . . . she . . . *couldn’t* have . . . You’re lying!” she blurted suddenly, the confusion warring with anger that swiftly overpowered the weaker emotion. “Why are you lying? Kit wouldn’t have –”

Cain winced and dug into the file. “Your parents were school teachers. They’d just gotten home. Apparently your sister always picked you up from the sitter a few blocks away. She took you to get ice cream – that’s what the sitter told Ben. That’s why you weren’t at the house when the earthquake hit.”

“Ice cream.” Sydney flinched, shooting Bas a pathetic glance. “She loved ice cream . . .”

“I’ll bet she did, baby,” he murmured.

Suddenly, she shook her head, her face contorting in a mask of stubbornness once more. “No, this can’t be right. Kit said . . . our parents left us. They *left* us.”

Cain held out his hands in a defeated sort of gesture. “Maybe that’s how she saw it, Sydney. Maybe it was simpler for her to say that than it was for her to deal with the idea that they had died. I suppose there’s some truth in that, but I assure you, they didn’t leave you by choice.”

Sydney bit her lip, glancing quickly at Bas once more as she struggled to understand what Cain was trying to tell her. “How can you be sure?” she asked quietly. “How do you *know*?”

“The school where your mom worked was closed down soon after the earthquake. It was old, I guess, and needed to be rebuilt. Your father’s effects were also lost somewhere along the way. The old babysitter, though . . . she had a picture of you. She gave it to Ben.” Cain pulled a fading old photo from the folder and glanced at it. The parents looked young but happy, and the two girls – one nearly a teenager with a smile

on her pretty face and a brightness in her eyes that bespoke a happy childhood, and the other little more than a baby held securely in her mother's arms. With a sigh, he held it out to Sydney. She leaned forward but didn't touch the photograph as she uttered a soft cry. "This is how we know we found the right family, Sydney."

Bas cleared his throat, and Cain glanced up to see his son jerk his head toward the desk. Cain nodded, laying the photo down and pushing it toward Sydney. She leaned forward a little further, craning her neck to look at the image before reaching out and snatching it up, retreating to the safety of Bas' arms while cradling the photo against her chest protectively.

Staring at Cain a few moments, as though she were trying to decide if he was going to snatch the picture away from her, she didn't relax until he sat back, steeping his fingertips together before him. Still wary, she slowly lowered the picture and blinked as she stared at the happy family. "I . . . I look like my . . . mother," she whispered.

Bas squeezed her gently and nodded. "So you do, kitty."

She nodded, nostrils trembling as she tried not to cry. "She's so pretty . . ."

"Yeah," Bas replied, clearing his throat but unable to swallow the ragged quality behind his voice.

"What were their names?" she asked in an almost conversational tone.

Cain didn't have to look at the papers for the answer to her question. "Bailey and Olivia . . . Bailey and Olivia Tucker."

"Bailey and Olivia," she repeated quietly. "I never knew . . ."

Bas grimaced and hugged her tighter.

Cain waited several seconds before speaking again. "They're buried in a quiet little cemetery owned by a local parish church. I have a picture of that, too, if you want to see it. Your sister has a grave stone there, too, but she was buried in a public cemetery just outside Los Angeles." He sighed. What he didn't tell her was that there was also one for her there, too. As soon as he'd confirmed that the baby was her, though, he'd told Ben to see that it was removed. There were some things that she didn't need to see, after all, and her own grave was one of them . . . "If you want, we can have them brought here to be closer. You don't have to decide right away, but . . . well, it's something to think about."

"When is my birthday?" she asked suddenly.

Cain frowned but looked at the documentation. "August 28, 2036."

"So I *am* twenty . . ."

Bas chuckled. "I guess you are."

She didn't respond as she stared at the photograph with a childlike sense of awe in her expression.

Sighing, he braced himself to move on to the less pleasant parts of the meeting. "Sydnie, there's something else."

"Hmm?" she replied absently, unable to take her eyes off the picture, and Cain had to wonder if she heard him at all.

"It's about your pardon."

That got her attention quickly enough. Sitting up straight, she swallowed hard and shook her head. "I thought you said that I could be."

Cain nodded. "Yes, but . . . you have to swear to me that you will never, ever take it upon yourself to mete out justice."

She blinked and nodded. "I won't . . ."

Cain sighed, pulling out the paper that had the official decree. It was easier years ago, before they started keeping better records. Just a formality and a lot of paperwork . . . He wrinkled his nose. "I understand why you felt you had to do what you did, and I acknowledge that I should have helped you more. I should have found you and took care of you, and I'm . . . I'm sorry that I didn't. However . . . If you were to do something like this again, I couldn't just ignore it. If you did . . . I don't always get to choose what is easier or nicer for me. Just because you're with Bas . . ." Cain trailed off, hating the thoughts that he had to put into words; hating that he had to make her understand the seriousness of the situation. "You're the mate of the next North American tai-youkai – my heir, but before that, he is my *son*. I trust you with his life. Do you understand?"

"I understand," she whispered.

"Good." Cain stood up and came around the desk, handing the folder to Bas. "I'll leave you two alone now. That's all I wanted to see you about." He started for the door then stopped. "I hope your wedding is as beautiful as ours was, Sydnie."

Striding out into the hallway, he heaved a sigh of relief and strode down the hallway toward the back doors that led onto the patio. He needed some space, some distance to square things in his mind once more. Talking to Sydnie had been one of the most difficult things he'd done in quite some time. Maybe someday she'd understand.

Her voice stopped him as he reached for the handle. Soft but clear, her voice was, and he could feel her youki closing in though he didn't turn to face her.

"I was wondering," she began haltingly, "you should be at the wedding, shouldn't you? Sebastian . . . he wants you there . . . and I . . . I do, too."

"You . . . do?"

She sighed. "You're his father. I'd . . . I'd want *my* father to be there."

Cain slowly turned to face her, his smile hesitant but genuine. "I'd be honored to attend your wedding, Sydnie."

She didn't smile, but he could see the hesitation diminishing in her gaze. Finally she nodded before hurrying back down the hallway and rounding the corner into his study.

Cain's smile brightened as he opened the door and stepped outside, positive and heartily relieved that his son had done well in choosing a mate.

*Final Thought from Sydnie:
Cindy ... Tucker ...?*

Chapter 53

Sunset

“Damn, kitten. Your hands are freezing,” Gunnar complained.

Sydney managed a weak little giggle and smoothed her dress. “I knew I should have tried harder to talk the puppy into eloping,” she complained.

“What? And take away my chance to –” he coughed delicately, “– be your daddy? I don’t think so.”

“How do I look?” she asked, stepping back and holding her hands out before turning around slowly so that he could get the full effect.

Gunnar sighed. “Tell me again: *why* are you marrying my baka cousin when you’d be so much happier with me?”

Sydney giggled again, and this one sounded much more natural. “Because he’s my puppy!”

“I’ll be your puppy,” he informed her.

She rolled her eyes, fussing with the hem of the short white gown she’d chosen. “You wouldn’t roll over for me, Gungie, and you know it.”

“Well . . . you’ll never know, will you?”

“*Ri-i-i-ight.*”

“I could be persuaded,” he went on. “Mutually beneficial – the perfect sort of relationship.”

“Oh? And where’s that girl you brought with you?”

Gunnar chuckled. “She’s around here, somewhere . . . I left her with Evan.”

“And you’re not afraid that he’ll try to charm the pants off her?”

“Oh, he’ll *try*. She doesn’t make a habit of sleeping with pups, though.”

"Is this the same girl you were seeing when we first got here?"

"No." Gunnar flicked a non-existent bit of lint off the immaculate sleeve of his traditional garments. All white with black embroidery on his shoulders and sleeves, she'd been told that his clothing looked almost identical to Sesshoumaru and Toga's. She wrinkled her nose. "How many stinking tai-youkai and wanna-be tai-youkai are in this family?" she grouched, leaning her head to the side to fasten one of the diamond earrings Bas had given her the night before.

"Ask me no questions; I'll tell you no lies, Sydnie," Gunnar quipped.

"That many?" she concluded, unable to keep the hint of horror out of her tone.

"Yes."

"Disgusting."

"Not too late to back out," he reminded her.

She rolled her eyes. "Well *if* I left Sebastian, it certainly wouldn't be for another tai-youkai."

Gunnar laughed and checked his watch. Sydnie laughed since the timepiece looked completely out of place with the ceremonial garb he sported. "It's about that time, kitty. You sure you want to do this? My car's parked in a strategic place: perfect for the quick getaway . . ."

"I'm sure," she replied with a nervous little giggle. "I'm ready."

Jillian hurried over to her, her pretty face bright with an anxious sort of excitement, carefully hugging Sydnie while trying to keep from mussing either of their dresses. Gin hadn't seemed very happy about Sydnie's choice of dress for Jillian since it was almost exactly the same as the bride's gown. In fact, the only real difference was the lack of embroidery around the hem of the skirt on Jillian's dress and the color since Jillian's was a light champagne colored silk. Still, Sydnie liked the overall effect and smiled.

"You look fantastic," the girl insisted, holding Sydnie by the shoulders and giving her the critical once-over. "Wow, Madison really did an awesome job with your hair, didn't she?"

Sydnie nodded, glancing quickly at the full length mirror. Hair swept up and away from her face and cascading from the pearl hair pins adorned with fine iridescent

sprays that reminded Sydnie of fiber-optic wires that lit up and glowed in those tacky lamps that were always glowing in the store window of an electronics store back in Los Angeles. She didn't wear a veil, and the silk dress wasn't fancy. Cut in the front to the length of most of her miniskirts, the hem was cut diagonally, almost touching the floor at her ankles with a soft trim of tiny embroidered leaves in pine green – Bas' color. It was the only embellishment on the form-fitting garment.

"I can't believe Cain let Bas sneak in last night," Gunnar grumbled. "All but opened the door for him, I'd say."

Sydnie fiddled with the compact in her hand, using the brush to touch up her gloss as a secretive little smile toyed at the corners of her lips.

Deciding that neither one of them actually wanted a bachelor or bachelorette party, the couple had opted instead to let Gin and Cain host an informal dinner with the immediate family, and while Sydnie was still quite sure that the actual term 'immediate family' wasn't supposed to include aunts and uncles, second cousins and his mother's brother's best friend's uncle, twice-removed.

She giggled. *'Okay, so that last part was a bit of an exaggeration,'* she allowed. *'It seemed like it, though . . .'*

The evening had gone well, all things considered. Sydnie still wasn't completely comfortable around Cain Zelig. Bas had laughed at her when she'd told him that she thought that his father was far too intimidating for her comfort.

"Wait . . . so you think my dad is . . . intimidating? My dad?" Bas asked incredulously.

"Yes, puppy. Far more intimidating than you are."

Bas looked extremely amused, his golden gaze brightened with barely contained laughter. "Really."

"Why is that funny?" she demanded, unable to keep the little scowl off her face.

"Because," he explained, *"most people think that I'm more intimidating than he is."*

Sydnie wrinkled her nose. "That's ridiculous. Of course you're not! You're just a puppy!"

Bas had merely snorted at that but let the subject drop as Gunnar sauntered toward them. "Come on, Bas. You're coming home with me for the night."

"What?" she interrupted, grabbing Bas' arm as an instant and fierce surge of panic swept through her. "No!"

Gunnar chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Come on, kitten. It's just for one night. You can have him back tomorrow – and I don't think anyone else would care, either."

Sparing a moment to glower at Gunnar before turning a pleading eye on her mate. "You promised, Sebastian! You swore that we'd never be separated again."

He grimaced. "I know, baby. They say it's bad luck for me to see you before the wedding, is all."

She shook her head. "Bad luck? Bad luck is leaving me here alone," she mumbled.

"It's just for one night, Sydnie. After tomorrow –"

"You said that before," she grumbled. "I don't want to stay here alone."

"It'll be fine," he insisted though she could tell from his tone that he wasn't any happier about it than she was. That didn't really help. All she wanted to do was to curl up with him; not lay awake all night, wondering whether or not he missed her as much as she missed him . . .

"You promised," she whispered, tugging his arm as she tried to make him understand.

Bas grimaced, the guilt that marred his features twisting her stomach unmercifully. "I know I did . . . if I could stay, you know I would."

"But you gave your word," she reminded him, pouting petulantly as she crossed her arms over her chest and shifted her gaze to the side. "You said you wouldn't let anyone separate us ever."

He sighed. "I know, but it's a tradition –"

"A stupid tradition," she shot back.

" – And my mother insists that traditions be upheld."

"You can't leave me here, alone," she hissed. "You can't!"

"Don't you think it's time to get moving?" Cain interrupted, clapping a hand on his son's shoulder.

Bas shot his father an irritated scowl as Gunnar stood back with an entirely amused grin on his face. "I was," he grumbled. "Give me a minute."

Cain nodded, pinning Bas with an inscrutable expression, like he was trying to tell Bas something that Sydnie didn't quite grasp. "Yes, well, there'll be time enough for that later – and don't even think about trying to sneak back in. I'll be watching, you know."

"I know; I know," Bas replied.

"I trust, though, that it's too cold to be trying to sneak in windows," Cain remarked then shrugged. "See you at the wedding, son."

Bas stared at his father's retreating form as he made his way back over to Gin's side. A slow grin surfaced, and he chuckled as he pulled Sydnie into a reassuring hug. "You look tired, kitty. Why don't you go on to bed?"

She snorted, resisting the powerful urge to lean against him.

"Oh, and Sydnie?"

"What?"

His grin widened. "Make it easy for me, will you?"

She shook her head in confusion. "What?"

He chuckled and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Just make sure that the sliding door is unlocked."

Sydnie giggled as the memory faded. True enough, she'd barely had time to lock the studio door when he'd tapped lightly on the glass balcony door. They'd cuddled well into the night, and when Gin knocked on the door only to find the groom sleeping with the bride-to-be, she'd shooed him out of the room with a long string of dire invectives about bad luck and starting things off on the wrong foot. Sydnie had laughed as Bas shot her a longsuffering look.

Now, though, she hadn't seen him since the unceremonious discovery, and she couldn't help but wish that the entire thing were over.

"Come on, kitten. Time to go."

Sydnie blinked and nodded, slipping her hand under Gunnar's elbow. "You look great," he murmured as Jillian opened the door and stepped out into the church foyer. The building was small but quaint; the perfect setting for a more intimate wedding, and Sydnie took comfort in the aged chapel. The very stones under her feet seemed to whisper to her, and she shot a nervous glance at Gunnar before pressing a hand to her

belly to steady her nerves. Jillian slipped a bouquet of creamy off-white roses into her hand and kissed the air beside her cheek before skittering over to wrap her arm under Morio's elbow. He turned to wink at her as the double doors were pulled open before straightening his back and escorting Jillian down the aisle in a rustle of slate blue silk. His ceremonial clothes reminded her of the peculiar crimson clothing that InuYasha seemed to favor though since his arrival at the Zelig estate, she'd seen him dressed in more modern apparel, even if the jeans and almost archaic-looking wrap-around off-white shirts that he had worn weren't exactly the height of fashion. Bas had told her one night that they were the kind of shirts normally worn under traditional Japanese haoris, and she nodded. They seemed to fit InuYasha's personality somehow . . .

She couldn't see Sebastian. The church was lit with hundreds of white candles, but the light didn't reach the darkened forms standing before the altar. Tamping down the sudden and vicious need to see him; to see his face, she bit her lip and willed the music signaling her entrance to start.

The ambient trill of the two pianos' dulcet tones seemed as gentle and perfect as the hush that had fallen over the assembly of guests. Sydnie smiled to herself as Gunnar led her forward past the first instrument that had been set up just inside the double doors. Evan, it seemed, had been convinced to wear a shirt for the occasion. He peered under the raised lid of the white baby grand piano and winked at Sydnie without missing a note. He wore his classic garb – clothing very much like Gunnar's – though his was black with metallic reddish-brown embroidery that looked completely out of place with the diamond nose stud and the glittering golden earrings that rimmed his left ear. A metal studded black leather dog collar completed his ensemble, and Sydnie had to bite her cheek to keep from laughing outright since she had a feeling that Evan had worn that to completely irritate Bas.

Faces were lost in a blur as Sydnie moved forward. Gunnar leaned down to whisper to her, and when he did, she laughed. "Who's your daddy, kitten?"

Shooting him a quick glance, she couldn't help the gales of laughter that spilled from her lips. Whether he had sensed the nerves that tied her stomach in nervous knots or because he simply wanted to make her laugh, she wasn't sure. Either way, she was grateful for the gentle reminder that her wedding day should be filled with laughter. "You are, of course!" she whispered back.

Gunnar chuckled, too.

Sebastian's uncle, Kichiro closed his eyes and inclined his head in an abbreviated bow as she passed the second baby grand piano that stood at the head of the small chapel. She smiled at him and drew a deep breath before turning her gaze to the man she was about to marry.

Bas looked calm enough, but she could feel the anxiety tingeing his youki. The black silk of his traditional garb served as a stark contrast to the brightness that glowed behind his eyes. The gold clasps that held the pine green cape on his shoulders glinted in the wan light, but the flash of light that glimmered off the pewter keychain – the moon and the dog – dangling from the end-cap of Triumvirate’s hilt offered her a semblance of comfort that she sorely needed.

Gunnar ignored Bas’ hand that he held out for Sydnie, kissing her cheek and squeezing her cold hands before casting Bas a condescending glower as he put her hand on Bas’ and stepped back.

“You look beautiful, kitty,” he whispered.

Sydnie tried not to blush. “You don’t look so bad, yourself.”

“You ready to get this over with?”

She nodded, and he finally smiled.

“Welcome to the family, Sydnie,” Gin remarked as she hugged her new daughter-in-law. Bas grinned as Sydnie shot him an amused glance and hugged Gin back. “You look lovely!”

“Thank you,” Sydnie murmured, nodding her thanks as Gunnar slipped a glass of champagne into her hand in passing.

“I can’t believe she married you,” he complained, eyeing Bas rather dubiously.

Bas shrugged. “Of course she married me. Why wouldn’t she?”

“No reason. I just thought she’d figure out that you’re as dull as dishwater, is all.”

“Careful, Mamoruzen.”

“Yes, well . . .”

“She wouldn’t have wanted to be with you, anyway.”

“Oh?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?”

Bas grinned. “It’s bad enough she’s married to the next North American tai-youkai. You really think that she’d want to be the Inu no Taisho’s granddaughter, even if it is only by marriage?”

“That’s true,” Gunnar confessed. “Damn.”

Standing across the room, Gunnar’s sister, Charity was talking to Ben with her hand on his forearm while he leaned down to better hear her. Bas nodded at them. “What do you make of that?” he mused mildly.

Gunnar followed the direction of Bas’ attention and frowned. “No idea,” he remarked. “Ben’s probably just humoring her.”

Bas shrugged again. “I don’t know, Gunnar . . . she’s *touching* him.”

Gunnar snorted. “Keh! That doesn’t mean anything. I think Evan turned up the band’s amplifiers.”

Bas rolled his eyes but nodded. In the course of a couple of hours, the band that had been hired to entertain during the reception had become increasingly loud. Come to think of it, he had seen Evan over there talking to the guys during one of the breaks. He shook his head but smiled. “So who is she?” Bas commented, jerking his head toward Gunnar’s date – a swan-youkai he had introduced as Belinda Marmoutte – who was chatting away with Sesshoumaru Inutaisho at the moment.

Gunnar glanced over and shrugged. “Isabelle introduced us.”

“Did she?”

He shrugged again. “She’s a medical student in Izzy’s class.”

“Yeah, okay. Why did you bring her along if you weren’t going to spend any time with her?”

Gunnar rolled his eyes but jerked his head toward another couple: his parents. “I’ve spent time with her,” he remarked rather airily. “Just because she doesn’t hang all over me doesn’t mean we aren’t compatible.”

"Compatible?" Bas echoed, judiciously hiding his amusement behind his champagne flute. "Compatible, how?"

Gunnar shrugged despite the wolfish grin he tried to hide behind his champagne flute. "In the only way that matters, Bastian."

Bas rolled his eyes. "Mate material?"

Gunnar snorted. "Keh! No."

"Ah, but your mother and father look so hopeful."

"Bite your tongue, Bas-tard. Father knows that I'll do that when the time comes. As for mother? When *doesn't* she worry about my marital status – and the need to produce an heir?"

Bas did chuckle at the absolute revulsion writ in his cousin's expression. "Your disdain for children is completely unnatural," he pointed out.

Gunnar snorted. "I don't *dislike* children," he countered. "I just don't *like* them – at least, not until they're older."

"You don't, huh? Then why do you get that panicked look on your mug every time you're faced with a baby?"

"I don't *panic*," he grumbled. "They're just . . . loud . . . and they smell weird."

"They're *babies*," Bas remarked acerbically.

"Just because you've succumbed to the overwhelming desire to be someone's bitch doesn't mean that *I* will," Gunnar shot back.

Bas rolled his eyes. "You have such a colorful way with words."

"Don't I?"

That earned Gunnar a marked snort. Gunnar slapped Bas' shoulder and wandered off toward Morio and Mikio, who were sitting at a table nearby.

"Now *that* doesn't look good," Cain commented as he stopped beside Bas. Following the direction of his father's gaze, Bas grimaced and handed the champagne flute over to

a passing waiter as he watched Evan talk to the band members. Waving his arms in an exaggerated gesture, Evan pointed at the stage then draped his hands on his lean hips.

"Fifty bucks says he'll sing something entirely inappropriate," Bas remarked.

"A hundred bucks says that your mother won't catch it," Cain added.

"You're on."

Cain shook his hand, and they both stood back, crossing their arms over their chests as they watched the scenario unfold. Sure enough, Evan hopped onto the stage with a shit-eating grin plastered on his face, patting his thigh as he tapped his foot, waiting for the cadence of the music to start. One by one, the guests fell silent, watching the youth on the stage. Evan's grin widened, and he winked at Bas before clearing his throat and glancing at the musicians behind him. "I didn't buy anything for the couple. Thought I'd dedicate a song to them, instead. Sydnie . . . bubby . . . this one's for you."

Bas shot his father a quick glance and waited for the proverbial gauntlet to fall. Gin sidled up beside Cain, slipping her arm around his waist and leaning against his chest with a happy sigh. "Evan's so sweet!" she remarked.

Cain coughed indelicately. "Sweet, huh? We'll see about that."

"Maybe you ought to stop him," Bas remarked as Cain grimaced.

"A song for us?" Sydnie mused, wrapping her arms around Bas' bicep.

"Too late," Cain muttered as the preliminary notes rang through the air.

"Oh . . . my . . . God . . ." Bas groaned. He recognized the song right away since it was one of the ones that Evan so loved to blast on his monstrosity of a stereo system. '*Nailed Her Down,*' the song was called . . . "You owe me fifty bucks, Dad."

"I like this song," Gin intoned with a little giggle.

Cain snorted. "Pfft. You have any idea what this song is about?"

Gin shrugged. "Well, sure! It's about understanding women."

Cain choked and shot Bas a knowing grin since the song wasn't really about that, at all. "And you owe me a *hundred*," he mumbled.

“*Nailed her down . . . licked her cream . . . all night long . . . she makes me scream . . .*” Gin sang along.

Cain’s choking escalated into a terse bark. “Uh, Gin . . .”

She waved a hand at her mate, bobbing up and down on her toes as she watched her youngest son’s antics. “He sings so well!”

Bas stifled a groan as Cain grimaced. “Baby girl . . .”

“*She’s my slow grind . . . the beat of my drum . . . all night long . . . and when she goes I co –*”

Cain slapped a hand over Gin’s mouth before the last word was finished. Sydnie giggled, covering her lips with her hand as Bas shook his head and sighed. “Gin . . . sweetie . . .”

She blinked up at Cain.

He winced. “I don’t think this song is about understanding women.”

She shook her head, her eyebrows drawing together in a marked scowl as his hand fell away. “Then what’s it about, Zelig-sensei?”

Cain scratched the back of his neck and leaned down, whispering something in Gin’s ear – probably an explanation of the song. Her eyes flashed open wide, and she gasped as she covered her mouth with her hand. “I didn’t know that!” she exclaimed then waved her hands though her cheeks were hot pink. “Well, I suppose that’s fitting . . . I mean, it *is* their wedding day, which means they’ll do that stuff tonight . . .”

Bas snapped his mouth closed and shook his head. Cain snorted, trying to cover his amusement as he glanced from Bas to Gin. “Gin . . .”

“Now, Cain, sex is an entirely natural part of life,” she pointed out reasonably despite the deepening blush on her cheeks, “and Sebastian *is* a big boy.”

“*Mo-o-om,*” Bas groaned.

“A *very* big boy,” Sydnie added between giggles.

“Yes, of course . . . he takes after his father,” Gin agreed.

Cain grimaced. “Gin, you remember when I told you that you have a habit of saying things that could be taken the wrong way?”

She shook her head slowly. "But I just said —"

"I know what you said," Cain cut in. "But that's not what you *implied*."

"I did not! I—" Cutting herself off abruptly, she winced and pressed her lips together. "Oh, I did it again, didn't I?"

"Come on, Mom," Bas interrupted, taking his mother's hand and leading her toward the dance floor. Evan's serenade was over, and the band was back to playing something softer and slower — perfect for him to dance with his mother.

Gin sighed and danced with her son. "I wasn't trying to embarrass you," she pointed out quietly.

Bas grinned. "I know."

She smiled, too. "Have I told you recently that I'm very proud of you?"

"Nope . . . are you?"

She nodded emphatically. "I am. So is your father."

"Good."

"And Sydney did take your name, after all," she went on.

Bas sighed. That had surprised him, actually. He'd have to ask her about that since she'd been so adamant that she didn't want to be a Zelig. The best he had hoped for was Tucker-Zelig, but she . . . "Yeah, she did."

"She's beautiful," Gin stated. Her smile faded as she glanced over. "Oh . . . hmm . . ."

Bas looked, too, and stopped dancing, letting his arms drop from his mother as he watched Cain dance with Sydney nearby. She didn't look like she was going to freak out, but she didn't look comfortable, either . . . her fleeting gaze caught Bas', and he bowed to his mother before striding away. "Can I cut in?"

Cain glanced at him and nodded, stepping back to allow Bas to take Sydney's hand. "Take care of her, Bas," he admonished.

Bas shot Sydney a quick smile and nodded, too. "I will."

Cain chuckled and wandered over to Gin. Bas watched him go before pulling Sydney close and kissing her forehead. "You okay, kitty?"

She sighed. "Yes."

"Good. So what did Dad say to you?"

"He just wanted to welcome me to the family," she remarked.

"Oh?"

Sydney nodded.

"What changed your mind?"

"Changed my mind?" she echoed.

"About taking Zelig for your last name."

Sydney shrugged. "Well . . . I guess it didn't matter . . . I never was a Tucker; not really."

"We could have your name changed. Dad mentioned it."

"Changed? To what?"

"Do you want to change it to Sydney? That's the name you know, isn't it?"

Sydney thought that over for a few moments while they danced. "My parents wanted me to be Cynthia, didn't they? I . . . I shouldn't change that," she mused.

"That's true . . . you could always change your middle name to Sydney, though. Lots of people go by their middle names."

"I'll think it over," she allowed. "Your father . . ."

"Hmm?"

She smiled almost shyly, and he had to wonder just what she was thinking. "The painting he did for me . . . well, for *us*," she amended. "It's beautiful."

Bas nodded his agreement. Cain had a rare talent: the ability to see something as simple as a picture and to paint something completely different while adding life to the

still imagery. He'd painted a portrait of Sydney's family, and Bas hadn't missed the tears that filled her eyes as she stared at it. "I told you, kitty. Dad's not a bad guy.

"Maybe," she agreed in a dubious tone despite the hint of a smile that still turned up her lips.

"He gave you the jewelry box he'd carved for Mom for Christmas," he told her.

Sydney blinked in surprise. "He did?"

Bas smiled. "Yeah, he did."

"I didn't know that," she allowed. "Why would he do that?"

"Who knows? Maybe he just wanted you to have it."

She pondered that for a moment then bit her lip. "I should thank him for that, huh?"

"If you want to. Dad probably didn't expect you would . . . I doubt he thinks I'd tell you."

"But you did, so . . ." She shrugged and shook her head. "I can do that later. Can we get out of here, puppy?"

He chuckled. "It's your reception, kitty . . . you don't want to stay for the rest of it?"

Her smile turned secretive, and she leaned up to nip his earlobe. "I think I've had enough of this for one day," she assured him.

"Have you?"

She nodded. "Besides . . . I own you now — *completely* own you. I have the papers to prove it."

"Papers?"

"Yes, and you *willingly* signed them, too . . . ownership papers."

He laughed. "And here I thought that was the marriage license."

She shook her head. "They won't miss us," she decided, glancing around at the mingling guests.

Bas grinned and caught her hand, pulling her along toward the doors of the formal ballroom of the mansion. Sydnie had groused about that before, citing that it just wasn't right to have a house big enough to have a formal ballroom. Bas had rather agreed at the time. Now he was grateful since that meant they really didn't have far to go to get away . . .

"And just where do you think you're going?"

Bas stifled a growl and eyed his cousin and uncle as the two stepped neatly into the path of retreat.

Mikio chuckled. "Looks like they were trying to escape to me."

"Not fast enough, apparently," Bas grumbled.

"Yes, well, Mikio and I wanted to give you your gift before you slipped away," Morio added.

"Fax it to me," Bas shot back, grabbing Sydnie's hand and heading for the door again.

Morio was faster. Neatly stepping into his path, he planted his hand in the center of Bas' chest to stop him. "This'll just take a minute," he assured the impatient groom.

"All right," Bas relented. "Make it fast."

"I think he's serious," Mikio remarked.

"Wouldn't *you* be serious if you were taking off to go have The Sex?" Morio countered.

"But they've already had The Sex," Mikio argued.

"That's true . . . but this is legally sanctioned, completely acceptable The Sex," Morio mused.

"Will you two get *on* with it?" Bas growled, much to Sydnie's amusement. She giggled and peeked around Bas to smile at the two hanyous.

"We just thought that since you weren't actually leaving on your honeymoon till tomorrow morning, we'd help you out a little."

"Help us out?" Bas echoed.

"Yes," Mikio intoned, digging a silver keyring with a single key out of his pocket. He dropped it into Bas' hand and idly fingered his twitching left ear.

"What's this?"

Morio chuckled. "We got you a room at that bed and breakfast just outside Bevelle . . . Don't want to spend your first night of wedded bliss in Mama and Papa's house, do you?"

Bas blinked in surprise. "Really? Thanks . . ."

"Get going," Morio went on. "We'll cover for you till you're gone."

Bas nodded. Sydney kissed Morio's cheek then Mikio's, giggling when his left ear twitched a little more, his face pinking in nervous embarrassment.

The two stood back, watching the couple's hasty retreat. Mikio was the first to speak, a thoughtful scowl marring his brow as he turned his head to stare at his nephew. "You sure he's not going to be ticked off when he figures out what we did?"

Morio snorted. "Keh! Nah . . . he'll *thank* us."

Mikio wasn't as inclined to agree. Sure, it had seemed like a harmless enough prank at the time . . . thing was, Bas wasn't the best at taking jokes well. "You're sure there aren't any side effects?"

Morio shrugged. "Nope . . . Evan said that Mammie told him that Sydney has interesting reactions to catnip . . . It's not harmful though . . . I asked Uncle Kich."

Mikio grinned just a little. They'd rented the room, all right. They'd also gone through and laced the entire place with catnip, even going so far as to poke little holes in the mattress and pillows to infuse them with the herb, too. "If Bas comes after us, I'm telling him it was your idea."

Morio chuckled, waving off Mikio's concern with a flick of his wrist. "Fine, fine . . . He'll *thank* us. You'll see."

*Final Thought from Bas:
Ownership papers ... nice ...*

Chapter 54

Saying Goodbye

“So this is it.”

Bas slipped an arm around Sydnie’s waist and nodded slowly. “It looks like the right spot.”

She shrugged. “That house doesn’t belong there.”

He nodded. “I imagine they sold the land and built a new one here.”

Sydnie uttered a terse little grunt and shuffled her feet against the sidewalk as she stared at the modest house. Neat and tidy in the midst of a quiet middle class neighborhood, it looked completely comfortable, nestled in the center of the suburban lot though gauging from Sydnie’s expression, she didn’t like the place at all . . .

“I wish I could remember the house that *was* here,” she murmured, her face registering self-disgust at her inability to recall the home she used to share with her family.

Bas grimaced, wishing for all the world that he could make this better for her, too. He couldn’t, and that bothered him. In the end, he sighed and draped his arm around her shoulders. “I wish you could, too,” he muttered.

Sydnie shot him a grateful smile tinged with a certain sadness that she simply couldn’t hide. “It’s okay, puppy. It’s just a house, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he agreed with a wan smile. “I guess you’re right.” He nodded despite the gnawing ache that had been eating at him since they’d landed at LAX the night before. He wasn’t sure if the trip was harder on him or on Sydnie. Being forced to stand by and watch as she struggled to find a semblance of understanding in a situation that made no sense at all just wasn’t something that he wanted to do. He wanted to fix things for her – he’d wanted to do that from the first moment he’d met her – and yet he couldn’t do that, either.

“It’s not so bad, I guess,” she allowed, biting her lower lip as she scowled at the new dwelling. “Even if the house was still here, my family is long gone.”

“I’m your family now, kitty,” Bas mumbled, burying his lips in the down of her hair.

She leaned back against him, wrapping her hands over his forearm with a little sigh. "So you are," she allowed. "My puppy."

A middle-aged couple stepped out of the front door onto the porch. They were human, and they didn't notice Sydnie and Bas right away. Talking about the day they had planned out, the man waited as the woman locked the door before striding off the porch and down the sidewalk toward the small car parked in the two-car driveway. Glancing up as he held out the keychain to unlock the doors, he finally noticed Sydnie and Bas and stopped. "Can I help you?" he asked, his tone brusque but not unkind.

Bas cleared his throat, unconsciously tightening his arm around Sydnie, pulling her closer against his chest. "Sorry," he apologized. "My wife's—" he grinned at the sound of the word, "—family used to live here."

The man scowled and shook his head slowly, turning to face them as the woman grasped his arm. "We built this house," he explained.

"Yeah . . . her house was destroyed in an earthquake."

Realization seemed to dawn on him, and he nodded. "Oh . . . yeah . . ." He grimaced, eyes awash with obvious concern as he stared at Sydnie. "I'm sorry about that . . . The realtor told us that the family—" Cutting himself off abruptly, the man reddened as he shrugged apologetically. "But I guess that wasn't true."

"Don't worry about it," Bas said. "They didn't realize that Sydnie survived."

He glanced at his wife. She nodded slightly, her light brown hair whipping into her face. "We were just on our way out for the weekend, but if you'd like to take a look around outside, feel free."

"Thanks," Bas replied. He wasn't sure if Sydnie really wanted to do that, but the offer was kind.

The man nodded as his wife hurried around the car to the passenger side and climbed in.

Sydnie didn't say anything until after the couple pulled out of the driveway. "I don't remember any of it," she admitted with a heavy dose of disgust in her voice.

"You were a baby," he reminded her, giving her shoulders a gentle squeeze. "How could you?"

"Do you remember things from when you were two?"

Bas shrugged. "Some things . . . vague things."

She sighed. "I'd settle for vague things."

"Kitty . . ." He fell silent as she dug into her purse for the picture. She'd bought a melamine frame for traveling at the airport gift shop during their two hour layover in Denver though the one she carried in her purse wasn't the original. Bas had scanned the image and printed it out for her, figuring that she'd want to keep the original in the fireproof safe in the mansion. She'd seemed happy enough with that.

Running her claw lightly down the center of the image, she smiled sadly and shook her head. "I shouldn't complain, should I? At least I have this much."

Bas didn't know what to say to her. She was trying; he could tell she was. He tried to smile but failed, unable to do more than manage a weakened grimace as she sighed again and leaned against his chest.

"I'm sorry, puppy. Pretty shoddy honeymoon, isn't it?"

"It's okay with me," he insisted.

Sydney craned her neck back to telegraph him a dubious look. "We could always get more catnip," she teased though her smile lacked the added sparkle in her eyes.

Bas snorted but couldn't help the hint of a blush that surfaced in his cheeks. "I'm going to kill them for that," he grumbled. Morio and Mikio had thought it'd be amusing to lace the room at the bed and breakfast with the stuff, and while he'd ultimately been the beneficiary of Sydney's amorous attentions, he still couldn't help but wonder if her reaction was intended for him or if anyone would have sufficed. Unfortunately, he'd been powerless to stop her, and she'd known it. They'd nearly missed their flight the next morning because of it, too . . . It just served to prove just how dangerous certain information could be in the hands of idiots, in Bas' opinion.

"Was that so bad?" she asked, wiggling around to face him as she slipped her arms around his neck and arched an eyebrow.

"Course not . . ."

She sighed and rested her cheek against his chest. "I rather enjoyed it," she murmured, her tone tinged with a certain huskiness that sent an altogether nice shiver up Bas' spine.

"I'd have enjoyed it more if I were sure that you wanted *me*," he grumbled.

"I want you, puppy. I want you all the time."

He groaned but smiled; her words – her tone – more of a caress than a physical touch. "Yeah?"

She nodded, hugging him tight as she shifted her gaze back over to the unfamiliar place. "Take me away from here?" she asked.

"Are you sure?"

A soft sigh escaped her, and she shrugged. "This is pointless. I don't remember anything, and . . . and even if I did, what good would it accomplish?"

Smoothing her hair back out of her face, he nodded. "Okay."

Falling in step beside him, Sydnie let him pull her along behind him toward the rental car. He could sense her sadness; could almost smell her quiet turmoil. Asking himself for the thousandth time if this really had been a good idea after all, Bas ground his teeth together and swallowed hard. The feeling that he couldn't help her – couldn't protect her – was enough to drive him insane.

"Anyway, this is supposed to be a fun trip," she went on. "We could –"

"K-Kathy?"

Sydnie whipped around, staring at the woman who had called out to her. She was staring at Sydnie in a state of quiet disbelief. The young boy beside her – no more than three years old – hopped up and down, tugging on her hand. "Excuse me?" Sydnie said.

The woman shook her head. "Kathy?" Her scowl deepened. "You're not Kathy, are you? I-I'm sorry . . . I just thought . . ."

"No, I'm Syd – Cindy," Sydnie replied. "Kathy? My sister . . . I think her name was Katherine."

The brightening in the woman's eyes was a painful thing. Bas stepped around the car and slipped an arm around Sydnie's waist. "Tucker? Kathy Tucker . . ." She gasped softly, her hand shooting up to flutter over her lips as her eyes widened. "Cindy . . ."

you're the baby!" She laughed suddenly, as though everything finally made sense. "Kathy always said you were *her* baby . . ."

He could feel Sydnie stiffen beside him. "She . . . she did?"

"Yep . . . she always said that she told her mom and dad that she wanted a baby, and they had you."

Sydnie shook her head. "I'm sorry . . . who are you?"

"Oh! I'm Jocelyn . . . Milner now. It used to be Halsey."

Sydnie didn't recognize the name. "I see. This is my puppy, Sebastian."

Bas wrinkled his nose but nodded. "Pleased to meet you."

Jocelyn looked a little confused at Sydnie's choice of words but let it go. "Likewise." She shook her head, a confused scowl marring her features. "They said you . . . but you obviously didn't . . ."

"Kit and I weren't there," Sydnie replied, and Bas had to wonder if she even realized the strange introduction she'd given.

The relief on Jocelyn's face was immediate and intense as tears filled her eyes but didn't spill over. "Thank God . . ."

"How well did you know my sister?" Sydnie went on.

"Kathy was my best friend."

Sydnie shot Bas a quick glance, her eyes clouded with her upset at not being able to remember this friend – or maybe it was something else . . . "Kit – Kathy – she died."

"D-died . . .? Oh . . . I'm so sorry . . ."

Sydnie bit her lip, offering the woman an apologetic sort of look. "That's all right . . . It was a long time ago."

That didn't seem to make Jocelyn feel any better, but she tried to smile. "My mother will be so surprised when I tell her . . . she used to babysit you during the day."

"She did?"

"Grandma?" the boy piped up, tugging on his mother's hand again. "Grandma *sat* on babies?"

Jocelyn rolled her eyes but laughed. "No, Travis . . . It's a word meaning that she watched babies while their parents were working."

"You don't work," he said with a frown.

Jocelyn smiled. "No, I don't. Daddy does." She took his hand and laughed softly. "This is my son. He's very inquisitive."

"Twavis," he said, curling up his fist and jabbing himself in the center of his chest with a chubby thumb. "Twavis Mil-ner."

Sydney smiled at the exaggerated way he'd stated his name before turning her attention back to Jocelyn again. "Your mother used to watch me?"

"Yes . . . she still lives here . . . I know she'd be so happy to see you . . . if you've got the time."

She shot Bas a quick glance. He nodded, offering her an encouraging grin. "Whatever you want, Sydney."

A radiant little smile was his reward. "I'd love that."

Jocelyn nodded and turned to lead the way. "What happened to you? I mean, everyone thought you two . . . well . . . the house was a wreck, and Kathy and you were just gone . . . I always wondered."

Sydney stiffened at the question but shrugged. "Kit took me into the city. That's where I grew up."

"I see."

Sydney sighed. She didn't like lying, and yet she couldn't bring herself to tell Jocelyn the truth either, not that he blamed her. The truth wasn't nearly as pretty as the illusion . . .

"What are you doing?"

Sydney glanced up from the small photo album that had arrived earlier in the day and smiled. "Looking at these pictures."

Bas stretched out on the bed, drawing Sydney back against his chest as he rested his chin on her shoulder and gazed at the photographs. "That was nice of Jocelyn."

"Hmm."

True enough, Jocelyn had a lot of pictures of Kit, and she'd offered to give them all to Sydney. Since she'd wanted to scan them first, she'd had the album delivered via courier earlier in the day.

They'd spent the day visiting Sydney's parents' graves. She'd told him then that she wanted to have Kit moved to be with her parents. Bas had called Cain to ask that he see it done. He could understand that, especially after visiting Kit's unmarked grave. The public cemetery was used for unidentified persons or those without the means to pay for a real cemetery plot. It was cold and desolate; completely unkempt. At least if she were moved to be with her parents, she'd have a place that was peaceful – and a headstone. He'd been able to tell that there had been another one beside Kit's – Sydney's, he supposed. He was glad that Cain had the forethought to have it removed. That would have been a little too surreal for Bas' liking . . .

Not for the first time, Bas had to admit that his honeymoon wasn't exactly how he'd imagined it. Still, it was something that Sydney desperately needed, and that was enough. To move on with her life, she needed the closure that this trip would bring her, and even if she always felt a little sad when she thought about the fact that she'd lost so much in her lifetime, maybe she could smile later . . . and maybe that was enough.

As it was, he'd almost wished that he hadn't agreed to take her to meet her former babysitter. The woman's tears and quiet heartache had hurt Sydney. Even if she didn't remember the woman, Margaret Halsey remembered her, and the one-sided reunion had taken a toll on the normally vivacious cat-youkai. She'd been pensive and thoughtful for the better portion of the day; not that Bas could blame her. Still, the pictures had lifted her flagging spirits, and for that, at least, he was grateful.

She'd taken a bath while he had ordered dinner for the two of them. Neither had felt like going out despite the reservations he had at one of the trendier places in Los Angeles. A couple of steaks and a gallon of milk seemed to do the trick. Sydney had eaten about half of her food before pushing the plate at Bas and insisting that he needed it more than she did.

The highlight, he had to admit, was the little grin that he'd gotten out of her when he'd presented her with a California state spoon. Her luminous gaze was enough of a reward, and if he couldn't remember anything else about their honeymoon in the years to come, he knew he'd remember that smile forever . . .

Kneeling on the bed with the photo album in her lap, she leafed through the pages for what had to be the hundredth time since the courier had delivered it. Bas couldn't blame her for that. It was a comfort she hadn't been afforded before. To see her sister smiling, happy . . . that was worth the trip, absolutely. He frowned. She'd mentioned wanting to revisit the abandoned building where she used to live. Bas wasn't so sure that was a good idea, but he also wasn't sure he could deny her anything, either. Maybe she'd forget about it. In any case, whether he took her there or not, Bas supposed it would be fine in the end. Sydnie was strong, wasn't she? He smiled to himself and sighed inwardly. She was strong, all right. He simply wasn't so certain that *he* was . . .

"I was thinking," she finally said, breaking the companionable silence that had fallen between them.

"What's that?" he asked, twisting a lock of her hair around his finger.

"My parents were teachers . . ."

"Hmm."

She shrugged, closing the photo album and setting it aside on the nightstand. "I just thought . . . I should get my high school diploma, don't you think?"

Bas smiled as Sydnie curled up against his chest. "If that's what you want to do."

She scowled. "I never went to school."

"I wouldn't have known that if you hadn't told me."

She made a face. "I told you I used to frequent the library . . . I read lots of books and stuff. I guess I'm worst at math, but I can do some of it."

"You could probably take the GED test . . . when we get back, I'll take you to the school to see if they have any information on it or things you could study for it."

Sydnie wiggled around, leaning up on her hands to gaze at him. "Would you?"

He nodded. "We should also look for a house of our own . . . unless you *like* staying with my family."

"Your family's fine, puppy . . . I think I'd rather have you all to myself, though."

"Okay," he agreed. "I'll start looking when we get back."

She frowned and rolled to the side, scooting off the bed and crossing her arms over her chest as she paced the length of the bedroom.

"Out with it, kitty," he said, leaning on his elbow as he watched her nervous motions.

She shook her head but stopped before the row of windows that overlooked the city skyline. "It's nothing," she lied.

Bas narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, I'm not buying."

Turning back to face him, she managed a weak little smile. "You're a hunter, though, right? That means you'll be gone a lot . . ."

He grimaced. "Not nearly as much as you think, Sydney."

"What does that mean?"

He shrugged. "That means I'm not so sure I'm really a hunter, and . . . and there's a couple other things that Dad's mentioned. Besides . . . I think I'd rather stick closer to home."

That admission earned him a bright smile, and she laughed suddenly as she lunged at him. He caught her and grunted as her body bore him back against the mattress.

"Careful, baby . . . you'll break me," he teased.

"Break you?" she echoed with an arched eyebrow. "*Really . . .*"

"Yes, really," he complained. "I don't think you should do that."

She giggled. "Break you? Oh, my, no . . . I can think of a few other things I'd rather do with you."

"Yeah?"

She nodded, nipping his lip playfully. "I think so . . ."

"Like . . . what?" he asked between nibbling kisses.

"I'll think of something," she assured him.

He chuckled. "I'm sure you can."

"Do you think I can do it?" she asked suddenly, rearing back to frown at him, her expression pensive at best.

Bas shook his head, his mind still clouded by her kisses. "Do what?"

She made a face and slapped his chest playfully. "Pass the test – that GED thingy."

He snorted. "Your mind, kitty, is something that I'll never understand."

"You're not supposed to, Sebastian. Do you think I will?"

Bas chuckled, leaning up to kiss her cheek soundly. "Yes, baby, I think you'll pass it just fine."

She sighed, protesting without words that she wasn't sure about his blind faith in her abilities. "I can study," she remarked somewhat defensively.

"I'll help you," he assured her.

Sydney seemed surprised by his offer. "You will?"

He nodded. "Yep . . . if it's important to you, then it's important to me, too. It wouldn't surprise me if you don't need my help, though. You're a pretty smart kitty."

"You *have* to say that," she told him with a little giggle before scooting off the bed to pace around the hotel room. "You're my puppy."

"I don't have to say any such thing," he argued. "It's the truth."

Her smile was thanks enough. Bas caught his breath at the flicker of heat that ignited behind her brilliant green eyes; as she stalked over to the end of the bed and crawled toward him. "You're so good to me, Sebastian. Let me see if I can be good to you, too."

"O-oh?" he stammered as she slowly, methodically snaked her hands up his legs until she was toying with the hem of his boxers.

Sydney giggled though the sound was tinged with a certain huskiness. "Hmm, yes . . ." she purred.

Bas rumbled out a choked chuckle and let his head fall back, eyes closing as Sydney slipped her fingers under his waistband and pulled . . .

Final Thought from Bas:
Her GED ...?

Chapter 55

Overworked

Sydney lingered in the doorway with a thoughtful frown on her face as she gazed at Bas. Sitting behind the wide oak desk, he was scowling at the papers in his left hand, propping his temple on his fingertips.

He'd been like this ever since they'd returned from their honeymoon. Even before they'd moved out of the Zelig mansion, it had been the same. Sitting at his desk for hours on end—at least he'd taken the time out to find a house that she liked—he'd shuffle through file after file with that same scowl marring his features.

"Are you hungry? Your mother brought over some clam chowder," she said, finally breaking the silence.

Bas grunted something unintelligible without looking up from the papers.

"Come again?" she asked, tilting her head in an effort to better discern his words.

He sighed and glanced up at her, smiling in a rather distracted sort of way that made Sydney wonder if he really saw her at all. "What's that?"

"Dinner, Sebastian. Are you hungry?"

He shook his head and let his gaze return to the papers in his hand. "Not really," he murmured. "Ate a late lunch at Mom and Dad's."

Sydney nodded and shuffled over to perch on the edge of the desk. He'd been doing that a lot lately, too . . . "My test is next week . . . you'll be there, right?"

Bas peered up at her and nodded. "Of course I will. I told you I would."

She chose not to argue that. Yes, he'd told her that, and she was certain that he *meant* to keep his promise. More and more often of late, though . . .

She'd thought it'd be better once they moved out of the mansion. Thinking that he was just too accessible there had been a mistake on her part. No, even after they'd moved into the little cottage that he'd found for her, he'd continued to be busy all the time, and

while Sydney could understand that he really couldn't drop everything all the time for her, she couldn't help but wish that he would do exactly that; at least once in awhile . . .

"What are you working on?" she asked, knowing the answer but forcing herself to question Bas anyway.

"Nothing," he told her—he always said that. His smile was fake, too, and he still seemed distracted. "Just some stuff I told Dad I'd look at for him . . . I told you that already."

"Can't you leave that alone for one night?" she wondered, her tone unnaturally bright.

Bas sighed. "No . . . I have to have the presentation ready for the quarterly generals' meeting. It's just this one case. It won't take long."

Sydney tried again. "Maybe I could help you."

"No, it's okay."

Stifling a sigh, Sydney scooted off the desk and shuffled over to the sofa, curling up with her GED study materials as Bas turned his attention back to the files.

Gin had taken Sydney up to the school so that she could ask about the GED test. Bas, at least, had asked his mother to take her when a meeting with his father had run over. Telling herself that Bas was bound to be busy sometimes, Sydney had smiled at Gin and hadn't complained. Come to think of it, she hadn't complained about Bas' preoccupation at all. She'd been a very good kitty, indeed . . .

Glancing up when the soft chime of the doorbell sounded, Sydney stole a questioning glance at her mate. He didn't appear to have heard it, so completely engrossed in his work, he seemed. Uncurling her legs, she stood up slowly, sauntering from the room to answer the door.

"Hey, kitty . . . how's it going?"

Sydney blinked, staring at Evan Zelig. Etched against the darkness of the night, he grinned roguishly, lazily. Leaning against the porch railing with his ankles crossed and the God-awful Hawaiian print shirt hanging open, he held up a small bag of . . . something . . . as his smile widened. "What's that?" she asked rather pointedly.

Evan chuckled and tossed the bag into the air, catching it neatly and repeating the process a couple times. "What do you think it is?" he countered.

She narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out just what was going on behind those deep blue eyes. "It looks like catnip, puppy."

"Hmm," he drawled. "So it does."

"Are you going to give it to me?" she asked, arching one eyebrow.

Evan's grin widened. "That was the plan, pussy," he teased.

Sydney reached for the bag.

He whipped it over his head, out of her reach. "I was just curious about how this worked on you."

"Give me the bag, and Sebastian and I'll let you know," she countered.

Evan chuckled. "I'd rather see for myself, Sydney."

"Would you really?"

He nodded. "Come on, pussykins. Surely you can think of a better way to convince me?"

Bracing her weight against his shoulder, Sydney tugged on Evan's arm, to no avail. "Hand it over, puppy."

"All in good time . . . all in good time."

She swatted at the bag once more. Her claw caught in the plastic, ripping the corner. The scent of the catnip invaded her senses, and she couldn't help the slight purr that rumbled in her throat. "You're a cute little puppy," she allowed, her voice dropping to a husky timbre. "Too bad you're just a baby . . . now give Sydney the catnip, won't you?"

Evan laughed outright at that, making a face of exaggerated upset. "Only works for Bubby, huh? I figured as much . . . Can't blame a pup for trying, can you?"

Sydney leaned toward him, licking his cheek as she tried to grab the bag again.

"Damn," he groaned. "You *do* have a textured tongue!"

Wrinkling her nose as she swatted at the bag, she didn't spare him a second glance. "I *am* a cat-youkai," she pointed out.

"Holy damn, I want a pussy, too!"

"Give me the bag, puppy," she nearly purred.

Evan snorted. "So you can use it on my brother? Oh, hell, no!"

Sydney couldn't help the slight flinch inspired by his words. "Just let me have it . . . please?"

Evan didn't miss the expression. Shaking his head as a sudden thought occurred to him, he licked his lips and pinned her with a serious look. "Tch! He's been too busy for you, hasn't he?" he asked in an uncharacteristically soft tone.

Sydney blinked at the hint of compassion evident in his somber gaze. For some reason, it irritated her even more. "It's not like that. He's been busy," she grumbled, all too aware of just how lame her excuse sounded.

He shook his head in disbelief. "That fucking bastard . . ."

"He's not," she insisted, swiping at the bag again.

If anything, that seemed to annoy the young man even more. His darkened glower shifted over her head, and he narrowed his gaze. "Speak of the goddamn devil . . ."

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Evan?" Bas' cold voice cut in behind her.

Sydney whined as he pulled her away from Evan, pushing her behind his back. "Puppy," she whined in protest.

He ignored her. "Answer me, you little fucker. What do you think you're doing?"

Evan rolled his eyes, leaning forward to tuck the bag in Bas' shirt pocket. "Relax, Bubby. I got your back."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Bas growled.

"Look, man, I was just testing out the theory, I swear. Don't blow an ass gasket over it, all right?"

Bas shot forward, grabbing Evan by the throat and squeezing just enough to impair Evan's breathing. "I've told you, haven't I? Stay the fuck away from her."

Sydney grabbed Bas' arm and pulled, to no avail. "Sebastian! *Stop!*"

"Back off, you tank," Evan growled, shoving Bas away and twisting his head from side to side. "You were bellyaching about the catnip, so I figured I'd test it for you. Not a big deal."

Bas shook Sydney off and advanced on his brother. Sydney darted between the two, planting her hands in the center of Bas' chest to hold him back. "Get out of here, Evan. Now."

Evan shoved himself away from the railing and shot his brother an insincere grin. "Thank me later, bubby," he said before running down the steps and into the night, heading for the trees to take the shortest route to the Zelig estate.

Only after his scent had faded did Bas bother to look at Sydney.

"You could have hurt him, Sebastian," she pointed out quietly.

Bas sighed, dragging a weary hand over his face as he struggled for a calm that he obviously wasn't feeling. "Sydney . . ."

Trying to ignore the unrelenting lure of the herb, Sydney shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. "He's your brother."

"I know he's my brother," Bas grouched, raking his hands through his hair in a completely exasperated sort of way.

"I didn't want him," she informed him with a marked scowl.

Bas ground his teeth together. "I can't believe he—" Cutting himself off with a loud sigh, he shook his head. "Yeah, I can . . . damn him . . . *damn him!*"

He moved so quickly that Sydney barely had time to react. Darting into his path, she threw herself against his chest, wrapping her arms around his neck as she pulled herself up to nip his chin. "Forget him, puppy. Deal with me."

"Kitty . . ."

Inhaling deeply, she couldn't help the little purr that welled up in her throat. The catnip tingled in her nose as a stifling heat suffused her body. He groaned softly, realizing that it was too late to stop her. Sucking on the roughened skin of his throat, she hopped up, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“Wait, Sydney,” he told her, his hands cradling her bottom so that she wouldn’t fall. Her answer was a scorching kiss filled with all the desire that she couldn’t fight. Shoving her hands under his shirt, she ran her claws up and down his chest. “Let me . . . take you . . . inside,” he mumbled between kisses.

“Fuck me, puppy,” she demanded as she writhed against him.

Bas groaned louder but managed to carry her inside, kicking the door closed as Sydney mewled quietly. He shuddered under her touch and let go of her long enough to whip his shirt over his head before doing the same to her. She shoved her skirt and panties down over her hips and kicked them aside before reaching for Bas once more. Fangs scraping over the newly bared flesh of Bas’ wide shoulder, she whimpered as he lifted her off her feet, heading for the stairs.

“Now, Sebastian,” she begged, twisting her body to press her breasts against his chest.

He kept moving straight through their bedroom into the master bathroom. Reaching out to smack his hand against the shower controls, he kicked that door closed, too. The ripple of air created by the shower taps suspended over the far right corner of the open bathroom hit her instantly, sending a delicious tremor racing down Sydney’s spine. He set her down long enough to discard his jeans in a careless heap before picking her up once more, moaning viciously as she wrapped her legs around his waist once more. Striding across the room before veering sharply to the side, he pushed her up against the wall. The warm water flowed down over them as she wrapped her legs around his waist again. With a predatory growl, he thrust into her.

Over-sensitized body reacting, Sydney could feel the first tremors of her orgasm reverberating through her body. Reaching over her head, she hung onto the shallow lip above the tile, bracing herself as she used her legs to draw him deeper and deeper. Bas’ hands closed over hers, knitting his fingers together with hers. Kissing her deeply, swallowing her impassioned cries in a torrent of ragged breathing and the thunder of two heartbeats that sounded as one, Bas met her desire with a strength, a power, that could barely be contained. She met his thrusts with her own, quivering as absolute pleasure coursed through her time and again.

He moved against her, his body surging over her like a constant caress. Sensation became emotion, and the emotion became a tactile thing that lived and breathed in the air around them, surrounding them in a vortex of passion tempered by the tenderness of an overwhelming desire to shelter. Bas drove into her, filling her with body with his as he filled her mind with the need to be cosseted; to be loved and to show her love in return. The electricity in their youkis blended and merged to create a single aura that pulsed with the beats of their hearts.

His abbreviated growls flowed over her like rain. The water that showered down on them releasing a steam that permeated her soul. Washing her clean in the tide of his passion, he took what he needed even as he gave her everything. Muscles contracting in an unsteady rhythm, she locked her ankles and arched her back, tearing her mouth away from his as she leaned back, as she cried out his name. Bas' answer was a few deep thrusts; a shudder, a shiver, a groan as he slammed her against the tile wall. He thickened, pulsed, throbbed inside her. The unrelenting burn exploded again; a stream of white light that set her free.

She pitched forward, clinging to him, helpless to do more than hold on. He struggled to breathe, bracing his weight against his hands as he supported her weight and his. It seemed like a long time before she could think; before she could form words. Turning her head, resting her temple on his shoulder, she gazed up at him, traced his cheek with her fingertips. "My puppy," she murmured, the barest trace of a tender smile turning up the corners of her lips.

Bas stared at her with a solemn expression, his eyes sparkling softly as he clenched his jaw tight. "I love you, kitty," he rasped, his voice barely above a whisper.

Sydney's smile widened, and she kissed him. "Forever, right?"

He nodded, a slow grin finally edging his sober façade aside, withdrawing from her despite her little whimper of protest. "That's right."

She sighed contently and let her legs drop. He carefully set her on her feet but didn't let go of her as he reached for her bottle of body wash. Taking his time while he lathered her, he chuckled softly, kissing every part of her as the water rinsed the bubbles away.

Striding over to grab a towel from the high shelf beside the sink, Bas stopped long enough to hit the shower panel to stop the flow of water. He held out the towel, and Sydney padded over to him. He wrapped her in the towel and scooped her up, not bothering to dry himself off as he carried her out of the bathroom and over to the hulking bed. She giggled and squealed when he stepped back, shaking vigorously and sending crystalline droplets flying. He grinned unrepentantly and winked at her before turning on his heel and striding out of the bedroom.

Shivering slightly, she kicked the covers down and cuddled down in the bed. It didn't take long for Bas to stroll back into the room with a glass of milk in his hand and the smile still lighting his eyes. "Here, baby," he said, sinking on the edge of the bed and extending the glass to her.

She sat up long enough to drink the milk. He took the empty glass and set it on the nightstand. "Thank you," she told him, scooting over to crawl into his lap.

Bas chuckled again, smoothing her hair and kissing the top of her head. "You're welcome."

"I've missed this," she admitted quietly, savoring the feel of Bas' arms around her.

"I know," he placated, a hint of resignation in his tone. "It's just for a little while longer."

Sydney nodded but didn't reply. It was the closest she'd felt to him since they'd returned from their honeymoon, and she was loathe to disrupt that.

"I swear to God, I'm going to maim Evan, though," he grumbled, leaning back against the headboard and cuddling Sydney against his chest.

She sighed. "He's your brother, Sebastian . . . and he's harmless."

"Harmless or not, I'm still going to lay the smackdown on him."

"No, you will not," Sydney argued, leaning up to pin him with a no-nonsense scowl. "He's just a puppy."

Bas grunted. "Yeah, well, that 'puppy' has done nothing but antagonize me from the start," he pointed out.

Sydney shook her head. "That's not true, is it? I mean, really . . ."

He sighed but shrugged, conceding her point. "Okay, so that's a little bit of an exaggeration. I'm just not sure . . . I don't know when everything changed."

"What do you mean?"

Bas smiled a little sadly, his gaze glossing over as though he were seeing things long past. "He was really cute, you know, as a baby. I had to wait in the waiting room with the old man and my grandmother . . . and everyone else. We'd gone back to Japan for it. Dad said that's where Mom belonged when she was pregnant – with her family. Anyway, Morio, Gunnar, Mikio, and I had gone down to the cafeteria for sodas – well, sodas for Morio and me. Gunnar never has liked it, and Mikio preferred tea . . . Dad came down, looking for me. He looked tired but happy . . . He said I had a new brother."

"And he was cute, right?" she added, smiling despite the seriousness on Bas' features.

He nodded. "Yeah, he was . . . all wrinkly and red . . . kind of like a lobster, come to think of it . . ."

"That's *cute*?" she asked pointedly, arching her eyebrow in question.

He chuckled. "Sure . . . and . . . and he smelled nice . . . that baby smell, I guess. He sure as hell doesn't smell nice anymore, but back then . . . well, I thought he was all right."

"You were ten?"

He nodded. "Well, close enough. I was about nine and a half when he was born." He smiled. "I used to sit on the floor and watch him while Mom was cleaning and Dad was busy. They'd ask me to watch him for a few minutes, and I'd sort of lean over him and try not to blink. I was a very literal child, I guess."

She giggled, snuggling closer against his chest. "I suppose you were."

Bas sighed. "Sure . . . It was weird, though . . . when Dad brought Jillian home, Evan was three months old. I don't think he knew what to make of her. I mean, she was smaller than he was, of course, and she cried a lot at first. Dad thought it was because she knew that Mom and Dad weren't really her mom and dad. Anyway, she'd cry if we put her down, so someone was always holding her. When Dad was working and Mom was trying to get things done, I'd hold her." He shrugged. "Evan started crying more. For awhile, Mom thought he had colic. I don't know . . ."

"Sounds like he was a little jealous of Jillian."

Bas snorted. "Evan's always been babied. He didn't have a reason to be jealous of Jillian."

"That doesn't mean he wasn't," she pointed out.

Bas shrugged. "Maybe."

"So you two just weren't really close?"

"No . . . it wasn't that, exactly. He used to follow me around all the time. Pain in the ass, really . . . He slept with Mom and Dad until he was nearly five, I guess. One night, Dad made him stay in his own room, and Evan . . . Evan cried all night, sobbing for Mom . . . That's one of the few times I remember Mom and Dad arguing. She didn't want to leave him like that. Dad said that he was just doing it to get to her. Thing was . . . I couldn't stand hearing it, either. After Dad got Mom to go back to their bedroom, I

went and got him and brought him in with me.” He sighed, an embarrassed sort of smile tugging at his lips. “How cool was that? Fifteen year old me with Evan and Jillian dog-piling me all night . . .”

The mental image of what that had to look like made her smile, and Sydnie giggled softly. “Sounds like you were a good brother . . . so what happened to the two of you?”

Bas shook his head, his smile fading. “I don’t know, kitty . . . I told you. Somewhere along the way, he changed . . . or I did . . . He was always tagging along after my friends and me when we would go play football or stuff . . .” The faraway look returned to his eyes, and Sydnie couldn’t help but smile at the little grin that seemed so very nostalgic. “One time—I guess he was around six or so—he was running around, trying to snatch my football . . . Some friends of mine were over, and they . . . they didn’t seem to like having Evan underfoot, so I ditched him . . . I grabbed a stick on the ground and heaved it into the forest. He ran off after it, and we took off, too . . . He was too little to know how to track me, and when he came back with the stick, I was gone.”

“Sebastian!” Sydnie chided.

He winced. “I could hear him crying. Hell, I think the entire eastern seaboard heard him crying . . .”

“And what did you do?”

Bas made a face then chuckled, tightening his arms around Sydnie. “What do you think I did?” he countered. “I went back and got him . . . He was sitting on a tree stump, covering his face with his hands. He just kept sobbing, even after I’d picked him up and started home. He just sort of . . . hung on to me . . . and he begged me not to leave him again . . .”

Sydnie didn’t know what to say to that, and Bas didn’t, either, for that matter. How long had it been since he’d remembered that day? She had a feeling that it had been awhile.

Bas sighed and kissed her forehead.

Closing her eyes, she sighed, too. She was entirely too comfortable, snuggled against Bas’ broad chest.

He waited until she was asleep, holding her close in the darkened room. Funny how he’d forgotten about that autumn afternoon. Sydnie had a way of reminding him of things, didn’t she? A vicious pang shot through him, and he winced. He wouldn’t trade Sydnie for the world, and yet . . . and yet the memories of those days gone by

seemed so far away. Evan, who couldn't say 'Sebastian' or even 'brother' . . . Evan, who had tried so hard not to cry when Bas had opened his door to get him . . . the myriad of times that Evan would come creeping into his room late at night, his little face full of self-disgust as he mumbled something about his puppy, Ralph, being afraid . . . Bas always grumbled – always told Evan to be still or he'd kick him out of his bed. Bas smiled wanly, taking comfort in the sound of Sydnie's content purring. He never had kicked Evan out of his bed, though, no matter how much the pup had fussed in his sleep . . .

With a sigh, Bas kissed Sydnie's forehead again before carefully rolling to the side and moving her onto the mattress. He should go to sleep, himself, but . . .

Sparing a moment to smooth her hair and kiss her cheek, he grabbed the empty milk glass and shuffled out of the room. He still had a bunch of files to sift through, and he didn't have much time to do it. The quarterly meeting with the generals was in less than a week. He had to have the presentation ready by then . . .

Final Thought from Sydnie:
So Sebastian and Evan used to be ... close ...?

Chapter 56

Losing Hope

Bas woke slowly and winced as he craned his neck from side to side and let out a deep breath.

He'd fallen asleep in the overstuffed recliner in his study – again. He hadn't meant to . . .

Rubbing his eyes, he frowned at the blanket that hindered his movements and forced his eyes open only to grimace when he saw that Sydnie must have found him sleeping again. She'd covered him up with the thick blanket that normally lay over the back of the sofa, then she had curled up at his feet, her hands crossed on his knee, cheek resting on her folded hands.

"Shit," he muttered, carefully maneuvering her so that he could scoop her up and carry her into the bedroom. Only four a.m. according to the clock . . . Bas tucked Sydnie into the bed and shuffled into the bathroom for a quick shower.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he'd bitten off more than he could chew. The meeting with the generals was tomorrow, and as far as Bas could tell, he only had about seventy-five percent of his presentation ready. So much was riding on this . . . he closed his eyes and let the warm water soothe him.

He'd been working on it since they got home from their honeymoon. Taking all of Cain's unsolved cases, he'd been meticulously looking over every one for tiny clues that had gone unnoticed. He'd found a couple of leads in one case. All he needed was the approval of the generals before he could go ahead with what he wanted to do. A youkai special crimes unit that concentrated on the unsolved cases that were left forgotten in the lone filing cabinet in his father's study . . . That was what Bas wanted to do. The trouble was that he didn't think he could do it alone. There were just too many cases, and even then, he had to admit that having more than one person looking at the files really couldn't hurt.

Luckily for him, Gunnar had inadvertently offered him a solution to the problem in his own roundabout way. He'd mentioned that he liked Bas' idea, and since he was already familiar with some of the cases, having been looking into a few things for his grandfather back in Japan, he would prove to be a valuable asset, and, Bas had to admit, they worked well together – when they weren't arguing over trivialities.

In fact, Gunnar would be there bright and early to help Bas go over the last of the files in final preparation for the meeting.

He sighed. He'd tried to explain most of this to Sydnie while leaving out the gory details that most of the cases contained. Ultimately, Cain decided whether or not something was a good idea, but having the backing of the generals tended to be quite helpful most of the time. It was a good idea: a *solid* idea. The only real drawback was Bas' perceived lack of experience in what was considered 'detective work', which was why Gunnar's experience would help tremendously. He'd been doing that sort of thing for his grandfather for awhile.

Scrubbing his scalp absently, Bas closed his eyes, tipping his head back as he rinsed the shampoo from his hair. He was confident enough that he would be able to convince the generals of the necessity of the new division. He just hoped that he'd be able to stop working so many hours after the meeting. He'd seen it in Sydnie's eyes: she missed him, and though he had explained it to her in an abbreviated sense, he wasn't so sure she understood. Still she hadn't complained.

No, she'd just nodded and tried to smile before kissing his cheek and curling up with her workbooks for her upcoming GED test. Somehow that made him feel even worse, and then to wake up every morning in the chair he hadn't meant to fall asleep in with her leaning on his knee . . . He grimaced. He didn't want to see her asleep on his knee anymore. He'd been going to bed with her and staying there until she was asleep before creeping out of bed to work just a little longer. Up at the break of day and working well into the night was taking its toll on him, though Gunnar was good at goading him into practicing for awhile when he thought that Bas was overdoing it.

Every day, he vowed that he'd make it home to eat lunch with Sydnie, and every day, something invariably came up instead. Either he found a small lead that had been overlooked before, or he got into some deeper discussions with his father, he had yet to keep that promise to himself, and that bothered him, too. *'I'll make it up to you, Sydnie,'* he vowed. *'As soon as all this is over, I swear I will . . .'*

'Fine thing, that . . . just don't forget that her test is tomorrow, too. You promised you'd take her there and wait for her.'

'I know; I know . . . her test is at one. I've got all morning to get through the meeting. Dad knows . . . I told him. He said that I'll be done by eleven.'

It was important to her. She'd actually asked him to take her, and Sydnie never asked anyone for anything. Though he was positive that she'd do just fine, she wasn't nearly

as confident, and seeing Sydnie worry that she wouldn't be up to snuff wasn't something that sat well with him.

He sighed again. *'She'll do fine . . . She's a cat. Cats always land on their feet.'*

Sydnie woke up and blinked the remnants of sleep from her eyes as she sat up and stared at the empty place beside her. *'Another morning without Sebastian,'* she mused with a sad little sigh.

Scooting off the bed, she padded over to the window that overlooked the small back yard. Her frown turned thoughtful as she gazed at the overgrown flowerbeds that lined the patio. Bas had said that he could pull all that out and seed it with grass. Still, she liked flowers. They were pretty yet seemed entirely useless, didn't they? *'I could do that,'* she thought slowly then wrinkled her nose. The idea of getting dirt under her nails wasn't appealing, and while she could probably get gardening gloves, she wasn't sure how well they'd hold up, considering . . .

'How hard could it be?' she argued.

'Famous last words, Sydnie.'

She shrugged offhandedly, stepping away from the window and over to the closet to get dressed. Staring into the darkness, she bit her lip. *'When was the last time I felt the desire to retreat to the closet?'* she wondered.

It had been awhile, hadn't it? Tugging off her nightshirt, she pulled on a thin cotton sundress. The spring morning was chilly but not cold, and by noon, she'd be glad she was wearing something sleeveless, she was certain.

With a sigh, she glanced at the undisturbed glass of milk on her nightstand. Badd whined softly, sensing Sydnie's melancholy. She rubbed the dog's knobby head as she passed him, sparing a moment to down the milk before tightening her hold on the glass and heading for the door.

The dog padded along behind her down the stairs and into the kitchen. Sitting at her feet while she washed out the glass and meticulously dried it before sticking it back in the cupboard, he grunted happily when she finally filled his food bowl.

That done, Sydnie stood back, taking in the bright and shiny kitchen. Strange, the idea that it was hers. Bas had said as much, anyway: her house . . . her home . . .

She bit her lip, crossing her arms over her chest as the emptiness in the house seeped into her soul. She didn't want it; not by herself. She wanted Bas here, too . . . she wanted it to be *their* home . . .

"Come on! Get the sword up or I'll wipe the floor with you!"

Bas rolled his eyes but raised Triumvirate as Gunnar whipped around in a circle, arcing Keppanshuto through the air toward him. The blades met with an awesome crash, and Bas ground his teeth together as the reverberation of metal meeting metal shot through him. Twisting his arm, he nearly managed to disarm Gunnar. Allowing Bas' movement, he followed it through with a flick of his wrist. "Nice try, Bas."

"I'll take the winner."

Gunnar's eyebrows lifted, disappearing under the thick fringe of his bangs without sparing a glance at the speaker.

Bas saw Evan leaning against the low railing that lined the stairs. Grinning lazily with his sword strapped to his hip, he intercepted his brother's glance and chuckled. "Come on, Bubby . . . you know you want a go at me."

Bas jerked his sword away and lowered his shoulder, barreling into Gunnar and sending him stumbling back. By the time he managed to regain his footing, Bas had Triumvirate leveled at his chest. Gunnar sighed and let his arm drop, shaking his head as he slammed Keppanshuto into the magnolia wood sheath strapped to his hip. "That was a cheap shot, you know," he pointed out as he strode over to the steps to stand beside Evan.

"There are no cheap shots, Gunnar," Bas pointed out, reminding his cousin of the lesson they'd learned years ago while training under Bas' uncle, Ryomaru.

Evan tugged his shirt off, dropping it onto the flagstone sidewalk and twisting his torso to stretch. "Bring it, Bubby," he scoffed, unsheathing Ternion with a flourish.

Bas tightened his grip on Triumvirate's hilt, narrowing his eyes on his brother. True, Evan was no slouch. Still, Bas had yet to lose to the pup, and he'd be damned if he would start now. "All right, Evan . . . what are you trying to prove?"

Evan chuckled despite the gathering darkness in his deep blue eyes. "Not a thing . . . ain't got nothin' *to* prove."

"Of course you don't," Bas allowed. "That's why you're challenging me?"

"Not a challenge, Bubby," he shot back. "You don't really think I wanna be tai-youkai, do you?"

"Not a chance in hell, baby brother."

"Yeah, good . . . so long as we're straight." Pushing off the ground, Evan shot toward Bas in a flash of silver and a blur of motion.

Bas brought his sword up, blocking Evan's blade with his own. Shoving him away, Bas lunged forward. Evan hopped out of the way to avoid the attack before sprinting toward him once more. Right arm crossing his chest, Ternion's blade dragged over the pebbly beach, sending up a spray of sparks as Evan swung his sword upward. Bas dove to the side to avoid contact. Ternion cleaved through the air, whistling as Evan lunged again. Rolling out of the way of the descending blade, Bas shot to his feet, raising Triumvirate in time to block another vicious blow.

"What's the matter, Bubby? Choking on your silver spoon?"

Bas growled low in his throat, heaving Evan away once more with sheer brute force that sent the younger man skidding back over the pebbles that covered the beach. He dug his heels into the soft ground before charging forward once more. He was out for blood, wasn't he? "What the hell's your problem?" Bas demanded.

Evan snorted. "Never did know when you had it all, do you?"

Gritting his teeth, Bas whipped around in a circle, meeting Evan with a force so jarring that they both grimaced but doggedly held on. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Dunno . . . you figure it out," Evan spat as he slid back a foot but didn't falter.

The overcast sky rumbled ominously. Bas smacked Evan's blade away before advancing with a series of short blows. Evan managed to block them but had to retreat backward even further. The agitated waves coming off the ocean surged over their feet as they danced back and forth. Evan didn't possess as much power as Bas, but he was

fast—damn fast. He had a level of finesse that Bas didn't, and that worked to level the playing field.

"What the hell are you trying to prove?" Bas growled, slapping Ternion's blade away with the broad side of *Triumvirate*.

"Not a fucking thing, *Bubby*," Evan shot back with a glower.

Bas spun away to avoid another swing, hefting his sword and cleaving a clean arc through the air as the rain started to fall. Evan darted forward, drawing his weapon back. He's miscalculated Bas' actions. *Triumvirate*'s tip grazed his cheek before Bas could stop the motion. Spinning away as he wiped his cheek on his bared shoulder, Evan growled angrily, bearing his fangs as he narrowed his gaze on his brother.

"Damn it, Evan! I've had enough!" Bas bellowed, tossing *Triumvirate* down in complete disgust.

Evan's growl intensified as he jabbed his sword into the ground. "Aren't you gonna finish me off?" he taunted, eyebrow quirking as he wiped his cheek with the back of his hand.

"What the—? Hell, no! Are you fucking *stupid*?"

Tossing his hands out to his sides, Evan shook his head as an exaggerated show of surprise surfaced on his face. "It's what you want, isn't it? You've said so often enough! What's the problem, Bassie-boy? Gone soft, have you?"

"Don't be an ass, Evan," Bas grumbled, glaring at his brother. "Maim you, maybe. Kill you? Hardly."

Slowly, deliberately, Evan strode forward, planting himself in front of Bas. Hair whipping around him in the rising gale coming off the ocean, he stood his ground. "Yeah? If you think you can . . ."

Bas started to turn away. He'd had enough of Evan's temper. Unprepared for Evan's attack, Bas grunted as Evan barreled into him, bearing him to the ground. His first punch snapped Bas' head to the side. He tried again. This time, Bas saw it coming and jerked to the side as Evan's fist smashed into the rocks. Heaving him away, Bas rolled to his feet, snatching up his sword and leveling it at his brother's chest before Evan had a chance to rise.

"That's enough."

Lowering his sword as he glanced over his shoulder to see Cain standing at the bottom of the stone steps with a completely horrified Gin peering around his back, Bas shot Evan a scathing glance before slamming Triumvirate into the scabbard.

“What the hell is going on?” Cain demanded, shifting his impassive gaze from Bas to Evan then back again.

“Why don’t you ask him?” Bas snarled, jerking his head toward Evan.

Evan retrieved his sword and remained silent.

“I’m asking *you*,” Cain reprimanded.

Bas sighed. “I don’t know . . . sir.”

Cain nodded almost imperceptibly, letting his gaze linger on Bas before moving on to Evan once more. “Do *you* know?”

Evan snorted. “Keh! Whatever . . . like it matters.”

Gin tried to catch his arm as he stormed past. Cain caught her before she could run after Evan. “Leave him.”

“But—”

“*Leave him*,” Cain stated again, this time in a tone that he rarely used with Gin though Bas had heard it often enough over the years. It was the ‘Don’t-Mess-With-Me’ tone: the tai-youkai tone. Gin didn’t argue, and she didn’t go after Evan though she did look like she was ready to cry. Cain sighed. “What do you *think* happened?” he reiterated.

Bas shook his head. “I have no idea. He just came down here and challenged the winner—he *wanted* to fight me.”

“I see.”

Draping his hands on his hips, Bas shuffled his feet in the pebbly sand. “Good, ‘cause I don’t.”

Gunnar shrugged, looking rather uncomfortable in witnessing this discussion. “Evan’s had a bigger chip on his shoulder lately than usual, hasn’t he?”

Cain nodded. “Something like that.”

Gin's ears were flattened, though whether it was because of the pouring rain or because of her upset, Bas couldn't be sure. He had a feeling it was the latter. "You *cut* him, Sebastian," she whispered.

Bas winced. "Mom . . . I wasn't trying t—" Wiping the rain out of his face, he touched his fattened lip and frowned as he saw the smear of blood on his fingertips. '*Right . . . I cut Evan . . .*' He sighed. "I'm sorry."

Cain sighed, too. "Go get dried off and clean up. I need to talk to the two of you about the special crimes unit."

Bas nodded, brushing past his parents and trudging up the stairs.

He didn't realize Gunnar was following him until he spoke. "Makes me kind of glad I don't have any brothers," he stated casually, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he fell in step beside Bas.

Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, Bas shrugged. "God . . . I swear he needs to grow up," he grumbled.

"I'm sure he will," Gunnar allowed.

Bas chuckled suddenly, shaking his head in slow disbelief. "Evan? Grow up? I highly doubt it."

Gunnar chuckled, too. "Yeah . . . maybe."

Bas sat back in his chair and scowled at the open case file before him. He'd reread the same part of the report more than ten times. It wasn't sinking in, though. Too lost in thought, concentrating on the conversation he'd had with his father, he couldn't help but wonder if it was going to be a colossal mistake . . .

"You're kidding, right?" Bas asked, narrowing his eyes on his father as though he were trying to read Cain's mind.

"No, I'm not," he replied dryly, shaking out a match and dropping it in the ash tray before sitting back in his chair and exhaling a long stream of smoke.

Bas shook his head, leaning forward, resting his forearms on his knees. "Dad . . ."

"It's non-negotiable, Bas. No matter what your personal feelings on the matter are—"

"There's nothing personal about it. I just don't think it's a good idea. How do you know we can trust her to work for us?"

Cain drew in a deep breath and shrugged. "We don't."

"Oh, well, that makes me feel better," Bas grumbled.

"She was good at her job," Gunnar interrupted. "Damn good at it, from what I can tell. Second in command . . . that's got to mean something."

"Yeah," Bas allowed. "It means you've both lost your fucking minds."

"Bas," Cain began in a warning tone.

"Sorry," he ground out, "your . . . minds."

"She could be a huge help," Cain pointed out calmly.

"Sure, she could. She could also decide that she's going to kill Sydnie, anyway."

"That won't happen," Cain insisted.

"How do you know that?"

Cain shot Gunnar a quick glance. Gunnar sighed and crossed his arms over his chest, slouching against the far wall. "She'll have a monitoring device on her at all times. If she goes out of bounds, she'll be killed, no questions asked."

"Just like that, huh?" Bas asked dryly.

"Just like that," Cain replied.

"Which won't make a great goddamn if she kills Sydnie, don't you think?"

"She won't," Cain said again. "She's had enough of that."

"Yeah, well, I'd rather not test this . . . woman's . . . miraculous change of heart on my mate, thanks," Bas remarked pointedly.

Cain sighed and drew a deep drag off his cigarette. "This is the only alternative I have," he said, his voice weary; as though he'd expected Bas to resist the idea. "Would you rather that I have her killed?"

Bas sighed and shook his head again. "They all came after Sydnie," he said quietly, his eyes burning as he fought to control his rising temper. "Every last one of them."

"She didn't," Cain reminded him. "She's cooperated completely. She even gave us access to the people who hired the hit. There's been enough death in this mess, hasn't there? She's not off the hook. She'll have to earn her right to be free again. Think of her as a human computer. She'll be able to gather information that might not be so easy for you two to get. Like it or not, Bas, people know who you are. Gunnar's the same. She won't leave the office. There're a few rooms that I'm having renovated for her. She won't be allowed out of her rooms. The security that's being installed is much too thorough for her to escape, even if she wanted to. If she needs to give you information, she'll call you or send it through the LAN. You won't really have any contact whatsoever with her."

"And later? You said you'd let her earn her freedom," Bas pointed out.

Cain nodded. "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he said. "It's not a perfect plan, but it's the best I can do without having her killed . . ."

Bas blew his cheeks out in a steady exhalation. He really hadn't had any say in it, at all, and while Bas could appreciate his father's dislike for indiscriminate killing, he could also understand that Sydnie's peace of mind might well be at stake if she found out about the ex-Onyx member's involvement in the special crimes unit. Myrna Loy, the second in command in the Onyx's organization, was going to be working for the special crimes unit, and the last thing he wanted to do was to tell Sydnie *that*.

Burying his face in his hands, he heaved a sigh and tried to push it out of his mind. One last case to go over, to see if he could come up with anything that they could check into further . . . he'd worry about telling Sydnie after the meeting. 'Damn it . . .'

"I don't suppose you're coming to bed."

Lifting his face, peering over his hands, Bas stifled yet another sigh and sat up straight. "I'm sorry, baby. I have to get through this file first."

She nodded, her gaze skittering away as she fought to mask her upset. "Okay," she said, her voice a choked whisper. She licked her lips and pressed her palms together, scrunching up her shoulders as she gathered her waning bravado. "You'll still go with me, won't you? Tomorrow's my test . . ."

"Of course I will," he assured her. "I promised, didn't I?"

She nodded – a jerky motion that made him grimace. Pushing his chair back, he held out his hand. "Come here, kitty," he coaxed.

She didn't look like she was going to comply. It took a moment before she shuffled toward him, staring at his palm for several heartbeats before gingerly slipping her hand into his. He tugged her into his lap, cradling her against his shoulder before fishing out the police report. She snuggled closer, closing her eyes. "You comfortable?" he asked.

Her nod was slow, almost dreamy. "I'll stay here until you're done," she murmured, her voice thickening as sleep closed in around her.

"Okay," he agreed, kissing her forehead. "Go to sleep, baby . . . I'll carry you to bed when I'm finished."

Final Thought from Bas:
Myrna Loy ...

Chapter 57

Resolution

Sydney sat on the cold concrete steps of the old brick building, staring at her hands as she slowly flexed her claws.

'Where is he?'

For once, her youkai voice remained silent.

'Maybe he just forgot . . .'

Sydney's scowl deepened. *'Just forgot?'* she echoed incredulously. *'Yeah . . . just . . . forgot.'*

She'd been asleep on the sofa in his study when he got home, she supposed. That was the last place she remembered being. When she'd called the mansion, he'd said he'd be home shortly. Three hours later, he still wasn't home. Waking up this morning completely alone in the bed that he was supposed to share with her had been difficult to deal with—again. *'You'd think I'd be used to it by now, wouldn't you? You'd think . . .'*

If she picked up the telephone once this morning, she'd picked it up a hundred times. She hadn't called him. He had that important meeting, didn't he? The last thing he needed was her interruption while he was talking to the generals. *'He'll be here . . . he promised,'* she told herself over and over. She'd given up the pretense of last minute studying about ten o'clock, opting instead to pull on one of Bas' obscenely large sweatshirts and huddle alone in their bed.

She must have dozed off, though. Waking up and glancing at the clock, only to see that it was nearly twelve-thirty, she'd paced the living room until nearly twelve-forty-five when Evan showed up. "Figured he'd cop out," the youth had said in a resigned sort of way. "He's never been good at realizing when he's had it all."

"It's not that," she maintained. "He's got that meeting today . . . he said it was important."

"And you're not?" Evan countered. "When's the last time that moron spent any time with you?" She flinched at that, and Evan had relented. "Sorry, pussykins. Didn't mean to upset you."

After trying to reach Bas' cell phone only to be sent immediately to voicemail, she'd accepted Evan's offer to take her into town. In the end, he'd pulled her onto his back and raced across the countryside, getting her to the testing site with five minutes to spare. He'd brushed off her thanks with a cocky little grin, but she'd declined his offer to stay and wait for her.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been sitting there, waiting for Bas. Everyone else, including the teacher who had given the examination, was long gone. He'd offered her a ride home. She hadn't even been able to muster a smile when she assured him that her husband would be there.

With a sigh, she let her forehead fall against the cool brick wall beside her. Somehow she felt more alone than she ever had before, even after Kit died . . . or maybe she just didn't remember that time well enough to make an accurate judgment.

The lengthening shadows cast by the surrounding buildings stretched over the ground as the sun crept toward the horizon. With a heavy sigh, she pushed herself to her feet, trudging down the cement steps and onto the sidewalk. Pausing a moment to scan the empty parking lot, Sydnie stifled a sigh and shouldered her purse before wrapping her arms over her stomach. Head bent, shoulders slumped, she willed her feet to move.

People were locking up buildings, stepping out on the streets and heading to their cars to make the drive home. Lifting her chin in time to see a young couple coming out of an insurance agency, she stopped long enough to watch them head to their car. He opened the door for her, mumbled something that made her smile as she climbed inside. The dull ache in Sydnie's chest grew stronger, and she pressed her hand over her heart, blinking quickly against the burn behind her eyes and forced herself to move on.

The screech of tires accompanied by the acrid stench of the rubber on the asphalt stopped her in her tracks. "Sydnie!" Bas called, killing the engine and stumbling out of the SUV. "I'm . . . I'm sorry. The meeting ran over a little, and then the road was blocked . . . Some guy's cattle got loose . . . My tire blew . . . I tried to call, but my cell was out of range . . . How'd you get to into town?" He shook his head quickly and forced a tentative little smile. "That doesn't matter, right? At least you made it for the test."

She stared at him for a long moment. He looked sincere enough, she supposed, but she just couldn't forget the promise he'd made. For all his perceived sincerity, he had still broken another promise, and Sydnie . . . well, she'd heard the apologies once too often of late . . . He'd said that if it was important to her, then it was important to him, too. *'Not important enough, apparently.'* She flinched at the vindictiveness of her own thoughts and stepped away from him.

He sighed. "Was it that bad?" he asked, catching her elbow and gently pulling her toward him. He frowned. "I'm sorry, baby . . . next time, you'll pass it."

Narrowing her eyes as indignant color blossomed in her cheeks, Sydnie jerked her arm away and carted around to stomp off without a word. She didn't trust herself to speak. All she wanted to do was to make him feel as badly as she did, and yet she couldn't lash out at him, either.

'Listen to what he has to say,' her youkai voice chided. *'Ask him why he wasn't there . . . just ask him, can't you?'*

No, she didn't think she could. She wasn't interested in hearing excuses. She didn't want him to explain another promise that he'd broken. She hated the feeling that everything else mattered more to him than she did, and yet . . . and yet, she desperately wished that everything were different . . .

Quickening her step, she ducked her chin a little lower and barreled onward, along the road that led home. She could hear Bas behind her. He'd left his vehicle behind. She didn't bother to glance back at him. If she looked at him, she'd cry . . .

"Sydnie, wait," he finally called out. The sounds of the town had faded away. The sun dipped lower on the horizon, and Sydnie bit her cheek as tears pricked her eyes.
"Sydnie . . ."

She shook her head but remained silent, hastening her step in her hurry to put some distance between herself and him.

He ran around her, caught her by the shoulders, holding her at arms' length to stop her. "Come on," he coaxed. "I'll take you to dinner. We can study more, okay? You can always take the test again."

"How was your meeting?" she asked quietly, proud of the way she was able to keep her voice from trembling; proud of the steadiness in her gaze as she finally deigned to look at him.

Bas sighed, letting his hands drop and stuffing his hands into his pockets as he shuffled his feet in the grass. "It was good . . . they – the generals – liked the idea . . . I had to stay a little longer than I planned to, though. Dad wanted my input on the replacement general he was recommending for the Canadian region. The guy's Dad's choice, but . . . if he's willing to serve under me later, then Dad figured I should have a say in it. . ." Bas shook his head, realizing that Sydnie really didn't have much interest in the generals or the meeting. "Well, you know what they say: *'if it ain't broke . . .'*"

“And this new division? You’ll be working a lot?”

“Yeah, sure . . . but —”

She swallowed hard, willing herself to remain calm in light of Bas’ admission. “I thought so,” she replied, brushing past him and breaking into a sprint.

Bas uttered a heavy sigh but gave chase. She could feel him behind her though she didn’t look to confirm it.

Sprinting into the trees that lined the road, she dodged over rocks and tree roots, needing to run; just to run.

Tears clouded her vision, and still she ran. Memories of the times when he’d chased her down cut into her deep, leaving gashes that he couldn’t see; leaving her torn and bleeding in places that she could feel but was powerless to doctor. She’d forced herself into his life — she hadn’t really stopped to think about whether or not he wanted it, too. Could she really blame him if she didn’t fit into it? It’d been different while they were on the road, wasn’t it? He’d concentrated on her because . . .

She grimaced, dashing her hand over her eyes as she pushed herself faster. Stumbling over a tree root, she caught herself and pressed onward.

‘Say it, Sydnie, if you really believe it.’

Uttering a soft whimper as she broke out of the trees and over a fence into a freshly plowed field, she kept running. *‘Because . . . I was his . . . job . . .’*

And that was the real reason, wasn’t it; the reason that she was loathe to tell him just how unhappy she’d been of late. Afraid that he’d be forced to choose between his responsibilities and her . . . afraid that she’d lose . . . even more afraid that she’d be left alone again . . . She’d rather live a life in the background with whatever Bas could spare for her than live a life without him, wouldn’t she? But Bas . . . Had he really wanted a wife — a mate — at all?

Slamming into the back door, Sydnie struggled to breathe as she jerked the screen open with a vicious yank and ran inside. She sprinted through the kitchen into the foyer, heading for the staircase as she heard Bas fumble with the screen door. It was all her fault, wasn’t it? She was the one who had forced him into agreeing to become her mate sooner than he’d wanted to. She was the one who couldn’t control her insecurities . . . She’d brought everything on herself, and Bas . . . Bas was too good a person to complain.

On an impulse, she veered to the right, throwing the front door open before her mate managed to get inside. Peering over her shoulder as she broke for the road, she wasn't surprised that Bas hadn't seemed to realize that she'd slipped out again.

Turning her attention straight ahead, she bit her lip and swallowed hard. Maybe it really was hopeless, after all. Still, she had to try . . .

Cain stepped outside the Zelig mansion, leaning to the side to peek in the window to make sure that Gin wasn't hot on his trail. The last couple weeks, she'd been even worse in her insistence that he stop smoking. True enough, he normally only indulged the habit when he was under a lot of stress, and while he wasn't under the same sort of stress as he had been while Bas had been on the run, this sort of stress was almost worse. Having stepped out of the quarterly generals' meeting in time to field a call from the school, Cain was at his wit's end with his youngest son. The little debaucher was at it again: this time with the principal's daughter in the middle of a film in chemistry class. It had taken thirty minutes of profuse apologizing while Evan had sat there grinning like a fool and a sizeable donation to the drama department to get the principal to calm down enough not to expel Evan for his antics, and when Cain had calmed down enough to summon Evan to his study for 'The Lecture', Gin had informed him that he'd run off.

'He's got to get that from his mother,' he mused, digging in his pocket for a rumpled pack of cigarettes. *'He sure as hell doesn't get it from me.'*

Lighting a cigarette and shaking out the match before lifting his head, Cain's thoughtful scowl darkened when he noticed his new daughter-in-law sitting on the patio stairs, shoulders slumped, head ducked, looking like she didn't have a friend in the world. Staring at his cigarette for a long moment, he slowly shuffled toward her, making sure that he made more than enough noise to warn her of his impending approach. The scent of her tears stopped him in his tracks, and he leaned his head to the side. She wasn't crying, no, but she had been. Cain could only wonder why.

"You smoke, right?" he said in a carefully neutral tone.

Sydney shot to her feet and whipped around to face him, her eyes wide, bright . . . frightened.

"Here," Cain offered, tossing the pack to her. "You look like you could use one . . . just don't tell Gin I gave it to you—*please*. Bas here?"

She shrugged, lighting a cigarette and waving the pack back and forth, as though she weren't certain whether or not he wanted them back. She held it out to him, and he took it. Her hands were shaking as she lit the cigarette with the match that he struck for her. "No . . . not yet, at least . . ." she said after taking a deep drag. "I . . . I wanted to talk . . . to you." She made a face and quickly shook her head. "No, that's not right. I wanted to ask you something."

"Okay," he prompted, waiting for her to speak.

She grimaced. "Could we . . . maybe . . . go for a walk or something?"

Cain nodded as slow understanding crept up on him. "I see . . . you don't want Bas to know that you're here?"

She nodded then shook her head and finally shrugged. "Something like that."

"All right."

Striding past her, he led the way across the yard and down the steps toward the beach, noting out of the corner of his eyes that she kept looking back over her shoulder as though she expected Bas to come tearing out of nowhere. Cain pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and hit the first number on speed-dial. Gin answered after the first ring. "Hello?"

"Gin, I'm taking a walk with Sydney . . . if Bas shows up, why don't you preoccupy him until we get back?"

"Is something wrong?" Gin asked.

"Nope," Cain assured her despite the nagging thought that maybe things really weren't fine, at all.

"Okay," Gin agreed. "Oh! He's here now!"

"Thanks, Gin," he said, snapping the phone closed and dropping it back into his pocket. "How was your test?" he asked Sydney.

She seemed surprised by his question but stopped long enough to dig a paper out of her purse. "Fine," she replied, handing him the slightly rumpled certificate.

It wasn't a diploma; it was her test results. Cain's eyebrows shot up in surprise as he stared at the marks. She hadn't missed a single question; not one. "Impressive," he told her. "Very nice."

She blushed slightly but didn't smile, biting her lip and crossing her arms over her chest in a purely protective manner. "The teacher said that they'd mail me my GED," she said. "Guess that's something."

Cain smiled. "Sure, it is. Gin'll want to throw a party for you, I imagine." She didn't reply, and Cain sighed. "That's not really why you came to see me, was it?"

She shook her head and scrunched her shoulders up a little more. "No."

Tossing his cigarette away, Cain stuffed his hands in his pockets and started walking once more. Sydnie fell in step beside him, scowling at the beach below her feet. "I've always liked the ocean," Cain remarked. "Kind of calming . . ."

"Yeah," she agreed absently. "You . . . you're tai-youkai . . ."

Cain blinked, casting Sydnie a questioning glance before nodding slowly. "I am."

She sighed. "Then you know all the . . . all the laws, right?"

He nodded again. "Pretty much."

"Can . . . can a mating be . . . undone?"

Stopping abruptly, Cain turned to stare at the cat-youkai. "Undone?" he repeated with a shake of his head. "You . . . regret becoming Bas' mate?"

She shook her head quickly, refusing to meet his gaze as her cheeks reddened; as the scent of fresh tears assailed Cain's nostrils. "I don't," she replied, knitting her hands together in a decidedly nervous fashion. "I . . . I think he . . . does . . ."

Cain frowned, trying to make sense of what Sydnie was telling him; trying to comprehend just why she'd think that Bas would regret that, of all things. "Sydnie, I don't think—"

"He doesn't have time for me," she mumbled, swatting tears away with an angry flick of her hand. "I don't blame him—really I don't . . . he doesn't sleep in our bed . . . he didn't even take me to my test today."

"Wh . . .? But he left in plenty of time."

She shrugged—a defeated sort of gesture. “Something about cows and tires and things blowing up,” she grumbled. “Anyway, I just thought . . .” She paused, swallowing hard as Cain dug in his pocket for a handkerchief or something. “He’d be happier without me . . .”

“I don’t think . . .” Cain grimaced. “I’m sorry, Sydnie . . . this is . . . my fault.”

She shook her head, her eyes lit with confusion.

Cain pulled a wrinkled but clean paint rag from his pocket and offered it to her. She took it rather hesitantly, drying her cheeks and sniffing pathetically. “Bas has never told me when I’ve asked too much of him. He’s always just sucked it up and done it, even if it was more than he could handle. I think . . . I think that was the case, here. I didn’t realize . . .” Waving off his unfinished thought, Cain heaved a sigh and glowered at the ocean. “I’ve never seen my son happier than he is when he’s with you. Besides, you can’t undo a mating. It’s permanent. It’s forever—He hasn’t been sleeping in your bed?”

Sydnie flinched but nodded.

“I see . . .”

Sydnie shrugged once more. “I . . . I didn’t think that he’d be busy all the time,” she murmured, scowl darkening, as though she hadn’t wanted to admit as much to Cain.

Cain sighed again, hating the obvious upset in Sydnie’s quiet tone. “I tell you what, Sydnie . . . you want a job?”

She looked at him as though he’d just sprouted another head. “A job?”

“Yeah, a job. Bas is starting up a new division for me—yukai special crimes and unsolved cases. He’s good at checking into things, and he’s damn good at seeing things through . . . Gunnar’s going to be helping him with intelligence; that sort of thing, but . . . but I think those two need a boss—someone who can keep them on their toes . . . someone who can tell my son when he’s done enough for one day . . . you know, so he can remember the way to his bedroom . . . so he can remember that his first and most important responsibility is to take care of his mate.”

“I could . . . be his . . . boss?” she asked slowly.

Cain nodded. “Listen, it’s not a pretty job, Sydnie. Some of those cases are uglier than what happened to your sister, if you can believe that. Thing is, Bas is afraid that there’s

another child out there – another pup that fell through the cracks. He'd mentioned wanting to bring in someone with a different background."

"Like me."

"Yeah, like you. I'd thought of you a few times. I just wasn't sure how Bas would like it, and then . . ." He sighed. "Then I wasn't sure if you'd even be interested."

"And I could tell him if he's working too hard?"

"I'd *expect* you to do that. Being a boss doesn't mean you just tell people what to do. It means you take care of those who push themselves just a little too hard. It means you make sure that they're not neglecting their families."

"But I don't have any experience," she admitted.

"Sydnie . . . Bas told me that you didn't know very much math, and yet you managed to learn it all in the course of a couple months. Besides . . . maybe you can give a new perspective on these cases. You've got a very different background from Bas and Gunnar. It's not a liability. We've got a woman named Myrna – hawk-youkai – doing intelligence, but she's under lockdown because of her connections with the Onyx. Maybe you . . . maybe you can get into places where Bas and Gunnar couldn't. I don't imagine they blend in well with a rougher sort of crowd. You can do that, can't you? Of course, I doubt Bas would let you go anywhere without him, but . . ."

Sydnie digested that in silence. Myrna . . . she was one of the Onyx? And yet Cain didn't want to kill her, any more than he wanted to have Sydnie put to death for her crimes. To work in that close a proximity to a woman who had been hired to assassinate her? Sydnie frowned. Somehow she had a feeling that the idea of this woman's presence would bother Bas much more than it bothered her . . .

Cain had another point, too. Bas *had* stood out in the bar the first time she'd seen him in the dimly lit, grungy bar. Too shiny, too polished . . . he hadn't belonged there, had he? She'd realized it right away . . .

Cain smiled and turned back toward the mansion. "Do you mind if I keep this awhile?" he asked, brandishing the test results so that she knew what he was talking about. "I'll return it; I promise."

She looked confused but nodded. "Okay."

His smile widened, and he turned to go. "Let me know what you think, Sydnie. The job's yours if you want it."

She didn't reply as he strode away. Heading back toward the mansion, he stared at the test results once more. Most of the time, he thought that he and Gin had done a fairly decent job raising their children. Sometimes, though, he had to wonder.

If he had his way, his son wouldn't be forgetting that his mate should be the most important thing in his life, bar none, and Cain aimed to remind him of that . . .

*Final Thought from Cain:
Undone ...?*

Chapter 58

Phantasm

Bas scowled as he stepped into Cain's office, tamping down the impatience that gnawed at his stomach. "Can this wait, Dad? I'm looking for—"

Cain dropped the paper in his hand onto the desk and leaned back in his chair. "No, Bas, it can't wait. Come in and shut the door."

"I'm trying to find Sydney," Bas reiterated. "Have you seen her?"

"Yeah, I saw her," Cain replied. "She's fine. Now come in and shut the door. I need to talk to you."

Seeing no way around it, Bas heaved a sigh but did as he was told. "Okay . . . what is it?"

"I had an interesting question posed to me today."

"Oh? What does this have to do with anything?"

Cain pinned him with his steady gaze. "Bear with me. You might think it's interesting, too."

Bas sat down across from his father though his expression stated plainly that he didn't think any such thing. "All right."

Satisfied that Bas was finally listening, Cain went on. "Seems she wanted to know if it were possible to undo a mating."

Bas snorted. "Pfft! What kind of stupid question is that?"

Cain shrugged. "Not so stupid if you knew why. You see, the woman—pretty little thing, really . . . She's under the impression that her mate regrets being with her."

"Sounds like her mate is worthless," Bas growled. "Are we done yet?"

Rubbing a hand over his face, Cain shook his head. "Do you know what your responsibilities are, son?"

Bas shook his head. "Of course."

Cain frowned. "Do you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good . . . why don't you remind me?"

Bas' patience was wearing thin. He wanted to go find Sydney, not sit around and discuss his station with his father. "To protect those who cannot protect themselves . . . to try to do what's right and honest . . . to uphold the integrity of the tai-youkai . . . why?"

Cain shook his head. "You forgot one."

Bas sighed. "What are you getting at?"

"You never asked me who *she* was."

"She?"

"Yes, 'she' . . . the one who asked me the question about mates."

Bas rolled his eyes, tapping his foot impatiently. "Okay, who was she?"

Cain leveled a look at his son, shaking his head slowly as he pressed his lips together in a thin line. "Sydney."

". . . *What?*" Shooting out of his chair, he stalked the room, opening and closing his fists as he tried to get a handle on his rapidly escalating temper. "No way . . . no! *Hell*, no! Damn it, why – ?"

"Because she thinks *you* regret it," Cain replied softly. "Bas . . . when's the last time you slept in your bed with your mate?"

The expression on his face must have said it all, as far as Cain was concerned. Grimacing as he sat back and dug a cigarette out of his pocket, he took his time lighting it before addressing his son again. "I shouldn't have piled so much work on you," he admitted, "but you should have told me that it *was* too much. Sydney is your family now – more your family than your mother or me . . . She's the one that matters to you. She's your future. Your first and foremost responsibility is to make her happy, Bas. It's not that hard to do."

"Fuck," Bas growled, dropping into the chair once more as he rubbed his temple furiously. "She was so upset about failing the test, and all I could do was make excuses . . ."

"Failing what test?" Cain asked mildly.

Bas scowled at his father. "What do you mean, what test? Her GED test . . ."

"Hmm . . . you mean this one?"

Blinking in surprise, Bas leaned forward and took the paper in his father's hand. It took him a minute to digest the results, and when he finally grasped it, he couldn't help the almost stupid grin that broke over his features. "I'll be damned . . ."

Just as quickly as the smile surfaced, though, it faded. If she weren't upset over the test, then that meant that he really was the reason for it. "Shit . . . I've really fucked up, Dad."

"Well . . . it's never too late to fix it."

"Yeah," Bas mumbled, staring at the test results. "Yeah."

She wasn't that hard to find. Following her scent home, he found her where she always was whenever she was upset with him: huddled on the floor in the back of the closet. She didn't look at him as he set the glass of milk on the floor and scooted it toward her, knowing that if he offered it to her, she'd ignore it. Funny how easy it was to predict her reactions sometimes . . .

"Not so stupid if you knew why. You see, the woman – pretty little thing, really . . . She's under the impression that her mate regrets being with her."

He sighed. "I'm really proud of you – did you know?"

"Are you?"

Nodding, he sat on the floor, ankles crossed, arms hooked around his shins. "Yep. I'm *always* proud of you."

"I kept telling myself that you'd be there," she said. "I wanted you to be there . . ."

"I wanted to *be* there, Sydnie . . . I tried . . . really, I did."

She shrugged offhandedly, wrapping her arms more securely around her knees. "It's okay. Evan made sure I got to the test on time," she told him.

Bas stifled the urge to growl and nodded, heaving a deep sigh. "I'll have to . . . *thank* him."

"He said —" She cleared her throat. "He said that you were a fool, but you're not. He said you were too worried about pleasing your father when you should have been more concerned with . . ." She flinched.

"He's right," Bas admitted with a grimace. "So that's what his problem's been lately . . . never thought I'd say that he was right about . . . well . . . *anything* . . ."

"What?"

He shook his head. "Nothing . . . Evan's just been a little . . . angry lately. Maybe he was trying to tell me that I'm . . . stupid."

"You're not stupid!" she argued. "You're smart, and you work hard, and . . . and —"

"And I'm sorry, baby. You're the most important person in my life. You know that, right?"

"Am I?"

"Yeah, you are . . . I just . . . I'm sorry."

She took the milk and drank it before setting the glass aside with a sigh. "You mean it? I know you're going to be busy, and —"

"That's just it . . . I'm not supposed to be . . . at least, not too busy for you. I forgot that. Forgive me?"

Sydnie stared at him for a moment, her eyes glowing in the darkened recesses of the closet. Slowly, hesitantly, she rose on her hands and knees and crawled toward him. Bas pulled her into his lap and cradled her against his chest. "You can't anymore, anyway," she finally said, twisting a lock of his hair around her finger.

Bas kissed her forehead and held her tight. "I won't."

"That's right; you won't."

Chuckling at the bravado in her tone, he leaned back to look at her. "Why is that?"

She shrugged then cuddled against him again. "Because, puppy . . . I'm your new boss."

"Come again?"

"Your father offered me the job. He said to think about it, but . . ."

"But?"

She sighed. "I think I'll take it. He said that you were afraid that there were others out there like me. If there are . . ."

"Sydnie, these cases . . . they're ugly – *really* ugly."

"I can handle it," she assured him.

"It's not that. I know you can handle it. You can probably handle it better than I can. Thing is, I don't *want* you to handle it. I never want you to have to see those kinds of things, ever again."

She reached up, caressed his cheek as a gentle smile – the first real smile he'd seen on her face in longer than he cared to think about – touched her lips. "Someone else might not have a puppy to save them."

"Was that it? I saved you?"

"Didn't you?"

He smiled, too. "Maybe I did."

"Before you – when I was alone – there wasn't anything, you know? Just me and the phantasms that I couldn't make sense out of . . . If there is someone else like me . . ." she trailed off with a soft sigh. He understood what she just couldn't say. "I don't want that . . . I . . . I love you."

"You . . . do?"

She shot him a narrow look. "You didn't know that?"

His grin widened. "I knew that. It's nice to hear, though. You *could* say it more often."

"Could I?"

He nodded. "Yes. Kitty . . .?"

"Hmm?"

"I love *you*," he said.

"I know, puppy," Sydnie said with a smile, leaning up to kiss his cheek. "I know."

*Final Thought from Bas:
... Happily ever after...?*

Epilogue

October 18, 2072

“I don’t like her.”

Bas chuckled and scooped up his year-and-a-half-old son, sitting on the edge of the bed and holding Bailey on his lap. “Why not?”

Bailey made a face. “She’s wrinkly like a raisin. I don’t *like* raisins.”

“A raisin, huh?” Sydnie asked, hefting an eyebrow with a secretive little smile on her face despite the weariness in the depths of her gaze.

‘*Twelve hours of labor would do me in, too,*’ Bas supposed.

“What’s her name?” Bailey demanded, leaning in closer to get a better look at his newborn sister.

“Olivia,” Sydnie told him.

Bailey thought that over for a moment, tugging on his right ear in his thoughtful manner. “Like Olive? I don’t like olives, neither,” he complained.

“Not olive, pup—Olivia,” Bas corrected though he wasn’t very successful in hiding his amusement at his son’s observations. “And you were wrinkly when you were born, too.”

“Was not!” Bailey hollered, thumping his little fists against his father’s leg. “I was round—Mama said!”

“Your *mouth* was round,” Bas agreed with a chuckle, “and it was *always* moving.”

Bailey crossed his arms over his chest, scowling in much the same fashion that Bas did. His father laughed. “*Ma-ma!*” Bailey whined.

Sydnie giggled. “You’re horrible, puppy,” she pointed out though she didn’t look at all chiding. “Leave him alone—he’s had a very busy day.”

“Oh, he has, has he?” Bas countered.

Sydnie let Bas take Olivia before pulling Bailey off his father’s lap and cuddling him against her. “Yes, he has. It’s not every day that he gets a new baby sister.”

A knock on the door sounded moments before Evan poked his head into the room. “Is she done yet?” he demanded as his cocky grin widened. “‘Bout time, pussykins. Hand her over, lap-dog.”

Bas snorted but let Evan take the baby from him. Evan chuckled rather evilly before striding out of the room with Olivia in his arms. “Where do you think you’re going? Bring her back here, you little fucker!”

“Daddy said a bad word,” Bailey chortled behind the hand he’d slapped over his mouth.

“Yes, he did, didn’t he?” Sydnie commented. “Sebastian . . .”

“Relax, Bubby! I got it all under control,” Evan assured him.

“How’s that?”

The cocky grin turned into a shit-eating smile. “Chicks dig babies, don’t you know?”

“You’re not using *my* daughter to pick up women!” Bas hollered, shooting off the bed to run out of the room after his younger brother.

“You’re not really going to leave me, are you puppy?” Sydnie asked behind him.

Bas stifled the urge to growl and glowered at the empty doorway but sat back down on the bed. “Sorry,” he muttered, brushing aside the irritation. “How are you feeling, kitty?”

“Just fine, puppy,” she assured him.

“Uncle Evan gonna bring her back?” Bailey asked, rising up on his knees and leaning so that he was staring his mother in the face.

Sydnie smiled. “Of course he will.”

“Oh,” Bailey replied, making no bones about being disappointed that his sister would be returned.

Bas leaned in and kissed Sydnie gently. She sighed and leaned forward to lick his cheek.

“I think this is yours.”

Bas turned his head in time to see Gunnar stride into the room with Olivia. Holding the infant around her chest and with his arms stretched out so that she was as far away from his body as she could be, he looked completely relieved when Bas stood up to grab his daughter before Gunnar did something stupid, like drop her. Bailey launched himself off the bed and onto Gunnar’s back. The hanyou peered over his shoulder then glanced at Bas and Sydnie. “You’re done, right? No more of those?” he asked, jerking his head toward the infant.

“Hell, we were going to have a few more—maybe ten . . . and they’re all going to come over and stay with you over the summer,” Bas quipped.

Gunnar affected a full-body shudder as he peeled Bailey off his back. “Down, boy,” he commanded as he set Bailey back on his feet.

“I gots a new coloring book from Grandpa,” Bailey pointed out happily.

“Yeah? Good . . . color something for me, will you?” Gunnar replied, affectionately ruffling the boy’s hair.

“So why’s Bailey okay but Olivia’s not?” Bas asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“She’ll be fine—just fine. Wean her and get her talking like Bailey, and she’ll be all right with me.”

“You’re such an ass,” Bas grumbled but grinned.

Gunnar chuckled. “Think so?”

“I *know* so, Mammy.”

“Oi!”

Bas grinned knowingly, letting Sydnie take the infant before he crossed his arms over his chest and slowly shook his head. “Mark my words: one day some woman’s going to come along and snare you, and you’ll be more than happy to have babies, too.”

“That’ll never happen,” Gunnar shot back.

“Oh, yeah?”

Gunnar grinned. “Yeah.”

-The End-

*-April 21, 2006-
-11:45 p.m.-*

*Final Thought from Gunnar:
... Neeeee vahhhhhhhhh...*