

*Dedicated to my forumers.
Thanks for being a great bunch!*

*Blanket disclaimer for this fanfic (will apply to this and all other chapters in **Fairy Tale**):
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.*

The Fairy Tale
A Purity Short

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Prologue
There She Goes

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September, 2056
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

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Izayoi Morio glanced up from the dog-eared copy of *Othello*, leaning back in his chair at the large oak table in the center of the library and tossed his glasses down on the inked-over pages of his notes. ‘*Why I agreed to take a stupid literature class when I’m studying to design cars is beyond me,*’ he grumbled, rather proud that his already sound grasp of the foreign language was getting better and better every day.

He sighed. He knew why. The student advisor he’d spoken with when planning his course schedule had suggested it since Morio originally hailed from Tokyo, Japan. She’d maintained that the lit class would help him get a better grasp on English—not that he had that bad of one, to start with. He had relatives who lived in the States, an aunt and might-as-well-be aunt who were native English-speakers, as well. No, Miss Hevershem had insisted that Morio spoke the ‘bastardized’ version of English, and that was why he’d agreed to take the kami-forsaken class. ‘*Someone,*’ he thought darkly, letting the book fall onto the table, ‘*ought to tell Miss H. that more people speak bastard than they do Ye Olde English . . .*’

Drumming his claws on the thickly varnished oak table, he shifted to the side, drawing his feet up and dropping them on the chair beside him, ankles crossed, rereading the same paragraph about ten times before giving up with a pronounced snort. Dropping *Othello* onto the table, Morio glanced around, pasting on a lopsided grin as he caught the disapproving look he garnered from the old librarian sitting behind a desk where she peered through the holographic computer screen to pin him with her eagle-eyed stare. Intercepting his grin, the librarian narrowed her eyes in silent warning, and Morio heaved another sigh before digging his laptop computer out of his knapsack.

“Excuse me.”

Morio glanced up and blinked as his eyes locked with the deep silver gaze of the girl who was standing beside the table. Untangling his legs, he slowly stood, offering the girl a slightly hesitant smile and a polite bow. She tucked a long strand of chestnut brown hair behind her ear and cleared her throat, hugging a stack of books against her chest as her cheeks pinked, hiding the dusting of soft freckles that spanned the bridge of her nose. “No, please . . . excuse *me*,” he insisted as his brain slowed to a crawl. ‘*She’s . . . youkai . . .*’

“That book,” she said, her voice soft, smooth. “Are you using it?”

Morio shook his head without bothering to look at the book in question. “No, no . . . help yourself.”

She nodded brusquely, pausing long enough to retrieve the book before casting him a tepid little smile. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” he assured her. She started to turn away. Morio’s hand shot out, catching her arm to stop her. “I’m Morio . . . Izayoi Morio . . . err, well, Morio Izayoi, I suppose . . .”

She shook her head and scowled. “Japanese?”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“Thank you, Morio Izayoi,” she allowed, breaking into a real, if not small, smile.

He grinned back, bemused, and she pulled her arm away before turning to leave once more.

“Wait,” he called after her, earning himself another formidable glower from the librarian. He ignored the look as the girl stopped but didn’t glance back at him. “What’s your name?”

“Why do you need my name?” she countered.

He shrugged. “Let me guess . . . your name’s Angel because you had to have descended from heaven.”

She rolled her eyes but her smile didn’t disappear. “No.”

“Bunny?” he tried again.

“Bunny?” she echoed, shaking her head since she didn’t quite understand his rationale.

His grin took a turn toward the cheesier side of things. “Yes, Bunny—because you’ve hopped right into my heart.”

She wrinkled her nose but her eyes sparkled. “Oh, that one’s bad,” she informed him as her smile widened the tiniest bit.

“I could go on,” he offered.

“Keep them to yourself, please.”

Morio grinned. “Then tell me your name?”

She didn’t look like she was going to tell him. Biting her lip, she glanced around as though trying to decide whether or not she was being watched. “Meara,” she finally said.

He grinned. “Meara? That’s pretty . . . I like it.”

She didn’t answer, but she did giggle softly as she headed for the checkout station with the pile of books.

Morio hurriedly shoved his things into his knapsack and slung it over his shoulder as he strode after Meara. He stood back to wait while she checked out the books. She blinked in surprise when she turned around, only to come face to face with him once more. Reaching over, he carefully took the stack from her, and while she looked like she might protest his unnecessary assistance, she didn’t voice her objections as he led the way out of the library and onto the sidewalk.

“I can carry those, myself,” she pointed out reasonably, tilting her head to avoid the wind that blew her hair into her face.

“That’s okay,” he assured her. “I was just heading that way.”

Meara frowned and shook her head. “What way?”

He chuckled softly. “Whatever way you’re going.”

She blinked as though she were trying to decide if he really was being serious or not. In the end, she choked out a little giggle as she brushed her hair back out of her eyes again. “Oh, my God . . . that was one of the worst pick-up lines I’ve ever heard.”

Morio chuckled and fell into step beside Meara. “I’ve got more.”

“I’m sure you do.”

He wasn’t daunted. “You want to go out sometime?”

“Nope.”

“Your parents told you not to talk to strangers?”

“Nope.”

“You already have a boyfriend, Meara?”

“Nope.”

“Then it’s just me?”

“Yes.”

“Careful . . . you’re crushing my heart.”

She laughed then smashed the back of her hand over her mouth as though she hadn’t wanted to give in to her amusement. “I’m sorry, Morio Izayoi. I’m busy.”

He heaved a melodramatic sigh then darted off to the left, carefully plucking a late summer flower from a carefully-kempt garden. “Here,” he said, jogging backward in front of her as he extended the blossom.

“You shouldn’t be stealing people’s flowers,” she admonished.

“Yeah, I know. I was improvising.”

She pursed her lips in an attempt to keep from smiling. “No, thank you.”

“But I stole it for you!” he insisted. “You have to take it.”

“Why’s that?”

“I committed a felony, just for you: flower theft—grand floral larceny . . . the petals made me do it.”

Again, she rolled her eyes, but she reached out and took the flower, bringing it to her nose and breathing deeply before handing it back. “I’d rather not be an accomplice, thank you.”

“Do you have a surname, Meara the Beautiful?”

She leveled a no-nonsense look at him. “Do you say that to every girl you meet?”

Morio shook his head and grinned. “No . . . in fact, I’ve never actually said that to anyone else, ever.”

“Really.”

He winced at the apparent disbelief in her tone. “Really . . . absolutely.”

She stopped, and so did he. Crossing her arms over her chest, she cocked an eyebrow and slowly shook her head. “I’m not interested, Morio Izayoi. If you’ll return my books . . .”

He sighed then nodded though his smile didn’t fade completely. Opening the first book in the pile—*Twenty-First Century Sculpture: A History*—he carefully slipped the stem of the flower between the pages and closed the book again. “I’ll give back your books if you tell me your last name, Meara,” he offered.

Meara stared at him, and for a moment, he honestly had to wonder if she was going to kick him in the shin or worse. She sighed, too, and shook her head, unable to mask the hint of amusement in the depths of her silvery gaze. “MacDonnough,” she said, holding out her hand. “Now can I have my books back?”

Morio handed them over, smiling to himself when she didn’t try to give the flower back. Holding the stack of books against her chest, she shot him one last glance before turning on her heel and sauntering away. He watched her disappear into Feighleigh Hall—an all-girls’ freshman dorm—as a slow grin widened on his face.

“Meara MacDonnough,” he murmured.

Stuffing his hands into his pockets after readjusting the knapsack he had carelessly slung over his shoulder, Morio shuffled back along the path, retracing his steps as he headed home. He didn’t notice the first droplets of rain that splashed down on him. No, there wasn’t room for anything else in his mind aside from the flashing silver eyes; the brilliant smile of Meara MacDonnough . . .

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Meara dropped the stack of books onto her desk and slowly shook her head, a soft giggle escaping her as she stared at the flower sticking out of the book.

‘Morio Izayoi . . .’

She knew that name—Izayoi. Who of her kind didn’t? All youkai knew the story of InuYasha Izayoi and his mate, Kagome . . . the angry hanyou—the hanyou of legend who had slain Naraku so long ago. Even then, it was common knowledge that the hanyou of legend was the half-brother of the Inu no Taisho, Sesshoumaru and if that were true, then this hanyou—Morio Izayoi—he was related to them all, wasn’t he?

Carefully extricating the flower from the book, Meara brought it to her nose and inhaled the fragrance of the bloom.

‘He’s cute, isn’t he?’

Meara sighed, tilting her head to the side as she stared at the flower, as she carefully traced the delicate edges of the outer petals. “Cute . . .”

Somehow, ‘cute’ didn’t seem to accurately describe the hanyou, did it? No . . . ‘cute’ was definitely an understatement. There was something about his eyes—so warm, so friendly—that made her want to forget all about every single thing, and how could that possibly be? She’d talked to him for maybe half an hour, if that, and he’d been nothing but an outrageous flirt.

‘A cute as sin outrageous flirt.’

Her smile widened at the rueful sound of her youkai blood’s voice whispering in her head. *‘Morio Izayoi . . .’*

The beautiful peach dahlia drew her attention once more as her smile faded. No, it just wasn’t a good idea. Better to push all thoughts of Morio Izayoi from her mind wasn’t it? Better not to think about him . . . wasn’t it?

“I thought you were going to the library.”

Blinking away the remnants of her silent musings, Meara glanced over her shoulder in time to see her roommate, Iona as the latter stretched out in her wooden desk chair, hiking her foot up onto the desk and leaning forward as she shook a bottle of bright pink nail polish.

“I just needed to get a book,” Meara replied, twirling the flower in her nimble fingers.

Iona flipped a long strand of ash blonde hair out of her face and stopped short, narrowing her gaze on the flower in Meara’s hand. “Interesting . . . where did that come from, may I ask?”

Keeping her eyes fixed on the delicate petals, Meara willed herself not to blush. Iona didn't miss much. It might have had something to do with Iona's uncanny sense of vision since she was a white-tailed eagle-youkai . . . "Someone," she replied as her smile returned.

"Someone?" Iona echoed. "And does this someone have a name?"

"He . . . probably does," she said, carefully keeping her tone of voice level—careful not to let any emotion slip.

Iona wasn't ready to leave it alone, though. "Someone gives you a flower and doesn't tell you his name? I'm not buying, you ken?"

"Maybe you're not," Meara went on, dropping the flower on her desk with a shrug. "It doesn't matter, anyway. I'm here to study; not to spend all my time dating odd men who steal flowers out of perfect strangers' gardens."

"Wow, you're a tough one, Meara," Iona went on with a sad shake of her head. "Dating a guy doesn't have to take center-stage. Look at you! You're nineteen years old, and you still haven't been on a single date, ever! It's just wrong, I'm telling you."

Meara grabbed the book she'd checked out of the library and flopped down on her twin sized dorm room bed. "It wouldn't be a good idea," she mumbled under her breath as she opened the publication, wishing that Iona would figure out that Meara just didn't want to talk about this.

"Why is that?"

Meara heaved a sigh and snapped the book closed before slowly shifting her gaze to her lifelong friend's familiar face. "It just wouldn't," she insisted.

Iona swung her foot off the desk and stood up, wandering over to perch on the edge of Meara's bed. "What aren't you telling me, Meara MacDonnough?" she demanded.

Meara drew a deep breath and let it out in a heavy rush before pushing the book away and sitting up, hooking her hands around her ankles and resting her chin on her raised knees. The sun was just starting to set outside, and she watched as the orange rays streamed through the window—odd for this time of year and proof that it didn't always rain in Great Britain. The orange looked like fire, and on the edges of the fire were streaks of brilliant gold—gold that reminded her of those eyes—those startling, beautiful eyes . . .

He smiled so easily, didn't he? He smiled, and he made her want to smile, too . . .

There was some intangible quality that he possessed; something that made her wish that things weren't quite so complicated. She had responsibilities, after all, and those responsibilities . . .

She sighed. Those responsibilities didn't include a shockingly handsome Morio Izayoi, and it didn't include his smiles . . . or his ill-gotten flowers . . .

“Do you have a surname, Meara the Beautiful?” His voice had been soft and tinged with a husky sort of quality that brushed over her skin much like a physical caress. The results had been devastating, weakening her knees as well as her resolve as she'd struggled to hold onto a modicum of her composure.

“Do you say that to every girl you meet?” she'd asked, inflicting enough boredom into her tone to make her appear to be more nonchalant than she was actually feeling.

Morio shook his head and grinned—a dangerous grin: a grin that could easily melt her heart and make her forget about every single thing in the world so long as he was smiling at her. “No . . . in fact, I've never actually said that to anyone else, ever.”

“Yoo-hoo . . . earth to Meara . . . come in, Meara . . .”

Shaking off her silent musings, Meara pushed Iona's hand away from her face with a giggle. “Stop that,” she chided.

“Tell me what you were thinking about?”

“Not a thing,” she lied.

“So what's really bothering you about this guy?” Iona asked, staring at her claws as she carefully filed down the tips.

“Nothing,” Meara maintained stubbornly.

“Don't give me that. I know better.”

She sighed. She never had been able to put anything over on Iona after all. “It just wouldn't work; that's all,” she insisted as she rolled off the bed and headed toward the bathroom to take a shower.

“Meara . . .”

Stopping on the threshold with her hand poised over the light switch, she felt her shoulders slump as a sense of resignation seeped over her. Some things, she decided, were doomed before they could even begin. Any kind of relationship with Morio Izayoi? That was simply one of those things, wasn't it? She knew that, certainly. She knew it as well as she knew her own name.

“Meara?” Iona repeated softly.

Meara turned her head but didn’t dare look at her friend. “He’s hanyou,” she admitted.

Then she walked into the bathroom and closed the door.



Final Thought from Morio:

... I think I'm in love ...

Chapter One
One Step Forward

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University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Thursday, February 13, 2059

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“Aww, he’s out there again . . .”

Meara heaved a sigh and smashed her hands over her ears in a vain effort to ignore the ungodly sound of the off-key singing that was blowing in the window along with the frigid winter afternoon wind. “Close that window, will you?” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the rising din. “It’s freezing, if you didn’t notice, *and* you’re encouraging him!”

Iona rolled her eyes and stuck out her bottom lip in a thoughtful moue. “Of course I’m encouraging him . . . he looks absolutely miserable . . . come see for yourself if you don’t believe me . . .”

Meara didn’t deign to respond to that. Heaving a sigh as she tried to pay attention to the book she was reading for one of her classes, she shook her head and wondered just how long he’d stand out there, singing and strumming his ridiculous ukulele before he gave up for the night.

One would have thought that’d he would have given up that particular line of pursuit over three years ago after the first time he’d tried it. All he’d succeeded in doing back then was irritating everyone else who lived in the dormitory to the point that they were throwing things at him. She supposed it was her fault that he kept it up. After seeing the numerous stuffed animals and other assorted things that were raining down on the poor man, she’d agreed to accept the flower that he’d offered her that had initiated the debacle though she had declined his offer to take her on a date.

‘You have to give him credit for his ‘never say die’ attitude,’ her youkai ventured.

She grimaced. *‘He needs to give up,’* she told herself sternly, refreshing her grip on the pen in her hand that she’d been using to take notes before the ruckus had started outside. It’d be simpler to ignore if Iona would stop opening the window whenever he started singing—which he always did whenever she refused to take the daily flower that he invariably offered her. A different flower every day—at least, a different color if he couldn’t find a completely different kind. She’d often wondered if he kept a calendar with the flower types and colors listed on them so that he didn’t repeat himself, though there were three separate occasions that she could name when he’d broken the rule. She’d

made the mistake of pointing that out to him a few months ago on that crisp September afternoon when he'd presented her the peach dahlia for the third time along with his prerequisite invitation to take her to the movies or whatever the offer of the day happened to be.

“Running out of flowers, are you?” she'd asked coolly, her gaze flicking over his handsome countenance.

Morio grinned unrepentantly and shook his head. “Nope. This one's special.”

“Special?”

He nodded. “It's our three year anniversary of the day we first met. It's only fitting that I give you the same kind of flower, don't you think . . .?”

Proving, of course, that there really *was* a method to Morio Izayoi's madness . . .

“Oh . . . looks like they've gotten out the eggs . . .” Iona said with a wince. “Poor guy . . .”

Slamming her book closed, Meara stood up with a swish of her heather brown skirt and crossed her arms over her chest as she grudgingly made her way to the open window. Grimacing when she saw that the other tenants in the quaint apartment building really *were* throwing eggs at the pathetic-looking hanyou who was still singing his lungs out on the square of yard below, she sighed. “Morio! Stop that!” she hissed, grasping the window sill and leaning outside.

Morio stopped long enough to retrieve the wine colored rose off the packed snow. “Will you take the flower?” he called up.

“No!”

He sighed and shook his head, carefully setting the flower back on the ground before strumming a few off-key notes on the ukulele once more. “*You are my sunshi-i-ine, my only sunshi-i-ine . . . You make me happy-y-y when skies are gr-e-e-ey . . .*” he sang.

Someone yelled something that Meara couldn't rightly discern seconds before another egg came crashing down from one of the apartments above. Morio neatly sidestepped the obstacle and kept singing. “*Mor-i-o!*” Meara hissed a little louder. “*Stop!*”

“You'll never know, de-e-ar—will you take my flo-ower and go on a date with me toda-a-ay . . .?”

Gritting her teeth, Meara growled in irritation at the stubborn hanyou who just didn't know when to quit.

“Just take the blessed flower, MacDonnough!” someone hollered. “I've got tests tomorrow . . .”

“Yeah,” someone else agreed. “Put *him* out of *our* misery!”

A chorus of agreement ensued, and Meara heaved a sigh.

“If you don’t want to accept the flower from him, maybe you should just accept it for the good of the other residents,” Iona pointed out reasonably despite the marked twitching of her lips.

Meara heaved a sigh, rubbing her forehead with a tired hand. “All right!” she called down. “Fine . . . you win, you stubborn man!”

Morio’s grin was instant and brilliant. Without a second thought, he dropped the ukulele and retrieved the rose, clamping the stem between his teeth before grasping the ivy covered trellis affixed to the building beside Meara’s window and starting to climb.

“Here,” he said, grabbing the flower and holding onto the window sill with one hand. “Does that mean—?”

“No,” Meara stated flatly. “No date; just the flower.” She hurried to take said-flower and slowly shook her head. “Be careful!” she fretted. He slipped but managed to catch himself before he took the two story plunge to the ground below the window. She reacted before she could stop and think about it, grasping at him before he fell. She reached for his shoulders, but he slipped a little more, and she gasped when her hands closed around fistfuls of hair and something . . . else . . .? Jerking her hands away, she scowled at him as he grimaced at her. Leaning to the side, he held on with one arm to free the other to rub at the little white dog ears that she could now plainly see. She might have seen them long ago if she has only tried to see through his concealment. Then again, his concealment had been a lot stronger than most hanyous . . . it bespoke his grandmother’s renowned miko powers as well as his direct relation to the Inu no Taisho, she supposed . . .

“Ouch, Meara . . . that hurt . . .” he complained.

“S-sorry!” she blurted before leaning forward to inspect the ears once more. “You have *dog* ears?”

He stopped rubbing long enough to grin at her. “Well, yeah . . . I’m hanyou, remember?”

Inclining his head, he twitched his ears at her; a silent invitation for her to touch them. She started to reach out then jerked her hands back again, scowling at him. “I-I *don’t* care!” she stammered, crossing her arms again to keep her itching fingers off Morio’s entirely too-inviting ears.

He chuckled and hauled himself up enough to peer into the room. “Hello, Iona. How are you this evening?”

Iona giggled. “Hi, Morio. Fine as ever.”

“You look lovely.”

“You look absolutely miserable,” she remarked with a smile at the casual conversational tone he was using despite his precarious position, hanging from the window sill.

“Nah,” he drawled with a lazy grin. “I’m just . . . hanging around.”

Iona laughed. “I see . . . just don’t fall, okay?”

He grinned. “Don’t worry; I won’t . . . So Meara . . . do you want your Valentine’s Day gift early?”

She rolled her eyes but couldn’t help the little smile that graced her lips. “It’s not Valentine’s Day yet.”

He shrugged. “That’s okay . . . I want you to have it early.”

“You mean you’re not going to the Valentine’s Day festival tomorrow?” she couldn’t help asking.

“Well . . . probably not . . . I mean, if some other woman pulled my name out of the hat, then I’d feel like I was cheating on you, right?”

Cheeks pinking, she snapped her mouth closed on the retort that had been forming. “We’re not together, so it wouldn’t be cheating.”

He grinned. “Face it, Meara. We’re meant to be.”

“You gave me the flower; now get out of here, will you?”

He chuckled. “Will you take your present?”

Rolling her eyes and stifling the desire to growl in abject irritation at his tenacity since she knew—just *knew*—that he wasn’t about to give up, she sighed instead. “Fine.”

Leaning to the side, he hung onto the windowsill with one hand while digging into the inside pocket of his leather jacket with his free hand.

Meara winced and gripped his arm to steady him. He shot her a cheesy grin as he carefully extricated a small flat box and held it out to her.

She stared at it for a long moment before slowly reaching out to take it.

“W-whoa . . . whoa!” he exclaimed suddenly, flailing his arm and trying to keep from falling. Meara gasped and dropped the box to grab him, pulling him back toward the window once more. He laughed, and she narrowed her gaze. “Aw, Meara . . . I didn’t know you cared.”

“You did that on purpose!” she gasped.

He laughed again. “No . . . well, maybe . . .”

“You *jerk!*” she growled, smacking his arm. “I thought you were really going to fall!”

His laughter escalated, and she heaved a sigh. “Were you worried about me, Meara?”

She narrowed her gaze and resisted the nearly overwhelming desire to shove the hanyou out of her window. “No, I don’t think I was.”

“Ah, well . . . how about a Valentine’s kiss for me?”

“How about not.”

He heaved a sigh but looked anything but contrite. “Can’t blame a guy for trying, now can you?”

Reaching up, she braced her hands on the bottom of the window, the threat obvious. With a hearty laugh, he hauled himself up to kiss her cheek before letting himself drop back to the ground below. “Morio!” she hollered, poking her head out the window before she could stop herself.

He landed on his feet and stood up slowly, turning and looking up to wave at her before gathering his ukulele and loping off into the night.

“I think he’s trying to kill me,” Meara grumbled as she slammed the window closed and snapped the latch into place.

“I think he’s sweeter than sugar,” Iona contradicted, rubbing her arms as she adjusted the thermostat to warm the apartment up quicker. “So what did he give you this year?”

Meara wrinkled her nose as she stared at the carefully wrapped package. Silver foil paper festooned with deep red and pink hearts shone in the weak light of the lamp beside the sofa, and she bit her lip, trying to decide whether or not to open it.

“Well, it’s too small to be another stuffed dog,” Iona remarked, peering over Meara’s shoulder with a soft giggle.

Meara tried not to smile at the reminder of the present Morio had bought her last year—a huge white stuffed dog that was currently sitting in her bedroom—not that she'd ever admit as much to him, of course.

“Sure, but what do you think it is?”

Iona tapped a delicate claw against her chin thoughtfully. “Hmm . . . too big to be jewelry . . . too flat to be a flower . . .”

Casting her friend a sidelong glance, Meara slipped her claw under the configuration of ribbons that were tied around the flat box and slit them. They fell away onto the floor. Tearing off the paper, she couldn't help the little giggle that escaped as she stared at the small box of gourmet chocolates—her favorites. How had he known . . .?

‘You ready to admit that he isn't as bad as you want to make him out to be?’

Meara frowned at the teasing in her youkai's voice, and she abruptly handed the box to Iona. “Here,” she said, shoving the chocolates into Iona's hands. “I'm on a diet.”

“A diet?” Iona echoed with an arched eyebrow. “Really . . .”

“Yes,” Meara stated flatly. “Now I have to finish that report.”

Iona's laughter trailed after Meara as she grabbed her book off the sofa and stomped off toward her room.

‘You gave away your Valentine's Day present?’

Scowling as she sank down on the edge of her bed and kicked off her shoes, Meara pursed her lips and tried to ignore the stinging reprieve in her youkai's voice.

‘Three years, Meara . . . that's a long time for him to be hung up on you when you won't even give the poor guy so much as a second of your precious time.’

Opening her book, she shook her head and tried to focus on the words printed on the pages.

‘And those ears . . . admit it: you really liked those ears . . .’

Wrinkling her nose, Meara bit her lip and heaved a sigh, squelching her eyes closed a few times as she tried to read once more.

‘You can try to ignore me if you'd like, but you know I'll just keep talking . . .’

With a heavy sigh, Meara slammed the book closed and tossed it aside before flopping back and dragging a pillow over to cover her face—and hopefully drown out the ever-increasingly annoying voice of her youkai blood.

‘La la la . . . I’ll leave you alone if you’ll just admit that you really don’t dislike Morio Izayoi.’

‘Okay!’ she relented with an accompanying snort. *‘I don’t dislike Morio Izayoi . . . I just don’t like him, either.’*

‘Are you sure about that? He’s awfully cute . . . and those ears were just adorable . . .’

Wrinkling her nose, she rolled her eyes. Leave it to her youkai blood to point out something as entirely irrelevant as Morio Izayoi’s cute little puppy dog ears.

The soft knock on the door sounded just before Iona poked her head inside. Lowering the pillow in time to see the strange expression on Iona’s face, like she had just discovered something that could change the world, Meara narrowed her eyes on her best friend. It was the kind of expression that Meara didn’t trust; not at all. “Why do you look like the cat that ate the canary?” she asked.

Iona shook her head and walked into the room, perching on the edge of the bed beside Meara with an entirely amused glint in her shining green eyes. “Remember that concert you wanted to go to but couldn’t get tickets to?”

Meara snorted, sitting up and making a face at the reminder. She’d tried to get tickets for the much-anticipated show, but it had sold out in record time, much to her irritation. She’d fumed about that for nearly a week afterward. Who would have thought that it would have sold out in a matter of hours? “Yeah . . . what about it?”

Iona’s grin widened, and she handed Meara a plain white envelope. “This was in your box of chocolates, Meara.”

She reached out slowly, unsure whether or not she really ought to take the envelope. Iona’s grin widened, and she rolled her eyes. “It’s not going to bite you,” she chided.

Meara wasn’t so sure. It wasn’t sealed closed, and she bit her lip as she hesitantly pulled the folded paper out, along with two VIP tickets: box seats and backstage passes to meet the members of Trinity, the hottest band in Great Britain. “Oh . . .”

“What does the letter say?”

Casting Iona a suspicious glance, Meara shook her head and set the tickets aside. “Did you read it already?”

Iona snorted. “Contrary to popular belief, I don’t make a habit of reading other people’s love letters,” she pointed out. “Anyway, yes, I saw the tickets, but no, I didn’t read the letter.”

Meara drew a deep breath and unfolded the slip of paper.

:

‘My dearest Meara,

‘I heard from a little birdie that you really wanted to go to see this show, and while I know it isn’t really a great Valentine’s Day gift, I hope you’ll forgive me and enjoy yourself. Take Iona or someone, and have a good time.

‘Happy Valentine’s Day to the light of my life.

‘With all my affection,

‘Morio.’

:

“That jerk,” she mumbled, gripping her forehead in her hands, crumpling the letter against her temple.

“What? Does he want you to meet him there or something?”

She shook her head, foisting the letter into Iona’s hands. “Worse.”

Iona spared a moment to stare at Meara before uncrumpling the note and reading it through.

“Wow . . . he really *is* an ass, isn’t he?” she deadpanned, quirked an eyebrow at Meara.

That earned her a deep scowl as Meara shook her head and sighed. “Don’t you see? He’s trying to *guilt* me! How fair is that, I ask you?”

“Or maybe he really does want you to go and have fun at the concert.”

Meara shook her head. “But how did he get those tickets? They’re box seats . . . with backstage passes, no less!”

“Well, don’t look a gift horse in the mouth . . . but you know, you could see if he wanted to go with you, if that’d soothe your soul.”

Flopping back against her pillows once more, Meara frowned at the ceiling. “Maybe I will,” she allowed grudgingly. “Maybe . . .”



Morio pulled the cottage door closed and rattled the handle to check the lock. Satisfied that the place was secure—then again, who would really want to rip off a college student?—he grabbed the handle on the suitcase and headed for his car, staring at the pristine white Narcissus in his other hand. He had to drop this off before he left, but that shouldn’t take too long, providing Meara accepted it . . .

‘Traveling on Valentine’s Day,’ he thought with a shake of his head. *‘This sucks . . .’*

Heaving a sigh as he held out the keychain to release the trunk, he was settling the suitcase into the back and mumbling under his breath about transcontinental flights when a soft voice interrupted his thoughts. “Where are you going?”

It took a moment for him to recognize the voice, mostly because it was one that never actually sought him out. Slowly turning his head, as though he was afraid that she was just a figment of his imagination, Morio broke into a hesitant smile as his gaze lit on Meara MacDonnough. Standing just behind him with her hands clasped in front of her, she was scowling just a little as the crisp February air whipped her hair into her eyes.

“Got to go to home for a few weeks,” he informed her. “Family thing.”

“Oh?”

He nodded, closing the trunk of the car before turning around and leaning against it. “Yep . . .” He grimaced. “Here.”

Staring at the flower in his hand, she almost broke into a smile as she hesitantly reached for the blossom—*almost*. “So you weren’t trying to make me feel guilty about going to that concert without you?” she ventured as she lifted the flower to her nose.

Morio blinked, eyebrows lifting in surprise. “No . . . why would I do that?”

She nodded slowly as, her nose buried in the bloom. “Oh, I don’t know . . . most guys would, I should think . . .”

“Maybe . . . but I’m not most guys.”

Meara wrinkled her nose and snorted indelicately. “You’re up to something; I know it.”

Shaking his head as he raised his hands in an innocent gesture, he grinned unrepentantly. “I’m not; I swear it. I just want you to have fun.”

That answer didn’t seem to please her, either, and she uttered a low growl under her breath. “I don’t trust you, Morio Izayoi.”

“You should,” he countered lightly, letting his hands rest on either side of him, drumming his claws against the trunk of the car. “It’s not good when you don’t trust your future mate.”

“My future . . . *what?*” she blurted, cheeks pinking as Morio’s grin widened.

“Your future mate,” he stated once more. “I’m telling you, Meara . . . we’re meant to be.”

Rolling her eyes, she crossed her arms over her chest and tried for an aloof stance that was completely undermined by the tingeing of pink that deepened on her face. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she mumbled haughtily.

He chuckled. “It’s okay, Meara . . . one day you’ll admit it. I can wait.”

Slowly she shifted her gaze to meet his and sighed. “You just don’t know when to give up, do you?”

Pushing himself away from the car, he ambled over to her, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his faded jeans as he tilted his head to the side and shrugged. “When it comes to you? I’ll never give up.”

“Maybe you should,” she murmured, silver gaze wide as she stared up at him.

To her surprise, he nodded slowly then heaved a sigh. “Maybe . . . but I don’t want to.”

“Are you always this persistent?”

“Only when it comes to you.”

She shook her head and stepped back as though she needed to distance herself from him—maybe she did. “It’d never work, you know,” she said softly. “It wouldn’t . . .”

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

She shrugged. “Don’t I?”

Heaving a sigh, Morio nodded. “All the more reason for me to convince you,” he told her. “We’d be great together. You’ll see.”

She looked vaguely amused for a moment before she shook her self, digging into her purse and pulling the tickets out. “Here,” she said, smacking his chest with the flimsy bits of paper.

He shook his head and gently pushed her hand back. “Nope . . . these are for you. I’m serious. Take someone with you, and enjoy yourself.” He grinned. “I hate to rush off like this, but I’ll miss my plane if I don’t get moving.”

She nodded and watched him as he strode over to his car once more. “Coffee,” she blurted as he reached for the handle.

He stopped and peered back over his shoulder at her. “Come again?”

Fighting back the furious blush that rose to stain her cheeks, Meara hooked a lock of chestnut hair behind her ear and hurried forward. “Give me your cell,” she demanded, looking completely consternated and yet wholly adorable.

Morio raised an eyebrow but did as she commanded, digging his cell phone out of his pocket and handing it to her.

Casting him a narrow-eyed stare, she quickly programmed in her phone number and thrust his phone into his hand. “Call me . . . when you get back,” she said, her expression a mix of belligerence and irritation. “Just coffee, though—*not* a date.”

Very slowly, Morio broke into a grin—small at first but brightening fast as he finally threw his head back and laughed. “You can count on it, Meara,” he said as he wound down to soft chuckles.

Meara let out a deep breath, peering up at him through the thick fringe of smoky eyelashes. “Why do I know I’m going to regret giving you my number?” she muttered.

Morio grinned. “You won’t regret it, Meara . . . I promise.”

She rolled her eyes but stepped back as Morio got into his car and started the engine. Rolling down the window and sticking his arm out in a jaunty wave, he pulled away from the curve, beeping the horn as she watched him adjust the side panel mirror his gaze meeting hers just for an instant.

“*You won’t regret it, Meara . . . I promise,*” his voice echoed in her head as Meara watched the car disappear around the corner.

Biting her lip as she tapped the tickets on the palm of her hand, she sighed and turned around, heading back toward the university and the class she was going to be late for. Flakes of snow fell around her, and she stopped, tilting her head back to watch the fluffy bits float to the earth. Smiling golden eyes danced before her, and she shook her head, trying in vain to force the image from her mind; the silvery hair . . . those little ears . . . those startling eyes that she’d never, ever forget.

She wouldn’t regret it? She grimaced.

Maybe that was what she was ultimately afraid of . . .



Author’s Note:

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*Final Thought from Morio:
Coffee and her digits ... ni-i-ice ...*

Chapter Two *Two Steps Back*

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

University of Edinburgh
Monday, August 25, 2059

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Morio stepped outside the cottage and ran down the step onto the sidewalk, slinging his backpack over his shoulder as he headed toward the University of Edinburgh campus.

'Another year . . .' he mused.

'Another year,' his youkai echoed. *'Another year of chasing the dream when she's made it abundantly clear that she just doesn't want . . . you.'*

Grimacing at the naked truth in that statement, Morio kept walking. *' . . . Ouch . . .'*

'Yeah, well . . . just remember: I warned you . . .'

'Sure you did,' he grumbled, ears twitching in irritation as he jammed his hand deeper into his pocket and walked a little faster. *'Whose side are you on?'*

'Yours, of course. I just figure one of us has to be realistic . . . after all, you're too busy dreaming to listen to much of anything these days.'

'She's coming around,' he shot back, determination lighting his gaze as he strode onward. *'It's just taking awhile. 'Good things come to those who wait,' or haven't you heard?'*

'Yeah, there's that . . . there's something else you haven't thought about, isn't there?'

'Hmm, what?'

'It's your fourth year, and hers, too. Last chance, Ri, and if you don't get her convinced this year, then you've lost.'

He sighed, ears flattening as the truth of his youkai's words sank in. *'Look on the bright side,'* he persisted. *'She never changed her cell number . . .'*

That earned him a longsuffering sigh, but it was true. As much as Meara complained and chastised him, she also hadn't changed her cell number, and he'd spent the summer sending her pictures—a different one every day—of various flowers he saw during his holiday in Japan. Opting to spend the time away from school visiting with his family back in Japan, he had made a point every day of seeking out a special flower to photograph and send to Meara.

'Big deal! Just because she didn't change her number doesn't mean she isn't laughing her ass off at the idiot hanyou who can't get it through his fat fucking head that he's being a fool . . . that'd be you, by the way . . .'

'Aww, shuddup,' Morio grumped, scowling at the ground as he slowed his pace near the campus.

He'd come back early in the hopes that he'd see Meara at registration or at least around. After all, she still owed him a cup of coffee . . .

'That should tell you something, Morio . . . she backed out of that, didn't she?'

Morio wrinkled his nose. *'No . . . her mother had a baby . . . that's completely different.'*

'Sure it is, but do you honestly believe she went home every weekend just to spend time with the new pup?'

'Course she did,' he argued. *'Meara's sweet like that . . . It's only natural that she'd want to be around her mother and sister, isn't it?'*

'Keh! If your mother and old man had another pup, you sure as hell wouldn't be running home every weekend to fawn all over him or her.'

'Well, that'd be a hell of a commute . . .'

'Smart ass. You know what I mean.'

Morio sighed, digging some money out of his pocket as he stopped long enough to select the flower of the day. He wasn't sure if Meara was around yet or not, but he'd rather be left toting the flower around than to find Meara and not have one in-hand.

"Ah, Morio! Glad I am to see you back this year!" Nessa Dreyfuss said with a smile as she handed him his change. The middle aged woman patted his hand conspiratorially and laughed. "You'll get Meara this year, mark me!"

Morio grinned. "I hope so," he replied lightly. "Thank you!"

She waved as he strolled away, heading toward the student building, slowly glancing around, scanning the meandering students for one face in particular.

'It's somewhat sad when the woman at the flower shop knows your name,' his youkai pointed out.

'So? I know her name, too.'

'Also sad.'

'And Nessa knows Meara's name.'

'I rest my case.'

'Stop being pessimistic, can't you? You're supposed to be on my side.'

'I am. It's just . . . it's been nearly four years, you know?'

Morio grimaced. *'I know.'*

'You remember when you were in the eighth grade and you had that huge crush on the French exchange student? What was her name again?'

'Jacqueline? Now that name brings back memories . . .'

'Yeah, well, you were convinced she was your mate, too.'

Morio stopped abruptly as some rowdy guys came tearing out of one of the dormitories, almost mowing him down. "Sorry!" one of them hollered over his shoulder as he loped away.

'That was just a stupid crush,' Morio went on as he nodded at the young man and kept walking.

'Stupid or not, it was the same idea. You convinced yourself that Jacqueline was your mate when, in actuality, she wasn't.'

'That's like comparing apples and oranges,' Morio protested, reshouldering his backpack. *'Meara is my mate. I know it. I can feel it. It's just a matter of time before she realizes that she can't possibly live without me any more than I can live without her.'*

His youkai heaved a dramatic sigh.

"Morio!"

Swinging around at the sound of his name, Morio smiled, recognizing a familiar face though not the one he'd been searching for. She waved and hurried toward him. Morio moved out of the middle of the path, waiting for the girl to catch up with him. Her name was Kelsey, and she was in a couple of his classes last year.

“Hi,” she greeted, her dark brown eyes shining bright as her smile widened just before her countenance crumpled in a marked grimace and she scooted out of the way of some students who looked like they were just going to run right over the diminutive female. “It’s mad today!”

Morio chuckled. “Yeah, it is . . . how was your holiday?”

She shrugged. “So-so . . . didn’t do much.” With a soft giggle, she shook her head. “Every year when I go home, it seems as though town is getting smaller . . . I wonder why that is?”

“Is it?” he asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“No . . . I actually think it’s growing. Maybe it’s just because my perception of it is changing . . .”

Nodding slowly, Morio scratched his chin, mulling over her words. “I suppose so. The first time I left home, I sort of thought the same way—and Tokyo . . . well, it’s huge.”

“I did go to Seoul, South Korea for a couple weeks,” Kelsey went on. “Talk about culture shock . . .”

“Oh, yeah? I’ve been there once.”

Shifting her book bag in a decidedly nervous fashion, Kelsey shuffled her feet and scrunched up her shoulders, face contorting in an expression of absolute concentration as she slowly lifted her gaze to meet his. Her cheeks reddened, but she smiled hesitantly as she hooked a lock of pale blonde hair behind her ear. “You, um . . . would you like to go for dinner sometime?”

“Dinner?” he repeated, eyebrows shooting up to disappear under his silvery bangs in surprise. “Oh . . . well . . . I, uh . . .”

Cheeks blossoming in embarrassed color, Kelsey bit her lip and quickly shook her head. “Never mind . . . that was . . . I mean—”

“No, no!” Morio cut in with a marked grimace. “It’s not . . . I don’t . . .” He sighed. “I’m . . . sorry . . .”

“Don’t be!” she exclaimed, waving her hand dismissively. Her tone was overly bright, as though she was trying to overcompensate for the discomfort her offer had brought on. “I just thought . . . You

know, I . . . um . . . I've got to go . . . I wanted to locate all my buildings so I'm not wandering around like a fool when classes start."

He winced as she started to back away. "Kelsey . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Dinner would be nice," he told her. "I mean, we're friends, right?"

"O-okay," she agreed quickly, a hesitant little smile finally replacing the look of acute embarrassment.

He rubbed his temple as he pondered his schedule. "Tomorrow night? I've got to finish unpacking and all that, so . . . We could go to the pub or something?"

Kelsey nodded as the color receded from her flushed cheeks, as her smile slowly returned to what it should have been. "Yeah . . . I'd like that."

"Give me a call."

She spared a minute to smile broadly before turning on her heel and walking away.

Morio watched her go with a sigh. Kelsey was a pretty girl, and he'd known somewhere in the back of his mind that she'd had a crush on him for the last couple of years. They'd worked together a few times, doing group projects for their classes, and he liked her well enough. He just wasn't interested in more than friendship with her. Kelsey had known that Morio had spent the last nearly four years hung up on Meara. She'd even offered him encouragement when his spirits were flagging, telling him that Meara was bound to come around eventually; of course she was.

Still, he couldn't help but feel a little awkward about the entire affair . . .

With a long, slow sigh, Morio's gaze dropped to the perfect blossom in his hand, and he frowned as he brought it up to inspect it. '*This year, Meara,*' he vowed. '*You've got to listen to me . . .*'

---*---*---*---*---*---

Stepping into the ambient lighting of the local pub near campus, Meara carefully shrugged her shoulders to shake off her date's possessive arm. Paul Gregory didn't seem to notice her reluctance, though, which wasn't really surprising. In the course of the last couple of months since she'd started

seeing Paul, she'd figured out quickly enough that he never really seemed to notice anything about her, especially things that she didn't particularly care for . . .

She should be grateful, she supposed with a dour scowl. Paul was certainly quite the catch, or so *People* magazine would lead one to believe. Touted as one of the world's ten most eligible bachelors, he was the son of one of the wealthiest men in the world . . . and he was dog-youkai, to boot . . .

'Look on the bright side, Meara . . . He's tall, good-looking, smart . . . his family's wealthy so you wouldn't ever have to worry about money . . . he's perfect . . . just perfect . . .' Her youkai trailed off with a sigh. *'Too bad we can't stand him . . .'*

Meara snorted inwardly though she managed to keep her expression completely blanked. *'You forgot arrogant, condescending, domineering . . . I'd rather die a thousand times than be with him . . .'*

'You're just sore because you haven't gotten to see someone else since you got back to Edinburgh.'

Cheeks pinking, Meara lifted her chin a notch and squared her shoulders stubbornly. *'I have no idea who you're talking about,'* she insisted.

'Pish and paw, Miss Meara . . . you know bloody well who I'm talking about . . . and you've been looking for him, too; don't deny it. You missed him. I know you did. That's okay, though. I missed him, too . . . Look on the bright side . . . at least Paul doesn't live in Edinburgh . . .'

Meara sighed. As far as she was concerned, that was the only 'bright side' to any of it. Paul's family resided in Switzerland, and he'd only come to Scotland to date her, as far as she knew. He'd announced that he had to leave in the morning, and Meara had nearly cried in relief. The arrogant man had offered her a completely self-serving grin along with a consoling pat on the rear meant to comfort her, she supposed . . . *'Paul's leaving in a couple of days . . . thank God . . . and as for 'him'? Please! I'm not worried about him, and I certainly don't miss him . . .'* Trailing off with a slight scowl, Meara shook her head and added almost absently, *'Maybe he hasn't arrived yet. He probably won't be back until the weekend.'*

'He's a far sight better than Paul . . . even if Morio sings off key, at least he knows the things you like and don't like.'

'It's not that . . . you know why I can't even consider dating Morio Izayoi . . .'

'Right, right . . . because of Aislynn . . . I get it . . .'

Meara licked her lips and grimaced. *'Aislynn . . .'* The simple sound of her baby sister's name made her smile despite her otherwise bleak thoughts. Born in the beginning of March earlier in the year, the nearly six month-old infant was the bright spot in Meara's life. It filled her with a sense of peace

and a wealth of happiness whenever she spent time with Aislynn, and she had to admit that the calm she felt was enough to convince her that what she was doing was ultimately the best thing for everyone involved. After all, her father felt very strongly about the issue of hanyous, and Meara wasn't entirely certain that he'd be forgiving if she acted against his wishes.

Even then, it was all too easy to remember her own childhood whenever she looked at Aislynn. She recalled the loneliness she'd felt, isolated from everyone else on the estate. She never really had any friends since there were no other children around, and when she first went to school, the barrage of children her own age frightened her horribly. It had taken a long time before Meara was able to come out of her shell, so to speak, and her first real friend was Iona . . .

'What the mighty Ian MacDonnough doesn't know won't hurt him, you ken?'

'Now you sound like Iona,' Meara grumbled since the conversation was starting to sound exactly like the one she'd had with her longtime roommate while she was getting ready for her date with Paul.

'Good, because she tends to be more level-headed than you are.'

Meara didn't respond to that. True enough, Iona didn't like Paul, either—also not surprising since Paul wasn't pleased with any female who dared to speak her mind. They'd gotten into an argument earlier over the dress Meara had chosen to wear. Paul hadn't liked the plain cotton dress, citing that it was too short and showed much too much of Meara's legs. Iona had rolled her eyes and said that it was fine, lovely in fact, and that Paul should keep his mouth closed since he wasn't the one wearing the dress in question. Paul had told Iona to mind her own business, and it had gotten uglier from there, to the point that Meara had wrapped an arm over her stomach, resting her elbow in her hand at her side and curling a finger over her lips as she slowly shook her head and leaned against the bedroom door frame until the argument had subsided.

She sighed. That wasn't quite fair, really. Paul wasn't *that* bad. In fact, he had a few redeeming qualities. The truth was, though, that Meara . . . well, she just wasn't interested.

Her father had chosen Paul for her. He'd summoned her into his study at the start of the summer holiday in order to tell her that he'd taken the liberty of 'arranging' things with Paul and his father. Since she hadn't found anyone she wanted to consider as a mate, he'd decided that he needed to intervene. Paul was the son of one of Ian MacDonnough's most trusted generals, which was saying a lot since her father made a habit of never trusting anyone.

Paul slipped his arm around her waist, pulling her closer than she was comfortable with as he led the way to a table near the front of the establishment, his intense brown eyes shifting over the restaurant as though he were looking for someone in particular. "Is everything all right?" she asked, breaking the stony silence that seemed to accompany every excursion they shared.

Casting her a cursory glance and an arrogant half smile, Paul cocked an eyebrow and shook his head. “Don’t worry about it,” he said in a tone that never failed to make Meara feel as though she were butting into his business even if all she’d done was ask a completely innocent question. “I’ll be back,” he assured her before swaggering away, heading in the direction of the bar near the front of the pub.

Stifling a sigh as she made a mental list of things she’d rather be doing—things such as watching grass grow, watching paint dry, sitting in the middle of the desert with no water and no shade—Meara dug her cell phone out of her purse and checked her messages. Lips twitching as she caught sight of one number in particular that she’d hoped to see, she spared a glance to see where Paul was before scrolling through the text messages to locate the email—and the attached picture.

The delicate white blossom looked so pristine against a blurry green background—grass, she supposed. Morio was getting better at taking the pictures . . .

Of course, he’d gotten in plenty of practice over the summer, and she . . .

She sighed. She didn’t want to think about how he made her feel . . .

‘He hasn’t missed a day, has he?’

Meara bit her lip as her smile faded. Gaze flitting over the proud, strong back of her date who was busy leering at a couple of girls near the bar, she turned her face away before darker thoughts interrupted her idyll.

The doors of the pub opened once more, and Meara glanced up only to do a double take when Morio Izayoi held the door open for a petite blonde woman. He didn’t see Meara right away, and she grimaced when he smiled at the girl with him, a foreign surge of something dark flooded through her body. He slipped his hand under the girl’s elbow—Kelsey, Meara thought her name was—which was completely understandable since more college students filed in after them, jostling them forward, right past Meara’s table.

It was understandable, she supposed. He probably couldn’t smell very well in the place. With all the people not to mention the convoluted scent of different food and drinks, Meara was having a bit of trouble smelling things, too.

They sat at a table not far away—a small table meant for two. Meara scowled at the couple as Kelsey leaned over the table to say something, and Morio laughed. It was that smile that she’d always thought was just for her, after all, and that didn’t sit right.

‘You’re jealous!’ her youkai crowed.

Feeling her cheeks explode in a hot wash of indignant color, Meara sputtered. *'I . . . I'm not! Of course I'm not! Why in the world would I be . . .? That's . . . that's . . . that's . . . no-o-o-o!'*

'Yes, you are . . . it's okay . . . I rather want to go rake that girl's eyes out, myself. . .'

Gritting her teeth since that was exactly what she *did* want to do, Meara gripped the edge of the table and dug her claws in deep, unaware of the territorial little growl that erupted deep in her throat as she watched Kelsey lean in a little closer to say something else that made Morio laugh.

"Here," Paul said, breaking through her irritated thoughts as he set a foaming glass of seltzer water before her.

She blinked and slowly shifted her gaze to the glass. "I'd rather have ale," she murmured, pushing the glass away.

"It's unbecoming for a woman to drink," Paul maintained, flicking his wrist in a completely dismissive gesture.

Meara stifled a sigh and got to her feet, brushing past Paul. He caught her arm. "Where are you going?" he drawled.

Meara carefully pulled her arm away, pasting on a tolerant little smile—the most she could muster. "I just wanted to play some music on the jukebox," she replied.

Paul didn't look pleased but he finally nodded. "I'll order for you," he said.

Weaving her way through the crowd as she assured herself that she was absolutely not simply trying to get within earshot to hear just what Kelsey kept saying to make Morio laugh, she wrinkled her nose and leaned in to stare at the digital selection on the huge machine. Built to look like the jukeboxes of long ago, she knew very well that it was all for show since the actual units could be purchased in very small sizes. Still, it added a certain ambience to the place, and she almost smiled as she considered how much she liked the old-fashioned feel of the pub. Flipping through the pages and pages of digital music files, she dropped a handful of coins into the machine and bit her lip thoughtfully.

"So what's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?" Morio quipped, leaning on the glass beside her with a lazy grin as he inclined his head to the side and twitched his ears.

Meara didn't move but did steal a glance out of the corner of her eye. "Where's your girlfriend?" she asked, grimacing inwardly and praying that her question hadn't sounded as catty as she was afraid it had.

He chuckled. “Kelsey? She’s not my girlfriend. You’re the only woman for me, you know. It’s just dinner with a friend,” he assured her.

She snorted, punching in the number of her first selection. “I don’t care, mind,” she went on haughtily. “Why would I care if you’re on a date, friendly or otherwise? I don’t!” Pausing, she couldn’t help the little snort that escaped her as she shot the girl in question a fulminating glower. “. . . Are you sleeping with her?”

Morio’s eyebrows shot up in surprise, and he looked suspiciously close to laughing outright. “Jealous, Meara?” he teased.

She opened her mouth to snap at him, and he held up his hands in surrender. “I know; I know: of course you’re not. Why would you be, right? Still, for not being jealous, you sound awfully irritated . . . Did you miss me over your holiday?”

She finally turned her head to face him, her eyes narrowing dangerously. “How could I miss you? You were spamming my cell with pictures of arbitrary flowers every day!”

He *did* grin, the ass. “Did you like them?”

Rolling her eyes, Meara almost smiled—almost. “I think you need a hobby,” she grumbled.

“You’re my hobby,” he quipped. “My favorite way to spend my free time . . .”

“Your lines really need work,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I learned a few more songs, too.”

“Oh, God . . .”

“Want to hear them?”

“No.”

He sighed melodramatically then shrugged, obviously undaunted. “Will you go out with me yet?”

“No.”

“You’ll have fun, I promise.”

“No.”

“You still owe me coffee,” he pointed out.

She spared a moment to pin him with a sidelong glance. “I was hoping you’d forgotten about that.”

He chuckled. “As if! How’s your sister, by the way?”

Meara finally smiled. “She’s fine . . .”

Morio’s smile suddenly disappeared, and he stood up straight, staring over her head with a marked scowl. Moments later, Meara felt the unmistakable and uncomfortable warmth of an unwelcome arm slip around her waist, drawing her back against Paul’s chest. “Who’s your friend?” he asked, his condescending tone leaving little to the imagination as to what, exactly, he thought of Morio.

“Morio Izayoi,” Morio supplied, his eyes taking on a darker glimmer.

“Izayoi . . . Ryomaru’s son?” A sudden and thoroughly mocking smirk surfaced on Paul’s face as he tightened his arm around Meara’s waist. “Ah, yes, I remember. You were the hunter who didn’t have it in him to hunt.”

Morio’s gaze narrowed the tiniest bit, and Meara glanced up at Paul with a shake of her head. “Morio’s not a hunter,” she blurted quickly, cheeks pinking as the implications of her words sank in. She sounded much too well-acquainted with him, didn’t she? She bit her lip, hoping that Paul wouldn’t notice.

Paul shot her a calculating glance before lifting his gaze back to Morio once more. “Sounds like you know all about him,” he said stiffly. “Do you, Meara?”

“Hunting just wasn’t my thing,” Morio said as the tension thickened in the air.

“Wasn’t it? You certainly couldn’t have been *afraid*, could you? The great hunter’s son, afraid of hunting?” Paul goaded.

Meara blanched, knowing very well that Paul hadn’t missed the possessive sound of her voice at all. Paul stared at Morio for another long second before turning away, propelling Meara back toward their table without a word.

She glanced over her shoulder in time to see Morio watching them go. Hands balled into fists at his sides, jaw clenched tightly, his ears twitched in a completely irritated way, and when she met his unreadable gaze, she grimaced when he quickly turned away.

“You made your point, Paul,” she bit out, shrugging off his arm and quickening her pace to distance herself from the irritating youkai.

“Now, Meara, don’t be angry,” he chided, catching her around the waist and pulling her back against his body once more, his tone placating, as though he were trying to console a small child despite the sharpness of his constricted youki.

“Let go of me,” she hissed, pulling against his hold to no avail.

His fingers tightened around her, and he leaned down to whisper, “Don’t make a scene, Meara. It’s unbecoming, you know.”

“You don’t own me,” she ground out, fighting to ignore the bitter wash of anger that frothed and seethed inside her.

Paul’s lips curled back in a completely arrogant mock-smile. “Ah, but I do. It’s as good as done, remember?” he stated impatiently. “By your father’s word, you’re mine, and you will not embarrass me. Do I make myself clear?”

Restraining the desire to grind the heel of her shoe into his foot, she cleared her throat and jerked her head once in a curt nod.

“Good,” he intoned, his hand sliding up, his fingertips nestled just below the swell of her breast. “Now let’s have a nice dinner, shall we?”

“Get your hands off her.”

Meara gasped as Paul stood up straight, craning his neck as he glanced over his shoulder. Meara struggled to look at Morio, too, but grimaced when Paul’s arms tightened once more. “Morio . . .” she whispered.

“Why don’t you run along?” Paul drawled, cocking an eyebrow as his eyes took on a derisive glint.

“Take your fucking hands off her,” Morio stated once more. People sitting at the nearby tables fell silent, staring at them with a marked sense of curiosity. “Now.”

Paul chuckled, tossing a discerning eye around the crowded pub. The hush rippled over the gathering, smothered by the tension that spun out of control, radiated off the two men standing near the table by the front of the establishment. “Mind your own business, half-breed,” Paul replied nastily, slowly turning around and allowing Meara to get a better look at Morio’s face in the process. His expression was blank enough despite the tell-tale shimmer in his eyes: a cold glimmer of something far more dangerous than she’d ever seen in him before.

Meara glanced around, unable to stop herself, hoping that no one actually understood the implications of Paul's insult. They didn't seem to understand, and for that small thing, Meara was grateful.

"Morio? Maybe we should go," Kelsey said, tugging on Morio's arm as she stole a worried peek at Paul.

Meara winced. She understood what Kelsey was implying without having to state it more plainly. Morio was strong, certainly, and yes, he was well-enough defined, but he was also nearly half a foot shorter than Paul, and Paul possessed far more bulk than Morio did, not to mention that Paul was full youkai while Morio was just a hanyou. All things weighed equally, she couldn't really see how Morio was being anything but valiantly stupid . . .

"I think she asked you to let go of her," Morio pointed out calmly. She didn't miss the angry intonation in his voice despite the stoic quality of his expression.

"It's fine, Morio," Meara said, lowering her voice as she shook her head furiously.

"You heard her," Paul said with a derisive sneer. "It's *fine*."

"Get your hands off her," Morio stated once more.

"And again, I'll say it's none of your business," Paul insisted.

Meara jerked away from Paul, stumbling forward. Morio caught her and pushed her behind him. "I don't think she wants you after all," he goaded.

Paul's deep brown eyes darkened even more. "Meara," he barked. "Get over here."

She started to skirt around Morio. He caught her hand and pulled her back. Meeting his gaze, she bit her lip when he shook his head. "Morio . . . he's my . . . my . . ."

"I'm her fiancé," he supplied with a mocking grin. "Now if you'll be decent enough to let go of her, you can let go of *my fiancée*."

"You're lying," Morio ground out.

He smiled disingenuously. "Ask her, yourself."

"M-Meara?" he said, slowly turning to look at her. "Is this true?"

Meara grimaced at the look in Morio's eyes, as though she'd somehow betrayed him. *'Of course I haven't,'* she assured herself quickly. *'We . . . there never has been anything between us . . . there never could be . . .'*

"Meara?" he said again.

"Not . . . exactly . . ." she mumbled. "Not officially . . ."

"Incidentals," Paul interrupted, reaching around Morio to grab Meara's arm and drag her back over to his side. "You're the one, aren't you? The one who's been mooning after Meara for the last four years." He laughed, shaking his head and making no bones about his belief that Morio was a fool. "Too bad she'd never have one such as you."

"I want to go," Meara said, trying futilely to stave off the altercation she could feel brewing. Turning toward Paul, she planted her hands against his chest and pushed him back. "Please . . ."

Sparing Morio a completely insincere smile, Paul caught Meara's wrists and chuckled. She saw his intentions writ in his eyes just before it happened. He dragged her close, smashed his mouth down over hers. Meara whimpered, pushing against his chest, struggling to escape the smothering kiss.

As quickly as the kiss began, it ended. Meara shrieked as she was jerked away, pushed back as a flash of motion, a blur of color streaked past her, barreling into Paul's chest, bearing him down onto the table. The glass of seltzer water smashed onto the floor. Morio slammed Paul down once more before drawing his fist back and smashing it against Paul's jaw.

"Morio! No! *Stop!*" Meara shrieked, grabbing Morio's arm and tugging in an effort to drag him away from Paul.

Paul pushed her away, grunting as he rolled over, pinning Morio against the Formica surface and taking a wide swing. Jerking to the side as Paul's fist slammed into the table, Morio shoved him hard, sending the youkai careening backward before he managed to right his stance once more.

"Stop it!" Meara screamed as she tried to ferret her way between the two. Morio shot her a fulminating glower before shoving her aside once more.

Closing the distance, he ducked to avoid another punch before blocking the next with his wrist. Paul growled angrily, his temper rapidly unraveling as Morio kept evading his attacks. Another swing that missed Morio elicited a loud howl of outrage, and Paul opened his fist, drawing his claws back. Morio saw it coming, carting around only to catch Paul's wrist, jerking the youkai forward as he snapped his arm out straight, catching Paul in the center of his chest with the heel of his hand as he let go of Paul's wrist. Paul flew back, smacking into a booth beside a window with an impact so tremendous that the very walls shook. Wiping the blood trickling from the corner of his lip, Morio

stomped over to tower over Paul's sprawled body. "Get up, you bastard," he spat quietly, flexing his claws, his body trembling with the force of his rage.

Paul stared at him for a long moment, shifting his jaw from side to side as he grimaced.

"Stop it, Morio!" Meara exclaimed, pushing past the hanyou to kneel beside Paul. Casting Morio a scathing glower, she shook her head and dashed a hand over her eyes. "What do you think you were doing?" she hissed, painfully aware of the eyes that were still watching the debacle.

"Who started it?" the bar tender demanded, pushing his way through the crowd. The chimes over the threshold rang merrily seconds before the door slammed closed. The pub was quiet; the only discernable sounds were the shuffling of nervous feet, the clearing of throats as the gathering started to disburse, milling back toward their tables in an effort to avoid drawing notice.

"Bill me," Morio bit out, sparing a moment to glare at Meara before turning on his heel and stomping out of the pub. The students hurried to clear a path for him, and if he noticed, he gave no indication.

"Your father will hear about this," Paul growled, sitting up slowly and shifting his jaw from side to side. "A hot head, just like his grandfather—at least that's what they say . . ."

Meara knelt, dumbfounded, for a moment before her temper spiked once more. She was shaking, late fear choking her. Seeing Morio standing toe to toe with the much larger and infinitely more ruthless youkai . . . she'd thought he was going to get hurt, hadn't she? Blinking quickly, telling herself that she absolutely was not—was *not*—going to cry, she pushed herself to her feet and headed for the exit, too.

He was stupid—*stupid!* That was the only rationale she could come up with. Sure he'd held his own, and in the end, he'd come out the winner, but that was still a completely foolish thing to have done especially over something as ridiculous as a kiss . . .

The cool air of the early fall evening did little to soothe the tattered edges of her frayed nerves. Sparing a moment to take in the shadowed landscape, she tried to find Morio by sight. If he was still nearby, he was hiding, and she had a feeling that he certainly wasn't doing that. Her nose was still too disoriented from the overwhelming scents in the pub, and with a frustrated growl, Meara hitched her purse strap up on her shoulder and pulled her sweater closer around herself before she started walking.

'Of all the stupid, pig-headed, idiotic displays . . . he could have been clobbered!' she fumed.

'You don't really believe that, do you? Meara . . . you remember what you heard?'

Scowling at the pragmatic tone of her youkai voice, she quickened her pace, glancing over her shoulder and noting with a grim sense of satisfaction that Paul hadn't followed her, after all. *'I remember,'* she grudgingly allowed. *'That wasn't the same, though . . . Sesshoumaru . . . he wasn't talking about Morio Izayoi.'*

'He didn't have to be, did he? Morio's his kin as much as Toga and his son are, right?'

She frowned, lifting a trembling hand to rub at her throbbing forehead as the memory of that conversation came back to her . . .

"With all due respect, Toga is not fit to take over as the Japanese tai-youkai," Ian MacDonnough's clipped voice cut through the haze enveloping her mind.

Fourteen year-old Meara had been on her way to tell her father that dinner was ready to be served, and she'd stopped short just outside his study, biting her lip as she listened, creeping closer to peer through the sliver of a crack in the between the frame and the door.

She'd never seen Sesshoumaru Inutaisho—the current Japanese tai-youkai as well as the undisputed Inu no Taisho—before. The tall figure seemed to loom larger than life, his silver hair catching the light that filtered through the long row of windows that encompassed one wall of the vast room. She could see part of his profile from where she watched, and she grimaced and scooted back a step when Sesshoumaru's amber eyes narrowed dangerously. "Be careful, Ian. You overstep yourself."

She couldn't see her father from where she stood, and she had to make herself step closer to the crack once more. No one argued with Ian MacDonnough; she knew this. Sesshoumaru, though . . . he wasn't intimidated in the least.

"He chose a human for a mate," Ian went on smoothly, his voice cold, condescending. "Hanyous—those perversities of nature—they should not be suffered to live."

"Whom he chose is none of your concern," Sesshoumaru cut in. "My son's right to succession is none of your concern."

"It is when it weakens the youkai," Ian shot back. Meara heard the rustle of movement moments before her father crossed through her line of vision. Sesshoumaru didn't turn to follow him. "Toga's choice has dire implications, don't you agree?"

"I do not," Sesshoumaru stated flatly. "My son and his son . . . they are the future, and you will respect them."

"A hanyou was never meant to be tai-youkai," Ian growled, whipping around on his heel to pin Sesshoumaru with a scathing glower.

Sesshoumaru slowly turned to face Ian, his expression a cold mask of indifference, the only trace of emotion writ in his icy gaze. “Do you doubt the power of the blood that runs through my veins? My father’s blood, and his father’s blood before him?”

“ . . . No.”

“My bloodlines extend back to the beginning of time, itself, while yours have been tainted by degrees of separation. In my veins runs blood so powerful that you cannot even begin to comprehend its might. It is the blood of the first inu-youkai, and those of your ilk hold no jurisdiction over me. What you are is only because I have allowed it to be so. Do not make the mistake of doubting me when I say this: the power in your blood has degenerated through the ages while mine, alone, runs pure. My son’s blood is my blood, and his son’s blood will remain stronger than yours, hanyou or otherwise.”

The memory faded, and Meara blinked it away. Shivering slightly as she called to mind the look of absolute rage on Morio’s face, she scanned the darkened campus once more . . .

“Izayoi . . . Ryomaru’s son? Ah, yes, I remember. You were the hunter who didn’t have it in him to hunt . . .”

She bit her lip, spotting the silver hair glinting in the light of the lamps lighting the walkway ahead. ‘He . . . he really was a hunter once, wasn’t he . . .?’

‘The untainted power . . . the bloodline of the Inu no Taisho . . .’

She grimaced and darted after him. “Morio! Stop, will you? *Stop!*” she yelled.

He kept walking, hands jammed deep into his pockets, the anger in his aura still painfully distinct. Meara sighed, wishing absently that she’d worn flat shoes instead of heels, and she quickened her pace to close the distance between them.

She grabbed his arm and tugged to stop him. He did, shoulders straightening, back stiffening. “What?” he growled.

Meara scowled at him—completely ineffective since he refused to look at her. “Are you *mad?*” she demanded, digging her claws into his jacket to make him stop when he started moving once more. “Have you lost your mind? Do you have any idea who that was?”

That stopped him abruptly, and he swung around to face her. Face hidden in the shadows cast by the dim lamps lining the path, all she could discern in the darkness was the indomitable glow—the steely glint—lighting his gaze. “I fucking must be,” he bit out. “*Four* years, Meara . . . the least you could have done was told me.”

Fighting down the indignant blush that stained her cheeks crimson, Meara shook her head stubbornly, letting go of Morio's arm as she planted her hands on her hips and glowered back at him. "I don't have to tell you a thing, Morio Izayoi!"

"The hell you don't!" he snarled.

"The hell I do!" she shot back. "You don't own me! You have no right to be angry!"

"Oh, so I was supposed to let him manhandle you like that when it was so damn obvious that you didn't want anything to do with him?" he ground out, taking a step toward her, towering over her as she glared back defiantly. "Is that the kind of guy you want? Someone who doesn't give a rat's ass about you? Is it?"

"That's none of your business!" she retorted, unblinking as she stood her ground. "You can't go around beating up on people! Paul isn't a slouch, you know! He could have killed you, and then where would you have been?"

"As if!" he countered with a pronounced snort. "I would have knocked him back down if he'd bothered to get up again."

That claim ignited Meara's temper, and she reached back before swinging her hand, palm cracking against Morio's cheek so hard that the sound of the impact echoed through the air before it died away. "Leave me alone, Morio! I don't want you! I never have! Just leave me alone, all right? I don't want your flowers; I don't want your songs—*I don't want you!*"

Eyes narrowing dangerously, he suddenly drew back as he blanked his expression completely. Even his eyes seemed to shut down. "I see. If that's how you want it."

"That's how I want it," she forced herself to say, ignoring the sudden tingle of tears that prickled her nostrils, and she rubbed her forearms through the thin summer sweater.

He stared at her for a long moment, gaze inscrutable. Meara bit her cheek, refusing to back down.

Finally he gave a curt nod, turning on his heel and walking away once more.

Meara swallowed hard as she watched him go, telling herself that it was better this way; telling herself that it didn't really matter in the end. She had to do what was expected of her, whether she liked it or not, and Morio . . .

Drawing a tremulous breath, Meara shook her head, pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes in a vain effort to stave back the tears that were gathering.

Morio . . . he was better off without her, too.

If only it were as simple to convince her heart of that . . .



Final Thought from Morio:

... Fine ...!

Chapter Three
The Barter

.-=*=-*=-*=-*=-*=-.-

University of Edinburgh
Friday, August 29, 2059

.-=*=-*=-*=-*=-*=-.-

Three days.

Morio dug his fist deep into his pocket, holding onto the knapsack slung haplessly over his shoulder with the other hand as he frowned at the path under his feet and trudged along the path that led from the graphic design building on campus. The rumble of thunder in the distance suited his mood just fine. He'd been in a funk since Tuesday night—since he'd walked away from Meara.

So maybe he wasn't the smartest knife in the drawer . . . it had certainly taken him long enough to realize that Meara really didn't want to be his mate. That didn't make the ache in his soul go away whenever he thought about her, and it didn't help him to sleep at night, either. No, the awful truth was that he missed her—missed the reluctant little half-smile she got on her face whenever he ran up to her with a flower in hand, missed the way the wind caught the wispy strands of her chestnut hair and tossed it around . . . He missed her smile . . .

'Come on, Ri, this isn't good for you. You saw the kind of guy she wants—a bastard. If that's the kind of guy she really wants to have as her mate, then who are you to argue it with her?'

He grimaced. As true as his youkai's words were, he couldn't help the desolation that engulfed him every time he thought about Meara with that cretin . . . any time he remembered the sickened feeling in the pit of his stomach when that bastard kissed her . . .

Heaving a longsuffering sigh as the rain started to fall, Morio flattened his ears—he'd forgotten to grab an umbrella before leaving his cottage—though he didn't increase his step.

He was simply going through the motions, wasn't he? Going through them because he didn't have a choice in it; not really. Meara . . . she'd made her choice. Maybe he was a little denser than he had believed. He'd honestly thought . . .

'Keh! Don't matter what I thought, does it?'

'Oh, come on, Morio . . . she doesn't owe you a damn thing, even if you think she does.'

'She . . . she could have told me . . . Hell, they probably spent all summer laughing at me . . . baka don't know when to give up . . . foolish . . . stupid . . .'

Trudging along the cobblestone path that led down the center of campus, he could have veered off to the left to walk under the relative shelter of the old oak trees. The thought didn't actually cross his mind. Too lost in his own feelings of recrimination, he kept moving without paying attention. He knew where he was going.

Grimacing as rain dripped into his ears despite their flattened state, he made a face but kept moving, his only concession the sharp flick of the offending appendage. *'Maybe,'* he thought, squinting up at the cold, gray sky, *'it's just not my week . . .'*

'Whether you like it or not, you probably should apologize for beating the snot out of her fiancé,' his youkai blood pointed out.

Morio snorted, scowl darkening as he dug his fist deeper into his pocket and hitched the knapsack over his shoulder once more. *'When pigs fly out of my ass,'* he shot back.

'Oh come on . . . you're the bigger man—at least figuratively . . .'

'Shut up, damn it.'

A slight rustle of movement, an abrupt stop of the rain drumming down on him, and Morio blinked, momentarily disoriented. The rain continued to fall, but it had stopped coming down on him. All at once, the familiar scent filled his nostrils, and he quickly glanced at *her*.

Meara was holding a yellow umbrella over their heads, her gaze carefully lowered to the path beneath their feet. Cheeks tinged with the barest hint of pink, she gnawed on her bottom lip and quietly cleared her throat. "Don't get any weird ideas," she told him, the color rising in her face. "I didn't feel sorry for you. I felt sorry for your ears."

"For my ears," he echoed with a curt nod, wincing as the need to shake off the water grew stronger and stronger. "Of course."

"Haven't seen you for a few days," she went on, casually. "I thought maybe you went back to Japan."

"Don't have any classes in this area," he replied, his tone clipped, brusque. "No reason to take this route, is there? Anyway, I figured you'd be relieved."

He didn't miss the grimace that contorted her features for the briefest of moments before she shook her head quickly and shrugged. "Why would I be relieved?" she demanded. He didn't have to look to know that she was staring at him. He could *feel* her gaze drilling into his head. The challenge in her tone defied him, challenged him, and he shook his head in silent confusion. What did she want from him? She'd wanted him to give up, didn't she? She wanted him to stay away, and yet . . . and yet the look in her eyes; the confusion and the unvoiced misery . . . he understood those emotions well enough. He'd been struggling with them, himself, hadn't he? Still he just couldn't credit them, couldn't allow himself to be dragged right back in. As much as he'd desperately love to believe . . . He sighed, forcing his gaze away, wincing as more water trickled into his ear canal, and he flicked his ears before more residual water could drip down in them.

Meara squealed, jerking back, effectively leaving him in the rain once more. Face scrunching up in a decided grimace, he couldn't help the little whimper that escaped when the torrential rain hit him once more, filtering into his unprepared ears. She shook her head but hurried back to stick the umbrella over his head once more. "That was *cold!*" she complained, wiping her cheek with nimble fingertips.

Morio couldn't help it; he really, really couldn't. Cocking his head to the side, he dropped his knapsack and shook himself hard, sending a fine sheen of moisture everywhere—most notably, off of himself.

Meara shrieked but didn't step away, holding up her hand to provide a pathetic shield against the shedding rain. "Morio!" she protested. "Stop it!"

And then she threw her head back and laughed.

Morio stopped and stared at her. It was the first time he'd actually heard her laughter. Sure, she'd giggled at him a few times, and yes, he relished the instances when he'd managed to humor her, but this . . . Her laughter was a balm on his soul, softening the sharpest edges of his resolve as he watched her in mute fascination. Eyes closed as gales of laughter welled up inside her only to spill over in a cascade of soothing sound, he felt the earth stop moving for one beautiful, wild moment. It was like falling in love all over again. A savage sense of unadulterated pride swept through him, and he couldn't help but smile, too as he bent down to retrieve his knapsack.

"You're horrible!" she insisted, digging in her satchel for a clean linen handkerchief.

He was enchanted by her smile. He couldn't help it. He loved the way her eyes took on a warm glow, the slight flush in her cheeks . . . Maybe she didn't want him to give up on her, no matter what she'd said . . .

She blotted her skin dry and shot him what should have been a chastising look, but the effect was completely ruined by the smile she was trying to hide. “You *dog!*” she complained in a tone that lacked any real censure.

“Well . . .” he drawled, smiling at her despite his reluctant thoughts.

“All the same,” she grumbled as her smile widened just a little.

“Listen,” he went on, lifting a hand in a gesture proclaiming his innocence. “You’re lucky. Your ears are on the sides of your head. Mine aren’t. They’re on top . . . see?” He flicked the ears in question as she grudgingly nodded. “You don’t get water and stuff in your ears. I do. Can’t be helped, and when water gets in there. I have to shake it out or . . . or I’d get an ear infection. And *die.*” He paused for effect before plunging on. “Then you’d feel bad, right? Because I’d die from the ear infection I got because *you* didn’t want me to shake . . .”

Meara rolled her eyes as Morio started walking once more. “Really.”

He nodded. “Then you’d feel *so* guilty that your thoughtless demands resulted in my untimely death that you’d end up killing yourself, too . . . The world would sink into darkness, and it’d all be because you didn’t let me shake my head. Now don’t you feel bad, Meara MacDonnough?”

She giggled, her fingers fluttering over her lips in a nervous sort of way. “Oh, absolutely, Mr. Izayoi; so bad, in fact, that I might just have to take my leave of you here and now.”

He caught her wrist and pulled her back with a soft chuckle but let his hand drop away when she made no move to veer away from him again. He sighed. “Is that witless fool really your fiancé?” he forced himself to ask.

Meara’s laughter died away, and she sighed, too. “. . . No . . .”

“You say that like it’s just a matter of technicalities.”

She frowned but peered up at him through the thick fringe of her eyelashes, her eyes unnaturally bright, as though she were willing him to understand. “It’s best,” she said slowly, quietly, deliberately. “It’s the best thing for everyone.”

“For you?” he countered. “Is it?”

Meara bit her lip, shook her head as the two of them headed away from the campus, down one of the side streets just outside university grounds. “I live here,” she said, stopping just outside a four story building. Neat, clean, it looked warm and inviting, and Morio nodded. “Just . . . return the umbrella after it stops raining.”

“Meara!” he called as she started to dash up the steps to dart inside.

She stopped and turned around as the rain poured down on her. “Yes?”

Casting a quick glance around, Morio spotted a window box full of miniature white roses two stories up. He ran up the steps, handed her the umbrella before vaulting over the stone banister and shimmying up the trellis affixed to the side of the building. It only took him a moment to cut off one of the flowers—a bud that was ready to bloom—and he dropped back to the ground once more, pushing himself off the earth and over the railing once more, lighting on the step below Meara as he extended the blossom and stood up. “Here,” he said as she hesitantly reached for the stem. “Sorry I’ve missed the last few days.”

She shook her head, gray eyes alight with a suspicious moisture. It was hard for her; maybe harder than Morio could credit. “Morio . . .”

Morio grimaced, knowing deep down that he just didn’t want to hear what she was about to say. Pressing his index finger against her lips, he shook his head and stepped back. “Don’t break my heart, Meara . . . not today . . .”

“Don’t break your heart?”

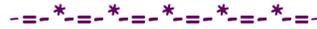
“I’d cherish you if you’d let me,” he whispered.

She shivered, closing her eyes for a second before opening her mouth to protest, her lips trembling under his fingertip. “I . . .”

He leaned down quickly, brushed his lips over her rain-dampened cheek. She leaned toward him, a soft sigh slipping from her as he slowly pulled away. He wasn’t sure if she realized it or not, but either way, he’d take whatever concessions Meara was willing to make.

She frowned but swallowed hard as he retreated down the steps, his finger lingering against her lips until he couldn’t reach her any longer. He’d seen it in her eyes, hadn’t he? Standing there in the pouring rain with her heart on her sleeve, even if it was only for the moment . . . She’d missed him, even if she didn’t want to admit as much. She’d missed him, and maybe—just maybe . . . “I’ll *never* give up, Meara,” he promised as the rain fell down on him again. “See you tomorrow.”

He left her there, standing on the steps of her apartment building with a bemused little smile on her lips and a single white rosebud in her hand. Turning slowly, he strode away, and in his mind, the sun was shining. ‘*Just a matter of time,*’ he told himself with a grin as the glimmer of hope inside him sputtered to life and grew brighter. ‘*It’s all just a matter of time . . .*’



Meara pressed her hand to her chest and leaned back against the door. Hair wrapped in a thick pink towel with her fluffy white terrycloth robe tightly belted around her narrow waist, she wasn't certain just how long she'd stood in the shower letting the hot water flow over her in a vain effort to settle her unraveled nerves.

Just how had he done that?

She sighed as a little smile quirked her lips.

'Who cares how he did it as long as he does it again . . . ?'

Lifting her fingers to her lips, she gingerly touched them, a heady shiver running down her spine, and she drew in a stuttering breath. *'He's sin . . . pure sin . . .'*

Her youkai laughed. *'Pure sin? Maybe . . . I think it's those eyes . . .'*

'Those eyes . . .'

Golden eyes danced before her in the superimposed darkness. Laughing . . . always laughing . . . smiling at her in the recesses of her mind . . . Suddenly, though, the laughter seemed to fade, giving way to the fiercer, brighter and somehow darker look . . . the complete and utter fury that had frightened her more . . . The fierceness of the hunter; the eyes that bespoke a long and proud history . . . the eyes of his ancestors . . . the same cold glint as she'd seen so long ago in the fierce gaze of the Inu no Taisho . . .

The gold color seemed to fade, replaced by stony gray—sleety color that brought to mind the iron cold of the summer storm clouds that was still blanketing the sky outside. Those were the eyes she knew better; the ones that she was loathe to displease. Her father . . . Ian MacDonnough . . .

"Hanyous—those perversities of nature—they should not be suffered to live."

That wasn't true. Meara never had believed that hanyous were bad or somehow against nature, and while it was true that Ian had never said anything of the sort to Meara, herself, she'd heard his opinion that day, and she knew . . .

Eyes opening as she pushed herself away from the door, grabbing the first dress she laid hands on out of her closet, Meara heaved a sigh and dropped the garment on the bed before flopping down beside it. *'Da would never accept him, would he? He'd never allow me to be with Morio . . .'*

'Who cares what your da would allow? If Morio's the one, then he's the one, and there isn't a thing your da could say against that.'

If only it were that simple . . .

Her gaze lit on the framed photograph standing on her dresser: Aislynn. Eyes bright without a trace of a smile, she stared at Meara from across the room, her gaze burning into Meara's with the strength of conviction behind it. *'Don't leave me,'* she seemed to be saying. *'Mummy and Da . . . they're too busy for me . . . just as they were always too busy for you . . . You're all I have . . . don't leave me . . .'*

Meara slowly got to her feet, shuffled over to stand before the dresser, kissing her fingertips and brushing them against the cool matte glass. "Aislynn . . ." she whispered. "I won't leave you . . ."

Turning away with a heavy sigh, Meara got dressed in silence. Her heart felt heavier now, and she grimaced, asking herself just why she'd initiated the conversation with Morio earlier in the day.

'You know why.'

She sighed as she pulled the towel off her head and started squeezing water out of her long locks. *'I suppose I do.'*

The image of him, wandering along the path with his shoulders slumped and his head down, with his ears plastered against his head as the rain beat down on him unmercifully . . . She winced, ignoring the fact that she'd also been knee-deep in self-loathing for having been so mean to him after the altercation with Paul. She should have thanked him, shouldn't she? He'd protected her, even if she hadn't really needed it. Paul had been jealous—no, not jealous. For him to have been jealous, he had to care about her, and he didn't. No, he cared about garnering favor from the current European tai-youkai, and that was all . . . She . . . well, she was just a pawn in that mess. Paul was being territorial. It was a different thing entirely.

To be honest, the idea of spending her life with Paul Gregory was something she just didn't want to think about. She'd end up as unhappy as her mother was, and that was something that was completely unacceptable, wasn't it?

Alesia Bellerophon was the only daughter of one of the oldest and proudest inu-youkai families in all of Europe, and when Ian MacDonnough had decided that it was time to take a mate, he'd looked to that family to oblige him. It had happened so long ago—over four hundred years, or so Meara had been told—and things had been much different back then. Looked upon as a strong alliance between two powerful families, the mating was not exactly one of the traditional sense, but it did work to solidify Ian's power in the realm, and to that end, he'd gotten exactly what he'd required.

Love wasn't something that either of them had wanted or craved, and now Meara had to wonder if they weren't both suffering for the choice they'd made so long ago.

Alesia rarely left her suite of rooms at the MacDonnough mansion, and it wasn't a secret that the once-proud daughter of the Greek general was in flagging health, though Meara had to wonder whether her father really would suffer if her mother died. There was no love; no love bond . . . In all the years that Meara had been alive, she could only recall a few scattered incidents when she actually spent any real time with her mother. Left in the care of a succession of nannies and governesses, it'd been a lonely childhood, to say the least, and by the time she'd gone to school . . .

She grimaced. The last thing she could do was to abandon Aislynn to a fate such as that. As well staffed as the manor was, there were no playmates to be found; no friends to be made. It was a horribly lonely place, that estate, and Meara . . . if she could make things easier for Aislynn, she would. She owed it to Aislynn. She owed it to herself.

Hanging the towel over the back of the straight wooden chair at her desk, Meara grabbed her brush off the table and headed for the door, determined to brush aside the worrisome thoughts before they ruined her mood completely. Would it be so bad to allow herself a few blessed hours to savor something so wonderful—so magical—even if it never could be . . .?

The sheer white curtains billowed in the strong breeze siphoning through the crack in the window. Iona hadn't closed them before she'd taken off for the evening. Shivering slightly as the night chill curled around her bare ankles and up her legs, she rubbed her arms briskly and hurried over to close it but stopped with her hands poised on the sill, eyes narrowing as she gazed down at the shadowy figure with the bright silver hair standing outside on the sidewalk in the pouring rain.

He saw her and lifted his hand to wave before grasping the ukulele she knew only too well and strumming the first discordant notes. "*Wise men say . . . only fools rush in . . . but I . . . can't . . . help . . . falling in lo-o-ove wi-ith yo-o-ou . . .*"

Pushing the window open further, she stuck her head out side and hissed, "Morio! What are you *doing?*"

He stopped playing long enough to grin up at her, ears flattened pitifully against the downpour. "Meara! Fancy meeting you here!"

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. "You're going to get struck by lightning, you fool!" she insisted. "Go home!"

"I have a proposition for you! I'll leave after you hear me out!"

'Of all the stubborn, foolhardy, asinine . . .' Another crack of thunder followed moments later by an intense bolt of lightning made her cringe. "Ask it, then!" she hollered.

"Invite me up, and I will," he replied pleasantly enough.

"I—no!" she maintained.

"All right," he agreed pleasantly enough as he propped his foot on the bottom step that led up to the front porch and idly strummed the ukulele that sorely needed to be tuned. Meara cringed as he resumed the song. "*Shall I stay . . . Would it be a sin . . . If I can't help falling in love with you . . .*"

"Sweet Jesus, MacDonnough . . . make him *stop!*" someone grouched from the apartment above.

"*I'll* invite him in if that's all it'd take," someone else lower down complained.

"Ugh! I heard that he was bad, but I didn't know he was *that* bad!" another voice chimed in.

Meara dug her claws into the window frame and grimaced. Another streak of lightning shot down, striking the earth just behind the trees off to the left, and Meara couldn't help the little shriek that escaped her. It was close—*too* close—and the insane man just kept playing and singing as though he hadn't noticed the lightning at all . . . "Morio!" She grimaced. "All right!" she called down. "Come up . . ."

That got his attention right quickly. Stuffing the instrument into the duffle bag on the ground beside him, he slung the cumbersome bag over his shoulder and hopped over the banister to grab the trellis in much the same fashion as he had when he'd climbed up to steal the rose from her next door neighbors earlier. Meara shook her head and shoved the window open. His hands slapped over the edge of the sill, and she reached out, cringing as another bolt of lightning struck, grasping the band of his jeans and jerking him into the apartment. "Haven't you ever . . . heard of doors?" she complained as she gritted her teeth and yanked.

"Ow, Meara . . .!" he exclaimed, the palms of his hands smacking against the hardwood floor. "Ow, ow . . . wedgie . . . ow . . ."

"You know, you and your singing were the reasons why Iona and I couldn't rent the same flat this year," she pointed out.

"This one's nicer," he grunted as she jerked on his jeans again.

With one more mighty tug, she dragged him through the window and let go as he sprawled on the floor with an unrepentant grin followed closely by a grimace as he reached back to rub his rear end. "You were a school bully, weren't you?" he complained as he rolled to his feet and straightened up.

Another flash of lightning split the sky outside the window, and Meara shook her head. “You’ll be the death of me,” she predicted with a sigh.

The blasted man had the audacity to chuckle. “Worried about me? That’s sweet but entirely unnecessary.”

“Hardly!” she shot back. “Just because you’re too stubborn to realize that you could have easily been hit by lightning and—Don’t you *dare!*” she warned as he cocked his head to the side, one ear straight up in the ear while the other was jutting out to the side, his face screwed up in a scowl of intense concentration.

He shot her a guilty glance and uttered a sound akin to a soft whine. “Have a heart, Meara!” he grumbled. “I’ve got water in my ears!”

“Let me get you a towel,” she insisted, jabbing her index finger into his chest none too gently, “and don’t even *think* about shaking.”

She backed out of the room as Morio stood motionless with his head tilted and a grimace on his face before careening around to gather some towels, praying that he wouldn’t give in to the urge to shake off the excess water.

Grabbing a handful of fluffy pink towels off the shelf in the bathroom, she darted back toward the living room, skidding to a stop and lifting her arms in time to stave off the barrage of water droplets that spun through the air as the irritating man shook himself. “*Morio!*” she protested.

He stopped mid-shake, and shot her a guilty glance, as if he thought that she wouldn’t notice that the apartment was drenched with water. The contrition that filled his gaze brought her smile to her lips despite herself, and she couldn’t help the laughter that bubbled from her lips as she planted her hands on her hips and helplessly shook her head. “Sorry,” he mumbled, cheeks pinking as the contrite expression dissolved beneath the guise of a cheesy grin.

“I’ll believe it when you mean it,” she countered with a crooked eyebrow.

He shrugged and held his hand out for a towel.

Rolling her eyes, she snatched one off the floor and tossed it to him before retrieving the rest of the hapless pile. The puddle around Morio’s feet darkened and spread, pooling outward in a viscous bubble as Meara dropped a towel on the floor to staunch the flow. Holding the ends of another towel wide, she motioned for him to tilt his head toward her. He looked surprised for a moment but did as he was told. Inclining his head so that she could reach his ears, he stood still while she carefully towed his hair dry, massaging his ears in a completely gentle way.

“That’s nice,” he murmured, eyes drifting closed as she continued her ministrations.

Meara deliberately slowed her hands as she almost smiled—*almost*. The feelings churning in her stomach weren’t exactly unpleasant as much as they were entirely unsettling, as if her very being were tumbling over on itself time and again. She’d felt stirrings of this kind about him before, of course, and she wasn’t completely ignorant as to what, exactly, they meant, but she couldn’t help the stirring of something far headier that churned around her in a dizzying sort of way. Precluding her powers of rational thought, she could only stare at him, couldn’t help herself as she let her hands drop away only to reach up once more to brush his bangs out of his eyes as a roughened sound not unlike a purr though much harsher—much deeper—issued from him. It was a foreign sound the likes of which she hadn’t heard before, and she gasped softly as he leaned into her touch, his hand wrapping around her wrist, holding her in place with a gentle albeit firm grasp.

“M-Morio?” she whispered.

Morio’s eyes opened slowly with a lethargy that seeped into her through his hand holding onto her wrist. She stood, spellbound, as he gazed at her through heavily-lidded eyes, his expression serious, primitive, deep . . . He uttered a low growl—a soothing sound, and she answered with one of her own.

“My bargain . . .” he murmured suddenly, reminding himself that he was there for a reason.

“Question . . .” she echoed.

He swallowed hard—she could see the motion of his Adam’s apple—and he licked his lips with the tip of his tongue. Meara shivered. “Go out with me,” he said quietly. “One time . . . just once, and I swear I’ll leave you alone if I don’t convince you that we’re meant to be.”

Meara shook her head and frowned. “I can’t. I—”

“One time, Meara. One date. What do you have to lose?”

‘*What do I have . . . to lose . . . ?*’ she thought wildly. She started to open her mouth to refute him.

He shook his head stubbornly. “One date, and if you can look at me at the end and say that you didn’t enjoy yourself—that you don’t want to be with me . . . I’ll leave you alone,” he paused here, grimacing slightly, as though the rest of his words were costing him, “forever.”

“Forever,” she repeated absently.

He jerked his head once: yes. “Forever,” he stated again.

Chapter Four
Sunrise

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

University of Edinburgh
Saturday, August 30, 2059

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

“Don’t scream.”

Meara’s eyes flashed open, and she blinked in the darkness, her breathing harsh against the hand covering her mouth.

Morio slowly lifted his hand. “Sorry about that.”

“M-Morio?” she stammered, her brain functioning pitifully slowly. She glanced at the clock and frowned. “It’s four-thirty in the morning . . .”

“Yeah, I know,” he replied with an apologetic little shrug. “But I’m only getting one chance, right? So I aim to take advantage of it.”

“Oh, you have got to be kidding,” Meara grumbled, pulling the blankets over her head.

He pulled them away. “Come on, Meara, or we’ll miss it . . .”

Grudgingly opening one eye, she regarded the hanyou carefully. He didn’t look like he’d lost his mind in the few hours since his unceremonious departure out the window. That didn’t really mean he hadn’t lost his mind, though . . . “Miss what?” she asked.

“Trust me, okay? You’ll love it . . . Hurry up! I’ve got the entire day planned out!”

“You’re mad . . .”

He chuckled, catching her hands and pulling her into a sitting position. “I’m not mad; I swear. Now come on.”

She shook her head and rubbed her face. “I still need a shower and some coffee . . .”

“You look fine,” he assured her.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m wearing my nightgown,” she protested. “Forget it, Izayoi. I’m not going anywhere until I’ve had my shower.”

He heaved a long-suffering sigh and nodded. “All right. You go get your shower, and I’ll make coffee for you.”

“Really?” she asked with a little grudging little smile.

“Really,” he quipped. “Now hurry up . . . I didn’t want to drive, but I can if we’re running late . . .”

Seeing no way out of it, Meara kicked the blankets back and stood up, grabbing her terry bathrobe from the end of her bed before shuffling out of the room once more.

‘Maybe I’m mad,’ she mused as she stumbled into the bathroom and turned on the light.

She’d been up much too late the night before, unable to settle down when all she wanted to do was to get through the night and the time before the date with Morio began. She was looking forward to it far more than she ought to, but she just couldn’t help herself, either.

Stripping off her nightgown and the delicate white silk panties she favored, she stepped under the flowing tap of the shower and sighed as the barest hint of a smile surfaced.

He was as excited as she was, wasn’t he?

‘Of course he is, silly! He’s been trying to convince you to go out with him forever, hasn’t he?’

Meara’s smile widened as she carefully lathered her hair. *‘Maybe . . . I wonder what he’s got planned . . .’*

‘Just promise that you really will let yourself have a good time today,’ her youkai chided.

‘Let myself?’ she echoed as she squeezed body wash onto a pale yellow scrubby. *‘Hmm . . .’*

‘Yes, let yourself . . . He could . . . he could really make us happy . . .’

Deliberately closing her mind against anything that might intrude on her temerarious sense of happiness, she finished her shower as a sense of excitement welled inside her.

‘It’s going to be great, isn’t it?’ she mused as she stepped out from under the taps and dried herself off.

'Yes . . . just believe it, and it will be . . .'

Tugging the belt of her robe closed after toweling her hair dry, Meara padded out to the kitchen only to find Morio digging two mugs out of the cupboard. He spared her a moment to smile broadly before pouring coffee into the cups. "You about ready?"

She giggled, taking the mug he held out to her. "What should I wear?" she asked, wrapping her hands around the warm ceramic.

He scratched his chin thoughtfully, leaning against the counter as he pondered her question. "Let's see . . . You might want a swimsuit . . . maybe something casual . . . something a little nicer for later . . . Sound good?"

She blinked, staring at him over the rim of the coffee mug. "Really . . ."

"Yep. Now hurry up or we'll miss it."

"Miss what?"

He wrinkled his nose, ears twitching as he grabbed the other mug off the counter. "Get moving, Meara. There're a lot of things I can do, but I cannot influence Mother Nature."

Raising her eyebrows at his cryptic answer, Meara turned on her heel and shuffled out of the kitchen. Making a face as she stared at Iona's closed bedroom door, she bit her lip and tried to tell herself that her friend wouldn't be that irritated with her for waking her up . . .

Taking a sip of the coffee, Meara choked and forced herself to swallow. *'Ugh . . . that's horrible . . .'* she choked. *'Nasty, awful, bad!'*

Pushing Iona's door open as she cleared her throat to rid her mouth of the vile taste of the sludge that Morio called coffee, she flipped on the overhead light and walked over, using her knee to jostle the mattress where Iona lay sleeping.

"Hmm? Wha . . .?" Iona mumbled, rolling over and burying her face deeper in the pillows.

"Wake up," Meara said. "I need your help."

Uttering a frustrated groan, Iona sat up, grabbing her watch off the nightstand and rubbing her eyes as she blinked at the device. "Meara? It's not even five in the morning," she pointed out with a shake of her head.

"I know . . . Morio's here already, and I need your advice."

Iona flopped back on her pillows and yawned. “Advice . . .? Is he *mad*? No one goes on a date at five in the morning,” she pointed out.

“Well, he does, and he says I need a swimsuit, so which one should I wear? The pink one or the yellow one?”

Iona pushed herself up on her elbows, waving her hand in the direction of Meara’s coffee cup. “Pink or yellow . . .” she mused with a thoughtful scowl then shook her head. “White.”

“White?” Meara echoed, cheeks pinking as she thought about the swimsuit in question. “The bikini?”

“Yes,” Iona stated. “*The* bikini.”

Biting her lip, Meara couldn’t stave back the little blush that rose to stain her cheeks. “*The* bikini,” she repeated.

Iona reached over, snagging the coffee out of Meara’s slack hand. “That’d be the one. That is definitely a Morio-Izayoi-date-bikini.”

She broke into a timid little smile. “You . . . you think so . . .?”

Iona shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Yes.”

Meara opened her mouth to warn Iona about the God-awful coffee but grimaced when her friend took a huge swallow only to choke out a disgusted hacking noise and slam the mug down on her nightstand, her face contorting in obvious agony. “Oh, my *God!*” she croaked out. “What the hell is *that*?”

“Morio made coffee. Wasn’t that nice of him?” Meara asked pleasantly, wisely holding back her own amusement over her friend’s misfortune since she knew, herself, just how bad the coffee really was.

“Ugh . . . I think I’m going to die,” Iona rasped out. “Nasty!”

Meara rolled her eyes. “Focus, Iona! The white bikini? Really?”

Iona nodded then grimaced, affecting a full-body shiver as she tried to brush off the side-effects of the pungent brew. “Yes, really,” she said. “Then again, maybe not. After that coffee? I’m not so sure anymore . . .”

Meara giggled, pressing her hand against her stomach in an effort to calm her nerves. “The white bikini it is . . .” she decided, turning to leave Iona in peace.

“Have fun,” Iona called after her, her voice muffled once more by her pillow.

“I will,” Meara called back.

Hurrying into her bedroom, she smiled to herself and closed the door quietly. No doubt about it; she had a feeling that she was going to enjoy the date more than she wanted to admit . . .



“Can I take off the blindfold yet?”

Morio snorted. “Keh! No.”

She wrinkled her nose but let her hands drop away from the white kerchief that Morio had carefully tied around her head before helping her into his car. “But I want to see where we’re going!” she protested.

“All in good time, wench,” he informed her. “Where’s your sense of adventure?”

She uttered a soft little sound of complete exasperation at that. “Where?” she tried again.

Morio shook his head. “Stop being so impatient. You’ve had a good time so far, haven’t you?”

Meara wrinkled her nose but couldn’t help the little smile on her face.

All right, so she was having the time of her life thus far. After walking down to the beach to watch the sunrise over coffee—purchased coffee, thank God, not Morio’s horrid concoction—and huge, fluffy croissants that he’d buried in a cooler under a large log on the beach, they’d talked for awhile about nothing in particular before diving swimming for a few hours. She’d never been to the beach so early in the morning, and she had to admit that it was a welcome thing. No one else was there, and it had been peaceful.

She’d buried Morio up to his neck in the sand, and while he’d grumbled about getting sand in places where it ought not be, he’d let her, and all she’d been able to do in the end was smile and shake her head at his silliness. When she’s stripped off the loose blue sundress to reveal the white string bikini, she’d waited almost breathlessly for Morio to notice. He’d been busy shaking sand out of his hair, and when he’d stopped only to do a double take, she couldn’t help the shyness that had overcome

her. Sure, she knew that she had a decent figure, but she'd always been a little self-conscious of her breasts. She wasn't exactly voluptuous, but judging from the look in Morio's eyes, maybe that was all right, too. He'd certainly had enough trouble swallowing and forming coherent words, and Meara had only been able to giggle at him. She'd have given the world to know just what was going through his mind in those moments. Then again, if the appreciative light in his golden gaze had meant anything at all, maybe she already knew what he had been thinking . . .

"We're here," he announced as he pulled into a parking space and shut off the engine. "Just sit tight. I'll come around and help you out."

Meara sat still, waiting impatiently as Morio stepped around the car and opened the door, grasping her hands to pull her out of the vehicle. "Ready?"

Turning her head slowly, she frowned as she tried to discern noises. None of them made much sense to her, and in the distance, she could hear the sound of people screaming. *'What on earth . . .?'*

Strange smells filtered to her on the breeze; a mix of water and salt and heated cooking oil, and none of them made sense to her. She could feel the electricity of human auras, an excitement that she couldn't quite credit. The last time she'd felt anything this powerful had been when she'd gone to that concert Morio had given her tickets to go to, and even then, this aura seemed different somehow . . . if only she could figure out why . . .

He pulled her along behind him. "Two, please," he said. Meara turned her head toward the sound of change being dropped into a metal tray. "Thank you."

"Enjoy your visit," A friendly voice said.

"Careful," Morio intoned, gently pushing Meara against a metal bar.

'A turnstile,' she thought absently as she gingerly shoved through the pass.

Morio stopped her with a hand on her shoulder. "Okay," he relented. "You can take that off now."

She pulled it off and blinked as she looked around. People were milling around; parents with small children . . . teenagers enjoying the final days of the summer holiday . . . He'd brought her to Edinburgh Playorium, the new amusement park that had been completed just a few years ago. She'd never been to a place like that, and it took a few minutes for her to accustom herself to the surroundings. "An amusement park?" she asked finally, turning a quirked eyebrow expression on him. "What am I? Five?"

Morio grimaced and shrugged, hiding his discomfort behind a bright smile but not before Meara saw it and flinched. “We can go somewhere else,” he ventured, stuffing his hands deep into his pockets with a shrug.

“No . . . I mean . . . I was joking,” she hurried to explain. “I . . . I’ve never been to something like this . . . is it like a carnival?”

“Sort of, just bigger,” Morio allowed then sighed. “Seriously . . . if you want to do something else, we can. I just thought . . .” he trailed off, shaking his head as a light blush rose to stain his skin. “You’re right . . . it’s kind of stupid.”

“No, no!” she insisted quickly. “It’s not stupid, at all! What do we do first?”

He broke into a nervous, slightly lopsided grin as his ears twitched nervously. “What do you want to do? There’s all sorts of junk food, and—”

“Junk food?” she repeated, her eyes sparkling as she considered just what that might mean. Having grown up tucked away on the MacDonnough estate, she had been well enough fed since Ian kept a full time cook in residence, but the aged turtle-youkai woman, Mrs. Kranken was of the old school and believed that junk food was the root of all evil.

“Sure . . . ever had cotton candy?”

Meara shook her head quickly as Morio’s eyebrows shot up, disappearing under his thick fringe of silvery bangs. “No . . .”

“Wha-a-at?” he gasped incredulously. “You’re kidding . . .”

“Nope . . . entirely repressed, huh?” she joked.

Morio grasped her hand and dragged her toward a small snack stand situated outside the gift shop. “What color do you want? Pink’s pretty good . . . so is blue . . . they’re all good; just stay away from the yellow stuff. Banana flavored. Nasty.”

She shot Morio a quick glance to see if he was teasing. He didn’t look like he was. In fact, the idea of the yellow cotton candy must have really disturbed him since he looked like he was trying to forget the taste of it . . .

“Pink looks good,” she ventured, catching his eye and smiling.

He nodded. “Good choice. That bag, there,” he said to the woman behind the counter as he pointed up at a bag of pink cotton candy held to a bit of clothesline over head by a clothespin.

She fished it down and handed it over as Morio dug some money out of his pocket. “Here,” he said, handing Meara the bag.

She eyed it rather dubiously, staring at the fine pink fibers with a critical eye. “And this is candy?”

“Yes,” he said with a curt nod. Reaching over to undo the twist tie that secured the opening, he pulled a large glob of the candy from the bag and shoved it all into Meara’s mouth without as much as a warning.

“Umph!” she complained then giggled as the dry bits melted on her tongue. Eyes widening as she swallowed the syrup left behind, she laughed. “That’s good!” she exclaimed softly.

He chuckled. “Told you! Here, have some more.”

She couldn’t help but laugh when he stuffed more of the fluffy candy into her mouth. She could feel the fibers sticking to her lips, to her chin, but she couldn’t help it, either. Morio reached into the bag to grab another wad only this time, he aimed for his own mouth. Meara reached over, snagging his wrist and pulling his hand down, eating the candy off of his fingers before he had a chance to feed himself. “Oi!” he complained.

“This is mine,” she explained sweetly. “You bought it for me.”

Morio rolled his eyes but chuckled. “Fine, fine . . . I’ll just get some for myself.”

She watched him as he ambled back over to buy another bag of the treat, this time opting to get the blue candy. Popping a huge wad into his mouth as he wandered back, he shot her a saucy grin. “Kami . . . you’ve almost finished your cotton candy?”

Meara shot her nearly empty bag a guilty glance and smiled. “It was good,” she replied, leaning against Morio as she tried to snag a bit of his candy.

He pulled his bag away and clucked his tongue. “Forget it, Meara. You ate yours.”

“But I want to taste the blue kind!”

That earned her a sidelong glance. “It tasted just like yours.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Nope . . . you said that the yellow tasted like banana, and the pink didn’t, so I want to taste the blue!”

Heaving a sigh, he shook his head when she batted her eyes a few times for good measure. “All right,” he agreed, handing her the bag. “I’m such a sucker . . .”

Meara took the candy happily and wasted little time in eating it, too. “Ugh, now I’m all sticky,” she complained with a giggle as she pitched the empty bags into a trashcan nearby.

He chuckled, leading her over to a water fountain so she could rinse her fingers. “You look like a pup,” he told her. “Oi! Don’t get me all sticky, too!”

She giggled, smashing her hand against his cheek and laughing harder when his skin stuck to her fingertips. “How’s that?”

He wrinkled his nose but laughed along with her. “Now that you’ve had your cotton candy and mine, you want to ride something?”

“Ooh! What are those?” she asked, tapping his arm and pointing at another confection stand.

Morio turned and narrowed his eyes. “Candy apples . . . let me guess: you want one of those, don’t you?”

“I’ve never had a candy apple,” she informed him.

“How can you never have had any of this stuff?” he complained but took her hand to led her over to the stand.

“The cook never made anything that wasn’t completely healthy *and* boring,” she informed him.

Morio quirked an eyebrow but remained silent as he purchased a candy apple for Meara and a caramel-nut apple for himself.

“That one looks good, too,” she commented as she turned the apple to find the best place to bite into it.

“You’re high-maintenance, aren’t you?” he teased.

Meara blushed but giggled as Morio handed over his apple.

It didn’t take long for her to finish off both apples, and Morio could only shake his head as he watched her dump the cores into the trash bin, brushing off her hands before turning to look at him once more.

“Here,” he said, tearing open a small packet of wet-naps the woman at the apple stand had given him. Meara grimaced but took the cloth and wiped her face and hands. “What next?”

He laughed. “Well, we could ride something . . . or we could find something else for you to eat, but keep in mind, I made reservations for lunch . . .”

“Reservations? Where?”

“You’ll see . . . patience is just not one of your virtues, is it?”

She had the grace to blush at the remark, but her giggle ruined the show of contrition. “I suppose not.”

“I love to hear you laugh,” he mused, stopping short to pin her with a meaningful glance.

“You . . . do?”

He nodded. “Yes, I do.”

A sudden sense of shyness crept over her, and Meara quickly turned away before he saw too much in her eyes. “They have rides here?” she said, racking her brain for something—anything—that could take her mind off of Morio and the unsettling feeling that the earth was spinning out of her control.

“Yep . . . not sure you should ride anything after eating all that crap, though,” he remarked dubiously.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m fine!” she maintained.

“Yeah . . . you say that now, but you’ll want me to hold your hair back while you hurl, too,” he predicted.

She blushed but laughed. “I won’t hurl . . . that’s disgusting!”

“Hurling happens to the best of us. I have it on very good authority that my uncle, Kichiro ended up praising the porcelain after he rode a few too many rides with Aunt Belle.”

“Really? Can’t take it?”

“Apparently not,” he replied, refusing to rise to the bait. “We could go on the Ferris wheel . . . it’s not so bad.”

Meara turned to follow the direction of Morio's outstretched hand, craning her neck back as she gazed up at the imposing structure. "That's . . . tall . . ."

"Afraid of heights?"

She shook her head. "Nope. Bring it on, Izayoi."

He chuckled, catching her hands and pulling her off toward the line for the Ferris wheel. There weren't many people waiting, and the ride was letting people off. Morio chuckled as he held the gate open for Meara and gestured for her to go before him.

Slipping onto the bench, she scooted over as Morio climbed in beside her and pulled the bar down until it locked into place. "You're having fun, right?" he asked, eyes sparking in the morning sunshine.

"I am," she admitted as a hint of pink filtered into her cheeks.

"You say that like you're surprised," he ventured.

She shook her head, startled for a moment when the carriage they were in ground forward. Grabbing onto Morio's shirt, she leaned closer to him until she realized that they were only being moved a few feet forward so that the attendant could load the next few benches. "S-sorry," she murmured, cheeks pinking as she swallowed hard and bit her lip.

"Don't be," he told her with an almost bashful sort of smile. "I don't think I minded that . . ."

She laughed softly, leaning over to peer down at the ground. "Funny how different things look when you're further off the ground."

He nodded. "I've thought that, myself, a time or two."

Sitting back, she leaned back to look at him, shaking her head as a thoughtful frown surfaced on her face.

"What?" he pressed when she didn't volunteer anything.

"You don't . . . strike me as a hunter."

He grimaced and shrugged. "Yeah . . . I'm not. Never was."

"But you did it."

Chapter Five
Twenty-Four Hours

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

University of Edinburgh
Saturday, August 30, 2059
3:50 p.m.

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

‘*Her hands are so small,*’ Morio mused as he led Meara through the tree-lined path that meandered through the park. She was looking around with a smile on her face and a brilliance in her gaze that pleased him.

She’d been smiling all day, truth to tell. All his work had really paid off, and he couldn’t help but be quite relieved since he’d worried that one date wouldn’t be nearly enough to convince her that they were meant for one another.

He’d spent all night running around and setting things up. He’d gotten to the amusement park just before it closed; bought a ticket just so he could go inside and rent a locker where he stashed the clothes he’d need for the second half of their date. She’d giggled at him when he’d retrieved his clothes and headed off to change while she did the same—he had run back out to the car to grab her bag, and despite her protests, he’d whisked her away to the Edinburgh Skyplex where they were setting up a special exhibit of Cain Zelig’s most famous works. She’d told him that she hadn’t been able to get tickets to the ultra-exclusive event as he’d led her into the building, and she’d apparently forgotten just who Cain Zelig was married to. He’d called and asked Cain to give Meara a tour around the exhibit, and though Cain wasn’t staying for the actual event, he said that he’d been more than happy to meet with Morio and Meara, and Gin . . . well, Aunt Gin had been every excited to meet Meara since she’d heard so much about her over the last three years.

After the tour, Morio had taken the four of them to lunch at the Skyporium—a very trendy restaurant at the top of the Skyplex building, and Morio had spent much of the meal simply watching as Meara, Gin, and Cain discussed art with a conviction that Morio appreciated. Now they were killing some time until the jazz concert in the park and enjoying a simple afternoon of quiet before the big event, having said goodbye to Cain and Gin at the restaurant. The city was hosting an end of summer festival in the park though most of the festivities were being held on the other side of the area, leaving Meara and Morio alone in relative peace as they strolled along the flagstone path.

“You’re amazing,” Meara murmured, squeezing Morio’s hand gently.

Caught off guard by the softly uttered praise, Morio shot her a quick glance and an uncertain little grin. “You think so?”

She giggled, hooking a strand of chestnut hair and slipping it behind her ear. “I think so,” she said. “Are you sure you haven’t had this date planned all along?”

He grimaced. “Actually . . . no.”

“No?”

“Nope . . . didn’t figure you’d actually accept my bargain,” he admitted with a shrug.

She sighed. “I see . . .”

“I was hoping that your art books weren’t just a fluke,” he hurried on, unwilling to let her say anything that might ruin the companionable moment.

“My art books?”

He nodded. “Well, yeah . . . you got one at the library the first time I met you, and I noticed last night that you have quite a few of them on your shelf . . .”

“Well, I am majoring in art theory and education,” she pointed out.

“There’s that, too,” he agreed.

She laughed. “I guess I never thought to ask . . . what are you studying?”

He shot her a cheesy smile. “Automotive design.”

She did a double take and barked out an incredulous laugh. “You’re serious? You want to draw cars?”

“Yes. Yes, I do . . . I wanted to be a mechanic, but my father said that it was women’s work.”

“Come again?”

Morio chuckled. “Mama’s a mechanic.”

Meara shook her head though her smile widened. “Your mother is a mechanic,” she repeated. “You have a quite interesting family, Morio Izayoi.”

“Course I do.”

She laughed suddenly, pulling her hand away and stopping as she lifted both her hands to cover her mouth.

“It’s not that funny,” he mused as he stopped to watch her.

“No, no, you’re right. I’m sorry . . .” she said between bouts of laughter. “I just imagined my mum all covered with grease mucking about in my da’s cars . . .”

“Can’t see it happening?” he teased.

She giggled harder. “Och, mon! No.”

That caught Morio by surprise. Meara had always spoken so carefully before. He’d never heard her slip into a real Scottish brogue before. “Why don’t you sound like that all the time?” he asked.

Meara blinked and shook her head before laughing softly once more. “I was sent to private school in Sheffield,” she told him. “The girls . . . they teased me because my brogue was so thick . . . I suppose I learned to hide it.”

“I like it,” he told her.

Her cheeks pinked though her smile didn’t fade, and she slowly shook her head. “I like your accent, too.”

“Accent? I have an accent?” Morio drawled.

Meara nodded as she slipped her hand into his again, and the two started walking once more.

“Look sharp! He’s gone and done it!” a guy Morio recognized from a couple of his classes said to a friend he was with. “She actually gave a scruffy mutt like you the time of day?” he called out.

Morio grinned and nodded. “Absolutely . . . I told you it was just a matter of time.”

“You’re impossible,” she said with a slow shake of her head.

Morio shrugged. “Can I help it that everyone knows that I’ve been head over heels for you . . . forever?”

With a sigh, she shook her head though her smile didn’t disappear. “Incorrigible.”

“Completely.” Spotting an ice cream cart near the central fountain in the park, Morio quickened his pace, dragging Meara along behind him. “Dessert!” he insisted.

She laughed but allowed him to lead her off, standing patiently while he bought vanilla cones for both of them.

“Here,” he said, handing her a cone.

She took it with an endearing little smile. “So what’s next?” she asked, the tip of her pink tongue darting out to catch the melting ice cream.

“Nothing for awhile,” he admitted. “Figured you might like a little quiet time.”

“Don’t tell me the date’s almost over,” she teased.

Morio snorted. “Keh! As if!”

She nodded. “Good,” she murmured, her cheeks pinking prettily as she shot him an almost timid glance out of the corner of her eye.

“Having fun, are you?”

Her blush deepened, and she shrugged just a little before turning her complete attention on her ice cream cone. “This is good.”

“Is it?”

She nodded. “Thank you . . . today’s been . . . amazing.”

He grimaced, unable to ignore the hint of sadness in her tone. “I told you: it’s not over yet.”

“You just don’t do anything in short order, do you?”

Tossing the last of his cone into a nearby trashcan, Morio made a face at his sticky fingers and glanced around for somewhere to wash off his hands. “Not when it comes to you,” he assured her.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as he strode over to the fountain. He spared a moment to grin back at her before swishing his hands in the cool water pooling in the basin beneath the statue of a hundred fairies flitting about a hulking stone tree. “Getting into the fountain?” she teased.

Morio pivoted on the balls of his feet and flicked water at Meara. She hopped back with a little squeal, clutching her ice cream cone tightly. “Just wait, you,” she vowed, popping the last of her cone into her mouth before carefully skirting around the fountain to use the other side to rinse off her fingers. Morio scooted toward her. She shot him a sidelong glance and flicked her wrist, sending a small wave surging over his hands. He returned the favor, and she did, too. By the time they were done, their arms were drenched, and Morio held up his hands in mock surrender. “You win,” he told her with a chuckle.

She stood up, shaking her hands since they didn’t have anything to dry off with. Morio did the same, staring at her, watching the way the sun reflected off the water and pooled in the depths of her eyes. “You’re beautiful, did you know . . .?” he said quietly, unable to look away from her.

“A-am I?”

He nodded, curling his fingers, lifting his knuckles to brush over her cheek. She seemed startled by the intimacy of his touch but didn’t shy away. Her skin was downy soft despite the dampness still clinging to his fingers, and he couldn’t help but smile at the way her lips parted only to close for a moment as she swallowed hard, nostrils quivering as her ragged breathing brushed over his wrist, condensing on his skin . . . “Beautiful,” he whispered once more.

She caught his arm and held on. He could see it in her gaze: she wanted him to kiss her, and as much as he wanted to oblige her, he didn’t want to scare her, either. Sighing softly as he forced himself to let his hand fall away from her, he cleared his throat and stepped back. “Come on . . . let’s see what else we can find to do.”

She sighed, too, but slipped her hand into his as they started walking once more. Morio smiled. Being with Meara was perfect, wasn’t it? Everything he’d ever hoped for . . . everything he’d ever dreamed . . . she was right there with him, and with any luck, he’d be able to convince her in the end . . .

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“You shouldn’t do that,” Meara said, eyeing the water balloon in Morio’s outstretched hand rather nervously. Sitting on the wall of the short stone bridge that extended over the footpath below, they let their legs dangle off the side, watching the pedestrians pass beneath them as Morio purposefully shook his hand. She leaned forward, steadied his arm, shaking her head despite the giggle that escaped her.

He’d purchased the balloons from some children who were having a water war near the swings. Meara had eyed him dubiously, holding her hands up as she backed away from him.

“You wouldn’t . . .” she said slowly, her expression stating that she wasn’t certain whether she believed he would or not.

“Of course I wouldn’t,” he allowed then cocked an eyebrow as he hefted one balloon in the palm of his hand. “Then again . . . white dress and water . . .? You don’t still have that bikini on, by any chance?”

She’d laughed and blushed, shaking her head. “I took that off,” she assured him. “So you can’t . . .”

He sighed, ears drooping in abject defeat. She clucked her tongue and stepped over to him, pushing his ears back into place with a soft giggle . . .

“Look . . . that guy looks hot, don’t you think?” Morio muttered, leaning toward Meara as he tipped his hand to the side, almost dropping the balloon but not quite.

She reached out and snagged the balloon out of his hand. “Oh, no . . . you’ll get us in trouble!”

Grabbing the last two balloons, Morio eyed them for a moment before hefting them up in front of his chest. “So what do you think? B-cup, at least . . .”

She giggled, grabbing one of the balloons and giving it a little squeeze. “I don’t know . . . I’d say a C-cup . . .”

“Meara!” he gasped, jerking away from her grasp. “I’m *shocked!*”

Her giggles escalated into a full-blown laugh. “Well, you *did* ask.”

“Yeah, I did,” he agreed, tossing one balloon in the air. It bounced off his palm and bobbed precariously before slipping off the side of his hand and crashing down onto the empty path below. “Oops . . .”

Meara squeaked and bit her lip as she craned her neck, staring down at the splatter of water where the balloon had impacted on the path. “You’re lucky no one was walking through right then,” she pointed out.

He grinned. “It was an accident!”

She rolled her eyes. “Sure, it was.”

“Hmm,” he deliberated, taking the last of his balloons and holding it by the tied end, dangling it over the pathway. “Hope it doesn’t slip . . .”

“You’re the one who’ll be in trouble if it does,” she chided.

“I’ll blame it on you,” he shot back.

“You wouldn’t!”

“Try me.”

A tall young man and his date emerged from the tunnel and stopped in the middle of the pathway to indulge in a kiss. Morio rolled his eyes and snorted. “Keh! Public displays of affection should be banned,” he told Meara as he let go of the balloon. The two moved away just in time to avoid being hit dead-on with the projectile. Meara smashed her hand over her mouth to suppress her giggles as Morio heaved a dejected sigh for having missed the intended targets.

“Morio!” she gasped.

He snorted again. “They didn’t even notice!” he fumed then shook his head slowly. “Aww, damn it . . . it’s up to you, Meara. You can hit ‘em, right? Make me proud?”

“No, way!” she argued, cradling the last remaining balloon in her hands. “You’re a bad egg, Morio Izayoi. I’ll bet you used to make little girls cry, too.”

“Nah . . . well, maybe . . . just my cousin, Bitty-Belle . . .”

“Beast.”

He laughed outright at her teasing tone. Reaching over quickly, he knocked the bottom of her hands. The balloon bobbed and slipped out of her grasp. Morio’s eyes widened as the balloon exploded on a man’s head. “*Shit!* You hit him!” Morio exclaimed, swinging his feet around to the other side of the wall and hopping down as he reached over and plucked Meara off the wall behind him. Digging into his pocket for a wad of cash, he tossed it over the ledge. “*Sorry!* Here . . . for dry cleaning!” he hollered as he grabbed Meara’s hand and ran, unable to control his laughter at the mingled expression of shock and amusement on the girl’s face.

They ran for five minutes before Meara pulled her hand away and stopped, leaning back against a gnarled old oak tree, doubled over as gales of laughter spilled out of her like an invisible waterfall. Morio stopped, too, chuckling softly as he slowly turned around to face her. She was flushed, though whether it stemmed from embarrassment or because she laughing so hard, he wasn’t certain.

Ambling toward her, hands stuffed into his pockets, he shook his head and smiled. “You’re bad, Meara,” he pointed out.

“Me? You’re the one who hit my hands!”

“Maybe . . . then you’re clumsy; is that what you’re trying to say?”

Her laughter died away but her smile didn’t as she reached up to pull a leaf out of his hair. “You’re evil . . . wicked . . . a horrible influence on me,” she teased.

Pulling his hands from his pockets, he leaned on the tree, arms extended one either side of Meara’s head. She leaned back, her hands behind her as the amusement in her gaze dissipated only to be replaced by something far headier . . . far more intriguing. “You’re shaking,” he murmured, leaning in until his lips grazed her ear. “You can’t possibly be cold . . .”

“C-cold . . .?”

He nodded, his hair falling over his shoulder, brushing against her cheek, against the bare curve of her throat: his silver strands enmeshed with her deep brown locks. The contrast was startling and somehow comforting, and Morio closed his eyes, breathing in her scent, letting her aura overwhelm him.

‘Kami, I . . . I want to . . . kiss her . . .’

His youkai blood sighed and uttered a wizened little whine. *‘Yeah, but . . .’*

‘I know; I know . . . I’ll scare her off if I do . . .’

With a heavy sigh, he drew in one last, deep breath and pushed himself away from the tree. It took several seconds for him to gather his scattering wits. “We’d better get moving,” he said, his voice oddly husky in his own ears.

Meara looked completely dazed, and she had to blink a few times to clear her vision. Her cheeks pinked again as she stood up straight, her gaze narrowing as she stared at him with an expression fairly close to consternation writ in the depths of her smoky gray eyes.

Pretending not to see the unvoiced questions, he took her hand and pulled her along toward their next destination.

He’d be a nice guy—a gallant man—even if it killed him, he vowed.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he grimaced when he noticed the confusion contorting Meara’s brow as she stared down at the path they were walking on, and Morio sighed.

'Sometimes,' he thought sourly with an inward scowl, *'being a gentleman really, really sucks; damned if it doesn't . . .'*



Meara stood back and waited patiently while Morio narrowed his gaze, counting the trees carefully before grabbing her hand and striding toward the fourth one in the wide circle. “What are you doing?” she asked when he didn’t volunteer any information.

“Wait here,” he said, letting go of her hand and wandering over to the base of the tree as he tipped his head back to peer up through the network of branches. Spotting the bright blue ice chest he’d left up there in the night, he glanced around to make sure that they were hidden well enough and since people were starting to filter into the makeshift amphitheater portion of the park.

It didn’t take long for him to retrieve the cooler and drop back down to the ground. Meara smiled, shaking her head as he opened the it and handed her the cream colored rose that rested on top of everything in the cooler. With a wolfish grin, he shook out the blanket that lay over the rest of the contents in the chest. “Not a fancy table or anything,” he remarked. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“This is where we’re eating?” she questioned with an arched eyebrow.

He nodded as he knelt down to pull packages of plastic covered hunks out of the chest along with two crusty loaves of bread and a bottle of wine. “Sit down?” he offered, holding out a hand to her.

She regarded him for a long moment before sinking onto the blanket beside him. The hunks of plastic covered stuff were various cheeses, and he shot her a grin as he pulled a deep red apple from the chest and cut it into slices with his claws. “Light dinner, I guess,” he remarked. “If you’re still hungry after the concert, I’m sure I can find something open . . .”

“I like light meals,” she replied, taking a slice of apple from his juice-drenched fingers. “You thought of everything, didn’t you?”

Blushing slightly at the quiet wonder in her tone, Morio took his time slicing off a hunk of baby Swiss cheese to offer her.

“Thank you.”

“You know, wine . . . cheese . . . fruit . . . it’s nothing to sneeze at, I suppose.”

Meara nodded and giggled as he fished two plastic wine cups out of the cooler, snapping the cup to the stem base with a flourish. She took one of the glasses and waited while he opened the bottle of wine and poured some for her. "Plastic wine glasses? I like these."

"You should," he rejoined. "It took me forever to find them . . . who'd have thought that plastic wine glasses were uncommon?"

She ate in silence as the early evening breeze ruffled her hair, and whenever Morio caught her staring at him, she smiled. The pink color dusting her nose didn't abate, and as the first shadows fell and lengthened, he had to force back the sudden stab of melancholy that crept up his spine. The band started to assemble down on the stage, tuning their instruments as more people filtered into the clearing. Most were heading for the risers that lined the perimeter of the stage, but a few had brought blankets and were sitting further back, just as Morio and Meara were doing. They didn't draw any notice, though, half-enclosed by the trees behind them. All in all, it was the perfect spot: one that Morio had painstakingly chosen the night before . . .

"Penny for your thoughts," he said, frowning slightly at the solemn look on her face as she thoroughly chewed a bite of apple.

"What's that?"

He shrugged. "Blame my cousin. He's from the States. Taught me some killer slang, though."

She laughed, but the sound of it was slightly hollow, and the humor in the gesture didn't reach her gaze. "You've been all over the world, haven't you? I . . . I've never been out of Great Britain . . ."

"Really?"

She shook her head. "No . . . sad, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't have said that."

"What would you have said?"

Dropping his empty wine cup into the cooler, he leaned back on his elbows and smiled absently as the first stars of the night twinkled high overhead. "Sounds like your father was protective . . . that's a good thing. If I had a daughter, I'd be that way, too."

Meara sighed, tossing her wine cup over Morio into the cooler and hooked her hands around her ankles. "It wasn't like that, you ken? Da . . . He didn't shelter me out of love . . . I'm a *commodity*. The arrangement with Paul should be evidence enough of that."

“Tell Paul to kiss your ass. You don’t belong with him.”

She sighed again, letting her chin fall onto her raised knees as the band launched into their first number. “This isn’t *really* a date, mind,” she said.

“Oh?” he contended, rolling onto his side and pinning her with a vaguely amused stare to let her know that he was quite aware that she was trying to change the topic.

“Quite so,” she went on with a curt nod as she let go of her ankles and curled her feet to the side.

“What would you call it, then?”

Even in the falling darkness as the pale light from the lamp posts lining the aisles in the amphitheater below, he could discern the tell-tale blush that heated her cheeks as her eyes skittered to the side and she smiled a self-conscious little smile. “Well, I don’t know, but one should *kiss* one’s date, shouldn’t he?”

“Oh . . . really . . .”

She nodded. “Absolutely, and you . . . you haven’t tried; not once, so I can barely credit this as a date, wouldn’t you agree?”

Morio cleared his throat as the blood in his veins burned hot. All he really wanted to do was to reach for her, and yet he was almost afraid to do that, too. After so long, dreaming of her, of trying to get her to give him a chance . . . if he blew it now, he’d lose her forever, and in his heart, he knew it. Sitting up slowly, he stole a surreptitious glance at her. She was sitting with her hands clasped neatly in her lap, gnawing on her lower lip as though she were trying to make up her mind about something. “I’ve never had a kiss before,” she admitted, her voice a throaty whisper. “Not a *real* one, anyway . . . Not one that counted . . . not from someone . . . someone I *wanted* to kiss . . .”

And he was done. Reaching out slowly, carefully, slipping his hand around her neck, he drew her forward, lowered his face as she turned to meet him. The softness of her lips gave to the gentle crush of his, and he felt the entirety of his world swell and shatter. The tender caress as her mouth lingered against his set off a yearning in his soul so deep, so necessary that he wondered if he’d crumble to dust if she turned him away.

The sweetness of the wine on her lips tempered the raging ache that burned inside him. Slowly, hesitantly, she slipped her hands up his chest, around his neck, fingers sinking deep in the strands of his hair. The timid nature behind her actions silently spoke to his desire to protect her, and he uttered a soft growl as the kiss broke away, falling between them like a feather, like the gentle waves of the ocean lapping against the shore . . .

She leaned against him, nudging her head under his chin, her fist curling around the cloth of his shirt. Her body tensed as he slipped his arms around her, as he pulled her close. The first of her tears struck his nose, drew a grimace from him as he stroked her back, as he broke into the soft rumble meant to offer her some modicum of solace.

“Meara . . . I didn’t . . . you’re not supposed to cry,” he whispered.

“It’s not fair, is it?” she breathed, her voice full of unrepressed anger as she clenched her fist tighter, as she held onto him with a ferocity that he didn’t fully understand. “Why did you do this?” she asked, leaning away, her eyes sparkling with the wash of unchecked tears. “Why do you have to be . . . everything?”

He sighed, holding onto her as she buried her face against his chest once more. “Meara . . .”

“You don’t understand, do you? No matter how much I’ve enjoyed myself today—no matter how much I wish . . .” trailing off with a sigh, she shook her head; closed her eyes. “It doesn’t change a thing. I still have to tell you that I can’t see you again, and you . . . you promised . . .”

Swallowing the bitter lump that threatened to block his throat, Morio nodded. “I promised,” he forced himself to say, unable to summon the conviction to be angry with her for it all. Maybe it was the understanding that she hated having to say it as much as he hated having to hear it. Maybe it was the bittersweet knowledge that she cared more than she had ever wanted to admit. Maybe it was the complete sense of hopelessness that was quickly flooding over him.

Maybe it was her tears.

“I . . . I should go,” she said suddenly, choking back her tears as she pulled away from him and stumbled to her feet. “I’m sorry, Morio . . . I’m so sorry . . .”

“Meara, wait,” he called, his voice louder than he’d intended as he caught her hand and held on. “Don’t go.”

“But—”

“You promised me a date. Well . . . the date’s not over . . . not yet.”

She stood there for agonizing moments, her conflicting desires waging their silent war in her head. Choking out a harsh little laugh, she sank to her knees beside him, smiling at him through the tears that coursed down her cheeks. He reached out to wipe them away as she cupped his face in her hands. “You’ll be the death of me, Morio Izayoi,” she stated.

He smiled at her cryptic words and nodded. "And you'll be the life of me, Meara MacDonnough . .
. I promise."



Final Thought from Morio:

So she does care ...

Chapter Six

Just Friends

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

University of Edinburgh
Sunday, August 31, 2059

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

Meara leaned back against the closed door and sighed, eyes closed as the smile on her face widened, as she twisted the stem of the single ivory rose he'd given her in her nimble fingertips. She'd never thought that she'd ever experience something as wonderful—as magical—as her time with Morio had been. The sunlight filtering through the window on the far side of the apartment building bathed her eyelids in the softest glow, and despite the weariness in her body, she couldn't help but feel entirely alive, loathe to go to sleep lest she lose the encompassing memory of that one brilliant day—the date.

A soft sigh escaped her as she pushed herself away from the door and wandered into the bathroom, dropping her bag of clothes on the floor before stripping off the simple white dress and discarding it, too. Hitting the panel on the wall that controlled the flow of the hydro jets, she glanced at herself in the mirror over the sink only to do a double take. Cheeks flushed, eyes bright, a hint of a smile still discernable, she idly lifted her fingertips, fluttering them over her still-swollen lips—lips swollen from the night spent kissing and cuddling with Morio Izayoi under the stars in the stillness of the park . . .

'But you told him that you could just be friends,' her youkai's pragmatic voice intervened.

Meara grimaced and sighed at the unwelcome reminder. *'I know . . .'*

'It wasn't very fair of you, was it?'

Biting her lip as she quickly brushed her teeth, Meara tried to push back the feelings of guilt that assailed her. *'It's not like that . . . that's all I can do, isn't it? Morio understands . . .'*

'Morio shouldn't have to understand, Meara . . . The man was desperate for anything you were willing to give him, or didn't you notice? He would have accepted anything just so he wouldn't have to deal with the consequences of his promise . . .'

'He . . . he promised he'd always catch me if I fell . . .'

‘There’s that . . . and before that, he promised that if you said ‘no’, that he’d leave you alone, didn’t he? What makes you think that he wouldn’t agree to anything—anything—just so you’d not leave him flat?’

That was the thing, wasn’t it? He’d caught her hand and pulled her back when she’d tried to leave. She hated the thought of being without him, and yet . . . and yet she couldn’t just cast Aislynn aside, either, could she?

That’s what it came down to, and Meara knew it. As strongly as her father felt about hanyous, she didn’t doubt for a moment that if she told him or even hinted that she had chosen to be with a hanyou, Ian MacDonnough would cut her off completely, no questions asked. She’d always known he was ruthless. She’d always known that there was no emotion called love anywhere in the man she knew as her father, and even if there were, it was something that he didn’t fully comprehend.

No, he’d disown her; she knew it, and while the idea of being disowned wasn’t pleasant, she could deal with that, too, for Morio . . . the trouble wasn’t that . . .

The trouble was Aislynn.

She was too little, too fragile, and Meara . . . she couldn’t stand the idea of allowing her infant sister to exist in a life that Meara remembered much too well . . .

When she was young, before she started school, she’d spent hours wandering through the seemingly endless gardens of the vast MacDonnough estate known as Nightsboro. Such a lonely place, it had been, and yet so mysterious, too. She’d climbed craggy cliffs, waded in the crystalline streams, ran through the forests and glens, ripping her dresses and getting her hair tangled into snarls so bad that she’d cry when her nanny yanked the comb through her hair later, and yet it had been worth it. Escaping the cold confines of the imposing castle, she had found a sense of voluntary seclusion, telling herself that it was something she wanted.

She wandered so far once that she’d found the local village, watching children play on the swings in the tiny little park near the school. Hesitating for a few minutes, she’d steeled her resolve before dashing out of the trees in the hopes of making a friend. Her legs were scratched and scraped from her trek through a briar patch, and her hair ribbons had been lost long ago. Dress smudged with dirt on her little face, she’d walked purposefully up to a little girl who was sitting in the grass with a doll.

“Hello,” Meara ventured, unaccountably shy in the face of this strange child. Twisting her hands together in the hem of her skirt, she shuffled her feet in the grass and waited.

“I’m Laina,” the girl said as she glanced up at Meara, deep brown eyes curious. “Who are you?” she asked.

“Meara,” she answered, dropping to her haunches as she slowly reached out to finger a glossy curl on the doll’s head. “She’s pretty,” she added, smiling uncertainly as the girl continued to stare.

“I got her for my birthday,” Laina replied. “You want to see her?”

Meara nodded, extending her chubby little arms to take the baby. The girl straightened the doll’s skirts and handed her over. “You got a doll for your birthday?” Meara asked with a shake of her head.

“Aye . . . Mum gets me one every year . . .” Laina frowned. “You act like you ain’t seen a doll before.”

Meara felt her cheeks heat up, and she shrugged her little shoulders. Truthfully, she couldn’t recall leaving Nightsboro, even for a trip to the store. The servants kept in Ian’s employ took care of everything, didn’t they? She’d never . . . She made a face, unwilling to let Laina see that she really hadn’t seen a real doll before. “Of course I’ve seen them before!” she lied. “Who hasn’t seen a doll before?”

“Meara.”

Meara’s back stiffened at the sound of that voice. Not cold, exactly, but not warm, either, she knew the voice well enough.

Ian MacDonnough strode over, sparing a moment to eye Laina as though she were no more than a scuff on his shoe before pulling Meara roughly to her feet and ripping the doll out of her arms. He tossed it down on the ground as he hurried her to the waiting car, and he hadn’t spoken to her until they were driving through Nightsboro’s gates once more. He was furious—even at the age of five, Meara could tell that she’d somehow done something that her father had found unacceptable. When the car stopped before the mansion, she’d meekly climbed out, shuffling her tones in the dirt as the driver pulled away, leaving Meara alone with Ian.

“You will not belittle yourself by associating with those people,” Ian stated flatly, no discernible emotion in his tone.

“Yes, Father,” Meara mumbled, eyes hot, grainy.

“You are the daughter of the tai-youkai, and you shall not do anything to embarrass me.”

“Yes, Father,” she repeated.

Ian nodded curtly and turned on his heel. “Your nanny was looking for you,” he said. “Come inside.”

Meara frowned as images of the plastic doll with the glass eyes and the fake hair flitted through her head, gathering the remnants of her tattered pride as she grabbed her father’s hand and tugged. “Father, if you please! I should . . . I should like a doll . . .”

“A doll?” he repeated with a scowl. “Don’t be silly, Meara. Dolls are for children. Now go see that you’re cleaned up. You look like a common urchin.”

He walked away from her then, leaving Meara on the steps of the MacDonnough mansion. She’d never tried to make friends with the village children again though she often went to the edge of the forest to watch them play. She never saw Laina again, either . . .

It was that sort of memory that Meara was struggling to keep Aislynn from ever having—that sort of loneliness and the confusion that came with it . . . the feeling that she just wasn’t good enough . . .

And Morio . . . even if he didn’t really understand, he tried, and that was something, wasn’t it?

Stripping off and casting aside her panties before stepping under the warmed flow of water, she closed her eyes and tilted her head back as the current soothed her.

The look in his eyes when she’d told him that they could be friends—there was nothing wrong with having friends, right? She grimaced. The disappointment in his gaze was masked quickly enough, but still she’d seen it, and though he said he understood, she had to wonder how he could when she didn’t really understand, herself.

“I can have friends . . . that’d be okay, wouldn’t it? I mean, everyone has friends, right? And friends . . . well . . . friends do things together, don’t they? They go places . . . they do things . . . such as going to dinner or studying together . . .”

Morio offered her a half-hearted smile. “Of course they do,” he allowed.

Meara nodded, licking her lips and clearing her throat as she dared a glance at him. Staring up at the sky overhead, he was scowling just a little, his eyes bright despite the darkness of the night. The expression faded only to be replaced by a sad little grin when he intercepted her perusal. “Would you . . .? Could you . . .? We could . . . we could have dinner? As friends? Tomorrow night . . . if you’re not busy, that is . . .”

His gaze didn’t falter as he slowly sat up, as he shook his head ever-so-slightly.

“Ah . . . oh . . . I’m sorry . . . You probably have plans, don’t you? That’s all right. It was a rather stupid thought . . . I just . . . Well, it doesn’t matter, does it? I—”

“Meara.”

“Hmm?”

He reached out, took her hand, pulled her closer as he tilted her chin, his lips hovering over hers, his breath condensing on her lips as a shiver ran down her spine. "Tomorrow night's too far away . . . how about tonight?"

It took a few minutes for her muddled mind to grasp the meaning of his words. It was after midnight, wasn't it? That's what he was trying to tell her . . .

They'd stayed there, lying on the blanket watching the stars as he'd covered every inch of her face with the gentlest kisses, holding her so close that the chill in the night air didn't touch her, sharing the sweetest kiss as the sun rose over the tree tops, and sometime during the night, she'd realized . . .

'Meara?'

'Yes?' she replied as she stepped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. It was one of the ones she'd used to dry the rain off Morio, and it still carried his lingering scent. She smiled, holding the towel to her nose and closing her eyes as she breathed in his scent.

'Maybe . . .'

'Maybe what?'

Her youkai sighed. *'Maybe . . . maybe we can do this.'*

Pausing as she squeezed the excess water out of her hair, Meara frowned. *'Do what?'*

'You know . . . take care of Aislynn and be with Morio, too. I mean, think about it. Your father never comes here to check up on you, and Paul . . . well, he's not around enough to know a thing, either . . . Aislynn won't be a baby forever, and when she's grown, wouldn't it be nice to have a steady home for her to visit? A real home filled with love and laughter and all those things you didn't have . . .?'

Meara bit her lip and absently pulled her bathrobe over her shoulders. *'You mean, just not tell them? Father or Paul . . .?'*

'Just for a little while, until Aislynn is old enough to understand . . . you could tell her then how to contact you . . . you can make her understand that she's always welcome with you.'

She shook her head, plopping down on the closed toilet, feet askew, shoulders slumped. *'But that would be lying . . .'*

'Lying? Perhaps . . . I rather prefer withholding the truth. Isn't that what your father's done to you all these years?'

'That doesn't make it right . . .'

'You still don't understand, do you, Meara? You still don't quite grasp the meaning behind it all.'

'The meaning . . .?'

'Go see Morio, and you'll understand. Just go see him now . . . follow your heart for once. We don't want to be alone anymore . . .'

Meara sighed and carefully dried her hair, pondering the cryptic words of her youkai voice. She wasn't supposed to see him until he came by to pick her up for dinner. Still, she couldn't deny that she desperately wanted to see him now; *right* now.

Shaking her head, she stepped out of the bathroom and crossed the hall to Iona's room. Her friend was lying on her bed still fully clothed with her cell phone clutched to her chest. "Iona . . ." she said softly, loathe to wake her but needing to talk to someone about everything. "Iona . . ."

Iona groaned and sat up, eyes flashing open as she stared at Meara. "Where the bloody hell have you been?" she demanded without preamble, grabbing Meara's hand and pulling her down to sit beside her. "I was worried sick! Why didn't you answer your cell phone?" Iona narrowed her gaze and sat back, crossing her arms over her chest. "And *why* do you look like the cat that ate the canary?"

"It was the best date," Meara said as her smile widened even more. "The *perfect* date . . ."

Iona almost smiled though she seemed to be convinced that she wanted to remain a little miffed for the worry she'd suffered. "Perfect? Really?"

Meara nodded. "Yes," she breathed. "But I have a problem."

"A problem? You've just been on the best date ever, and you have a problem?"

Meara's smile died, and she heaved a sigh. "We've decided to be friends," she explained.

Iona rolled her eyes. "Oh, you've got to be kidding! You pulled the 'just friends' thing on him? Poor sot . . ."

"It's the best I can do," Meara whispered, unable to meet her friend's gaze.

Iona sighed. "All right, so he chose friends over nothing, and you come out of it smelling like a rose . . . what's the problem?"

Meara wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "It's not a problem, really . . . more of a . . . matter of perception."

Iona's eyebrows disappeared under her thick fringe of bangs. "Oh? Do tell."

Unable to stave back the blush that rose to stain her cheeks, Meara shrugged in what she hoped was a nonchalant manner. "Well, we've agreed to have dinner, but the thing is, historically speaking, dinner has always been used in reference to the largest meal of the day. You follow?"

Iona nodded.

"Good, good . . . and also *historically* speaking, the biggest meal of the day has always been the afternoon meal; am I right?"

"I suppose . . ."

Meara nodded quickly. "Well, then it would stand to reason, wouldn't it, that instead of agreeing to meet him tonight, I should, in fact, meet him sooner since 'dinner' and all it entails should occur in natural order during the early afternoon hours."

Iona laughed. "You don't have to convince me, Meara . . . Just friends, aye?"

Meara nodded slowly. "Just friends," she echoed.

Iona digested that, wrapping her arms around her ankles as she rested her cheek on her knees and carefully regarded Meara. "You know something . . .?"

"Hmm?"

"I'd consider Will to be my friend."

"Will?"

Iona nodded.

"But he's your boyfriend . . ."

"Which doesn't mean he's not a friend, too."

"Oh . . . really . . .?"

“Uh-huh . . . You like him, don’t you? Morio, I mean . . . It’s written all over your face. That’s not a bad thing.”

“Isn’t it?”

Iona shook her head, reaching over to pull Meara against her shoulder. Meara leaned her forehead against Iona’s cheek and sighed. “Absolutely not. You’ve spent your life making sure that every other person is taken care of; making sure that your father is pleased, and that your mother need not ever worry—not that he is or that she ever would be . . . Meara . . . do something for yourself, just this once. You owe it to yourself, don’t you? And maybe . . . maybe you owe it to Morio, too.”

“He . . . he makes me laugh,” she admitted quietly. “He makes me feel things . . . frightening things . . . wonderful things . . .”

“You can’t be with Paul, and you know it. He doesn’t make you happy, and if you were with him . . . you’d end up no better off than your mother . . .”

Meara swallowed hard and nodded, sitting up as she quickly wiped away a solitary tear that streaked down her cheek. “She’s dying, you know?” Meara said in a whisper. “I can feel it every time I go there . . . She’s given up. She wakes up in the morning and looks out the window, and . . . and I wonder just what she sees . . .”

Iona didn’t answer, pulling Meara’s hair over her shoulder and kissing her temple. “That’s what I mean. Your mum . . . she’s never been quite right, has she? If you accept Paul as your mate . . . You’ll never love him, you ken? You’ll end up like your mum: dying a little every day.” Heaving a sigh, Iona scooted off the bed. “I’m going to make some coffee. Just think about it?”

Meara nodded, propping her elbow on the window over the bed as she stared outside without really seeing anything at all.

What Iona said made sense, didn’t it? Was that the real reason her mother had always been so distant; so unapproachable? To live a lifetime without the comfort of being loved and loving in return . . . Meara shook her head. *‘I . . . I couldn’t do that . . .’*

Pushing herself off the bed, Meara slipped out of Iona’s room. Her cell phone was in her purse, and she frowned at it for a long moment before she padded into her bedroom and over to her desk, rummaging through the top drawer for her address book. *‘How telling is it,’* she wondered with a wince, *‘that I don’t have Mother’s number programmed into my phone . . .?’*

It didn’t take her long to find it. It wasn’t the number for a cell phone but was her mother’s private number—the phone in her suite of rooms. As far as Meara knew, Alesia didn’t ever leave those

rooms, and she certainly never left the castle. She'd given birth to Aislynn in those rooms, and for all Meara knew, she'd been born there, too.

Heaving a sigh as she swallowed hard, she forced her cold, numb fingers to dial the number before slowly lifting the receiver to her ear.

"Hello?"

Grimacing at the thin, reedy voice of Alesia Bellerophon MacDonnough, Meara had to clear her throat before she spoke. "Hello? M-M-Mother?"

There was a long pause on the other end of the line, as though Alesia were trying to figure out just who would be calling her 'Mother'. "Meara . . .?"

"Y-yes . . ." She tightened her grip on the phone, licking her parched lips as she drew a deep breath and tried to figure out just what, exactly, she wanted to say.

"I hear that London is beautiful this time of year," Alesia went on in a distracted sort of tone. "You should go for a walk through Hyde Park . . ."

"I . . . I'm not in London, Mother . . . I'm in Edinburgh."

". . . Edinburgh . . .?"

"Yes . . . Mother . . ."

"*Beware the Ides of March . . .*"

Meara frowned at her mother's absurd babbling. "I wondered if I could ask . . .?"

"Ask . . .? Certainly . . ."

She sighed. "I met this man, you ken? He's wonderful, and I . . . Father . . . wouldn't like him."

"Your father's word is law . . . He breeds unhappiness and resentment . . ."

"What . . . should I do . . .?" she whispered, knowing in her heart that her mother wasn't going to be able to help her and yet wishing all the same that the woman who had been such a stranger to her could manage to offer some modicum of motherly advice, just once . . .

"I loved one once . . . I thought . . . He did not return my love . . . I mated your father because it didn't matter . . . I didn't want it to matter."

“Mother?”

Alesia sighed. Meara could hear the scrape of a window being opened. “Regrets, Meara . . . a lifetime of regrets . . . that’s what you’ll have, and your father will win after all.”

“I understand,” Meara whispered, blinking quickly to disburse the moisture that gathered in her eyes. “Thank you.”

“Winter comes early this year,” Alesia murmured. “Do not be caught out in the cold.”

She almost smiled before her face crumbled, but she managed to choke back the sob that swelled in her throat. “Yes, Mother.”

“I must go . . . it’s time for tea.”

“Yes, Mother. Goodbye.”

Clicking the phone off, Meara wiped her eyes and sniffled. Something about the idle chatter of the woman who was her mother hurt more than she wanted to credit. As though the centuries of existing without really living was enough to rob her of the very will to survive . . . Meara understood, didn’t she? What her mother had been trying to say . . . if she didn’t fight for this . . . she’d end up just like Alesia, wouldn’t she . . . ?

“There you are,” Iona said, poking her head into the room before slipping inside, holding out a steaming mug of coffee to her.

“Thank you,” Meara said, managing a weak, watery smile.

“Oh, you look serious,” Iona remarked.

“I’m going to do it. I don’t know how, but . . . I . . . well, Morio . . .”

Iona smiled over her cup of coffee. “If you’re going to go to an early dinner, then I might suggest you get dressed?”

Meara blinked and glanced at the clock. It was nearly ten in the morning, and she smiled. “What should I wear? I mean . . . it *is* just a friendly dinner . . . between *close* . . . friends . . .”

Iona nodded slowly, her gaze shifting to the open closet as she pondered Meara’s wardrobe. “The yellow dress,” she stated. “Sexy but cute . . . soft and feminine but mature. Yes, I think that’ll do.”

Chapter Seven
Interpretation

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

University of Edinburgh
Sunday, August 31, 2059

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

'You realize that they arrest people for doing this sort of thing . . .'

Meara wrinkled her nose and bit her lip as she carefully squeezed past an overgrown bush to peer in the window. *'Where is he . . .?'*

Her youkai snorted. *'Are you kidding? You just spent over twenty-four hours with him, and it's a safe bet that he didn't sleep the night before, either, since he was probably running around all night setting things up for that date . . . Where do you think the man is?'*

Drawing away from the window as a small amount of her anticipation died away, Meara pressed her lips together in a thin line as she slowly shook her head. As much as she wanted to see him, how thoughtless would it be for her to disturb his sleep now? *'Maybe . . . maybe this wasn't a very good idea . . .'*

'Oh, no . . . you're not leaving. If you leave, you'll talk yourself out of it, and you know you will. Try his cell phone again.'

Sucking in a sharp breath, she dug her cell phone out of the yellow purse that Iona had presented to her with a completely calculating grin. When Meara had started to put her things into the purse, she'd gasped and stared at Iona, eyes wide as a heated blush exploded on her skin.

"Iona!" she breathed, shoving the purse directly into Iona's chest.

Iona arched an articulated eyebrow and stepped back with a curt nod. "I'm not saying you have to go have sex, but if you want to, then you're prepared."

"Have sex . . .?" she echoed, shaking her head in disbelief. Iona had stashed at least a dozen condoms in her purse before returning it. "Iona . . ."

"Just go," Iona insisted, stuffing Meara's wallet and cell phone into the purse. "Have fun . . . and I do mean 'have fun'."

Meara groaned as Iona pushed her out of the apartment, locking the door behind her for good measure. "Thank me later, love!" she called through the stout steel door.

"Traitor," Meara grumbled, face fevered and eyes burning as she turned and headed for the stairs . . .

Grimacing as she fished the cell phone out of her purse and quickly dialed Morio's number—the first number on her speed dial—she tapped her foot and gnawed on her lip. It only rang once before it redirected itself to Morio's voice mail.

"Oh, I can't *do* this!" she moaned, slumping against the smooth stone wall as she shut off the phone and dropped it into her purse.

'Stop being a baby, Meara . . . but you'd better do something because those people at that café across the street are starting to give you rather strange looks . . .'

Sparing a glance at the café in question, she grimaced when several people ducked behind newspapers or quickly looked away. *'Nice, nice . . . I'm going to be arrested . . . I'll blame this on you, you ken?'*

Her youkai sighed again. *'Well, look around the back of the cottage. Maybe he left something unlocked . . . a window or something . . .'*

'A window or something,' she repeated, pushing the bushes aside and skirting out from between them. The waist-high gate was locked—that just figured—and Meara peeked back over her shoulder to make sure no one was watching before she knelt before the wrought iron gate and carefully jammed her claw into the rusty hole to pick the lock. Flinching when her claw twisted a little too far, she blinked quickly to dispel the tears that sprang to fill her gaze just as the lock clicked with a grating creak. It pushed open to her touch, and she sighed in relief as she stood up and hurried through the passage, closing the gate behind her.

The old stones were covered with a configuration of ivy—very quaint really, and she couldn't help but smile when she saw the cooler from the park standing on its end with the lid open on the cobblestone porch. She tried the back door and sighed again. It was locked, of course. *'He could have made this a little easier, couldn't he?'* she grouched.

'And where would the fun be in that?' her youkai teased. *'Look . . . there's an open window . . .'*

She noticed it then, the open window. Not a very large window, and the panes were frosted glass . . . A bathroom, she supposed, but better than nothing. Wandering over, she tilted her head to the side, staring thoughtfully. *'I . . . I could fit through there . . .'* she mused.

'So you could . . . I don't imagine he would mind that you've gone and let yourself in . . .'

Meara smiled wanly. *'No, I don't imagine he would . . .'*

It didn't take long for her to negotiate the opening. The window pushed open easily enough. Crawling through the hole and dropping lightly onto the floor, she took a moment to look around before venturing further inside. The bathroom was neat and tidy. Even the vanity mirror over the sink was spotless and shining. A single white towel hung over the rack beside the open air shower, and she reached out to straighten it, smiling as she headed out of the bathroom.

Her smile widened as she investigated the rest of the cozy little cottage. It was very clean: much cleaner than most bachelors kept their homes. It spoke well of Morio's general respect toward life and toward his environment, and while she almost wondered if he employed someone to come in and clean his home, she had to appreciate it, too.

The kitchen wasn't large, but she was pleased to see the basket of various fruits sitting on the cupboard in easy reach along with an herb rack that was well-stocked with fresh herbs as well as some jars of dried things.

If he owned a television, she didn't see it, but there was a large armoire across from the sofa; easily large enough to hide whatever electronic devices he had and keeping them out of view in the quaint room where the technology would detract from the overall setting. The huge hulking fireplace near the back door was built of stones that matched the cottage's exterior with a thick wooden mantelpiece imbued with delicate scrollwork carving along the edges, and over that, suspended on shining silver hooks, hung a sheathed sword.

The menagerie of framed photographs arranged on the slab drew her attention, and she smiled as she examined the strange faces of those who had to be Morio's family. One image in particular made her smile. Four young men in the snow . . . The tallest and biggest of the men had the same golden bronze hair as Cain Zelig but possessed Gin Zelig's golden eyes. *'Their son . . .'* she mused as her gaze shifted to the next. Hair so black it shone blue in the thin light of the winter's day with little hanyou ears atop his head, he looked rather arrogant despite the slight curling of his lips. The last two men in the picture . . . one was Morio—she'd recognize that good-natured smile anywhere, and the last of them had to be a relative. Sharing the exact same coloring as Morio, the hanyou stood slightly off to the side with the fingers of his left hand covering his ear, and the almost shy nature of his smile was completely engaging . . .

Another picture of Morio standing behind a girl with golden eyes and bronze hair . . . He had his arms draped around her neck and was smiling broadly as she tugged on his ear. *'Who . . . is she . . . ?'* Meara growled, turning away from the pictures.

Her youkai laughed. *'Oh, come on, Meara . . . you're not jealous, are you?'*

Wrinkling her nose, she snorted out a curt little sound and stomped away from the mantel with the picture still clasped in her hand. *'Jealous? Please! Of course I'm not . . . but I am going to ask him who she is . . .'*

'Yes, well, then you'd better go find him. Morio's probably sleeping . . . you're not really going to wake him up, are you?'

'Yes. Yes, I am,' she declared as she strode down the short hallway and peeked into the open room off to the right. It was a guest room: neat and tidy and a little cold since it lacked any real decoration. *'A painting on the wall or maybe some flowers . . .'* Meara mused before stepping out of the doorway and stopping abruptly as she faced the closed door across the hall. It was his room. She could sense him inside. Biting her lip as she slowly, hesitantly reached for the handle, she drew a deep breath and grasped it, pushing down on the handle until it opened with a whispering click.

The bedroom was darkened, the curtains drawn, and she swallowed hard as the steady, even sound of his breathing filled her ears. The scent of him was intoxicating; fresh and clean as a summer day. He lay sprawled in the middle of the bed that took up most of the floor space in the decently sized bedroom. Lying on his stomach with his arms tucked under the pillow where his face was hidden, he had a sheet draped over his rear, and Meara couldn't help the flush that surfaced as she realized that he was also very naked.

The muscles in his back weren't huge by any means, but they were well defined. With every breath he drew, they rippled slightly in a symmetry of motion under the smoothness of his skin. She'd felt those muscles, hadn't she? As she lay on the blanket in the park, she'd run her hands up and down his back a hundred times or more, but she had felt him through the softness of his shirt. That he was naked now . . . She just wanted to crawl into him, to hold onto him and to never let him go . . .

'Do you suppose his backside is as nice as the rest of him?' her youkai asked innocently.

'W—I—I'd think so . . . why wouldn't it be?'

'You could always take a quick peek and see . . .'

'Oh, I couldn't . . .!'

'And why not? He certainly took his time giving you the once-over in that bikini, didn't he?'

'Well, that was entirely different . . .'

'And why is that?'

Meara smashed her knuckles against her overheated cheeks and gulped like a fish out of water. *‘I wasn’t . . . naked . . . or sleeping . . . it’d be taking advantage of the situation, as it were . . . entirely unfair, if you ask me.’*

‘Which is all the more reason for you to do it,’ her youkai reasoned. *‘After all, he’ll never know, will he?’*

‘Good point,’ she allowed.

Drawing a deep breath, she bit her lip and reached out, her fingers shaking as she grasped the thin sheet and carefully lifted it up. *‘Oh . . . that’s nice . . .’* she breathed in her head, mesmerized by the symmetrical contours of Morio’s rear.

“Getting a good enough look or do you want me to turn over?”

Uttering a strangled shriek, Meara dropped the sheet and jumped back, face exploding as a violent wash of color saturated her skin as she smashed her fist against her chest to contain her hammering heart. “Morio! You scared the life out of me!” she chided.

He chuckled softly, rolling onto his side and propping his head on his raised hand as his sleepy gaze slowly dragged over her. The sheet was still covering him, albeit barely, and he bent his knee, planting his foot on the mattress as his sleepy grin widened. “Do you always go around sneaking into strange men’s houses?” he drawled, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand.

Meara opened and closed her mouth a few times. “I didn’t—I never—You didn’t answer your phone!”

“My phone?” he repeated. “My phone never rang.”

She wrinkled her nose, holding onto her righteous indignation despite the resurgent color that just wouldn’t drain out of her face. “It did,” she argued. “It’s not my fault you turned it off. I kept getting your voicemail . . .”

The entirely amused expression on his face bespoke his disbelief that she really had called. Meara stomped over to the bed and crawled over it to grab Morio’s phone off the far nightstand.

“Oh, damn, Meara . . .” Morio groaned as he flopped onto his back.

She blinked and scooted back, scowling down at the almost pained expression on his face. “What . . .?”

He slowly opened his eyes, his gaze darkened with a heady light. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you that you should let sleeping dogs lie?”

“Sleeping . . . dogs . . .?” she repeated, caught in the fire of his stare.

He groaned quietly and heaved a ragged sigh before forcing his gaze to the side. “Suppose you tell me why you broke into my house?” he teased.

“I didn’t . . . well, I suppose I might have,” she admitted, sitting back and biting her lip as she considered her actions. “You’re late.”

“I’m late?”

She nodded. “Yes, late.”

“And how do we figure that I’m late?” he asked with a quirked eyebrow.

Meara wrinkled her nose. “Because, Mr. Izayoi, we’re supposed to go out to dinner, correct?”

He nodded slowly, knitting his hands together under the back of his neck as he settled in to listen to her argument.

“And since we’re to go out to dinner—presumably the midday meal—”

“It is?”

She waved a hand to silence him. “Of course it is! It’s always been the midday meal!”

“It has?”

“Yes, yes . . . the largest meal of the day is called ‘dinner’, and the largest meal of the day was most often consumed in the middle of the day—still is in many parts of Europe—where you are, mind you—so it stands to reason that the dinner we were to meet for is only a couple hours away, and you, Morio, are set to sleep through it.”

He shook his head slowly at her powers of reasoning. “You don’t say.”

“I *do* say.”

He chuckled again. “Well, guess I’d better get up, then, huh?”

“Yes.”

Sparing a moment to cast her an entirely calculating grin, he rolled off the bed and got to his feet, leaving the sheet behind in a tangled mess. His body had a fluidity in its movements, and he strode over to the closet without bothering to try to cover himself at all. Meara's breath caught in her throat, and she let her fingertips flutter over her lips as she stared, spellbound.

"How 'bout this?" he asked, pulling a grayish-blue tee-shirt out of his closet.

"Huh . . .?"

"The shirt, Meara . . . is this acceptable?"

"Oh! Um . . . it's a little . . . uh . . . a bit too casual," she blurted.

"Oh? Well, all right," he allowed, putting that shirt back and grabbing a dressier shirt. "This one?"

"Too dark," she said.

"Too . . . dark . . . okay . . . This one?"

"Too light?"

"Meara?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you *want* me to get dressed?"

And explosion of color erupted under her skin, and she couldn't help the little choked sound that escaped. "W—I—Of *course* I do!"

"Yeah," he replied with an over exaggerated sigh. "Then stop criticizing my clothes . . . unless you want to pick something out for me."

Snapping her mouth closed, Meara forced her gaze away, only to catch sight of her purse lying on the end of the bed, and the thought of what Iona had stuck into her purse was enough to make her suck in her breath as she pressed her icy palm against her overheated forehead.

"You know, I'm glad you came over," he remarked as he shuffled through his clothes.

"Y-you are?"

“Yep,” he stated, glancing over his shoulder and casting Meara a lazy grin. “I mean, it’s not every day I wake up with a sexy as hell woman eyeing my parts.”

“I wasn’t eyeing your—”

His chuckle cut her off. “Okay, you weren’t,” he agreed amicably. “What do you have there?”

Glancing down and blinking as she realized that she still had the photograph smashed against her chest, she wrinkled her nose. “Who is she?” Meara demanded, stomping over to shove the picture under his nose.

Morio leaned back and squinted at the image, taking it from her hand and setting it on the bureau beside him. “That? That’s my cousin, Bitty Belle . . . why?”

“Your cousin?” she repeated slowly.

“Well, yeah . . . did you . . .? Were you jealous?”

Meara snorted, whipping around on her heel to avoid Morio’s amused stare. “Jealous? *Please!* Of course I wasn’t jealous! Why on earth would *I* be jealous?”

She gasped as the warmth of his arms slipped around her waist, drawing her back against his hardened body as his husky laughter in her ear drew a wash of gooseflesh. “You don’t have a thing to worry about, Meara,” he murmured, his lips grazing her ear in a most delightful way. “You’re the only one for me . . . you’ve been the only one for me since the moment I first saw you . . .”

“M . . . Morio . . .”

He held onto her another long moment before heaving a sigh and letting his arms drop. “I know; I know . . . just friends,” he muttered, turning away and shuffling back over to the opened closet.

She flinched at the unmasked bitterness in his tone, and she had to wonder if he had realized that it had slipped in there, at all. The upset in his youki was a hurtful thing, and before she could think her actions through, she strode over to him, grasping his face in her hands, pulling him down into a gentle kiss.

Time seemed to stand still. The warmth of his lips opened around hers like a flower in the early morning. The tender flutter of velvety flesh drew on her soul with a gentle demanding. He tasted like rain in a forest; brushed over her skin like a crisp autumn wind. His arms slipped around her, drawing her up against him, the thin fabric of her summer dress yielding under the insistence of his body, molding against her contours as a wash of need roiled deep inside. Nibbling her lips,

whispering endearments that made her shiver, he held her closer than his heart as the throbbing length of him pressed against her stomach.

“Oh, God . . .” she moaned, letting her head fall back moments before Morio’s teeth grazed the sensitive skin. Her body felt like it was on fire, burning hotter, brighter, setting off an incessant burn everywhere his lips touched, every place their bodies met, with ever whisper, every growl, every touch.

She felt him scoop her up and whimpered when he lay her down in the middle of his bed. Surrounded by the scent of him, it took a moment for her to realize that he wasn’t touching her any longer. “M-M-Morio . . .?” she breathed, forcing her eyes open in narrow slits, her breathing ragged, harsh.

“What do you want from me, Meara?” he asked, his tone rife with confusion as he studiously avoided her gaze.

Swallowing hard, she pondered his question, unable to speak past the thickness in her throat, unable to see through her tear-blurred vision. He was so precious to her that the very idea of letting him slip through her fingers hurt; hurt in a place deep down in her soul, and she knew in those moments what her youkai had been trying to tell her.

Rising off the bed, she turned away from him, reaching up behind her back to pull her zipper down. The dress slipped from her shoulders to pool around her feet. The lacy silk bra followed as she pushed her panties down her hips. They fell away, too, and she stepped out of them, kicking off her shoes before she slowly turned around, her breath catching somewhere between her lips and her lungs at the burning fire that ignited behind Morio’s stark golden gaze. “I . . . I want you, Morio,” she whispered, taking one hesitant step closer to him. “I . . .”

She gasped as his hands shot out, catching her wrists and dragging her over him as he fell back against the mattress, rolling to rise above her as his mouth slashed down over hers, hungry, voracious, full of a desperation, a wanton need. His hands raked over her, demanding whatever Meara was willing to give. She uttered a soft whimper, rising up to meet his ardent touch, breasts smashing against his burning flesh. He trembled against her, the muscles in his body straining as he let his fangs scrape down the shallow vale in the center of her chest, his breath condensing on her skin and combining as a wave of desire ripped through her.

Sucking one of her nipples deep into his mouth, he growled almost viciously despite the gentle lapping of his tongue. The scrape of fangs, the nip of teeth, and the soothing draw of him. She tightened her hands on his shoulders, kneading the muscles with the pads of her fingertips. Arching her body up to meet his mouth, she gasped and moaned when he squeezed her other breast in his hand.

The repletion warred with the burgeoning sense that there was more that she wanted to feel. Drawing up her knees, planting her feet on the bed, she lifted her hips against him as instinct took over. His claws dragged down her sides, her skin jumped up to meet his perusal. The tide of desire was tempered by the absolute strength of his will. His hair brushed over her in a tickling caress, and he moaned as she rose up once more, pressing her body against the heat of him.

Dragging his mouth away, he threw his head back and shuddered, eyes squeezed closed as he bit his lip, digging his claws deep into the mattress on either side of her. “Shit,” he muttered, struggling to contain his rampant emotions. “Damn it . . .”

“What?” she asked, her tone breathless, harsh in the quiet.

He grunted and rolled to the side, sitting up on the edge of the bed and grasping his forehead between his hands. “Nothing,” he mumbled. “Just . . . I have to run to the store.”

“Store?” she echoed, shaking her head in confusion.

“Condoms,” he clarified. “I don’t have any here in the house.”

“Oh,” she exclaimed softly, her eyes widening. “I . . . I have some,” she admitted, fighting down the urge to blush as she nodded toward her purse.

“Really . . .”

“Iona put them in there,” she blurted as the blush she’d been trying to avoid filtered into her skin.

“Did she . . .?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “She did . . .”

He grunted and reached for her purse, making quick work of locating the condoms before dropping the bag on the floor and rolling toward her again. Falling forward, planting wet, slow kisses on her belly, he traced her hips with his claws. She moaned, legs falling open, eyes fluttering closed as she was reduced to a series of incoherent murmurs, sighs, shivers. Kissing his way down her stomach, along the hollows of her hips, he buried his nose in the tangle of curls between her legs and breathed deep, uttering a ragged groan—a harsh sound, and she jerked wildly, unsure if she was asking him to stop or to go on . . .

The flick of his tongue wrung a cry from deep inside her. He parted her with his fingertips, sank his thumb into her. Closing his lips around the deepest part of her, he sucked gently, darting his tongue against her in a frenzied motion that exploded somewhere in her head. She called out his name, her

body constricting as a violent surge of pleasure ripped through her. She couldn't think, couldn't breathe, couldn't understand anything but Morio and the things he made her feel.

A sudden sense of fullness made her gasp, and she lifted her hips against the welcome intrusion. Morio gasped and moaned, eyes squeezed closed he held himself up on his elbows, his body rigid, still. The maddening ache was growing stronger by the second, and Meara whimpered, bucking her hips in an effort to alleviate the consuming pressure that built unmercifully. He shifted his hips, and she choked out a hoarse entreaty. The feel of his body so deep inside hers . . . It was almost more than she could bear.

Undulating his hips, he pushed against her, rose inside her, kissed her deep as she writhed beneath him. She felt as though she were melting around him, as though everything she'd ever known had converged in him. He steadied her, calmed her, drew her close as he thrust deep, slow. His body throbbed in time with the beat of his heart, and she clung to him, afraid to let him go . . . afraid to lose him . . .

The painful anticipation grew thicker, more cloying, closing in around her, forcing the air out of her lungs as she struggled to breathe. Running her hands up and down the length of his spine, grasping his buttocks as she lifted her hips to meet his strokes, she begged him for the fulfillment that she knew he could give her. Locking her ankles around his waist, she held on tight, meeting his body halfway, only to let him drive her back down with a fierce abandon.

The surge of passion enveloped her, wringing primitive sounds from her soul. Rising up on his hands, he drove into her hard, and she screamed as the last of her control shattered. His own cry mingled with hers moments later, and he collapsed against her, his body shivering, quaking, and he held her face still, kissing her a hundred times—a thousand times as she cried and clung to him, her laughter and hiccups punctuated by stunted breaths.

"I can't let you go," he whispered after rolling onto his back, dragging her with him and holding her cuddled against his chest. "I won't let you go . . ."

She smiled, nuzzled closer against his chest. "I don't want you to let me go," she whispered. "I . . . I don't want to leave you; not ever."

"Thank kami," he groaned, squeezing her tight and kissing her forehead.

She savored the feeling of being completely safe with him for a long moment before bracing herself on her elbows and leaning back to look down at him. "Morio . . ."

He had his eyes closed and a completely self-satisfied smile on his face. She supposed he'd earned the right to grin like that . . . "Hmm?" he breathed.

“I was thinking . . . I mean, Aislynn’s just a baby now, sure, but she won’t be a baby forever . . . and when she got older, I could tell her how to find me . . . I could tell her she’d always be welcome with us . . . right?”

“Anyone you love will always be welcome in my home,” Morio murmured without opening his eyes.

“R-really . . .?”

“Yes, Meara, really,” he said, kissing her knuckles, one by one.

“So it’d only be a few years,” she forced herself to say as her eyelids closed against her will.

“A few years . . .?”

She nodded, opening her eyes when Morio gently pushed her aside and sat up, discarding the used condom before ducking into the small bathroom across the room. “Well, I mean . . . I want to stay here with you . . . but maybe . . . we could hold off on telling anyone about us? Until Aislynn’s old enough to understand . . .?”

Morio spared her a glance before retrieving a washcloth and dampening it under the tap. “So . . . keep us a secret, you mean.”

She grimaced and sat up, grabbing the sheet to haul over her naked body. “Paul isn’t here often, but if I told him, he’d tell Father, and . . .”

“And you think he’d disown you,” Morio finished for her, resignation seeping into his tone as he wiped himself off and grabbed another wash cloth. “I understand.”

She sighed, shoulders slumping as she frowned at her clasped hands. “It’s too much to ask of you . . .” she forced herself to say with a little shrug. “I’m . . . I’m sorry . . .”

Morio strode out of the bathroom and knelt beside the bed, drawing the sheet away and pushing her back gently before wiping her off with the warmed washcloth. “So you’re saying we’ll be together; we just won’t tell anyone . . . but we will be together . . .”

“If . . . if you’ll have me,” she said as tears filled her eyes at Morio’s gentle ministrations.

He shot her a wry smile, noticeably dimmer but happy nonetheless. “Don’t be stupid, Meara. You’re my mate, and . . . and I’ll wait however long it takes.”

“My . . . mate . . .” she repeated, mulling it over, loving the sound of the words. “You’re sure?”

Chapter Eight

Sisters

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Thursday, December 8, 2061

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“What about this one?”

Morio wrinkled his nose and shook his head, checking his watch as he tapped his foot impatiently. “It’s a doll, just like the last doll and the doll before that. It’s wonderful. It’s great. She’ll *love* that one.”

Meara leveled a no-nonsense look at him and arched an eyebrow. “You said you’d help me Christmas shop for Aislynn,” she pointed out calmly.

“I did,” he agreed, “this morning . . . and that was *hours* ago . . . Don’t you think you’ve bought her enough stuff? I mean *kami*, the toy store is going to have to deliver this stuff, and then you’ll have to hire someone to tote it all out to that damned fortress your screwy father calls ‘home’.”

Meara turned back to the two dolls she was holding. “This one pees, and this one says ‘mama’ when you squeeze her.”

“And that one,” he said, pointing to another doll on the shelf, “does both.”

“Yeah, but her skin isn’t as soft as these two.”

He chuckled. “Then get her both.”

“You . . . wouldn’t mind . . .?”

He shook his head. “Nope . . . if you want to fill her room with dolls, then go right ahead,” he quipped.

She leaned up to kiss him on the cheek and smiled sweetly as she carefully set both dolls on the growing pile in the shopping cart. “You’re so sweet.”

“I know,” he allowed with a sigh. “I am . . . I really am . . .”

Meara giggled, grabbing the ends of his scarf and tying them tightly around his neck.

Morio choked and made a face as he pulled the ends loose once more. “Trying to choke me . . . figures . . . heartless wench that you are.”

“Heartless, am I?” she shot back.

He nodded. “Aye, that you are,” he said in a horrible affectation of a Scotsman’s brogue.

“You know,” she remarked lightly, hanging onto Morio’s arm as he pushed the overload of gifts down the aisle, “I never had a doll.”

“Never?”

She shook her head and laughed, but her eyes looked a little sad. “My father said that dolls were for children.”

“But you *were* a child,” he pointed out.

“Yes, well, he never did realize that . . . probably still doesn’t.”

She didn’t see his scowl as she turned to examine a set of porcelain play dishes.

‘The bastard . . .’

Morio sighed. In the two years that Meara and he had been living together, he had yet to hear a damn thing that could raise his opinion of Ian MacDonnough. Though she didn’t like to say anything that would amount to badmouthing her father, she’d let things slip from time to time, and the things she said invariably left Morio wondering just how someone like him could have possibly become tai-youkai. It was unconscionable, really. Maybe he hadn’t ever physically abused Meara, but the isolation and sadness she’d experienced as a young girl was more than enough to convince Morio that the man bordered on completely unfit, and though there had been plenty of times when Morio had wanted to tell Meara that he’d had enough of their clandestine love affair, he knew in his heart that it was just as bad, if not worse, for her . . .

‘A couple more years,’ he told himself, uttering a resigned sigh as Meara smiled at the rows and rows of toys. She wanted to wait to tell anyone about them until Aislynn was five, figuring that it’d be best since the girl would be old enough for school then. She was almost three now, and Morio felt that he knew her as well as Meara did since Meara did so love to brag on the child . . . He’d seen pictures aplenty of her, too. From what he could tell, she looked like a tiny version of Meara,

though Meara had confessed that she had no childhood pictures—an idea that had turned Morio's stomach.

She'd moved in with him on the same day that he had awakened to find her in his room, staring under the sheet at his naked ass. She'd fallen asleep, and he'd gone over to her apartment, grabbed all of her things in a succession of trips, and when she'd opened her eyes to find a flower on the pillow beside her, he had just finished putting her clothes in the closet with his. In the end, she'd just smiled at him and pulled him down for a long, slow kiss. They'd made love the rest of the weekend, stopping only when necessity demanded. Those first few months had been completely idyllic. Meara always teared up when he said that he loved her. It wasn't that he made her sad, she'd said. It was that no one had ever told her that before . . .

So Morio made it a point to tell her that he loved her every day, showering her with constant affection, and maybe he was trying to make up for everything she should have had growing up. She didn't seem to mind, though, and Morio . . . well, he'd never complain about that, anyway.

No, the main trouble they had weren't things that Morio felt comfortable telling her about. Little things, really, like her refusal to as much as touch him once she'd had her shower before she left to drive out to Nightsboro . . . That always burned him though he always smiled and tried to hide the upset that never failed to turn his stomach. Once she'd almost forgotten her shower, and Morio had been tempted to let her. In the end, he'd heaved a sigh and called her back to remind her before she stepped out the door. *'Washing off my scent . . . but she can't wash off all of it . . . Is her father so unobservant that he's never noticed that she doesn't smell quite like she used to . . . ?'* Unfortunately, he didn't have any real answers to that, either.

Holidays were also fairly abysmal affairs. She'd go to Nightsboro, leaving Morio alone for the long weekends and the special days that should have been shared by the two of them. Of course he understood. Aislynn needed her. Still, he hated carrying her satchel outside and packing it into the trunk of her car with whatever goodies she'd managed to procure for her young sister. He'd smile tightly and then spend the bulk of their time apart feeling guilty for being jealous of a child who only had her sister's visits to look forward to . . . She'd promised, though, to spend the Christmas holiday with him this year. It'd be their first one together, and Morio couldn't wait. His mother and father were flying in from Japan—they'd never met Meara, and Morio just knew they'd adore her—and Meara was looking forward to meeting them, too.

And then there were the visits from Paul.

Morio hated those worst of all. True, Meara had been able to make excuses a number of times as to why she couldn't see the overbearing bastard, but the handful of times that she hadn't been able to talk her way out of it had left Morio seething, and when she'd come home smelling like him because he'd had the audacity to slip his arm around Meara's shoulders? He'd wanted to kill Paul, no doubt

about it. The only real consolation was that Paul never stayed more than a day or two at best. Edinburgh was just not a happenin' sort of city, Morio supposed, and for that, he was grateful . . .

He sighed, shaking his head as his conscience got the better of him again. Meara was trying to please everyone, and he knew it. He knew why she felt the way she did, and he understood why Aislynn was so important to her. He hated the idea that he'd be angry over anything when Meara was so frightened that she would be disowned in the end. To be honest, Morio hadn't really believed her, but after almost two and a half years, he had to admit that he was beginning to understand why she'd feel that way . . .

"*You know, I never had a doll,*" Meara's voice echoed in his head.

Morio grimaced, smashing his teeth together so hard that his jaw ticked. '*Damn that old bastard,*' he growled to himself. '*Damn him . . .*'

Meara held up two sets of dishes for Morio's inspection. He forced a smile. "What's her favorite color?"

Meara smiled. "Pink, of course."

"Of course . . . then I'd say you should buy the pink ones," he said reasonably.

"Okay," she agreed with a happy little giggle. "I guess we're done . . ."

"Yeah, I'm not helping you wrap this stuff," he informed her as he headed down the aisle once more.

"I like wrapping presents!" she insisted. "Though I may need to borrow your finger when I tie the bows."

"Su-ure," he drawled, stopping in the shortest checkout queue. "You'll tie me into the presents and give me away as a Christmas gift."

"I'd never give you away," she argued as a pretty blush stole over her cheeks.

Morio chuckled. "You would if Aislynn said she wanted me for Christmas," he predicted.

"Well, that's true enough . . . You're sure you don't mind if I go up there tomorrow?"

"What's one birthday when you're spending the entire Christmas holiday with me?" he quipped. "But you're going to be up all night wrapping that stuff."

"True enough," she agreed. "You could stay up and keep me company."

“Bite your lip, wench. I have classes in the morning—unlike *some* people who are going to play hooky tomorrow.”

Meara giggled, slipping her arms around Morio’s waist with a happy sigh. “I can’t believe we’re almost finished with graduate school,” she mused.

“I don’t know. Maybe you should stay in school,” he pointed out.

Meara wrinkled her nose. “Should I, now?”

“Maybe . . . might have to if your father gives you grief about moving home again . . . If you’re still in school, he’ll leave you alone, right?”

Meara stiffened in his arms, and Morio sighed. He could have kicked himself for bringing that up . . . “Let’s just concentrate on the holidays, hmm?” she said with a tight little smile.

Morio leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. “Your wish is my command, ma-a-ahstah . . .”

She giggled and pushed herself up on her tiptoes to kiss him. “You’re completely incorrigible . . .”

He chuckled, tightening his arms around her and lowering his lips to hers. “I’ll show you incorrigible . . .”

The man behind them cleared his throat. “Not to interrupt, but, um . . . she’s waiting,” he said, nodding his head toward the cashier.

Morio let go of Meara and started emptying the cart onto the conveyor belt while Meara burst into a fit of giggles.

‘*Yep,*’ Morio decided, sparing a moment to appreciate the sparkle that lit Meara’s gray eyes. “*Tis the season . . .*’

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Reaching over to turn on the windshield wipers, Meara pulled herself forward on the steering wheel to glance up at the graying sky and wrinkled her nose. She hated to drive while it was snowing, but it hadn’t started until she’d left Edinburgh . . . even then, Aislynn was probably waiting, though Meara rather hoped that the child wasn’t doing what she normally did: standing outside in the middle of the driveway as she waited for Meara to arrive. She’d started doing that about as soon as

she'd learned to walk, and while Meara loved seeing her sister waiting for her, she often worried about it when the weather in the Highlands was known for its unpredictability.

She turned her head to check her rearview mirror, catching sight of the pretty doll with the shiny brown hair sitting on the seat beside her. Childish, perhaps, to have brought the toy, but Meara hadn't been able to leave her behind.

Morio had gone out to get dinner while Meara was wrapping the mountain of gifts they'd purchased for Aislynn, and while he was gone, he'd stopped by the toy store again. His smile had been a little shy when he'd returned with the brightly wrapped birthday present in his hands, and he'd insisted that she should have it, even though they'd agreed to celebrate her birthday after she got back from Nightsboro . . .

She'd gasped when she'd seen the doll. Maybe it was impractical, and maybe it was childish, but she held the doll against her chest, unable to stop the flow of tears that coursed down her cheeks. That he'd buy her something as silly as a doll was something that touched Meara's heart. Her first doll, and how fitting was it that he'd been the one to give it to her . . .?

He'd seemed genuinely surprised when she threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and kissing him with everything she was worth before grabbing his hands and dragging him back to the bedroom . . .

"So I buy you a doll, and I get mind-boggling sex in return?" he'd teased when they lay cuddling in the middle of the sweat-dampened bed.

Meara giggled, leaning up to kiss his chin. "Just this time," she assured him.

He chuckled as she scooted off the bed and darted out of the room to grab the doll before crawling back into his arms once more. "What are you doing?" he asked, kissing her temple as she settled back against his chest.

"She came with three dresses," Meara stated. "I want to see how she looks in the other two."

"Look . . . she drinks and wets, too," he pointed out, holding up the tiny plastic bottle for her inspection.

"She does? Did you buy diapers for her?"

He laughed. "No, I didn't, but I can if you want them."

"What do you think, Morio? Yellow, pink, or blue?" she asked, holding up the dresses for his inspection.

Morio wrapped his arms around her, nuzzling the side of her throat. "What? Are you mad? Yellow, of course . . . something damn sexy about a girl in a yellow dress . . ."

It took her a moment to realize that he was talking about that fateful morning when she'd climbed through his window. When she did, she smiled. "Yellow, it is," she murmured, carefully dressing the doll in the yellow gingham confection of lace and ruffles and ribbon.

"I want to have babies with you, Meara . . . lots of babies . . . seeing you fat and round . . . I could handle that," he mused.

"Oh? That doesn't sound very flattering," she pointed out.

"It's flattering," he argued, "and when you get too fat, I'll just roll you around the house."

Meara giggled. "Your lines aren't getting any better," she remarked, wrinkling her nose.

"You don't think so? How about this one? Your teeth are like stars . . ."

Meara blinked and leaned back to smile up at him. "That's so sweet . . ."

He grinned, a wicked light dancing in his gaze. ". . . They come out at night."

"Morio!" she gasped then giggled, grabbing a handful of his hair and tugging playfully.

Morio leaned to the side, nabbing a flower off the nightstand—he'd had it in his hand when she'd dragged him back to the bedroom. "Here's your flower of the day. I think it's a repeat . . ."

"Hmm, you must be losing your touch," she teased . . .

Laughing softly to herself as she drove down the lonely stretch of road that meandered between the sharp cliffs and crags of the Highlands, Meara sighed softly, flicking off the radio as she reached for the button on the console and pressed it down. "Morio," she said precisely and let go of the button as the tone of the number being dialed sounded in the vehicle's speakers. He'd be home from classes now . . . and Meara . . . she missed him.

"Hello?"

"Hi," she greeted, smiling at the sound of his voice.

"Miss me already?" he deadpanned.

"Yes."

“You’re entirely co-dependent,” he informed her then chuckled.

“Am I? Then that’s your fault.”

“I’m sure it is . . . are you on your way home yet?”

Meara laughed since she’d just left Edinburgh a couple hours before. “I just left, and you know it,” she chastised.

Morio heaved a melodramatic sigh. “Yeah, I know . . . I was just hoping you’d changed your mind and were coming home.”

“It’s just for the weekend.”

“Yeah . . .”

“I’m almost there,” she said with a little sigh. “I’ll miss you.”

“Well, good,” he drawled. In her mind, she could see him leaning against the counter with his ankles crossed and that little grin on his face. “Be careful. The forecast said that there’s a pretty big storm moving in.”

“Yes, well, nothing will keep me from coming home,” she assured him.

He paused for a moment then sighed. “I love you.”

“I . . . I love you, too.”

She clicked off the intercom and sighed, too. She hated leaving him for any length of time, and yet she adored seeing Aislynn. It was a futile wish, and yet she couldn’t quite help it, either. If she could just be with both of them at the same time . . . That was what she really wanted . . .

The two youkai guards that had forever stood watch over the gates that led to Nightsboro stood at attention, nodding as she passed. The long and winding driveway had been cleared of snow though Meara didn’t try to delude herself into thinking that it had been done for her. Her father was an important man, and it wasn’t uncommon for the various European leaders to converge here. Europe had more generals than most other regions, she supposed. It was more diverse, both in history as well as in language that it was impossible not to have a separate general for each of the various countries. She had never actually met any of them, not even Paul’s esteemed father. It didn’t matter to her. Meara wasn’t looking to have a future in Europe, anyway.

The tiny form in the middle of the semi-circle drive caught her attention, and she frowned. It was much too cold for Aislynn to be waiting outside, yet there she was and without a coat, no less . . .

Stopping the car, Meara hurriedly unfastened her seatbelt as she turned off the engine and stumbled out the door.

“Meawa!” Aislynn exclaimed, dashing over to hug her sister as a bright smile broke over her features.

“Oh, sweetie,” Meara chided, shrugging off her coat to wrap her sister in it. “You’ll catch your death of cold out here.”

“I wait for you!” Aislynn said proudly, peering out from the folds of Meara’s coat and sticking out her hand, balled into a fist other than the index finger she held out straight. “One day . . . see?”

“I see you did,” Meara agreed, shivering slightly from the chill winter air. “I brought your Christmas presents,” she coaxed. “Why don’t you run in the house, and I’ll bring them to your room?”

“I can have them now?” Aislynn demanded, tugging on Meara’s arm.

Meara laughed. It was impossible to remain chagrined with the child, especially when Meara knew that Aislynn had been waiting just to see her.

“I can help! I’m big!” Aislynn announced, sticking her arms through the cumbersome sleeves of the much-too-large coat.

“Just go on in,” Meara said. “Wait inside the door for me.”

Aislynn skipped away, long strands of chestnut brown hair flying out behind her in the wind.

Meara retrieved the two huge bags of presents and closed the trunk with her elbow. She could come back for her luggage later. Turning toward the house, she smiled, seeing Aislynn’s tiny face plastered against the window beside the door.

‘This weekend with Aislynn . . . and then my first real Christmas with Morio . . .’

Meara’s smile widened as she headed toward the hulking stone edifice.



“Why aren’t you going to be here for Christmas?” Aislynn asked as she carefully pulled a silver comb through her new baby doll’s hair.

Meara shifted her legs to the side and slipped her claw under a plastic band that held the wheels of the doll carriage in place. “I promised I’d spend the holiday with someone special,” she explained.

“I’m special,” Aislynn said, her bright silver eyes round and sober.

“Of course you’re special, but he’s special, too . . . a special friend . . .”

Aislynn wrinkled her nose, her gaze turning a little sad as she looked around at the load of presents Meara had brought her. “I want a special friend,” she finally stated with a shrug of her thin shoulders.

“You want to see him?”

Aislynn nodded. “Yeah.”

Meara smiled, pushing herself onto her hands and knees and stretching her arm out to snag the strap of her purse. Cycling through the images stored in her cell phone’s memory, she laughed softly at the image of Morio, one ear straight up while the other was bent to the side. “See?” she said, holding out the device. “That’s Morio. He’s my friend.”

“Morio?” Aislynn repeated, gingerly reaching out to take the phone from Meara’s slack fingers.

“He’s got puppy ears!”

Meara laughed. “Yes, he does.”

Aislynn’s smile turned bashful, and she dropped the phone before scooting back against the bed.

“You don’t think he looks nice?” Meara prompted.

Aislynn nodded. “He can be my friend, too?”

Leaning to the side, Meara snagged Aislynn around the waist, drawing the nearly three-year-old into her lap and idly smoothing the ruffles in Aislynn’s skirts. “I’m sure he’d love to be your friend, too. Anyway, I think it’s time for you to go to bed. What do you think?”

“You can sleep in here,” Aislynn said hopefully.

Meara nodded. “If that’s what you want, Aislynn. Let me go change, and I’ll be right back, okay?”

“Okay,” Aislynn agreed, hopping to her feet and reaching over her shoulders in a vain effort to unbutton her dress. Meara had to press her lips together in a thin line when the little girl started shuffling around in circles in an attempt to better reach her buttons, a look of intense concentration marring her brow.

“Come here,” Meara said, pulling Aislynn over and unfastening the dress. “Now put your nightgown on, and I’ll be back to brush your hair before bed.”

Aislynn skipped over to the immense oak dresser, pulling out the bottom drawer to use as a step so that she could reach the top one. Satisfied that Aislynn wasn’t going to hurt herself, Meara shook out the discarded dress and hung it on a hook beside the door before slipping out of the nursery and into the hallway.

“Meara, a word,” her father said, striding down the hallway from the master suite at the end of the hall.

“Yes, Father?” she said, turning to face him, hands clasped demurely, eyes cast down toward the floor in the subservient pose that Ian tended to favor from his daughters.

Ian grunted. “It has come to my attention that you will not be here for the holidays.”

“I thought it’d be best,” she replied quietly. “I wanted to start looking for a job . . . I mean, this is my last year of school . . .”

“Unacceptable,” Ian barked tersely. “I expect you to be here.”

“But—”

Ian arched an eyebrow, his expression turning even more foreboding. “You will be here, Meara—end of discussion. You needn’t concern yourself with finding a job, anyway,” he went on, his tone leaving no question as to what he thought of the idea of his daughter looking for gainful employment. “You’ll be mated by the end of June, and no daughter of mine will *work*,” he said, curling his lip as though the word was a curse.

“Wh-what?”

If he noticed the anxiety in her voice or the alarm in her expression, he didn’t remark on it. Brushing some non-existent lint from the sleeve of his immaculate jacket, he shook his head. “I’ve arranged for the formal announcement of your engagement at the New Year’s Eve soiree.”

“But I—”

Chapter Nine
Frustration

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Sunday, December 11, 2061

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

“... *What...*?”

Meara flinched and bit her lip, rubbing her forearms as she told herself to stay calm. “I’m sorry, Morio,” she murmured, unable to look him in the eye.

Morio didn’t respond right away, and she winced when the glass he’d been holding in his hand cracked and shattered.

“I tried to tell him that I’d made plans, but—”

“Yeah. Yeah, of course you did,” he bit out in a caustic tone, and he shook his hand, flicking water on her before stomping around the counter and turning on the faucet tap with a vicious twist of his wrist.

“I did,” she argued softly. She’d known he was going to be upset. She hadn’t realized that he was going to be furious . . . maybe she should have . . . “Please . . . *please* don’t be angry . . .”

Morio snorted and snatched a towel out of the drawer beside the sink, striding back around the counter and bending down to clean up his mess. “You know, Meara . . . don’t, okay? Don’t make me feel guilty right now. I’ll let you do that later; just not right now.”

“I’m not . . . I wasn’t . . .” she sighed and shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“*Don’t* say you’re sorry,” he growled.

“I’m s—” She swallowed hard, biting off the word that had almost slipped from her lips yet again.

“I’m so sick of hearing you say you’re sorry!” he snarled. “Damn it! Just *stop!*”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Morio slowly lifted his gaze to meet hers, his eyes burning with anger that he didn't try to hide from her as he pushed himself to his feet, grabbing the larger pieces of glass and stepping over to drop it in the trash can. "Just once," he mumbled, his voice a low growl. "Just once I'd like for you to put me first. Just . . . one . . . time."

"You *are* first," she argued, hurrying over and slipping her arms around his waist.

Morio turned his face to the side when she tried to kiss his cheek and pulled her hands apart to step back. "Can you just . . . let me be angry? Just this time?"

She tried to staunch her tears; she really did. He deserved to be angry with her . . . he deserved . . . a lot . . . "Morio . . ."

He shook his head again and strode over to the door, yanking it open and storming out of the cottage without another word.

Meara watched him go, everything inside her telling her to run after him, and yet she couldn't. He'd come back. She knew he would. He was simply upset with her, and with good reason.

Stumbling over to the sofa, she sank down, burying her face in her cupped hands as the first sob racked through her body. She was trapped, wasn't she? Damned if she did; damned if she didn't . . . The precarious balance was tilting, and she had to do something before it was too late. Morio . . . she owed him that . . . but Aislynn . . . Didn't she owe her something, too? A childhood that was closer to what a real childhood should be than hers had ever been . . .

Or was that just an unattainable dream? Was she doing more harm than good to the girl she was trying so desperately to protect? Her nanny had told Meara that Aislynn spent the days between visits walking around with her little hand outstretched. On Mondays, she always had her five fingers stuck out; on Tuesdays, it was four. On Wednesdays, it was three, and so on, and then on Friday mornings, she'd get out of bed and run outside to stand in the empty driveway until Meara arrived early in the evening. For reasons that Meara didn't want to dwell on, the idea of her sister learning how to count, day by day . . . it was painful . . .

But Morio . . .

She'd thought in the beginning that it'd be all right; that he understood, and while she knew that he really wanted to, how could he when all he knew was the dotting family that he bragged on; the loving parents who would drop everything and plan a trip halfway around the world to visit their child? He'd lived a life that she'd never been able to touch, and while it made him into a man who loved her without a doubt, could she really blame him for feeling that she was putting him off when he took a back seat to her family—to her *father*—time after time after time? True, he came first in

her heart—always first. How could she prove that to him, though, when she jumped when the great Ian MacDonnough commanded every single time?

“Just this one last time, Morio . . . I promise . . .” she whispered, her voice muffled by her hands.

But he wasn’t there to hear it.

- - * - - * - - * - - * - -

‘You’re a bastard, you know that?’

Morio jammed his hands deeper into his pockets and hunched his shoulders forward, glowering at the sidewalk passing under his feet. *‘Yeah . . . maybe . . .’*

‘Maybe? Try definitely . . . that was low, and you know it. It’s not her fault.’

Sucking in a sharp breath only to let it go just as quickly, Morio wandered through the streets of Edinburgh without a real destination in mind. *‘I . . . know . . .’*

‘It’s hard for her, and you’re making it worse. What are a few months—a couple years—when you have the rest of your lives to look forward to?’

‘I know,’ he maintained, wrapping his hand around the thin gold band buried deep in his pocket—fingering the smooth diamond as a sense of utter hopelessness washed over him. *‘I thought . . . I thought this Christmas was going to be different; that’s all . . . That’s all . . .’*

‘So you have to spend another Christmas alone . . . you’ll have hundreds of them with her later, right?’

‘. . . Right.’

‘And I hate to tell you, baka, but you knew it from the start, and you said that it’d be okay. You think you have the right to change the rules this late in the game?’

‘. . . I don’t want to change the rules,’ he argued with a grimace as he veered to the right, rounding the corner of Cowgate onto South Bridge. *‘I just want to . . . bend them a little . . .’*

“Oh, Morio! I was just about to close up for the night! Wondered if you’d be by for your daily flower, and here you are!” Nessa Dreyfuss called out as he started to pass by.

Morio blinked and slowly lifted his chin to meet the cheerful smile of the florist. “Oh . . . yeah . . . Meara’s flower . . .”

“Ach, mon, that doesna look like a happy face,” she chided, clucking her tongue like a mother hen. “Having a spat, are you?”

He heaved a sigh and grimaced. “Not exactly . . .”

The clucking commenced once more. “Hmm . . . take her a flower, and she’ll forgive you.”

Wrinkling his nose, he cast the woman a sidelong glance. “What makes you think I did something wrong?”

“You’ve got that guilty look about you, Morio Izayoi . . .” She reached back and grabbed a large pink chrysanthemum out of a vase just inside the door. “There now . . . on the house.”

“Thanks,” he replied, taking the bloom and offering Nessa a low bow. “Maybe you’re right.”

“Of course I’m right! She’s a lucky lass, you ken? If I were twenty years younger, I’d be chasing you, myself.”

“Would you?” he said as he finally managed a wry grin.

“That I would. Now get out of here, will you? I’ve a husband waiting and dinner to get on the table.”

Morio nodded and bowed again before wandering along the street once more. The flower was deep pink; as pink as Meara’s lips . . . as pink as the pretty blushes that stained her cheeks whenever he caught her staring at him . . . He loved her more than he loved himself—more than he loved waking up in the morning; more than he loved the sunrise and the sunset . . . He’d agreed to her terms because the alternative had been something that he just didn’t want to consider, and yet . . .

And yet here he was, wandering the streets of the timeless old city, staring at the sidewalk as though he were searching for truths written on the worn paths . . .

He’d left her crying. He knew he had. Maybe in that respect he was no better than her father. After all, he’d never been there for her; not as a child when she’d needed a daddy, and certainly not now. Morio had left her, too, and maybe his abandonment had been worse—so much worse—because he was the one who told her he loved her.

His thoughts turned toward the little girl—Aislynn. He’d only seen pictures of the child. With her serious expression, her wide gray eyes . . . she’d looked like a lost soul, and Morio grimaced. He’d

asked Meara once if she had pictures of herself as a child. She'd hesitated before answering. "No," she'd said. "*No one thought to take pictures, I suppose . . .*"

Meara was the one who bought Aislynn dolls and toys: those things Meara never had. Meara was the one who coaxed Aislynn out into the gardens to take pictures with her digital camera—hundreds of pictures of a little girl who was too shy to smile at the odd electronic device. Meara hugged her and cuddled her; gave her all the doting affection that a child needed to have. Meara helped her brush herself off when she stumbled and fell, and Morio . . .

Morio was bastard enough to be angry at her for caring about her baby sister when no one else did.

Stopping abruptly, he blinked and stared. It took a moment for him to realize that he'd come full-circle. Standing on the sidewalk before the path that led to the front door of the cottage, he clenched his teeth and heaved a sigh, lifting the flower to his nose for a mere second, breathing in its scent. Squaring his shoulders, he strode up to the small porch and reached for the door handle. It'd be no more than he deserved if she launched something directly at his head as he entered the cottage.

She was curled up on the sofa with her doll clutched against her chest, the smell of her tears thick in the air. She'd cried herself to sleep in his absence, and Morio's ears flattened as the excruciating sense of guilt nearly overwhelmed him.

Closing the door softly, he paused for a moment to gather his thoughts before pushing himself away from the wall and crossing the floor to kneel beside her, smoothing her hair out of her face with a trembling hand as he smothered a low whine.

She moaned quietly, her brows furrowing though she turned toward his hand without opening her eyes.

"Meara," he murmured, stroking her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "Meara . . ."

She opened her eyes slowly, and he grimaced when fresh tears washed into her gaze. Quickly sitting up, she grasped his hand and held it tight as the doll slipped from her, falling onto the floor with a dull thud. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Please believe me . . ."

"Don't apologize," he said, trying in vain to swallow the lump that blocked his throat and he blinked rapidly to dissipate the moisture that clouded his vision. "I . . . I was a bastard, and I'm sorry."

His words only served to worsen her upset, and she quickly shook her head. "You're right . . . You're right . . . I'm a horrible, horrible person! I made a promise to you, and I broke it . . . and that makes me a liar, too . . ."

“You’re not a liar,” he assured her, hooking his hand around the back of her neck and pulling her forward, resting his forehead against hers. “Can I ask you for something?”

“Anything,” she sniffled. “Anything, anything, anything . . .”

He sighed, kissing her temple before letting go, dangling his hands between his bent knees. “Do you have a picture of Aislynn?”

She looked confused, but nodded slowly, reaching over to nab her purse off the table beside the sofa. It didn’t take her long to dig a photograph out of her wallet that she handed to him without a word.

The little round face stared back at him, her bright gray eyes too solemn, too serious. The smudge of a red Cupid’s bow mouth . . . the palest cheeks . . . her nose was so little that it brought the term ‘button nose’ to mind, and Morio smiled sadly. “Do you care if I keep this?” he asked.

“Okay,” Meara agreed slowly. “But why . . .?”

“Sometimes I just need to remember why we’re doing this; that’s all. Call it a reminder.”

“A reminder . . .?”

He heaved a sigh and lowered the picture, lifting his gaze to meet hers once more. “Sure . . . a reminder . . . She’s cute . . . definitely worth it.”

“That’s just it,” Meara said with a sigh. “As much as I love her, I love you, too, and . . . and sometimes I feel like . . .”

Morio straightened up enough to turn and sit on the sofa, drawing Meara into his lap and holding her close while she gathered her thoughts. “Like what?” he prompted when she didn’t speak.

Cuddling closer to him, she sighed again, shaking her head just a little as she closed her eyes. “I can’t help but feel like it’s impossible . . . that I can’t be with her and with you at the same time . . .”

“That’s not true,” Morio insisted, unaware that he was holding her, rocking her, soothing her as though she were little more than a pup. “She’ll always be welcome wherever we are. Don’t you know that?”

“I know that,” she whispered. “My head tells me that you’re right. My heart . . .” She drew a deep breath to bolster her rapidly fraying resolve. “I don’t think I can do this anymore . . . and I don’t want to ask you to, either.”

“Meara . . .”

She swallowed hard and shook her head, tears clinging to her eyelashes, sparkling like the sunlight on water, causing an ache so thick, so deep that Morio grimaced. "I . . . I have to tell him . . ."

Wild hope surged through him at the resolve in her tone, and yet he couldn't help feeling like he had done something worse than what her father had over the years. He sighed, pulling her close again. "You don't have to, Meara . . . It's all right. I told you I'd wait for you. I will, you know."

She shook her head again, buried her face against his chest for a moment. "I feel like I'm being pulled apart," she said, her voice throaty, raw. "When I'm with you, I feel like I should be with her, and when I'm with her, I just want to be with you . . . and . . . and . . ."

Kissing her forehead gently, Morio wiped the streaking tears from her cheeks. "Don't cry, okay? I'm sorry that I made you cry . . ."

She drew a ragged breath and sniffled. "I . . . I love you."

He smiled wanly despite the gravity in his expression. "I love you *more*," he told her.

"You shouldn't," she maintained.

"But I do."

She sighed.

"This is for you," he said, handing her the flower.

She gazed at it for a minute, another tear spilling over, falling on the petals like the gentlest rain.

Morio grimaced. "All right; enough of that . . . since you're going back there for Christmas, I thought I'd give you your present early."

"You never let me have my presents early," she pointed out. He grinned when she fell for the diversionary tactic.

He shrugged. "If you don't want it now . . ." he drawled.

"I never said that!" she protested.

"Sounded like that's what you were saying . . ."

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Give it to me."

“Okay, okay,” he relented. “It’s in my pocket.”

“Your pocket?” she echoed with a shake of her head.

“Yes, in my pocket. You have to find it.”

She stared at him for a moment before slipping off his lap, depositing the flower on the table beside the sofa and digging her hand into his right pocket. He chuckled when she brushed a ticklish spot, his body jerking slightly before he controlled the impulse. “What’s the matter, Meara? Can’t you find it?”

She narrowed her eyes stubbornly and dug a little deeper. He groaned when she brushed something that was definitely not her present. She blushed, realizing why he’d made that particular sound, but didn’t give up. “You know . . . that’s not really what I was talking about, but if you want to play with that instead, I don’t think I’d mind . . .”

Her blush deepened, and she shook her head but smiled. “You’re horrible, Morio Izayoi.”

Her claws raked lightly over the part of his hip that reacted the most violently to the tickle stimuli, and he rolled to the side to avoid the contact. “Okay! Wrong pocket!”

Meara pulled her hand out and bit her lip. He could tell from the look on her face that she wanted to tickle him more but feared the retaliation. Leaning over him, she reached into the left pocket and fished around for a few moments. “I can’t find anything . . .”

Morio snorted. “You shouldn’t be groping around down there and then tell a guy that you can’t find anything . . . it’s bad for the ego.”

She shot him a droll if not completely embarrassed glance before resuming her search.

He watched her face for any sign that she’d located the ring. It took a minute, but she stopped suddenly, her eyes rounding as her lips formed a silent ‘oh’ as she hesitantly lifted her gaze to meet his. “Is this . . .?” she breathed.

Chuckling softly, he nodded as she slowly, hesitantly pulled her hand out of his pocket once more. She gasped as she stared at the ring, shaking her head as her eyes filled with tears again. “No!” he insisted, pulling her close again. “You’re not supposed to *cry!*”

“I can’t help it!” she wailed, her hands trembling as she held up the ring as though she were examining it—quite impossible since she had tears running down her cheeks again.

“Meara,” he complained, kissing her temple and wiping her face. “I don’t like to make you cry, you know. Makes me feel like a bloody bastard . . .”

She shook her head, uttering a terse laugh despite the flow of tears. “Does this mean . . . you want to . . .?”

He rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Will you marry me, Meara MacDonnough? Not now, but when you’re ready . . .? Make an honest man out of me?”

She choked out a gruff sound as she leaned away to stare at him before launching herself at his chest, her arms locking around his neck with a death-grip. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, yes, yes!”

He smiled to himself, stroked her hair, his happiness tempered by the moisture that saturated his shirt as she sobbed. “I told you I love you, right?”

She nodded but didn’t let go.

“I don’t remember a time when I didn’t love you,” he mumbled. “I . . . I’m sorry I’m not as supportive as I should be.”

It seemed like a long time before she finally wound down to hiccups and sniffles. The little grin on her face was radiant and somehow poignant, nonetheless. Her eyes were reddened, her nose was pinked and shiny . . . Her lips still trembled from the emotion she’d spent, and yet . . . And yet he couldn’t remember her ever looking quite as beautiful as she did in that moment. “You . . . you have to put it on my finger,” she said, clearing her throat and offering him a tumultuous smile.

Morio grinned and took the ring. “Balls, Meara . . . I *made* the damn diamond . . . I have to put it on your finger, too?”

“You made it?”

His grin widened. “Yep.”

“How?”

He shrugged, taking his time rolling the ring in his fingers as he rubbed her knuckles with his other hand. “The last time I went back to Japan . . .”

“Yeah?” she asked, letting her head fall back against his shoulder as she nestled into the crook of his arm beside him, her knees casually bent over his leg.

“Yep . . . I took a nice lump of coal and shoved it up Sesshoumaru’s tight ass . . .”

She pulled her hand away from his and tugged his hair. “That’s just wrong,” she pointed out despite the giggle that escaped her.

“Wasn’t it?” he agreed, recapturing her hand and slipping the ring onto her finger before kissing her knuckles. “Truth is, I borrowed the old man’s sword . . . it has the ability to send out diamond spears, and there are always smaller shards, too . . .”

“It can?”

Morio shrugged. “Sure . . . Tetsusaiga is a legendary blade, after all . . . you’ve heard of it, haven’t you?”

She shook her head, holding her hand up and turning it from side to side as the diamond caught the light. “No.”

“Really? Kami . . . sounds like I’ll have to educate you before you meet him, then.”

“But you said that his sword has a different name, didn’t you? Ry—Ry-something . . .”

“What? No, the old man’s sword is named Tetsusaiga,” he said slowly.

She shot him a perplexed look. “Your ‘old man’ isn’t your father . . .?”

It took him a second to figure out what she was asking, and when he did, he laughed. “No . . . the old man—the *real* old man—that’s my grandfather, InuYasha. My father . . . he ain’t nearly as old.”

“InuYasha . . .” she repeated slowly.

He nodded. “The hanyou of legend . . .”

“The angry hanyou?”

Morio chuckled. “That, too.”

“I’m sorry about Christmas,” she murmured.

Morio shrugged and wrapped his arms around her. “It’s all right. My parents will still be here when you get home.”

She sighed but nodded. “You’re a wonderful man . . . I don’t think I tell you that often enough.”

Chapter Ten

Holiday

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Sunday, December 25, 2061

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“You know, Morio, if your face gets any lower, you’ll step on it,” Deirdre Mitako Izayoi—most commonly known as ‘Nezumi’, or in Morio’s circumstance, ‘Mama’—commented as she peered over the top of the latest issue of *Popular Mechanics* magazine.

Morio forced a smile that looked more like a grimace. “Sorry, Mama.”

She sighed. “Don’t tell me you’re sorry. We can wait to meet Meara.”

He grunted in response but didn’t speak.

“Maybe you should go out there and beat the shit out of her old man,” Ryomaru suggested, lounging against the counter. “Hell, I’ll help . . .”

Nezumi rolled her eyes at her mate’s perceived propensity toward violence. “You will not, baka,” she grumbled as she dropped the magazine on the coffee table and turned to face Morio once more. “Ignore him,” she said with a shake of her head. “He’s never had a lot of common sense.”

“Keh!” Ryomaru snorted, one of his ears twitching indignantly.

“You could call her . . . I’ll bet she misses you,” Nezumi prompted.

Morio shrugged, grimacing inwardly since he hated to admit the truth out loud. “She . . . doesn’t like it when I call her there,” he confessed. “She worries that her father will find out about us.”

He could feel his father’s gaze boring into the back of his skull as he concentrated on not giving in to the blush that was threatening around the edges, despising how pathetic that reason sounded in his own mind. “Ian MacDonnough is a damn bastard,” Ryomaru stated. “Never liked him; never will.”

“You’ve met him?”

Ryomaru nodded. “Met him? Yes. Liked him? Hell, no.”

Morio nodded slowly, pushing himself to his feet and striding over to grab a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. “Meara said he doesn’t like hanyous.”

“That’s putting it mildly. Had the balls to try to tell Sesshoumaru that Toga didn’t deserve to be taiyoukai ‘cause Sierra’s human. Too bad Sesshoumaru didn’t force-feed them back to him. Damn bastard.”

Morio’s eyebrows shot up, disappearing under his bangs as he lowered the water from his lips. “Bet Uncle liked that.”

Ryomaru grunted in response.

“You’d think I’d stop being surprised by the depths of MacDonnough’s asshole-ish-ness,” Morio grumbled, crossing one arm over his chest with a scowl. “You’d *think*, but no . . . just when I think he can’t get much lower, someone tells me something else that makes me wonder how the hell the man ever had a daughter like Meara . . .”

“They come in all kinds,” Ryomaru muttered.

Nezumi sighed, telegraphing her mate a censuring glance before frowning at Morio. “Why don’t you call her anyway? You miss her, and it’s Christmas.”

Morio grimaced but nodded, reaching over to snag his cell phone off the coffee table and pausing a minute to take a picture of the poinsettia he’d picked up for her last night—not a flower, exactly, but she’d understand—that was, if he didn’t kill the plant before she got home, that was. He wasn’t exactly skilled when it came to taking care of stuff like that, though a few days ought to be all right . . .

Dialing the number, he lifted the phone to the side of his head—not ear-level, no, but he could hear well enough that it never had been a problem—intercepting his mother’s amused little grin out of the corner of his eye.

“I was just thinking about you,” Meara’s voice came over the line. “Merry Christmas.”

“Yeah? I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

Meara laughed. “Not unless you call helping Aislynn diaper her baby doll ‘something,’” she teased.

“Oh, well, that sounds pretty important,” he drawled.

“Who’s that?” he heard the little, high-pitched voice in the background.

Meara giggled, her voice muffling as she lowered the phone from her ear. “Remember that special friend I told you about? He’s on the phone,” she explained.

“The one with the puppy ears?” the girl—it had to be Aislynn—demanded.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

Aislynn giggled.

“Come here. Say hi to him.”

After a momentary pause, Meara laughed and got back on the line. “I guess she’s being shy right now,” Meara apologized.

“She sounds tiny,” Morio allowed, unable to restrain the little smile that twitched on his lips.

“She is.” Meara sighed. “I miss you.”

“I miss you, too.”

“I told Father that I’m leaving after his New Year’s party . . . I’ll be home on the first.”

“Good. What’s this party?”

“Ach, nothing important—at least, not to me. Father hosts this New Year’s party every year—all of the important people in Europe, I suppose . . . At least five hundred people last year, and I hear this year’s party will be bigger . . . do you really think he’d notice one way or the other if I weren’t here?” she complained.

Morio’s smile dimmed. “Well, now . . . you’ve got to keep up appearances, don’t you? Get anything good for Christmas?”

She heaved another sigh. “Just a beautiful ring from the gorgeous man I’m going to marry,” she quipped.

“Oh, yeah? What’s his name? I’ll kick his ass.”

Meara laughed. “How was your parents’ flight? You didn’t make coffee for them, did you?”

Morio snorted at her indelicate reminder that despite the passage of a few years and numerous attempts, he still had yet to brew a drinkable pot of coffee. "It was fine, and yes, I did. They *loved* it. Drank it while I serenaded them with my ukulele."

"Su-u-ure," she said dubiously. "They're there to visit, mind, not to be tortured."

"Ouch!"

She giggled. "You forgot my flower today," she pouted, her voice taking on a saddened tone.

"I didn't," he protested, lowering the phone and sending the image through. "See?"

Meara laughed. "So you didn't. Good. I'm glad."

"You know, I was thinking," Morio went on. "It seems to me that you've never, ever admitted that you were wrong and I was right."

"Hmm," she mused, "you were right? About what?"

He snorted. "Keh! About us being meant for each other; that's what."

"Oh, that," she teased. "I'll think about it."

"Keh! I want to hear it, wench."

"Wench?"

"Yes . . . highest form of flattery in my family."

She laughed. "Did I ever tell you that your family is a little odd?"

"Incidentals," he retorted. "Anyway, about admitting you were wrong . . ."

"I said I'd think about it," she reiterated. He could tell from the tone of her voice that she was smiling, and it made him smile, too.

"Aww, just say it: Morio was right; Meara was wrong. Morio's a god among men, and Meara's just a lowly wench."

She snorted. "Is that what you're thinking?" she challenged.

"Yes, that's what I'm thinking, Meara."

“I don’t think—hold on.” He could hear the rustle on her end as she lowered the cell phone.
 “What is it?”

He could hear the muffled intonation of Aislynn’s response though he couldn’t make out the words. Catching his father’s slow shake of his head, Morio grinned unrepentantly.

“Aislynn wants to say hello,” Meara said. “Here.”

He could hear the child’s shallow breathing, the scrape of tiny claws against the phone’s plastic casing. “H-hi,” she whispered.

“Hello, Aislynn . . . are you—?” Jerking the phone away from his head and grimacing at the thunderous crash that resonated on Meara’s end of the line, Morio cautiously brought the phone back to his head. “What was that?”

“Sorry . . . Apparently she didn’t realize that you’d talk back to her,” Meara apologized, unable to keep the undisguised humor out of her tone. “She’s gone and hid her face in her pillow . . .”

Morio chuckled. “Then you’d better go comfort her . . . scared by the evil hanyou . . .”

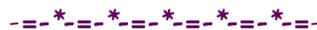
“You? Evil? Hardly . . .”

“I love you, Meara.”

She sighed yet again. “I love you, too.”

“Hurry home.”

“I will,” she promised. “I will . . .”



It was late—*really* late—as Meara slid the plastic card through the scanner and waited for the door lock to release.

There really hadn’t been any choice for her. She’d been unable to stand Nightsboro another moment, especially after the farce of a party that she’d been forced to attend, accepting the well-wishes of perfect strangers for the announced marriage that was never going to happen. Aislynn was

in bed sleeping—she was never allowed to attend those sorts of functions. She'd be upset in the morning when she awoke only to find that Meara had already left, but . . .

She grimaced. It wouldn't have been so bad, but Paul . . . She wasn't certain if he'd simply had too much champagne, but he'd been so adamant, and she'd barely been able to fend him off, fleeing down the hallway to her bedroom where she hurriedly threw her things into her bag and got out of the mansion before anyone discovered that she'd gone.

Deliberately shoving those thoughts aside as she concentrated instead on the happier idea that she was home, she leaned down to grab her satchel. She'd sneak in and shower before slipping into bed with Morio . . . God, she'd missed him . . .

The cottage was dark, and she had to grope her way to the bathroom after hanging her coat on the hook beside the door, depositing her purse and keys onto the table next to the door. It didn't take long for her to shed her clothes and slip into the old fashioned enclosed shower stall, and she hurried through her shower, anxious to snuggle close to Morio; to draw from the comfort he unwittingly offered her. The very idea of being home was enough to make her smile as she turned off the taps and reached for a towel.

She dried off quickly and slipped on her robe, tying the belt in a feminine bow before reaching for the door handle. Her mood had improved significantly with the shower and the washing away of Paul's overbearing scent that had clung to her since the party . . .

"Welcome home."

Gasping softly as the harsh kitchen light blinded her momentarily, Meara blinked and slowly focused on Morio's scowling face. She started to run toward him but stopped when he crossed his arms over his chest, taking a step back in retreat. Anger was delineated in every angle of his face, in every plane of his expression. "Morio . . .?"

He shook his head; let his arms drop only to rake a hand over his face. "How was the party?" he demanded, his tone oddly cold, hostile.

Meara bit her lip, unsure why he was acting this way. "The . . . party?"

"Yeah," he ground out, "the party—your *engagement* party."

She winced. "It wasn't . . . How did you . . .?"

He snorted, stalking around the room as though he had to move. "I was there, Meara," he snarled quietly. "I was there . . . I saw it . . . Fucking bastard had his hands all over you, and you let him!"

“I didn’t . . .” she said weakly, rubbing her throbbing temples as she tried to figure out how to diffuse Morio’s anger before it got worse. “I . . .”

Rounding on her, he narrowed his eyes and pinned her with an icy glare. “You didn’t,” he echoed with a curt nod. “Then why don’t you tell me where your ring is?”

Glancing down quickly, she flinched when she realized too late that she’d forgotten to take off the gaudy diamond ring that Paul had made a show of bestowing on her at the party while Morio’s ring was tucked neatly away in her purse. Jerking the jewelry off her finger, she darted over to retrieve Morio’s ring once more, carefully putting it on her finger as she stowed the other one away. “I . . . forgot . . .” she murmured, praying that her answer didn’t sound quite as lame to Morio as it had in her own ears.

“You knew, didn’t you? You knew that the fucking party was to announce your engagement to that damn bastard.”

Meara didn’t deny it, clasping her hands and staring at the floor.

Morio snorted. “Keh! That’s nice . . . good, Meara . . . *fabulous* . . . were you going to tell me before or after you fucking *married* him?”

“I’m not going to marry him,” she said softly, without lifting her gaze to meet his. “I . . . I’m going to marry you.”

“Yeah, well . . .” Trailing off with a frustrated sigh, he strode over to her, grasped her hand, staring at the ring on her finger in a sad sort of way.

Meara pressed her lips together, told herself not to cry. Morio hated it when she cried, and the last thing she wanted to do was to make him feel guilty over something that was entirely her fault. It took everything within her to grasp the ring and pull it off her finger again. She couldn’t hold back the little whimper that escaped as she took his hand and gave it back to him. “I . . . I don’t deserve this,” she whispered, her words harsh, grating as her throat swelled closed.

With a grimace, he swallowed hard, taking the ring she dropped into his hand as tears washed into Meara’s eyes. He scowled at the ring for another minute before unhooking the gold chain he wore around his neck and slipping the ring onto it and fastening it once more. “So that’s your choice,” he forced himself to say. “I . . . I understand.”

“No!” she insisted, grabbing his arm when he swung away from her. “No, it’s just . . . you’re right! I’ll give Paul back the ring—I’ll drive out there right now . . . Then I can have yours back, can’t I?”

He didn’t answer for a long moment, staring at her hand clutching his sleeve. “Meara . . .”

“I have to tell them all,” she said, sniffing, wiping her cheeks with impatient fingers. “I *want* to tell them . . . Aislynn . . . she’ll understand one day, right? I can’t wait anymore . . . it’s not fair to you . . . and it’s not fair to me, either . . .”

Morio sighed and reached out, pulling her into his arms as the tears wrenched free from her precarious hold over them, as she buried her face against his shoulder and sobbed. “You let him touch you,” Morio murmured brokenly as he rubbed her back and sighed once more. “I wanted to *kill* him, damn it . . .”

“I’m sorry,” she muttered, her voice muffled by his shirt. “So sorry . . . I hate this! I really hate this . . . the lying . . . the hiding . . . and all I ever do is hurt you . . .”

“You don’t hurt me,” he lied then grimaced. “At least, not so much,” he amended. “Meara . . .”

“All I wanted was to come home to you . . . I couldn’t stand it anymore . . .”

“I came up . . . you’d said there’d be lots of people there . . . I figured that your father would never know,” he confessed. “Then I saw you through the window . . . that bastard was giving you that ring . . .”

She uttered a soft little moan, wrapping her arms tightly around his waist as she slowly shook her head. “I don’t want his ring, Morio. Please believe me . . .”

“I can get you a bigger diamond,” he said suddenly. “As big as you want . . . whatever you want.”

“I don’t want a bigger diamond,” she insisted, leaning away, clasping his cheeks in her hands. He looked like he was suffering a severe bout of recrimination, and she stubbornly shook her head. “I want that ring,” she stated again, determination hardening her tone. “When I tell them . . . when I tell everyone so we don’t have to hide anymore . . . I can have it back, right?”

Morio sighed, ears flattening for a moment as he grimaced and closed his eyes. “You can have it back, Meara. I’ll never take it away from you again.”

“No,” she said, managing a wry smile, just for him. “I . . . I want you to keep it . . . until everything’s out in the open . . . I want you to keep it for me.”

“Meara . . .”

Her eyes suddenly widened, and she drew away, glancing down the darkened hallway with a guilty expression on her face. “Your parents . . .?”

Chapter Eleven
Aislynn

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Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Friday, March 3, 2062

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Morio pushed the power button on the car stereo with a sigh, welcoming the sudden quiet as he glanced at the uncharacteristically quiet woman in the seat beside him. Biting her lower lip, she stared out the window at the passing landscape though it all seemed blurred in her eyes.

“We . . . don’t have to do this,” he said, hating the slight hesitation in his voice, in his words.

Meara blinked and shot him an almost worried glance before letting her gaze dart out the window once more. “It’s time,” she replied quietly. “I just wish . . .” Cutting herself off short, shaking her head quickly, she forced a smile that looked more like a grimace as she fingered the pink stuffed dog in her lap. “I think she’ll like her,” Meara said, holding up the dog for his inspection.

Morio nodded and shrugged. “Yeah, well, it’s the thought that counts, right?”

“Did you have to sew it up with black thread?” she asked with a pointedly raised eyebrow.

“Well, sure . . . why not? It’s a reminder that she should look in that dog one day.”

Meara sighed and nodded absently. Morio had bought the stuffed dog for Aislynn’s third birthday, and when he’d brought it home, she’d been confused. The seam was ripped down the stuffed animal’s back, and it wasn’t until Morio carefully pulled the rolled slip of paper out of the toy that she realized what he’d done. Writing down the address of his home back in Japan along with his cell phone number, he’d given Meara one last way to tell Aislynn how to find her. The simple action had brought tears to her eyes, and Morio hadn’t been able to do anything but hold her as she cried.

But the time had come, hadn’t it? Aislynn’s birthday tomorrow, and Meara aimed to make it the best birthday the girl had ever had, no matter what. That Morio was with her just lent her that much more determination to see her task through. After all, who knew if Meara would be allowed to see her sister again? That idea . . . it terrified her, and yet she’d somehow known it would eventually come down to this, hadn’t she? When she thought of her sister’s sweet little face . . .

“Meara . . . we don’t have to do this yet,” Morio murmured, reaching over to squeeze her icy fingers.

“We do,” she argued then shook her head. “It’s time.”

She’d hoarded the last few months, dedicated to inscribing each and every memory into her brain while telling Aislynn time and again that she’d always be there with her, even if she couldn’t come to see her every week.

Aislynn looked at her with those solemn gray eyes and gravely nodded. “Are you going away, Meawa?” she asked, her voice soft like the chime of bells.

“I . . . I don’t know, Aislynn,” she replied with a wince, wishing that she could tell Aislynn that she wasn’t yet knowing in her heart that the lie would be harsher than the truth. “I hope not.”

“I can go wif you!” Aislynn said suddenly, her eyes brightening as hope took over, as she scampered over to curl up on her side in the empty suitcase that Meara had opened to put her things in. “I’m little . . . I fit!”

“Sweetie . . . I’d never pack you into a suitcase,” Meara said, smiling as tears filled her eyes.

“But I can go,” she insisted. “Please?”

“Oh . . . you know, they’d miss you here.” She almost choked on the lie.

Aislynn’s face contorted in a disappointed scowl. “Oka-a-a-ay,” she said . . .

“You know, I still can’t fathom a father disowning his own child,” Morio said, breaking the stilted silence with a heavy sigh. “It’s unnatural.”

Meara wished she could believe him. “After everything you’ve learned about Ian MacDonnough, you doubt he’d do that?” she challenged quietly.

Morio rubbed his forehead, readjusting his grip on the steering wheel in his other hand. “No . . . I don’t,” he confessed. “I just . . . Kami, it’s just wrong.”

“It’s okay,” Meara said, touching his cheek with her folded knuckles. “I . . . I want to be with you. You’re my future.”

“She’ll always be welcome in our home,” he stated, reaching across his chest to capture her hand and kiss her fingers. “Always.”

“I know, but I . . .”

Morio snorted. “No buts. Always.”

Meara smiled, a trembling thing that surged in her heart and warmed her soul. Morio . . . how was it that he always knew just what to say to make her feel better? It was a gift; a talent . . . or maybe it was just because he loved her . . . “Always,” she breathed.



“Are you going somewhere?” Meara asked as Ian MacDonnough stepped onto the wide stone porch, watching as one of the servants packed a suitcase into the trunk of the box-like vehicle.

Ian spared a moment to glance at his daughter before resuming his commanding stance. “I have a meeting in Venice,” he replied.

Meara shook her head, her chagrin clearly showing on her features. “But it’s Aislynn’s birthday,” she pointed out. “You can’t leave her alone!”

That earned her a reproachful scowl, and Meara had to fight the urge to recoil. “You’re here, are you not? She is not alone then, is she?”

“No, but—”

Ian’s gaze flicked to the side, and she saw his eyes widen for a moment just before they narrowed suspiciously. “Who . . . is *that*?” he demanded without taking his gaze off the newcomer.

Meara didn’t have to look to see the person in question. Clearing her throat, she mustered as much bravado as she could. “Father, this is Morio Izayoi . . . he’s a friend of mine . . . a *good* friend.”

Ian grunted in response.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lord MacDonnough,” Morio greeted, bowing slightly in deference to Ian’s stance.

“Izayoi,” Ian repeated thoughtfully. “Ah . . . kin of the *hanyou* of legend.”

Meara bristled at the hostile undertone in Ian’s words.

“InuYasha is my grandfather,” Morio replied, giving no indication that he’d heard the derisive tone at all.

Ian shot Meara a narrow-eyed stare, and she forced herself not to look away. “I see.” Drawing a deep breath despite the suspicion writ in his gaze, Ian flicked his wrist, making a show of looking at his watch before straightening his shirt cuff and smoothing the arm of his navy blue jacket. “I shall be home Sunday,” he informed Meara as he brushed past her and descended the stairs.

Morio stepped back to allow Ian to pass, bowing slightly once more—a show of his impeccable manners. Meara had noticed that before. As much as Morio liked to tease and cajole, his manners, when it came right down to it, were beyond reproach—a trait doubtless taught to him by his mother.

Meara had liked Deidre Izayoi, though she hadn’t been able to understand just why the woman tended to answer to ‘Nezumi’, the Japanese word for ‘rat’. Morio had explained that it was something that stemmed from her childhood, growing up as the best friend of both Ryomaru, whom she had later married, and his twin brother, Kichiro. Meeting Morio’s parents had been a daunting experience. Despite Morio’s reassurances that they’d ‘love’ her, she had been more than a little reluctant when she’d finally come face to face with them.

Nezumi had been very kind, a little on the reserved side though her smiles had seemed warm and genuine. It was easy to tell where Morio got his sweet disposition though Meara didn’t doubt for a moment that Nezumi could very easily take them all to task if they deserved it.

Ryomaru had been a little more intimidating. Standing with his arms crossed over his chest that was just a little wider than Morio’s though Morio stood a couple inches taller than his father, the scowl on his face was rather foreboding as he slowly and deliberately sized Meara up. She must have passed his criteria though, because he finally smiled—a wide, cheesy smile that reminded Meara of his son, and that, at least, had taken the edges of her nervousness. Shortly afterward, he’d started joking and teasing, and Meara had understood at last, just why Morio tended to be on the good-natured side. She’d found it quite interesting. Ryomaru could go from one extreme to another in a blink of an eye; making jokes one minute and blustering vile invectives another only to make an about-face with a goofy smile, normally directed at his mate while Nezumi rolled her eyes and shook her head, smiling despite her exasperation with her mate.

Meara sighed and caught an errant lock of hair, tucking it behind her ear as she watched her father get into the shining black car. The driver closed Ian’s door before slipping behind the steering wheel. She watched as the car purred to life and slowly negotiated the winding driveway toward the stone walls.

“He . . . didn’t seem . . . so bad . . .” Morio said, choosing his words carefully.

Meara snorted indelicately and shook her head. “I cannae believe he left on her birthday,” she complained, the lilt of her brogue rolling off her tongue, giving testimony to her quiet irritation.

“Why don’t you show me where I can put this stuff?” he said, lifting the satchel in his hand and his notebook computer carrying case in the other.

Meara blinked and frowned at the items as though she’d forgotten that he was standing right there. “Oh . . . right . . .”

She turned on her heel, absently noting that the front door opened before she could reach for the handle, leading Morio past the butler without a word. Through the foyer and up the wide staircase, down the hallway toward the wing of the house that was reserved for guests, she finally stopped before a thick oak door and pushed it open before stepping back and gesturing inside. “Welcome to Nightsboro,” she muttered, looking anything but happy about the current situation.

Morio shot her an encouraging smile and stepped inside, striding over to deposit the luggage on the imposing four poster bed on the raised dais in the center of the room before wandering over to step out onto the balcony that overlooked the garden below. Meara slowly followed him. “The birthday girl, I take it?”

Meara followed the direction of his gaze and smiled despite her irritated thoughts. “Yes . . . that’s Aislynn.”

He smiled as he watched the girl dart here and there as she gathered a few early season flowers from the different raised beds. “A girl after my own heart,” he teased. “I thought you said she always waits for you outside.”

Meara’s smile turned a little sad. “She does . . . we’re early though . . . she probably wasn’t expecting us until this afternoon . . .” Turning to him with a sudden glint in her eyes, she grabbed his hand and tugged him back toward the bedroom. “Come on! I want you to meet her!”

Morio chuckled. “Why don’t you go on out there? I promised Cromwell I’d call him before noon,” he said.

Meara nodded and kissed his cheek before hurrying out of the room. Though Morio was still in his final months of grad school, he was already trying to network a little in the hopes that he could land a good job after graduation in early June. William Cromwell was the personnel manager at Arisat Motors, one of the premier car manufacturers in Europe, and Morio had impressed the man enough to get his phone number after a presentation Morio had given at the university. With any luck at all, he’d be able to land a job with the company, or so they hoped.

It didn’t take long for Meara to negotiate the maze of corridors in the old castle. At one point, she supposed that the bulk of the main level had been one great hall, but over the years, it had been partitioned off into smaller rooms to satisfy the needs of the MacDonnough family. The place had belonged to their clan for hundreds of years.

Stepping outside into the early spring sunshine, Meara laughed when Aislynn whipped around, dropping the armload of flowers she held and dashing over to hug her sister's leg. "Meawa!" she exclaimed, her face aglow in her excitement.

"How's my girl?" Meara asked, picking Aislynn up and giving her a squeeze before kissing her cheek soundly.

"It's not my birthday yet," she said with a doleful sigh.

Meara laughed again. "Well, no, but soon," she assured the little girl, "and I have a surprise for you!"

"A present?"

"Yes . . . and a new friend for you to meet."

"A friend?" she echoed, cheeks pinking in anticipation and perhaps a little bashfulness, too.

"But you can't have your birthday presents until tomorrow."

Aislynn's expression shifted into a moue, and she waited a moment before asking, "Is it tomorrow now?"

Meara giggled. "No, silly . . . after you got to sleep and wake up . . . that'll be tomorrow."

Aislynn nodded despite the frown furrowing her brow. Meara set her back on her feet, and Aislynn ran off again, chasing a bird that swooped down from the small thicket of trees near the back of the gardens.

"I could have gotten lost in there," Morio grumbled behind her.

Meara turned and smiled at him as he stepped outside and shook his head. "This place . . . no wonder you didn't spend much time with your parents. How could they find you in that bloody maze?" he complained.

Meara grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the grass. "Did you get a hold of Mr. Cromwell?"

"Nope . . . left a message with his secretary, though. She said he'd be in meetings most of the day."

"His loss, then," Meara stated. "Now you're mine."

“I’m yours,” he agreed amicably enough.

“Aislynn!”

The girl in question stopped abruptly and turned around, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Her smile disappeared when she spotted Morio, and she darted over, ducking behind Meara’s skirts, clutching the material as she buried her face in the copious folds of material.

Meara laughed as Morio knelt down, one hand on his bent knee, the other resting in the grass beside him. “Hi, Aislynn . . . it’s an honor to meet you.”

Aislynn tugged on Meara’s skirt. “Hmm?” she asked, peering over her shoulder with a gentle smile as Aislynn leaned away just enough to see Meara’s face.

“He’s got the doggy ears,” Aislynn whispered.

Morio chuckled. “So I do . . . you want to touch them?”

Aislynn shook her head, burying her face once more, much to Meara’s amusement. “Come on, sweetie . . . he won’t bite—and if he does, I’ll protect you.”

Aislynn giggled but didn’t show her face again.

“They’re really soft,” Meara remarked, leaning forward and rubbing one of Morio’s ears.

He winked at her. “Ears should be soft . . . other things? Not so much . . .”

“Morio!” she chided, shaking her head despite the smile on her face. “You behave.”

His reply was an unrepentant grin that shifted into a light chuckle when a small hand reached around Meara’s legs, fingers opening and closing as though Aislynn were trying to grab at something. “Oh, you want to feel my ears?” he asked.

Meara giggled when Aislynn nodded but didn’t speak. “I think she does.”

Morio nodded, leaning forward far enough to let his left ear brush against Aislynn’s fingertips. The touch must have tickled, because he flinched seconds before his ear twitched. Aislynn shrieked and jerked her hand back, the sound of her childish giggles muffled by Meara’s skirt.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Morio apologized. “I swear I won’t move this time.”

Aislynn shook her head again but slowly reached out, latching onto Morio's ear this time, and he grimaced when her fingers pinched a little too hard.

"Aislynn . . . be easy . . . those *are* his ears, after all . . ."

The girl's grip loosened just a little, and she peered around Meara's legs.

Morio smiled, staying perfectly still, and when he spotted Aislynn's rapt attention, he smiled. "Hi."

Aislynn squealed, jerking her hand back and darting behind the cover of her sister's skirt once more.

Morio grimaced as he slowly pushed himself to his feet. "I don't think she likes me," he mused.

"She's shy," Meara said.

Morio chuckled. "Well, there's one sure-fire way to get her to warm up to me," he drawled.

"And what would that be?"

He shrugged. "You'll see."

She watched as he turned, stuffing his hands into his pockets and striding away.

Aislynn peeked around Meara's legs, watching Morio's slow retreat before tugging on Meara's skirt. "Meawa?"

Meara didn't look at Aislynn, smiling just a little as she watched Morio's easy gait. "Hmm?"

Aislynn giggled. "I'm gonna marry him," she whispered.

Meara blinked and glanced at her sister as a surge of laughter spilled out. "Really."

Aislynn nodded, her chubby little cheeks glowing with a rosy blush. "Yeah."

"Well, if that's the case, don't you think you should talk to him instead of hiding from him?"

Aislynn's face scrunched up in a thoughtful frown, and she shrugged. "I can talk to him . . ." she finally decided.

"Can you?"

She nodded. "I can!"

Morio re-emerged from the side of the mansion with a pink blob in his hands. Meara smiled. *‘Bribery, huh . . .? Well, it might work . . .’*

Aislynn tugged Meara’s hand. “Is that for me?” she asked, waving one hand toward the stuffed dog in Morio’s grasp just before she shoved her fingers back into her mouth—a nervous habit, and one that tended to annoy Ian MacDonnough to the extreme.

Meara smiled down at her sister. “I don’t know, sweetie . . . why don’t you run over there and ask him?”

She didn’t look like she was going to do it. Biting her lip, she seemed to be considering her options. With a soft giggle, she finally let go of Meara’s skirt and darted away to intercept Morio and ask him about the stuffed animal, she supposed.

Meara couldn’t help the little smile that trembled on her lips. To see the two of them together—the two people she loved most in the world . . . It made her feel like everything really might be all right in the end . . .



“What’s that?”

Morio spared a moment to glance at the child as Aislynn leaned over his shoulder and pointed at the laptop computer on the floor beside him. “I’m working on a project,” he told her, holding up the notebook on his lap for her to see.

“You write funny,” she said as she stared at the scrawled notes.

Morio chuckled. “You think so? It’s called Kanji . . . it’s writing from where I was born and grew up.”

“You were born in Kanji?” Aislynn asked, her gray eyes darkening as she tried to understand what he was saying.

Morio’s chuckle escalated into a soft laugh. “No . . . I was born in Japan . . . this was how I was taught to write.”

“I can write my letters!” Aislynn announced proudly. “Meawa taught me.”

“Yeah? You want to show me?”

She shook her head. “It’s night time, Rover! No one writes at night time!”

Morio snorted, more from the name that the girl insisted on using for him than because of her assertion that writing was something that was only done during daylight hours. For some reason, she couldn’t seem to say ‘Morio’ and since he had ‘doggy’ ears, she’d decided that his name was ‘Rover’—interestingly enough, the same name she’d bestowed on the little pink stuffed dog . . . and Meara, of course, thought that was a riot. ‘*Go figure . . .*’

“Why you gots white hair?” Aislynn asked suddenly, lifting a handful of his hair and letting it slip through her fingers.

“I don’t know . . . lots of people in my family have this color hair.”

She scrambled off the bed where she’d been lying behind Morio and darted out of the room just as Meara rounded the corner with a tray of cocoa and pretzels. “Oh, Aislynn!” she said, barely reacting in time to lift the tray to avoid colliding with the girl.

Aislynn tore down the hallway and into her room. Morio could hear the door bang open with a resounding ‘thud’.

“What was that all about?” Meara asked, lifting an eyebrow as she slowly shook her head.

“No idea . . . she was playing with my hair, then she took off . . .”

Meara nodded, setting the tray aside and handing Morio a steaming mug. “She’s quite smitten with you, I think.”

Morio chuckled, lifting the mug to his lips as he added to his notes and set the tablet aside with a heavy sigh. “She’s something.”

Giggling softly, Meara sat down on the floor and scooted close to Morio’s side. “She told me that she’s going to marry you one day,” she pointed out, the devil dancing in her gaze.

“Oh, yeah? Well . . . that might be tricky since I’m planning on marrying you . . . maybe there’s a loophole in the mating law somewhere . . . you think sisters count as a two-for?”

“You’re terrible,” Meara chided.

Morio grinned. “I don’t know . . . she *is* awfully cute.”

“Of course she is!”

The soft patter of bare feet on the stone floor announced Aislynn’s return. She held her brush and comb clutched in one hand and a wooden box that looked completely suspect in her other one. Morio eyed her as she climbed back onto the bed and set the box aside, dropping the comb before carefully brushing Morio’s hair with a frown of concentration on her brow.

“What are you doing, Aislynn?” Meara asked as she crawled over to retrieve the last mug of cocoa off the tray.

“I’m making Rover pretty,” she announced.

Morio cocked an eyebrow but took up his laptop to work on the presentation again.

Meara laughed. “Are you now?”

Aislynn nodded once. “Yes!”

Morio tried his best to ignore the ministrations, intent on completing the project since he was due to give the presentation Monday. He’d been assigned the task of mocking up a hydro-electric hybrid car that ran chiefly on a water-soluble mineral solution. The challenge wasn’t so much in designing the car. The real problem was keeping an engine cooled enough to prevent evaporation and thus mineral deposit build up . . .

“Do you like blue or red?” Aislynn asked suddenly.

“Hmm? Oh . . . blue’s fine,” Morio said, only paying half attention.

“I like blue,” she ventured cautiously.

He chuckled, reaching over his shoulder to squeeze her little hand gently. She laughed and jerked her hand back before dissolving into a fit of giggles. “You like pink, too?” she asked after her laughter died down.

“Pink’s pretty, but blue’s better,” Morio replied, biting his lip as he considered the project open before him on the laptop computer’s monitor.

Aislynn fell silent again, and judging from the slight tugs on his hair, he could tell that she really was working on making him ‘pretty’.

“Now don’t you look sweet?” Meara teased, obviously enjoying the results of Aislynn’s efforts.

“Do I?” Morio asked, sparing a sidelong glance out of the corner of his eye.

Meara nodded, digging into her purse for the mother-of-pearl compact she carried. Snapping it open, she handed it to him, and Morio sighed at the pale blue ribbon tied around a central tuft of hair drawn up between his ears. “Oh, yep . . . I’m . . . pretty,” he stated.

Aislynn giggled and gently tugged on his hair. “I’m braiding hair,” she announced.

Morio sighed and shook his head but didn’t try to stop the child.

“It’s almost time for bed,” Meara said, leaning back to look at her sister.

Aislynn nodded. “Okay! And when I wake up, it’ll be my birthday!”

“Yes, it will . . . now why don’t you run along and get your nightgown on?”

Aislynn snapped the box closed and scooted off the bed, gathering up her things before wagging a plump little finger under Morio’s nose. “Don’t take your hair down, Rover!” she demanded.

Morio grinned. “All right,” he allowed. “You’d better go get ready for bed.”

She skipped out of the room, and Morio chuckled. “Cute little thing, isn’t she?” he commented.

Meara smiled and leaned on his shoulder. “She is . . . and she loves that dog you gave her. I can’t believe how fast she’s warmed up to you.”

Morio’s grin widened. “Of course she did! It was the power of bribery . . . she couldn’t resist once I’d offered her the stuffed animal . . . Besides, she couldn’t be my mate if she couldn’t stand to talk to me, don’t you think?”

Meara gathered up the cocoa cups and set them on the tray. “I’m going to take these downstairs then get ready for bed, myself,” she informed him.

Morio nodded as Meara hurried out of the room.

Aislynn wandered in once more with the stuffed dog in her arms, her toes peeking out from beneath the wide ruffed hem of the white nightgown that reminded Morio of the old fashioned ones he’d seen in paintings and pictures. ‘*Victorian*,’ he mused with a small grin.

Kneeling on the floor near him, Aislynn closed her fingers over the ruffle at her wrist and scrunched up her shoulders. Slowly creeping toward him, she glanced almost nervously at the faint click of the computer keyboard echoed through the room. Little by little, she crawled into his lap, always

Chapter Twelve

Birthday Wishes

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Saturday, March 4, 2062
2:30 p.m.

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Morio caught Aislynn and swooped her off the ground, hefting her into the air as she giggled and screeched. Meara's soft laughter drifted to him from where she sat under a spiny-looking tree in the sparse grass of the Nightsboro gardens. It was an uncharacteristically warm spring day without a hint of snow or rain, and Meara had teased Morio earlier, saying that it wouldn't dare do either such thing, given that it was Aislynn's special day.

He'd tucked Aislynn into his bed, and Meara had crawled up there, too, stroking Aislynn's hair and softly humming a tune that was vaguely familiar to him.

"What's that song?" he'd asked.

Meara smiled. "All the Pretty Little Horses," she replied softly without taking her gaze off the sleeping child. "My nanny used to sing it to me . . ."

Morio nodded and smiled, staring at Meara for a long heartbeat, struck by the complete sense of happiness in her expression as she watched her sister sleep.

By the time he'd finished his presentation, they'd both been sound asleep. Morio had stood there for the longest time, watching them. Meara had her arms wrapped around the girl, who was cuddled close against her sister, and both had the sweetest hints of smiles on their faces that Morio had been loath to stir them. In the end, he'd carefully crawled into bed, curling himself around Meara and laying a protective arm over both her and Aislynn where he'd fallen asleep almost instantly.

He had woken up this morning with a little girl standing beside the bed, staring at him with her stuffed dog—she'd decided that the dog's name was Rover, and that the pink animal was a boy—clutched to her chest and one of his ears locked firmly but gently in her free hand, staring at him with such intense concentration that he'd blinked a few times before he'd managed a smile.

"Morning, Aislynn," he said.

“I’m three,” she announced solemnly, as though to explain her actions by stating her sudden change in age.

“So you are,” he agreed, his smile widening as Meara yawned and snuggled closer. “Happy birthday.”

“I got a new dress,” Aislynn said, crawling back onto the bed and over Morio to ferret her way between Meara and him. “Meawa . . . it’s my birthda-a-ay,” she half-sang, “I get presents no-o-ow . . .”

Meara laughed and sat up, sparing a moment to ruffle her sister’s downy hair. “You do . . . absolutely . . . Let’s go get dressed, all right?”

Aislynn bobbed her head once in agreement before scrambling off the bed once more and lifting the long hem of her nightgown as she dashed out of the room.

“Is the sun up yet?” Morio asked, arching an eyebrow and slowly shaking his head.

Meara turned to look outside and giggled. “Yes . . . just barely . . .”

Morio groaned but sat up, too, grabbing Meara around the waist and giving her a sound kiss; her first of the new day . . .

“You’re going to make her sick,” Meara intoned from her place under the still-barren tree.

“Nah, she loves it,” he assured her.

“More!” Aislynn demanded, bouncing up and down in Morio’s arms.

He laughed, tossing her up into the air only to catch her moments later. “See?”

Meara shook her head but smiled. “I’m going to fetch her cake.”

“Cake!” Aislynn hollered, holding up her stuffed dog by his overstuffed paws. “Rover wants cake, too!”

Morio grinned as Meara headed inside. “Rover, huh? Why’d you name the dog ‘Rover’? He’s pink . . . like a *girl* . . .”

Aislynn giggled and wrapped her arms around Morio’s neck, letting her forehead rest against his shoulder. She was tiny—so tiny, and not for the first time, Morio had to wonder if telling Meara’s father really was worth it, in the end. If what Meara feared came to pass . . . where would that leave the little girl?

'It's not up to you anymore,' his youkai voice chided. 'Meara's made up her mind. You saw it yourself, didn't you? She's determined this time . . . It's now or never. If you don't let her tell him now, she'll end up mated to that damn bastard, and then where the hell will we be . . .?'

"Aislynn," he said suddenly, nodding toward the dog clutched firmly in her arms.

"Yeah?"

"If you ever need Meara or me, you can always come to us, okay?"

She nodded though he didn't delude himself into trying to believe that she really understood what he was saying.

"The black thread looks funny, don't you think?" he asked, fingering the jagged stitches he'd used to close up the tear in the animal's seam.

"It's a stripe," Aislynn said.

"Yeah," he agreed. "A stripe . . . Don't forget it's there, okay?"

Aislynn nodded. "Okay . . ."

Morio sighed. Shifting his gaze around the quiet gardens, he couldn't help the slight shake of his head as he took in the grim visage of the old graying stone castle. Though the place had been completely modernized somewhere along the way, the absolute foreboding of the structure, itself, made him wonder just why anyone would want to live in such a place as this. High turrets accented the thick stone walls . . . tall parapets where the ancient wars between the clans were waged . . . Even the lead-glass windows that sparkled in the early afternoon sunshine were disturbingly empty. He'd noticed that the MacDonnough family didn't seem to hold much stock in ambient touches, such as curtains, aside from the simple sheet-like damask treatments draped over the top of the gleaming brass curtain rods. Everything about the castle bespoke a rigidity that made the place seem that much more unwelcoming. After the casual home where he'd spent his childhood, it was a stark and painful reminder of a childhood that was spent behind locked doors, alone . . . always alone . . .

He'd promised that Meara would never be alone again, hadn't he? That wasn't the trouble; not at all. The idea of leaving Aislynn to blunder her way through the same sort of existence bothered Morio more than he cared to think about or admit. This place, this castle—this fortress . . . it wasn't a place to raise children . . .

A flicker of white in one of the upper windows caught his eye, and he stopped, absently stooping down to set Aislynn on her feet. If he believed in ghosts, he might have sworn that was what he'd

seen. Shaking his head to dispel the fanciful thought from his mind, he narrowed his gaze on the window. The flutter of white came again, and he frowned.

“Gathering wool, are you?”

Morio grunted and glanced at Meara as she passed with a tray that held the cake as well as delicate white bone china plates, tiny silver forks, along with tall, frothy glasses of lemonade and crisp white linen napkins.

“I thought I saw something . . . in that window . . .”

Meara glanced over and followed the direction of his gaze as she stepped up beside him and wrapped her arms around his. “Hmm . . . those are Mother’s rooms.”

“Your mother.”

“Yes . . .”

Morio shook his head, unable to comprehend the odd quiet, the undertone of sadness, in Meara’s voice. “Doesn’t she ever come down here?”

Meara sighed. “No . . . Aislynn . . . she was born in there . . . for all I know, I was, too.”

She lived in the eastern turret of the castle? A strange sense of horrified fascination crept up Morio’s spine. What kind of woman was she, to confine herself like that; never to come out to see the world; never to spend time with her children? Maybe his mother wasn’t exactly conventional, but she’d always been there with a hug or to tousle his hair . . . What had Meara had? What would Aislynn have if Meara wasn’t there for her?

It was that question that spurred Morio on; that burning question that made him move his feet; to stride toward the imposing edifice of the castle. Meara called after him, but he didn’t stop. The sound of Aislynn’s laughter drifted to him, and he grimaced. He wasn’t certain what he thought he could accomplish, but he had to try, didn’t he?

Striding down the meandering hallways, he veered down seemingly endless corridors in search of the eastern turret. The sparse staff that he passed paused only long enough to spare him curious glances, and though he could have asked any of them for directions, he didn’t. Had any of them ever seen the elusive lady of the manor? He had to wonder, didn’t he . . .?

Stopping abruptly outside a nondescript door, he stared at it for a long moment before hesitantly lifting his fist to knock. No one answered. He wasn’t sure he had actually expected anyone to. All the same, he couldn’t help but wonder just what the woman inside was really like . . .

Meara's mother.

He knocked again, a little harder this time. Determination set in, and he couldn't help the strange sense of urgency he felt. For reasons he didn't quite understand, one thing was clear. He had to meet this woman, this mystery.

A third knock availed him nothing, and he scowled for a moment before slowly reaching for the shining brass knob.

Turning the handle and pushing it open, he peered inside with a scowl. "Hello?" he called into the empty receiving chamber. Devoid of even the basest of comforts, the room seemed stark, cold. *'Surely the rest of the suite can't be this bad,'* he thought as his frown deepened. *'How could anyone live like this . . .?'*

He got no response and nearly turned to leave. A soft clatter, little more than a dull thump, sounded above him, and he strode inside, letting the door close behind him with a small click. Passing through the antechamber as he headed toward the stairway, his footfalls resounded like the report of a rifle in the stillness. The old stone steps were steep, winding around the turret onto another level much like the one below—cold and empty . . . a desolate place . . .

The third landing ended abruptly at another plain wooden door. Morio could hear someone shuffling about inside, and he knocked on that one, too.

"Come in," the soft voice called out, muffled but discernible. The voice sounded much like Meara's, and Morio had to grit his teeth, unaccountably worried about the woman he'd find on the other side of the door.

'Don't be stupid, baka,' he told himself sternly. *'It's Meara's mother . . . just her mother . . . don't read more into it than that . . .'*

Still, it took a moment before he gathered his wits enough to reach for the handle. The brass lever gave under his hand with ease, and he blinked for a moment as the brightness of sunshine filtering through the myriad of windows in the circular room engulfed him. It wasn't a bedroom; more like a small living room—small by the castle's standards, anyway, and this room was quite comfortably appointed. Delicate yet comfortable looking chairs . . . a chaise lounge . . . a richly upholstered Victorian-style settee . . .

Beautiful paintings adored the walls. One of them looked like it might have been painted by his uncle, Cain Zelig . . . elegant statues of marble decorated occasional tables around the chamber, and in the midst of it all was a tiny slip of a woman; a dark haired beauty with the deepest, most soulful brown eyes . . .

“Who are you?” she asked, her eyes flitting over him but not actually seeing him.

“Hello,” he greeted, bowing low in deference to the woman; his would-be mother-in-law. “My name is Morio. Morio Izayoi.”

“Izayoi . . .?” she repeated, fine lines appearing between her eyebrows as she pondered the name he’d given.

“You are Meara’s mother . . . Aislynn’s mother . . .”

A vaguely confused expression crossed her features, and she shook her head just a little. “Meara . . .? My Meara . . . Today is her birthday, isn’t it?”

Morio frowned. “No, my lady . . . today is Aislynn’s birthday.”

A sudden laugh rippled out of her, and she waved a hand, fluttered her fingers in blatant dismissal. “Meara loves cake . . . Did you buy her the cream cake she loves so, Ian?”

Morio shook his head, unable to grasp the madness that surged around him, thick in the woman’s youki. “Would you come out and see her? Wish her happy birthday?” he found himself asking, unsure where the words had come from.

“O-o-outside?” she stammered, her laughter dying as a look akin to fear surfaced on her countenance.

“Just for awhile,” he said softly, slowly reaching out to her, offering her his hand.

A thousand emotions rippled over her features; a million thoughts, none of them solid. She seemed to be completely unsure, and yet there was a certain gravity in her gaze when she finally looked at him. “You . . . you’ll stay with me? You won’t leave me?”

“I . . . I won’t leave you outside,” Morio replied.

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Meara looked up when Morio finally reemerged from the mansion only to do a double-take when she saw the waif of a woman he led by the hand. Clinging to his arm with her free hand, her gaze darting hither and yon as though she expected someone or something to jump out at her, Alesia

Bellerophon MacDonnough seemed to want to run away yet she didn't though she hung onto Morio as though her very life depended upon it.

"M-mother . . .?" Meara said quietly as she shook her head in silent question.

Morio smiled. "She thought she'd come out and wish Aislynn a happy birthday," he replied.

"She is three this year," Alesia said, her gaze finally coming to rest on Meara. "Where is my girl?"

Meara stared at her mother for a long second before slowly turning and clapping her hands.

"Aislynn! Come here," she called.

Aislynn stopped chasing the bird and skipped over, her gaze steady as she glanced from her sister to her mother and back again. "Mama . . .?"

"Happy birthday," Alesia said in a vague sort of way.

"You came down to have cake?" Aislynn asked carefully.

"Cake," Alesia echoed. "Yes, cake . . ."

Morio led the way to the table while Meara stood dumbly, unable to do more than watch as Morio helped Alesia into a chair.

"Girl," Alesia called, her eyes settling on Meara. "I should like a blanket, if you please."

Meara frowned but nodded, turning to head back inside to find a light blanket for her mother. '*Girl . . .?*' she wondered. '*How did Morio talk her into coming outside . . .?*'

She shook her head as she opened a small closet near the back door. Pulling down the softest wool blanket off the shelf, she gave a mental shrug, pausing to gaze out the glass door before heading back outside once more. Aislynn was handing Alesia a delicate white flower—one of the first of the uncommonly early spring, and she knew. Morio hadn't coaxed Alesia out of the house for her, had he? He'd done it in hopes that Alesia would spend more time with Aislynn . . .

He was a good man. She'd known that ever since the first moment she'd met Morio Izayoi. As frustrated as he might get with the given situation, he really did try, didn't he? He'd always tried to understand; to be supportive, and while she'd always felt as though she was giving him the short end of the stick, he'd tried not to make her feel worse for it, too.

The fleeting image of Aislynn, snuggled in Morio's lap, came back to her, and she smiled. She couldn't help it, could she? The girl had looked so comfortable, so reassured in the knowledge that

Morio wouldn't let anything bad happen to her that she couldn't really help it, could she? Cuddled there like the angel she really was, Aislynn's eyelashes lay, long and thick on her rounded pink cheeks . . . Aislynn had felt the true warmth, the generosity of love that she should have felt all the time. It was Morio's gift, wasn't it? The man didn't know how to be selfish. She'd seen it; his innate ability to give and give of himself; his spirit that reached out to everyone, drawing them near and holding them as close as he would his own family without really trying at all . . .

Meara sighed, pulling open the door and stepping back outside once more. Aislynn's laughter drifted to her. The girl was holding Morio's hand on one side and Alesia's hand on the other, dancing with the two of them in a small circle, and as she drew nearer, she heard the familiar sound of the child's nursery rhyme that Aislynn and Morio chanted: Aislynn's voice as clear as a bell; Morio's pitifully off-key though she had to give him points for trying.

*'Ring around a rosy,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down.'*

With that, Aislynn let go, flopping down in the sparse grass as a shriek of laughter swelled in her and burst. Morio leaned down to help her to her feet once more, and the dance resumed.

Catching sight of Meara, Morio grinned and stopped, letting go of Aislynn's hand and reaching out to her. Meara set the blanket aside and ran over, slipping into the circle, taking Morio and Aislynn's hands as she blinked quickly, willing away the unsettling moisture that blurred her vision. They sang the song once more, Aislynn's laughter filling the air as she and Meara dropped to the ground. Morio laughed softly as she got to her feet, pausing just for a moment to brush off Aislynn's neat white dress.

A foreign sound filled Meara's ears, and she stopped still, listening. Alesia was watching Aislynn—really watching her—looking at the child as though she were really seeing her—and she was smiling. The smile trembled like a new leaf in an early spring wind, but it stayed as the softest chimes of laughter ebbed from her, warming Meara through and through, and she realized with a startled glance that she'd never, ever heard her mother laugh before . . .

"I can show you my rocks!" Aislynn announced proudly, letting go of Meara's hand and grasping Alesia's arm with a gentle but insistent tug.

Alesia looked somewhat alarmed for a moment, glancing at Morio as though she were afraid to let him go. He smiled and nodded. "I'll be right here," he said.

She nodded, too, finally letting go of Morio's hand and following Aislynn across the garden to the small stone bench where Meara knew Aislynn hid a little box with her favorite rocks—pretty ones she'd discovered on her own solitary adventures around the estate.

“How did you get her to come outside?” Meara asked softly, smiling as Aislynn spoke in rather animated fashion to the mother she'd only just met.

Morio shrugged, waving when Alesia glanced back at him. The gesture seemed to lend her strength, and she smiled a little uncertainly. “I just asked her to . . . asked her if she'd come down and wish Aislynn a happy birthday.”

“I cannae believe it,” Meara whispered, shaking her head in wonder. “Is there anything you can't do, Morio Izayoi?”

He shrugged again as a rather embarrassed expression surfaced on his face. “There're lots of things I can't do, Meara,” he reminded her.

She shook her head. “I don't think so,” she said softly. “You . . . you amaze me.”

“It's nothing . . . I was just hoping that maybe your mother would spend some time with Aislynn . . . maybe see that it'd be okay to spend more time with her later on, too . . .”

Meara digested that in silence. She'd love for that to come to pass, wouldn't she? Then maybe she wouldn't feel so guilty at the prospect of leaving her dear sister alone in this place when the time came . . .

“It'll be all right, won't it?”

Morio's smile faltered, and Meara sighed. “I hope so,” he said, unable to muster the bravado to lie, she supposed.

“Are you sorry you met me yet?” she asked, only half teasing.

“Never,” he growled, a vehemence in his voice that took Meara by surprise. “Don't ever say damn stupid stuff like that, Meara. I'll *never* be sorry I met you.”

Still, she sighed and grimaced, unable to put a good face on it, even though that was what he wanted. “I would be if I were you.”

“Good thing you're not me, then,” he remarked rather stiffly though he tried to smile.

“Morio . . .”

He sighed, shaking his head and quickly rubbing his temple in an infinitely weary sort of way. "Meara . . . your mother . . . she's not . . . Do you think she . . .?"

"She's mad, isn't she?" Meara asked hesitantly.

Morio grimaced, slipping an arm around Meara's waist. He'd said once that Japanese weren't usually given to public displays of affection, but that he could make a few exceptions for her. She'd smiled at the time and tweaked his ear. "She thought . . . she thought I was your father even though I told her my name."

Meara nodded, leaning against Morio's arm as the full implications of his words sank in. "I don't think she's ever been completely sane . . . not since I've known her, anyway . . ."

"She seems to be having a good enough time," Morio added in a tone that Meara understood was an attempt at making her feel better.

"I can't believe you talked her out of her chambers," Meara mused once more as Aislynn crawled onto the bench beside Alesia with the little box of her treasured rocks in her arms. Smiling bashfully at her mother, the child methodically removed the intricately carved lid to reveal the stones she'd so painstakingly collected. Alesia smiled just a little. It was enough of a reward for Aislynn.

"She acted like she hadn't realized she was allowed to leave the tower," Morio said with a shake of his head.

"I don't remember having ever seen her come out of there," she confessed. "Maybe she forgot how."

"Well, she knows the way down to the garden now," Morio mused. "If she'll just do it . . ."

"She thought I was one of the staff," Meara said quietly, unable to brush aside the faint trace of upset that accompanied the realization.

Morio winced. "She keeps calling your sister 'Meara' . . . I don't think she's realized that you've grown up and that Aislynn exists at all . . ."

Meara digested that for a moment, heaving a sigh as she tried to ignore the feeling of hopelessness that welled inside her. "She'll . . . be all right, won't she . . .? Aislynn, I mean?"

Morio didn't answer right away as he took in the moment between mother and daughter, and something in his gaze made her sad . . . "Aislynn will be all right, too," he said.

Chapter Thirteen
The Split

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Saturday, March 4, 2062
6:45 p.m.

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“I think this was the single best birthday she’s ever had,” Meara said, twirling the delicate white blossom between her fingertips as she smiled sadly in the quiet of the early evening shadows. Sitting on a thick old bench swing suspended by rusted metal chains from the gaunt branches of a very old oak tree in the corner of the garden, she sighed as her smile widened, as the sadness in her gaze deepened.

“You think so?” Morio intoned lightly, kissing Meara’s forehead.

She nodded. “Yes, I do . . . I just wish Mother had stopped calling her ‘Meara’ . . .”

“It didn’t seem to bother Aislynn.”

“No, it didn’t . . . I think it was enough for her that Mother came out of her rooms.”

Morio sighed, feeling the underlying tension in Meara’s youki. She tried to hide it from him, but it didn’t do any good; not really. He knew her too well, was too in tune with her quiet introspection. She never had been able to hide her feelings from him . . . “What are you thinking about?” he prompted though he shouldn’t have. He’d be stupid not to know what was really on her mind.

“My father will be home tomorrow,” she replied. “Then I’ll tell him . . . about us . . .”

“Do you really believe he’ll take it as bad as all that?”

Meara shrugged and forced a thin smile. “I . . . I don’t know.”

He understood her concern, of course. She seemed to be convinced that he really was going to have a fit over the idea that Meara had chosen a hanyou as her mate, and as much as he’d learned about Ian MacDonnough over the years since they’d first gotten together, Morio had to admit that he agreed with her, on some level. Still, it was almost impossible to grasp the idea that a father—*any*

father—could really do that to his child. Mates were mates, and there wasn't anything anyone could do about it without adversely affecting them both. Surely MacDonnough wouldn't take that sort of risk with his daughter's life, would he? It'd be unnatural, and inasmuch as Morio knew that Meara really wasn't over-exaggerating about her father's disdain for hanyous, the fact of the matter was that Morio and Meara really were mates, in every sense of the word that mattered. All that was left to be done was to make it official, and if he had his druthers about it, that would be rectified soon enough, too.

Aislynn had fallen asleep on a bench, and Meara had carried her inside to finish her nap in the comfort of her room while Morio escorted Alesia back to the tower. The afternoon spent playing had been a little much for both mother and daughter, and Morio didn't doubt for a moment that Alesia was up in her rooms, likely sleeping, too.

Perhaps she wasn't able to discern the difference between Meara and Aislynn, but it was progress, wasn't it? Meara had said that she'd never seen her mother come out of her self-imposed prison, and that was enough to give Morio a skewed sense of hope. He had to believe that it had been a step in the right direction . . .

Meara sighed, leaning against Morio's shoulder as the gentle breeze stirred her hair. "You amaze me, Morio Izayoi," she said softly.

"Of course I do," he agreed with a wide grin. "I'm amazing, after all . . ."

She giggled. "You are."

"I am."

She sighed, leaning away to stare into his eyes, a peculiar light illuminating her gaze.

"What?" he asked gently, unable to comprehend just what she was thinking.

Meara shook her head. "I was wondering . . ."

"Wondering what?"

She shrugged. "What I did to deserve someone as wonderful as you."

"You make it sound like I'm a saint or something," he grumbled, cheeks pinking as he braced his feet against the ground and pushed.

"Maybe you are," she mused.

"I'm not," he argued, scowling at the ground as the breeze picked up just a little, carrying with it the smell of salt and the tang of the barest hint of rain. "You bring out the best in me."

"Do I?"

He nodded, slipping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close as she shivered slightly. "You do . . . If you're cold, we can go inside."

She shook her head, cuddling closer. "There's a storm coming, isn't there?"

"Yeah," he replied with a sigh, unsure if he was talking strictly about the weather; unsure if she was, for that matter.

"Tell me about Japan?" she coaxed.

He smiled, understanding her unspoken need to distract herself from things that she'd rather not dwell on. "Japan . . . what do you want to know?"

She shrugged, twining her fingers together with his, staring at their clasped hands with a thoughtful frown. "Tell me about your grandfather's forest? That's where your house is, right?"

"*Our* house," he corrected her, "and yes, InuYasha's Forest . . . It's always been known as InuYasha's Forest."

"You said it isn't a big house, didn't you?"

"Not really . . . of course, everything looks small after seeing this place."

Meara made a face. "I don't mind small . . . is it as cozy as the cottage?"

"Cozy? I'd hardly call the cottage 'cozy' . . . cramped is more like it."

She shook her head. "Why'd you buy it if you think it's too small?"

"It was close to campus . . . It wasn't expensive . . . and I suppose it's kind of . . . what's the word? Quaint . . ."

"So your house in the forest is larger than the cottage?"

"Four bedrooms, three bathrooms . . . overlooks the pond in the back yard . . . next to my uncle's house . . ."

“Your uncle?”

Morio nodded. “Technically he’s my uncle, but he’s my age . . . a year or so older than me—about a year and a half, really . . .”

“Why so close?”

Shrugging, he kissed Meara’s knuckles and sighed. “Well . . . he’s my best friend, for starters . . . that’s not the only reason . . . Mikio tends to have . . . spells . . . My father asked me to stay close to him because Mikio hates it when everyone fusses over him.”

Meara sighed, snuggling closer against Morio’s side. “I can’t wait to see it.”

“I can’t wait to show it to you.”

“I’m glad you came with me this weekend,” she mused quietly, lifting her gaze to meet his. The waning light glowed softly behind the mellow brightness in her stare, capturing the incoming clouds as the wind blew a little colder. Shivering slightly, she adjusted the thick woolen shawl she’d thrown over her shoulders.

“Me, too,” he allowed quietly.

Meara’s smile widened though her gaze remained a little sad, and she shook her head slowly. She was thinking about the coming day, wasn’t she? Thinking about telling her father about them . . .

She sighed softly, leaning against Morio just a little more, as though she were trying to draw some of his strength into herself, to make it her own. The wind picked up, the bitter edge bringing with it the salt of the ocean in the distance. Two fat flakes of snow drifted down, settling in Meara’s hair only to melt in silence, and he had to wonder if she could hear the beat of his heart in the stillness. The descending night darkened the depths of her gaze, as gentle as the wind, as turbulent as the sea. She tilted her head back, staring up at him through those mysterious silvery eyes, speaking a thousand thoughts in a fleeting few seconds; unspoken promises, unwavering resolve . . .

Kissing her gently, letting his lips press against the warmth of her, he sighed softly as the edges of his resolve unraveled. Touch and sensation spiraled through him as she leaned in closer. It felt like this every time they touched; every time they kissed, didn’t it? The bond that was so strong offered both reassurance and comfort even as her lips opened under his. Slipping his arms around her, he sheltered her against the rising gale, held her to him, unable to let her go.

“I love you,” she whispered time and again between kisses. “I love you . . .”

“I love you, too,” he murmured, eyes closed, lips brushing over her eyelids, over her cheeks as she cuddled against him. “It’ll be okay, Meara. You’ll see.”

Her only answer was the softest sigh, the barely perceptible tightening of her fists against his chest. He didn’t know whether or not she believed him, but he hoped . . . Kami, he hoped . . .

“What is the meaning of this?”

Meara gasped, pushing against Morio as she stumbled to her feet, meeting the unmistakable hostility in her father’s formidable glower. She didn’t falter, but Morio could feel the unease in her aura. Ian MacDonnough was home early, and finding them kissing was probably not the best setup . . .

“Lord MacDonnough,” Morio began.

Ian’s icy glare flicked over Morio before dismissing him completely. “You would do well to halt your foul mouth, hanyou,” he bit out coldly.

“F-father,” Meara forced herself to say. “H-how was your trip?”

If Ian heard Meara’s question, he ignored it. The absolute bitterness in his stance, in his very youki, filling the garden with a venomous malice.

“It’s an honor to meet you, Lord MacDonnough.”

“Izayoi . . . Ah . . . kin of the hanyou of legend.”

“InuYasha is my grandfather . . .”

Morio grimaced. He’d sensed it, himself, hadn’t he? The absolute loathing in the man’s youki had been palpable. Straightening his back as he got to his feet, he didn’t blink as he met the man’s hostile gaze, the burning light of hatred, of absolute loathing, he slipped an arm around Meara’s waist, offering her a measure of unvoiced support, allowing his stance to speak louder than words.

“What is the meaning of this, Meara?” Ian demanded once more. “Speak.”

Meara flinched but stood her ground. “I meant to tell you, Father,” she began slowly. “Morio and I . . . we’re engaged.”

Dead silence met Meara’s announcement. The ominous threat in the air drew Morio forward, and he stepped between Meara and Ian—an unvoiced declaration that he wasn’t backing down, that he would protect Meara, even from her father.

“This you will not do, Meara,” Ian asserted, his voice low, tinged with a rage that mingled with the rising whirl of bitter cold wind. “You will be mated to Paul Gregory. End of discussion.”

Morio’s growl was cut short by the gentle touch of Meara’s hand on the small of his back. “N-no,” she forced herself to say, her voice trembling despite the underlying hint of resolve. “I want to be with Morio . . . he’s my . . . mate.”

Ian moved so quickly that Morio barely had time to react. Stepping neatly to the side, he tried to grasp Meara’s wrist. Morio knocked his hand away, unable to help himself as he bared his fangs in a menacing snarl. “Don’t touch her,” he bit out, able to maintain a semblance of calm that he was far from feeling.

Ian narrowed his cold gaze on Morio. “You will stay out of this, hanyou,” he growled.

Morio didn’t back down, carefully but quickly shoving Meara further behind his back as he stare, unblinking, at the irate youkai. “Hanyou or otherwise, I will protect Meara, even if that means I have to protect her from you.”

“You dare threaten me? The tai-youkai?”

Morio shook his head. “I didn’t say anything about the tai-youkai, Lord MacDonnough.”

Ian snorted derisively. “Really.”

“That’s right.”

“I love him,” Meara blurted, her quaking body pressing against Morio’s back as she tried to stand her ground. “I love him . . .”

Ian’s laugh was a cruel sound, a bitter rumble that colored the air with a foul loathing. “Love? There is no love, daughter of mine,” he retorted. “You will do what you must do. It’s your destiny.”

“Morio’s my destiny,” Meara replied quietly. “Father, please . . . *please* understand . . .”

Ian’s silver gaze glowed in the darkness, the light of hatred reflecting from the hollows of his face. His hand shot out, catching Meara’s wrist and dragging her away from Morio. He growled low, cracking his knuckles as Meara struggled against her father’s hold. So long as he had Meara in his grasp, there wasn’t really a thing Morio could do since he refused to put her in danger.

“You will not disgrace me, Meara,” Ian bit out, shaking her roughly though he didn’t take his eyes off Morio.

Meara couldn't contain the whimper that slipped from her as she stumbled, only to be jerked upright again. "I . . ."

"I will not have it," Ian growled, punctuating each word with a series of hard shakes. "Go inside."

"Let go of her," Morio snarled. "She doesn't want to be with that bastard! She's *my* mate, or haven't you heard? She belongs with me."

Ian's eyes flared, nostrils quivering as absolute hatred seethed from him, fouling the descending mist, bringing to mind the half-dormant memories of the stories he'd been told in his youth; the stories of Naraku and his deadly jyaki—as though Ian MacDonnough's raw loathing was enough to produce the anomaly, and maybe it was. "You have no say in what will be," Ian bit out, his gaze narrowing on Morio.

"The hell I don't," Morio countered. He could feel Meara's gaze on him; could sense her distress though he didn't look away from Ian to confirm it. He didn't have to, did he? He knew her better than he knew himself. "She is my mate. She'll be my mate, and you . . . you can accept it or not. I really don't give a bloody rotten damn."

Ian's jaw ticked as he glanced at his daughter before glowering at Morio once more. "You will bring shame on me, Meara?"

She shook her head miserably as the salt of her tears filled Morio's nose. "No, Father . . . but I . . ."

"Then you will not speak of this anymore."

"Meara . . ." Morio began, taking a step toward her but stopping abruptly when Ian's hand tightened around Meara's wrist, drawing a little whimper from her as she blinked furiously to stave back her tears. A violent surge of impotent rage boiled deep inside, and Morio had never felt quite as inept as he did at that moment.

"He is worthless! Nothing more than a miserable abomination! You are *my* daughter, and you will do as I say!" Ian snarled.

Meara shook her head quickly, trying in vain to break the hold of her father's hand around her wrist. "He's my mate! I'll die without him!"

A mask of complete indifference slammed down on Ian's expression, precluding the anger—the hate—that ebbed and flowed from him. The coldness in his gaze intensified—the only real trace of emotion—and he drew his hand back to slap her.

Morio reacted before he could think, one burning thought racing through his head. Claws ripping through the air, he grunted in pure satisfaction as the arc of blood erupted from the tai-youkai's wrist, and he jerked away, shoving Meara back. She fell to her knees, screaming Morio's name as he planted himself between Meara and her father, his golden eyes daring the man to make good on the threats he was so good at dealing.

"You dare to raise your hand against me?" Ian growled, flicking his hand, droplets of blood splattering on the flagstone path under his feet.

"You will never hurt her again," Morio rumbled, his voice low, gravely, raw.

Ian's eyes narrowed the tiniest bit, the barest hint of his emotions glittering in his derisive gaze—a steely coldness in his otherwise stoic countenance. "Get out of here before I call security. They can deal with the likes of you."

Meara pushed herself to her feet, reaching out to grasp her father's hand as he strode toward the castle. "Wait, please! I'll go, but . . . may I say goodbye to Aislynn?"

Ian shook Meara off and kept moving. "You will never see my daughter again." Raising an accusing finger at Meara, his voice shook slightly, filled with unspent rage, then steadied as the burn behind his glower grew brighter. "You . . . you are dead to me. Dead."

"Father—"

"Leave here. If I must say it again, I will kill you, myself."

Smashing the back of her hand against her lips, Meara fell to her knees, her tears falling from her face, glowing in silver trails down her cheeks; as the snow started to fall in earnest, blanketing her hair in the downy whiteness.

In the distance, Morio could hear the tell-tale rise in the wind, could feel the auras of approaching youkai. Grasping Meara's shoulders, he pulled her to her feet. "Come on, Meara," he said, wishing that he dared to stop, if only to reassure her that everything really would be all right in the end. "We've got to get out of here."

Meara didn't respond. She was so lost in her own misery, Morio wasn't certain she could hear him at all. Grimacing, he scooped her up into his arms, sparing just a moment to kiss her forehead as she glowered at the cold stone edifice that had been her home for far too long. It didn't take long to sprint around the castle, absently thanking his luck that he'd left his car in the middle of the circular driveway. Digging the keys out of his pocket as Meara wept against his shoulder, Morio unlocked the doors without breaking his stride.

Chapter Fourteen
Full Circle

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Thursday, March 23, 2062
9:30 a.m.

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Tokyo, Japan
Thursday, March 23, 2062
5:30 p.m.

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Morio gritted his teeth and restrained the urge to slam the phone receiver down out of frustration. Drawing a deep breath meant to steady himself, he shook his head and willed his tightly-balled-up fist to relax. “So you’re saying that there isn’t a damn thing we can do.”

Silence greeted his question for several long seconds, and in his mind, Morio could see Sesshoumaru standing near the wall of windows that overlooked the back yard of the Inutaisho mansion. “I am sorry,” he finally said.

“Damn it! Why?”

“She is not being abused.”

Morio snorted indelicately and shot to his feet, prowling around the living room, dangerously close to losing what was left of his self-control. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he growled. “Maybe she’s not being physically abused, but that doesn’t mean shit, does it? Ian MacDonnough isn’t worthy of being called a father, and you know it!”

“What I do or do not know is not the issue here, Morio. Removing Ian’s daughter . . . I cannot justify that without proper provocation,” Sesshoumaru replied calmly.

“Proper provocation? What the hell does that mean? Just look at what he’s done to Meara if you need proof! Psychological damage is much worse than physical, don’t you think?”

Sesshoumaru sighed—an unusual sound from the Inu no Taisho. “As much as it bothers you, you must learn to let it go. She is in no danger, and as such, I will not interfere.”

Raking his hands through his hair, Morio couldn't help the savage growl that escaped him. “So you'll condemn her to live in a place like Nightsboro? She deserves better . . . *Meara* deserved better.”

“The implications are deep and wide, Morio. If I allowed the removal of the child, do you think that anyone would come out of it unscathed? Have you any idea how many hanyous live in Europe?”

Morio snorted. “Keh! What does that matter when—?”

“It matters,” Sesshoumaru cut in coldly. “Do you think even for a moment that Ian MacDonnough would not seek his revenge on those hanyous? He would, and then their blood would be on your hands . . . The fact of the matter is that Ian MacDonnough is as tainted as his father was fair. The integrity that used to be synonymous with the name has fallen to ruin, and all you can really hope for is that the next tai-youkai in the line will be better.”

Somehow Sesshoumaru's explanation did little to assuage the anger that roiled through Morio's very soul. “What good is the title of Inu no Taisho if you won't even lift a finger to help someone who is too small to help herself?”

Sesshoumaru didn't answer right away, and Morio knew deep down that his great-uncle didn't say anything for effect, and he didn't do anything unless there was no other way. It was just too much to bear, wasn't it? In the end . . . In the end *Meara* and *Aislynn* were the ones who would suffer . . .

Getting into the car and driving away from the castle was the hardest thing Morio had ever had to do. The image of Aislynn, alone in that upper window, haunted him, and Meara's quiet sobbing, her incoherent words babbled in the throes of grief had only exacerbated Morio's pain. 'If I had just taken Bas' advice; listened to Gunnar . . . If I'd just left Meara alone . . .'

But he hadn't believed that, either. If he'd never met her, she would have ended up mated to that bastard, wouldn't she? Then she'd have ended up just like her mother, and the idea of that—of watching helplessly as Meara's smiles faded . . . No, that wouldn't have been better; not at all.

In the days since the altercation, *Meara* had been withdrawn, pensive. She'd tried to drive out to her father's castle last weekend only to be turned away at the gates. Morio hadn't wanted her to go, but she couldn't be stopped, and when he'd offered to accompany her, she'd withdrawn just a little more from him.

She blamed him, didn't she? Somewhere in her mind, she knew that it was his fault, and while she told him that she loved him; that she'd be fine in a 'little while', he hadn't believed her.

"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?"

Bas' cryptic prediction echoed in his head, and Morio grimaced. He'd been right, hadn't he? Bas, the cousin who didn't know the first thing about women in general, had known that much, and Gunnar's words later; words that he'd wanted to believe were just another example of his jaded cousin's warped outlook, and yet . . . And yet they'd held true, hadn't they . . .?

"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."

Sesshoumaru's smooth voice cut through Morio's memories, and he clenched his jaw as the Inu no Taisho spoke. "I know you are frustrated, Morio, but understand there is nothing I can do. The child does not suffer mistreatment at her father's hands, and the only case for emotional abuse you have is one that would have to be dealt with by human authorities. You know the trouble that would cause. In the end, the cure would cause more damage than the ill. The European generals are not completely trustworthy in my mind, and I doubt they would act upon my suggestion to remand the child, especially to your custody."

"What the hell's wrong with being in my custody?" Morio snapped.

Sesshoumaru cleared his throat. "Nothing, per se. They would take issue with the idea of both of the tai-youkai's daughters—his only living issue—residing in Japan instead of in Europe."

"Damn it . . ."

"I am sorry."

Morio snorted, digging his claws into the wooden window frame. "Yeah, thanks for fucking nothing," he snarled, clicking the 'off' button on the remote handset and stalking over to drop it back on the charger once more. Logic told him that Sesshoumaru had valid points. Common sense insisted that he listen to reason. Unfortunately, logic and common sense weren't exactly high on Morio's list of viable emotions. He'd hoped that maybe there would be a way to keep Meara and save Aislynn, both . . .

There wasn't. As much as he'd love to be able to tell Meara that they'd be able to take Aislynn with them to Japan, it seemed like an impossible feat, and one that Morio would have given anything to

make happen. He hadn't told her that he was asking Sesshoumaru to intervene. He wasn't certain how she would react. Still he'd hoped, and now . . .

He sighed, a sudden wave of hopelessness crashing over him as he flopped into a chair. He'd spent so long telling himself that Meara wasn't going to have to lose a thing to be with him. He'd wanted to believe it . . .

He'd been wrong, and Meara . . .

The all too vivid memory of Aislynn, standing in the upper window, pounding against the glass with her fists, veiled in shadows, bathed in an unearthly glow from the hallway lights behind her . . . The chestnut hair, the stormy eyes so very much like Meara's . . . If it weren't for her, the situation wouldn't be as difficult as it was, would it?

Morio grimaced, jaw twitching as he gritted his teeth, as he dug his claws into the palms of his hands.

The price of their happiness . . .

Was it too high to ask Meara to pay?

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*:Edinburgh, Scotland, UK:
:Thursday, March 22, 2063:
:1:30 p.m.:*

:--*--*--*--*--*--:

Meara unlocked the door and pushed it open, dropping her knapsack on the floor with a heavy thump.

She crossed her arms over her chest, realizing absently that she didn't have to go looking around to know that Morio wasn't there. She couldn't feel any more than a lingering trace of his presence in the house. Maybe he got called in for an impromptu interview at one of the places he'd submitted his resume to.

She sighed, spotting the sheet of paper in the center of the counter, weighed down with a crystal bud vase with his floral offering of the day, a snowy white camellia. The edge of the note lifted and

curled at the behest of the gentle breeze filtering through the cracked window over the sink, and Meara uncrossed her arms as she wandered over to read the message.

‘Meara,

‘I had to run a few errands and drop off a project for class, but I’ll be home soon.

‘Your,

‘Morio.’

Heaving another sigh, she rubbed her red-rimmed eyes with a trembling hand. She was tired—exhausted, really. She hadn’t slept well since that fateful day, and even the comfort that Morio so readily offered her was of little solace in the end. The fitful sleep she had managed to get was perpetually interrupted by the sounds of a little girl’s sobs; the accusation inflicted behind a melodic little voice that always demanded to know why—*why*—Meara had abandoned her . . .

She winced. *‘Aislynn . . .’*

Morio hadn’t wanted her to drive out to Nightsboro last weekend. He’d begged her not to go, and when that failed, he’d demanded to go with her. In the end, she hadn’t let him, afraid that his presence would do nothing but upset her father, and while she had no intention of taking back her decision to be Morio’s mate, she’d desperately wanted just one last chance to say goodbye to Aislynn; to try to make the child understand that she wasn’t really being abandoned.

The curt knock on the door drew her attention, startled her enough that she pressed her hand against her chest in an effort to contain her racing heart. As she drew nearer to the door, a terrible sense of foreboding assailed her. She couldn’t sense the presence well enough to identify the visitor, but she had a feeling that it wasn’t someone she wanted to see . . .

Hand trembling as she reached for the handle, she swallowed hard and wondered exactly when Morio had written the note. *‘I . . . I wish you were here . . .’* she thought suddenly, dizzily. *‘Morio . . .’*

Gasping as she pulled the door open, she stepped back involuntarily, away from the menacing aura that surrounded Ian MacDonnough. He sniffed loudly, wrinkling his nose as Meara twisted the engagement ring—Morio’s ring—on her still shaking finger. “F-father,” she stammered, desperately trying to distance herself from the youkai who strode into the room with an air of careful

deliberation. The click of the door resounded like thunder in her ears, and she grasped the edge of the sofa in an effort to steady her rapidly unraveling nerves.

“This is not a social call, Meara,” he stated flatly, his gaze full of abject disdain as it flicked over the modest living room. “I’ve come to make a deal with you.”

“A . . . deal . . .?”

Ian turned his head slightly, pinning Meara with a cold glare. “Come home with me, and I shall forget this nonsense without prejudice. I will not force you to accept Paul as your mate, but you will not see that disgusting hanyou ever again. This is my offer.”

Meara shook her head, withdrawing another step as her eyes flared wide, incredulity writ in the depths of her eyes as she struggled to understand just what her father was saying. “That’s . . . no . . .”

The shift in Ian’s youki was obvious; sharp, cutting like the flash of a blade in the darkness. “You would still dare to defy me?”

“No, but . . . I don’t have a choice . . . Morio . . . He’s my mate—my *true* mate. I’d die without him.”

“Don’t be stupid. That law . . . it is an old wives’ tale. Mates are not forever. Nothing is forever. Do you think my life depends upon that of your pathetic excuse for a mother?” He narrowed his eyes as his lips drew back in a grotesque show of razor sharp fangs. “I raised you to be like me: strong, self-sufficient. You don’t need the likes of that worthless half-breed. Do not disgrace your father.”

A sudden laugh, incredulous, bitter, welled up inside Meara, spilling over into the silence of the cottage. “Raised me?” she repeated with a raised eyebrow, her laughter cutting off as abruptly as it had started. “Raised me? Please! You’ve never given a damn about me, and you don’t give one about Aislynn, either. Let me have her! Let me show her what a family is supposed to be. That would be my way of honoring you: to raise her to be a good, kind woman who knows how to love and be loved. Please, for Aislynn’s sake, I’m begging you . . . *please*.”

He narrowed his gaze on her coldly, and she’d known that he’d never agree, yet she still had to try . . . “And I have told you: no kin of mine will be subjected to a hanyou—least of all one that is nothing but a coward.”

“Morio is not a coward,” Meara shot back. “He’s a good, kind man. He loves me . . . and I love him.”

Ian's terse chuckle was cold, full of malice as he narrowed his eyes on his daughter. "If he was truly a man, he would have come to me long before now. He would have asked for my permission to pursue you instead of taking matters into his own hands."

"I asked him not to," she said. "I asked him to let me do this my way. He let me because he *is* a man. I won't leave him."

Ian nodded slowly, his eyes glossing over with a stoic sort of acceptance. "Then you force my hand."

Meara frowned as her father turned and strode toward the door, stopping with his hand poised on the handle as he turned his face enough to glower at her out of the corner of his eye. "Remember: whatever comes to pass is your own fault. Pity me for being a fool who raised a foolish daughter."

"What does that mean, Father?" she forced herself to ask.

Ian turned back toward the door again, but made no move to open it. "Your approval is not necessary. If one should claim you by force or otherwise, the result will be the same."

It took several minutes for the crux of Ian's words to sink in, and when they did, she gasped softly, collapsing onto the sofa as she stared in complete horror at the closed door. With a strangled cry, she got to her feet, stumbling over herself as she ran over, throwing her weight against the door as her trembling hands fumbled with the deadbolt lock. Her vision blurred as a sheen of tears glossed over her gaze, and she couldn't contain the whimper that escaped her as she jammed a clumsy finger against the keypad beside the door to set the security alarm.

'He . . . he wouldn't . . .' she tried to tell herself as she slid to the floor, her body supported by the cool steel door that she knew wouldn't really be a decent defense against her father or Paul Gregory, should they come to see the plan to fruition. *'He couldn't . . . That'd be . . . rape . . .'*

"You will never see my daughter again. You . . . you are dead to me. Dead."

Meara grimaced, the pain in her chest surging deeper, hotter, thicker. "Father . . ." she mumbled, closing her eyes as she slumped forward, her face smashed against the floor.

"Leave here. If I must say it again, I will kill you, myself."

'He would . . . Yes, he would . . . He would send Paul or whomever he chooses . . . He'd do it because I couldn't stop him, but . . . unless . . .'

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:*Edinburgh, Scotland, UK:*
:*Thursday, March 22, 2063:*
:*8:30 p.m.:*

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

“I . . . I *can't* . . .”

Meara whimpered, her eyes puffy from the tears that just wouldn't stop. Morio flinched, claws dug deep into the wood floor as he stared down at Meara's precious face—pale in the hazy moonlight filtering through the window. She sniffled and closed her eyes as more tears shimmered in the fringe of her lashes, gathering at the corners of her eyes to trace a path into the darkness of her hair.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice ragged from the hours they'd spent arguing over this very thing.

Muscles taut, straining, Morio held himself over Meara, horrified at what she'd asked him to do; disgusted at his body that had responded despite the pungent aroma of her tears—tears that never should have been wrung from an already battered soul.

It had taken almost two hours to get Meara to say what Ian had threatened, and the admission had only come after a frantic phone call from Iona, Meara's old friend. Iona's boyfriend—a rat-youkai who worked for the French general—had overheard the warrants being issued. Morio and Meara were considered traitors against the European tai-youkai. He'd hurriedly purchased plane tickets—they'd be leaving tomorrow afternoon. All of this because of one man's hatred . . . Meara's father . . .

“He'll send Paul,” Meara had babbled between sobs that racked her body. “He said that I didn't have to agree,” she went on. “If Paul claimed me . . .”

“The hell he will!” Morio snarled. “No, Meara . . . no.”

She winced, wiping her cheeks, her face pale, her eyes smudged with purple shadows. “But he can't, you know?” she squeaked, her emotion causing her voice to break. “He can't if we're already mated.”

He didn't want to. He couldn't, could he? Something like that was supposed to be beautiful. It was supposed to be the promise of a lifetime, not something done to escape a greater evil, and yet . . . and yet . . .

She gulped back her sobs, scooting toward him without rising to her feet. The determination in her expression—the scent of her tears that was too thick to ignore—and as much as Morio wanted to reassure her, he couldn't, could he? He couldn't tell her that everything would be all right. He'd made that promise one time too many, and in the end, he'd been wrong; so wrong . . .

And he'd watched, still as stone, powerless to stop her, wincing at the grotesqueness of her actions as she unfastened his jeans and jerked them down to his ankles. Taking him into her hands, she sucked him in deep as her tears fell, as they disappeared into the tangle of his pubic hair. Choking back sobs as she worked him, she refused to let up, and the longer she sat there, her head bobbing up and down in a solid rhythm, the faster her tears flowed; the more Morio cursed himself for giving in to what she wanted him to do.

Pulling away, wiping her lips with the back of her hand, she slowly, methodically stripped off her clothes before taking his hands and pulling him down. She sobbed quietly as she spread her legs, her knees bent as her feet rested against the floor.

'Kami, I . . . can't . . .' he muttered in his head as his body sank to his knees. *'I don't . . . not this way . . . no . . .'*

"He'll send Paul . . . He said that I didn't have to agree . . . If Paul claimed me . . ."

Muscles tense, his mind rebelling against the heat of passion that raged through him, tempered by the tears that fell like rain; by the sorrow so deep that it hurt Morio, too, he grimaced as the head of his penis slipped into her body.

He understood her feelings; her fear. She wanted—*needed*—the reassurance that no one really could come between them, didn't she? As much as she was hurting emotionally, he also realized that she wanted this—wanted to be his mate in every single way, and maybe it would ultimately help her to feel a little more secure despite the worry that plagued her. A fine sheen of sweat broke over his forehead, dripped down his cheek as he struggled to hold his body in check. "Meara . . ."

She shook her head, squeezed her eyes closed as she lifted her hips to meet his, taking him in completely as a choked sob slipped from her, breaking Morio's heart as he closed his eyes against the vision of the woman he loved more than life, deep in the throes of her own agony, her own brand of hell.

The best he could offer was a quick mating designed to get the vile task out of the way so that he could try to comfort her, so that she might really believe his half-hearted reassurances.

Grunting as he thrust in her, he threw his head back, grimacing as the crack in his soul widened. He hated himself for what he was doing. It sickened him that Ian MacDonnough would be monster enough to force it to be this way. Of every thought he'd ever had of claiming his mate, he'd never in his wildest dreams ever thought that it would be akin to dying. He could feel his climax drawing closer, couldn't ignore the tightening sensation in his balls, in his muscles. His heart beat so hard that he thought it might burst, and he let out a ragged moan as the first wave of his orgasm crashed down on him.

Meara's sobs mingled with Morio's harsh attempts to draw breaths, and he collapsed on her, struggling against the realization—against the knowledge of what he'd just done. He hated himself. He hated Ian, and he hated Paul, but maybe in some small way, he hated Meara for asking him to do the impossible, too.

Rolling over onto his back, he felt himself slip out of Meara and winced, trying to brush aside the gnawing sense that he'd somehow betrayed Meara as he reached for her and pulled her into his arms. She buried her face against his chest, sobbing even harder than she had been before. He sighed and squeezed his eyes closed, moving his hands to stroke her hair without giving thought to what he was doing. "I'm sorry, Meara," he murmured. "Kami . . . I never . . . I never wanted it to be like that . . ."

She sniffled and tried to lean away, her tears falling on his damp skin. "Now they can't do anything, right? They can't separate us or . . ."

Morio frowned, unable to meet her gaze as a violent flush stained his skin. He was ashamed, wasn't he? Ashamed of his own actions, no matter what the benefit, no matter what the outcome. '*Hate me, Meara,*' he thought sadly, his eyes focusing on the crystal bud vase and the pristine white camellia. '*Curse me . . . hate me . . . send me to hell . . .*'

" . . . Hold me, Morio? Just . . . hold me?"

He sighed, swallowing the thick lump that choked him, drawing her into his arms, knowing that she was and always would be his ultimate weakness. When had he ever been able to tell her 'no' and mean it? Morio winced. '*Never . . . I never could . . . and I don't think I ever will be able to . . .*'

It seemed like forever until her sobs wound down to hiccups and stunted breathing. She slowly relaxed in his arms, and he didn't have to look to know that she was sleeping—fitful and restless but sleeping, nonetheless. Closing his eyes, he couldn't help but think of the first time they'd been together; of the beauty and wonder of discovery. She'd cried afterward when he'd told her that he loved her, and maybe now he truly understood why; maybe he could finally credit the absolute torment it had caused inside her when he'd asked her to follow her heart. He thought he'd understood at the time. He'd thought he knew it all. He'd believed that the promises he had made to her would be easy to keep, hadn't he?

Morio sighed and sat up, careful not to disturb Meara. Grabbing the afghan off the back of the sofa, he covered her up and trudged back toward the bedroom. He could pack for them both. He had to wonder if Meara even realized that they were leaving in less than twelve hours, and they could never come back. She'd been so upset that she likely hadn't heard him when he'd explained it to her earlier. Then again, maybe it was better that way.

Epilogue
The Fairy Tale

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK
Edinburgh Airport
Friday, March 24, 2062
11:45 a.m.

:--*--*--*--*--*--*--:

“Last call for passengers boarding Flight 898 from Edinburgh to London. I repeat: last call for Flight 898. Thank you.”

“That’s us,” Meara said as she stood up, smiling wanly despite the weariness in her drawn countenance.

Morio smiled, too, taking her hand and leading the way toward the boarding gate as he dug the tickets out of his pocket. Edinburgh to London to Bangkok to Tokyo . . . a hell of a long flight, but in the end, she’d be safe. “No regrets, right?”

Her smile widened though the barest hint of melancholy remained. “No regrets,” she agreed.

“She’ll find you one day,” Morio said, understanding the unvoiced concern.

Meara nodded, squeezing Morio’s hand—a thank you, he supposed, for being supportive. “She will, won’t she?”

“You’ll love Tokyo, you know,” he went on, trying to get her mind off her worries, “and my family . . . well, they’ll adore you almost as much as I do.”

Meara smiled again, her gaze slipping to the side, and she paused, taking one last, long look out the sheet glass windows at the only place she’d ever really known. “I’ll never see Scotland again, will I?”

“Never say never,” Morio said.

Meara sighed, dragging her gaze away before leaning up to kiss Morio’s cheek. “As long as I’m with you, I don’t think I’ll miss it.”

“I’ll make you smile every day. I promise,” Morio vowed.

Meara giggled softly—it was the first time he'd heard that particular sound since Aislynn's birthday, and the relief he felt . . . well, it was welcome. "You know . . . I've been meaning to tell you."

Morio stopped in line behind a dozen other last minute boarders. "Oh?"

She nodded, licking her lips with the tip of her pink tongue. "Yes."

"What's that?"

She shrugged, a light dusting of a blush rising on her cheeks as she demurely looked at the floor. "You were right in the beginning . . . 'Morio was right; Meara was wrong. Morio's a god among men, and Meara's just a lowly wench'."

He laughed. "Yeah . . . you just owe me another . . . oh, let's see . . . almost seven years of admitting that every day . . ."

"Don't push your luck, Morio Izayoi," she countered, wrinkling her nose in an absolutely adorable way.

"I'll always push my luck for you, Meara. I love you, and I wish . . ."

She sighed, lifting her fingers to press against his lips, silencing him. "No regrets, remember?"

Morio caught her hand, kissed her fingertips, letting her see every emotion she made him feel written in the depths of his gaze.

'Think of it this way: living in regret is the coward's way out. Vow to make her smile every day instead . . . the fairy tale can happen . . .'

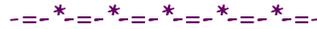
"The fairy tale is just beginning, Meara; I promise you."

"Fairy tale?"

Morio chuckled, pulling her close into a warm hug. "Yes, wench: the fairy tale . . . and one day, the princess will be rescued from the evil lord, and she'll be reunited with the sister that she loves."

She stared at him for several long moments, her eyes glossing over with a fine sheen of tears. "You really believe that, don't you?"

Morio nodded solemnly, refusing to believe, even for a moment, that it wasn't going to happen just like he saw it. "Yes, I do."



The front door creaked open with a mighty tug as the little girl pulled with all her strength, casting a fearful glance over her shoulder at the empty foyer behind her. Breathing a sigh of relief as she slipped out the door and let go of the handle, she shuffled to the edge of the great stone porch and down the steps onto the flagstone path that led to the huge circular driveway of the old manor.

Off to the left, she could still see the rising tendrils of smoke, and she could still smell the fumes of burning plastic and other man-made materials as the last of the bonfire was slowly dying away. She'd watched that fire all night from her darkened bedroom window as silent tears streamed down her rounded cheeks. All of her toys were gone, weren't they? Every single one that Meara had ever brought her, burned in the night along with every single thing that bore Meara's unmistakable scent that had been left behind . . .

The heels of her shining white leather Mary Janes clicked against the flagstone as she clenched her small fists around handfuls of the white lace overlay of her dress, and she stepped with an absolute purpose toward the driveway, glancing up at the sunny sky as the late March breeze rippled through her downy hair.

She stopped in the middle of the driveway, straightening her shoulders as she faced the east—faced the long and winding driveway, holding onto her index finger with her other hand, the darkest pink Cupid's bow lips mouthing words that held no sound.

“It's Friday, Meara . . . You'll be here today . . .”

Father had said that she wasn't coming back, hadn't he? Still, Aislynn knew in her heart that Meara wouldn't leave her alone like that. She wouldn't because they were sisters, and because Meara . . . Meara loved her.

The tiniest smile perked up the corners of her lips as Aislynn's arms dropped to her sides.

She wouldn't go back into the castle; not until Meara arrived . . .



~ *The End* ~



