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Vendetta

Dedicated to M ouF  
For all my gipes and grumbles that youve patiently listered to.  
Thank you

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I do not claim any rights to InuYasha or the characters associated with the anime/manga.  
Those rights belong to Rumiko Takahashi, et al  
I do offer my thanks to her for creating such vivid characters for me to terrorize.

# Purity 8 Vendetta

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## Prologue

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The sound of the bus' horn cut through the peaceful tranquility of the late spring afternoon in the small town. It was the last time he'd hear the sound for a few months since Divide County Elementary School had been officially dismissed for the summer, and with talk of a trip to Disney World in late July to look forward to, Kurt Drevin figured that this vacation was shaping up to be one of the best so far. The seven year-old had been promoted to the second grade with the distinction of having attained perfect attendance—all in all, no small feat since winters in Crosby, North Dakota, tended to be quite harsh. More than half of his class had been absent one week, victims of a particularly nasty strain of flu. Kurt hadn't been touched by it. His mother was fond of saying that it was all in his blood, but that was something that Kurt really didn't understand.

He hurried around the front of the bus and onto the sidewalk, scowling at a rip in the bright red shorts his mother had just bought for him. He hadn't meant to tear them, but sometimes it couldn't be helped when he was playing dodge ball during recess, and while he knew that his mother would likely scold him, he also knew that after she was finished, she'd ruffle his hair and give him a cookie from the never-empty jar on the counter in the bright and airy kitchen of the Drevin family's home . . .

“Bye, Kurt!” Billy Rotmore called, waving over his shoulder before Kurt turned down the alley—the short-cut to his back yard.

“See you!” Kurt yelled as he stooped to retrieve a short stick off the ground. “Come over if your mom says you can!”

Billy nodded and ran up the steps onto the wide porch that spanned the length of his house. He heard Billy’s front door slam moments later as the wail of sirens erupted in the distance.

Letting out a deep breath in a heavy gust that lifted the fringe of black bangs that framed his little face, Kurt reshouldered his backpack and trudged down the path to the high wood plank gate, letting the stick thump against the picket fence edging the neighbor’s yard. It fell from his fingers as he reached for the heavy iron handle of the gate and let out a soft little grunt as he bore down on it with all his weight. It opened with a loud groan that made him grimace, and he pulled it closed in case his dad decided to put Loopy, Kurt’s clumsy golden retriever puppy, out for a while. He frowned, cocking his head to the side as he scanned the empty yard. Caroline wasn’t outside, and that was strange. His three year-old sister loved to wait for him on sunny days, and sometimes she would sit on the swing with a cold Capri Sun packet, just for him. ‘*Stranger still,*’ he thought as he scowled at the emptiness of the screened-in patio door, ‘*where’s Loopy?*’

An odd ripple of foreboding ran up his spine, prickling like a thousand tiny needles along the nape of his neck, and he couldn’t help the slight tremor that he felt deep down when the empty swings started to sway. Maybe it was just the breeze that stirred them, but for reasons that he didn’t grasp, the movement seemed somehow eerie, like the whisper of ghosts that couldn’t be seen or touched. The air stilled abruptly, and Kurt swung around, scanning the area with a thoughtful scowl. He couldn’t figure out why he thought it, but he knew—just *knew*—that something wasn’t right. The trees, maybe, were a little too still; the air a little too empty . . . the only thing that Kurt could hear was the slowly increasing wail of distant sirens . . .

Letting his backpack fall from his shoulder, Kurt broke into a sprint, closing the distance to the back of the house and throwing open the door with a dull thud as it hit the white vinyl siding and snapped back. The air piston caught it, keeping it from slamming hard, and it clicked closed as Kurt stopped in his tracks, staring through the plate glass window in the door that led into the kitchen. From his vantage point, he could see directly through the kitchen and dining room into the living room at the front of the house, and what he saw . . .

Reddish brown streaks on the walls; splatters of the same color on the ceiling; the pristine white paint indelibly marked with the crimson stains . . . He could feel the stagnant aura that seemed to seep from the very edifice around him . . . He'd seen that color before, if he could only remember where or why. As the trepidation he'd been feeling surged and swelled, he reached for the doorknob but couldn't bring himself to turn it.

'*B . . . blood . . . ?*' he thought suddenly, his eyes flaring wide as he gaped at the stains. He'd tripped last summer, cracking his forehead against the corner of the wall that separated the kitchen from the living room and breaking the soft flesh against the unforgiving metal support. His blood had marred the stark white wall back then, and he'd stared at the smears with a sense of morbid curiosity as he touched the gauze covering the stitches for which he'd had to go to the emergency room.

Now . . .

Now there was no perverse urge to see it up close this time . . .

He couldn't see Caroline, but he could hear her terrified shrieks as a malevolent shadow moved off to the right. His father's voice was muffled by the door, but the words were clear enough, and despite the filter, Kurt could hear the unmistakable desperation, could sense the anguish that thickened his father's tone, "Don't kill her! *Please* don't kill her! For the love of God, don't—*God, no!*"

Kurt gripped the door knob so tightly that it rattled in his hand as Caroline's shriek was abruptly silenced. His father was sobbing, mumbling things that Kurt couldn't discern. Blood thundering painfully in his ears, his heart lodged in his throat, silencing a scream that he could feel but couldn't voice, he wanted to run inside, to help his father, to save his sister, and yet . . .

And yet he stood rooted to the spot, unable to run, unable to speak, unable to do more than watch as the monster—no, *two* monsters—lumbered into view. Kurt gasped, eyes widening as he gaped at the creatures—the *demons* . . . knobby horns atop their heads, they looked like the gross depictions of devils that he'd seen somewhere—he couldn't remember where at the moment. Razor sharp teeth protruding from grimacing maws, they had no lips, their faces forever caught in a permanent snarl, their mouths gaping, dripping, glistening hideously in the sunshine pouring through the windows, eyes red—*crimson*—and glowing with a perverse sense of grim enjoyment . . . Grotesquely long arms with spindly fingers . . . grayish skin that looked more like reptilian scales than real flesh . . . and hideous claws . . . In one of the beast's hands dangled the lifeless form of his baby sister—of Caroline. Kurt uttered a sound caught somewhere between a strangled cry and a choked sob.

'*Monsters . . . demons . . .*' he thought wildly, his chest constricting painfully. '*Monsters are real . . . demons . . .*'

He couldn't understand; it made absolutely no sense to him. Where had they come from, and why . . .? Why?

"*Why?*" he muttered, his voice little more than a squeaky whisper. He could feel the edge of panic wrapping around the edges of his psyche, but it was blunted, dulled, almost more frightening than the altered reality that he was observing through the window. As though he was no longer a part of himself, as if the only real part of him was floating

somewhere else—near enough to touch but far enough away to protect him from the understanding that what he was bearing witness to was absolutely real. “Daddy . . .”

His father stood, head bowed, staring at the floor, or maybe he had his eyes closed. The monster tossed Caroline away as the other creature raised his claws and brought them down with a terrible bellow, and Kurt watched in abject terror as his father’s blood sprayed, fanning through the air only to fall like a macabre rain as the demon’s claws sank into his chest. The beast growled and swung again, catching the right side of Kurt’s father’s head. The man never cried out as his blood spilled from him, as he staggered back from the blow, careening wildly: a puppet on invisible strings commanded by a drunken puppet master.

The monsters stood still for a moment. Kurt could hear the sirens coming closer despite the roar of his erratic pulse throbbing in his ears. They seemed undecided, as though they’d lost their focus. Seconds later, they grunted to each other and ran out the front door, moving faster than Kurt could credit, their forms little more than blurring streaks of washed-out color.

Kurt blinked, eyes burning though the tears he could taste wouldn’t come. He couldn’t move, couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe. The door opened with a soft groan, and he flinched, staring incredulously at his fingers wrapped tightly around the knob—fingers that he couldn’t stop from shaking, gripping the knob so tightly that his knuckles leached white. Fumbling with the door, he shoved it open and stumbled inside, whimpering quietly when the residual rage hit him. It hung thick in the air like a funeral pall, choking and cloying and malevolent.

He didn’t want to go in there; didn’t want to see—didn’t want to understand, and yet his feet carried him forward slowly, haltingly, gingerly. “D-daddy?” he whispered, his mind oddly numb, unable to fully comprehend what he saw, what he knew.

His mother was sprawled on the floor in front of the sofa, her chest ripped open, her face contorted in pain; frozen in time and indelibly etched into the haze of memory, precluding the memories of the mother he knew so well—the laughing mother who would tell him to make sure he wore his helmet when he went biking, the one who tousled his hair and checked behind his ears after his bath. He took a hesitant step toward her then jerked back. Something deep down—a whispering voice, a warning, perhaps—told him that his mother wouldn't have ever wanted him to see her that way. 'Mom . . .'

Caroline lay nearby, folded at an odd angle, her head nearly severed from her body, her hand still wrapped tightly around the arm of her favorite doll; the grisly tableaux laid out before him like the roiling remnants of an inescapable nightmare. Golden curls stained in blood, her eyes were still open, staring at him in an accusing way, demanding to know why he wasn't dead, too. Shaking his head and swallowing hard, he forced himself to look away as a strangled scream welled up inside him but wouldn't come out. In his head, he could still hear her laughter as she teased him and followed him all over the place, and he wasn't sure why, but all he could discern was her scream over and over again, ringing in his ears like a fell wind.

Stumbling back, shaking his head in a pathetic effort to challenge the knowledge that couldn't be denied, his feet bumped against something, and he glanced down. Loopy, his beloved puppy . . . mauled so badly that all he could discern was the color of one patch of golden fur. One of the pup's legs was missing, the jagged edge of bone glistening in a twisted mass of tendon and muscle, and her mouth was open, spilling grayish-pink—*something*—and blackened blood all over the floor beneath her.

Kurt leaned over quickly, pitifully heaving so hard that his chest ached, his vomit furthering the thickened stench of death that seeped into his very being. He closed his eyes and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, struggling to breathe, to think . . . struggling to figure out just what he was supposed to do.

A wet gurgle drew his attention, and slowly, hesitantly, he opened his eyes, turning his head to the side, gazing in shock at his father.

“K-Kurt . . .” his father whispered, lifting his trembling hand for a moment.

“Daddy!” Kurt yelped, scooting across the floor to his side, trying to ignore the oddly misshapen contour of his father’s face. “Daddy . . . the monsters—monsters . . . *monsters*,” he babbled as a thick sob choked him.

He reached out unsteadily, trembling as he groped for Kurt. Fingers already being leeches of warmth, he somehow managed to latch onto Kurt’s hand. “Don’t tell,” his father said, his eyes strangely clear, uncannily bright as he stared at Kurt as though he were willing his son to understand this awful thing. “Never . . . tell . . .”

“M-m-monsters,” Kurt repeated, clumsily clutching his father’s hand, his voice cracking, crumbling. Nothing made sense; nothing seemed real. Everything he saw, everything he knew was fuzzy around the edges like a surreal dream where demons lived—where those things that dwelled in the darkness rose up to strike man down. “Devils . . . demons . . .” he babbled, dashing the back of a shaking hand over his eyes.

His father shook his head, his breathing growing shallower, more rasping, and his grip on Kurt’s other hand tightened as a desperation seeped into his voice. “Don’t . . . tell . . . Live, Kurt . . . live . . .”

‘*Don’t tell? Don’t tell . . .?*’ Hysteria was rising thick and hard, hitting him squarely in the chest and squeezing with an invisible hand, tightening around him, choking him, as a little whimper spilled over. “*Monsters, Daddy; monsters . . .*”

His father’s breathing sounded wet, garbled as his chest cavity slowly filled with blood, as the brightness of his gaze flickered and faltered, and yet he smiled . . . He smiled . . .

“Daddy,” Kurt whimpered as the first cold prickles of true understanding began to penetrate his overwrought brain. “Daddy, don’t leave me . . .”

His father squeezed his eyes closed for a moment when the pain grew to be too much, and when he opened them again, he had trouble focusing on Kurt’s face, but his grip tightened, and a low sound borne of pure sadness slipped from him as a single tear fell. “You . . . live, Kurt . . . happy . . .”



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
**Monsters...demons...**

# Chapter 1

## Everyone's Darling

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October 30, 2070  
Thirty-One Years Later  
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Scowling at the slim-file in her hands, Samantha Izayoi tapped her claws against the hard plastic casing as she read through the information she'd been given. *'Jean-Pierre Benoit; viper-youkai . . .'*

"He's the one responsible for a rash of killings in and around Paris about seventy-five years ago. According to reports, he cut down fifteen children at a daycare facility then disappeared."

Glancing up from the file long enough to shake her head and flick her ears, Samantha narrowed her gaze on her cousin-in-law and employer as Sydney Zelig pushed herself onto the desktop and crossed her slender ankles, idly kicking them to and fro as she met and returned Samantha's look. "So if he was able to elude detection back then, why is he surfacing again now?"

Letting out a deep breath, Sydney's expression darkened considerably, her emerald green eyes glowing with pinpoints of angry light. "Why, indeed," she muttered.

"Calm down, kitty," Bas Zelig said as he leaned back on the desk beside his mate. "There's reason to believe that he hadn't actually disappeared—at least, not as well as he could have. The truth of it is that he was hanging out in Europe until recently, and, well, you know how that goes."

Sam snorted indelicately, snapping the slim-file closed as she shook her head again. “Since he killed humans, then it wasn’t a very big concern for the MacDonnough, you mean,” she reiterated, unable to completely repress the scorn in her tone.

“Well,” Bas said, obviously struggling for a semblance of objectivity, “Ian claims that he had more pressing concerns at the time—at least, that’s what Dad said. However, since Benoit was stupid enough to try to slip into the States . . .”

“Then that makes it a whole new ball game,” Sydnie finished when Bas trailed off.

Bas sighed but smiled wanly. “Something like that.”

“Doesn’t exactly sound like a youkai special crimes case,” Samantha remarked slowly.

Bas’ golden eyes narrowed slightly, but he didn’t look away. “You’re right; it’s not, but Dad had to dispatch all his hunters on that syndicate investigation, so he asked if I had anyone I could send.”

Samantha’s delicate eyebrows rose, disappearing under the thick fringe of silvery hair that framed her face, and she couldn’t help smiling at the pure chagrin evident in her cousin’s expression. “And you chose me?” she teased, unable to help herself.

Bas made a face and shook his head, leveling a no-nonsense glower at her. “Not really, no, but Dad had to call in some of my hunters, too, so you won by default.”

Repressing the urge to roll her eyes, Samantha pasted on a tolerant smile since the subject was a sore one, in her estimation.

No one in her family with the possible exception of Sydnie seemed to think that Samantha ought to put her years of training to use and become a youkai hunter; not one. Even her very open minded parents were against it from the start though at least her

father, Kichiro pretended to support her choice. Looking back now, she figured that it was more of a show of indulgence than actual approval on her father's part. She had a feeling that he believed that she would eventually change her mind and settle on a less violent line of work.

"Anyway, I trust you'll be careful," Bas went on, narrowing his eyes just a bit, enough to give away his understated concern that had waned over the past few years since she'd come to work for the youkai special crimes division.

She nodded and pushed herself to her feet. "You know I will," she remarked with a shake of her head. "Besides, you have bigger things to worry about, like that baby," she pointed out, leaning forward to rub Sydney's slightly protruding belly.

Sydney giggled, cheeks pinking in a happy display of absolute pleasure. "Just make sure you call when you're done," she said with an arched eyebrow.

"Of course," she said, hoping that they couldn't discern the thinness of the smile that surfaced on her face. "I always do."

Bas frowned as though he wanted to say something, pressing his lips together in a tight line, but he must have decided against it. Reaching back, he grabbed a plastic card off the desk and held it out to her. "Here are your funds," he said as she took the card. "Your flight leaves in about nine hours, and a courier will be by later to deliver your ticket."

"Okay," Samantha agreed as she headed for the door. Sparing a moment to offer a jaunty wave and a flashing smile, she couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief when she pulled the door closed behind her and stepped into the hallway.

She could understand everyone's concern, and she supposed that she could appreciate it on some level, as well. The trouble was that she'd been doing this for nearly two years,

and she knew that she could keep up with the best of them. The truth of it was that she was damn good at what she did, and she only wished that the rest of her family would acknowledge that, too.

“Oh, Samantha, I didn’t see you come in,” Connie Leadbetter, Gunnar Inutaisho’s personal secretary called as she stepped out of the hallway.

She paused and shot the secretary a smile. “Gunnar was probably barking at you,” she said.

Connie gave a deep belly laugh. “That sounds about right,” she agreed easily. “Heading out on an assignment?”

Offering a small nod, Samantha’s smile faltered just a little. “Yeah. It shouldn’t be a big deal.”

“That’s what they all say,” Connie commented, waving a hand as she lifted a steaming mug of coffee to her lips. “Between you and me, though, some of the guys who come in here regularly are a little shady in my estimation.”

Samantha laughed that off and reached for the knob. “I’ve thought that, myself,” she replied then waved. “I’ve got to get going, so keep Gunnar in line, will you?”

Connie’s laughter followed her out of the office, and Samantha heaved a heavy breath that lifted the fringe of silvery bangs that framed her face. Hurrying toward the metal door of the enclosed stairwell, she shook her head as she lightly ran down the steps.

It was strange, she figured, that Gunnar had hired a human secretary. He’d maintained that Connie had been the best choice, but Bas had given him hell for it, or so Samantha had heard. Because of that, the hunters that were employed by the youkai special crimes office were hidden under the disguise of clients who would come in to see Bas and Sydney

or Gunnar since it was deemed better to keep their association with the division as confidential as possible, and not simply because of Connie, either. Renegade youkai would undoubtedly love to get their hands on information such as the identities of the hunters. In fact, Samantha was the only one who actually frequented the office to receive her assignments, and only because Bas insisted on giving her the 'You'd-Better-Be-Careful' speech each and every time he sent her out . . .

"You'd think I was still just a pup," she muttered under her breath to no one in particular as her cheeks pinked at the prodding of her disgruntled thoughts.

*'That's not entirely fair,'* her youkai voice chided reasonably as Samantha pushed through the doors and into the lobby on the ground floor of the youkai special crimes building. *'Would you rather that no one cared about you at all?'*

A long sigh slipped from her as she stepped outside into the late October sunshine. The day was crisp but not quite cold despite the chill wind blowing off the Atlantic Ocean, and she closed her eyes for a moment, lifting her chin as she savored the invisible fingers of the breeze rippling through her hair. Being out of doors never ceased to calm her, no matter how badly frazzled her nerves were, and she could feel the irritation ebbing away as cleanly as waves receding from the shore. Feeling somewhat renewed, she took a step toward the nondescript white car parked in front of the building.

"Samantha!" Bas called, throwing open the door and leaning outside.

She stopped and whirled around to face him. "Yes?"

"Think fast," he said, tossing an unlabeled amber bottle at her.

She caught it and shook it, turning it over in her fingertips with a thoughtful frown. "What's this?"

Bas shrugged. "Scent-tabs," he said. "You said when you got back the last time that you were almost out, right?"

"Oh, yeah," she agreed, slipping the bottle into her pocket. "Thanks."

"No problem," he called after her. "Be careful."

She waved a hand over her shoulder as she stepped off the curb to skirt around the car. "I'll call when I'm finished," she assured him.

He nodded but remained silent as she got into her car, started the engine, and pulled onto the street.

If it weren't for Sydney, she wouldn't be a hunter, she supposed. She'd gone to her father's uncle, Sesshoumaru, the Inu no Taisho, to ask him for a job when she'd finished school only to be turned away. Sesshoumaru had maintained that she would have to talk to Toga but that he was quite certain that there was no need for more hunters in Japan, and when she'd approached Toga later, he'd pretty much echoed his father's sentiments.

She'd even asked her grandfather, the North American tai-youkai, and hadn't been at all surprised when he'd turned her down flat, too. As a matter of fact, she'd started pondering the idea of contacting other tai-youkai in hopes that someone might give her a chance when Sydney had called her.

*"Cain tells me you're looking for a job," the cat-youkai had said, her soft alto voice reminding Samantha of a purring feline.*

*"Grandpa did?" she blurted before she could stop herself.*

*Sydney laughed. "Actually, he said something about it to my puppy, but I overheard him. Is it true?"*

*Samantha frowned. "Sure, but I'm looking for work as a hunter."*

*"Sebastian said that you were trained by the same men who trained him?" Sydnie went on, ignoring Samantha's statement.*

*"Grandpa InuYasha and Uncle Ryomaru, you mean? Of course!"*

*"Good, good," Sydnie intoned, "and Mikio?"*

*She wrinkled her nose at the reminder since she wasn't particularly pleased about that part of it. She was hanyou, after all, and while she could appreciate her father's thoughts on the matter when he'd insisted that she learn how to use a firearm, she didn't want to use that knowledge unless she absolutely had to, either. Her uncle, Mikio had taught her how to fire guns, though, more for her father's peace of mind than for her own. "Yeah," she admitted slowly.*

*Sydnie uttered a low sound of approval. "Well, I could use a decent hunter who can use her head when necessary. Would you be interested?"*

*Samantha clutched her cell phone tight, blinking quickly as she tried to understand that she really was being offered a job—a real job—as a hunter. "Of course I am!" she blurted.*

*"Excellent! I don't know how soon you can be here, but I'd feel much better if you were able to come sooner than later. I hope that it won't be a problem . . ."*

And it hadn't been. Much to her parents' collective chagrin, she'd packed up her things that afternoon and had grabbed the first flight out of Tokyo, and while Bas had insisted that he test her skills in a mock-battle, he'd grudgingly given in when she managed to prove that she really could hold her own. She knew that he hadn't really fought her toe-to-toe, but he was forced to acknowledge her abilities, and that was more than enough, in her estimation. Aside from the oldest male members of the family like InuYasha and

Sesshoumaru and very likely Ryomaru and his own father, Cain, it was common knowledge that Bas, the next North American tai-youkai, was *the* force to be reckoned with when it came to fighting.

For the most part, she enjoyed her job. Well, maybe that wasn't the exact word she'd use, but it was close. It was more of a calling, she'd thought before. She felt compelled to do what she did. Protecting humans and youkai alike, she'd always felt as though what she was doing was important, and while she didn't particularly relish the idea of taking a life, she knew deep down that it was worth it in order to bring closure to people who had lost loved ones in inexplicable acts of violence.

Stopping at a light at the corner of Fox Street and Twenty-First, Samantha bit her lip as she scanned the surroundings with a critical eye. It was second nature, really. She'd learned early on in her training that a hunter always had to be fully aware of his or her surroundings or they wouldn't be alive very long. When Uncle Ryomaru had said that at the time, she'd thought he was being a little melodramatic, and maybe he was trying to scare her out of wanting to be a hunter, but regardless, she'd taken that lesson to heart.

The soft trill of the cell phone broke through Samantha's musings, and she tapped the blue intercom button on the dashboard beside the windshield wiper controls. "Hello?"

"How's my girl?" Kichiro Izayoi's warm voice greeted.

She smiled, the dimple in her right cheek flashing as she turned the corner. "Just fine," she assured him. "How are you and Mama?"

"Missing you, of course," he replied smoothly. "Don't suppose you've decided to come home for a visit any time soon?"

With a soft laugh, she shook her head. "Sorry, Papa," she apologized without sounding at all contrite. "I'm heading out on a job in a few hours."

She didn't miss Kichiro's sigh though he didn't say anything about it otherwise. "Your mother said to remind you that you've not been home for Christmas in the last two years," he pointed out.

She winced, her little white hanyou ears flattening for just a moment. "I'm sorry, Papa," she said again, this time sounding truly genuine. "I can't make any promises, but I'll try."

"I'll be more than happy to talk to Bas," he warned.

"That's hardly fair, you know," she remarked. "Just because I'm *related* to the boss isn't really a good reason to take advantage of it."

Kichiro grunted. "Everybody is entitled to a vacation every now and then," he reiterated.

Sam pulled into the driveway in front of the apartment building she called home. "I know, Papa," she assured him. "I'll talk to Bas and Sydnie when I get back; I promise. Besides, I *did* make it home both years for your birthday party."

"I'd hardly call a one day furlough a visit, Samantha," he reprimanded her gently.

"But I *did* make it," she quipped once more.

He heaved a sigh designed to let her know that he was going to be well beyond upset if she wasn't able to go home for the holiday this year, and she smiled. "I promise," she repeated solemnly.

"I'll tell your mother," he said.

Samantha grimaced since that, in her opinion, was hitting below the belt. If he did that—if he told Bellaniece Zelig Izayoi—that she was coming home for the holidays,

then she'd have to make sure that it happened. It wasn't that her mother was mean or anything of the sort. No, it just wasn't really an option to disappoint her, and Kichiro knew that, too. Bellaniece wasn't exactly the typical mother by any means, but she was always the first to hug her children when they came home from school, always right there when Samantha had a piano or dance recital. She was the kind of woman who would drop everything at a moment's notice to make sure that her children came first, and while Samantha had grown up with a stay-at-home father for the most part, it had made a huge impression on her whenever her mother somehow managed to juggle her schedule between an internship at one of the local hospitals in Tokyo and still make the time whenever Samantha asked her to.

"All right, Papa," she agreed as she slipped into the parking spot in front of her ground-floor apartment.

He chuckled. "Good, and do me a favor?"

Yanking on the emergency brake and killing the car's engine, she smiled wanly as she reached for the slim-file on the seat beside her. "What's that?"

"Call your mother when you get a chance. She worries about you."

"Of course, Papa," she said as she scooted out of the car and bumped the door closed with her hip. "Love you."

"You, too, babydoll."

Smiling as the line went dead, she clicked the phone off and dropped it into her pocket as she hurried up the walkway toward the staid door of the building. Kichiro had called her 'babydoll' for longer than she could remember. Her mother was fond of telling her that it was the first thing he'd said when he'd held her minutes after her birth, as he'd taken in Samantha's silvery tufts of flyaway hair, the tiny hanyou ears that were flattened against

her head. Bellaniece had said that Samantha was rosy and smooth and perfect, and that she'd stared up at her father in complete fascination as her sparkling blue eyes—her mother's eyes—slowly blinked in the brightness of the birthing room. "*She looks like a porcelain baby doll,*" he'd said with a tender smile. "My *babydoll* . . ."

She knew well enough that her parents' worry wasn't completely restricted to her. She'd overheard her mother often enough over the years as she fussed over Samantha's older sisters. It was a mother thing, she figured, and it came part and parcel with the years that passed, even after the children weren't children any longer. She'd seen the sad sort of smile that touched her mother's lips from time to time—the melancholy that was mingled with absolute love when she spoke of the daughters that had left home long before Samantha had.

In fact, she'd wondered more than once if it wasn't her sisters' leaving home that had prompted Bellaniece and Kichiro to have her. Her sister, Alexandra, was eighteen when Samantha was born, and Isabelle, the oldest, was twenty. She'd grown up as an only child, for the most part, and while she'd always known that both of her sisters adored her, she couldn't help but feel as though they would never truly see her as anything but their 'baby', and while she'd tried not to let Alexandra and Isabelle's uncommonly close bond bother her, she couldn't help but feel a little jealous of it, too. They were always like the best of friends, no matter how much time or space existed between them. Isabelle, after all, lived in Maine with her mate, Griffin—one of the three men that Samantha adored above all others. The surly and oftentimes gruff Kodiak bear-youkai was also one of the gentlest men she'd ever met, and while he'd grouch and turn a bright shade of red if anyone pointed that out, there wasn't a doubt in anyone's minds that he loved his mate and respected her family without question.

Alexandra, on the other hand, lived in Sydney, Australia, about three blocks from her long-time boyfriend and might-as-well-be-mate, John Troyer—quite possibly the most perfect man on earth, and Samantha wasn't the only one to think so, either. The male members of her family tended to refer to John as 'Mr. Perfect', and while it was meant to

be a playful nickname, it was entirely appropriate, too. He was completely in control of every given situation and could just as easily spar with Samantha's notorious grandfather, InuYasha as he could talk art for hours with her other grandfather, Cain Zelig. He watched sports with Bas whenever he was in the area, and he discussed youkai policy with Gunnar for hours on end. He even knew a hell of a lot about music—more than enough to earn Evan Zelig's overwhelming respect, and even Kichiro had been known to discuss his current research with John, too. He brought Alexandra flowers, took her to the nicest restaurants all over the world—when he could coax her into leaving her own research behind for a much-deserved vacation, that was—and basically treated Alexandra like a princess, and Samantha had harbored a crush on him ever since the first time she'd met him.

These days, though, she knew that it was more of a young girl's hero-worship than real love. Over the years, she'd learned how to differentiate between those feelings, and while she still adored both John and Griffin, she knew that they really weren't the ones for her, but she couldn't help but compare men to them, either. Unfortunately, that was the problem, wasn't it? She'd yet to meet a man who could measure up to John or Griffin, and if that wasn't bad enough, even if she did manage to find the one man who might be able to outshine those two, she sincerely doubted that she'd ever meet anyone who could hold a candle to her father . . . Well, if she was a betting kind of girl, she wouldn't like the odds; not at all . . .

Stopping outside the door of her apartment, Samantha pressed her thumb against the indentilock and waited. Seconds later, a soft beep announced that her print had been accepted, and the door opened with a click. Her stack heels clicked against the slate floor as she stepped inside, depositing the slim-file and her purse on the immaculate glass top of the small wrought iron stand nearby before reaching back to nudge the door closed with her elbow.

The LCD panel on the wall blinked to life as the apartment's computer system started up, running through a list of phone calls and received emails that she'd missed while she

was out. *'Nothing important,'* she decided as she tapped the screen to close the reminders, and she heaved a sigh as she turned away, checking her watch and breaking down the list of things that she needed to do before she got on the plane later.

Pulling the bottle of scent-tabs out of her pocket, she headed for the kitchen. It took a few hours for the tablets to take effect, after all, and she didn't like going to the airport with her real scent intact. Her grandfather had told her time and again during training that a youkai's scent was akin to their fingerprints and infinitely easier to identify. After her father had accidentally stumbled across the gene that controlled an individual's scent, it had become par for course for hunters to be issued scent-tabs before they left on a mission. The overall effect lasted for about seven days before another scent-tab had to be taken to prolong the effect. It helped to conceal them, and it helped to protect the hunters' families because it wasn't uncommon for a renegade youkai who felt as though his or her loved one was unjustly targeted to lash out at the hunter who had been charged with the task of taking care of the deviant youkai, in the first place.

She shook a small tablet out of the bottle and held onto it while she carefully filled a glass with tap water. Making a face at the chalky, bitter taste left behind by the scent-tab, she dumped the rest of the liquid down the drain and set the glass on a towel beside the sink to dry.

The next thing, of course, was to pack, and that never took very long. She wasn't going on a recreational trip, anyway, and whenever she was sent out on a job, she made a point of making sure that everything she needed fit into a carry-on bag. In fact, most often, she only bothered packing one change of clothes, minimal toiletries, and, of course, her gun. It could be a bit of a pain, but her family insisted that she carry it with her at all times, and while Samantha had been detained at the airport more than once as security checked and double checked her concealed weapon permit, she also had to admit, at least to herself, that the bother was ultimately worth the peace of mind that her family had in knowing that she was absolutely protected.

She'd also learned that, while she could take the gun with her, she was not allowed to carry ammunition with her in any capacity at all. Instead, she'd stop at a local gun shop on her way to the hotel before she even bothered to secure housing for the duration of her stay. If she didn't, there was a good chance that her family would flip out on her.

*'You're being harsh today, aren't you?'* her youkai voice spoke up.

Samantha wrinkled her nose and leaned against the wall as she bent down to pull off her boots, taking a moment to straighten them neatly before she straightened up and strode through the living room and down the hallway toward the bedroom. *'I'm not trying to, no,'* she replied defensively, pressing the flat switch beside the mirror fronted closet doors and tapping her claws against the smooth plastic as the door slowly slid open.

*'For not trying to, you're being awfully touchy.'*

Heaving a sigh, she shook her head and retrieved the utilitarian black leather carryon bag that looked more or less like a very large backpack.

She wasn't trying to be touchy. Shuffling toward the bed as she unzipped the bag and checked to make sure that she'd unpacked everything the last time she was sent out on an assignment, she bit her lip. She loved her family; of course she did, but there were times when their concern became a little stifling, and there were moments when she couldn't stand it, she supposed. That was natural, wasn't it? After all, every single one of them had voiced their concerns over her choice of profession at one time or another.

Even her renegade cousin, Evan had asked her if she was sure that hunting was something that she really wanted to do. As close to a big brother as she had, she had spent many a summer of her youth trailing after him when he'd come to Japan to learn how to fight. Back then, he'd ditched training as often as he could, preferring to hang out with Kichiro, who taught Evan how to play the piano. She was only three or so at the time, but she could remember Evan, who was nearly fourteen, sitting at the baby

grand piano with Kichiro, listening as her father played piece after piece. It was remarkable, her father had said later, just how quickly Evan had picked up on any song he heard. He played by ear—that's what Kichiro maintained. He'd said, too, that Evan had a gift for music. Samantha had simply thought that the songs that they played were beautiful.

She'd followed Evan around all summer like a puppy, she supposed. Thinking back now, she had to marvel at the patience he'd shown. She couldn't remember him ever grumbling at her or telling her to go away even though she had to have frustrated him. After all, how cool was it for a teenage boy to be toting around a toddler?

And maybe that was the real reason that she couldn't help but feel a little betrayed by his line of questioning. Coming from a man who thumbed his nose at convention with a cheesy grin on his face and a smart-ass remark on the tip of his tongue, she hadn't really thought that he, of all people, would be anything but supportive of what she thought was a perfectly logical choice.

The men in her family were well known for their compassion in dealing with humans. As tai-youkai, as legendary figures that were commonly regarded as heroes, they'd fought the vilest of evils, had passed on to their children and grandchildren the responsibility that they all took very seriously: the need to protect those who didn't possess the strength to do that for themselves. Her grandfather, InuYasha had fought to destroy the monster known as Naraku centuries ago, fought to protect Samantha's grandmother and their friends. After he'd traveled through the Bone Eater's Well to Grandma Kagome's time, he'd found his niche in working with children, starting a specialized and elite school on the outskirts of Tokyo near the shrine where Kagome had grown up—near InuYasha's Forest.

In the wake of his defection from Sengoku Jidai, the youkai had come up against another frightening menace; one that had ultimately led to her uncle, Sesshoumaru's rise to power. As the eldest son of the Inu no Taisho, Sesshoumaru had been recognized as

leader of them all in a time when they desperately needed someone to step forward; to bring the youkai together in a show of alliance against humans. Those same humans had discovered gunpowder, and that innovation had very nearly brought about the end of the youkai. In the simplest terms, youkai were faster, stronger, lived longer, possessed powers that humans feared, however even the mightiest of youkai were unable to outrun a bullet.

But it had taken a hideous act of violence to bring about the legendary edict that had come to dictate their lives since then. A youkai family was lured into a human village. The father, believing that if he helped humans fight against the lower youkai—the ones who could not hold even a semblance of a human-like form—had gone with them since he recognized the threat that the lower-youkai posed. The lower-youkai were animalistic than intellectual: incapable of cognizant thought, relying heavily on instinct and possessing far too much power to be viewed as anything but a menace. Because of that, the villagers had managed to lure the youkai as well as his family into the village where they had procured the assistance of a traveling monk who subdued the youkai with his barriers and Ofuda.

The family was tortured and killed, one by one, starting with the father, then the mother, and then the youngest—a little girl. In the midst of it all, the teenage boy managed to get loose, and in an insular act of sheer desperation, he cut down the villagers: every last man, woman, and child. He'd managed to escape in the end, taking his sister's ravaged body and burying her under a lone sakura tree in a quiet field near their family's home, but he could not retrieve his parents' bodies since they'd been scattered on the wind as little more than dust.

That boy had grown up, bearing the scars of that awful day, and he'd eventually ended up in North America—in Maine. His name was Griffin Marin, and he was Samantha's oldest sister's mate.

But his family's sacrifice had been the beginning for the youkai in so many ways. When rumors of the slaughter reached Sesshoumaru's ears, the reluctant Inu no Taisho had

issued the edict by which all youkai lived now: hide their true natures; do what one had to do to keep the existence of youkai a secret. Blend into human society and let them believe that they'd won, and while many youkai had protested, they'd all understood that the only way that they could ultimately survive against the threat of guns was to do exactly what Sesshoumaru had ordered.

So they'd faded into myth and legend, lending humans the sense of security that they seemed to crave and creating an illusion that mankind was the ultimate power. The ruse suited the youkai well enough, and while there were dissidents who felt like the edict was akin to cowardice, the more vast majority ascribed to the belief that Sesshoumaru's command was the only reason that youkai had been able to survive in the centuries that had passed since then.

And with the rich history of the men who had fought and carved the world in which she now lived, Samantha had understood that same sense of honor and duty very early on. It was that sense of honor and duty that had compelled her grandfather, InuYasha to protect Kagome and the Shikon no Tama so long ago, that had forced her great-uncle, Sesshoumaru to forge a sense of reason in a time so full of chaos, that had driven her uncle, Ryomaru to be a hunter, and even her father, Kichiro in his never-ending quest to understand and aide youkai through his medical research. The list of achievements in her family was long and proud, and while she didn't even try to delude herself into believing that she could top even one of those milestones, she couldn't help but hope that maybe she could leave an indelible impression with her chosen profession, if even just the smallest bit.

It wasn't personal glory that she sought, and she had no desire to have everyone in youkai circles know her name. The reason she'd chosen to do become a hunter was simpler than all that—something that she'd come to realize normally was the case with the biggest decisions in life.

To be completely honest, it was something she'd just felt. She'd overheard her uncle



## Chapter 2

# Reversal of Fortune

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October 31, 2070  
Chicago, Illinois  
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Opening her bag, Samantha pulled her gear out to check it, arranging it on the light tan bedspread that looked just like every other bedspread in every other run down motel that she'd checked into during her course of time as a hunter. The room was cleaner than some of them she'd rented before, though the smells that always seemed to linger in places such as this still whispered in the back of her mind—base odors that she could recognize and that she'd learned to ignore a long time ago.

Shuriken—one of the weapons that she'd painstakingly trained with—etched with her father's seal—her subtle reminder of the family that she was fighting for . . . The wicked-looking twin daggers that she used in hand-to-hand combat . . . Forged from the fangs of her grandfathers, Cain and InuYasha, and great uncle, Sesshoumaru, they were just as formidable as the men's swords, but it had been decided that she was too small to wield a sword, too, and to that end, her uncle, Ryomaru had spent hours upon hours upon hours, training her how to fight with the knives, instead . . . Her gun—she'd already stopped off to buy ammunition . . . She'd never actually used the weapon in a fight, but if she'd opted to leave it behind . . .

Wrinkling her nose, she shook her head, checking the gun to make sure that it was loaded and ready. To her knowledge, she was the only hunter who carried one—even Cain's hunter, Cartham, who was a notorious gun enthusiast, didn't carry one on the job. To him, they were toys though he did show them the utmost respect. Still, it grated on her nerves that she was constantly admonished to carry hers . . .

Shaking her head as she pulled her leather coat from the confines of her luggage, she shook it out and pulled it on, scooping the length of her hair out of the collar before flipping back the collar. She hadn't bargained on the chill in the air. Even Maine hadn't been this cold when she'd gotten onto the plane earlier in the day. One of the men she'd overheard in the airport upon arrival had said something about a blast of arctic air that had moved down from Canada. Add to that the looming threat of a heavy rain, and, at least in her estimation, they were in for a heck of a ride from dear old Mother Nature.

Letting out a deep breath, Samantha reached for the slim-file. She spared a cursory glance at the shoddy photo of the youkai in question before tapping the touch screen to open the file that contained pictures—images of the children that had been killed for no other reason than because they were human—children who didn't realize that their lives were going to be so short, who didn't deserve what had happened to them, in the first place.

She'd already memorized every line of Benoit's face, knew them by heart. No, she wanted to remember the faces of those that Benoit had cut down without thought and without caring that they meant something to someone. Those faces would give her the strength—the will—to see this mission through.

She took her time, scrolling through the images. A golden haired girl with bright blue eyes and rosy, rounded, chubby cheeks with deep dimples as she smiled at the camera . . . a little boy no older than four, holding onto the limp arm of a much-loved teddy bear . . . another girl, this one with deep brown eyes and her thumb in her mouth . . . Just babies, they were . . . babies who shouldn't have known or ever had to feel that sort of fear . . .

Snapping the file closed, Samantha set it aside and reached for the throwing stars, stowing them carefully in the inside pocket of her coat. The knives fit snugly into holsters that hung on her hips within easy reach, and the gun was strapped to the small of her back. A couple extra cartridges of bullets fit into her left side pocket, and she ticked

off the inventory in her head before reaching for the small black beret and heading for the door.

The late afternoon sunshine outside the motel was dull and watery, diluted by thin, filmy clouds that seemed more of a high fog than clouds. It reminded her of the haze of smog that tended to linger over Tokyo, though she'd been told often enough that the smog was much better these days than they had been in years gone by. Still, there that many people gathered, it was an inevitable thing, and while Chicago was no where near the size of Tokyo, it was certainly large enough.

Striding through the nearly abandoned parking lot as she maneuvered between a couple rows of parked cars, she stepped onto the sidewalk, letting the crowd encompass her as she moved along the tired old streets. She'd purposefully found a motel on the seedier side of town. The last bit of intelligence they'd gotten had placed Benoit in this neighborhood, and from what she'd been told, the youkai seemed to have taken a liking to a particular bar a couple streets over. That was her destination now, and while she didn't try to delude herself into thinking that she'd actually find him tonight, she couldn't help but hope that maybe she'd get lucky, anyway . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

The incessant drone of the electronic alarm clock rattled through the silent room with a vengeance. Uttering a low growl, an arm reached out from beneath a thin pillow, swinging wildly in the general direction of the clock without actually hitting it.

With a frustrated grunt, Kurt Drevin rolled over and sat up, smacking the offending timepiece with a balled up fist before swinging his legs off the bed and slumping forward, elbows on his knees. Rubbing his bloodshot eyes, he slipped a hand around the back of

his neck, rubbing hard in an effort to alleviate the stiffness that had set in during the forty-five minute nap he'd allowed himself.

"Shit," he muttered, shaking his head vigorously to dispel the lingering haze that fogged his brain.

It didn't help.

Heaving a sigh, he stumbled to his feet and shuffled across the cramped room to the dingy kitchenette and shook his head. He could have sworn that he'd set the coffee maker to brew before he'd grudgingly stretched out, but no, he hadn't.

He turned on the tap, letting the water flow for a few seconds to force out the orange-tinted water that always retained the pervasive metallic tinge of rust before filling the carafe to start a pot of coffee.

He didn't pay much attention as he scooped grounds into the filter basket and pushed it closed. That done, Kurt shuffled over to the backpack sitting on the grungy table and checked over his equipment. Night vision goggles—fairly pricey but well worth the investment since he tended to prefer to take care of business under the cover of darkness whenever possible—a fresh roll of duct tape . . . the talismans that he hoped he'd need . . . Pushing all that stuff aside, he dug out the reel of sturdy steel rope—not nearly as thick as the old fashioned hemp, but a lot more dependable, and it didn't take up nearly as much space, which, in his estimation, was a good enough reason to use it, in the first place. He had to stop earlier to buy more of it since he'd ended up having to cut the old one the night before while he was out.

Setting the wire and the retractor on the table, he plugged in the soldering iron, then moved back to the counter to pour a cup of coffee.

Scowling into the mud brown mug and deciding against taking the time necessary to wash it out with soap, Kurt blew into it, called it good, then dumped coffee into it and slugged down half of it despite the scalding heat as he strode over to the window.

The late afternoon sunshine was patchy and thin as he stared out over the washed out gray buildings that made up the skyline of Chicago. He hated the city—really hated it. It had always been a strange thing to him. People in larger cities seemed to see less of what was directly in front of them than small town folks did. ‘*Then again,*’ he thought, the right side of his upper lip curling up in a derisive sort of grimace, ‘*maybe they just don’t want to see what’s around them . . .*’

He supposed it was something of a defense mechanism. Living so close to so many strangers conditioned people to guard what little privacy they had by summarily ignoring things that intruded on that sense of forced solitude, and it didn’t matter if he were in New York City, Los Angeles, or here in Chicago. None of those places were considered his home, if he considered them at all. No, they were merely hunting grounds, at best.

He didn’t really call anywhere ‘home’. There was too much of a sense of familiarity about that sort of thing. It made it too easy to fall victim of the misplaced sense of complacency that was so easy to lose. Nothing was forever, and he knew it better than anyone.

Turning away from the window, he trudged back to the kitchenette to refill his coffee mug before he got to work again. He had to finish checking his gear and solder the wire rope around the pulley that he wore on his belt, check his equipment, and sharpen the knife that he’d had to use to cut the other wire free last night. Evening wasn’t far away, and he had a job to do.

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“Target acquired.”

“Good. Where are you?”

Sparing a surreptitious glance around the crowded bar buried deep in the Chicago slums, Samantha narrowed her gaze as she homed in on the youkai she'd tracked to the kami-forsaken dive. Grimacing and shaking her head in abject disgust, she uttered a terse growl then sighed. “He's barely concealed,” she reported quietly. “It's almost as if he *wants* to be seen.”

“Wouldn't put it past him. MacDonnough let him get away with his shit for a little too long, if you ask me,” Bas Zelig said. “You sure you're up for this?”

Rolling her eyes at the discernable hesitation in her darling cousin-slash-uncle's voice, she shook her head. “I'll earn my pay, thanks,” she retorted mildly, a hint of her native Japanese accent seeping into her words.

Bas sighed. “Just be careful, damn it. Uncle will have my head if something happens to you.”

“*Uncle*,” she replied in reference to her father, “knows very well that I can handle myself, thank you very much—and since when do you call Papa ‘uncle’?”

“Since he's your father, and that kind of outweighs the ‘brother-in-law’ aspect in this given situation, don't you think?” Bas retorted mildly. “Anyway, I've got to run. Got a lead on that youkai rumored to be hiding out in Nevada. Give Sydnie a call when you've silenced the target.”

“Will do. Tell Sydnie to take it easy. She's pregnant,” she reminded him then clicked off her cell phone.

Pausing long enough to drop a couple crumpled dollars onto the dingy bar, Samantha slipped through the rough crowd and headed toward the doors.

The laughter of children was the first thing that she made note of. Halloween was a holiday that she thoroughly enjoyed. Seeing the children all dressed up with bright and shining faces as they rushed here and there, collecting all their sugary loot . . . It was something that Samantha loved. Her first year in the States, she'd had the night off work, and she'd absolutely reveled in passing out candy to her callers. She'd even gone as far as to dress up for the occasion, donning a goofy clown costume, complete with the bulbous red nose . . .

Smiling to herself at the fleeting memory, she indulged herself a moment before turning her attention back to the task at hand. There'd be time enough to revel in the children after her work was finished.

She had to rely more on her ability to sense the target's youki since there were too many people about. At this time of day, the general population was either coming or going from work or out to play, and with the holiday to add to the confusion, it took her a minute to hone in on the one she was following. He seemed to be in a hurry, though she didn't think he had a clue that he was being followed. Men like him tended to be in a constant state of rushing, and they always looked over their shoulders—a lesson she'd learned long ago, as well.

Quickening her pace enough to keep a steady distance between herself and her target but not enough to close in on him, Samantha bit her lip and frowned. There were just too many people out and about for her comfort—too many humans in front of a monster who loathed them.

He turned down a narrow alley. Sam stopped at the corner of the building and leaned against it, counting to twenty before she carefully peered around the side. The youkai strode around the corner at the far end, taking the left passage without looking back.

Sparing a moment to glance around, to make sure that no one else was going to take note, Samantha slipped into the alley, sticking as close to the shadows as she possibly could.

To be completely honest, she was surprised at the luck she'd had thus far. The damned bastard wasn't even trying to hide, prowling about in the open as though he were thumbing his nose at the North American tai-youkai . . .

Stopping when the vibration of her cell phone erupted against her hip, she made a face but dug out the device. She didn't recognize the number, but it wasn't entirely surprising. As a rule, everyone involved in the special crimes office as well as Cain Zelig's normal hunters switched phones frequently, so it was a good guess that the call was work-related.

"Hello?" she answered, peeking around the corner at the end of the alley.

"Sam, it's Larry. Zelig told me you were sent out after Benoit."

"Yeah, I'm following him right now."

Larry grunted. "Listen, I finished up what I was sent to do, so the boss told me to fly on in. I'll be there in the morning. I can take care of him then."

A flash of righteous indignation forced her to grit her teeth as she stepped into the pathway and cautiously kept moving. "Not necessary," she replied tightly. "I'll have him silenced within the hour."

There was a very pregnant pause on the other end of the line, and Samantha nearly rolled her eyes since she knew—just knew—that the man was about to try to pull rank on her. "I've got it under control," she stated.

“All right,” he agreed slowly. “Don’t push yourself. If you can’t get him or if you lose your track, just go back to the hotel, and I’ll take him out when I get there.”

Shaking her head with an irritated scowl, Samantha clicked off the phone and stashed it away, unable to contain the seething anger that she was still being second-guessed despite the fact that she’d yet to fail at any mission they’d assigned her.

It irritated the hell out of her, and damned if she was going to let this one pass. When she got back to Maine, she was going to drive straight out to her grandfather’s house and let him know exactly what she thought of his perceived need to ‘send in help’. She wasn’t a child, after all. Benoit wasn’t going to be able to harm her as easily as he’d murdered those little ones . . .

But the farther she went, the more irritated she grew. She couldn’t seem to help it. Everyone in her family underestimated her, didn’t they? She knew damn well that it wasn’t normal protocol to send in a second hunter without just cause. For kami’s sake, she’d just talked to Bas. He knew well enough that she had the situation under control. This, in her opinion, was like a slap in the face—yet another example of her family’s inability to reconcile themselves to the truth of the matter, which was that she was fully capable of doing her job, just like anyone else . . .

She was so irritated that she didn’t notice the strange way and eerie quiet that surrounded her as she turned another corner in Benoit’s wake. So focused on the job at hand and proving once and for all that she really was quite capable of doing her job, Samantha kept moving . . .

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*‘Target sighted . . .’*

Lowering the long range telescoping binoculars, the violet eyes narrowed as the lone figure atop the roof of the derelict building scanned the area as the demon skulked in the shadows of the night. The sliver of moon faded in and out of view as thick clouds drifted across the sky just minutes after the sun had finally disappeared. It was a perfect night for hunting, providing him with the cover that he needed to carry out his mission.

Pushing himself to his feet, he crouched low as he swung himself over the side of the building, repelling down to the filthy alley below and making quick work of unhooking the wire apparatus that he used for such ventures. He slipped on the night vision goggles, creeping toward the street. The hulking creature grunted as it knocked over a trashcan, stumbling over the debris left scattered in its wake. Little more than an inky blob against a slightly paler backdrop, the demon was about mid-way down the section of street that he had already marked off. *'That thing isn't one of them, either,'* he realized with a slight curling of his lip, the familiar sense of disappointment roiling up inside him. Gritting his teeth, he shook his head once, willing himself to relax. It didn't matter, did it? They'd pay, regardless of whether or not the beast he caught was the one of the ones that *he* was hunting.

Closing his eyes and mumbling the words that would activate the yellow Post-It notes with the scrawled incantations that he'd stuck to the surrounding alleys at precise intervals, he felt the surge of his spiritual power flow out of him, radiating from him in waves of energy. Opening his eyes, he glanced up to check his handiwork.

Satisfied that the barrier was in place to prevent his actions from being inadvertently observed, he slipped out of the shadows of the alley only to stop short at the sight that greeted him.

A small figure clad in black stood just behind the demon he'd targeted. He couldn't discern much about the intruder aside from the cascade of silvery hair that spilled down its back. Face contorting in an irritated grimace, he drew back into the shadows a little

more. He was a creature of habit, and he hated—loathed it, actually—when something forced him to deviate from the set plan he'd constructed.

He could sense the new demon's power—easily more power than he'd ever sensed before. In the stillness created by the barrier he'd erected, he could hear the creature's shuffling footsteps. He could hear the soft click as the strange demon shifted its weight.

He'd sensed that same aura, hadn't he? After he'd set up the barrier and before his prey had entered the area, as he'd sat, crouched low atop a nearby building, he'd felt it then. What he couldn't reconcile was the realization that the whole of the demon's power belonged to the one before him. It wasn't possible, was it? The figure was too small—just inches over five feet tall. Frowning as he stared at the creature, he shook his head. It wasn't possible . . . it just wasn't possible . . . He'd seen groups of those things over his lifetime, and they hadn't possessed that sort of aura. Just what the hell was it, anyway? That thing in black . . .

"You dare to come here?" the intruder spoke, drawing the demon's attention as it swung around. "You disgust me."

*'It sounds like . . . a woman?'*

He scowled as the smaller demon flicked its wrist. The flashes of metal glowed in the night, three tiny objects that whipped through the air. One struck the demon in the knee, bringing it down. One struck it in the chest with a sickening thud. The last one embedded itself between the monster's eyes. Howling in pain, its arms flailing wildly, the beast swung at the intruder. It—the intruder—sauntered toward the creature, drawing a long, thin blade. Without a trace of hesitation, it jerked the knife, silencing the creature's howls in one deft motion. An unearthly rise of a gale wind ripped through the area enclosed by his barrier, and the demon exploded in a flash of purple light and a cloud of dust.

The thing bowed its head for a moment before sheathing the knife in the holster on its belt. He slipped out of the shadows, deliberately striding toward the demon. The irritation that it had cost him his target dissipated with the underlying knowledge that the researchers would pay more for this one. It had taken the other one down with minimal effort—a feat he wouldn't have thought possible had he not seen it for himself even if it did possess more strength in its aura than any other single monster he'd run into thus far.

If it realized that the barrier would prevent its escape, he wasn't sure. It let out a deep breath, stowing two of the small silver throwing stars in its pocket as it walked slowly, pulling off a pair of leather gloves and stashing them in its other pocket before adjusting the little black beret perched on its silvery hair. It started to reach down, probably to retrieve the third star, but stopped, standing perfectly still, as though it had sensed something.

Reaching into the pocket of his black leather coat, he closed his eyes for a moment, feeling the gathering of the energy within him, concentrating it into his palm as he pulled a longer Post-It note out. The text painted onto the page meant nothing to him: silly Japanese kanji that contained the power to seal one of those creatures. He didn't know how or why they worked; he just knew that they did.

The energy that he'd forced into his hand seemed to throb just under his skin, and he gritted his teeth, dashed forward, closing in on the beast fast.

It started to turn around, and whether it had heard him or sensed him, he didn't know. It was too late, though. Fathomless dark eyes flared wide seconds before he slammed the paper against its chest, and he felt the discharge of energy flow from him into it, creating a crackle in the air like the hum of power lines on a quiet summer's day. It didn't make a sound aside from a whoosh of breath. He landed in a crouch as the monster's form fell to the ground and didn't move.



## Chapter 3

# Dangerous Liaisons

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Samantha moaned quietly, unable to recall exactly why she felt like hell. Biting down with a grimace, she almost gagged on the strips of duct tape that were wound around her head. The room where she lay was disturbingly quiet—so quiet that she heard a faint buzzing sound that wasn't really there—the sound of nothingness, and, stifling a groan at the strange numbness in her right arm, she cautiously opened one eye.

She was lying on a metal and plastic cot, curled on her side with her hands confined behind her back, probably with the same duct tape that was gagging her. Her feet were also taped at the ankles, and while the constraints bothered her, her main concern at the moment was where she was and how she'd gotten there.

She'd silenced her target. She distinctly remembered that much of it. She also remembered hearing the sound of rapid footsteps—someone running—and she remembered seeing a blur of motion that was more of a shadow in the even more shadowed darkness. A flash of light and a sense of pain that ended as abruptly as her sketchy memory . . . The pain was still there in the center of her chest though it had dulled. Shifting her head just enough to peer down at herself, she frowned. A sutra written on a Post-It note was affixed to her shirt.

It was difficult to tell whether or not she'd been dealt any real physical harm, but she didn't think so. Closing her eyes for a moment as she willed her mind away from the dull ache in her chest that radiated out from the makeshift ofuda, ignoring the throbbing just above her numbed arm, she methodically moved the parts she could, starting with her fingers and toes.

Wiggling her thumb, she scraped at the tape on her wrists, only to gasp and groan when a sharp shock shot up her arm. Definitely a shock—her captor had must have taped ofuda between the layers. Blinking quickly, fighting back the blackness that ringed her vision, she bit down hard on the gag, telling herself that she was not—*was not*—going to pass out, no matter what.

That, however, was easier said than done, and it took a few precious minutes for Samantha to compose herself enough that she didn't. Forcing her eyes open again, she slowly shifted her gaze around the room, instead.

A small lamp fitted with a naked light bulb burned in the center of a bare metal table about six feet away with a few papers draping limply over one side. Behind the table was a cold gray sheet metal bookshelf. The books were haphazardly stacked on the shelves without any discernable order. A rusted old white filing cabinet stood beside the shelf, looking grotesquely stark against the perforated panel board wall. Behind the cabinet was a menagerie of equipment that she didn't recognize. A mint green metal cabinet mounted to the wall above a rusted white sink bore a stout chain and padlock. Craning her neck to continue her perusal, she frowned at the barren panel where a telephone might have once been mounted, and she took note of her coat and bag tossed carelessly in the far corner near the sink. Across the room from the sink was an open doorway—the door had been removed at some point, and the barren half-hinges stuck out like rotting teeth contorted into a permanent grimace. Through that door, she saw the side of what she assumed to be a shower stall. Grayed with age and streaked with yellowed orange against a lighter shade of gray that was the painted cinderblock wall. To the left of the gaping doorway was a dilapidated plywood dresser, so old and rickety that it bowed down in the middle.

The place was devoid of anything that might have otherwise told her something a bit more personal about her captor. No pictures, no nothing to give her a clue about who had nabbed or nor why. Her first thought was that someone had managed to find out

that she was a hunter, but even common logic dismissed that idea fairly quickly. She was too careful, wasn't she? She'd never confronted anyone in any place where there might be a witness. It was obvious, though, that her captor knew what she was and had known that the ofuda would stop her cold, too.

Stifling a low groan, Samantha closed her eyes for a moment, willing away the dull throbbing behind her eyes as she flopped back down, sucking in a sharp breath when her shoulder protested the abuse.

The door beside the foot of the bed swung open, and a man strode in. He carried a beat up canvas bag that looked like something that was issued by the military, and he only stopped long enough to kick the door closed before continuing over to the table. Letting out a metallic groan when he set the bag down with a heavy thump, he didn't even glance at her as he tugged the drawstrings that held the bag closed and started pulling stuff out of it.

She recognized the field test kit. It was one that she'd never had the occasion to use, herself, but she was familiar enough with what they did. Marked with a biohazard stamp, it was a blood sample collector kit, and it could be used to test blood type and that sort of thing, but it wouldn't be able to provide much more than the barest modicum of information.

He dropped the kit rather carelessly on the table and delved into the bag once more. The next kit he pulled out was a bit more perplexing. In truth, she hadn't seen one of those before. It looked much like the blood kit, but it was slightly larger. He tossed that one down, too, and shoved the bag off onto the floor.

He stared at the table for a long minute before slowly turning on his heel to look at her. She didn't make a sound, but she didn't look away, either.

He was human—something that she hadn't really realized right off, probably because her

sense of smell was altered. In fact, all of her senses felt dull. Still, she couldn't help but think that he didn't look completely unfriendly, despite the marked scowl on his face. Brusque, businesslike, but not exactly cruel . . . She couldn't put her finger on why she felt that way, but she couldn't shake the feeling, either.

But what did he want . . .?

It seemed to Samantha that he spent an inordinate amount of time staring at her, his gaze so intense that she had to control the urge to fidget. One arm crossed over his chest with his other elbow propped on his hand, he chewed on his thumbnail as he continued to frown at her. Most of his face was lost in the darkened shadows cast by the paltry light behind him, his black hair shone with a soft bluish hue. Eyes that were reduced to little more than pinpricks of light, he didn't move, and she wished that he'd straighten up or turn his head—anything to allow her to see his face just a little better.

Nodding curtly, as though he'd figured something out, he let his arms drop as he strode over to the rickety metal shelf, shuffling stacks of books aside until he found the one that he was searching for. Turning slowly as he leafed through the pages, he took the two steps that separated him from the table and sat in the folding metal chair, thumping the dog-eared book down with a heavy thud.

Stifling a groan as she mustered enough strength to push herself onto her back, she bit down on her gag to keep herself from vomiting as a wave of nausea shot through her with a vengeance.

Unable to staunch the low moan that seeped out of her as she tried in vain to lay impossibly still, she squeezed her eyes closed. The scrape of the chair—the legs had worn through the rubber shoes that would have kept the noise to a minimum long ago—resounded in her ears like nails on a chalkboard. Footsteps, neither soft nor heavy, moved away from the table . . . the rattle of a chain, the vague sound of metal scraping against metal in arbitrary contact . . . ripping paper mingled with other sounds that she

didn't quite recognize . . .

After a moment, the footsteps drew closer, and with a dull sort of expression, she forced her eyes open as a stabbing prick—more of a nuisance than a pain—erupted in her shoulder.

He'd given her a shot of . . . something; what, she had no idea, but the effects of it were almost immediate and intense. Scowling in concentration, he lifted the empty syringe and narrowed his eyes at it, and for a crazy moment, she wished that she could ask him what color those eyes really were. A sudden surge of drowsiness bore down on her despite her best efforts to keep herself awake, and she blinked quickly at the bizarre thought that occurred to her.

*'He . . . reminds me . . . of Grandma . . .'*

And then the blackness descended.

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Kurt frowned at the lifeless form of the demon curled up on its side in the middle of the cheap old cot. It was breathing, and that was enough, as far as he was concerned. The things he needed to do were easier accomplished with it knocked out, anyway. Glancing around the unremarkable cube of a room in an unremarkable building he rented by the month, this was where he brought the demons he captured so that he could haggle with *them* before he attempted to make a delivery . . .

Its eyes disconcerted him, damn it.

To be entirely honest, a lot of things about it disconcerted him.

How could such a tiny demon possess that much power—power that he'd sensed and that he had to admit, he'd almost feared, at least for a moment.

*'Don't be stupid, Drevin. Fear one of those things? Hardly!'*

No, it wasn't fear, exactly . . . more of a healthy understanding of exactly what things like it were capable of. He'd seen it firsthand, hadn't he . . .?

Besides, fear in and of itself pissed him off, didn't it? He'd vowed to himself long, long ago that he would never, ever fear a damn thing, ever again. Those things might be powerful, and they were definitely monsters, but they still bled, and they still breathed . . . and, ultimately, they still died, too.

What was it about this one? Why was this one so much more powerful than the others he'd come across? It shouldn't be, should it? It was the smallest monster he'd come across in all his years of hunting them. Freaks of nature or nightmares come to life . . . Kurt didn't give a damn, what they were. All he cared about was finding the ones who had attacked his family, to make sure that those demons would never hurt another soul, ever again.

Heaving a sigh as he tossed the empty syringe into the dented metal trashcan near the door, he crossed his arms over his chest and scowled at the huddled form. It looked entirely too human, didn't it? That was what bothered him most. Strange, fuzzy little triangles atop its head—dog ears, they looked like—and fangs—he'd seen those while he was gagging it—nasty looking claws that he knew were made for the express purpose of tearing things to shreds—pretty little girls in pink sundresses with golden curls and bright violet eyes . . . Those things aside, though . . .

Gritting his teeth so tightly that his jaw bulged slightly, Kurt let his right hand hover just above the beast's silvery hair, murmuring the same incantation he'd used earlier to remove

the disguise that it clung to.

Something was barring him from removing the concealment completely, wasn't it? That was why it still bore such an unsettling and uncanny resemblance to humans. If he could remove that, then his business would be much simpler, wouldn't it?

There was no change. He didn't figure that it'd work, anyway. After all, it stood to reason that if it were going to have an effect, it would have showed the first time he did it. Well, it had worked, to a point. It had revealed the dog ears and fangs; the claws and the strange slits of its pupils . . .

Giving himself a mental shake, he whipped around and strode over to the table, retrieving the blood sample kit so that he could get to work.

It didn't take long to draw a sample and test it, and he wasn't at all surprised at the unreadable results, either. Those things didn't seem to have a true blood type like humans did—at least, not one that was classified by the standard tests. The only reason he bothered was because *they* insisted, citing that anomalies occurred often enough that they wanted to be sure before they paid him.

'*Cheap ass bastards,*' he thought with a decisive snort. They'd use any reason they could to keep from having to pay his full fee. Not this time, though—not if he had a say in the matter. If anything, he'd charge them more since it was obviously more powerful than the others that he'd caught before. How much more powerful remained to be seen, but if the strength of its aura meant anything at all, then it was light years away from those demons he'd already handed over . . .

He'd heard it talk, hadn't he? It had actually spoken to the other demon—the one he'd originally targeted. It had spoken in a low, melodic tone—definitely a woman's voice. Articulated despite the lingering hint of some sort of accent that he hadn't been able to place at the time, it had surprised him, of course, but it hadn't deterred him, so he

supposed that he should be grateful for that . . .

A rapid tapping drew his attention to the careless heap where he'd tossed its jacket earlier, and he frowned. It sounded almost like something vibrating, and he strode over to inspect. It didn't take him but a minute to locate the cell phone. The number that it showed was unremarkable. It hadn't even bothered to enter a name into the memory. Kurt flipped the device over in his hand a few times before switching it off, and he dropped it into the drawer beside the sink without a second thought.

Turning back to the table once more, he pulled the small amber bottle of pills from his pocket, staring at them thoughtfully as he dropped into the rickety metal chair once more. He wasn't sure what those were, but he aimed to find out. He'd never seen one of those things carrying anything that resembled medicine before—just one more thing to add to the list of peculiarities regarding this demon . . .

He took his time, setting up the equipment he needed for testing. Opening the nondescript bottle with a marked scowl, he shook out a couple of them and dropped them into a clean mortar. Smashing the pills into a fine dust with the thick stone pestle, he tugged on a clean pair of sterile gloves and used the flat side of a knife to carefully dump some of the powder into a clean plastic vial.

He ran about seven tests on the substance, and not one of them was conclusive. He'd figured that they wouldn't be. As it was, the tests would have only given him a base amount of information, to start with, but what surprised him was that the alkaline test that he'd conducted hadn't showed any results, either. He might not have been able to pinpoint exactly what the drug was, but he would have been able to rule out whatever it wasn't.

Lifting the securely closed bottle to examine it against the wan light of the lamp on the table, he frowned. There were only five or so left, and while it didn't matter to him if the beast needed some sort of medication, it might well matter to *them* . . .

Setting the bottle aside with a heavy thump, he stood up and made quick work of disposing of the testing kit.

None of his books said anything that he didn't already know about the removal of illusory spells. He knew they didn't. Still, he had thought that maybe he'd missed something along the way, so he'd re-read them. There was nothing.

"Damn it," he muttered, slamming the book closed. Unconsciously, his gaze rose to linger on the tiny form in the center of the cot as an irrational surge of irritation shot to the fore. No demon was going to get the better of him, especially one so diminutive . . .

But it was, wasn't it? The strength of the concealment was proof enough. It was knocked out, wasn't it? Why the hell could he still feel such a lingering power? He'd dealt with more than his fair share of the beasts over his years of hunting. Once before he'd felt an aura as strong as that one, but he'd been reasonably sure at the time that it had belonged to a collective group of them—at least, that was what he'd thought at the time. Now, though . . . now he had to wonder.

Making a completely disgusted face, he stood up, striding over to the cupboard once more and reaching for the nondescript stoneware jar shoved to the back behind the sparse contents therein. Heaving a sigh since he couldn't quite believe that he was actually about to try what he'd always called 'ridiculous', he flipped back the wire that held the top in place and set it aside before striding over to the cot once again.

He dug a generous handful of the grayish brown dust out of the jar and flung it on the demon, only to shake his head in frustration when nothing happened. "Crazy old coot," he grumbled to himself. He should have known, all things considered. The old man hadn't actually done much of use for years, and while he'd maintained time and again that his peculiar kind of witchery worked, Kurt had been a bit more dubious.

Sometimes it really sucked to be right.

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Samantha awoke slowly, feeling the strangest sense of déjà vu creeping over her as she stifled a groan and forced her eyes open.

The same darkened room that she felt she'd seen before despite the fogginess that surrounded her brain . . . the same reluctance to let go of the obliterating blackness that she'd felt all along . . . it took a minute for her to realize that she'd seen everything in the place already when she'd woken up before. The drugs that her captor had forced into her, wasn't it . . .? They were impairing her senses . . .

Stifling the urge to whimper as a handful of different aches in her body demanded her attention, she bit down hard on the gag but couldn't contain the revolt in her belly. Whether it was the drugs or the gag, itself, she wasn't sure, but to her horror, she couldn't stop the rise of bile, either.

Choking on the vomit that she couldn't get out of her mouth because of the gag, she barely managed to turn her head to the side to let some of it out, as the rapid approach of footsteps, the low, hissed expulsion of breath preceded the rough jerk that brought her upright.

The harsh tug on her head was abrupt, as was the sudden freedom as he jerked both the length of her hair, as well as the gag, away. She swayed just a little as she spit out the last of the purge before slowly lifting her head—her eyes—to meet his.

He'd taken a step back, her hair and the tangled duct tape dangling limply from one hand, a nasty looking bowie knife held slack in the other, and he didn't look angry,

exactly, but he was definitely quite irritated. Swallowing hard, she focused on telling herself that she did not have to throw up again, Samantha licked her lips with a swollen, dry tongue and cleared her throat a couple of times before she could trust her voice to work. “W . . . water . . . please,” she croaked.

He didn’t answer, and he didn’t move. Samantha sniffled—her nose was suddenly leaking like a sieve—and let her head fall forward onto her chest as she closed her eyes and drew a few deep, steadying breaths.

She heard him set the knife aside; heard him toss her hair away. Grabbing her arm, he hauled her to her feet, letting go as soon as she was standing so that he could turn to the dingy old sink. She watched in silence as he used the handheld sprayer to wash the cot clean. The water ran along the slightly tilted floor, ebbed around her bare feet, and gurgled down the drain hidden in the shadows under the table.

Biting the inside of her cheek as a thousand stabs of pain shot up her leg straight to her brain, she wondered vaguely just how long she’d been here already. It was obvious to her that he wasn’t out to avenge someone she’d hunted, but the trouble was that she really didn’t know what he wanted, otherwise. Maybe he was after money . . . maybe he’d figured out who her family was . . . A sudden surge of panic swept through her as the idea solidified in her head. She was related to far too many powerful people, wasn’t she? A scrap of memory from her training years ago edged closer . . .

*“If you’re ever caught, you don’t tell them who you are,” Ryomaru had said. Bright golden eyes flashing in the wan sunlight of the late summer afternoon, he stared at her hard for a long moment before shifting his gaze away to drop his sword into the nondescript magnolia wood scabbard strapped to his hip. “There’re far too many bastards out there who’d dearly love to get a-hold of one of Sesshoumaru’s kin . . . or Toga’s . . . or Zelig’s . . . hell, even the old man’s . . . Don’t tell them who you are, and don’t let on that you’re hanyou, either.”*

Samantha blinked to clear away the memory, she willed herself to clear her mind—no

small feat, considering. As her body woke up from the forced position she'd held for far too long, one pressing idea entered her mind, drawing a wince from her. Her captor was kicking the bottom of the cot, sending remnant droplets of water in a fine spray. That done, he turned toward her, lifting his hand to grab her again. It seemed as though he were moving in slow motion, and she uttered a small whine as she twisted out of his grasp. "P-please," she whispered, unable to summon her voice to be stronger. "I . . . I have to . . . pee."

He pulled his hand away and stood still for a moment or two, contemplating her claim with an air of dubiousness. He thought she would bolt or something, didn't he? Samantha grimaced inwardly. Maybe she would have if she didn't still feel like she could throw up all over again. At the moment, though, the insular thought in her head was that she sorely, desperately, absolutely needed to pee. "Please," she whispered once more.

He let out a deep breath—not a sigh, but a very irritated sort of sound, shaking his head as he hefted her over his shoulder and strode toward the bathroom.

Samantha clenched her jaw, closing her eyes against the bile that was rapidly rising in her throat again, but she couldn't help the sharp whine when her feet hit the floor hard again. The consuming pain that reverberated up her legs—still not used to bearing her weight at the moment—was intense, and she had to blink back the blackness that seeped into the edges of her vision.

The bathroom was filthy—deplorably so—the toilet worse than some gas station ones she'd seen before. The only reason she could see in the room was because of her advanced vision, which likely meant that he couldn't see anything at all though he didn't reach for a light switch or anything, either. Still, beggars couldn't be choosers, could they, and the mere sight of it nearly brought tears to her eyes as she waited for . . . well, something . . .

He grunted at her, jerking his head toward the stool, obviously indicating that she should

go. Samantha slowly shook her head. “I-I . . . my pants . . .” she forced herself to say.

That drew a real sigh from him as he seemed to consider her words. Digging into his pocket, he pulled out something, and she heard the soft click as the blade of the pocketknife snapped into place.

It took everything she had to keep from gasping . . . screaming . . . as he stuck the end of the blade beneath the waistband of her pants, cutting through the fabric with one deft stroke before he repeated the process on her other pants leg. The material fell away as he repeated the process with her panties, leaving her naked from the waist down. She opened her mouth to protest but thought better of it as he pushed her down onto the toilet and pushed together the scraps of her clothing with the toe of his boot. Despite the pervasive thought that the stranger wasn't really going to hurt her—she had no idea where that idea had come from—she didn't figure that she ought to test it, either, given the situation . . .

“Nothing. Funny,” he stated flatly as he stooped over to grab her clothes.

She blinked and watched as he turned on his heel to toss them away despite the absolute embarrassment that she should have to do something as base as pee in front of him. His back was only facing her for a moment, but in that breath of time that it had taken for him to turn and discard her pants, she'd seen a glimpse of his face in the meager light of the lamp on the table. There was a measure of hostility, wasn't there, and yet, she knew it wasn't exactly directed at her . . . a sense of melancholy that tightened the muscles at the corners of his eyes . . . How she knew that it was melancholy, she wasn't sure, and yet she felt in her heart that it was so . . . but what bothered her most was the emptiness in his darkened gaze. She hadn't been able to discern a true color, but that didn't matter. She'd seen that expression before on the youkai that she'd hunted over time—the vast emptiness that bespoke a life that had been abandoned long before the flesh had been sent to follow . . .

She didn't stand up right away. In truth, she doubted that she actually could. Her legs were too weak, her body still affected by whatever drugs he'd shot into her, and while she'd wanted to move of her own accord, her body simply wouldn't allow it.

That irritated him more. Satisfied that she'd finished what she needed to do, he jerked her to her feet once more, his movements efficacious, direct, but not cruel. Forcing her feet to move, she stumbled a little but caught herself, though it seemed impossible to close the distance to the cot once more.

The long shirt she'd chosen for the day tumbled down as she moved, affording her at least a modicum of cover that she could be grateful for. When she finally reached the cot again, he pushed her down with a hand on her shoulder. "Try anything stupid, and I'll bind your ankles again," he warned.

For some reason—maybe it was because of the drugs—that statement struck her as amusing, and while she tried not to laugh out loud, she couldn't help the giggles that escaped her. She'd heard that line before, hadn't she? Some old gangster movie that her cousin, Evan seemed to love, maybe . . .

That reaction drew a narrowed gaze from him as he sat back on his haunches, hands dangling between his spread knees. With a shake of his head and an unintelligible grunt, he pushed himself to his feet and stomped over to the table once more.

It didn't take long for Samantha's amusement to die away, especially since the pain in her arm and shoulder was exacerbated in her current position. Her skin felt clammy against the plastic cot that hadn't completely dried, but she couldn't rightfully say that she was more than a little uncomfortable, either.

Settling for watching him as he leafed through a thick, old tome, she fell silent.

Propping his elbow on the table, he absently tapped his index finger against his forehead.

“Will you tell me where I am?”

He made no move or indication that he'd heard her at all.

Samantha frowned. “Do you want something from me?”

Still no answer.

“Do you need money?” she asked, her voice stark and harsh in the otherwise silence despite the quietness of her tone.

He seemed surprised by her softly uttered question, and he glanced at her for a moment before looking away again.

“I have some,” she went on. “Y-you can have it . . .”

He ignored her.

“Do you . . . know . . . who I am?” she ventured to ask when he didn't respond.

“I know *what* you are,” he growled without lifting his face.

His words were sharp, cutting her to the quick as her eyes flared wide just for a moment. ‘*What I . . . ? He . . . can't . . .*’ Struggling to regain her composure, she forced a half-laugh and shook her head. “What I . . . am? What do you mean?”

He didn't answer in words, but he did lift his chin long enough to narrow his eyes on her, and for the barest of moments, the briefest of heartbeats, she was almost frightened of him—almost. Then he blinked and dropped his gaze to the book opened before him.

*'Sami . . . maybe you should stop,'* her youkai voice warned.

Samantha blinked and closed her mouth on the next question she had been poised to ask.

*'Why?'*

*'He's not going to answer you, and . . . and you can feel it, can't you?'*

*'Feel . . . it?'* she echoed with a shake of her head. *'What do you—?'*

*'His power, Samantha . . . the gross overabundance of spiritual power—so much that it almost flows from him . . . can't you feel it . . .?'*

*'Spiritual . . .? Like . . . Grandma . . .'*

Her youkai didn't answer, and Samantha swallowed hard as her gaze shifted back to the man at the table again. "Who . . . are you . . .?" she murmured, though it was more of a rhetorical question than one she actually expected to be answered.

His chair flew back with an angry screech, and he stalked over to the sink, yanking open the cupboard and rummaging around inside until he found whatever he was searching for. She could hear the sounds but couldn't quite associate them with whatever he was doing, but when he turned toward her, he didn't miss the small syringe he held in his hand as he stalked toward her.

Her brain seemed to freeze and yet speed up at the same time, compelling her to do something—to say anything—that might keep him from sticking her with the needle. "M-my name is—" she began only to be cut off when he jabbed the needle into her arm.

"Shut up or I'll gag you again, and if you puke, you can choke on it for all I care."

She fought against the instant effects of the shot even as she felt her body starting to shut

down again, even as the familiar void beckoned her . . . Even as she closed her eyes . . .

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Letting out a deep breath, Kurt scowled at the demon, jaw ticking as he clenched it tight, as he tried to tamp down the irrational surge of anger that it would have the audacity to try to play some sort of mind game with him. Common sense told him that he would do well to gag it again, but the unfortunate truth was that it was worthless to him dead, and if it threw up and choked to death, he wouldn't get paid, would he?

*'Gotta get that disguise off of it,'* he reasoned with a shake of his head. In that form, it looked entirely too human, despite the ears and fangs and claws. He knew damn well that those things always tried to look like humans; tried to blend in with everyone else.

What bothered him most, though, was that he could normally see right through their disguises—he always could. He hadn't thought it odd or weird when he was young, no. Back then, he'd thought that everyone could do that. His father certainly could. Kurt knew that. It hadn't been until he was forced to live with his aunt and uncle that he'd started to understand that it wasn't true, at all; that most people couldn't see the demons—the monsters—and that maybe he was the odd one.

But why couldn't he see past this one's concealment? It didn't make sense, damn it. He knew—*knew*—that there had to be an uglier façade under it all, but he couldn't see it.

*'Because it's more powerful than the other ones,'* he thought suddenly, his eyes narrowing as he continued to stare at the tiny form. *'Remember what the old man said . . .?'*

*"Put that over there, boy!"*

*Kurt wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand and shot Old Granger as fulminating a glower as he could muster before grasping the handles on the huge earthenware urn and scooting it across the rough plank floor. "I'm not slave labor," he pointed out, his violet eyes reproachful as he dropped the urn into place and stepped back.*

*"Sass me again, and I'll beat you," Old Granger warned, lifting the gnarled old walking stick that he'd picked up somewhere in the forest and shaking it at Kurt. "Didn't beat your daddy near 'nough, and look how it turned him out!"*

*"Dad said you were just a crazy old man," Kurt pointed out since he'd yet to actually see the old codger lift a hand to him. "Guess he'd know, wouldn't he?"*

*Old Granger snorted, pushing back the brim of the dusty old hat he always wore to wipe his forehead on a bright red hanky. "It was that ma o' yours fault. Filled his head with idiot notions . . . Bah!"*

*"You leave Mama out of this!" Kurt bellowed, balling his hands into tight fists at his sides.*

*The old man slammed the end of the cane into the floor so hard that the window panes rattled. "Shut up, boy, and listen good, else you'll end up just like 'em."*

*Kurt recoiled slightly, angry that he'd fear the old maniac; angry that Old Granger always—always—took potshots at his mother.*

*Satisfied that Kurt's tantrum was over, Old Granger huffed indignantly and shook himself. "Them what came after your'n wann't so tough. There be others—ornery sons o' bitches—that you won't see. They hide what they are, see? More powerful . . . and them're the ones to just laugh at you, and you never see 'em comin'!" Turning away, his shoulders slumped slightly, as though the long statement had worn him out, Old Granger shook his head as he stared out the window at the small rise just before the tree-line—at the small wooden cross that stood under the spreading branches of a thick old tree. "Them's the ones you fear, boy. Them's the ones . . ."*

Blinking away the last of the memory, Kurt shook his head and tightened his jaw as his gaze fell to the small demon once more. “Fear that . . .? Never . . .”

The low hum of his cell phone rattled against the pages of handwritten notes he’d left on the table, and he turned away with a snort. “What?” he barked in lieu of a proper greeting as he grabbed the phone and hit the ‘connect’ button.

“How’s the hunting?”

He almost smiled insincerely at the sound of the calculated calm in the voice on the other end of the line. “Got one,” he admitted at length, but not before giving a pregnant pause designed to make the man squirm. “It’s going to cost you.”

“Doesn’t it always?” the man quipped in a facetiously pleasant tone.

“Yeah, well, this one is going to cost you more.”

“Why’s that?”

Unconsciously shifting his gaze to the huddled form once more, he sucked in his cheek while he contemplated how much information he was willing to divulge over the phone. “It’s . . . stronger.”

“. . . Stronger?”

“I’d say one-point-five is a good place to open negotiations,” Kurt went on, knowing damn well that the cheapskate would never come close to coughing up that much for the creature.

The man bit out a very terse laugh. “One-point-five . . .? Does it shit gold?”

“You want it or not?” he went on in a deliberately bored tone of voice. “Makes no difference to me. Maybe the guys in Wichita would be more interested in paying the fine.”

“Wait, wait,” he hurried to say. “It’s just that I’ve got to see it before we commit, you understand.”

Kurt’s smile was as thin and insincere as the man’s voice on the line. “Tomorrow,” he replied.

“All right, then. We’ll be expecting you tomorrow.”

The line went dead, and Kurt stared at the device for a second before clicking it off and dropping it onto the table once more. To be honest, he figured he’d be able to talk them into seven-fifty, tops, but it didn’t hurt to try . . .

Besides, even if they didn’t want to pay over the base rate, he had other options, didn’t he?



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
Time to get paid ...

## Chapter 4

# Twisted Fate

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“Five is the normal fee.”

Kurt didn't bat an eye as he watched Harlan slowly circle the small demon. It hadn't moved since he'd put it down in the middle of the examination table.

“It's smaller than the ones you normally bring in,” he went on, pulling a penlight from his pocket and tentatively pushing back its eyelid.

“Don't insult me, Dr. Harlan,” he growled in an even tone. “That's one of the most powerful ones I've seen, and if you're not willing to pay what I want, then I'll just take it elsewhere.”

“Wait, wait,” the good professor hurriedly said, letting go of its eyelid as he scowled at it. “You say it's more powerful, but it doesn't look it. Surely you can appreciate my predicament here. I have to answer to my investors, and shelling out that much for one untried specimen . . . Well, I'm sure you can see the problem here.”

“And it is *your* problem, not mine,” Kurt maintained, reaching for the black leather gloves that he'd peeled off when he'd arrived at the nondescript building. Situated on the outskirts of the Chicago suburb amid other medical research facilities that all pretty much looked the same, Bradford Medical was a good cover for the clandestine establishment, but the research done here was entirely different.

Research aside, though, the other thing that made this building different from the others

were the strips of paper that were embedded around the perimeter of the building, itself—papers that, with the proper inscriptions, ensured that other demons wouldn't sense the presence of the ones inside. Kurt, himself, had mounted them—had painted over them with weatherproof paint. For that task, he had managed to demand a payment of twenty-five thousand dollars—a price that the cheapskates were willing to pay since none of them were willing to tangle with the beasts without the proper precautions in place.

“It doesn't look powerful,” Harlan stated again dubiously, his beady little eyes taking on a calculating slant as he turned to eye Kurt over his shoulder.

“Let it rip your heart out of your chest so you can watch yourself die and see if you still agree,” Kurt remarked acerbically as he pushed himself away from the wall with a nonchalant shrug. “I already called Claxton in Houston, and they're very interested . . .”

“Claxton, huh?” he echoed, tapping his chin with his index finger—a nervous habit that irritated Kurt nonetheless. “Hell of a trip with one of these.”

“Be worth my while,” Kurt replied, taking a step toward the form on the gurney, his intention clear: either they bargain reasonably or he really would take it somewhere else.

“Six,” Harlan grudgingly offered.

Kurt's gaze flew back to Harlan. He had been eyeing the security team stationed around the perimeter of the large room. Seven men on detail, and Kurt doubted that it was nearly enough to deal with that particular demon if it should happen to freak out . . . With a tight and completely insincere smile, he stepped toward the gurney, his intention clear: negotiations were over. Six hundred thousand dollars for that particular demon was an insult, in his opinion.

“You get what you pay for, Dr. Harlan,” Kurt muttered.

To his credit, the professor looked duly perturbed. On the one hand, it was evident that he dearly wanted to get his hands on this one. On the other, he hesitated at the price that Kurt had stipulated, and Kurt could probably understand that, too. Too bad that this was all strictly business. If Claxton would pay more, then that that's where he'd go.

Loosening the restraint holding its left hand in place, Kurt held onto it as he skirted around the gurney. It was still out cold and probably would be for a while. He'd taken care to dose it a little heavier than he had the night before since it seemed to have a high resistance to the tranquilizers on a whole. Three different kinds of tranquilizers, and none of them had knocked it out for more than a couple hours, tops. He'd given it another shot before wrestling it out of the rental car, just to be on the safe side.

He made quick work of taping its wrists together, slapping a couple extra seals between the layers of duct tape. He'd also cut its claws before leaving the rented office building where he'd been keeping it just in case. Those claws were just like dog's claws with a vein that extended up into it. He'd cut one of them a little too short, and it had bled like a stuck pig—yet another mess that he'd had to clean up, of course.

“If I had some proof that it's as powerful as you say . . .” Harlan blurted in a plaintive tone.

Kurt didn't spare him a glance as he ripped the tape and strode toward the end of the gurney to unbind its feet. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Harlan that he'd do well to reinforce the paltry leather straps attached to the table, but didn't. What did he care if the damn things got loose and killed the lot of them, anyway? Overbearing, condescending bastards . . . thought that they knew how to control these beasts when their 'control' was only illusory, at best.

“Wait, Doc,” Harlan said, striding over and pushing Kurt away from the gurney as he reached for the second restraint. “Don't be hasty . . . say we let the meds wear off of it . .

. I'd like to observe it for a day or so before we finish discussing the terms."

Kurt slowly shook his head. "It doesn't leave my custody until it's paid for."

Harlan grimaced then pasted on a bright, if not completely fake, smile. "Okay, okay . . . how about this? I can give you the five now, right? If it proves out to be as powerful as you claim, then we'll authorize a . . . shall we say . . . bonus?"

Kurt didn't miss the man's flash of near panic that filtered over his features at the offer. "How do I know that you won't damage it just so that you don't have to make good on that?"

Harlan chuckled nervously. "Damage it . . .? Why would we do that? We only observe them . . ."

"Cut the crap, Harlan," Kurt intoned, narrowing his eyes on the pudgy, balding man. "Now, I can't say that I give a shit, one way or the other, but you don't really think that I'm too stupid to realize that none of the others that I've brought in to you is still here, which means that you let 'em go, sold them to another lab, or killed them . . . Guess which one of those I'm banking on?"

Harlan backpedaled quickly enough, then grasped Kurt's arm to lead him farther away. "We have run some tests . . . to check their immunities . . ."

Kurt shrugged offhandedly, as much to shake off the man's grasp as to indicate his utter indifference. "Spare me. I don't care what you do with them—*after* you've paid me."

Harlan heaved a sigh, adjusting the lapels of his lab coat. "Okay . . . five now—your standard finder's fee . . . another two-fifty after it regains consciousness, and we verify that it's healthy, and another two-fifty if it proves to be as powerful as you claim."

Kurt considered the offer and slowly nodded. In truth, he'd been doubtful that he could get seven-fifty out of them, and while he wasn't particularly pleased with the idea of waiting for part of the payment, he wasn't too worried about getting the shaft. They could talk big if that's what they wanted to do. He knew that they understood that they'd be shit out of luck if he decided not to supply them anymore.

Sure, they employed a couple other freelance hunters. Too bad that their real catches had been nothing more than flukes. Though they often professed to be able to sense the demons, it hadn't taken Kurt long to figure out that they were just blowing hot air. To his knowledge, there were only a couple of people in the world who actually could do what he did, and of those that he'd met—he could name two of them—one was a crazy old man who had lost his precarious touch with reality long ago, and the other? Well, that guy lived in a constant state of denial about the monsters he saw sometimes when he walked down the streets near his home in Heidelberg, Germany . . .

Kurt had sought him out after hearing whispers of some astounding young man who wrote books that were rumored to be based on the creatures that he saw—creatures that hid themselves in the guise of humans. He'd been cautiously optimistic that the writer would know something about them that Kurt didn't. Unfortunately, Stefan Ulrich refused to acknowledge the things he saw, and Kurt . . . Well, he couldn't help but feel a little sorry for him, in the end. Living his life behind the confines of a three-foot-thick stone wall, complete with security cameras stationed in every single room of his modest home, he ventured out when he was with a group of people—as though other humans could possibly provide any sort of real defense against the demons that frightened him.

His family hadn't been killed by the monsters, but maybe it was just as bad. His father had bailed out when he was a child after Stefan had claimed that his boss at work was one of those things. His mother had signed the papers to have him committed to the Schliessel Assisted Living Center—a nice name for a nut house—in Hamburg about a year later, and from what Kurt could tell, Stefan had spent the majority of his youth in soothingly painted beige rooms devoid of furniture with electronic fields over the

windows. They shocked him if he tried to reach through them to touch the glass panes. With a quiet smile, he'd said that they'd been afraid that he'd bust the windows and use the glass to cut himself . . .

Still, Kurt had felt for the young man in the end. Taking his time as he set up a protective barrier around the perimeter of the home, he knew well enough that such a show of generosity wasn't really in his nature, and yet, he really had felt sorry for young Stefan—an emotion that Kurt hadn't thought that he possessed anymore.

Still, he had almost laughed outright the one time that he was here when another of their supposed hunters for hire had brought in his catch of the day. The idiot had brought in a chimpanzee—where or how he'd managed to find it, Kurt never found out and didn't really care—citing that it was the creature's “true form” and that it “talked” to him. He'd been inclined to tell the powers-that-be that it really was a demon, just to give himself something to chuckle about later—at least, he'd considered it until he remembered that he hadn't laughed in years.

But it irked him to hell and back that those damn researchers didn't trust his judgment. After all, every beast he'd brought them was the real thing.

Dr. Harlan smiled in what Kurt supposed he thought was a warm affectation. To him, it seemed entirely facetious—the kind of expression that was offered to pesky children or to the waitress who snapped her gum and tapped the toe of her white canvas Keds sneaker as she waited to take your order. “Put it in the cage,” he ordered when Kurt nodded once more.

Two of the security guards stepped forward without a word. Kurt shook his head at the perceived carelessness. They were wearing riot gear, sure—par for course in this place—but it seemed to him that they were underestimating it entirely; lulled into a false sense of security since the demon still had yet to move.

The one guard unfastened the last binding that secured it in place. The two pulled the demon off the gurney, its feet dragging across the cold cement floor. The other guards fell in behind them as they headed out of the room to take it to the holding area with their tranquilizer rifles trained on the unconscious form.

“Authorize that payment now,” Kurt demanded mildly.

Dr. Harlan nodded, pulling his cell phone from his pocket.

A loud bang, the sound of men yelling at one another erupted in the distance. He gritted his teeth as he broke into a sprint when a volley of gunfire rang out. Muttering curses under his breath, he dashed out of the room and down the hallway, stopping short as he rounded the corner into the holding room.

The two men who had been holding it lay sprawled just inside the doorway. Kurt didn't stop to find out if they were dead or alive, stepping over them with his eyes fixed on the demon. It was surrounded by the remaining guards who seemed to be at a loss as to what, exactly, they ought to do. Three yellow-tagged tranquilizer darts permeated its skin, and it still showed no sign of wavering. Somehow, it had managed to wrangle its hands to the front, and it stood at ready, neither moving nor shying away.

Three of the guards rushed forward. It whipped around in a blur of motion too fast for his gaze to discern, bringing its clenched fists down against one man's throat. Momentum brought the demon down into a crouch, and, planting those hands on the floor, it spun around, kicking out its legs in a scissor motion, locking its ankles around the second guard to bring him down, twisting its body as it pushed off the floor enough to force more power into its legs before smashing the heel of its foot into the center of the man's chest to make sure he stayed there. The third guard dashed forward, unleashing a loud battle cry. The demon lifted its feet, let its legs bend as it caught the guard in the center of his chest and shoved him back. He didn't stumble; his feet didn't touch the ground as he flew back, hitting the two way mirrored, tempered glass wall

across the room. The mirror did nothing to slow the man's momentum, but the concrete wall on the other side of the observation deck did, and the impact rattled through the building, the sound dulled but the resulting tremor reminding Kurt of a sonic boom. Kurt shook his head and crossed his arms over his chest. He'd known, of course, that it was powerful. He'd known that, and even though it swayed slightly as it got to its feet again, he didn't delude himself into thinking that it couldn't very easily take out the remaining two guards without any trouble at all.

Damn it, it shouldn't be that cognizant. It had been heavily sedated since he'd caught it. None of the others that he'd brought in had ever woken up while he was dealing with the bargaining of fees and payment arrangements. Powerful, maybe, but . . . just what the hell was that one . . .?

"I thought you tranquilized it!" Dr. Harlan hissed between labored breaths as he trotted into the room.

"And you saw that I did," Kurt shot back mildly since Dr. Harlan had been in the docking bay when Kurt had arrived with the demon. True to protocol, he had administered the dosage that Harlan had handed to him, himself, before he'd hauled it out of his car with the good doctor standing right there.

"Do something before it tears up the place!" Harlan demanded.

Kurt snorted indelicately and stepped forward, methodically removing the black leather glove covering his right hand. One of the remaining guards fumbled around, jerking the gun from the holster on his hip. The demon noticed it and laid back its ears, uttering a fierce growl as the man, hands shaking, brought up the weapon, aiming it directly at the demon's chest.

"No!" Kurt yelled, darting forward to intervene. "Don't be stupid!"

But the little demon leapt at the man, raising both fists to strike. The man screamed and squeezed his eyes closed as he pulled the trigger in rapid succession. The deafening sound of the firing gun resounded in the room, but didn't stop the beast. Kurt heard the bullets hit the wall behind him—the fool had missed. The beast was bringing its fists down hard, and in a last ditch effort to reach it, Kurt sprang forward, bringing his hand down on its shoulder as a hiss of energy surged from him in a flash of purple light.

The demon crumpled to the floor in a pitiful heap as Kurt glowered at the guard. “Put that away,” he growled, pushing the demon onto its back with the toe of his boot. He'd been careful not to hit it too hard with the full brunt of his power, but it had been enough. Dark blue eyes staring at him with emotion that he didn't want to understand as a thin rivulet of blood dripped down the demon's cheek from the singed streak where a bullet had grazed it, he slowly shook his head and, seeing no help for it, hauled it over his shoulder as he stepped past the guards, heading for the small cage situated in the center of the observation room. “Do anything like that again, and I'll kill you, myself,” he muttered, knowing damn well that it could hear him.

He shoved the monster through the door and slammed it shut, touching the panel that hissed as the air lock slipped into place. The cage was one that he'd built for the center. It looked like a large dog kennel—that's where he'd come up with the design—but every single bar had notes sealed into them—notes that would hurt the demons if they tried to break them. The control panel on the outside of the door was the same, but that was just a safety lock, anyway. The real locking mechanism was the main cage that extended up out of the floor once the computer lockdown was initiated. No sooner did he pull his hand back from the device than the slow series of beeps tell him that Harlan had initiated the main lockdown from the terminal near the door. The grates rose up and locked into place with a heavy clank, and all the while, the little demon stared at him.

“It won't be moving around for a while,” Kurt said, standing up and pulling a pad of Post-It notes out of his jacket. Reasonably certain that the creature was secured, sure, but something about this one made him uneasy. It was just too damn powerful, wasn't it?

And that feeling of unease ticked him off.

He plastered the entire top of the cage with more of the notes then stepped back, lifting his hand perpendicular to his face, his index and middle fingers extended as he closed his eyes and muttered the words to activate the seal. Satisfied that it was finally secured, he spared another moment to eye his handiwork before turning back to face the men once more.

He wasn't entirely surprised that they were all staring at him with varying degrees of awe laced with fear in their expressions. Two of the guards had woken up, and the one it had managed to club was stirring. Harlan met Kurt's gaze and tried to cover the utter revulsion in his expression a moment too late.

Kurt didn't say a word as he strode toward the door.

"You can wire the entire amount right now," he muttered before he strode out of the room. "I think my claim's been proven, don't you?"

\*\*\*\*\*

Gunnar Inutaisho leafed through the small stack of pink "while you were out" notes he'd found lying in the center of his desk when he'd walked into his office at the youkai special crimes office. Nothing that couldn't wait until later, he figured, dropping them into a careless heap as he reached for the steaming mug of coffee that his secretary had slipped onto his desk a few minutes ago.

"Hey, Gunnar . . . you just get in?"

Gunnar nodded as he turned in time to see his cousin, Bas poke his head into the office.

“Yeah. Why’s Ms. Dunkirk calling me? I thought you were handling that case . . .”

Bas sighed and stepped into the office. He started to close the door but stopped when Connie asked if he’d like a cup of coffee, too. “No, thanks,” he said as he quietly closed it. “You, uh, heard from Sam?”

Gunnar sat down behind his desk and leaned back. “No,” he supplied slowly. “Should I have?”

Bas rubbed his face and smiled, though the expression was entirely too thin to be marked. “No, I just thought . . . maybe she’d called you instead of me.”

Gunnar shook his head and sipped the coffee. “She’s out on assignment, isn’t she? That Benoit case, right?”

Bas nodded, but he still looked entirely unsettled. “Yeah, she is, but she hasn’t called since she located him.”

Gunnar digested that for a moment then shifted his gaze to the computer monitor on his desk. Tapping the keypad built into the arm of his desk chair, he pulled up the reports around Chicago and the outlying areas. Newspapers, news stories, weather reports . . . ‘*Technology can be a bitch,*’ he thought with a wry smile as he navigated the pages via the trackball under his fingertips. “Hmm . . . looks like they got one hell of a storm,” he pointed out reasonably, nodding slightly to indicate that Bas should look at the monitor, too. “Knocked out power in a number of areas . . . tornadoes verified just outside the city . . . Maybe it knocked out cells for a while, too.”

“Maybe,” Bas agreed in a tone that indicated that he didn’t really believe it, at all.

Gunnar didn’t say anything as he scanned the pages of headlines. “Nothing remarkable,” he finally said with a shake of his head. Turning his attention to Bas once more, Gunnar

regarded him in silence for a moment then sighed. “Bas . . . she’s only been gone a couple days, hasn’t she?”

Bas nodded. “Yeah.”

“So maybe you’re worrying about nothing.”

Bas nodded again. “Yeah . . .” Letting out a deep breath, he rubbed a hand over his face and leveled a serious look at Gunnar. “She knows that she’s supposed to call,” he pointed out quietly.

Gunnar was inclined to agree, but given Bas’ grave expression, he figured he’d be better off not to voice that thought. “Maybe she lost the target after she acquired him.”

“Gunnar . . .”

“What?”

Bas looked like he was deliberating whether or not he wanted to voice his current line of thought. “I . . . I’ve got a really bad feeling about this . . . and so does Sydney.”

Gunnar nodded. He’d figured that it was something like that. “Sydney’s pregnant. Her feelings are impaired,” he half-joked.

“And me?” Bas countered mildly, arching a golden eyebrow.

Gunnar smiled slightly. “You’re pregnant by proxy.”

Bas sighed and shook his head, but he finally smiled. “You’re a jackass,” he muttered, standing up to leave.

Gunnar chuckled and shrugged. “Probably,” he agreed.

He watched Bas go as the slight smirk on his features dimmed as he reached for the telephone but didn’t pick it up until after Bas had closed the door behind himself.

“Myrna,” he said when the sound of the youkai woman’s voice greeted him after two rings.

“Ah, Lord Puppy-pants . . . what can I do for you?”

“I need you to do something for me.”

“Hmm, okay . . . what kind of ‘something’ are we talking about?”

Gunnar sighed and sat back. “I need you to hack into Ian MacDonnough’s system. I need to know everything you can find about that Benoit character.”

“The MacDonnough’s system?” Myrna echoed dubiously. “Wow, nothing like asking for huge favors . . .”

“Just do what you can,” he stated.

Myrna uttered a small hum. “Anything in particular?”

Tapping his claws on the polished surface of the desk, Gunnar’s eyes narrowed dangerously. “I need to know if Sam could take him down.”

“Sam,” Myrna repeated. “How’d she get sent in on that? Benoit would have fallen into Zelig’s jurisdiction.”

“Call it a comedy of errors,” Gunnar intoned. “Just have that information for me as fast

as you can.”

“Will do, Son of the Puppy . . .”

“Thanks.”

He dropped the phone into the cradle and leaned to the side, curling an articulated finger over his mouth as he propped his chin on his hand. Samantha took her job seriously, and he knew it. She wouldn't ignore protocol, and he knew that, too. She would have called, at least to give a progress report, even if she had failed to secure her target right off, and that was the hell of it, wasn't it? Bas was right, damn it. Something struck him as strange, too . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Samantha rubbed her arms in the filmy darkness of the room where they'd finally left her. The row of security lights that ran around the perimeter of the large, drafty room did little to dispel the pervasive darkness. One of the fluorescent bulbs in the far right corner flickered but clung to life, and in the quiet, she could hear herself breathing.

If she could just figure out where the hell she was, she'd be able to settle herself down, at least a little bit. After the incident yesterday when she'd taken down five of the guards, they'd pretty well left her alone, which wasn't to say that she wasn't of sovereign interest to them. On the contrary, it seemed to her that they'd spent the bulk of the day watching her, scribbling notes on their clipboards, but they seemed to be a little afraid to come near her, even when they'd opened the four inch high slot that ran along the base of the cage in order to slip a tray with a crockery bowl of dog kibble and a metal tin of water through. She'd stared at the food with unabashed surprise, unsure exactly what to make of it, but she'd figured out quickly enough that the men in the white lab coats seemed to believe

that she was some kind of animal.

It was some kind of research facility; that much she'd figured out. She'd also realized fairly quickly that the one who had brought her here had somehow managed to remove her concealment, too. She'd overheard the men talking amongst themselves about her ears and fangs. Apparently, the holy man had to have warned them to trim her claws, too, because the only other time they'd bothered to come near her was to tell her with as few words as possible that she needed to stick her hands through so that they could trim them.

Tucking her legs a little tighter under herself, she grimaced and bit the inside of her cheek. She needed to pee, but she was loathe to do it. When she'd finally managed to move after the holy man had zapped her, she'd noticed that the cage was not only affixed to the floor, but it was situated over a six inch drain in the floor, too. In the time since, she'd figure out two more very important things about that drain. Firstly, a lot of really cold air came out of it, and the second thing?

Biting her lip as a humiliated flush crept up her cheeks, she'd rather not think about the second thing. It hadn't taken long for her to realize that they weren't about to accommodate her as far as taking her to the bathroom, either. In fact, one of them had even said that 'it' could go wherever 'it' was, and that was true, too. She'd even gone as far as to rattle the bars of the cage, ignoring the painful jolts that shot through her for her efforts. In the back of her mind, she had considered breaking down and asking them to take her, but in the end, stubborn pride had kept her silent, though to her own mortification, she hadn't been able to control her body, either. In the end, they'd gotten out the power hose and had turned it on her, blasting both her and the cage with the icy spray in what they called, "cleaning it up."

Which was partially why she was freezing now. The draft coming up from the drain didn't help, either, but she didn't delude herself into thinking that she'd at least be a little more comfortable if she weren't soaking wet.

Letting her forehead fall against the cold bars of the cage, she closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. How had she ended up here? The time that had passed since she'd been captured was little more than a dull blur in her mind, and she had no way of knowing exactly how long had passed since that fateful night. The conspicuous lack of windows both in the small room where the holy man had taken her as well as this place made it impossible for her to gauge the time accurately. The only reason that she knew it was night now was because the men in the white coats had left a while ago, murmuring last minute instructions to the man in the brown service suit—her warden, she figured.

The bars of the cage really were reinforced. She'd figured that out a little while ago. The guard was leaning back in a metal chair behind the wide desk that was lined with monitors and glowing buttons—a far sight better than earlier when he'd strolled around the cage, glowering at her as though he thought that she were going to sprout a few more heads or try to eat him. She hadn't moved an inch, refusing to allow herself to retreat to the far side of the cage—refusing to even look at him as he slowly sized her up.

After almost an hour of pacing around, though, he'd suddenly grinned nastily as he pushed his hat back to scratch his head. "You're not so tough," he decided, kicking the bars of the cage for good measure. The incursion had activated the ofuda that seemed to have been sealed into the bars, though, and she couldn't help the smothered gasp that escaped her when the residual energy shot through her with a vicious jolt. White hot fire burned her deep, and, satisfied that he'd made his point, he stuffed his hands into his pockets, whistling off key as he strode over to the desk, falling asleep while reading a magazine.

*"Do anything like that again, and I'll kill you, myself. . ."*

Shivering slightly as the thread behind the words echoed through her mind, she sighed and drew her legs up, wrapping her arms around her ankles in a vain effort to retain some measure of warmth. She didn't doubt that he was fully capable of making good on that

threat. Still, why did she feel like it was just a threat, after all? She didn't know the holy man, not really, and yet she couldn't help but think that he really wouldn't hurt her, even if she wasn't feeling up to testing that theory. He hadn't used the full extent of his power in bringing her down. She knew that he hadn't. He was strong—really strong—maybe as strong in spiritual power as Kagome, herself, was . . .

*'He has . . . violet eyes . . .'* she thought almost absently as she scrunched herself a little smaller against the corner of the cage. Black hair cut short though the bangs were a bit on the longish side, his sideburns were touched with gray. Those eyes had been scowling at her as she lay immobile at his feet. Those seconds when their eyes had met, though, she knew that he understood what she was trying to tell him, even if he'd ignored her plea in the end. He wasn't a small man, by any means. Easily six feet tall—maybe an inch or two over—with a sturdy build though he wasn't even close to the brute of a man that Bas Zelig was. No, it was obvious to her that he took care of himself though maybe it was a little more difficult to maintain as he grew older. Still, she could sense the man's power easily enough, especially since the medication that he'd kept pumping into her had worn off. With her mind cleared of the drugged fog, she could process things with a lot more clarity.

She remembered hearing rumors regarding youkai disappearances. At the time, it had been speculated that they were fighting amongst themselves. They all seemed to have been lesser-youkai, anyway—the beings that were only a bare step above being complete animals. Most of those kinds ended up on the hunt list sooner or later. They didn't know how to control their impulses, and since the way of the youkai tended to revolve around violence, it wasn't entirely surprising that they'd eventually turn renegade, either. She'd discounted the rumors she'd heard, figuring, like everyone else, that the disappearances were mere infighting, but now . . .

Had they been hunted down like she'd been? Had they been brought here or to another facility like this somewhere else? Maybe not all of them—it was too easy to chalk up every single incident to the same cause, wasn't it? Still, she didn't have to be brilliant to

understand that the holy man had obviously captured beings like her before, even if she doubted that he'd ever managed to snag anyone as advanced as she was.

But why . . . ?

She'd sensed his anger, his perceived lack of caring, and yet she'd understood somehow that it wasn't necessarily her that he hated. It was more of a general dislike, wasn't it? An animosity for her kind as a whole . . . Hadn't she seen the emptiness in his gaze? He was just going through the motions, wasn't he? Living because he wasn't dead yet, but unwilling to look for the good in the world, too . . .

Heaving a quiet sigh, she shook her head, slightly irritated with herself for letting her mind dwell on the holy man. Chances were that she'd never see him again, anyway, right?

Besides that, she had bigger things to worry about; things like just how the hell she was going to manage to escape from this place . . .



**Final Thought from Samantha:**  
**Where ... am I ... ?**

## Chapter 5

### Demons

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Kurt reshouldered the knapsack as he trudged through the dense trees of the familiar old forest. He'd spent years in these woods, hiding from the insane old codger who lived there. He hated the place even as he felt the old familiarity of it seep into his psyche. How many times had he huddled under these trees, telling himself that once he got out, he'd never come back again?

Yet here he was, retracing the paths that he'd despised. The irony of the situation was not lost on him, though. The one man that he had always maintained that he'd never ask for help . . . and, well, he needed it now.

It irritated him to no end that he wasn't able to completely remove the little demon's disguise. He'd tried for almost a whole day before giving up and readying it for transport. He'd combed through every text that he owned, had tried everything that he could think of to remove the concealment, to no avail, and that, more than anything, had goaded him into making the trip to this God-forsaken area of the world.

Trudging through the trees, he let out a deep breath and shook his head. Best just to get over with, and fast.

It took him a few hours to hike through the forest, though he did stop here and there to stare at a few different places that he remembered from his youth. Funny how the area hadn't really changed even though his perception of it had. How large had the trees seemed when he was a boy? How many times had he stared up through the branches, hating how alone he felt? Afraid to let anyone get too close . . . afraid that only bad

things happened to people who tried . . . Even the old man . . . he'd kept him at a distance, too . . .

And he still did, didn't he?

*"Don't . . . tell . . . Live, Kurt . . . live . . ."*

The memory didn't dredge up the same emotions that it used to. It was entirely different now, wasn't it? His father hadn't understood a damn thing, had he? He'd honestly thought that Kurt could just forget what he'd seen that day—forget about it and move on.

He'd moved on, hadn't he? His body had aged, his mind had matured, but something deep inside him had been destroyed—murdered that day, along with the rest of his family, leaving him with a lifetime of nightmares. So many emotions had been decimated. He'd learned to function by blocking out everything that could possibly hurt him. He'd forgotten how to smile, how to laugh. He'd trained himself to look through humans, shoving them to the very recesses of his mind as he buried himself in his training. He'd attended college to study medicine—not to help people, but to aid his cause in identifying those monsters by the differences in simple biology. Spending more nights in the library than he had in his dorm, he'd read everything that he could find on the occult, on things that went bump in the night.

There was truth behind legends, fact behind lore. All he had to do was to strip away the romanticism that had been built up around these beasts. Some called them vampires, others called them poltergeists. Still others called them gremlins or even aliens, but Kurt knew better. They were demons—monsters—ghastly visions of grotesquely distorted humans. Thing was, they weren't human, not at all, and he, better than anyone, knew this to be true.

So he'd listened to Old Granger's instructions on how to paint just the right symbols on a strip of paper—different symbols for different things, and they worked, didn't they? They worked . . .

Old Granger had taught him a lot of things, even if Kurt was loathe to admit it, and while he knew that the old man was about as bent as a paper clip, he'd also managed to live well into his late eighties and still counting. Having spent a lifetime being able to see those same monsters that plagued Kurt, he'd also managed to avoid the fate that had befallen Kurt's family years ago. Crazy, maybe, but he was a survivor, and that had to mean something, right?

Snow started to fall though it was blunted by the tree cover. Kurt had read in the paper over a cup of coffee and a stale doughnut—breakfast at a local diner—that a pretty bad storm was blowing in—the first of the season albeit definitely not the last. Winters in the northeastern corner of Minnesota were harsh, and it wasn't uncommon to find himself snowed into the small cabin with Old Granger for company for days on end during the winter. Those were curious times, he recalled. Old Granger normally found new and oftentimes annoying ways to pester his grandson. One time, it was the beads created from a mixture of tree resin and badger's blood—it had reeked so badly that Kurt had wanted to cry while it boiled slowly on the wood burning stove. Old Granger had been sure that the bracelet he created from the nasty things would make them invisible. It hadn't worked, of course, and the old miscreant had maintained that it was because Kurt had ruined the mixture. Impossible since he'd refused to go anywhere near it.

Another time, Old Granger had gotten it into his head that Kurt was possessed by a spirit demon, and all because he told his grandfather to go get bent when the old man had told him to walk into town for a bottle of whiskey. Even at twelve years old, Kurt wasn't entirely stupid. Trudging thirty miles into the nearest town for a bottle of booze in three feet of snow during a zero-visibility blizzard was just not something that Kurt was willing to do. So instead, Kurt had sat in a stout old chair while Old Granger performed a ritual that was probably closer to a Native American war dance than an

actual exorcism. Kurt had rolled his eyes but stayed perfectly still for nearly three hours until Old Granger was satisfied that the demon had left his body.

Come to think of it, a lot of Old Granger's child-rearing skills were probably akin to abuse. Still, Kurt couldn't complain too much. After all, his upbringing had helped to shape him into what he was . . .

Still, going back to that place . . .

Straightening his back and steeling his resolve, Kurt hastened his step.

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Cain Zelig sat back in the thickly cushioned chair, elbow propped on the armrest and his fingers curled over his lips as he frowned at the document in front of him. It was a request for asylum from yet another European family—this one from London—who felt as though they were in danger of being blacklisted by the long reach of the MacDonnough.

*'Makes the fourth family this year,'* he thought with a frown. Two of the three had been accused of high treason outright, and charges had been pending against the third, and they'd barely been able to escape before the hunters had been sent in. According to the correspondence, that was probably close to the same in this situation, too, and the worst of it was that Cain knew damn well that Kensington was one of MacDonnough's generals.

Heaving a sigh as he shifted his gaze out the window, his turbulent thoughts were soothed almost instantly by the mere sight of his mate as she wandered along the tree line on the outskirts of the yard with Munchy, their nine month old Rottweiler-Collie mix

puppy gamboling along beside her. Cain grimaced but smiled. It was easily one of the ugliest animals he'd ever seen, but for Gin, it had been love at first sight. '*Oh, well,*' he thought with a shake of his head. '*She took me home, too, didn't she?*'

"There's a reason you don't get a damn thing done," Ben Philips commented mildly as he strode into the office.

Cain didn't turn away from the window. "I'd much rather look at her than at you," he shot back just as mildly. "You're not nearly as pretty."

"I'll agree with that," Ben replied with a chuckle as he settled into the chair opposite Cain's desk.

"See what you can find out on the Kensington situation, can you? And I need the information as quickly as possible."

Ben sighed but remained silent for several moments. Cain was the one to break it. "He's going after his own generals now," he muttered, his irritation apparent despite the hint of a smile that had surfaced as he watched his mate stumble backward when the exuberant pup barreled into her.

"I'll talk to Myrna."

Cain nodded. "He didn't say why he's being exiled," he remarked, tossing the missive onto the desk for Ben to look over if he had an inclination to do so.

Ben picked it up but didn't look at it right away. "There's been a lot of unrest there ever since . . ."

"Ever since he issued a hunt for his own daughter," Cain finished when Ben trailed off.

"Yeah, I know."

“I don’t know how much truth there is to it, but I heard a rumor that there’s been a movement of late to allow both her and Morio back into Scotland. Something about the line of succession.”

“Fat lot of good that’d do . . . Morio wouldn’t go back there if you paid him.” Cain frowned and finally looked away from the window. “The line of succession . . .? How can that be in danger when he recently had a child?”

“A girl,” Ben pointed out, “and from what I understand, there’s also rumor that MacDonnough’s mate passed on recently.”

“That’s not possible,” Cain stated incredulously. “Everyone would know about something like that, don’t you think?”

Ben shrugged.

Cain snorted. “So he goes out and finds another woman stupid enough to let him intimidate her into marrying a bastard like him. Problem solved.”

“He was challenged; did you hear?”

That got Cain’s attention quickly enough. “He was?”

Ben nodded. “Yes, and he won, but from what I understand, there was a . . . problem.”

Cain’s expression turned dubious, and he shrugged. “Problem? What sort of problem?”

This time, Ben chuckled, and it wasn’t a particularly nice one, at that. “Let’s just say that the equipment is still there, but parts of it are . . . missing.”

Cain flinched. "You mean his . . .?"

"Not enough to make him a eunuch, but enough to kill the libido."

"Ugh," Cain grumbled, shaking himself as he tried to get the entirely too-vivid image out of his head. "More information that I wanted or needed, I think."

Ben looked like he was inclined to agree.

"How'd you find this out, Ben?" Cain pressed, shaking a cigarette out of the slightly crumpled pack that he'd been carrying around in his pocket.

Ben shook his head and reached forward to nab the pack out of Cain's hand. "Myrna. Apparently she hacked into the MacDonnough's system and found a memo."

Cain took his time, lighting the cigarette before tossing the gas station dark blue Bic to Ben. "Why was she doing that?"

"Gunnar wanted her to, apparently. Wanted more information on our friend, Benoit."

Cain frowned. "Why did he want that?"

Ben shook his head again then chuckled. "Myrna didn't know. She swears that she got more peace when you had her under lockdown under the special crimes headquarters."

"She like her new place?"

Ben shrugged but smiled. "the penthouse in the tallest building in Maine? Damn straight, she does. She said to tell you 'thank you'."

Cain nodded since he was the one who had secured the apartment for her. He'd let her go last summer, and she'd promised to keep working for him. Good enough, as far as Cain was concerned. The woman was frighteningly good at gathering intelligence . . .

"I tell you, that woman is hell on the ego . . . You ought to have heard some of the things she said . . . I swear, I'll never, ever commit anything to computer that I don't mind if she finds out. I sincerely thought that she was going to pass out from laughing at the poor bastard."

Cain shook his head and turned back toward the window again. Gin caught sight of him and smiled but quickly shook her head and wagged a finger at him when she noticed the burning cigarette dangling from his lips. Cain almost smiled though he made no move to put out the offending thing.

"So the generals want to ask Meara to come back?"

"That's the rumor."

Cain considered that for a long moment then snorted. "Even if Morio would—and that's a *huge* if—MacDonnough will never allow it," he predicted. "Besides, he still has the young one—what's her name?"

"Aislynn," Ben supplied.

Cain nodded. "Right, Aislynn . . ."

"Yes, but she's still a child. If something were to happen to him now, it doesn't matter that he's exiled Meara. Since Aislynn is still too young, Meara would be MacDonnough's heir by proxy, regardless—or more to the point, her mate would be." Narrowing his eyes on Cain, Ben lifted an eyebrow. "Why am I explaining all of this to you? You're tai-youkai. You know how this works."

“Not really,” Cain argued but grinned just a little. “I have an heir, remember?”

Ben’s retort was cut short by the curt knock on the door seconds before Larry Rowland stuck his head in. He looked tired, but he nodded before stepping inside the room. “Figured I’d check in.”

Cain stood up and strode over to grab a bottle of water out of the small refrigerator across the room. Larry never drank anything else, as far as he knew. “Think fast,” he said, tossing the bottle at the hunter.

Larry caught it with one hand and popped the top. “Thanks,” he muttered before draining half of the liquid in one go.

“I take it you got him,” Cain remarked, not bothering to clarify of whom he spoke.

“Didn’t have to. Sam got to him, first.”

He almost smiled. He was getting more comfortable with the idea that the girl had chosen to be a hunter even though the grandfather part of him still wasn’t entirely thrilled. That didn’t mean that he was unhappy with the skill she’d shown thus far. Of course, it also didn’t mean that he was about to offer her a job working for him, either . . . “Good.”

Larry nodded. “If there’s nothing else, then I’ll be going. Been meaning to spend some time fishing . . .”

“Fishing?” Cain echoed with a raised eyebrow. “Just take your phone with you, okay?”

“Ayuh,” he muttered, finishing off the bottle of water and tossing it toward the trash can as he turned to leave. “Oh, yeah,” he said, turning quickly once more. “I almost forgot . . .”

Cain frowned as Larry dug into his pocket. He pulled out something and looked it over for a moment before flicking it at Cain. He caught it as his frown darkened, opening his hand to reveal the flash of metal that he knew well enough. It was one of Samantha’s shuriken. “Where did you get this?” he called out.

Larry stopped again and turned back with a shrug. “With Benoit’s remains,” he replied simply. “Why?”

A savage surge of foreboding shot up Cain’s spine. “Did you see her?” he demanded, his tone a lot sharper than usual.

Larry shook his head, giving Cain a rather conspicuous look. “No . . . that’s why I brought that back,” he said. “She hasn’t checked in?”

Slumping into his chair again, Cain held the throwing star between his fingertips and let it spin slowly. “She doesn’t check in with me,” he replied.

Larry stared at Cain for a moment then slowly nodded. “All I found were Benoit’s clothes and that.”

Cain considered that in silence. The shuriken were a gift from Samantha’s parents, he knew: a symbol that she had finished her training, and they meant a lot to her. She wouldn’t have just left one behind, especially if it was right there in plain sight. No, something about this just wasn’t right . . . “Larry,” he said as he reached for the phone, “would you mind holding off on that vacation . . .?”

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“Hey, Dad,” Bas said as he lifted the phone to his ear. “You going to be home later? I think I need to talk to you . . .”

“Bas, did, uh, Samantha check in with you?”

Frowning at the abruptness of his father’s question, Bas sat back, dropping the ink pen that he’d been using to jot notes in the margins of a police report. “No, not yet,” he admitted. “Did she call you?”

“No,” he replied then sighed. “When’s the last time you heard from her?”

Unable to control the wince that surfaced on his features, Bas gripped his forehead and cleared his throat. “She checked in to let me know that she’d acquired the target,” he said.

“That’s the last time you heard from her?”

“That was three days ago,” he went on. “I was going to come over in a bit to tell you about this . . .”

“Have you tried to call her?”

Bas grimaced since he figured that Cain’s reaction to what he was about to say wasn’t going to be any better than his was. “She’s either out of range or she’s shut it off,” he admitted.

“What? Why the hell didn’t you tell me this before?”

“Listen, Dad,” he went on, “Sam’s gotten a little . . . irritated lately. Thinks that we constantly second-guess her. Sydnie was afraid that she . . . that she might have been a little irked when you sent Larry in to cover.”

“I don’t care if she was irked or not,” Cain growled. “You should have told me about this sooner, Bas!”

“They’ve had some storms around there, too, and they knocked out some stuff. We were waiting to see if she’d call once power was completely restored.”

Cain didn’t answer right away, and Bas forced down the irritation that he felt like a pup caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “So why didn’t you call me this morning?”

Letting out a deep breath, Bas shook his head. “I was waiting for the manager of the motel where she was staying to get back to me. He said that he’d check the tapes to see if he could find out the last time she’d gone into or come out of her room.”

“Larry got back a bit ago,” Cain said, his voice much huskier than it normally was. “He found Benoit’s remains . . . and one of Sam’s shuriken.”

Bas closed his eyes tight, clenching his jaw. His bad feeling . . . but he’d told himself that he was overreacting . . . “Shit,” he muttered, shaking his head. “*Damn* it . . .”

“I’m sending Larry and Cartham in to see if they can find anything else. Give me the room number and the address of the motel. She’s been taking the scent tabs, right?”

“Right,” Bas admitted. “I-I’ll go, too.”

“No,” Cain barked, the groan of his desk chair erupting in the background. “Sydnie needs you here. Ben’s calling everyone. Just get out here so you can brief us with what you do know.”

“Right,” Bas agreed, hauling himself out of his chair. “Give me fifteen minutes.”

Clicking off the phone, he dropped it into his pocket as he headed for the door. Damn it, he’d listened to Gunnar when he said that Bas was just being paranoid. He’d told himself that he was worrying over nothing. Samantha was good at what she did, even if everyone, including himself, wasn’t particularly happy that she’d chosen such a violent line of work. Maybe that was why he’d been so reluctant to call in the troops, as it were.

He muttered something to Connie as he headed for the door. So wrapped up in his own thoughts that he didn’t really pay much attention to anything else, he headed out of the office without breaking his stride. *‘Damn it, Sam, where the hell are you?’*

The sounds of traffic, of everyday life were his only answer as a bitter wind blew over him, the whisper of snow hanging in the air.

Ducking into to the alley beside the office, Bas spared a moment to look around, and seeing no one in the near vicinity, he vaulted onto the building and set out at a sprint.

Time was of the essence now, and he could move faster this way than he could in a damn car . . .

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Kurt opened the creaky old door and stepped into the small cabin, noting that it hadn’t really changed since the last time he’d ventured this far out. It was amazing. It was ordinary. It was . . . completely unsettling.

“Old—” cutting himself off when the crazy old coot stepped out of the shadows to heave a handful of dirt right into his face, Kurt coughed and waved a hand to dispel the dust, glowering murderously at the old man—at least, he would have, had he been able to see through the cloud of tears that filled his eyes. All in all, he figured that he looked pretty damn stupid. “Hell, old man! Is that any way to—” He sneezed. “—greet me when you haven’t seen me in a while?”

Old Granger snorted, thumping the end of the gnarled walking stick on the plank floor. “And just whose fault is that, I’d like to know? Ingrate . . . you’ve always been an ingrate . . . Now you come a-traipsin’ in here, reeking of them demons . . . come back to do in the old man, have y’?”

Sniffing loudly as he shoved the door closed behind him, Kurt brushed at his shoulders and hair, grimacing since the melting snow combined with the dirt was making a mess of him. “So you going to tell me what that was for?” he complained.

“Been up to no good, boy. I can tell it from your aura. Purified, that’s what you are.”

Kurt sighed. He’d figured that it was something like that, anyway. “I didn’t need purified,” he grumbled as he followed Old Granger into the cabin.

“So you say,” Old Granger shot back. He was pulling various jars off the shelves, muttering to himself about this and that. Kurt wrinkled his nose and stepped back, knowing damn well that the old man was trying to figure out what else he could throw at him.

“I brought this out for you,” he said, pulling a fifth of Jack Daniels out of his backpack and thumping it onto the table.

Old Granger snorted. “Cut the crap, boy. What do you really want?”

Kurt almost smiled—almost. “You don’t think I came out just to see you?”

“I know you didn’t come out just to see me,” Old Granger retorted as he grudgingly eyed the liquor. “What’d’ya do to it?”

“Not everyone is as bent as you are, old man,” Kurt pointed out. “I didn’t do anything to it . . . but if you keep drinking it like water, it might do something to you . . .”

“D’ you know how old I am?” Old Granger grumped as he broke the plastic seal on the neck of the bottle. “When you’re as old as me, you can say whatever you want and do whatever you want! You can even fart wherever you want and piss wherever you want, too, so don’t lecture me! Just shut up and . . . and find me a glass.”

Kurt shook his head but retrieved a reasonably clean glass from the stack of dirty dishes near the rusted old sink. “What do you know about the more powerful demons?” he asked, setting the glass on the table beside his grandfather.

Old Granger held up the glass, squinting in the candlelight and glow of the fire. He must have decided that the dingy glass was clean enough, though he did spare a moment to blow in it for good measure. That done, he reached up, popped out his upper plate, and dropped the dentures into the cup before slugging down a few gulps from the bottle.

“You stay the hell away from them ones,” Old Granger muttered, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. The rough robe he wore over the grimy shirt that used to be white was looking pretty rough.

Come to think of it, Kurt didn’t remember having ever seen Old Granger without it. It looked like a surplus army blanket, and maybe that’s what it had been once upon a time. It certainly wasn’t something that was bought in a store, that was for sure . . . “Kill you, they will . . . kill you and eat your eyeballs.”

"I'm pretty sure that there are far more tasty parts on my body than just my eyeballs," Kurt remarked dryly.

Old Granger snorted. "There be a mystic quality to the eyeballs, boy. I told you that a hunnert times if'n I told you once."

"The ones that look more like humans," Kurt went on, ignoring the crazy fool's comments. "How do I remove the rest of their concealments?"

Old Granger stopped and eyed his grandson closely. "Didn't I tell you to leave those ones be? Better 'n that, run like hell, boy! You ain't no match for the likes o' them! Damn it, I ain't even a match for them! Just run away fast, and don't piss yourself when you're going."

"Their concealments, old man," Kurt repeated. "How do I remove them?"

"You can't! Ain't you never heard a word I said? With them, you can't see but what they want you to, and they don't *want* you to see what they really is!"

"You're telling me that there's nothing I can do to remove their disguise?"

"Ain't that what I just said, boy?"

Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head. Old Granger lifted the bottle to his lips again, his stance familiar enough: subject closed, as far as he was concerned. To Kurt, it meant just one thing: Old Granger didn't have a clue. Not surprising since he also figured that the old man hadn't really come into contact with one of the more powerful ones, either.

Gritting his teeth against the sense of frustration that rose in him, he frowned. Damned if he'd let that little demon get away with making a fool of him. It was entirely too

human looking, wasn't it? That was the reason that it unsettled him, even if he were loathe to admit as much.

A small beep drew his attention, and he dug his cell phone out of his pocket. The daily transmission of his bank account balance had failed due to lack of available connection. Not entirely surprising since he was stuck in a cabin deep in the heart of nowhere.

He strode outside without a word. It was an iffy proposition, either way. Sometimes he could get signal if he were outside; sometimes he couldn't. Luck was on his side this time, though, and the signal was weak but good enough to download the report.

Heaving a sigh, Kurt shook his head as the message opened. As he'd figured, that damn Harlan had only authorized the payment of five-hundred-thousand. If he wanted the rest, he might have to beat it out of the cheap bastard . . . a prospect not without its merit, in his opinion . . .

Snapping the phone closed with a muttered curse, he turned on his heel and stomped back into the tiny cabin. "I've got to go, old man," he said.

Old Granger didn't look up. Staring at the dancing flames on the hearth, he looked about a million miles away—he always did when he was drinking. Kurt also knew well enough that Old Granger knew well enough what was going on around him despite the vacant expression on his face.

Digging into his backpack again, Kurt set down another bottle of whiskey, a nice chunk of sharp cheddar cheese, a couple pouches of chewing tobacco, and a roll of money secured with a rubber band. "Take care of yourself," he said, pulling the laces to close the backpack once more.

He was almost out the door when Old Granger finally spoke. His voice oddly quiet, he didn't look at Kurt, when he did, either. "You stay away from them powerful ones, boy. Mess with them, and you'll end up as dead as your daddy."



**Final Thought from Kurt:**

... Let's hope he doesn't lose that cup ...

## Chapter 6

# Have You Seen Her?

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Bellaniece Zelig Izayoi rubbed her face with one hand as she tapped around on the nightstand to locate her cell phone, as a wide yawn brought tears to her eyes.

Blinking rapidly, she shook her head and tried to focus on the glowing green numbers on the clock. Almost midnight, but she'd had to stay at the hospital late the night before since she was watching over an infant who had been born about a month too soon, so she'd crawled into bed a while ago to catch up on some much-needed sleep. She didn't even bother trying to read the name on the caller ID as she opened the device and put it to her ear. "Hello?"

"Uh, Bellaniece . . . hi . . ."

Smiling at the familiar sound of her father's voice, Bellaniece laughed softly and pulled the comforter up a little more. "Hi, Daddy! How are you?"

"Fine," he assured her. He sounded a little reluctant, maybe even a little shy.

'*Typical Daddy*,' she thought with a shake of her head. "I'm looking forward to seeing you for Christmas," she went on.

"Me, too," he said then sighed. "Listen . . . sweetie . . . I'm sorry to call so late, but . . ."

Pushing herself up as the smallest hint of a frown furrowed her brow, Bellaniece couldn't help but think that her father's tone just wasn't right. "Daddy . . .? Is something wrong?"

She heard him sigh, heard the snick of a lighter. He was smoking—never a good sign, in her opinion. “Daddy?” she prompted again when he didn’t answer.

“Samantha’s, um . . . missing,” he finally said. “We’re not sure where she is or why.”

Bellaniece’s brain slowed to a crawl, her mind refusing to acknowledge the meaning of her father’s words. “Wh . . . what?”

“Bas sent her out on an assignment, and we . . . we know that she managed to take him down, but . . .” Cain trailed off, as though he didn’t have the heart to continue.

“But . . . That’s not . . . She . . . she . . .”

“Bellaniece, is Kichiro there? I tried to call him, but I got sent straight to his voicemail. Why don’t you let me talk to him?”

Closing her eyes, clutching the comforter tight against her chest, Bellaniece shook her head stubbornly. “N-no . . . I’ll tell him. Thank you for calling, Daddy . . .”

“Bellaniece, I—”

She hung up her phone, waited a second, then dialed Samantha’s number. She was forwarded straight to voicemail—the central terminal in Samantha’s apartment. It fell through her listless fingers as a strange sense of numbness settled over her. The device hit the floor, dislodging the battery. She heard it bounce under the bed. Slowly, methodically, she got out of bed and reached for her robe before padding out of the room and down the hallway.

Kichiro was standing at the back doors, staring out at the glow of the city that hung over the tree-line of InuYasha’s Forest. “Why aren’t you still sleeping?” he asked quietly. She

could hear the smile in his voice though he didn't turn to face her.

Bellaniece shook her head, unable to grasp the meaning behind her father's words. "Kichiro . . ." She swallowed hard. *'Our baby . . . is . . . ? No . . .'*

Turning his head to look over his shoulder at her, his smile faded slightly, his golden eyes darkening just a shade. "Belle-chan?"

"We need to fly to Maine," she said in an oddly empty monotone. *'Daddy said . . . but . . .'*

"We will," he replied, his eyebrows drawing together as he continued to stare at her. "I mean, that was the plan, wasn't it?"

She shook her head. "No, we can't wait . . ." They couldn't, could they? *'Sami . . . my Sami . . .'*

"What's going on?"

"You'll call, won't you? For tickets? Even coach is fine . . ." Turning on her heel, she started back down the hallway. *'This can't . . . be happening . . .'*

She pulled a suitcase out of the closet and moved over to the bureau for clothes. Kichiro strode into the room, grasping her arm firmly but gently to force her to look at him. "Belle, what's going on?"

"You turned your cell phone off, Daddy said," she replied in the same efficient tone of voice. "I've got to pack. Do you think we should bring along our winter coats? Oh, that's a silly question . . . Maine's cold this time of . . . of year . . ."

Shaking his head, his expression registering complete confusion, his scowl was darkening

every second. She could feel his mounting trepidation, and she tried to smile. “What’s going on?” he asked again, his tone growing gentler as his youki spiked.

“I-I . . . I don’t know,” she whispered as the first crack in the overwhelming sense of numbness started to widen. Dark blue eyes wide, scared, she shook her head as she struggled to understand what she’d been told. “They . . . they don’t know where she is . . .”

“What?”

Grimacing when Kichiro’s hand tightened just for a moment before he realized what he was doing and immediately loosened his grip, Belle shook her head again, swallowing hard as a soundless sob rose to choke her. “Bas sent her out, but she . . . she hasn’t come back, and . . .” she muttered in a voice that sounded wholly unlike her.

Kichiro stared at her for a moment then let go, striding out of the room. He was back a moment later, cell phone in hand. Bellaniece cast him a wild-eyed look moments before he drew her against his chest in a comforting embrace.

“Hey, Kichiro,” Bas said, his voice loud in the stifling silence. Kichiro had placed the call on the speaker.

Kichiro gave her a reassuring squeeze. Crazy, through the fog that had settled over Bellaniece’s every thought, every movement, she wondered fleetingly if he were trying to reassure himself or her. “Bas, where’s Cain?”

Bas sighed. “He’s briefing Larry and Cartham. They’re heading to Chicago within the hour.”

“What the hell is going on? Where is my daughter?” His grip on the phone was so tight that it groaned under the pressure he was exerting. With a grimace, he dropped it onto

the bed before he managed to mangle it.

“I . . . I sent her after a youkai who’s wanted for the murders of fifteen children in Paris,” he explained. “She got him—we know she did. What we don’t know is where she is now.”

“How can you not know where she is?” Kichiro demanded from between clenched teeth. “What about your protocol? She’s supposed to check in, isn’t she?”

“She is,” Bas agreed quietly. “They’ve had some really bad storms in the Chicago area. There was no way to know whether or not coverage was out. We had to wait until we could get confirmation.”

“*Confirmation?*” Kichiro echoed incredulously, stepping away from Bellaniece in favor of prowling the bedroom floor. Bellaniece stood still for a moment then abruptly turned back to the bureau again. “Track her, damn it! How hard can that be?”

Bas cleared his throat but didn’t reply right away. Kichiro erupted in a low growl. “She probably took a scent tab before she went out. It’s standard procedure, and . . . and it’s going to make tracking her a lot more difficult.”

“Tell me what you know; tell me *everything* you know!”

“That’s pretty much it, but . . . but Larry got in this morning . . . and he had one of her shuriken.”

Kichiro stopped dead, the color leeching from his skin. “Her shuriken . . .” he whispered, more to himself than to Bas.

“Yeah.”

“How long has she been out there?”

“It’s been almost five days since she last communicated with us.”

“Five . . .? She’s . . . she’s been missing for almost five days, *and you’re just now telling us?*”

Bellaniece flinched at the rage that nearly crackled in Kichiro’s aura as she carefully, methodically, arranged clothes in the suitcase.

“We’re doing everything we can, Kich,” Bas said in a low, placating tone. “I understand your worry, and—”

“The *fuck* you do!” Kichiro bellowed. “You don’t understand a damn thing! You don’t have children! Sami isn’t one of yours! She’s *mine!* Mine and Belle’s . . .” Trailing off, Kichiro ran his hands over his face in a show of complete exasperation. “Look, we’re going to get on the next flight out, but if you hear anything—*anything*—you *will* call me.”

Bas sighed again. It struck Belle, just how weary he sounded. “Absolutely.”

Reaching down, Kichiro snapped the device closed to end the call. Staring at it as though he were willing it to ring, he didn’t move for several moments.

“She’s fine,” Belle murmured, a certain amount of clarity entering her gaze. “I can feel it—feel *her*. She’s . . . she’s fine . . .”

He finally turned to look at her, his gaze darkened by a fear so deep, so wrenching that she could feel it, too. He nodded slowly. “O-of course . . . she is . . .”

Bellaniece would never know how she found the strength to smile, but standing there, staring at the misery delineated in every inch of Kichiro’s face, she couldn’t think of

anything but the fierce need to reassure him, even if she wasn't sure if she believed her own words. "She's . . . she's tough. She'll come home."

He reached for her so quickly that his motions were a blur. Dragging her in to a stifling hug, he heaved a sigh. "She will," he whispered though he didn't sound at all confident. "She . . . she will . . ."

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Griffin ran as quickly as he could, ignoring the white-hot burn as his hip protested the movement. Though he'd had the first of the reconstructive surgeries over a month ago, his body was still recovering. Still, now was not the time to hesitate, to count the numbers of aches and pains brought on by the overexertion. Dashing through the crowded parking lot near the medical clinic where Isabelle worked, he ignored the strange looks he was garnering as he slammed the door open and strode inside.

"Isabelle Marin," he muttered, running into the front desk since he hadn't bothered to stop properly.

"Morning, Dr. G . . . Isabelle's with a patient—"

"Where?" he demanded, striding toward the closed door that led back to the examination rooms.

The receptionist shot to her feet, running parallel beside him behind the wide counter. "If you'd like to wait in her office, I can—"

"Forget it," he growled, stomping down the hallway despite the girl's protests.

It didn't take him long to find her, and for once, he tossed all manners and courtesy by the wayside, slamming open the door and striding into the room. The woman who was in the middle of what looked to be a pelvic examination screamed, and Isabelle glanced up at him only to do a double take. Whatever she had been about to say died on her lips, and she reached over to pull a thin blanket over the embarrassed patient and snapped off the rubber gloves. "Griffin?"

"You've got to come with me, now," he stated in a tone that left absolutely no room for discussion.

"Can this wait?" she asked, casting the patient a worried glance. "It'll only take—"

"Now, Isabelle, now! You know what that means, right?"

He wasn't sure if she reacted to his tone or to the fact that she knew him well enough to know that he wasn't one to blow things out of proportion. It didn't matter. She nodded and mumbled an apology to the patient before following him out of the room.

He grabbed her arm when they reached the hallway, hurrying her down the corridor and back the way he'd come. She seemed surprised by the direction in which he was hustling her, but she didn't argue. "I-I'll be back," she called out to the receptionist as he pulled her toward the clinic doors.

"Give me your keys," he demanded without breaking his stride as they moved down the sidewalk and around the corner to the smaller, exclusive parking lot reserved for the clinic's doctors.

"What's going on?" she asked, digging her keys out of the pocket of her lab coat and dropping them into his hand.

He let go of her, loping around the bright yellow sports car to unlock the doors. She

climbed in just after he did, and when she turned to face him, she couldn't help the worry that marred her brow.

Griffin didn't speak until they'd turned out of the parking lot and were heading out of Bangor. "Your cousin called . . ."

She shook her head, and he could feel the intensity of her gaze boring into his skull. "Mamoruzen?"

He nodded. "Yeah . . . He said . . . Sam's missing."

He almost thought that she hadn't heard what he'd said. He opened his mouth to say it again but was cut off by a harsh bark of incredulous laughter that ended as abruptly as it had begun. "What do you mean, missing?"

He grimaced inwardly at the disbelief in her tone. "I mean, she never checked in after she finished her assignment. I mean . . . one of the hunters who was sent there to back her up found one of her throwing stars in what was left of the youkai."

He could feel her gaze on him, probing, disbelieving. He didn't look to confirm it as he willed his own turbulent emotions to calm. "But that . . . that . . . It can't . . . Griffin . . .?"

"They haven't heard from her in about five days, give or take—at least, that's the best estimate they've gotten thus far. They're hoping that someone else might've heard . . . uh, she . . . she didn't call you, did she?"

"N-no," she mumbled thoughtfully. "Did they ask Mama or Papa? Sami might've—"

He gripped the steering wheel a little tighter as he turned onto the highway and urged the car just a little faster. "Your parents said that they'll be out on the next flight," he

went on. "I . . . I'm sorry, Isabelle."

"Why would you say that?" she demanded sharply. "You sound like she's . . ." Trailing off, she shook her head stubbornly. "No! Absolutely *not!* Look, I-I-I don't know what happened, but Samantha . . . She's not . . . not *dead!* Do you hear me, Griffin Marin? Do you?"

Keeping his eyes trained on the road, Griffin nodded, unsure whether she believed what she was saying or if it was just something she needed to tell herself. In actuality, he didn't want to think it, either, but given what he'd been told, he wasn't entirely sure that it could be ruled out. "No one knows where she is."

"Then we *find* her," Isabelle stated matter-of-factly as she dug out her cell phone. Griffin put a hand on hers to stop her before she could dial it. "I want to call and see what they're saying," she explained impatiently.

"Don't," he growled in his normal, gruff tone. "Leave the phones open. What if . . . what if Sam tries to call?"

"Oh . . . right . . ." she replied, her voice suddenly quiet, completely unsure. "She's okay; I know it. She . . . she *has* to be . . ."

Griffin nodded but drove in silence. In the couple years since Samantha come to live in the states, the sisters had grown a lot closer, though he'd noticed that there was still a certain distance between them, one that didn't exist between Isabelle and her sister, Alexandra. He supposed that it had a lot to do with the gap in ages between Isabelle and Samantha, and while he knew damn well that Isabelle adored Sam, he also knew that, somewhere in the back of her mind, Isabelle still thought of Sam as that little girl that he'd first met years ago. Maybe it was because she hadn't really been there while the girl was growing up. He supposed that was possible.

“Papa gave her the shuriken,” Isabelle ventured just as quietly. Griffin glanced at her only to find her staring out the window. “Mama said he . . .” She lowered her gaze to her hands, still gripping the cell phone, in her lap. “She said he made a huge production out of it: threw this big party and invited everyone in the family—at least, everyone in Japan . . . Then he made this speech about how proud we were of her for completing her training, and he . . . he gave them to her.” She heaved a sigh and shook her head sadly. “And I . . . I was too busy to go. That’s what I told Papa. *Too busy* . . .”

“Stop that,” he commanded a little more fiercely than he’d have liked. Reacting to the rising anxiety in her youki, he couldn’t help himself, either. “You didn’t do anything wrong; you hear? A-and you said, yourself . . . she’s fine, right? So . . . don’t do that.”

She sniffled loudly but nodded. “You’re right,” she murmured, forcing a thin smile despite the worry that lingered in the depths of her gaze. “She’s strong . . . and she’s an Izayoi. Izayois are made of tougher stuff than that.”

Still, the last thing he’d ever do was to tell his mate that he wasn’t quite as optimistic, no matter what he thought, and, stealing a quick glance at Isabelle, he felt the familiar and uncertain flicker of hope ignite. She’d taught him that hope, that love, that *she* could work miracles in her own way . . . Maybe her peculiar kind of magic . . . maybe it could work again . . .

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Alexandra Izayoi leaned to the side, staring through the microscope with her right eye as she held the tiny recorder in her left hand, hovering near her mouth. “Day seven . . . The structure of the cell hasn’t altered in the least. It seems to be a very hearty strain . . . If I could isolate the part of the code that controls that behavior . . .”

The soft knock on the door interrupted her observation, and with a start, she glanced over her shoulder and smiled. “I seem to recall that a certain lady promised to have dinner with me,” he reminded her.

She winced as she glanced at her watch then smiled contritely. “Oh, I’m sorry . . . I guess I just lost track of time.”

John chuckled and held up a white deli bag. “That’s all right . . . I assumed you’d be here, so I figured that the mountain must go to Mohammed.”

“Aww, what a sweet mountain,” she teased, setting the recorder aside and strolling over to peek into the bag he held out to her. “Ooh, my favorite!” she gasped, pulling the fat, batter-dipped fish plank out of the bag with a delighted giggle.

John grasped her waist and gently set her atop a high worktable, a good-natured smile lighting his eyes. “And chips . . .”

She laughed as he pulled a steaming hot slightly thick wedge of potato out of the bag and held it out to her. “What would I ever do without you?” she teased.

“Well, you would probably waste away to nothing since you never remember to feed yourself when you’re deep in the throes of your research,” he teased back with a gentle smile.

“I’m almost done here,” she offered as her conscience pricked her. She hadn’t meant to stand him up . . . “How about a late dessert? My treat?”

He chuckled and leaned forward to kiss the tip of her nose. “Dessert sounds great, but I’ll buy. After all, I was going to take you to *Maison d’ Moi*, and I daresay that would have cost more than *Briney’s Fish and Chips* . . .”

She laughed and shook her head, figuring that she wasn't going to win an argument against John or his wallet. "Oh, I almost forgot . . ." He trailed off, opening his light jacket and carefully pulling a single long stemmed white rose from inside. "I don't think it got too rumpled . . ."

Alexandra rolled her eyes but lifted the blossom to her nose, closing her eyes as she inhaled deeply. "Dinner was more than enough, you know."

He shrugged. "I saw it as I was passing by—the florist was getting a late night shipment—and—"

"And you sweet talked the florist into letting you buy one after hours?"

His cheeks pinked just slightly as his smile turned bashful. "Something like that."

She laughed as her cell phone rang. Staring at her greasy fingers, Alexandra made a face and stuck out her chest at John since she'd dropped the device into her breast pocket earlier. "Would you mind . . .?"

Eyebrows rising in an affectation of mock surprise, he uttered a soft, warm chuckle. "Why, Lexi . . . is that a come-on?" he teased.

She rolled her eyes but grinned. "My hands are all messy," she complained, "and you bought the messy dinner, so the least you can do is answer my phone."

He chuckled, reaching out with his index and middle finger to snag the phone from her pocket. "Hello?" He winked at her as she hopped down to wash her hands in the utility sink. "No, it's John . . . Lexi's washing her hands. How are you . . .? Oh? Anything I can help you with?"

Wrinkling her nose—no one had bothered to get out more paper towels to fill the

dispenser, Alexandra knelt down to rummage through the supplies under the sink.

“What . . .? My God . . . When?”

She slowly stood, frowning at the strange tone in John’s voice. The man she knew was utterly unflappable, wasn’t he? So why did he sound so . . . so . . . worried . . .?

“Yeah, don’t worry . . . Listen, you’re breaking up . . . I’ll tell her.”

He let the phone drop away from his ear by degrees, his expression inscrutable as his gaze sought out hers, and when their eyes met, he grimaced slightly then quickly looked away. “J-John?”

He squeezed his eyes closed at the sound of her voice, quietly closing the phone on the heel of his hand before he cleared his throat and shook his head. “That was . . . that was Isabelle,” he said, his voice hushed, reluctant. He still refused to look at her. “Samantha . . . She’s missing.”

She stared at him for a moment before striding over to him and pulling her phone out of his hands. After dialing the phone, she paced the floor, gritting her teeth as she waited for an answer. In the background, she could hear John talking on his phone, making reservations on the next international flight to whatever United States destination he could get.

“Lexi?” Isabelle answered on the second ring.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, ignoring standard pleasantries. “John said that you told him that Sam’s missing?”

Isabelle sighed. Alexandra didn’t miss the slight tremor in the sound. “They sent her out on a hunt, and she hasn’t checked in . . . and they found one of her shuriken . . .”

“Well . . .” Gripping her forehead, she stopped her pacing when John’s strong embrace wrapped around her. “I-I don’t understand . . . She wouldn’t have left one of those behind . . .”

“I know. Anyway, that’s about all I know. Mama and Papa are on their way.”

“Me, too,” she blurted. “I’ll be right there.”

“Okay,” Isabelle agreed. “Be careful.”

“Yeah.”

Snapping the phone closed, Alexandra leaned against John for a moment, allowing herself to draw on his quiet strength before pulling away and turning to face him.

“I already made the reservations,” he told her calmly. “The flight leaves in twenty minutes, but I talked to them and explained things, so they’ll get us through security fast. If we hurry, we can make it.”

Shaking her head, she turned her troubled gaze on him. She’d give anything to have him go with her, but she wasn’t entirely sure she could or should ask that of him . . . “But you . . . what about your business?”

He shot her a dark look that could easily have passed as his version of the ‘don’t-be-stupid’ expression, if it were possible for John to have one of those. “Business is business, Lexi, but you’re far more important to me than it is.”

Nodding slowly, letting her eyes drop away from him, she blinked rapidly to dispel the sheen of moisture that his words had stirred in her. The sudden and shocking image of Samantha’s smiling face shot through her head, and she bit back a sob with a vicious



## Chapter 7

### Choices

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Samantha sat perfectly still, watching for the moment she knew wasn't far off.

Having spent the last few days doing nothing but observing her captors—especially the one who watched her at night, she knew his habits now, and while he might vary them slightly, changing the times that he performed certain tasks, he still did them, and all she had to do was wait.

He always slipped a fresh bowl of dog kibble into her cage, followed in close order by the replacement of the water bowl. She'd figured out quickly that both of those were drugged, and while she didn't know exactly what kinds of drugs they'd added, she wasn't about to eat or drink any of it, either.

Her gut instinct had been that maybe they'd figured out who her family was, that they'd ordered her brought in an effort to extort money or something from them. She'd really believed that, hadn't she?

At least, she had until today . . .

For the first time since her forced incarceration, they'd let her out of the cage, though only after cuffing her wrists—the cuffs had ofuda in them, she could tell. Then they'd chained her ankles, too. The length of chain that separated them was barely a foot long, sorely inhibiting her movements. At the time, though, she was so relieved to have been finally allowed out of the cage that she'd told herself that she didn't care what they were planning to do to her.

Or so she had thought.

They'd strapped her to a table and had drawn near a pint of blood from her before hooking her to an array of machines that she didn't understand. They'd spent hours poking her with various gadgets, trying to get readings from this and that, and while her grasp on English was damn good, she'd faltered in the face of the more technical jargon. Lying in the center of the gurney she'd been strapped to, she'd had nothing to do but watch the clock, making little to no sense of the snippets of conversations that she was able to hear.

But the most alarming thing wasn't the testing, no. It was the gradual realization that her senses were slowly dulling. Not surprising, she figured, considering she hadn't had anything to eat in days, and nothing to drink, either. Stubbornly refusing to eat or drink anything they offered her might not be good for her system, but without knowing exactly what they'd added to everything they'd offered her, she couldn't take that kind of risk, could she?

It seemed to baffle the good doctors, too, actually. Every day, they carefully measured all food and water, and every morning when those things were taken away, they were carefully measured again. It—she'd come to figure out that she was the 'it' in question—was eating a little bit, wasn't it? So why wasn't it showing any reactions to the drugs they'd added to the food and water?

The automatic response to that was to add more, and they did. Every night after her keeper had fallen asleep, she took a handful of the kibble, carefully discarding it one piece at a time down the drain beneath her cage. '*Down with the rest of the shit,*' she thought to herself one night. For some reason, that thought had made her laugh, and she'd had to cover her mouth with both hands to keep from waking the guard . . .

The water was easier to dispense of, though. Every morning, roughly an hour before the

white coats arrived, her warden—the name patch on his standard issue security shirt read ‘Dustin’—turned that damned power hose on her, and more often than not, he upset the bowl during his careless spraying. She wasn’t entirely sure how much pressure went into that stupid hose, but it was enough to leave marks on her when it was directed at her, and she’d come to know the stinging pain of the water’s spray very quickly.

Her waning energy, though, was what worried her the most. If she continued to refuse to eat, then she’d continue to grow weaker day by day, as well, and last night as she’d lay in the crate wide awake, a thought had occurred to her . . .

Every time Dustin sprayed the cage, some of the back spray hit the ofuda that the holy man had papered the top with, and as she looked a little closer, she realized that some of them were already starting to peel back, not that it mattered too much. What interested her the most was that the writing on those pages was starting to run and drip, thus altering the original orientation, and while she wasn’t entirely certain it would matter, she couldn’t help but think that it might.

But the main thing that she’d learned was that the reinforcing cage that retracted into the floor didn’t dare get wet. When retracted, it was hidden beneath tented metal plates that tilted down to the concrete and the drain hole beneath the cage, and once those walls were retracted, Dustin never, ever raised them again.

With a little more luck, too, she might be able to escape . . .

Frowning as she glanced around, she had to squint to make out the clock on the far wall, and even then, she wasn’t entirely sure if it read two or three in the morning. She’d watched closely enough to understand that the cage panel would not shock a human in the same way it would a youkai or hanyou, and, as luck would have it . . .

*‘It’s now nor never,’* she told herself as she carefully scooted toward the door of the cage. She knew well enough that her plan was chock full of holes and variables that she

couldn't control or even anticipate, but how much of a choice did she really have? As it was, she'd been lucky to have escaped detection tonight since Dustin always shut off all the lights except for the security ones that were always lit, and once he'd put the food into her cage, he never, ever bothered to look in on her again, so with the added cover of the makeshift paper roof, she'd been able to keep in the shadows with her hair caught back under the patients' smock that they'd tossed at her earlier—after cutting away her shirt with a surgical scalpel.

Her cheeks burned hotly at the memory of that awful encounter. Two of the older doctors didn't say much, but a couple of the younger ones . . . Well, she really didn't care to remember their assessments, anyway.

Shifting so that she could keep an eye on the sleeping guard, Samantha bit the inside of her cheek as she inched her hand between the bars, half expecting to be zapped with the painful jolt despite her human form. Nothing happened, and when she pressed on the seal that locked the door closed, she almost yelped in relief when the soft beep sounded twice.

Pulling her hand back into the cage, she scooted over again. Luck might be with her, but she knew well enough that she couldn't rely on that, alone. After all, given the season, she wasn't at all positive that she'd be back in her hanyou form before the white coats arrived for the day . . .

Letting her head fall against the cold bars of her prison, Samantha wondered exactly how long she'd been here. For as near as she could tell, it'd been at least three or four days since the holy man had brought her in, but she couldn't say for sure, how long he'd had her before that, either. She'd spent the majority of the last couple of days wondering whether or not her family had figured out that she was missing yet. She supposed that they might have—after all, she never had called in after she'd brought down Benoit, but maybe not . . . They'd surely come looking for her, wouldn't they?

Heaving a sigh, she winced. Of course they would. They all worried about her so much that she'd be stupid to think otherwise. Trouble was, she wasn't entirely sure she wanted them to do that. As badly as she wanted to escape, she couldn't help but worry that somehow, one of them would get caught, instead, and that just wasn't something that she dared to dwell on.

She'd heard the rumors before, of course: the disappearances of youkai that couldn't rightfully be explained. At the time, it had made sense, the idea that the lesser youkai were just too geared toward infighting that it couldn't be helped, but . . .

But just how many had the holy man caught? How many of them had been here before her? During her first full day here, she'd sensed them, hadn't she? The lingering auras of some nameless, faceless youkai, and she'd overheard enough whispers to know that she certainly wasn't the first . . .

And if they'd been here before, where were they now . . .?

*'Maybe I don't want to know . . .'*

Nodding slightly, Samantha sighed. That thought had come from somewhere deep inside her, and under ordinary circumstances, she might have thought it was her youkai voice, but that voice never spoke to her when she was human, and at times like that, she missed it so fiercely that it made her want to scream.

She was under constant surveillance, and she knew it. She hadn't missed the camera affixed to the metal support beams high above the cage, and while she thought that was the only one in this room, she knew that there were at least five in the examination area where she'd spent the bulk of yesterday.

If only she had an idea of how long they'd keep her here . . . if only she knew why they wanted her . . .

The first, snaking tendril of a fear so deep and so vast that it could engulf her turned her stomach.

'No,' she told herself stubbornly, biting the inside of her cheek so hard that she drew blood. *'Stop that! If I let myself think that way, I'll go crazy . . .'*

The first stirring of change was so subtle that she nearly missed it: the first palpitations of the resurgence of her youkai blood. Glancing fearfully at the sleeping guard, she grimaced when she realized that he was starting to wake. Holding her breath as the throbbing in her body grew stronger, she watched in horror as Dustin yawned and stretched, sparing a moment to turn his head from side to side, his neck cracking as his joints popped. "Damn cold," he muttered as he hauled himself out of the chair and shuffled toward the panel by the door to lower the reinforced sides. They dropped down and locked into place as he headed for the water spout that jutted out of the cinderblock wall. The creak of the turning handle made her grit her teeth, and all at once, she felt her ears open up as a deluge of her returning senses told her that the transformation was complete.

She couldn't help cringing into the corner of the cage when he turned the power nozzle on her, gasping loudly at the frigid flow of water that pounded against her. Shifting her body so that her legs took the brunt of the onslaught, she huddled down as far as she could and waited for the torrent to end.

It seemed to her that he took an inordinately long time hosing her down this morning, but he finally finished. "Aww, shit," he grumbled, kicking her cage when he realized that he'd soaked the food bowl again—an offense that he'd already gotten griped out for once since they couldn't get an accurate reading of how much she'd eaten during the night. She hissed as a painful shock shot through her and leaned forward on her hands as she willed the pain to pass.

She didn't have enough time—certainly not enough to will away the pain. With a nasty chuckle, he turned to walk away, and Samantha reacted.

Shoving herself against the door and thanking whatever gods there were above since they'd also removed her ankle restraints the night before, she was out of the cage before the jolt could hit her. She didn't bother trying to subdue the guard, either, her intent clear. Shoving him out of the way, she bolted for the door, only to yelp in pain when Dustin caught her ankle and wrenched it hard.

She tumbled to the floor seconds before he landed on her with a dull grunt. She started to push him off with her feet but stopped when the 'snick' of a gun being cocked resounded in her ear.

Dustin grinned nastily as he pressed the barrel of the gun to her head. "Give me a reason, bitch," he hissed.

Something inside her snapped, and with a vicious shriek, she shoved him hard as the reverberation of the firing gun echoed in the room.

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Bas rubbed his forehead as he trudged up the steps onto the porch of the small house he shared with his mate. It had been one hell of a night. To be honest, he figured that he should probably still be over at the mansion, and he would have been, but his father had told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to go home and check on his mate.

He sighed. *'What the hell is happening?'* he asked himself for what had to be the millionth time. The sun was rising out over the ocean, and normally he loved to take the time to look at it. This morning, however, he didn't see it.

Evan was gone. He'd been at the mansion when Bas got there; he'd stopped by to bring their mother a present, or so he'd claimed. Sometime during the briefing in Cain's study, though, he'd slipped out, and by the time they'd managed to reach him on the phone, he was in Chicago. "*Why the fuck are you all sitting around discussing it?*" he'd growled. "*Scratching your asses isn't going to find her, is it?*"

The hell of it was that Evan was right.

Cartham, Larry, Evan, and Gunnar were already out there scouring the area for any signs of Samantha, and with InuYasha and Ryomaru on their way from Japan, he didn't doubt for a moment that they'd follow the others straight away.

No, the real trouble had started when Kichiro had strode into the mansion, walked right up to Bas and had proceeded to deck him. He wanted to go to Chicago, too, but Cain and Ben had advised against it—at least until after he'd calmed down a little bit. That had started a nasty round of name calling and finger pointing, none of which was actually helping the situation in the least, but damned if Bas could blame Kichiro for that, either.

He'd grab a shower, a change of clothes, check on Sydnie and head back to the mansion.

The door opened suddenly, and Bas blinked. Sydnie stood there, eyes suspiciously bright, with a suitcase in her hands—her suitcase.

"Kitty? What are you doing?" he barked.

Sydnie's face took on a defiant scowl, and she shook her head. "I'm going to Chicago, puppy," she replied in a calm, smooth way.

He reached out to stop her when she tried to breeze past him. "What?"

She sighed. "I'm going to Chicago . . . It's my fault she's out there. I've got to find her . . ."

"No," he stated in a tone that should have left no room for discussion. "You can't. You're pregnant!"

"I know that," she shot back, her emerald eyes flashing dangerously. "I have to. She's somebody's kitten, and kittens shouldn't ever, *ever* be lost!"

Bas heaved a sigh and tugged her back gently albeit firmly. "Sydnie . . ."

She struggled against his hold then suddenly collapsed against his chest, shaking so violently that Bas winced as he held on tight. "Will you go, puppy?"

Closing his eyes, he let go of her and took her bag, leading her back into the house. "Sydnie . . . you're pregnant . . . you need me . . ."

She shook her head. "What I *need* is for one of us to go! I told you to send her! I told you . . .! Sebastian, I . . ."

He stared at her for a long moment, knowing in his heart that her mind was made up—knowing it but hating it, just the same. The pleading in her gaze, the unshed tears that he could smell and just couldn't stand . . . and it wouldn't matter if he told her that this wasn't her fault, deep down, she would think that it was. "Okay, kitty," he murmured. "Okay."

She didn't look relieved, but she nodded curtly. He stared at her for a long moment before turning on his heel to retrieve his sword, hung over the mantle in the living room. Staring at it before he reached out to take it down, he smiled sadly of the pewter keychain that dangled from the hilt: the dog etched against the flat, silver moon . . . The last time he'd drawn this sword, he'd used it to protect Sydnie, and maybe, in some strange way,

that was his reason now, too.

“Bring her home, Sebastian,” Sydnie murmured, leaning in the doorway as she watched him.

Bas turned the sword over in his hands and nodded once. “I’ll do what I can.”

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“Where is the rest of my money?”

“It’s too early in the day to be talking money,” Dr. Harlan insisted as he waved a Styrofoam cup of coffee in Kurt’s general direction.

“By my calculations, you owe me another five, so either you authorize it right now or I start deconstructing the barrier outside that I set up to keep this place safe.”

Harlan grimaced, his already ruddy complexion darkening a few more shades. “I’d love to authorize the money,” he hurried to say, tossing the cup into the nearest trash can. “Unfortunately, I can’t.”

“And why’s that,” Kurt asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“There was an . . . incident this morning. The demon was shot.”

“What?” Kurt exploded. Without waiting for further explanation, he turned on his heel and strode down the hallway to the holding area, only to stop short at the sight of the empty cage. He could hear Harlan trotting up behind him, but he was sorely pressed not to wring the bastard’s rubbery neck. “You killed it?” he bellowed.

“No,” Harlan rushed to say, his eyes widening as he took a step back away from Kurt’s very obvious irritation. “We didn’t kill it. It tried to escape, you see? The night guard shot it.”

“Shot it.”

Harlan nodded enthusiastically. “The others are treating it now. They think it’ll be fine—a clean wound straight through the shoulder . . . the thing is, this one . . . We feel that we need a little extra security, obviously. Dustin—the guard—said that it literally broke out of the cage—the cage *you* constructed, right? And you don’t have any problem controlling it, right?”

Kurt drew a deep breath, satisfied, at least for the moment, that his prize catch wasn’t dead, though he wasn’t entirely certain that he liked where Harlan was going with his current commentary, either. “What’s your point?”

Harlan’s smile was downright smug as he rubbed his chubby hands together. “Now, we can authorize the rest of your payments in increments, provided that you do a little side work for us . . . as the night watch.”



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
... Night watch ...?

## Chapter 8

# When Night Falls

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“I want to see it.”

Dr. Harlan glanced around as though he were trying to find a way to put off Kurt’s demand. “See it?”

“Yes, damn it, see it. I want to see it. Now.”

“I’ll take you to see it as soon as we have an agreement.”

Narrowing his eyes, Kurt wondered briefly if Harlan really understood exactly how daring he was truly being, and not for the first time, he realized once more, exactly how much he actually could despise another human being. That the good doctor held Kurt in about the same level of regard was arbitrary, as far as Kurt was concerned. If the man walked out in front of the noon cross-town bus, he certainly wouldn’t lose any sleep over it, and if he didn’t need the damn money, he might consider doing the shoving, himself . . .

“Do we have a deal?”

Gritting his teeth—this entire situation was just getting stupider and stupider, in Kurt’s opinion—he narrowed his eyes at the doctor. “You want me to work as your night watch? For money that you already owe me?”

Harlan twittered out a chuckle that sounded entirely forced. “Of course not; of course not! We’ll pay you what we were paying Dustin.”

“And how much were you paying Dustin?”

Harlan’s broadcast-journalism smile dulled just a notch. “Seven-hundred a week plus medical and limited dental.”

Kurt snorted. “Forget it.”

Harlan grimaced. “N-nine hundred a week, no benefits.”

“I don’t need your damn benefits,” Kurt reminded him, “and I make way more than that for one night’s work as it is. If that’s your best offer—”

“Fifteen hundred a week,” Harlan blurted as his skin shifted from blotchy red to a sickly shade of doughy yellow.

Kurt didn’t respond right away. Frankly, he was surprised that Harlan was willing to offer him that much. “I want to see it,” he stated again.

Harlan finally nodded and led the way down the hall to a darkened observation room that looked into a clinical white room devoid of most everything though there were a few monitors spewing out steady streams of papers that pooled on the floor. A couple doctors moved unobtrusively around the sturdy table where the little demon was secured via metal bands. It appeared to be unconscious, but Kurt noted the tape and gauze that covered its shoulder. Dark red blotches marred the stark white of the bandages, and he frowned at the IV that had been pushed off to the side. “It was shot, right? Why aren’t you giving it blood?”

Harlan sighed and shrugged, as though it were of no consequence. “It got agitated when they tried to hook it up to the IV, and its vital signs evened out well enough that we figured that we’d just monitor it. For now.”

“And Dustin?”

Harlan forced a weak laugh. “It knocked him out just after he shot it. No permanent damage, but I don’t imagine that he’ll be willing to mess with that kind again.”

“Has it spoken to you yet?”

The doctor frowned and slowly shook his head, his expression stating plainly that he thought that maybe Kurt had been smacked upside the head at one point or another. “She doesn’t talk,” he said slowly.

Kurt snorted indelicately, pinning Harlan with a bored sort of glower. “Those things spend their lives trying to deceive humans. Don’t be so quick to pin a sex on it. You only see whatever they want you to see. Don’t you get that? And it *does* talk.”

“Are you saying that . . . it . . . has spoken to . . . you?”

He didn’t have to be brilliant to see the mocking glint in Harlan’s eyes. “You’ve heard other ones speak, haven’t you?”

Harlan forced a condescending laugh. “I’d hardly call broken sentences and series of growls ‘speaking,’ Doc,” he replied. “Those other ones you’ve brought in . . . Are you sure that they’re not more advanced than that one? All it does is sit around and watch—watches everything—but it doesn’t speak. I doubt it knows how.”

Kurt didn’t reply to that despite the irritation that surged inside him. What kind of game was it playing, anyway? He knew damn well that it did talk—it had talked to him a few times—even when he hadn’t wanted it to do any such thing . . .

The doctors stepped over to check it, mumbling things to each other. Kurt turned away, satisfied that it was being taken care of. “You’ll authorize the first payment now,” he warned.

Harlan considered that then nodded. “You’ll understand that I’d like you to start as soon as possible.”

Kurt nodded. He wasn’t overly pleased with the circumstances, and he was even less impressed with the feeling that he was being manipulated. Maybe he could coerce Harlan into paying, but it wouldn’t be worth it in the end.

Besides, as loathe as he was to admit it, Kurt figured that it wouldn’t be a bad idea to do a little observation of his own. After all, it was the most powerful demon he’d captured. He might as well see if he could figure out anything else about it while he collected the money that was due him.

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Cain Zelig glared at his eldest son in abject disbelief. “I forbid it,” he stated flatly.

Bas shook his head and heaved a sigh. “Dad, this isn’t actually open to debate. I’m going. I have to.”

“What you have to do, Bas, is to take care of your mate,” Cain shot back. “She needs you *here!*”

Raking his hands through his hair in abject frustration, Bas glared at his father and stubbornly stood his ground. “Yeah, that’s just it! She was walking out the door with her suitcase this morning! If I didn’t agree to go, she was going to! I *have* to do this!”

“Damn it! You’re the next tai-youkai,” Cain maintained. “Why don’t you start acting like it?”

“You think I’m not?”

“No, I don’t!”

Slamming his hand down on the desk so hard that it groaned under the strain, Bas met his father’s formidable glower without backing down. “What am I supposed to do? What if it were Mom?”

Narrowing his eyes dangerously, Cain shook his head. “I’d damn well stay home with her if she were pregnant!”

Drawing a deep breath, Bas pressed his lips together and considered his words. “Dad . . . Sydnie was the one who said that Sam could handle this job. She’s the one who backed her up, and she feels like it’s her fault that Sam’s missing now. You, better than anyone, understand what guilt can do to someone. I’ll be damned if I’ll let Sydnie suffer that kind of thing.”

Cain heaved a sigh. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, Bas’ words struck home, and as much as he hated the idea of his son taking off while his mate was pregnant, he had to concede that he *did* understand. “All right,” he finally said then held up a hand to stop his son’s departure. “But this is non-negotiable, though. I want her to stay here where we can keep an eye on her. A pregnant woman shouldn’t be left alone.”

Bas nodded though his scowl didn’t diminish. Cain knew, too, that the cat-youkai was very likely going to balk at the idea of staying at the mansion, but Bas understood Cain’s reasoning there, too. “Okay,” he agreed, glancing at his watch. “I’ve got time to go get her.”

Cain watched his son go and sighed. He felt as though he were going crazy, plain and simple. In the hours since they'd figured out that Samantha really was missing, he'd had to make more judgment calls—calls that he could only hope would bring her home in the end . . . and the worst of them had been the decision that he, of all people, couldn't go.

Actually, it was Ben who had reminded Cain of the problems that his accompanying the search party could present, and though it had ticked him off completely, he really did have to admit that Ben . . . well, he'd been right.

*“Don't be stupid, Zelig! You cannot go,” Ben said when Cain announced that he was going, too.*

*“What do you mean, I can't?” he snarled, glaring at Ben furiously.*

*“Think about it,” Ben went on, ignoring Cain's outburst completely. “You have no idea where she is or why. If someone managed to find out that she was related to you or to Sesshoumaru . . . You'd be playing right into their hands, wouldn't you?”*

*“She's my granddaughter!”*

*“And you're the tai-youkai, and whether you like it or not, you have to be the tai-youkai first! You know that!”*

*“Forget it, Ben! You can talk all you want, but that doesn't mean that I'm going to listen to you, either,” he growled. “She's my granddaughter,” he repeated in a calmer tone.*

*“No, Daddy . . . Ben's right.”*

*All heads had turned in time to see Bellaniece slip into the study. Worry tightened the skin at the corners of her eyes, but she looked determined as she approached the assembly of men. “Bellaniece . . .”*

*“Ben’s right,” she stated once more. “You’re the tai-youkai. You can’t . . .” Trailing off as she swallowed hard, she shook her head before continuing. “You’re needed here.”*

*“Don’t worry about it,” InuYasha grumbled. “We’ll find her. Besides. You’d just get in the fucking way.”*

Letting out a deep breath as he brushed away the memory, it was all he could do not to growl in utter frustration. Sometimes he really despised his position as tai-youkai . . . Unable to do anything but sit here and watch as everyone else went out to look for Samantha . . . Well, it was enough to drive him insane.

The familiarity of a comforting aura seeped over him, engulfing him like an invisible embrace, and he looked up in time to see his mate slip quietly into the office. She managed a very thin smile that he knew damn well was solely for his benefit, and, after looking around to make sure that she wasn’t interrupting, she slipped across the floor and around the desk to hug him for real. “You looked like you could use one of those,” she pointed out, her voice muffled by his shirt.

Wrapping his arms around her, he sighed, accepting her offer of comfort. “I’m completely useless,” he mumbled, wishing for the life of him that it wasn’t true.

“Why do you think that?” she asked. There was nothing condescending or humoring in her tone.

No, she sounded genuinely puzzled, and he shook his head. “I can’t even go and . . . and look for her. I can’t do anything but sit here and be tai-youkai.”

“Well, that is a pretty important job, isn’t it?”

He snorted but didn't bother to answer since it was debatable—at least in his mind. “Is it?”

“Papa said that I should tell you not to worry.”

Cain rolled his eyes since he highly doubted that InuYasha Izayoi said anything of the sort. “Oh, did he?”

She smiled wanly. “Maybe not in those exact words . . .”

“Yeah, I didn't figure.”

“I'm sure that this is all a huge misunderstanding. She'll come . . . come walking through that door any minute, and . . . and she won't understand what the fuss is all about.”

Cain almost smiled at Gin's optimistic words. He might have done it if she didn't sound like she couldn't even believe herself. “If she walked through that door right now, I'd let her say whatever the hell she wanted,” he admitted quietly.

Gin sighed and gave him a squeeze before leaning back to stare up at him. “You look like you could use some coffee, Zelig-sensei . . . How about I go make you some?”

He flinched inwardly, knowing damn well that her show of bravado was strictly for his benefit, and he tugged her back into his arms, against his heart, and closed his eyes. “How about you just stay here, like this . . .? Better than coffee, at any rate.”

“Have you talked to Bellaniece yet?”

“Uh, no . . . haven't had a moment to stop and think until now.”

“She’s in her room. She said she was tired right after Kichiro and Sebastian left, but I . . . I doubt she’s actually sleeping.”

Cain nodded slowly, and this time, he didn’t draw Gin back when she stepped away. “Definitely coffee,” she stated briskly. “I just finished a nice cake to go with it, too.”

He watched her go as the frown on his face deepened. He’d been the one who had taught her how to smile and fib when she didn’t want anyone to know the truth. He’d taught her how to do that so long ago, and while he knew that she had the best of intentions always, he had to wonder how much of a toll it was taking her on her now.

Still, there’d be time enough to talk to her later, to remind her that it was all right if she wanted to cry, but right now . . .

Stuffing his hands deep into his pockets, he strode out of the study and headed for the stairs.

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“How was your flight, my lady?”

Bellaniece didn’t turn away from the window as she stared at the long driveway for any sign of movement. “It was fine,” she murmured. “Not much turbulence, and . . . and it was quiet.”

She felt her father’s youki draw near, felt it envelop her moments before his arms followed suit. Leaning back against him with a heavy, tired sigh, she indulged the warmth and safety that she felt for several seconds, drawing on his strength to bolster her

own. “Where is she, Daddy?” she whispered though it didn’t sound much like a question in her own ears.

“They’ll find her,” he assured her, giving her a tight squeeze as he buried his nose in her hair.

“Why does she want to be a hunter? I’ve never understood that . . .”

Cain sighed softly, his breath stirring her hair. “She wants to protect people . . .”

Bellaniece nodded vaguely, her gaze fixed out the window. “And who will protect her from people?”

She felt him stiffen, his body recoiling from her softly uttered question though there wasn’t a trace of it evident in his tone. “We . . . we will.”

She laughed sadly: a sound devoid of humor but full of a quiet sense of irony. “She would have called if she could . . . Even when she was younger and still in school, if she were even a few minutes late, she always called . . .”

“They’ll find her,” Cain stated once more, his voice a little stronger, full of quiet conviction. “They’ll find her, and they’ll bring her home.”

“Of course,” she replied, turning away from the window and smiling up at her father. She wasn’t sure if the pained expression on his face was because he didn’t believe the show of emotion or if it was because she was entirely too convincing with her lie. “She’s all right,” Bellaniece went on, carefully straightening Cain’s rumpled shirt, smoothing the fabric with light brushes of her palms. “I can feel her. She’s out there, but . . . but I can feel her.”

Cain nodded and tried to smile. It fumbled and faltered and failed, but she had to give him credit for trying. *'Daddy has always tried to smile for me, because that's what he does . . .'*

"I need to get downstairs and call Ben. He and Myrna were checking into anything that could be a possible lead," Cain said apologetically.

Bellaniece nodded and quickly leaned up to kiss his cheek. "It's not your fault, you know," she said.

He blinked a few times and turned his face away. "I know," he muttered. "I'll be in the study if you need me."

She watched him go with a frown, knowing and hating that he would dare blame himself over Samantha's disappearance. It was no one's fault, was it? It couldn't be.

Because, if she were honest, Bellaniece would have to believe that if it really were someone's fault then the precarious tightrope she was navigating with her own emotions . . .

It would break, wouldn't it . . .?

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Sam flinched and uttered a low moan as the intrusion of consciousness invaded her senses. Her shoulder ached with a vengeance, and it took a few minutes for her foggy mind to recall the reason. She felt the cold grate under her, and she knew without opening her eyes that her attempt at escape had failed.

She'd been shot, hadn't she . . .?

Even worse, as the memories floated back to her, she remembered that she'd been so angry—angrier than she'd ever been before—that she'd actually attacked the guard. As if something in her brain had snapped, she could recall the absolute rage that had engulfed her when the man had dared to put his gun against her head. She'd seen in his eyes, hadn't she? He wanted to pull that trigger, and yet the anger had obliterated all sense of who she was and what she believed. To protect humans . . .

She'd kicked him off as he fired the gun. She could remember the searing pain as the bullet had ripped through her shoulder, and curiously, it had only served to deepen her resolve, and while she ought to have just got up and ran, she'd actually wanted . . .

Trailing off as a mortification so deep and consuming overwhelmed her, she covered her face with her hands, ignoring the pain in her shoulder. She was everything she professed to protect others from—a terrible creature who gave in to their hatred and animosity. How many times in her life had she heard those kinds of actions condemned on the lips and tongues of those whom she loved? And yet she'd almost . . .

Sitting astride the guard, she'd had her hands clasped around his neck, choking off his oxygen supply, her brain lusting for the scent of his blood. Pressing her claws into his flesh as the coppery tinge of his blood filled her nostrils . . . the perverse pleasure that coursed through her—the desire to kill him stronger than any insular emotion she'd ever felt before . . .

She'd felt the small pricks, secondary to the puffs of air as the tranquilizer rifles shot their venom into her, but whether it was her anger that steadied her or the intrinsic thought that she'd rather be dead than trapped there like a wild animal, she wasn't sure. It was something else she hadn't understood—the sudden desire to die . . .

They'd shot her again and again with those silly little darts, over and over again. She must have passed out finally—blessedly . . . and she couldn't remember anything else.

What would her family say if they found out what she'd done? Harming humans . . . that was wrong—always wrong. Weaker than youkai, weaker than hanyou, it was her job to protect them, wasn't it? If they found out, they'd be disgusted by her and by what she'd done, and worse, they'd be disappointed in her . . .

She didn't deserve to be a hunter—the one thing she'd always wanted, and now . . . Even if she managed to escape from this place, what right did she have to profess to be a hunter? Allowing herself to be consumed by that hatred—that anger . . . How could she possibly say that she wanted to protect humans when she'd had so little regard for one of those lives . . .?

So lost in her own miserable thoughts, trying to refute the truth in her mind as she struggled against a melancholy so overwhelming that she felt as though she were drowning in a pitch-black ocean, she didn't hear the approaching footsteps.

The definite scuff of metal against metal got her attention, though, and, peering up between splayed fingers, she watched as the ruined layer of ofuda was stripped away. The blank expression on the holy man's face swam in and out of focus. Samantha gasped—she hadn't meant to, but she really hadn't thought she'd ever see him again, either. For the first time in days, a strange sense of hope swelled in her though she didn't dare stop to consider why that might be. She knew that he didn't like her. She understood that well enough. Still, he really hadn't been *unkind* to her, either, and that . . . well that had to mean something.

He shot a cursory glance at her before spreading a layer of thick, opaque plastic over the cage. Then he placed another layer of sutras under a second layer of plastic. He'd apparently figured out that the ofuda had been ruined in the course of spraying out the cage. Then he secured the plastic with a layer of duct tape that he wrapped around the cage a few times for good measure.



## Chapter 9

### Futility

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He couldn't believe it, and he wouldn't have if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes. Okay, sure, he'd dealt with enough of those beasts to know that they possessed an uncanny ability to heal, but . . .

The gunshot wound was completely healed over. It wasn't scabbed over or anything; it was gone. A trace amount of pinkness remained along with a slight indentation in its flesh, but the wound, itself, was gone.

*'Three days to heal a wound that would have taken a human months to recover from . . . months and a few reconstructive surgeries, and even then, they probably wouldn't be able to regain full mobility in that limb . . .'*

Kurt gritted his teeth. Those things were damn near indestructible, weren't they? Maybe guns could kill them, and maybe there were other ways of bringing them down, but if they were left to their own devices . . .

Leaning back in the squeaky metal office chair with a loud sigh, he found himself staring thoughtfully at the cage yet again. He'd done that a lot the last few nights since he'd unwittingly found himself employed: staring at it, trying to figure out just what was going through its head . . .

And growing more and more irritated at the fact that it wouldn't speak now. It ticked him off more than he cared to admit, actually. That damn Harlan, staring at him as though he thought that Kurt had managed to sprout two heads, Kurt could understand

exactly what the bastard was thinking, that Kurt was just as freakish as the demon was . . . He'd *heard* it speak, hadn't he? So why was it refusing to now?

And why did it stare at him as though it were trying to make him understand something . . .?

Just now, though, it was facing away from him, slumped against the bars of the cage. It never raised a fuss at night, never tried to escape. Whether it heard and remembered the threat he'd muttered in its ear the day he'd delivered it was debatable. He was inclined to believe that it was probably trying to formulate another plan to get away, that maybe it was simply attempting to lull him into a false sense of security, just waiting for him to lower his guard. Too bad that would never, ever happen . . .

'*You're thinking about it too much,*' he told himself sternly. He was letting it become something akin to an obsession. The overwhelming sense of anger that he felt whenever he stopped to consider that the little demon refused to talk, coupled with the indulgent looks he'd intercepted from the good doctor and his damn cronies . . . They thought he was crazy, didn't they? They thought that he was a bare step above those monsters on the proverbial food chain . . .

Already preoccupied by the strange aura that he'd felt when he'd stopped at a corner newsstand on his way to the facility, he'd been late to work since he had turned around to follow it.

He'd lost track of it, though—another thing to irritate him, he supposed. The most puzzling aspect of it had been that it had felt so much different—so much stronger—than that of the little demon. Was that really possible? The strength evident in its aura had, quite frankly, stunned him. Common logic told him that the aura he'd felt earlier couldn't have come from just one of those creatures. Still . . .

Shaking his head, he snatched up the newspaper and snorted inwardly.

It *was* just one of them. How he knew that, he wasn't sure. It might have had something to do with the uniformity of it, but the thing that had drawn the most thought from him was the conflicting sense of agitation in the aura, a restlessness that seemed sorely out of place . . .

*'Like it was . . . looking for something . . .'*

Brushing that stupid thought aside with a mental shrug, Kurt scanned the headlines. The city was still working to recover from the storm that had taken out the power in some sectors the night he'd captured the little demon. There was an updated report on a missing five-year-old boy that said that there were no new leads . . . a shoot-out between inner city gang members and the local authorities had resulted in three deaths . . . If those monsters didn't destroy humanity, it was a safe bet that they'd manage it, on their own, anyway, he figured.

*By the time he'd made it to the facility, Dr. Harlan had been in quite a snit. "I thought you'd backed out on our deal," he'd growled in a completely mulish tone.*

*Kurt offered no apologies. "I'm here now," he pointed out.*

*"Yes, well, I had plans and didn't really want to sit around here to wait for you," he remarked in an accusing tone.*

*"I didn't realize that you had to wait for me to get here before you could leave," Kurt said, carefully tugging off his black leather gloves and stowing them in his pockets.*

*"Ordinarily, no," Harlan went on with a long sigh. "I wanted to ask if you wouldn't mind doing something for us, though."*

*Kurt almost refused on general principle. Wasn't it enough that he was spending his time, babysitting the little demon since no one else was adept enough to do it? "What?" he asked instead, inflicting just enough boredom into his tone to let Harlan know that he wasn't really committing himself, one way or another.*

*Harlan shook his head, obviously not quite as stupid as Kurt had figured. "She's losing weight," he stated flatly. "We weren't entirely certain the other day when we had her under observation since we hadn't actually gotten her weight, to start with, but, well, look at her . . ."*

*Kurt reluctantly followed Harlan's gaze through the one way mirror that looked into the holding block. He personally didn't see any real difference. Huddled as tiny as it could be inside the small cage that was its prison, he glanced back at the doctor and shrugged. "It looks fine," he remarked, adding extra emphasis on the 'it'.*

*Dr. Harlan stared at him for several moments before he shrugged. "If you say so, Doc . . . It'd be a shame if it got sick, though. It's not good business to keep making payments for dead merchandise."*

No doubt about it, Kurt loathed that man . . .

Tossing the newspaper down, he stood abruptly, sending the metal chair scraping across the floor as he stomped over to the chart that they'd been keeping on it. Frowning at what he read, though, he wasn't entirely sure what to think. According to the charts, it was eating well enough. Okay, so maybe it could stand to eat a little more, but then, maybe it didn't need to. After all, kept in the cage as it was, it certainly didn't get any decent amount of exercise. Harlan had made it sound like the beast was losing mass amounts of weight, didn't he?

But no, the food was weighed before it was put into the cage, and it was weighed again when they brought it out again in the morning. According to the reports, it was eating about six to ten ounces of food every night—not a lot, but enough . . . Water readings

were nearly always inconclusive, but that didn't really concern him. It was a rule of nature that animals behaved instinctively when it came to the basic needs of food and the like. Hunger was hunger, wasn't it? It'd be a strong enough impetus to break even the strongest of wills.

And just what did he care whether or not the damn thing starved itself? If it were really stupid enough to do that, then it would just mean one less demon in the world, and that, in Kurt's opinion, was more than a little all right . . .

*'Yeah, except for one minor detail, genius . . .'*

Wrinkling his nose at the not-so-gentle barb, Kurt rolled his eyes and tossed the chart onto the high workstation.

*'Even if you don't care if it dies, maybe you should consider that if it does, they'll stop paying you. Harlan said as much, didn't he?'*

Head jerking up as his eyes flared wide, Kurt couldn't contain the hostile snort that slipped out of him. "The hell . . ." he muttered, stomping across the floor. He knelt beside the cage, glaring at the huddled form within. It didn't turn or even acknowledge that it had heard his approach, but those strange ears atop its head twitched and turned to listen to the sound of his movements, no doubt.

He didn't say anything as he stared into the darkened cage. The layer of notes that he'd plastered all over the top of it had only served to lend to the darkness that lingered within. The creature didn't move, but even from his vantage point, he could tell that it really did seem a little smaller—not an easy feat, considering it was never what he'd have considered 'large', anyway.

"Quit trying to starve yourself and eat your damn food," he muttered, knowing full well that the demon could hear him.

Its movement was little more than a whisper of sound, a flutter in the dark that he almost didn't see. He couldn't miss the brightness behind those eyes, though—those fathomless eyes that were entirely too human despite the unusual oblong pupils. It was trying to tell him something, he could feel it. Narrowing his gaze, he tried to understand. “What? You'd prefer a different brand?” he growled.

Its eyes blinked quietly, and it shook its head, ears flattening slightly—almost drooping.

Those ears, though, were a reminder—a blunt statement that shot through to his core. It was trying to garner his sympathy, wasn't it? Too bad he didn't have any, not for the likes of a demon. A hot and putrid anger roiled within him—anger at himself for deigning to try to communicate with that thing. In the half light, it was almost easy to forget that those eyes belonged to a monster. With a mental snort, Kurt pushed himself to his feet and turned on his heel to stalk away again.

*‘As if that would ever—ever—happen!’ he scoffed. ‘Forget what that thing is . . .? I'd sooner forget to breathe . . .’*

It pissed him off, no doubt about it. He knew damn well what those vile monsters were capable of. He'd seen it, first hand. The carnage and destruction—the encompassing hatred, and he'd always understood that there was no rhyme or reason, that they simply despised him because he could see what they were: because they could not hide from his eyes. That one might look less intimidating on the outside. That meant nothing when it came right down to it. If anything, maybe that made it a much tougher adversary, one that could hide behind the guise of an unsettling face.

He could feel its eyes like a physical thing. Not a sound had come from the cage, and he knew that it hadn't turned around, but it was watching him—studying him. Well, it could study him all it wanted. There wasn't a damn thing that it could do about the situation, after all . . .

Snatching up the newspaper once more, Kurt dropped back into the chair and propped up his feet, set to ignore the monster, even if it killed him.

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Kichiro stopped, draping his hands on his hips as he stared at the dingy alleyway that he'd already surveyed a thousand times, and while he knew deep down that there was nothing else to find here, he couldn't help but look anyway.

There was no rhyme or reason behind his logic. He wasn't entirely certain why he kept feeling like he needed to check this place over and over again. Maybe it was the inner knowledge that this was the last known place where his daughter had been, and though he knew that the area had been looked over many, many times, he couldn't help but feel compelled to check it over just one last time.

There was a certain measure of comfort in knowing that those who loved Samantha were dispatched all over the unfamiliar city, and common sense told him that the ones who were here were the undisputed best of the best, as far as tracking went. If anyone could find her, they could. That had become his mantra over the last few days since he'd gotten the news. It was a father's worst nightmare, wasn't it? A missing daughter—a daughter whom he loved—and no one knew where she was . . .

"The old man said you were out here."

Kichiro turned at the familiar sound of that voice, the familiar brush of that youki. He knew it almost as well as he knew his own. Unable to summon even the smallest fragment of a smile as his twin brother slowly got to his feet—he'd dropped from the buildings above to land in a crouch behind him, Kichiro nodded and turned his attention

back to the cold brick and mortar of the alley. “She was here,” he murmured, his eyes scanning the surroundings, searching, searching for just a sign—a *hint*—something . . . anything . . .

“Sorry I couldn’t get here sooner,” he said.

Kichiro nodded. He knew that Ryomaru had been out on a hunt when the call had come. It had probably frustrated him almost as much as it had frustrated Kichiro that he hadn’t been able to drop everything. “It’s all right,” Kichiro heard himself saying in a quiet tone that just didn’t sound like him. Raw, rough, almost ragged, it sounded almost as broken down as he felt.

Ryomaru sighed, stepping over to touch the walls. He was searching for any lingering traces of her *youki*, wasn’t he? The same thing that Kichiro had done only moments before . . . “Cain briefed me on the flight over. Said she, uh . . . she took a scent tab.”

That comment drew a wince from Kichiro. If he’d beaten himself up once, he’d done it a million times already. Those scent tabs . . . those were his creation, weren’t they? Designed to protect the twin brother who stood next to him, the very last thing that he’d thought at the time was that those very same things would mean the difference between tracking his daughter through the streets of Chicago and not being able to find her at all. He knew her scent. He knew every nuance of it. The sweet little girl who smiled at him and blushed when her mama asked her about boys at school . . . the little girl who had come to him, her mother’s eyes staring at him out of the face that reminded him of the baby sister whom he loved . . . She’d had such an air of determination around her, as if she’d known that he wasn’t going to like what she wanted to tell him.

And, *kami*, he hadn’t. The words she’d said that fateful day had struck a fear in him so deep, so dark, and while he’d never discourage his children from doing what they felt in their hearts was the right path, how desperately had he wanted to tell her that she just

wasn't old enough, big enough, tough enough? How desperately had he wanted to tell her that it . . . It scared the hell out of him, didn't it?

*"Papa . . . I've decided. I want to be a . . . a hunter."*

And he'd prayed that it was just a phase, hoped beyond hope that she would realize that the life of a hunter wasn't really what she wanted at all. But he'd said nothing as she'd progressed, had held his own council as his baby had grown up, training harder than any of the boy ever could, working harder than she needed to, driven by the inner knowledge that girls weren't supposed to want to be what she wanted to be.

"Morio took off to join up with Bas and Evan," Ryomaru went on, letting his hand drop away from the walls with an irritated expression on his face.

"Morio came, too," Kichiro mused as he turned around to re-examine the area where the remains of Benoit had been found along with one of Samantha's shuriken.

Ryomaru followed along. "Insisted," he ventured. "He's a better tracker than he was a hunter, anyway."

Kichiro nodded, hunkering down in the slightly paler outline where the youkai's body had exploded. The impact had, in essence, sandblasted the dingy sidewalk beneath him. Touching the area, he gritted his teeth. Even the lingering traces of Benoit's youki had been swept away—or washed clean in the rains that had hammered Chicago . . .

"Toga had a fit. Sesshoumaru said that it'd be better if he stayed where he was since they don't want to draw too much attention here. You heard from anyone?"

Kichiro shook his head as he stared at the surroundings once more. What was it about this area that brought about such an understated sense of foreboding? "Nope," he replied absently, still glancing around. The common thought was that somehow, Samantha

might have been taken by someone who knew who she was, at least in a broad sense. Though they might not have realized that she was a hunter, there was certainly no mistaking her looks. The silver hair and hanyou ears were enough to proclaim who she was, even if they didn't know exactly how she was connected in the family. If anyone wanted to get to Sesshoumaru or InuYasha or even Ryomaru, what would be better than getting their hands on one of their own? Even then, the theory had been suggested that maybe someone had mistaken the girl for Gin. After all, the wife of the North American tai-youkai would make a hell of a bargaining chip, wouldn't she?

But to him, Samantha was none of those things. She wasn't his sister; she certainly wasn't a bargaining chip. She was his daughter—his baby girl. How the hell would he find her . . .?

"This place is weird," Ryomaru remarked at length, stating the thing that Kichiro had thought, himself.

Kichiro nodded. The layout of the area was . . . well, unsettling. He'd seen streets in different old European cities that reminded him of this one: a broad street square with buildings curving around it like an old town square or something. The buildings here were as dilapidated and tired as the ones in Europe had been quaint and warm—what was it that he couldn't put his finger on?

Ryomaru sighed and pushed himself to his feet, venturing around as his critical eye took in the area.

Kichiro stood, too, heading in the opposite direction, hoping against hope that he could find something—anything—that might help to at least shed a little more light on the situation.

And yet he couldn't understand just who would want to hurt her, either. The precious little girl with the brightest eyes and happiest smile . . . everyone loved her, didn't they?

She was the daughter that he'd never had to Ryomaru, the little girl who never, ever got tired of listening to InuYasha and Kagome's stories . . . the sensitive young woman who'd worn black to her sister's wedding as a form of protest since she'd developed a huge crush on the groom . . . Whenever he turned his head, the fading peals of her laughter reached him, and every single sound dug a little deeper into his heart . . .

"Oi," Ryomaru called, snapping Kichiro out of his reverie. "Kich . . ."

Standing up, he loped over to where Ryomaru stood just inside the opening of an alley on the far side of the square. He was holding a soggy slip of paper—it looked like a yellow Post-It note, and when Kichiro drew closer, Ryomaru shook his head. "Damn it . . ."

"What's that?" Kichiro asked, holding out his hand.

Ryomaru turned the bit of paper over, examining the backside, then held it out to him.

Kichiro's eyes widened, and only sheer will kept him from jerking his hand away. The ink on the page had faded and smudged, but the lingering pulse of spiritual power was still contained in the document. Narrowing his eyes, he could make out the slightly misprinted kanji. "What is this?" he muttered, more to himself than to his brother.

Ryomaru grunted. He was staring around at the other entrances into the square—there were three others. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "If it's what I think it is . . ."

"What do you *think* it is?" Kichiro demanded a bit harsher than he'd intended.

"We need to take it to the old man," Ryomaru stated. "I think . . . I think it might be a barrier marker."

“A barrier?” Kichiro repeated, shaking his head in confusion. “No . . . only a really powerful miko or monk could construct something like that. Someone like Mama or . . .”

Ryomaru was slow to look at him, and when he did, Kichiro blinked. He’d never seen Ryomaru look so serious, had he? “The old man will know if that’s what it is,” he said.

Kichiro nodded as Ryomaru dug his cell phone out of his pocket. It still didn’t make sense, though. As far as he knew, there wasn’t another who possessed the holy power necessary to construct a barrier, and even if then, it couldn’t possibly be any ordinary person, anyway. The ability to contract a barrier like that took training—years of it. ‘*Still*,’ he thought, staring at the scrap of paper. ‘*What else could this possibly be?*’

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Samantha stared at the form huddled on the small metal cot not unlike the one she’d found herself on a few days ago in that tiny room without windows. The holy man—she’d come to understand that the white coats called him ‘Doc’—hadn’t moved in a while. Even from where she was in the center of the room, she could make out the light, even sound of his breathing, and she knew that he was sleeping.

In fact, he’d been sleeping for a while. Still, she wasn’t sure how heavy of a sleeper he was since this was actually the first time she’d seen him doing that.

But he’d been watching her fairly closely tonight, and while she wasn’t entirely sure why, she knew that it had something to do with his earlier irritation when he’d come to hunker down beside the cage. For a dizzying few moments, she’d honestly thought that he’d understood what she was trying to tell him. If he had, though, he hadn’t remarked on it, and then he’d gotten so angry . . .

She didn't understand his anger, either. She'd already sensed the underlying emptiness inside him, and she could tell that there was a lot of pain deep down that he was trying to hide. She wasn't entirely sure how she knew that, but somehow, she did . . .

Shaking her head, she licked her lips, grimacing at the sting of her cracked lips brought on by the trace moisture provided by her tongue. She'd almost broken down and drank some of that tainted water earlier. Kami, she was thirsty—and hungry: so hungry. Recalling the times over her life when she'd thought that she was hungry, she slowly shook her head. She hadn't understood then what it meant to truly be hungry. She'd never felt the cramps that were so bad that she felt as though her entire being were being twisted in half, the ones that were so bad that she had to bite down on the inside of her cheek, her mouth flooding with blood as she struggled to keep herself from crying out. She wasn't entirely sure how long she'd be able to refrain from eating the food they provided. She could feel her strength ebbing away. It was a gradual thing, and maybe that horrified her more than anything. She wasn't allowed any sort of exercise, confined for most of the day and all of the night in a three foot wide, four foot long, three foot tall cage that she barely had room to turn around in . . . She was filthy, she was exhausted, and she was sore.

Carefully scooping up a handful of the dog kibble, she brought her hand up and stared at it. Her hand was shaking when she lifted one off her palm, holding it in front of her face as she considered what it would mean to eat it.

With a marked grimace, she dropped the kibble down the drain under the cage, frustrated with her own perceived weaknesses. If she gave in, they'd win, wouldn't they? If she gave in and went along with their perceived ideas, would it really help her situation?



# Chapter 10

## Proof

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Kurt frowned at the slightly smashed and dented cheeseburger that he'd picked up earlier. Warmed up in the utilitarian microwave just a little too long, the bun had taken on a somewhat rubbery consistency not unlike shoe leather, he supposed.

It was his own fault, he figured, for not paying a lot of attention to the food. Staring instead at the motionless figure inside the cage, he almost thought that it wasn't paying any attention to him at all if it weren't for the way its ears kept twitching.

Giving up all pretenses that he was actually going to eat the sandwich, he sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. The demon's ears twisted around, almost facing backward as the small, dull rattle sounded again.

Narrowing his gaze when the demon turned its head just enough to look at him out of the periphery of its vision. Reaching for his book, he opened it in his lap, watching through the veil of his bangs that had fallen forward as he wondered just what the hell it thought it was doing.

It didn't do anything for a few minutes, and he could sense that it was still eyeing him though he couldn't rightfully tell. Still, he trusted his instincts well enough. '*Sneaky beast,*' he thought with an inward sneer. '*Just what the hell are you up to, anyway?*'

He pressed his lips together in a thin line as he turned the page.

He knew that it was up to something, just like he knew that it could talk, just like he knew that the few times he'd actually deigned to approach the cage, it had been trying to tell him something even though it stubbornly refused to speak. In the week that had passed since he'd started watching it at night, he'd tried a few times to get it to talk. He knew it could; it had very obviously spoken to him when he'd had it at his office. So why was it playing dumb now?

Just last night, he'd stomped over there and all but demanded that it speak though to be completely honest, he hadn't really expected for it to comply. After all, if it was going to, it would have started to do so already, wouldn't it?

But it had stared at him for moment with an intensity in its expression that was almost uncanny. Lifting its eyes as though it were looking at something high above the both of them, it had slowly lowered its gaze again. Too bad Kurt wasn't in any sort of mood to play the little demon's games, and he'd stared at it for another moment before stomping away, muttering curses under his breath since he wasn't sure why he even bothered to try to get it to talk.

Okay, so that wasn't completely true. He knew damn well why he had tried. With every day that passed, he couldn't help but get a little more irritated that it was making him look like a damn fool. Those research bastards were laughing at him, and he knew it, thinking that he'd finally cracked and lost his mind. Talking to those beasts? Yeah, he could understand why they'd think he was mad. The other demons he'd brought in had spoken to some extent, even if it were confined to single words and guttural sounds—normally curses, of course. But this one . . . maybe it was more advanced than the others had been, and maybe that was the reason why it could talk. That was probably also the reason why it was refusing to do it now.

Even still, he was about to decide that he was being paranoid, after all, when it finally moved. Leaning forward in a very quiet movement, he hear the strange scrape as it sat up again, cradling its hand to its chest as it scrunched up its shoulders as though it were

protecting something. A moment later, he heard the dull rattle—come to think of it, he'd heard that sound quite a few times over the past week, hadn't he—and before he could stop to think about it, he stood up and crossed the floor to the cage.

“What do you have?” he demanded.

The little demon jerked like he had startled it then shot him a perfectly blank look.

“Don't give me that,” he growled, reaching into the cage to grab its arm. It was faster, shoving against the side as it scooted back, still cradling its hand against its chest with its back smashed against the bars. It didn't wince at the jolt it got for rattling the bars of the cage too hard, but Kurt didn't miss the suspect brightness enter its gaze, either. “What do you have in your hand?” he demanded again.

Damned if it didn't keep staring at him in that completely stupid way. Kurt had had enough of its games. Slamming his hand against the release lock, he yanked the door open and reached into the cage, grabbing the little demon and dragging it out. “Do anything stupid, and it'll be the last thing you ever do,” he warned as he seized its wrist and pried its fingers open.

It uttered a small sound—almost like a smothered sob though its eyes remained steady and clear, and it crumpled to the floor, suspended only by his hand around its wrist as he stared at the six kibbles that it had been holding onto.

A fleeting surge of emotion swept through him; one that he didn't want to identify as he let go of its wrist and let it drop. The dog food fell to the floor in a deafening clatter in the silent room. Staring at the demon for a long minute, Kurt slowly shook his head. “I wasn't going to take it away from you,” he muttered, unsure exactly why he was saying anything at all to the beast. Maybe it was just the understanding that, at least at that moment, it was far more pathetic than he'd ever been . . .

It didn't try to move. It didn't try to fight him. Hunched over on the floor, its dull, grimy hair hanging into its face in nothing but a filthy, smelly old hospital smock, it didn't look even remotely fierce or tough, and while he wasn't fool enough to underestimate it, he certainly didn't fear it, either.

"Get in there," he ordered, tapping the cage with the toe of his boot.

It didn't move. Kurt scowled, unsure why he felt like it wasn't trying to disobey him as much as that it really couldn't do it. Narrowing his eyes as he carefully regarded it, he had to admit that in the harsh light of the fluorescent bulbs, it really had diminished. Shoulders thinner, bonier—he could see that despite the thin smock that covered it, everywhere he looked, he could make out angles and bones protruding just under its skin.

What the hell was it doing? That wasn't right . . . if it were trying to eat the food, then why was it so damn frail looking?

Something *wasn't* right, was it? Unable to make sense of it, Kurt glanced at the empty cage then stopped. '*The . . . drain . . .*'

And he understood. It hadn't been holding onto the food to eat it; it had been deliberately dropping them down the drain to make the researchers think that it had been eating all along . . . What the hell was it doing? *Trying* to starve itself . . .? Enraged that it would try to do something as stupid—irritated as hell that he had almost—*almost*—felt a little sorry for it—Kurt uttered a frustrated growl and gestured at the cage once more. "Get in there."

It swayed slightly but made no move to comply. Kurt snorted and grasped its wrist again, its pulse erratic and thready under his fingertips as he brought it to its knees and pushed it toward the cage. It gasped but complied, crawling somewhat slowly back into the darkness of the cage once more as Kurt shoved the door closed behind it and secured the locking mechanism.

*'What the hell do I care if it starves itself?' he fumed as he stomped back over to the desk once more and plopped into the chair. Irritation rising rapidly—it was trying to make him feel sorry for it, wasn't it? Was that its new ploy? Well, he was on to it, damn it. There was no way on earth that he was going to fall for that, just none.*

*'Yeah, but . . . if it starves itself. . .'*

Ignoring the voice in the back of his head that he'd always thought sounded quite like his father, Kurt snatched up the newspaper and loudly shook it out.

*'If it starves itself,' the voice stated again, 'you know well enough that Harlan won't finish paying you.'*

Damned if that didn't get his attention entirely. Unfortunately, that was entirely accurate, and he knew it. If something happened to the little demon before they finished paying him, then he was just shit out of luck, wasn't he?

"Eat," he stated, crossing his arms as he glowered down at the huddled form inside the cage.

It didn't move.

Rolling his eyes, he wondered how bad it would be if he dragged it out of the cage and force-fed it . . . As if it gave a damn about what happened to it—he didn't—really didn't—but there was no way that the stupid creature was going to cost him money, too . . .

And he really was pondering doing exactly that when it finally sat up, its eyes glowing in the semi-darkness.

“Eat,” he demanded once more, hunkering down to get a better look at it.

Its only response was a slow blink.

Glancing at the food and water bowls, Kurt snorted. Somehow during the ruckus—maybe when he’d dragged it out of the cage earlier—the water had been upset. The empty bowl was upended on the side of the food dish, and with a muffled curse, Kurt reached around, unlatching the small panel that popped up so that he could grab the water dish and pulled it out of the cage. Heaving a sigh, he stomped over to refill the empty bowl and returned, shoving it into the cage without spilling it though a bit did slosh precariously.

The little demon watched him, its eyes still alert enough. No sooner had he slipped the panel back into place than it sat up in the cage, grasping the water bowl in shaking hands as it lifted it to its face.

Why did it surprise him that it drank from the bowl as though it were a cup—albeit a very large one? Sputtering, choking, it gulped down the water as fast as it could, its throat bobbing in greedy swallows as dribbles of liquid spilled onto its chest.

Shaking his head in abject disgust, Kurt rolled his eyes and snorted. “Jesus, you’d think that it hadn’t had a drop to drink in . . . *Shit!*” he bellowed as realization dawned on him. If it had been dumping its food down the drain, would it actually have been drinking, either? With a muffled curse, Kurt reached through the bars and smacked the bowl out of its hands. It clunked uselessly against the grate floor, the metal clanking with an empty ring as the demon slumped back against the cage wall.

Heaving a sigh, Kurt pulled his hand out, resting his elbows on his bent knees as he continued to regard the strange little demon. It stared at him for a long moment before leaning to the side as a pitiful wretch brought every last drop of water right back up again. “Damn it!” Kurt hissed, hopping back out of the way. The demon heaved a couple times,

resting on its hands and knees, and as irritated as Kurt was, he couldn't help but notice that the only thing that it threw up was water . . . "God, you're stupid—*stupid!*" he growled, pushing himself to his feet and stomping over to the water spout. With a deft tug, he loosened the power hose and strode back over to the cage once more.

The little demon saw the bright yellow hose and pushed itself back into the deepest corner of the cage, eyes squeezing closed, ears flattening as Kurt turned on the nozzle with a vicious yank. The water shot out in full force, drenching the cage and the floor beneath, cleansing away all traces of the vomit and washing it harmlessly down the gurgling drain.

The water pressure suddenly dropped off, and Kurt glanced over his shoulder. The hose had kinked up near the faucet. Transferring the nozzle to his left hand, he turned around and gathered up a handful of the hose, then gave it a swift flick. He repeated the motion a few times. It finally worked the kink free, and Kurt's left hand tightened as roughly four-thousand-five-hundred pounds of pressure shot through the hose once more.

Wincing when the cold spray rained down on him—he'd been holding it upright while he messed around with the kink—followed in short order by a spray of sparks and billowing smoke. Kurt dashed out of the way as the little demon's shriek rang in his ears. Shutting off the water tap and dropping the hose, he spun around in time to see a few errant sparks showering down from the observation camera mounted high above the cage.

He snorted, his expression darkening. He supposed that those damn bastards would tell him that he had to pay to replace that . . . '*Like hell,*' he thought with an inward snort.

The rattling of the cage drew his attention, and he narrowed his gaze when he noticed that the little demon was clutching the cage bars and staring at him again.

Suddenly, the memory of it, raising its eyes and lowering them again—how many times had it done that in the last week, anyway—shot through his head. The camera . . .? Was that the reason that it had refused to speak . . .?

“P-please,” it whispered, its voice much rougher than he remembered. It cleared its throat and swallowed hard. “Water . . . please . . .”

His gut instinct was to ignore the quiet plea, but his next thought was far baser than that. If it came to harm before they finished paying for it . . .

Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head, his irritation skyrocketing at the very thought of pandering to the demon.

Too bad he sorely needed that money. Some of his equipment was in dire need of replacement, and unfortunately for him, all of that stuff cost a lot more than he'd like to think about. Damn it all . . .

Stifling a sigh, Kurt strode forward to retrieve the bowl. This time, though, he'd be damned if he'd let the beast make itself sick all over again . . .

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“How can that be possible?” John Troyer asked, gaze intense as he stared at Ben Philips.

The panther-youkai shook his head slowly, his eyes shifting to the women assembled around the dining room table in the Zelig's kitchen. They were trying to catch up on small-talk—that was what Isabelle had said with a tight little smile that was supposed to pass for her normal show of ebullience. Gin Zelig, her daughter, Jillian . . . Bellaniece Izayoi with Isabelle and Alexandra . . . Sydnie Zelig and Meara Izayoi . . . Nezumi and

Kagome . . . Some of the strongest women that Ben had ever had the pleasure of meeting were gathered there, and not one of them would give in to what had to be the natural desire to cry . . .

“Your guess is as good as mine, but there’s no doubt about it. It was definitely an Ofuda. InuYasha verified it in the field,” Ben commented without taking his eyes off the women.

John sighed and nodded, his expression shifting into a thoughtful scowl. “What does that mean?” he finally asked.

Ben rubbed his temple in an infinitely tired sort of way and shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine, but . . . but if that’s the case, then it’s safe to assume that we’re not dealing with youkai here. Youkai can’t create a barrier, not using a medium like that . . .”

“Then who the hell has her?” John hissed, careful to keep his voice lowered.

“Who do you think?” Griffin Marin, the surly bear-youkai rumbled. Expression even darker than normal, he shook his shaggy head and let out a deep breath. “It’s not a question of who has her; it’s a question of what the hell they want to do to her. Zelig heard anything yet?”

Ben shook his head and jerked his head as he turned around, indicating that the men should follow. He led the way to Zelig’s office and waited as Cain paced the floor with the telephone receiver plastered against his head. “No, I’m not overreacting,” he growled, clenching and unclenching his fist by turns. “Yeah, I hear you. Call me if you find anything else.” Lowering the device away from his ear, Cain didn’t glance at the men as he strode over to his desk and dropped the receiver into the cradle. “Nothing,” he stated in answer to the unvoiced question. “Not a damn thing.”

“They’ve only been out there a little over a week, Zelig. They’ll find her,” Ben remarked mildly.

That comment earned him a darkened scowl as Cain shoved a chair out of his way and strode over to the wet bar. “A little over a week with some bastard who possesses holy powers? I don’t like the odds, Ben.”

“Isabelle’s mama keeps saying that she’s alive,” Griffin muttered. “A mama would know, right?”

Cain grabbed a clean glass and sloshed a good amount of scotch into it before draining and refilling it before he trusted himself to speak. “A mama might believe what she wants to believe . . .” Heaving a sigh, shaking his head, Cain downed that drink, too. “I know she believes it, and I . . . I want to, too . . .”

“Then do it,” John commented with an offhanded shrug. “It’s a little premature to give up hope.”

Cain stared at him for a minute then nodded. “Sorry,” he muttered, waving a hand as he pulled more glasses up onto the counter. “I’m just . . . frustrated . . .”

The men stepped over to take the drinks that Cain offered—even Griffin, surprising as that was. The bear didn’t normally drink at all that Ben knew of, and he didn’t now, either, simply holding the glass though he made no move to lift it to his lips. “We’re all frustrated, Zelig,” Ben pointed out gently.

Cain shook his head and grabbed his glass, pacing the floor in a caged sort of way. “What good is being tai-youkai if you can’t do a damn thing to protect the ones you love? I should be out there, looking for her, and I’m . . . here . . . Completely useless . . .”

“You’re where you’re needed,” Ben said. “Bellaniece needs you. Her mate is out there looking for their daughter . . . The last thing that she needs is to be worried about you, too.”

There was truth in that, and Cain knew it. Still, logic was just not something that Cain had a mind to hear at the moment. “Have you gotten that list from Myrna? The ones that could be capable of possessing spiritual powers strong enough to construct a barrier?”

“She’s still working on it,” Ben supplied, settling into a chair across from Zelig’s desk. Griffin sank into the other one as John slumped against the wall just inside the doorway.

Griffin cleared his throat, his gaze fixed on the amber liquid in the glass he held. “How long are you planning on keeping this from the women?” he asked quietly. There was no censure in his tone, no underlying hints that he disagreed with Cain’s decision on the matter.

Cain heaved a sigh and plopped down at his desk, raking his hands through his hair before answering. “I want more facts before I tell them,” he said. “They’re still . . . they’re still hoping that this has all just been some sort of misunderstanding . . . a *miscommunication* . . . or something . . . Telling them about the barrier . . . they would know what it means. They’d know that someone had meant to trap Samantha; that it was premeditated, but they—*we*—don’t know why.”

Griffin nodded. “That’s what I figured,” he mumbled.

John shook his head. “I cannot fathom anyone wanting to do this to her . . . not to Samantha . . . It just . . . it doesn’t make a damn bit of sense.”

“If it made sense, we’d know where she is,” Gavin Jamison stated as he walked through the doorway. “Any news?”

“No,” Ben stated. “Nothing.”

“Did you find out anything?” Cain interrupted impatiently.

Gavin let out a deep breath as he headed for the wet bar. “No. Dad said that he’s still checking into a few things, though. Said he’d give you a call later.”

Cain nodded though he didn’t look at all appeased. “Thanks.”

“What about this ofuda?” Ben asked.

“InuYasha said that he’d send it back with Larry. Maybe Kagome can tell us more about it.”

“But she doesn’t use them, does she?” Griffin put in.

“No, she doesn’t, but InuYasha said one of their friends from the old days did and that maybe she’d be able to verify that it was a barrier anchor.”

Gavin strode back over with a bottle of water in hand. “I’d like to go,” he stated. “I can help them track her.”

Cain rubbed his forehead and sighed. “That’s the problem, Gavin. There’s no trail to track, and as much as I hate to say it, the more people we send in, the more attention it may draw. Whoever has her knows about our kind, and sending in more people might work against us in the end.”

Gavin nodded despite the frustration in his expression. “All right, but if you need me . . .”

Cain managed a tired smile that wasn’t nearly as bright as it normally would have been. “If this drags on . . .”

“I can go, too, if you need me,” John added.

Griffin nodded once.

“Did Attean know anything?” Cain asked.

Griffin shook his head and set his untouched glass on the desk. “He said he hasn’t heard anything from the Chicago area, but he did say that he’s heard rumors about some guy professing to be able to see youkai out near New Mexico.”

“New Mexico,” Cain repeated thoughtfully. “Sound like anything, Ben?”

“I’ve heard that, too, but from what I gathered, the guy also believes that we’ve got a little green man locked up in Roswell and that the assassination of President Werner some years ago was a sign of the Apocalypse.”

“Did he make Myrna’s list?”

Ben raised his eyebrows and shrugged. “Yeah, he did. The woman is thorough, I’ll give her that much.”

“So it’s just a waiting game,” Gavin muttered.

“Yeah,” John replied then heaved a sigh of his own. “It’s the figuring out what the next move is that’s the problem.”

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Samantha reached for the bowl, only to be stopped short when the holy man uttered a terse sound. “Slowly,” he warned, narrowing his gaze to emphasize his point. “Puke again, and you can lie in it all night, for all I care.”

She grimaced but nodded, her cheeks pinking as she brought the bowl to her lips again.

“Sip it,” he commanded.

The water on her parched tongue felt like heaven, and she had to fight against the basic instinct to drink it down fast. She knew that he was right, though. After so long a time without eating or drinking anything, her body just wasn’t ready to cope with anything in large amounts. Curiously enough, though, the sip she’d swallowed only served to make her thirstier—so much so that she had to grit her teeth together hard to keep from trying to gulp it down again.

He didn’t say anything as she slowly sipped the water. His expression still suspicious, he just watched her without batting an eye.

Even sipping the water was creating a bit of trouble for her. The coldness made her shake violently as her stomach knotted up a little. Still, she wanted the liquid—wanted it worse than she’d ever wanted anything before, and when the holy man reached through the bars of the cage to take it away, she couldn’t help the growl that escaped her as she bared her fang and wrapped her arms around the bowl to protect it from him.

“Give me that,” he snarled, yanking it away from her despite her attempt to keep him at bay. She whimpered quietly as he turned it sideways and pulled it out of the cage. “Why the hell weren’t you drinking the water they gave you?” he growled.

Letting her head fall back against the cage bars, Samantha swallowed a few times to keep the liquid down. “They drug it,” she murmured, her eyes slipping closed of their own accord.

He snorted and shook his head. “Well, I doubt they poison it,” he muttered. “Don’t you dare throw up again.”

She almost smiled—she tried to. She was simply too exhausted to manage it. “Thank you,” she whispered as her eyes slipped closed again.

He grunted something completely unintelligible and shoved himself to his feet to dump the bowl.

*‘Stupid demon,’* he thought as he emptied the bowl in the sink. Didn’t it figure that it would just make itself sick if it tried to drink the water too fast again? It apparently hadn’t learned anything from the first experience, and he had thought that it might have possessed at least a base level of pseudo-intelligence . . . Obviously wrong . . .

*“They drug it . . .”*

Rolling his eyes, Kurt set the bowl aside on the drainer board beside the deep sink. It wouldn’t surprise him if they did exactly that, though the kind of drugs was debatable. He knew damn well that the researchers were concerned over its apparent weight loss, so it was entirely possible that they were adding vitamins or something—though Kurt highly doubted that, too.

Shuffling back over to the desk, he dug his notebook out of the knapsack he wore pretty much everywhere, flipping through the pages until he found a blank one. He’d figured that, if he had to spend his time babysitting the damn thing, he might as well see what he could learn about it, too. The information might come in handy later, after all, and while he’d never actually considered studying them, himself, he had to admit that the idea held merit. It wasn’t as though he wanted to know what made them tick, no, but any information he could gather about them might help him in the end.

There were things that he'd already noticed about them from dealing with others. The first time he'd cut off one of their hair only to discover that it was completely grown back by morning had been odd. At the time, it had been the simplest way to remove the duct tape that he'd used to gag the beast, and that one was no different, he thought as he glanced thoughtfully at the cage. The little demon wasn't moving, obviously content to sleep after having that drink of water. Its hair had done the same thing—had grown back over night—when he'd cut it off to remove the gag lest it should have choked on its own vomit.

The claws had also grown back. The researchers weren't smart enough to keep them cut back, either, but Kurt was. No, he'd seen first hand what those claws could do, hadn't he? That memory was more than enough to make him cut them every morning before he left for the day.

He'd seen signs of the uncanny ability to heal before he'd ever encountered the little demon. A couple of the larger targets had been harder to secure, especially in his first days of hunting them. He'd learned a lot along the way, and he'd seen a lot of things, and while he had never gone out of his way to doctor any of those damn beasts, he had noticed that their wounds seemed to close up fairly quickly. Still, it had been a bit of a shock to see exactly how fast that process could be. The little demon had definitely been shot clean through the shoulder, and yet there was no lingering scarring or anything to attest to the wound that he knew it had suffered.

All in all, the more he learned about them, the more frightening they became. How could a race of beings that powerful, that strong manage to hide and why? Why would they bother to do that, in the first place? With a swipe of their claws, they could rend human flesh without a second thought. Lips twisting into a cynical sneer, Kurt snorted and jotted down a few notes. Unless they were lying in wait, biding their time for something . . .

Deliberately ignoring the voice in the back of his head that sounded entirely too much like Old Granger and his asinine babble, Kurt rubbed his forehead as the pen dropped from his fingers. There was only one real goal that he had in mind—that he'd ever had in mind. He was going to find those demons that had destroyed his family . . .

And he was going to kill them.



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
That one is a little ... stupid ...

# Chapter 11

## Concession

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Samantha groaned and rubbed the back of her neck, almost happy to be back in the relative quiet and safety of the cage. At least when she was in there, they left her alone, didn't they, and as much as she loathed the confinement, the knowledge that they were leaving for the night served to calm her nerves just a little.

They'd drawn more blood from her today—maybe three pints of it. Focusing her gaze on the clock mounted high on the wall, she'd lain perfectly still, telling herself over and over again that she didn't care, that they couldn't break her, that one day, she'd be free again.

As if it hadn't been humiliating enough to have been bound to the table by a series of restraints, they had also removed her smock for the duration, too, leaving her completely naked and completely at their mercy while they took a series pictures and scribbled on their clipboards, examining every inch of her, or so it had seemed. A couple of them had made remarks about how 'human-like' her body was, and that, even if she was a monster, he'd have been more than happy to fuck the hell out of her if he'd met her in the bar. They'd inspected every single cavity on her body as she'd bit her cheek and stared at the painfully slow hand on the clock as it ticked off the seconds, the minutes, the hours. As they'd unfastened her, shackling her wrists and ankles, she'd wondered if anyone really deserved to be degraded like that . . .

She sighed, trying not to wonder whether or not her family was searching for her. On the one hand, she missed them insanely, especially at times when she had nothing to do but think. On the other, she couldn't stand the idea that they were out there somewhere, looking for her. The frustration that they would feel when they couldn't find her . . . how

hard would that be for them to deal with?

Her mother and father . . . That was the worst thought of all, really. Her parents—people who were always smiling, laughing . . . *‘Please don’t let them cry . . .’* she thought to herself as she closed her eyes. *‘Mama . . . Papa . . . I’m so sorry . . .’*

The door slipped open, and the holy man stepped inside. His hair was damp, his collar streaked with moisture that had soaked into his sweatshirt. Black leather jacket slung over one arm and knapsack slung over his shoulder, he didn’t even spare her a glance as he stalked over to the desk and dropped his gear.

She frowned, unsure why her heart had lurched when he’d entered the room. He shook his head, sending fine droplets of water flying, and with a heavy sigh, he peeled off the sweatshirt and let it fall over the back of the old office chair. The effort drew up his shirt, exposing the small of his back, and she almost smiled when she noticed that he had the smallest little love handles. He was quite fit—she had to give him that. His back wasn’t overly muscled, but she could tell that he obviously took care of himself.

*‘He’s the enemy, Sam,’* her youkai voice reminded her.

She wrinkled her nose and forced her eyes away. *‘No, I don’t really think he is . . .’*

Her youkai heaved a sigh designed to let her know what it thought of the capriciousness of her own thoughts. *‘Maybe you ought to spend more time considering how the hell we’re going to get out of here and less time contemplating the holy man’s back.’*

*‘Hmm . . .’* she muttered though her gaze returned to the holy man once more.

He plopped into the chair and dug into the knapsack to draw out a sandwich wrapped in plastic and wax paper.

Turning her face away, she bit her lip and tried not to breathe too deeply. It seemed like a simple deli sandwich, and she could smell it, which only served to make her stomach growl in blatant reminder that she hadn't had anything to eat in days.

She knew, didn't she, that she couldn't keep going on like this. Youkai, in and of themselves, did not necessarily need to eat, but hanyou did. She could feel her strength waning. The water that she'd had last night had helped her, but water wasn't food . . .

She'd almost started hoping that they'd stop putting the drugs on the food that they gave her. If they did, maybe she could bring herself to eat it. After all, if worse came to worst, then she figured that her pride was the least of her concerns, but she could smell whatever they added to the food, and while she wasn't entirely sure what it was, she knew that it couldn't be good.

Even if she could bring herself to eat the dog food, that would just lead to another bout of humiliation, wouldn't it? The white coats made fun of her, made comments about her, but she'd had no choice but to do what she had to do. Just the memory of that was enough to strengthen her resolve. She couldn't—*really* couldn't—deal with that kind of humiliation all over again . . . Hungry or not, didn't she deserve to retain even a semblance of her pride . . .?

It was pastrami on rye.

As hard as she'd tried not to smell that sandwich, she couldn't help it, either. Squeezing her eyes closed as she let her temple fall against the cool bars, she gritted her teeth, wrapping her arms over her stomach in an effort to stifle the sounds she couldn't control.

At least the holy man couldn't hear it, and even if he did, he made no indication.

But the thought of food was enough to trigger her thirst, as well, and she opened her eyes, only to stare at the hated bowl of water that the main white coat—Dr. Harlan, she

thought his name was—had stuck in her cage just before he'd left. He hadn't added the same drug to it; it smelled just a little different, but he hadn't tried to mask it, either. Even in the weakened light, she could see the slightly cloudy water, like the last of a glass of milk after the ice cubes had melted.

The crinkle of the wax paper signaled that dinner was mercifully over. Letting out a shaky breath, Samantha bit her lip. She wasn't entirely sure that the holy man would give her water if she asked. Still, she had to try, didn't she? She had to . . .

"M-may I have . . . water?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He glanced up from the newspaper that he'd gotten out after he'd finished his sandwich. He didn't lift his head, but she could feel his eyes on her, and for a moment, she thought that he was going to ignore her.

Standing slowly, he strode over to the cage and pointedly looked inside. "You have water," he told her brusquely. "Drink that."

"It's drugged," she whispered, unable to keep the hint of desperation out of her voice. "Please . . ."

She really didn't think that he was going to cooperate. Staring at her for what felt like forever, he refused to speak; he didn't move. An irrational surge of panic shot through her, and she sat up quickly, grasping the bars of the cage so tightly that her knuckles leached white. "Please," she whispered once more.

He heaved a sigh and shook his head but walked over to lift the panel and retrieved the dish of water. Without a word, he strode over to the utility sink and dumped the contents, then rinsed the bowl a few times before finally filling it with fresh, clean water. "Sip it," he commanded as he started to put it back into the cage. "If you puke it up, I'm not giving you more."

She nodded enthusiastically and made a grab at the bowl. He pulled it back before she could reach it. “I mean it,” he stated.

“Okay,” she blurted.

This time he let her take the bowl. “Sip,” he repeated as he flicked his wrist to stare at his watch. “Stop.”

It was one of the hardest things she’d ever done, to stop herself from gulping down the liquid. The only reason she did was because she knew he’d take it if she disobeyed. Still staring at his watch—he was obviously timing her—it felt like hours before he finally nodded. “Okay,” he instructed. She tipped the bowl. “Stop.”

She couldn’t help the tiny squeak of dismay when he reached in and pushed her wrist to make her lower the bowl. “I’ll take it,” he warned.

She shook her head.

He eyed her for a long moment. “Sip.”

He let her take about ten sips of water before he made her put it down again so that he could remove it from the cage. She felt like crying when he slipped the panel closed again despite the warning pangs in her stomach that weren’t quite as bad as they had been the night before but were enough to remind her that she really did need to take it slowly. Still, telling herself that she should be grateful that he’d given her the water at all was a bittersweet thing, at best.

Satisfied that she would leave him alone—at least for the moment, the holy man set the bowl in the sink and returned to the desk and his newspaper once more.

Samantha sighed and curled up against the corner of the cage. From her vantage point, she could watch him, and that, for the moment, was enough.

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*'Almost two weeks . . .'*

The soft rattle tray drew Alexandra Izayoi out of her reverie as she stared out the window in the sun room of the Zelig mansion. Turning her head to watch as Isabelle approached with a tea tray. She set it on the small wicker coffee table and proceeded to pour. "Would you like sugar or honey?"

Alexandra stared at her sister for a minute before letting out a deep breath. "Uh, honey, please," she replied as the frown on her face deepened.

Isabelle smiled brightly as she squeezed honey out of a plastic bear bottle. "Griffin loves honey, too . . . I have to admit, I like it much better than I used to . . . Is that enough?"

"Sure," Alexandra said.

Isabelle stirred the tea carefully before handing the cup to her sister. "I got a call earlier about one of my moms. She's doing well, which is such a relief. She was diagnosed with gestational diabetes during her last checkup, but she seems to be controlling it just by watching what she eats."

Alexandra stared at her sister, the air of disbelief growing by the second as Isabelle sat down and slowly sipped her tea. She looked completely calm, wholly collected despite the slight tightness around the corner of her eye. "I don't care about your patient," she said quietly as she set the cup of tea back onto the tray.

Isabelle shot her a cursory glance. “Sorry . . . I was just making small talk . . .”

Shaking her head, Alexandra rubbed her forehead, unable to wrap her mind around her sister’s strange behavior. “Small talk? Do you think that I want to sit here and discuss your patient’s gestational diabetes? Women get that all the time, and they’re fine, you know.”

“Of course they are,” Isabelle replied, that strange little smile back in place. “If you don’t drink your tea, it’s going to get cold.”

“I don’t care about the tea, either, Bitty! Our baby sister is out there somewhere, in case you hadn’t heard!”

The first crack in Isabelle’s forced calm showed in the quick fluttering of her eyelashes as her smile faltered for an instant. “Samantha’s fine,” she said, her voice trembling despite the forced cheerfulness behind her words.

Alexandra stood abruptly, unable to deal with Isabelle at the moment. Stomping through the house, she didn’t stop until she’d pushed past the glass doors in the living room. The blast of frigid air that hit her as she strode over to the railing that wrapped around the great stone patio was a welcome thing, soothing the anger that she couldn’t control, and she drew a deep breath, lifting her gaze out over the ocean.

What the hell was happening?

She couldn’t understand it. Isabelle’s behavior baffled her. She was starting to wonder if her sister even realized exactly what was going on. Always smiling, always making tea or putting together a snack or helping Gin make dinner . . . It simply didn’t make sense at all.

Her grandfather rarely came out of his office. He seemed to think that he'd miss a call if he did, and she seriously doubted that he'd gotten any sleep at all since Samantha's disappearance.

Everyone seemed to want to know exactly what was going on, but no one seemed willing to discuss it, either. As if they thought that talking about it was going to make the entire situation a little too real, they danced around it, making small talk and going out of their ways to be as courteous as possible, but . . .

But it was all fake, wasn't it? Fake and contrived and . . . and stupid . . .

Even her mother was putting on a strange sort of act that horrified Alexandra, as it made her feel even more alone. When she caught anyone looking at her, she just smiled—thin, strained, painful—and said that Samantha was fine; that she was simply having trouble getting back home.

And every day that Alexandra saw these things, she couldn't help but feel a little more isolated, a little more alone . . .

"Hey . . . You're going to freeze out here."

Alexandra didn't turn around at the sound of John's voice. Slipping up behind her, he sighed and dropped his coat over her shoulders. "So you . . . had a disagreement with your sister."

Alexandra sighed and suddenly covered her face with her hands. Seconds later, John's strong arms slipped around her, pulling her against his chest, sheltering her from the blowing wind. "I don't understand," she said with a sniffle. "Has everyone gone mad? Isabelle acts like nothing at all is wrong, and Mama . . . Grandpa won't say anything, and Grandma just keeps baking cakes and cookies . . . What's *happening* . . .?"

John kissed her forehead. "People deal with things in their own ways," he mused. "Maybe it's too hard for them to admit any of this to themselves."

She shook her head and turned her face to the horizon once more. "Samantha's the reason we're all here, and yet it seems like everyone's afraid to say her name."

"Do you really think so?" he asked.

She nodded then sighed and shook her head. "I don't . . . I don't know . . . It's been two weeks, John . . . two weeks . . ."

"Your mother's convinced that she's all right," he ventured at length.

Alexandra leaned back and to cast him a haunted look. "Do you believe that?"

He tried to smile. It didn't work. "They say a mother knows."

"How much does she know, and how much does she just want to believe?"

John let out a deep breath and pulled her close. "Isn't it . . . all right . . .? To believe . . .?"

Alexandra choked out a broken sob and buried her face against his chest. "Where is she, John? Where is she . . .?"

He didn't answer. He didn't know how. For as long as he'd known her, Alexandra was never the one to cry. Strong, stubborn, almost fixated sometimes, she formulated her hypotheses and systematically worked to achieve the logical end, and yet . . .

And yet maybe this—maybe now—this thing that she couldn't control . . .

“I believe she’s okay,” he murmured, hoping against hope that for once, she couldn’t see through his lie.

She nodded slowly as her tears soaked through the fabric of his shirt. “You do?”

He closed his eyes and cleared his throat, his arms unconsciously tightening around her. “. . . I do.”

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*‘They really did drug that water . . .’*

Reading through the same page in the book he’d brought along, Kurt pushed the text away and rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand.

He really hadn’t doubted that they had drugged the water and likely the food, as well. Seeing the proof for himself earlier, though, just hadn’t set well with him.

It ticked him off, damned if it didn’t. It wasn’t human, was it? Administering any kind of drug on a system that wasn’t meant to absorb it wasn’t a good idea. Even he could figure out that much. If he didn’t know better, he’d swear that they were trying to hurt it in hopes that they wouldn’t have to pay him the full finder’s fee.

Not even they could be that stupid, could they?

Snorting loudly, Kurt pushed himself to his feet and stomped over to the cot. Yeah, they really could be that stupid. He’d dealt with them long enough to know that much to be true.

Heaving a sigh as he stretched out on the uncomfortable cot, he glowered at the naked beams high above. For almost fifteen years, he'd worked for them and other facilities like them. His job had always been simple: hunt down the demons and capture them. Sell them to the centers—normally whichever one he was closest to—and use the money to further his real mission.

Everything felt as though it were spiraling out of his control. He'd never wanted to be coerced into watching that one. He hadn't wanted to see it again after he'd walked out the door after making the initial deal. He certainly didn't want to be stuck here, night after night. It pissed him off that it would have the gall to speak to him. It irritated the hell out of him that he had to pander to it, giving it water and making sure that it was healthy . . .

Flopping over onto his side, Kurt smashed his fist into the pathetic excuse of a pillow and uttered a low growl. "Damn it," he hissed. Those bastards didn't comprehend it, did they? They really, really didn't understand what those things could really do. To them, it was just a fun little game. To them, it was just something else to pick apart and examine, to look at through the eyes of those who professed to be smarter than the rest of the hapless population . . .

To them . . .

To them, the things that had happened to Kurt—to countless others that were as unfortunate as his family—were nothing. They didn't care because they hadn't seen it. They hadn't seen the horrific things, and they didn't really give a damn, either. They didn't hear the voices of those who were dead calling out to them in the depths of their dreams. They didn't know what it was like, coming home, believing that everything was all right, only to find out that it wasn't; that it never, ever would be again . . .

They called themselves doctors. They went to their parties, and they laughed over their own cunning. They patted themselves on the back and smiled their broad, empty smiles.

Then they went home to their wives, doped up on Prozac, to their children who were all in the top ten percentile at their respective schools . . . The perfect little existences, right? And they never knew—never *would* know—just how easy it'd be to lose it all.

Kurt knew. All it took was a blink of an eye, an insular moment in time, and everything—*everything*—could be taken. Call it fate or misfortune or even just circumstance, it all came down to that one moment—that space in time that you could spend a lifetime regretting . . . *If I'd only have gone on that vacation that my wife begged me to take . . .* *'If I'd only taken the right road instead of the left one . . .* *'If I'd have listened to that gut feeling that said there was something wrong, to start with . . .* *'If only . . .*

And if wishes were mountains, then that consuming sense of melancholy that was always left behind would be the sea . . .

And if that were true, then the ones left behind? The ones left with a lifetime of distorted memories and nightmares that never ended . . .? What would that make them?

Uttering a terse sound—a half growl born of frustration and doubt—Kurt gritted his teeth, swallowed hard against the surge of anger that he just couldn't repress. *'That's simple enough,'* he thought with a grimace, a shake of his head. *'That makes them the damned, the pitiless . . . That makes them . . . just like me . . .'*

Heaving a sigh, he closed his eyes. As far as he was concerned, he was gone just as soon as they finished paying him what they owed . . .



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
**What a pain in the ass ...**

## Chapter 12

# Monsters

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*“Come on, Kurt . . . you know this song, don’t you?”*

*Kurt kicked the scuffed toes of his tennis shoes in the dirt and shrugged.*

*Mary glanced over his head, casting Marcus a worried frown. Marcus smiled in an encouraging way and continued to poke marshmallows onto the sharpened end of a stick. “Here you go, champ. Toast those up as much as you want, and I’ll help you put together a s’more.”*

*Kurt didn’t reply, his large violet eyes staring blankly at the dancing flames. Marcus wrapped Kurt’s little hand around the stick and helped to position it over the campfire. “You got it?” he asked.*

*Kurt’s arm locked into place, and Marcus let go, reaching behind him for another stick and another handful of marshmallows. “These are really cool, huh, Mary?” he went on. “Red, white, and blue marshmallows . . . who’d’a thunk it?”*

*Mary smiled and slipped her arm around her nephew’s shoulders, giving him a gentle squeeze as she brushed his long bangs out of his face and kissed his forehead. “We can go fishing tomorrow if you want,” she offered, her tone overly bright.*

*Slowly, Kurt turned his head, his eyes searching her face in the semi-darkness that had fallen. ‘She looks . . . like Mom,’ he thought suddenly. His eyelids burned, and he wanted to look away. She smiled, scrunching up her nose and squinting her eyes just like his mother used to do.*

*"Why do you look like Mom?" he whispered with a confused shake of his head. She looked like her, but she wasn't, was she? His mother . . .*

*"Well, sweetie, it's because your mama and I were identical twins," she said quietly, her smile faltering but not disappearing. "You miss her, don't you?"*

*Kurt didn't answer. The question seemed dumb to him.*

*She sighed and winced, and the smile that returned was more apologetic than bright. "Of course you do. I'm sorry, Kurt."*

*"Hey, hey! Burning mallows!" Marcus said with a laugh as he grabbed Kurt's stick and shook it high to extinguish the flames. "How about we try again, champ?"*

*Kurt stared at his aunt for another long moment then turned to face his uncle. "Those aren't red," he stated flatly. "They're pink."*

*Marcus chuckled and swatted the bill of Kurt's oversized baseball cap. "Actually, they're black now," he joked.*

*For the briefest of moments, Kurt smiled. Mary gasped softly, pressing her hand to her chest as tears sprang to her eyes. "I like the white ones," he finally said.*

*Marcus nodded, winking at Kurt as he tossed the pink one he'd been about to jam onto the stick into the fire. "White, eh? I like the classics, myself."*

*"Daddy did, too," Kurt said at length.*

*Marcus smiled and nodded. "That's because your dad was a smart man . . ."*

Eyes flashing open as the dream dissolved, it took Kurt a moment to regain his bearings as he blinked in the dim, filmy light. The room was silent, eerily so, and he sat up quickly, throwing his legs off the cot, leaning forward and clenching his head in his hands as he tried to steady his breathing.

*'Damn it,'* he thought, clenching handfuls of hair and tugging. *'Damn it . . .'*

Stumbling to his feet, he stomped over to the utility bathroom, jerking hard on the cold tap and filling his hands to douse his face with water. Hands shaking, he couldn't steady them—couldn't deal with the lingering traces of memory that clung to him, that wouldn't let him go.

Leaning his forearms on the sink, he drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. *'Sh-shit . . . even . . . those memories . . . hurt . . .'*

That was why he hated to sleep—shadows of things best left forgotten . . .

It took a long time for his thoughts to clear . . . seconds slipping by with the uneven stream that fell from the leaky faucet. Straightening up, he splashed another handful of water on his face and let out a deep breath. Slowly, his heartbeat was starting to return to normal as a semblance of his self-control resurfaced.

Shutting off the tap as he wiped his face on his shoulder, Kurt sniffled as he caught his reflection in the mirror. Violet eyes still bright, wild, hair sticking up here and there, he looked like he was completely spooked, and maybe he was. Skin leached to a sickly pallor, he hated the weakness he could discern in the expression on his face.

*'Damn it . . .'*

Drawing a deep breath, he pushed himself away from the sink, telling himself that he was just being stupid, that he outgrew that sort of thing a long, long time ago.

Striding out of the bathroom, he ignored the little demon. It'd be too dark to see whether or not it really was looking at him, but then, he didn't need to verify it. He could feel its eyes following him, could sense the unmasked curiosity behind its gaze. Swiping up his sweatshirt, he tugged it over his head before dropping into the creaky chair and grabbing the book he'd brought along.

"Are you . . . all right . . .?"

Ignoring the softly uttered question, Kurt's scowl deepened as he buried his nose in the book. If he didn't know any better, he might have actually thought that it sounded sincerely worried. It was trying to fuck with him, wasn't it? Kurt's jaw tightened. *'The hell it will.'*

It sighed quietly but continued to stare.

Stubbornly refusing to acknowledge its presence, Kurt forced himself to read a couple of pages; forced himself to keep his eyes averted from the cage in the middle of the floor.

It cleared his throat. He didn't look up. "Um, I . . . I have to . . . to go to the bathroom," it said in a whisper.

Kurt didn't answer, either. The more he thought about it, the angrier it made him. It felt sorry for him, didn't it? That realization ticked him off just a little more. How dare that creature—that *monster*—pretend to have feelings like that? How dare it try to . . . to *humanize* itself when he knew damn well what it really was.

It was nothing more than a monster—a living phantasm—a demon that preyed upon humans, that wanted to destroy them . . .

And that was something that Kurt would never, ever forget.

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“Kami, this seems so . . .”

Evan Zelig shot his cousin a darkened glower as the two ran silently over the rooftops in the northwestern quadrant of Chicago. Morio didn’t look like he had any desire to finish that thought, which was just as well with Evan. It was something that both of them had acutely felt during their time searching for any trace of Samantha. It was also something that no one—*no one*—wanted to admit out loud, either . . .

Heaving a sigh as he told himself that Morio wasn’t trying to be obnoxious, Evan drew to a halt atop the Perode Communications Corporate Office building, planting his hands on his lean hips as he silently surveyed the city. “It’s like searching for a needle in a fucking haystack,” he muttered.

Morio stopped beside him, his expression more serious than Evan could ever remember having seen on that particular cousin. “I’m starting to wonder if she’s even here,” he admitted.

Evan nodded. He’d wondered about that, too. After all, thanks to his damn brother’s reluctance to admit that he’d lost contact with her, they’d lost a few valuable days, hadn’t they? By the time Evan had heard what was going on, he’d slipped out of the Zelig mansion and caught the first flight out, irritated as all hell that the powers-that-be were wasting even more valuable time in sitting around Cain’s office discussing tactics and motives when the thing that mattered—the *only* thing that mattered—was finding her.

So he’d scoured the city, checking every business, every hotel, every motel he could find. He’d found the bar where she’d had a drink, probably while scoping out Benoit. The

bartender had remembered her, grinning lecherously as he'd recalled her silver hair and deep blue eyes. He'd said that she hadn't been in there long, simply sipping her drink while she talked on a cell phone. No, he didn't overhear her. He just recalled that she had a damn fine ass . . .

Morio frowned at his phone when it rang, the sound empty and hollow and thin. "Hello?" he answered as Evan continued his perusal. "No, nothing," he went on. "You having any luck?"

Evan snorted when his own cell phone rang, though for entirely different reasons. Half tempted to ignore the caller since he really didn't feel like arguing with his manager about his whereabouts, he shook his head but answered the call, anyway. "What?"

"Nice, Roka. Where the hell are you? I got a bus, a band, about a hundred gigs, and no damn main attraction," Mike Murphy grumbled.

"Something came up, man," he said, unable to keep the hint of irritation out of his tone. "Cancel."

"What?" Mike blasted—Evan had figured that he would. "You didn't just say . . . *shit*, you *did* . . . Listen, Roka, I can't just cancel! These shows have been sold out for months! *Months!*"

"Some things are more important," he growled, "and this is one of those things."

Mike heaved a sigh. Evan figured he was probably slumping in his chair, furiously rubbing his forehead. "This isn't like the time you took off with that dancer—what was her name? Mississippi or something? Just to fuck around on Nassau, is it?"

Evan grimaced and glanced at Morio, who was still listening to whoever had called him. “Listen, Mike . . . Sam’s missing. She disappeared while she out on a hunt. I gotta help look for her.”

Mike was silent for a few moments. “Jesus,” he muttered, his tone registering late worry. “Yeah.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be back,” Evan went on. “Just . . . refund the money for the tickets and release my apologies.”

“No problem,” Mike said. “You just find her, okay?”

Evan clicked the phone off and heaved a sigh of his own. Mike had only met the girl once after a show in Oklahoma City. She’d been in the area after a hunt, and he’d talked her into coming out to see him. She’d been awed by the entire affair—she’d never been to a concert before in her life—not a real one, anyway, and Mike, who hadn’t minded escorting her around all evening to give her the VIP treatment, had adored her.

She’d followed him during the pre-show insanity as Mike took care of a thousand small details that had slipped past until the last moment. She’d stood just offstage while he performed, her eyes shining as she sat back and enjoyed the music. Half way through, she’d managed to talk the stoic youkai into escorting her down into the audience. He’d said later that she had complained that she couldn’t rightfully see everything from her vantage point. Evan wasn’t sure how long it had been since Mike had actually braved the insanity of the frenetic crowds, but in his estimation, it was good for him, and Mike hadn’t complained at all . . .

Evan smiled a little at the memory of that night in particular. Everyone loved her, didn’t they?

So why in the hell would anyone hurt her now . . .?

“You find out anything?” he asked when Morio dropped his phone into the inner pocket of his black leather jacket.

Morio shook his head and winced. “The old men aren’t having much more luck than we are,” he admitted. “Guess Bas and Gunnar had just checked in, too, and the old man was on the phone with the hunters . . .”

“I’m starting to wonder . . .” Evan mused then heaved a sigh and slowly shook his head.

“What’s that?”

“I’m starting to wonder if she’s even here,” he confessed quietly, his scowl darkening as he glowered over the cityscape stretched out before them.

Morio sighed and slowly nodded. “That’s what my father said, too.”

“Damn it, she could be any-fucking-where,” Evan growled.

Morio chuckled though the sound was a lot emptier than usual. “Yeah, and that’s what the old man said . . .”

Evan grunted and pushed off the roof, clearing the thirty foot gap between buildings with Morio close behind. He wasn’t about to give up, even if it did seem impossible. Samantha needed him, and he’d be damned if he’d let her down . . .

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Samantha huddled in the corner of her cage, thankful that she was hidden in the shadows. Still acutely embarrassed over the situation, she figured that she'd do well to make herself as unnoticeable as possible, at least for the moment.

She'd tried to hold it; she really had, but she had to pee too desperately to do it. She wasn't entirely sure that he'd listened to her when she'd told him that she needed to go, but she couldn't help but try. He'd taken her to the bathroom before, hadn't he? She'd hoped . . .

In the end, she'd done what she needed to do, her face flaming with mortification that was at least somewhat eased by the darkness that she was blessedly allowed. But the sound of the drain gurgling below her was deafeningly loud in the stifling silence as she bit her bottom lip and tried to console herself by repeating that she just didn't have a choice.

It hadn't helped much.

Actually, it hadn't helped at all.

Still, she reasoned as her acute embarrassment had receded, something was bothering the holy man; something that he'd dreamt. She'd been sleeping, herself, when his soft moans, his harsh breathing had roused her. She hadn't meant to say anything to him about it. Knowing deep down that he really wouldn't want her to comment, she'd tried to stay quiet when he'd come out of the bathroom.

It was the expression on his face, she supposed, that had done her in. He'd looked so . . . so pale, so worn that she hadn't been able to remain quiet. He'd looked a little afraid—no, not afraid, exactly . . . It was more of a mixture of sadness, complete horror . . . and a lingering sense of loneliness . . .

And she'd forgotten for that moment that they weren't really friends, and while common sense told her that he was nothing more than her warden, she'd sensed that strange sort of familiarity from him that she couldn't even begin to comprehend.

She closed her eyes and wished that she could go back to sleep. Kami, it was difficult to do that here. Trapped in a room that smelled like everything and like nothing at all, she wondered absently if this was what it would be like to be trapped inside a vacuum.

*'How long will we be here?'* she wondered, willing her mind to take her somewhere outside, somewhere far away.

*'Maybe we shouldn't think about that,'* her youkai murmured in a comforting tone.

*'I wonder what he was dreaming about . . .?'*

*'What does that matter, Samantha? We need to figure out how we're going to get out of here, don't we . . .?'*

Samantha frowned, unable to repress the next thought that came to mind. *'Even if I managed to escape . . . what then? Wouldn't they just capture someone else . . .?'*

Even if she were able to escape, even if she were sure that there was no way that they could capture another youkai or hanyou . . . Even if she believed that it would be all right . . .

The overwhelming memory of her anger, her rage, seeped in around her once more. Frightening, obliterating all logical thought of what she should or shouldn't do . . . For that one brief moment, she'd understood exactly why some youkai went out of their ways to hurt humans—she'd known it because she'd felt it, too, and as ugly as it was, uglier still was the knowledge that she might not have been able to stop herself in the end. The

barest thread separated her from the ones she hunted, didn't it? The barest thread: the barest scrap of reason . . .

In a way, didn't she deserve this? She'd always believed that she was somehow better than those youkai who killed and destroyed and cared nothing for any sort of morality aside from their own, and yet, wasn't she the same? Weren't her reasons just as strong, her beliefs just as righteous? If right and wrong were all a matter of simple perception, then which side really had the right to claim to be superior?

She realized now that she'd lived her entire life in a smug sort of superiority, positive that what she was doing was just and even pure. She believed it because she had been raised in it, raised to understand and acknowledge the truth in the idea of hiding her true nature, in blending into the human's world . . . She'd always looked down on those who hurt and exploited humans, considering them to be so much lower than she, herself, was, but how true was it? How much of her understanding was nothing more than a hazy gray pale?

Those youkai who hurt humans—youkai like Benoit, and even ones who just stood by and turned a blind eye to the destruction and desecration every day . . . Didn't they wake up in the morning, absolutely believing their ideals to be right?

And yet she understood that the idea of hurting and killing just because they were bigger or stronger or faster was wrong. She knew well enough that there was a simplistic sort of beauty to be found in the humblest of moments. Walking to the grocery store on the corner near her apartment . . . watching humans walking their dogs or children riding their bikes on the sidewalk . . . seeing mothers laughing with their babies . . . fathers teaching their sons how to swing a bat to hit a baseball . . . These were the things that Samantha had always found comfort in: the things that she wanted to see again someday . . .

Those were the reminders of why she fought, weren't they? They were the reason that she stepped out and hunted down those who had trespassed—the ones who had destroyed a thousand moments just like those without so much as a second thought and without ever stopping to wonder exactly how many of those insular moments they'd managed to end before they'd ever begun . . .

But what if she couldn't protect humans from herself? What if that anger, that rage came back? What if the next time, there was no one who could stop her?

That question was enough to strike a deep fear inside her; a painful fear that festered and grew. Maybe she belonged here, locked away and confined. Maybe she just hadn't realized before, how very close she was to completely losing her grip . . .

A sudden, twisting sense of melancholy swept through her; the sense that everything she knew was just out of her reach. Even if it was supposed to be this way, she couldn't help but wish that she'd had just one more day—another day to tell everyone how very much they meant to her.

And even as the innate knowledge that they were out there somewhere, looking for her occurred to her, she squeezed her eyes closed a little tighter. What if they didn't find her . . .? What if they did? What if they searched everywhere and never, ever found her? What then? How long would they go on looking? How long would they sit by the phone, willing it to ring?

The answers to those questions were far too painful to contemplate. Much easier, it was, to think about them all as she'd always known them, sitting in their homes with their loved ones close at hand, joking and laughing and sometimes just enjoying one another's silent companionship . . . That was simpler, wasn't it? Smiles, laughter . . . in her mind, that's what she heard, and that's how she wanted it to be.



## Chapter 13

# Mystified

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Samantha watched the second hand on the clock as it moved with painfully slow precision, willing her brain to ignore the throbbing pain in her arm as she deliberately thought about things that made her happy, instead. Practicing with Grandpa or Uncle Ryomaru . . . knowing that they didn't really have to pull their punches as much as they did when she'd first started training . . . the scent of leaves falling on the earliest days of autumn . . . the crisp wind blowing off the ocean, tingling in her nostrils as she breathed deep . . . Running free for hours on end through the majestic trees in InuYasha's forest or along the craggy coast of Maine . . .

They were testing her nerves—at least, that's what she thought they were doing. They never, ever told her anything directly, of course, but the series of pins they'd stuck into her arms and chest and legs were soldered to tiny, thread-like electrodes. They had spent the majority of the day sending small electrical shocks into her via those needles. It had become a game to her to ignore the pain. They were watching the monitors they'd affixed to her as well as the expressions on her face to get a reading on her pain thresholds, she supposed.

As if she'd ever give them the satisfaction of knowing when or if they hurt her. That was something that she wouldn't do, no matter what. Bad enough to be stripped naked; to have everyone passing by eyeing her like she was no different from any other animal, strapped spread-eagle on the cold, clinical table, but to give them the satisfaction of knowing that they could hurt her . . . 'No,' she thought stubbornly. 'No . . .'

“It’s weird,” one of the white-coats said as he shoved one of the needles just a little deeper into her skin. “None of the other ones were this docile.”

“She’s scared,” another commented. He was on the other side, and she couldn’t see his face, not that she wanted or needed to. She could tell from his tone that he was smiling. “Damn, though . . . Never thought that there were demons that looked like her.”

“Makes you a little worried, doesn’t it?” the first one went on. “Meet a girl in a bar and take her home, only to find out later that you went and screwed a demon.”

The second one laughed. “Like that’d matter,” he commented. “I’d screw this one . . .”

“Oh, man, that’s messed up,” white-coat one said.

“Like you wouldn’t!” white-coat two argued. “Her vagina looked normal enough, and she’s got nice breasts even if they are a little on the small side . . . Besides, something like that . . .? It would all feel the same with your eyes closed.”

Gritting her teeth as she tried to ignore the feel of their eyes on her, she gritted her teeth and concentrated on the clock.

One more hour . . .

That thought was enough to strengthen her resolve moments before another painful jolt rattled through her. They were upping the voltage little by little. It was a battle of wills, she figured: hers against theirs, even if there really wasn’t anything on the line. *‘Nothing but my pride,’* she thought absently. *‘At least, what’s left of it, anyway . . .’*

She wondered for what had to be the millionth time in the time since she’d woken up, only to discover that she was trapped in a place that she didn’t know. *‘Why am I doing this? Struggling to hold onto my pride? What’s the point?’*

'*You know why,*' her youkai voice replied.

'*Do I?*'

*'You want them to win everything? To give them everything? It's the last thing—the very last thing—that separates you from them, and you know it. Hand them your pride, and you've got nothing left: nothing at all, and what would you possibly say to your family—to your mother and father—if you let them win?'*

Wincing inwardly at the blatant reminder, she felt the rawness resurface again. Her mother and father . . . kami, she missed them. Did they miss her, too, she wondered?

'*Don't answer that,*' her youkai commanded.

No, she supposed that she was better off not answering that, wasn't she? Better to think of them, sitting at the kitchen table as they quietly chatted about their plans for the day over breakfast . . . better to think of them, her mother sitting in a comfortable chair as her father played song after song on his baby grand piano in their living room . . . better to think about the warmth, the pervasive feeling of complete and total safety that she'd felt as a child, snuggled between them in the huge bed: so close that she could hear both of their hearts beating as one; close enough to feel the warmth of their arms wrapped around her to protect her as she slept . . .

Isabelle and Alexandra: her sisters . . . She knew well enough that they loved her—the blind love of siblings who never really stopped to consider that the baby they'd first encountered really wasn't a baby anymore . . . Still, that was all right, too, wasn't it? She didn't doubt that they loved her, and that was more than enough . . .

Only one more hour . . .

They all went home around five. They would put her back in her cage and leave her alone in the blessedly quiet room . . . alone to think, to listen, to wonder . . . alone with nothing but her thoughts and feelings and silence . . .

Except for him: the holy man. He'd be there, too, wouldn't he? He'd be there, and she'd know that she wasn't really as alone as she felt sometimes. It was a strange thing, wasn't it? Here, in this room, surrounded by the white-coats, she was more alone than she'd ever been, and though she knew that the holy man didn't really like her, she didn't think he hated her completely, either. Oh, sure, he wanted to think that he did, and maybe he even believed it, too. But she'd seen him when he found himself staring at her, a myriad of questions lost among the lonely shadows of his haunted gaze.

It wasn't the first time that she'd wondered what, exactly, could create such a void in one's very existence? She'd never seen that sort of expression before—the complete emptiness, as though there were nothing and nobody . . . as though there were just another day to wake in the morning without the basest of comforts . . .

Had he forgotten how to smile, how to care? Had he ever known these things at all? Somehow, she thought that maybe he had. If he didn't know what those things were, in the first place, why would he be so lost without them now?

Stranger still was the underlying feeling that she somehow knew him, too. The familiarity of him, of his very presence . . . She didn't understand it. Like a whispered secret that she hadn't been able to grasp, it lingered there before her—truth that she could not comprehend.

Closing her eyes for a moment as another jolt of pain ripped through her, she almost smiled when she opened her eyes, when she looked at the clock and the retreating minutes.

*'Forty-six minutes,'* she thought. *'Forty-six minutes . . .'*

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“It’s a barrier.”

All eyes turned to stare at Kagome as the miko’s soft voice echoed in the quiet.

“You’re sure?” Cain asked, shaking his head as he stared at the ofuda in Kagome’s hand.

She nodded slowly, her expression clouded over in concentration. “Yes . . . I remember . . . Miroku used ones like these . . .”

Cain heaved a sigh. “Right. That’s what InuYasha thought, too.”

“Miroku used proper ofuda. This one is pretty crude, but they’re the same idea, and the kanji . . .” Kagome heard herself saying. It felt as if she were talking in a dream, as though she could remember every detail, as though time were slowly inching by . . . surreal . . .

“Wh . . . what does this mean?” Bellaniece asked quietly, her eyes flashing from Kagome to her father then back again. “That ofuda . . . what does it have to do with Samantha?”

Cain didn’t answer right away, staring at his daughter as though he were trying to figure out exactly what he wanted to say. “It means,” he said, casting Kagome a quick glance, “that whoever took her . . . meant to do it. It meant that they knew what they were doing: that they’d thought it through long enough beforehand to secure the area.”

A strangled sort of sound escaped her, muffled by the back of her hand. “Meant . . . to . . . .?”

Cain grimaced and stepped forward, tugging his daughter into a comforting embrace. “We’re looking into it now, Bellaniece: anyone who could possess the wherewithal to create this kind of barrier . . .”

Kagome eyed him for a few moments as he struggled to comfort his daughter. It was a harsh thing, wasn’t it? Cain was trying desperately, but he was struggling, as unsure as everyone else. It made no sense, did it? Also something that she was certain that Cain understood. Why would anyone want to hurt Samantha?

Turning abruptly, she slipped out of the room, needing some quiet, some room to think. The rest of the mansion was silent as she let herself out the front door. The frigid air of the early November afternoon cut through the thin sweater she wore, lifting her hair and tossing it unmercifully.

Stepping off the porch, she pulled her sweater closer around herself as she wandered toward the yellow painted bench swing suspended from the lowest branch of a white ash tree that stood beside the looping driveway. All the children who had come to visit had scratched their names into that swing. The paint was faded with age, the wood that peeked through was grayed and old, but the chains that secured the swing into place were newly replaced, likely by Cain, himself, and likely at Gin’s request.

Samantha’s name was easily found. In the center of the middle slat on the back of the bench, she’d sat and scratched her name . . .

*‘Was it warm that day, Samantha?’* she mused as she sat and lovingly traced the bold lines. *‘Were you just sitting out here by yourself as you watched the clouds drift by? Were you talking and laughing with Cain or Gin as you idly etched your name here?’* Lifting her gaze as she saw the thick, gray storm clouds rolling in, she knew that they were in for a heavy snowfall by nighttime. *‘Where are you, Samantha . . .? Help us to find you, can’t you . . .?’*

“M-mama . . .”

Kagome blinked and turned in time to watch as Mikio, her youngest son, approached. Hands stuffed deep into his pockets, he came from the direction of the mansion though she wasn't entirely sure he had been inside. Smiling gently, almost absently, she stared at him. He was certainly his father's son, with his silver hair and golden eyes, but the shape of his face, the almost regal lines, gave testament to his lineage as his grandfather's son, or so she'd been told. Sesshoumaru had remarked a few times over the years that Mikio looked like the great Inu no Taisho. He sat down beside her, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his head inclined to the side as he idly fingered his left ear—a habit that he'd done ever since Kagome could remember . . .

“Anything new?” he asked quietly.

Kagome sighed and shook her head. “No,” she admitted. “The ofuda, but you've heard about that already, haven't you?”

He nodded. It didn't surprise her. Cain had said that they'd known about it for a couple days, but he'd wanted Kagome to see it before he said anything to the rest of the women. She'd understood, of course. He'd wanted to keep them from worrying if he possibly could. That Mikio knew wasn't really so remarkable. The rest of the men had already heard it, too.

“I feel so useless,” he muttered, scowling at the ground. “I mean, Sam's important to me, too . . .”

“I know she is,” Kagome said, hating the understated sting to Mikio's pride that he always felt whenever it became apparent that he was vastly different from the other male members of the family. He normally accepted his limitations as par for course, sure, but she knew well enough that it had to hurt him, even when he tried to hide things from everyone else in the family. “We'll find her, and I have to tell you, I think that you've

been underestimating yourself, you know . . . Having you here, especially when some of the others aren't . . . it means a lot to all of us, and . . . and you know that, too, right?"

He shot her a grimace that told her plainly that he knew what she was trying to do and didn't really appreciate it, either. Kagome sighed. "Yeah . . . because no one else can do *that*, huh?"

"Mikio . . ."

He shook his head and turned a little red. "Sorry, Mama . . ."

Kagome drew a deep breath, her shoulders falling back as she lifted her face to the heavens. "Do you know what the hardest thing for your father to learn to do was?"

"No . . ."

Smiling a little sadly, she reached over and patted her son's hands. "Learning to let your brothers protect their own . . . and learning to let your sister be protected by the one she chose."

"And Sam?"

"Do you believe that she's all right?"

He nodded slowly. "Y-yeah."

Kagome stared at Mikio's profile for a long moment as her smile faltered. He looked like he believed it, and yet . . . and yet he couldn't mask the quiet anxiety that he felt deep down, either. She understood that feeling, didn't she? Knew it because it reflected her own . . . "Me, too, Mikio," she said quietly. "Me, too . . ."

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Gunnar set aside the news reader folder and pulled off his glasses with a sigh. Out of the corner of his eye, he couldn't help but see the constant motion of his uncle's leg as Kichiro tapped his foot. Staring out the window at the darkened skies, he looked like he was ready to snap, and Gunnar supposed that he couldn't blame him for that, either.

"You all right, Uncle?" he asked, breaking the stony silence that had fallen moments after the pilot had announced their flight plan just after taking off.

"Yeah, sure," Kichiro muttered, his expression darkening by the second.

Gunnar didn't take it personally. "Getting a couple days' rest will do you some good," he said.

That got Kichiro's attention quickly enough. Glowering incredulously at his nephew, he shook his head and snorted. "A couple days' rest? Is that what you call it? My daughter's out there somewhere, and you say that I need rest?"

"Aunt Belle needs you, too," he remarked, letting Kichiro's tirade roll off him.

"Listen, pup, don't presume to tell me where I need to be right now."

Gunnar nodded. Of course he could understand the predicament. His uncle felt compelled to be in both places at once, didn't he? Still, when the call had come in that they should check into the short list of people rumored to possess the spiritual power to erect any kind of barrier using the ofuda they'd found, Kichiro had stubbornly maintained that Samantha was still in Chicago; that he could feel it even if he couldn't explain it.

It was Ryomaru who had suggested that Kichiro return to Maine for a few days—at least long enough to get a little rest and to check up on his mate. The irony of that was not lost on Gunnar. That Uncle Ryomaru was the voice of reason was a strange, strange thing, indeed . . .

Gunnar, though, had said that he needed to get back to check up on things at the office. Sydnie was out—everyone was afraid that the stress of work, coupled with her acute worry over Samantha wouldn't be good for her unborn child—and Bas was heading for Idaho to check up on a young man there rumored to be able to see through youkai disguises. Evan and Morio were heading for Los Vegas while InuYasha and Ryomaru were checking into a lead in Austin, Texas. The two hunters were staying in Chicago, performing a more in-depth sweep of the city, and after Gunnar made sure that everything was all right there, he and Kichiro would be heading for Detroit, Michigan to seek out a woman who had managed to create a barrier some years ago to save some children when mass flooding had caused a nearby dam to burst.

“This is all fucking wrong,” Kichiro grumbled angrily, digging his claws into the arm of the plush seat. Sesshoumaru had sent in both of his private planes so that they'd have ready transportation available should they need it.

Gunnar nodded. “We'll find her, Uncle,” he said.

Kichiro snorted indelicately but didn't refute the claim, either.

Gunnar stared at him for another moment before picking up the news reader again. Scrolling through his subscriptions—he was collating news from all over the United States and Japan—he navigated the listings of headlines via the touch screen, searching in vain for anything that sounded even remotely like it could pertain to Samantha. It wasn't likely, of course. Still, it couldn't hurt, either . . .

Missing children in Vermont . . . a crazed gunman opened fire in a Wal-Mart in Clarksburg, Tennessee . . . a thousand headlines, none of which sounded like it could have anything to do with her at all . . .

But it just didn't make any sense. According to records, the prepaid cell phone that Samantha had been issued still contained unused minutes. The representative that he'd talked to had maintained that the phone appeared to be shut off, so it wasn't possible to track its location, either.

Letting the reader fall to his lap, Gunnar rubbed his eyes with a weary hand. Why did he feel as though they were missing something; something really, really important?

Gaze darkening as he scowled at the open article on the softly glowing reader screen, he shook his head. He'd figure it out, wouldn't he? After all, solving this sort of case was something that Gunnar did every day, and he'd be damned if he'd fail this time, not when his cousin was at stake . . .

'*Hold on, Sam,*' he thought as a steely resolve entered his amber gaze, as the lingering mirth of her laughter rang in his ears. '*We'll find you . . .*'

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Kurt scrunched up his shoulders, tugging at the sleeves of his sweatshirt as he stood up to check the system panel by the door. The room had dropped about ten degrees in temperature just since he'd gotten there about two hours before. Turning up the thermostat, he shook his head. Those cheap assed bastards had it set at fifty-eight degrees, which just figured. He'd be damned if he'd wake up with icicles hanging from his nose just because they were too stingy to properly heat the place . . .

The groan of the heating system responded, and with a shake of his head, Kurt turned away from the panel once more.

The demon was strangely quiet this evening—not entirely unwelcome, really, but a little suspicious, he figured. Striding over to its cage, he frowned at the bowl of food. It was obvious to him that it had been up to its usual tricks of dropping a handful of kibble down the drain. Shaking his head since he knew well enough why it was doing it, Kurt shoved the panel open with his foot and swiped up the bowl. He dumped the contents into the trash without stopping as he headed for the utilitarian workstation nearby. Under the sink was the nondescript bag of dog food, and he frowned at it for a moment before dumping a little bit of it into the empty bowl.

It was watching him; he could feel its gaze. Crumpling up the top of the bag to keep the contents from spilling out in the cupboard, he tossed it into the cabinet once more and kicked the door closed with his heel, snatching up the bowl once more before heading back for the cage again.

He shoved it through the slot and kicked the panel back into place. “Eat,” he commanded in a tone that should have left no room for discussion.

The little demon’s ears flattened slightly, and it didn’t lift its chin from its raised knees. “No, thank you,” it said.

Kurt snorted and knelt down, irritation rising at the stupid creature that didn’t have the common sense to eat. It was thinner—visibly so—and as much as he hated to admit it, he was starting to worry: not so much about the beast, but worried that it really was trying to starve itself to death. Reminding himself for the hundredth time that if it died, Harlan would stop paying him, he narrowed his eyes on the demon and tapped a bar on the cage with his fingernail. “I don’t think I asked if you wanted it. I told you to eat it,” he clarified.

“I don’t eat dog food,” it replied icily.

“Why not?” he blurted before he could stop himself.

It shifted its darkened gaze to meet his, and for a moment, he thought he could almost sense its anger before it squelched the emotion and slowly shook its head. “Because I’m not a dog,” it replied simply enough, as though it were telling him that it was cold outside.

He couldn’t stave back the loud snort brought on by its claim. “Oh? Then what are those?” he demanded, reaching into the cage to flick one of its ears.

The ear twitched and jerked and flattened against its matted hair before popping back up into place and twitching around like a little radar. “It’s an ear,” it replied in what could only be described as a haughty tone.

He snorted. “A *dog* ear,” he retorted.

“*My* ear,” it corrected.

“Your ear that looks like a *dog* ear,” he shot back.

“Hmph!” it snorted and turned its back toward him, at least, as much as it could manage. Kurt blinked in surprise. “I don’t think I like talking to you. Go away, houshi-sama.”

He shook his head. “What did you just call me?” he demanded.

It snorted again. “. . . Houshi-sama.”

“And what does that mean?”

“Go look it up,” it huffed.

Letting out a deep breath as the realization of the situation occurred to him, Kurt pushed himself to his feet abruptly, his irritation growing by leaps and bounds. He was arguing with a damned demon! “Eat your food or else,” he warned.

“Or else what?” it muttered.

Kurt narrowed his eyes and leaned down to peer into the cage once more. “Or else I’ll force feed it to you. Don’t think I won’t; you hear me?”

“You can try,” it grumbled. “I’ll just throw it up again.”

“How do you know that? I didn’t drug it. You saw me get it out for you.”

“I’ll just stick my finger down my throat until I puke; that’s how!”

Drawing a deep breath, Kurt tapped his fingers against the cage as he tried to convince himself to calm down. “Do that, and I’ll break your fingers,” he warned.

It turned his head far enough to glare at him over its shoulder. “I told you: I’m not a dog, and I refuse to eat dog food.”

“You’re also not in a position to be so damn picky,” he pointed out.

It shrugged—mock bravado, he figured. “I don’t care what you say,” it maintained stubbornly. “You can’t make me eat it.”

“Listen,” he snapped, tapping on the cage a little harder. A loud hum erupted when the bars were disturbed, and it flinched slightly but otherwise made no sound. “You are not

going to cost me money,” he growled, “so I don’t give a damn if you like the dog food or not, but you *will* eat it. End of discussion.”

“How much money will I cost you?” it asked suddenly, levering itself up on its hands to turn in the cage once more. This time, though, it looked quite fascinated.

Kurt shook his head, unwilling to believe the abrupt change in temper. “A lot,” he muttered. “Now eat it.”

“Is that why you caught me? For money?”

Caught off guard by its candid question, Kurt stood and stepped back with a frown. “Enough questions,” he growled as he turned on his heel to head back to the desk. “Just eat.”

It let out a deep breath, and he heard the rattle of the bars as it leaned forward and grabbed hold of them. “Youkai don’t need food, you know,” it said.

Kurt spared it a glance despite his almost perverse resolve not to do anything of the sort. That word was somewhat familiar to him, maybe one he’d stumbled across in his research. Still, it meant nothing in particular to him, and he snorted indelicately as he grabbed his knapsack to dig out his dinner. “Youkai? What’s that?” he asked as he dropped the smashed and crumpled sandwich onto the desk.

“That’s what we are . . . you didn’t know? Well, to be more precise, I’m not really youkai. I’m hanyou.”

That wasn’t a word that rang any bells, and he snorted again. “Han-what? What the hell does that mean?”

It laughed—an entirely pleasant sort of sound, he had to grudgingly admit. That thought drew an even darker scowl from him. Just what the hell was he thinking, anyway?

“Hanyou,” it repeated again. “It means that I’m only half-youkai.”

“Half-youkai,” he echoed with a shake of his head. “Hanyou, youkai, monster, demon . . . it’s all the same to me. Now shut up and eat. You’re giving me a headache.”

It heaved a sigh and shook its head, its ears drooping just a little. Kurt saw the response out of the corner of his eye as he carefully unwrapped the soggy BLT he’d picked up at the deli on his way in.

It seemed to do the trick, though. The creature finally stopped talking though it stubbornly refused to touch the bowl of food. Thanking his luck for small favors, Kurt took a bite of the unappetizing sandwich.

‘*Youkai* . . .’ he mused, his gaze taking on a thoughtful light. He had heard that term before, hadn’t he? At the time, he’d just lumped the name in with the rest of the generic and fanciful terms he’d come across in his research. Now, though, he had to admit that the creature referring to itself and its kind as youkai was quite interesting . . . interesting enough to look into it a little more, even if Kurt knew damn well that a demon was a demon was a demon.



### **Author's Note**

**Houshisama** a very, very proper way to address a monk. Sarge usually uses this term when talking to Miroku



**Final Thought from Kurt**

**...Houshisama...?**

## Chapter 14

### Stalemate

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*'Youkai . . . magical creatures. Though there are a number of youkai that are able to harness the power to control the elements of nature, many also are the manifestation of wild creatures. Those that are derivative of beasts are often referred to as 'mononoke' in Japanese texts and lore. Rumored to possess the ability to control their wild counterparts, these creatures are popular in Japanese fairytales and lore and have been referred to by many names . . .'*

Kurt shook his head as he crossed the street, reshouldering his knapsack as he flipped up the collar of his coat against the bitter wind blowing straight off Lake Michigan. Why couldn't he get that passage out of his head?

Did it matter, really? He knew what they were, those things. He didn't care what word the little demon seemed to favor for it, either. What he had found interesting, though, was that there really wasn't much text regarding that particular word. He'd found other references to different names, but they were all the same in his head, weren't they? Damnable beasts and scourge that preyed upon humans . . . They all needed to be destroyed.

He quickened his pace as the snow began to fall—huge, fluffy flakes that would be reduced to slush within moments of it hitting the ground. It was lost on him even as the hint of a voice whispered in his head . . .

*"Why's snow so white, Kurt, huh?"*

*Kurt—he'd smiled in a completely self-important way—shook his head and shot her an overly indulgent look that made his mother laugh. "Because it's light like feathers," he replied.*

*"O-o-oh," Caroline breathed, her eyes wide, her tiny mouth opened in a perfect 'o' . . .*

Gritting his teeth as he forced the memory away, Kurt shook his head and kept moving. He'd failed to mention that the same pristine snow would end up dull and dirty the longer it stayed on the ground. Then again, maybe that was something that he hadn't learned back then . . .

The strange burst of an unseen power stopped Kurt in his tracks, drew him up short as he slowly looked around. He didn't see anything odd, but the aura he felt . . .

It was weird. It was . . . searching . . .? Easily on par with that of the little demon, maybe even a little stronger . . . where the hell was it coming from . . .?

But all he could see were normal people—people hurrying here or there, trying to get out of the falling snow. Damn it, he couldn't stand not being able to tell where they were . . .

The aura seemed to be moving, though, moving away, and while his gut instinct was to follow it, he knew well enough that he really wasn't prepared to deal with another one of them, either. He hadn't brought along any of the gear he normally had with him when he went hunting. Besides that, he was already running late, wasn't he?

Uttering a terse grunt, he started moving once more, irritated that he'd missed out on a chance to track down another one of those things, but promising himself that he would be far more diligent from then on, Kurt heaved a sigh and turned down the street that led to the facility.

The building was already empty when he stepped inside the service door in the alley beside it. He wasn't entirely surprised. According to the clock near the freight elevator,

it was already a quarter after five, and the researchers seemed to live and die by the time. He didn't care, one way or the other, did he? In fact, it wasn't so bad, really. It saved him from having to talk to them, and that was a plus. Striding past the small surveillance room, he pressed the button beside the elevator and stepped back to wait.

"Oh, Doc! There you are," Harlan greeted in a very fake, very warm tone when the elevator doors opened.

Kurt stepped inside, wondering if he could get away with ignoring the man. When Harlan punched the button for the basement, Kurt stifled a disgusted sigh. '*Apparently not,*' he thought with a shake of his head. '*Damn it . . .*'

"The camera in the holding room . . . do you know what happened to it?" Harlan asked at length as they dropped below the ground floor.

"Camera?" Kurt echoed in a completely noncommittal tone. "Nope."

Harlan looked him over, his friendly smile cooling by degrees. Kurt knew damn well that the old bastard suspected that he knew something, which, he supposed, proved that the old man wasn't nearly as stupid as he looked. Still, there was no way that they were going to try to deduct that expense from Kurt's pay. "You're sure?"

"You think I'm lying?" Kurt countered mildly. "Fine, then. Pay me what you owe me, and I'll be happy to get the hell out of here."

"Well, we need to replace that camera," Harlan muttered.

"So send someone in maintenance down there with a thirty foot ladder."

Harlan sighed as his ruddy complexion darkened a little more. “Well, it isn’t that,” he admitted as the elevator jerked to a halt. “Those cameras are expensive,” he muttered as Kurt stepped out.

“Not my problem,” he tossed over his shoulder, half expecting the good doctor to give chase. Then again, if he were as old and fat as Harlan, he doubted he’d do any such thing.

The little demon sat up, clutching the bars of the cage when he entered the room. Pausing just long enough to slap the security locks on the terminal, he ignored the anxious expression on the demon’s face as he strode over to put his knapsack down and take off his coat.

“You’re late,” it said in that sing-song voice. “Did you get a traffic ticket or something?”

Kurt ignored that question as he draped his coat over the rickety old chair before striding over to check the chart that was lying on the work desk. Observation, it said on the day’s schedule. As usual, nothing listed for breakfast or lunch, which only made him wonder if they ever bothered to try to get it to eat during the day. Probably not, and even if they did, did it really matter? The damn thing was far too stubborn for its own good, and while it may have said that they didn’t need food, he wasn’t entirely sure that he was going to buy into that. After all, if they didn’t need food, why was it losing weight?

Heaving a sigh, he shook his head. It never did touch the food he’d put into the cage last night, and he hadn’t bothered to try to force the issue, either. Well, he could be stubborn, too, couldn’t he? The last thing that it was going to do was to cost him money, damn it.

It watched him closely as he took the bowls out of the cage, replacing the contents of each with clean, fresh food and water, and he wasn’t surprised when it went straight for the liquid, downing the contents in a series of gulps. At least it wasn’t making itself sick

anymore. Still, he figured that its manners left a lot to be desired as he watched as it wiped the back of its mouth with the back of its hand. “More, please,” it said, setting the bowl back in place again.

“You want more?” he asked, sudden inspiration dawning on him.

It nodded, eyes sparkling in the pervasive shadows.

“Then eat your food, and I’ll think about it.”

“I will,” it agreed easily enough.

Kurt couldn’t help the suspicious narrowing of his eyes. It had agreed *too* easily, hadn’t it . . .? “You will,” he repeated dubiously.

It nodded. “As soon as you give me something edible, yes.”

Kurt blinked and stared, unable to come up with a suitable retort for that right away. Caught off guard by its almost flippant response, he pressed his lips together in a thin line and shook his head. “You have your food,” he muttered, turning away from the cage. “Eat that.”

“But it’s *dog* food!” it complained.

“Yeah, and you’re a dog.”

“We’ve been through this,” it said patiently. “I’m not a dog. I’m—”

“A *demon*,” he interrupted coldly. “A demon that should be glad that it’s fed at all.”

“And I will be,” it went on calmly, “as soon as you actually *feed* me.”

“Then don’t eat,” he snapped, growling under his breath. “I don’t give a damn.” Kurt stomped over to the desk, intent on ignoring the irritating beast. Why did he allow himself to be drawn into any kind of conversation with it, anyway? That thought only served to further his anger. Talk to it? Hardly . . . just another mind trick that it was trying to pull over on him, and he’d be damned if he fell for it, wouldn’t he?

No, as far as he could tell, that little demon was just trying to get under his skin. He hated it—*despised* it—more than he cared to think about. It was no different from the rest of them—the rest of its kind: a violent monster that would cut him down if given the chance. Worse than wild animals, they were. At least wild animals only killed when they needed to eat or if they felt as though they had to protect themselves. Those things . . . Well, Kurt knew better, didn’t he?

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“It’s cold out here.”

Kichiro turned at the sound of his mate’s voice. Standing behind him with her arms crossed over her chest, holding her thin violet robe closed, she didn’t look particularly cold as she shuffled over to his side and slipped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek on the back of his shoulder as she sighed softly and closed her eyes.

“Why don’t you go on back inside, Belle-chan?” he murmured as his gaze returned to the restless horizon. He just hadn’t been able to sleep, had he? Lying in bed long after everyone else in the mansion had fallen asleep, he couldn’t get past the feeling of guilt that had plagued him. How could he possibly be here, pondering why he couldn’t sleep while his youngest daughter was out there somewhere? Not for the first time, he felt that painful indecision, as though he were being torn into pieces. Part of him wanted to be

here with her, wanted to reassure her every day that everything really was going to be all right while the other part of him couldn't help but be angry that he was here instead of out there searching for his daughter. Bellaniece needed him, but so did Samantha, and though he understood that he really needed to take care of both, he couldn't help but feel as though he were failing them, instead. Lying warm in bed with his mate huddled close . . . She hadn't slept at all while he'd been gone, had she? Falling into an exhausted slumber, she'd looked so very forlorn, as though she couldn't help but think about Samantha, even when she was supposed to be sleeping . . . and he knew that feeling, too, didn't he?

It didn't make sense; nothing did. They'd combed the city, hadn't they? Searched everywhere they could . . . Not even the disjointed scent they'd located in the abysmal motel room helped. There wasn't an overlying scent to track. She couldn't have been there long enough to leave a lasting imprint of her scent behind, and the myriad of scents of others hadn't helped at all. The torrential rains that had beaten down on the city for days following her disappearance had all but obliterated anything that might have otherwise helped them in the search. It was as if the universe were conspiring against them, wasn't it?

"Will you come inside with me?" she asked, her words breaking through the bleak thoughts that plagued him.

Sighing softly, he forced a smile that he was far from feeling. "Yeah . . . sure," he said,

Bellaniece could see through that, though, couldn't she? It was her gift . . . or her curse . . . he wasn't entirely certain which . . . "She's fine. I can feel it," Bellaniece said in a calm, steady tone.

He nodded slowly as he pulled her around to hug her properly. "Me, too."

She smiled just a little and stared up at the skies—completely clear and bright with a thousand stars dancing high overhead. “Do you think she can see the same stars that we do, wherever she is?”

“Yeah,” he replied slowly.

She sighed. “I just want to find her . . . bring her home . . .”

“Me, too.”

With a soft laugh, she shook her head. “Do you remember when she was five and wanted to bake that cake for your birthday?”

He uttered a quiet groan but nodded and smiled. “Oh, yeah, I remember that . . . best cake, ever.”

Which, of course, was a bit of a stretch. He’d had to go in to the clinic for an emergency meeting, and Samantha had somehow managed to convince him that she’d be all right if he left her by herself, promising that she’d call her grandfather or uncle if she had trouble since Bellaniece had been trying to catch up on some sleep after working a very long graveyard shift in the emergency room at a local hospital. He doubted that he’d been gone longer than five minutes when Samantha had decided to bake him a special birthday cake.

She’d forgotten to add flour, and, while she could read, some of the words had tripped her up since she wasn’t entirely familiar with baking. The measurements were in cups and table and teaspoons since it was one that Bellaniece had brought over from one of their trips stateside, and Samantha hadn’t understood how to convert everything to metric units.

The cake had overflowed the small glass dish she'd selected to bake it in, and it had been quite raw in the center. All in all, he figured it was likely one of the worst cakes he'd ever seen or tasted, and yet he hadn't had the heart to say anything of the sort when she'd so happily presented it to him later. He'd eaten the whole thing as she'd stood at his side, her face beaming with pride as he'd told her how delicious it was. Later, he'd ended up sick to his stomach because of the mass amounts of sugar and honey that she'd added to the batter. Still, he'd eat as many as she set in front of him, if she'd just come home . . .

"So she'd never be a great baker," Bellaniece admitted with a sigh. "God, I wish I'd told her that I didn't want her to be a hunter . . . I should have . . . should have told her . . . *forbade* her. If I had . . ."

Kichiro tightened his arms around her. "Don't do that, Belle-chan," he admonished gently. "When did we ever tell the girls what they could or couldn't do? It wouldn't have done any good, anyway. She's as stubborn as you are. She . . . she just wanted to do what she thought was right."

She nodded slowly and let him tug her back into the house before wandering back to the bed as he pulled the balcony doors closed and drew the curtains. He slipped back into the bed and pulled her close, kissing her forehead as she cuddled against his shoulder. "Bring her home, Kichiro . . . promise me that you will . . ."

Blinking into the darkness as he listened to the sound of her heart beating, Kichiro let out a deep breath and tightened his arms around her. "I will," he promised, praying that she never figured out exactly how hard it was for him to say what she wanted so desperately to hear. "I . . . I will . . ."

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*'You'd do well to stop antagonizing him, don't you think?'*

Grimacing at the accusing tone in her youkai blood's voice, Samantha tugged her smock over her legs a little more and hunched forward in an effort to warm herself up.

*'You're listening, right? You need to stop saying things that you know you shouldn't. He's barely tolerating you now, you know. Do you really think it's a good idea to keep pushing your luck?'*

Her gaze sought out the man in question and stuck. Sitting back with his legs kicked up on the desk, he had his nose buried in another book. *'I'm not trying to antagonize him,'* she thought with a sigh. *'Not really, anyway . . .'*

*'Well, then try a little harder not to. At least he gives you water, and you can probably hold out for a while longer without food, but water? Forget about it . . .'*

She let her temple fall against the bars of the cage and let out a deep breath. Kami, she was so hungry that her stomach was in a constant ache—almost a pain, really, and the times that she smelled food? That was worse, wasn't it? So much worse . . .

Talking to the holy man . . . at least she tended to forget about that gnawing ache for a little while, anyway, and that was worth something.

Scratching thoughtfully at her head just behind her ears—what she wouldn't give for a real bath with warm water and shampoo—she grimaced. If she kept scratching, she'd make herself bleed, but it felt good. *'Hell,'* she thought sourly as she forced her hand to drop away from her head, *'let's not gild the lily here. I'd be happy enough with a cold shower and a bar of soap . . . That's it; the first thing I'll do when I ever get out of here is take the longest bath in recorded history . . .'*

That was, if she ever got out of there. It led right back to some other thoughts that she'd been having lately. If she didn't eat, she could survive, that much was true enough, but if

she didn't eat and she didn't get any kind of real exercise, her muscles were going to disintegrate, too. She could feel it already, the slow but steady decline in her physical abilities. Caged all day and night, the limited walking she was allowed wasn't even worthy of being considered real exercise, was it?

She sighed. If she'd only have gotten away the first time she'd tried to escape . . .

Gaze slipping back to the holy man again, she couldn't help but to stare as he frowned at the pages of the book. Brows furrowed, expression darkened with intense concentration, he looked like he was pondering the things that he was reading mightily heavily. What was it about him that spoke to her, she wondered. What was it about the look in his eyes that intrigued her?

Nothing . . . and everything . . . and . . .

And what did it matter? He hated her kind, and she knew it, but she didn't know why. Why would he hate youkai so much that he'd hunt them and catch them and sell them? And yet she knew, too, that he didn't exactly hate her. It wasn't something that she could readily explain. She knew that he hated what he called 'demons', and she knew that somewhere deep down, he felt he had a right to. She'd seen that much in his eyes. Maybe if she could understand that . . .

He stood up suddenly, letting the book thump onto the desk as he strode over to the control panel near the door and fiddled around with it. A few seconds later, she heard the indistinct hum of the central heat. Common sense told her that he hadn't turned it up for her. Did that really matter when she would benefit from it, too?

He turned around to stare at the cage, then hit another button to bring the outer walls up from the floor. They locked into place with a loud groan. A third press of a button resulted in a dull static that was barely discernable to her, but she knew it well enough. It meant that he'd activated another barrier over the doorway—a barrier that he thought she

couldn't pass. True enough, she figured. She probably couldn't, at least, without being purified. If she were full youkai, that would be more of a deterrent. As it was, though, it would purify her, sure, but the end result would just be that she'd be stuck in human form for a while. That was a risky venture, at best, and not one that Samantha really wanted to test. The last thing that she needed was for those damn white-coats to find out that she was half human, after all. If they'd do these things to her now, just what would they do if they were armed with information like that?

Apparently satisfied that she was secured, the holy man turned on his heel and strode out of the room, completely unfazed by the artificial barrier he'd erected.

The emptiness that engulfed the room, though, was a nearly painful thing. Samantha had never really been a social butterfly or anything, preferring to keep to herself, but she did have a few friends—friends she'd lost touch with over the years. Most of them were back in Tokyo, and these days, she hadn't really had the time to spend making new ones. Still, she hadn't realized how one other person could alleviate the complete emptiness without saying much of anything. Kami, she'd taken so much for granted, hadn't she?

Letting her eyes slip closed, mostly to blot out the overwhelming sense of loneliness, Samantha huddled deeper into the corner of the cage and sighed. Thinking too much was a dangerous venture at best. She wanted to sleep, but she never could manage more than a brief catnap. Too uncomfortable with her surroundings to really be able to sleep, she figured. Not surprising, really. It went hand in hand with the sense of security that had been compromised, too. She'd forgotten what it was like to close her eyes and not still harbor some deep rooted sense of trepidation . . .

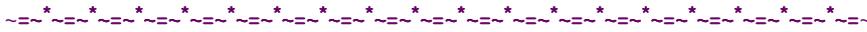
The footsteps, the familiarity of his aura brushed over Samantha as the holy man stepped back into the room. She heard the metallic pop of a soda can but didn't open her eyes. She'd known that there were some sort of vending machines close by—the white-coats were constantly carrying around coffee or soda, weren't they? So that's where he'd gone .

..

It was all right though, wasn't it? He'd come back, and maybe . . .

She felt herself yawn as she slumped a little lower in the cage, as a hazy sense of numbness settled over her mind.

Maybe that was enough . . .



**Final Thought from Samantha:**  
So ... hungry ...

## Chapter 15

# Deliberation

-----

*“So, Kurt . . . what do you think of the four of us going to Disney World this summer?”*

*With an excited yelp, Kurt hopped up and ran over to his father, who was sitting on the sofa with Caroline tucked neatly in the crook of his arm. The girl yawned and whined as the exuberant seven year-old threw himself onto the couch and bounced up and down happily. “Really? Honest?” Kurt insisted.*

*His father chuckled. “Really and honestly,” he agreed. “Shh . . . don’t wake up your sister.”*

*“You and me and Mom and Carrie?”*

*“Yes, you and me and Mom and Carrie. What did you think? That we’d leave her home?”*

*He stumbled to his feet and dashed out of the living room. He could hear his mother running water in the kitchen, finishing up the pots and pans from dinner.*

*Tearing into the bright room, he flung himself against his mother’s back, hugging her tight around the waist—something he normally wouldn’t have done, but it seemed okay this time, all things considered. “Disney World, Mom!” he hollered.*

*She laughed, leaning to the side to grab a clean hand towel to dry herself before she turned far enough to tousle his unruly black hair. “Glad you approve, Kurt. And you were complaining that you didn’t have anything good to write in your summer vacation essay . . .”*

*He grinned up at her, and she gave his shoulders a quick squeeze before letting go. "Now you'd better get out of here before I decide to put you to work . . . you know I had to wash dishes at your age . . ."*

*He knew a blatant threat when he heard one, and he ducked out the kitchen again. Loopy darted after him, yapping happily, and while she might not have understood the words 'Disney World', she certainly could pick up on Kurt's excitement.*

*"Can we stay there all summer?" Kurt asked as he ran back into the living room and vaulted onto the sofa again.*

*His father laughed. "All summer? Geez . . . that'd be something, wouldn't it?"*

*Kurt shook his head. "But Disney World is huge . . . Billy Rotmore went last year, and he said that they didn't see everything, and they stayed a whole week . . ."*

*"Well, we did figure we could stay for two weeks . . . That'd be okay, wouldn't it?"*

*Kurt scrunched up his face in a thoughtful frown as he considered that. Two weeks was a whole seven days longer than Billy's trip, and Billy had bragged for months afterward about it, too . . . "Two weeks is okay," Kurt finally allowed.*

*His father laughed as Caroline sat up in his lap, rubbing her eyes with a chubby little fist. "I wan' go, too," she murmured drowsily.*

*Kurt rolled his eyes. "You don't even know what Disney World is, Carrie," he pointed out. It was all completely logical in his seven-year-old mind.*

*She was undaunted by the censure in Kurt's tone, and she smiled widely at him, her deep dimples digging into her cheeks as she wiggled off her father's lap. "Dis-ney, Dis-ne-e-ey," she sang as*

*she ran off to the kitchen, her arms bent at the elbows, her hands stretched out as though she were trying to retain her balance.*

*“Babies,” Kurt said in a resigned sort of way that made his father laugh.*

Jerking awake with a disoriented start, Kurt blinked and glanced around the darkened room. That dream . . . wasn't so bad, and yet the emptiness that it left in its wake was bitter, harsh.

Right after he'd gone to live with Aunt Mary and Uncle Marcus, the psychologist that they'd taken him to had prescribed drugs that were meant to help him sleep. He wasn't sure why, but he recalled that the nightmares he'd had after taking those damned blue pills had been more vivid, more frightening than any other he'd had before the pills or after . . . Gross distortions of that day, and then . . .

Deliberately slamming the door on those thoughts, Kurt rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, refusing to think about or acknowledge the power that those dreams had once held over him, he clenched his teeth and willed away the black rage that licked at him.

Drawing a deep breath, he rubbed his eyes and heaved a sigh. Having fallen asleep while reading through one of the books he'd brought along, he couldn't help the hint of disgust that crept over him after the anger had subsided, either. He hated sleeping, and he loathed sleeping here, of all places, and especially in the presence of . . .

Half afraid that he'd managed to wake up the little demon again, he rather reluctantly glanced at the cage in the middle of the room. Luckily, blessedly, it was sleeping, too. Come to think of it, it had been oddly quiet all night—not exactly something that bothered Kurt. Not at all, but . . . but it was a little strange, wasn't it?

Snorting at his own thoughts, he shook his head. He was glad, really. After all, the last thing he wanted was to be pestered incessantly by the damned creature. Maybe it had

finally figured out that he really didn't welcome conversation with the likes of it . . . He could hope, couldn't he?

Still, that dream . . . it may not have been as vindictive as some, but it was bad enough, wasn't it? More of a memory than an actual dream, that was. Maybe that was why it was so much easier to deal with after the fact. Memories were controlled things; things that had happened that made logical sense in a logical order. Dreams were wilder, unmanageable . . . inescapable . . .

Letting out a deep breath that lifted the fringe of bangs on his forehead, Kurt scratched the back of his neck and glanced at the clock. Two a.m. He picked up the book again but let it thump back onto the desk carelessly. He really didn't feel like re-reading the same texts he'd already read so often that he practically had it all memorized. He felt restless, damn it, and normally when that sort of feeling assailed him, he squelched it by going out to see if he could find any trace of demons nearby. Sometimes he did; sometimes he didn't. He figured that it was all the same, anyway.

Demons . . .

That thought brought back into focus the strange aura he'd felt a couple days ago on his way in. It was the third overwhelming aura he'd felt of late. One of those had belonged to the little demon, he knew. The other two? Those unsettled him more. He'd worked for years, tracking down those things, hadn't he? And while he knew now that he'd probably happened across an aura like that before, at the time, he'd chalked it up to belonging to more than one of them because he simply hadn't realized that one of those things could possibly contain that much power, but now . . .

Now he knew better. Still, it bothered him. Why now? Why so many, and why now?

It had been searching.

He wasn't entirely sure why he knew that, but he did. It was searching for something.

Shaking his head, Kurt pushed himself to his feet, unable to reconcile the unsettling notion that made no sense. Searching? He snorted. He was giving them far too much credit, damn it, and that, more than anything, really ticked him off.

Then again, something else had occurred to him, too. Maybe it wasn't that they hadn't been there before. Maybe he'd somehow managed to grow stronger in his ability to sense them. Maybe spending time watching the little demon was aiding him more than he cared to consider, like mental training or something. It was entirely possible, wasn't it?

In fact, the longer he considered that, the more probable it seemed to him. Just as he hadn't learned back then to differentiate a collective bunch of their auras from one really strong one, maybe it was all a matter of teaching himself how to do it, instead.

It made sense. It wasn't that those things were getting stronger, by any means, but maybe he was . . .

Glancing down, his gaze fell on the clipboard lying on the work desk, and he opened it. He hadn't actually checked the chart in a few days. It always seemed to say the same thing: observation. He frowned when he read the agenda from the day before.

*'Blood testing. Low readings on all counts. Borderline anemic. Insulin levels erratic . . . Skin, blood, urine, and hair samples taken . . . recommend vitamin injections . . .'*

Low levels . . .

Flipping the chart closed, he heaved a disgusted sigh as his gaze lifted involuntarily to the small form huddled in the corner of the cage. He hadn't bothered to try to get it to eat for the last couple days, either, since that only tended to invite unwelcome conversation on his part.

He snorted. He honestly didn't give a damn whether it ate or not. As long as he was still collecting payments on it, he could care less . . .

Let the damn researchers figure out how to keep it alive. They're the ones who wanted it, weren't they? As far as he was concerned, they could just deal with it, themselves . . .

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"Hey, Cartham. Any luck?"

Deke Cartham grunted as he prowled around the dilapidated hotel room. "Nothing," he muttered, unable to keep his irritation in check. "You find out anything about that list?"

Cain sighed and spared a moment to light a cigarette. The sound was completely unmistakable. "Nope. InuYasha and Ryomaru said that their lead was worthless. Bas said that the guy he was supposed to check into committed suicide last year, and Evan and Morio's target has been a resident of the Fernlowe Clinic for the past two months. Cocaine, I believe they said."

"And the one in Michigan?"

"Gunnar said that he checked into it from the special crimes office and that it's no good. They're heading out tomorrow, though. They're flying back to Chicago . . . Kichiro seems to think that she's still there."

"But we've been everywhere," he pointed out.

“Yeah, but . . . Cartham . . . If the person who got a hold of her to start with was able to construct a barrier, then who’s to say that he or she didn’t do it again around wherever they’re holding her now?”

Cartham nodded. He’d thought that, too. “I ain’t sensed no barriers.”

“You wouldn’t necessarily, would you? InuYasha said that back when they were searching for Naraku, that he’d erected one that had made his castle virtually undetectable.”

“But Naraku was a hanyou,” Cartham pointed out.

“Yes, well, the theory’s the same. Myrna’s running a cross check on every listed residence and business in the greater Chicago area to see if she can’t figure out where Sam might be held. Right now, we’re figuring that if we can find a location that has an active listing that we can’t see . . .”

“That might be where they have her, you mean.”

“Yeah.”

“Makes sense.”

Cain sighed again. “I’ll have Myrna fax over what she finds.”

“All right,” Cartham muttered.

The line went dead, and Cartham clicked off the phone before tossing it onto the bed. What they’d said made sense, didn’t it? Even still, he couldn’t shake the feeling that it was a little too simple, wasn’t it? No, he had a bad feeling about this case, he really did, and while he hadn’t breathed even a word of that to Zelig or any of his kin, Cartham

couldn't shake the feeling that something menacing was looming just out of view—something that none of them had ever even considered.

The problem was figuring out exactly what that could be; what could possibly make him feel that much unease . . . He'd seen some ugly things over the years. Hunters normally did. Call it par for course, he figured.

So why did he feel like this—whatever 'this' was—had the potential to be far, far worse—far uglier than anything any of them had seen before?

No, it didn't matter how you looked at it. Cartham had a feeling that the real problem wasn't so much in finding Samantha alive—she was a damn clever girl, and if anyone could survive the unknown, he figured she could. The real problem, as far as Cartham could tell was in fighting an enemy that couldn't be seen . . .

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Sydney sat on the window seat, staring out at the falling snow. She could hear herself blink in the quiet. Watching the beach just off to the right, she frowned at the lone figure that wandered close to the water's edge. Even from the distance, there was no mistaking her: Bellaniece—Samantha's mother.

*'They blame me.'*

Those three words had been haunting her ever since Samantha's disappearance. It didn't matter if they smiled at her or if they always—always—offered her a cheerful 'good morning' or a 'sleep well, Sydney' before she went to bed. She could feel the accusation in their gazes, could feel the sharpness of their condemnations, even if they were all in their own minds. She knew, didn't she . . .?

And even as she thought that, she knew that she was wrong, too. Not one of them blamed her—not one.

And maybe that made her feel all the worse about it, too.

She was the one who had told Cain that Samantha could handle it. She was the one who had stared the men down and laughed, telling them all that, just because Samantha was a female didn't make her any less capable, did it? In her own way, it might even have made her tougher than her male counterparts: tougher because she had to be, because the men would continue to baby her if she didn't prove that she really was.

After all, women were far more vicious, far more vindictive than any man could ever be, and Sydnie . . . Well, she knew that from personal experience, didn't she?

She'd sensed Samantha's frustration of late, and she knew damn well that it was wholly grounded. Sydnie had been livid when Bas had told her that Cain had sent Larry into Chicago. The implication was clear in her mind: Cain was telling her, whether he believed it or not, that he didn't think that Samantha had what it took to do her job, and yet . . .

And yet the life growing inside her belly gave Sydnie pause, too—gave her a new perspective on things that she had once believed were cut and dried. She had never considered a parents' point of view, had never understood fully, what it meant to love someone so much that the very idea that they weren't completely safe was enough to make you want to scream inside . . .

And she knew that her understanding of that was growing day by day, along with her child.

It scared the hell out of her.

Kichiro and Bellaniece . . . Sydnie had always thought that they were amazing parents: encouraging their daughters to be who they wanted to be yet possessing the patience to catch them when they faltered . . . Even if they weren't perfect, they tried, and that meant something, didn't it?

To be honest, she'd always thought that the strained expressions that they got on their faces whenever they spoke of their daughter the hunter though only when Samantha wasn't looking, was a little too much. They worried too much or they didn't believe in Samantha.

How had she ever been so very wrong?

It wasn't that they didn't believe in the daughter they'd raised. It was simply that it didn't matter in the end. Samantha had been their daughter from the moment she'd entered their lives, just as her unborn child was a part of her and Sebastian, and even sight unseen, she knew she loved him or her; knew that there was nothing she wouldn't do to protect the life that she nurtured. That was what Bellaniece and Kichiro were feeling now, wasn't it? The pain of a parent who didn't know where the hell their beloved child was . . .

And they ought to blame her, oughtn't they? They ought to yell at her and curse her and tell her that it was all her fault. Guilt was a painful emotion. She'd recognized it in the beginning, the first time she'd met Cain Zelig's gaze. She'd thought that he deserved to feel guilty, as ugly as that was to admit now. He ought to suffer as much as she had—that's what she'd thought at the time. The tai-youkai who had failed her . . . she'd wanted him to understand exactly how much pain she'd endured.

But now . . . now she wished that she had understood at the time. The guilt was worse than anything else, wasn't it? Pain gave way to anger, and anger was simple to deal with.

Guilt was something else, entirely, and the more people sought to show someone that they weren't to blame, the worse that guilt became, didn't it . . . ?

A soft knock on the door drew her out of her reverie though she didn't look away from the figure wandering the shore.

"Hey, Sydnie . . . I was hoping you weren't lying down . . ." Sydnie didn't answer though she heard Jillian Jamison cross the floor. "How are you doing? I brought you some milk . . . I know, I'm hardly Bassie, but . . . Well, he called a little while ago, and he asked me to give this to you . . ."

Sydnie took the tall, frothy glass with a trembling hand. "Thank you," she murmured and shook her head sadly.

"He says that he'll be home in a couple days since Gavvie, John, and Griffin were going to head to Chicago, too."

Not even the idea of her mate's return was enough to draw a smile from her. On the beach far below, Bellaniece had stopped atop a large formation of rocks that sheltered the small cove from the wind. Standing still, facing into the wind, her absolute melancholy had the power to reach Sydnie where she sat, warm and secure in the safety of the mansion.

Bellaniece was waiting, wasn't she? Waiting and looking for the daughter that she wanted to come home . . .

"Are you feeling all right? Mama said that I shouldn't fuss over you so much, but someone has to, right? Having a baby is hard work. That's what Gavin's mother said, anyway. Of course, she also said that Gavvie was a really big baby, so that might have had something to do with it, too . . ."

“I’m a real bitch, aren’t I?”

Jillian blinked in surprise. “What? No! Why would you say that?”

Uttering a humorless laugh, she nodded at the window then shrugged. “Her baby’s missing, and mine’s right here . . . and all Sebastian can think about is who will give me a glass of milk . . .”

“That’s not true,” Jillian chided gently. “Bassie loves you. That hardly makes you a bitch.”

“And what would you say if I told you that it’s my fault that Samantha’s . . . missing . . .?” she countered, her voice as raw as her emotions, unable—unwilling—to meet Jillian’s compassionate gaze.

“It’s no more your fault than it’s Daddy’s or Bassie’s or Gunnar’s . . . or Kichiro’s or Belle’s . . . or anyone’s. The only one to blame is the . . . the *bastard* that took her . . . It’s not good for you or the baby to get this upset, Sydnie . . .”

Sydnie shook her head stubbornly and set the untouched glass of milk aside. “It is, you know,” she whispered, her words cracking and breaking as emotion rode up thick in her throat. “I told them to stop babying her. I told them that she could—”

“And you were right! We all knew you were right! Daddy thinks so, and so does everyone else! Sydnie . . .”

“I know,” Sydnie relented with a sigh, a half-hearted attempt at a faltering smile. “I know; I know. It’s not my fault.” Drawing a deep breath, she let her head fall back, staring up at the ceiling, looking for answers that were nowhere to be found. “I just want her to come home.”



## Chapter 16

### Precarious

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*“Have you actually seen her eat anything when you’re there with her at night?”*

*Kurt crossed his arms over his chest and leveled a look at Dr. Harlan. “Can’t say I have,” he admitted.*

*Harlan sighed and rubbed his temple as he made a deliberate show of pacing around the observation room. “You know what we’re trying to do here,” Harlan began in a conspiratorial sort of tone. “We’re on the same page, you and I . . . but the thing is, if we cannot keep her healthy enough to stand up to our testing, we won’t be able to do it.”*

*“The same page?” he echoed. “Is that right?”*

*Harlan shot him a broadcast grin—a hollow gesture that he honestly believed Kurt would find genuine. “Aren’t we? These creatures aren’t normal—probably produced by some freak of genetics . . . If we can figure out what makes them tick, we could—”*

*“Could what?” Kurt cut in coldly, pinning the good doctor with a penetrating look. “Harness their power? Is that what you were going to say? You can’t. No one can. Those things need to be destroyed. They only thing they want to do is to kill humans because we’re weaker than they are. Do you understand that? That’s it, and that’s all. It’s not a woman or a girl or anything like that. It’s a beast: a monster. That’s all it’s ever going to be.”*

*“Of course, of course, but you know, this research is important! It’s that old adage: know your enemy as you’d know yourself.”*

*“Spare me your reasoning, Harlan. I don’t give two shits about any of it. If you’re so worried about that demon, then you figure out how to make it eat.”*

*A slight narrowing of the eyes was Harlan’s immediate response. Kurt turned on his heel and stalked out of the observation room that he’d been dragged into before he could make it to the holding area. Harlan followed. He’d figured that he would. At least he was tenacious, Kurt had to give him that . . . “The board isn’t overly impressed with your demon. They’re questioning whether or not they should keep compensating you for it.”*

*And that didn’t really surprise Kurt, either. “Is that right?”*

*“She needs to eat,” Harlan went on. “If she loses more weight before the next board meeting, I’m not too sure that I can talk them into continuing your payments.”*

*It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the fat old bastard to go straight to hell. If there was one thing that he couldn’t stand, it was being manipulated. That Harlan was trying to do that and quite blatantly at that irked the hell out of him, damned if it didn’t. “Then I highly suggest you find a way to make it eat,” he growled. “Or do you really have that little control over it?”*

*“Just think about what I said,” Harlan remarked as he offered Kurt a tight little smile. “Have a good night.”*

Glowing at the demon’s chart, Kurt still couldn’t brush away the complete irritation that just wouldn’t leave him alone. The more he thought about Dr. Harlan and his smug attitude, the more ticked off he got. He wasn’t sure whether it was funny or just really, really sad that those damned morons actually thought that he could make the demon eat. More to the point, they spent the bulk of their time making idiot comments when they thought that he couldn’t hear them: comments about his stubborn insistence that the little demon could talk, comments about his own ‘freakish’ power . . .

But who did they come to when they had a problem, after all? The freak, of course . . .

Never mind that he'd felt the little demon's eyes on him all evening, too. It had yet to speak to him, but it didn't have to, did it? It was infinitely more annoying to just be stared at, he supposed, so if it were trying to tick him off, then its plan was working in spades . . .

'*Testing pain reflexes,*' the chart had listed for the day as another little 'ping' announced that it had just dropped a kibble of dog food down the drain. Kurt shook his head, tossing the clipboard aside. Besides, he seriously doubted that those things felt anything akin to pain, anyway . . .

Shuffling over to the small desk, he dug his dinner out of the knapsack and unwrapped the cheeseburger he'd picked up on the way. The bun was soggy, the meat looked gray—all in all, a pretty sorry looking sandwich, he figured. He took a couple bites of it and pushed it away with a grimace before grabbing his bag again, this time pulling out his night vision goggles and the cleaning kit.

Since the last time he'd come across such a strong aura, he'd figured that he'd be better off to carry his gear with him. Might as well be prepared, right? At least, that's what he figured, anyway. He couldn't afford to let his guard down, not that it was likely to happen. He wasn't going to go out of his way to find another one at the moment, but he wasn't going to miss an opportunity, either.

Besides, with the way his luck was going, if he did manage to capture another one, he'd be stuck with watching over two of them, at least long enough to collect his money . . .

It didn't take long to clean his gear despite the methodical way he checked everything over. He relied on the stuff far too much to take it for granted, didn't he?

'*Testing pain reflexes . . .*'

That was laughable, wasn't it? Those things only knew how to inflict pain, didn't they? What did they know about that sort of thing, anyway? It pissed him off. That damned Harlan had told him in the beginning that they were trying to find a way to destroy the beasts, to discover a way to ensure that they could not survive—a type of genocide, he'd called it. The demons were far too powerful to be allowed to thrive. Kurt hadn't completely bought into it, but he hadn't been against the idea, either. Researching them? Testing pain thresholds? What point was there in all of that?

Of course, Kurt wouldn't have cared, one way or another, as long as he got the funding he needed to continue his quest. He didn't care how long he had to search or what he had to do to find them, one day he'd run into the ones who were responsible, and when he did, he'd destroy them. He didn't care what happened afterward as long as he knew that those monsters couldn't ever do what they'd done to another family, ever again.

A rattle sounded from the cage, and Kurt glanced up with a frown. Nothing out of order, he supposed. The little demon was trying to stretch out in the cage. Even as small as it was, it had difficulty accomplishing its task. It heaved a tiny sigh—a sound that he wasn't meant to hear—and he sat back, crossing his arms over his chest as he continued to watch it.

It fidgeted around like it was trying to get comfortable before finally settling for propping its feet on the end above the food and water bowls, then using those feet to brace itself to lift its hips enough to wiggle the smock down just a little more.

Letting out a deep breath as he slowly shook his head, Kurt stood up, swiping up the abysmal sandwich and started toward the trash can. He stopped mid-step, though, frowning at it thoughtfully, then altered his course, ripping a small bite-sized piece off the sandwich as he walked.

The little demon blinked and sat up with minimal difficulty as it stared at the food he dropped into the cage. Eyes darting curiously from the disassembled bite he'd tossed in to the rest of the half wrapped sandwich in his hand, it looked completely suspicious.

Kurt snorted. "I know damn well you saw me eating it, so you can't say that I drugged it," he pointed out.

It blinked slowly, its mouth shifting into a petulant little pucker as it forced its eyes away from the food. "No, thank you," it muttered.

He couldn't help the incredulous growl that slipped from him as he eyed the stubborn demon. "Oh, yeah? You don't eat dog food, and you won't eat that? What the hell *do* you eat?" Rolling his eyes as he turned on his heel, he uttered another loud snort and stomped over to the trash can. "Don't answer that," he grumbled, berating himself for his own stupidity as he crumpled the wrapper around the sandwich and dropped it into the trash. Of course it didn't eat food like that. Those damn things . . .

Completely disgusted, he pivoted again, but stopped short at the sad expression on its face as it stared almost mournfully at the scrap still lying in the cage where he'd dropped it. Kurt frowned. It *did* want it, didn't it? The way it was staring at it was obvious enough. The little demon wanted that sandwich, and it had to know that he really hadn't drugged it, but he couldn't understand why it wouldn't eat it.

Exhaling sharply, Kurt dragged his hand over his face and shook his head. He didn't care, damn it, but he couldn't let it starve itself, either; not if he wanted to finish collecting his fee, that was . . .

Tamping down the feeling that he was being completely manipulated, Kurt stifled a sigh and crossed his arms over his chest. If he left it there, maybe the damned stubborn creature would give in . . . Maybe . . .

So he forced himself to move back over to the desk again, careful to keep the little demon in the periphery of his vision the entire time.

*'That thing gives the word 'stubborn' a whole new meaning,'* he thought as he plopped into the desk chair and propped his feet up, making no bones about the fact that he was blatantly observing the demon. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway. Staring at the bite of food so intently that Kurt actually doubted that it was even blinking, it took no notice of its audience as he settled back to watch and wait.

*'Okay, little demon,'* he thought with a grimly determined scowl. *'I'm going to win this round . . .'*

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"What do we know?"

Inutaisho Toga sighed and rubbed his forehead as he settled back in the thickly cushioned chair across from his father's desk. "Not a hell of a lot," he admitted with a shake of his head. "Cain said that none of the leads were even remotely connected, but it doesn't make sense, does it? The person has to be able to use spiritual powers. It stands to reason that someone knows something."

Sesshoumaru nodded slowly, his gaze calm—almost bored—the normal expression that he tended to favor when he was considering things in his head. "She has been missing for nearly three weeks . . ."

Toga sighed and inclined his head once, acknowledging his father's observation. "Yes." Standing abruptly, Toga paced the floor, knowing damn well that Sesshoumaru wasn't going to like what he was about to say. "I want to go," he stated.

“And what will you do if you go? Can you accomplish something that the others cannot?”

Shrugging offhandedly, Toga shook his head. “Probably not, but . . .”

“But?” Sesshoumaru prompted when his son trailed off.

“If it were one of my girls . . .”

“And if Samantha isn’t really the target that they’re after?”

Toga shook his head again and met his father’s gaze full-on. “I would not sacrifice one of the children in order to avoid an altercation . . . and I daresay you would not, either, Father.”

A vague hint of recognition sparked behind Sesshoumaru’s gaze; the acknowledgement of the complete understanding of his son’s logic. “I would not,” he allowed quietly. “Toga . . .”

“Yes?”

Sesshoumaru stood and turned toward the window, his gaze scanning the horizon as he contemplated the situation. “I do not believe that you or Zelig or even I am the target of this. If that were the case, they would have already voiced their demands.”

Toga considered that and nodded. He’d thought as much, himself. Even then, it wouldn’t have changed his mind. If it were different—if one of his daughters had gone missing—he knew damn well that Kichiro and the others would not just sit back and do nothing. That he’d given in to his father’s initial insistence that he stay put irritated the hell out of him, and while he certainly could appreciate the concern that it would draw

too much attention, the bottom line was that Samantha was family. Kichiro was family, and if family didn't come first, then nothing in the world ever would.

“Will your mate be going, too?”

Toga sighed. He'd had that particular conversation with Sierra before he'd come over to apprise Sesshoumaru of his plans. He'd wanted her to stay here just in case it wasn't safe. She'd insisted that she was going and was probably home packing right now. She might not be able to help them search, but she could be there for Bellaniece, and despite his reservations on the matter, he hadn't had the heart to argue that logic, either. “She will,” he said quietly.

Sesshoumaru nodded but didn't turn away from the window. Toga, figuring that the discussion was over, started to go, only to be stopped once more by his father's voice. “Tell Zelig . . . he has the full support of the Inu no Taisho.”

“Absolutely.”

Narrowing his eyes as the sound of the door softly closing faded away, Sesshoumaru stared past the drizzle falling from the hazy November sky. How many times had he watched out this same window as Samantha had wandered around the yard? A quiet child—not exactly shy, but thoughtful, she was . . . and yet he hadn't been nearly as surprised as he likely should have been when she'd stated that she wanted to be a hunter.

And she'd gone to Toga to ask for a job. Toga had been horrified, and rightfully so. No one wanted her to take on such a daunting occupation. For some, they disliked the idea of a woman hunter. For others, they worried that she was far too petite to be effective. Sesshoumaru had his own reasons for disliking the idea . . .

He knew that she was capable. He did not believe that her size was a disadvantage. He did not believe that women were inferior or any ridiculous notion such as that. No, what

worried him was the gentleness within her—the same gentleness of spirit that her father also possessed. It was that part of her that gave Sesshoumaru pause. That sort of quality was so easily crushed, and to have chosen to be a hunter . . .

“So you’re going to let him go?”

Turning at the sound of his mate’s voice, Sesshoumaru regarded Kagura as she slipped into the office and wandered over to his side. “I do not believe he was asking my permission,” he remarked dryly.

She nodded, her bright eyes slowly shifting over his features as she tried to read him. “This isn’t right, is it? I can feel it . . .”

“I’ve thought as much,” he allowed. “You believe that we should go, too.” It wasn’t a question.

She didn’t answer right away as she turned her attention outside. Sesshoumaru had very little doubt that she wasn’t seeing the past, just as he had when he’d stared out the same window. “She’s such a beautiful girl,” Kagura murmured, lifting a hand to press against the glass. “That smile . . . everything about her smiles when she does . . .”

Sesshoumaru shook his head slowly, uttering a terse grunt—a sound that was rather unusual for him. “Her grandfather is there,” he said at length. “That baka will tear down everything he sees if given the chance . . .”

Kagura turned her head to look at him, the barest hint of a smile touching her lips. “And, of course, you’re the only one who can stop him.”

Sesshoumaru nodded once as his gaze narrowed the smallest bit. “Of course.”

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*'I hate him; I hate him; I hate him; I hate him . . .'* Samantha fumed as she glowered at the bit of sandwich the holy man had dropped into the cage.

*'You ought to hate him,'* her youkai admonished. *'You don't, but you should . . .'*

Flattening her ears for a moment, Samantha tried to force her gaze away from the tiny hunk of meat and bread but couldn't. *'I do,'* she insisted stubbornly. *'It's right there! But . . .'*

*'Don't you touch it!'* her youkai snapped. *'You know what'll happen if you do.'*

Stifling a sigh since she did know what would eventually happen if she did, she dug her claws into her arm—they were crossed and resting on her drawn up knees—she grimaced as the scent of her blood hit her hard. It didn't smell right, and she knew it. It didn't smell quite as rich as it normally did. Deliberately trying not to consider what that might mean, she tried once more to get her mind off the food that was much, much too close.

*'Umm . . . remember that time that Morio broke his arm? The bone was sticking out all funny? I thought I was going to puke . . .'*

Her stomach growled in reply.

*'Or the time he fell out of Goshinboku and busted his head on the pavement?'*

Yeah, that one didn't work, either.

*'How about the time Papa told me about that patient of his that got his big toe cut off with a length of fishing line . . .'*

The sigh she was trying to hold in slipped out in a dull whoosh.

She couldn't forget that bite of cheeseburger. It was entirely too close for her to do it. She wanted it. She really, really wanted it. It was the *aftereffect* that she didn't want . . .

How could he do that? How could he be so cruel as to offer her what she desperately wanted, anyway? It wasn't enough that those damn white-coats were trying to strip away every last bit of her dignity, but that he would help them was almost more than she could stand. The couple times that she had broken down and let her body's needs take precedence were entirely too vivid in her mind. The humiliation of the white-coats' disgust and ridicule—laughing and sneering as they'd gotten out the power hose and sprayed her with it . . . They'd spent more time disinfecting the table she'd been strapped to than they had in cleaning her up, and all the while, they'd talked and jeered and belittled her . . .

And there was no way she was going to repeat that, even if it killed her.

She'd spent hours trying to console herself, telling herself time and again that she hadn't had a choice. They'd taken that away from her, and even though she knew that logically, it hadn't helped her; not at all . . .

Okay, so it wasn't the perfect solution. If she didn't eat, she was going to get weaker, and if she got too weak, she'd never be able to escape, but she also couldn't stomach the idea of repeating that kind of humiliation. Just considering it was enough to bring a sudden and savage surge of panic rising to the fore.

She heard the holy man move but didn't look to see what he was doing. She heard the sound of the power hose being pulled loose. With a smothered gasp, she jerked away into the corner of the cage as he slowly turned on the hose and fiddled with the nozzle, taking his time as he aimed it at the floor and started to spray.

He was going to flush out her cage, wasn't he? He hadn't done that since the night she'd puked up the water he'd given her . . . Gasping out loud when she realized exactly what he meant to do, she couldn't help herself when she laid her ears back and uttered a rather vicious growl, snatching up the bite of sandwich before he used the hose to push it into the drain.

He didn't look particularly impressed by her show of ferocity. If anything, he looked a little irritated by it. Still, he switched off the hose and crossed his arms over his chest, arching an eyebrow at her as he waited impatiently for her to explain.

"So you *do* want it," he finally said when she ventured nothing.

Grimacing when she realized that she was cradling the food against her chest, using her body to shield it from him, she tried to make herself lower her hands but couldn't. "Of course I want it," she whispered, unable to keep her ears from flattening slightly as she scrunched up her shoulders a little more and tried to keep from looking entirely pathetic though she figured that she'd already failed in that department, anyway.

"Of course," he echoed, his voice thick with sarcasm. "That's why you wouldn't touch it, right?"

Clenching her jaw, she forced her hands to lower as she stared miserably at the food. "They . . . they won't . . . take me to the . . . the bathroom," she muttered.

He stared at her for several moments, as though he couldn't quite believe what she'd said. "You're refusing to eat because they won't take you to the bathroom?" he blurted incredulously.

Her ears flattened at the underlying contempt in his voice, and suddenly, she had to blink fast to keep herself from crying. "No," she whispered, shaking her head slowly as she

swallowed hard to keep him from hearing the emotion that she was fighting to hide. “I refuse to eat *this* because of that . . . but I won’t eat dog food. Not ever.”

She didn’t really know what she expected of him. She supposed that she figured he’d say something caustic and tell her to eat it anyway. Maybe she was even hoping somewhere deep down that he’d make good on his threats to force her to comply. It struck her then, just how pathetic her situation really was, and at that moment, she just wished that he’d go back over to his desk and leave her alone . . .

“Yeah, well, you’d damn well better tell me before you have to do anything like that,” he grumbled as he turned his back and strode away to hang the hose back on the hook. “They’re not paying me *nearly* enough to clean up after the likes of you.”

She gasped and blinked, her chin shooting up as his words slowly sank in. He’d sounded angry, and he’d sounded disgusted, and she couldn’t really blame him for that. Somehow, though, his offer was enough, and even if he’d made it for purely selfish reasons, Samantha didn’t care. That he’d allow her that much of a concession . . .

She started to shove the bite into her mouth but stopped when he whipped around to face her. “Chew it, demon,” he commanded, narrowing his eyes suspiciously. “Throw it up, and I won’t give you more. Got it?”

She nodded quickly.

“I mean it,” he stated once more. “You chew it until I tell you to swallow. Understand?”

She nodded at that, too, and hastily shoved the food into her mouth before he could give her another condition.

Closing her eyes as she suddenly slumped against the back of the cage, she couldn’t contain the rapturous moan that slipped out of her as she slowly chewed. At the

moment, she couldn't recall having ever tasted anything as good as that cold bit of meat that was more gristle than lean . . . stale bun that was starting to harden on the outside . . . and she simply didn't care.

"Swallow," he said.

She opened her eyes and did as he said. Sometime during her moments of blissful chewing, he'd come closer and was hunkered down in front of the cage with the wrapped up portion of the sandwich he'd thrown into the garbage can earlier. Sparing a moment to eye her dubiously, he broke off another small bite and tossed it into her lap. "Same rules, demon," he said.

She wasted no time in stuffing that into her mouth, too.

He continued to feed her little by little despite the obvious irritation in his features. The very last thing he wanted to do was to sit there and babysit her, she figured, and in her absolute relief, she never thought to question whether or not he really would make good on his word later. Somehow, though, she knew he would, even if she didn't understand why.



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
**What a pain in the ass ...**

## Chapter 17

### Terms

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“Doc! Glad you’re here!”

Casting Harlan a suspect eye, Kurt stepped off the elevator and let it close behind him as he adjusted his grip on the knapsack and waited for the proverbial gauntlet to fall. An unsettling sense of trepidation crept up his spine as he waited for the aging doctor to reach him. Plodding down the hallway in what Kurt figured was an all-out sprint to him; at least, he looked a little shaken.

“The . . . demon . . . is . . . sick,” he huffed between labored breaths.

“It’s what?” Kurt demanded, brushing past the doctor and heading down the hallway.

“What do you mean, sick?”

Dr. Harlan ran after him. “Sick! Sick! We were testing her hearing, and—”

“It’s not a *‘her’!*” Kurt interrupted angrily, quickening his stride as he closed in on the researchers who were milling around in the hallway.

Harlan waved his hands in blatant dismissal. “It, then!” he agreed with a wheeze. “It vomits every time we try to move it . . .”

Making a face as he skidded to a halt just outside the door of the room where it sat, legs bent and splayed on either side, hands shackled before it with its head down so low that its hair spread over the floor around it. The room reeked of bile, and not one of the

researchers seemed willing to step foot inside, though he highly doubted that it was the demon that kept them at bay nearly as much as it was the idea of being puked on that did it.

Kurt snorted loudly and pinned Harlan with a glower. “And just what the hell am I supposed to do with it?” he snapped.

Harlan shrugged and took a step back. “You can put her in her cage, can’t you?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell the bastard to do it his damn self. Before he got a chance to, Harlan mumbled something about a business dinner that he was already late for and that he’d see Kurt in the morning.

Shaking his head as the rest of the team followed suit, Kurt heaved a disgusted sigh and dropped his knapsack on the floor before stepping into the room.

He took about three steps, the sound of his boots echoing off the cement floor, then stopped short when the little demon lurched to the side, barely managing to catch itself on its hands as it reared up on its knees and heaved almost pitifully. He wasn’t sure if it was better or worse that it had nothing left to purge, and as he stood there, watching it, he couldn’t help the grimace that enveloped his features.

It didn’t make sense, did it? Harlan had said that they were testing its hearing, hadn’t he? So why was the creature so sick?

He was almost inclined to think that it had something to do with the sandwich he’d fed it the night before, but then, he was fine, wasn’t he, and he’d eaten some of it, too . . .

It had seemed fine this morning when he’d left, hadn’t it? Awake, alert, it had sat in its cage, content to look around and watch as he double checked the cage as well as the security walls. It had watched with avid interest as he’d inspected the doorway barrier,

too. In fact, he'd checked everything in the holding area, making sure that nothing needed to be fixed or replaced, and it had cooperated completely, if not even a bit easily, when he'd demanded that it scoot out of the cage, feet first so that he could fasten the ankle chains on it before he allowed it to go to the bathroom . . .

Something had definitely happened, hadn't it?

Scowling at the stench that choked him, he rubbed his forehead and weighed his options. He really didn't like the idea of staying in this room. There was too much stuff that the demon could grab and use to its advantage if he weren't careful, and the room, itself, was far too small, and while that might limit the demon, it also limited him. The problem was that he wasn't overly keen on the idea of being vomited on if he tried to move it, but the smell was entirely overwhelming in here, turning his stomach unpleasantly as he tried his hardest not to breathe too deeply.

"Turn . . . it . . . off . . ."

Kurt blinked and glanced at the demon, not entirely certain that he'd really heard it speak. Barely above a whisper—more of a breath or exhalation than spoken words. He shook his head and stared at it. "Turn what off?"

Uttering a soft whine, ears flattened against its head, it forced its eyes open painfully slowly. "Turn it . . . off . . ."

'*Damn it!*' he thought as he realized that those idiot researchers must've left some sort of sound on, Kurt shot the demon a darkened scowl then turned on his heel to stride into the adjacent booth . A modified sound board not unlike those used at recording studios had been left on, the needle on the indicator dancing erratically up near the red zone. Muttering curses under his breath since he had no idea what button or knob worked the sounds that it could hear even if he couldn't, he glanced through the one way mirror before running his hand under the row of knobs, turning them all counterclockwise.

The dancing needle faltered then dropped. A moment later, he flicked off the main power then heaved a sigh as he strode out of the booth.

“Can you stand up?” he asked. He figured that it couldn’t, but asked anyway.

It tried to comply but didn’t get far. The exertion brought on another round of heaving. Deciding against trying to move it, Kurt looked around and frowned. This room wasn’t equipped with a hose, probably because of the sensitive equipment in the booth, but the smell was overwhelming. Even if it did throw up again, at least he could clean it up in the holding area, which was a far sight better than enduring the stench until it felt up to moving on its own.

There just was no help for it, was there?

He started to haul it over his shoulder but thought better of it since the added pressure on its stomach could not possibly help the situation. It whimpered and moaned but didn’t fight him at all as he scooped it up, trying his damndest not to breathe as he strode out of the room.

He grimaced. It really was tiny, wasn’t it? He hadn’t really noticed that before . . . If it weighed more than eighty-five pounds, he’d eat his knapsack, and that . . . that was because it hadn’t been eating, wasn’t it? It . . . it hadn’t felt that light before, damn it, and now . . . It leaned against him without even trying to give any kind of token resistance, almost . . . almost trustingly . . . like a . . . a . . .

His frown darkened. *‘Like a . . . child . . .’*

Somehow, that idea didn’t sit well with him, either.

He stifled a sigh. Even if he didn’t like the thought, it had lied to him about its kind not needing to eat, and that knowledge only served to tick him off just a little more. *‘Stupid .*

*.. stupid demon .. ?*

Luckily, he managed to get down the hall and into the holding area before it pushed against him. Striding over to the trash can, he leaned it over, gritting his teeth as it heaved again then spit. A few more steps put it back in its cage, where it huddled against the far corner with its ears still flattened against its head.

He spared a moment to lock the cage but didn't bother to bring up the security walls before he hurried out to gather his things.

It still hadn't moved when he returned to the room a few minutes later. He almost thought that it had fallen asleep when it moaned quietly.

Was its sense of hearing really so acute that the sounds that it had been subjected to could make it physically ill? Crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at the huddled form, he thought that maybe it was possible. He wasn't sure how bad the noise was that it had asked him to shut off. He hadn't heard a thing, had he?

That was interesting, he decided. He'd never actually thought that those monsters could be susceptible to something like that, had he? He'd never considered it, really . . .

He considered cleaning up the examination room for all of thirty seconds before discarding that idea altogether. They were the ones stupid enough to leave the sound on that made the demon sick, in the first place, weren't they? They could just clean up after it, too . . .

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“Here.”

Kichiro glanced up and took the Styrofoam cup from Gunnar, frowning at it for a moment before he lifted it to his lips.

“I hate this place,” he muttered, flicking his ears to shake off the snow that had settled on them in the few minutes that he’d been waiting on the cold metal bench.

Gunnar sat beside him and nodded, slowly sipping his coffee as tendrils of steam rose from the tiny holes in the lid. “Me, too.”

Kichiro sighed. He hated waiting, too, and that was what they were doing at the moment: waiting. Because neither Ryomaru nor InuYasha were entirely fluent in English, they’d figured that it’d be best to split up, which meant that Gunnar would be heading out with Ryomaru while Kichiro was paired up with InuYasha. At least, that was the story they’d come up with. Kichiro had a feeling that there was more to it than that. Gaze shifting up and down the street, wishing and praying that he’d see the familiar streak of silver hair that he knew so well . . . Kami, he felt as though he were going crazy . . .

“We’ll find her,” Gunnar said quietly as he scowled at his coffee cup.

Kichiro shot him a quick glance. “Yeah, I know,” he murmured.

“She’s a smart girl,” he went on. “I remember the first time she came back from a hunt—she brought in a youkai for questioning . . . old buffalo youkai . . . We’d tried to get him to come in for years, but he never would. Sam convinced him, and when I asked him why he’d agreed, he said that he just trusted her.”

“I’m not worried that someone would trust her,” Kichiro admitted with a shake of his head. “But she tends to trust everyone else, too . . . and that scares the hell out of me.”

Gunnar didn't get a chance to reply when Ryomaru and InuYasha strode out of the alley beside them. "No luck?" Ryomaru asked in lieu of a proper greeting.

"Keh!" InuYasha snorted as his eyes darted up and down the busy street. "Would've been sooner if I didn't have to waste time talking to your father-in-law," he complained. "Damn that Zelig . . . if he's so damn concerned, why don't he get his ass out here to look, too?"

"You know why, Uncle, and if I recall rightly, you agreed with the rest of them at the time," Gunnar pointed out rather acerbically.

Ryomaru shook his head, draping his hands on his hips as he, like his father, took his time as his gaze roamed up and down the street. "There's still a few decent hours of daylight left," he interrupted. "How 'bout we make use of 'em?"

Gunnar nodded as he got to his feet. "We'll call if we find anything."

InuYasha grunted as the two strode away. "How's your mate, pup?" he asked.

Kichiro stood, tossing the cup into a nearby trashcan. "She's all right," he said. "She's stronger than people think she is."

"So's your mama," InuYasha allowed as he fell into step beside his son.

"Speaking of Mama, she said that the ofuda was definitely a barrier anchor."

InuYasha nodded. "Figured as much. That damned monk used to harass me with 'em—him and that old hag, Kaede."

"Belle says . . . she says that Sam's fine. She says she can feel her . . ." Kichiro ventured.

InuYasha nodded. "Sounds 'bout right. Your mama could always tell when any of you got in over your heads, too."

"Except for Gin."

InuYasha shot him a quick glance. "Hell . . . I think your sister . . . No one thought she'd do something that damn stupid."

"It's not the same," Kichiro finally muttered as they ducked into an alley to vault onto the building. "All the idiotic things we've done . . . we've done them to ourselves . . ."

"Keh!" InuYasha snorted as he landed beside Kichiro atop the building. "And you think that matters?' It don't. When it's your pup, it don't."

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Samantha slowly opened her eyes, sighing heavily in the welcome silence. She didn't remember coming back here. To be honest, she didn't remember a hell of a lot about anything. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She did remember some of it. She remembered being shackled and then being led into the examination room. She'd figured that it was just more of the same and had been bracing herself for it. To her surprise, though, they'd shackled her legs to the iron loop embedded in the wall, followed by the collar that they'd secured to a chain hanging from the ceiling. Locked into place, she couldn't do much more than just stand there, but it hadn't taken long before she figured out exactly what they'd had in mind as they affixed sensors to her body at various points to get accurate readings on her reactions.

Oh, it hadn't been too bad in the beginning. Playing a series of tones that she recognized easily enough as being a standard hearing test, she'd simply stood there, expression blank.

But as the minutes then hours ticked away, the researchers had gradually increased the sounds, ranging from low tones that she barely heard to the loudest, most obnoxious tones that jarred through her with a painful clarity.

She didn't know when she'd started to feel sick. Unable to block out the barrage of sound, she'd felt her legs giving way. She vaguely remembered feeling as though she were going to choke to death when her knees finally buckled, as she'd remained there, suspended by the collar. Her already weakened body just couldn't hold up, she'd realized, and she'd nearly passed out when they had finally unfastened the collar, letting her crumple to the floor.

The thing was, that didn't stop them, either. Intent on continuing their tests, she supposed, they'd continued to inundate her with sound—sounds so high in pitch that she knew that they couldn't hear it, and to her mortification, she hadn't been able to stop herself when the first waves of nausea hit her hard.

Everything after that, though, was pretty much a blur. She vaguely recalled one of the guards unfastening her ankles when they tried to get her back to the holding room. She sort of remembered tugging off the sensors and tossing them away, herself. The weak and blurry image of the holy man's face swam in and out of her conscious, and she thought that maybe she'd asked him to turn the sound off, though that might have just been wishful thinking—something she'd wanted to do but couldn't.

Still, she knew that he had been the one to bring her back here. That was enough.

Drawing a tentative breath, she pushed herself up. Her head felt heavy, and her throat still hurt from the collar, but she supposed that those things were pretty incidental, really.

The panel slid open, and he pushed a fresh bowl of water into the cage. She stared at it for a moment before willing her body to move. The first couple mouthfuls, though, she

swished around and spit out, wishing that she had a toothbrush or some gum—anything to get rid of the nasty taste that lingered.

It was strange, the things that she found that she missed; the simplest things, really. Toothbrushes or soap . . . a soft, warm towel or a fresh cup of coffee . . . the smell of a summer breeze blowing straight off the ocean or the gentle sound of laughter . . . the freshness of a spring rain or the crisp cold of a winter storm . . . the crackle of a fire, the rustle of autumn leaves . . . the burn in her muscles after a good, long run . . . simple things: beautiful things . . .

Things that felt a little further away with the passage of every single day. *'We're . . . not made for this . . . to endure this . . . We're . . . not . . .'*

The confines of this place, the limitations that she couldn't control . . . Youkai weren't meant to survive like this, and she knew that, too.

What she couldn't understand was why, exactly, she didn't mind it—at least, not as much as she ought to. She ought to loathe the constraints, shouldn't she? She should . . .

She should hate . . .

Grimacing at the vehemence of her own thoughts, Samantha bit her lip, stared at her weak and distorted reflection in the mirror of the water's surface. It was odd, wasn't it? A little dirty, a little smudged, but really, she didn't look that different . . .

"Take these."

Samantha blinked and lifted her chin to stare at the fingers stuck into the cage. He held out two nondescript white tablets, and when she made no move to take them right away, he shook his hand impatiently.

“W-what . . .?”

“Ibuprofen,” he muttered. “Should help your head.”

She smiled despite the ache in her skull. “I thought . . . you hated me . . .” she teased.

He snorted loudly and shook his hand again. “I do,” he insisted. “I just don’t feel like cleaning up after you if you throw up again.”

Well, she figured, that was better than nothing, and at this point, she would take whatever she could get. Accepting the medicine despite her general dislike of such things, she stuck them in her mouth and downed a few drinks of water. “I don’t like those,” she said as she wiped her lips with the back of her hand. “They always make my head feel thick . . .”

“Why won’t you talk to them? The researchers?” he asked suddenly, and judging from the expression on his face, he had surprised himself by asking it.

She shrugged and set the bowl aside. “I wouldn’t want to disappoint them,” she replied, only half joking. “They seem to like to think that I’m an animal.”

He snorted again, shaking his head as though he’d found something she’d said to be utterly ridiculous. “Demons aren’t even worthy of being compared to animals,” he stated though his tone lacked any real rancor. Disgust, sure, and even a hint of irritation, but the way he’d said it—as if it were known fact he was quoting—didn’t bother her.

“And you think I’m a demon.”

“You *are* a demon.”

She shook her head. “I told you before. I’m hanyou.”

He sighed and braced his fingertips against the floor to push himself to his feet. “Look, I don’t give a damn, what you call yourself. I know what you are, and I know what your kind is capable of, so don’t try to play your mind games with me.”

“I’m not that good at mind games,” she admitted quietly. The look he shot her told her quite plainly that he didn’t believe her, and she figured that was all right, too. She honestly hadn’t expected him to, anyway.

He said nothing else as he headed back over to the desk once more. Shaking out his newspaper, he seemed content to ignore her. She frowned. He seemed to read the paper every night, she’d noticed, which made her wonder why he didn’t just get a digital reader like most people. Sure, the papers were still printed on a daily basis for those who choose to buy it sporadically, but most people who read the paper every day tended to buy the readers instead since the subscriptions overall were far cheaper in the long run . . .

Then again, maybe it didn’t surprise her that much. He struck her as an old fashioned sort, didn’t he?

*‘Sam . . . we have to talk.’*

Wrinkling her nose at the incursion of her youkai voice, Samantha heaved an inward sigh and waited patiently.

*‘You need to stop fixating on him. I don’t think he was joking when he said that he didn’t like you.’*

No, she didn’t think he was joking, either, but somehow, she didn’t quite think that he really meant it, even if he thought he did or wanted to . . .

*‘Don’t be stupid! You’re here because he put you here!’*

And she had to allow that that was true, too. Still, she knew that there was more to it. She wasn't sure how she knew that, but she did. She knew . . .

"Stop staring at me," he growled without lowering the paper.

Samantha bit her lip, her cheeks pinking almost instantly as she forced herself to look away.

*'But he has been decent to me,'* she rationalized to herself.

*'Because he has let you go to the bathroom? That's being nice, is it?'*

*'Isn't it?'* she countered angrily. Maybe it wasn't a huge allowance, especially since he'd completely shackled her beforehand, but it was enough—*more* than enough. It was enough to let her retain some small measure of her dignity, wasn't it, and even if he had much simpler motives for the actions, that just didn't matter; not really.

*'Stop trying to make excuses for him, and concentrate on what matters, can't you? We need to get out of here! You know it, and I know it, too! We can't stay here—we really can't. If we stay in here . . .'*

Her youkai didn't need to finish that statement. In her heart, Samantha knew that it was true. Staying here . . .

Rubbing her arms against the chill that was never very far away, Samantha deliberately forced herself to think about other things since dwelling on those aspects was just not good for her. She hoped that Sydney wasn't letting herself get too worried. She didn't need to be thinking about Samantha when she had much more important things—things like her unborn child—to consider . . . and Bas should be there with her, shouldn't he? Gunnar . . . she'd never really gotten a good feel for him. Certainly, she respected his

abilities, and yes, she spoke with him whenever they were in the same room, but there was always a certain level of awe, she supposed, the residual effect of having grown up so much later than them, maybe . . . Her grandfather, InuYasha . . . Kami, he'd hated it when she'd told him that she wanted to be a hunter. Worse, he'd just stared at her then nodded, but she hadn't missed the heightened brightness that he'd masked in his gaze . . . Aunts and uncles, cousins, everyone . . .

All of her family . . . they worried her. The last thing she wanted was for them to drop everything, just to look for her. If her thoughts were like the ocean, would they reach them one day?

Besides . . . the holy man had brought others here, hadn't he? She'd gotten that impression from the few things he'd said. It stood to reason, didn't it? If he had, if she weren't the first, then he very likely had done something to ensure that she couldn't be found, anyway . . .

A slow sense of melancholy crept up her spine—a melancholy so fierce that she had to bite the inside of her cheek to keep herself from screaming out loud. For a girl from a large extended family, she couldn't help the overwhelming sense of loneliness that ate away at her. All her life, she'd been surrounded by people who loved her, even in those few times when she'd thought that she was isolated. Even then, she'd felt them—the warmth of their presences, even if they weren't right there with her. She'd never, ever felt their absences as deeply as she did at that moment . . .

And she realized then with a poignant clarity that she really and truly was alone.



Final Thought from Samantha:

... alone ...?

## Chapter 18

### Rage

-----

*“Come on, son . . . It’s not polite to stare at people . . .”*

*Dragging his eyes off the creature standing in the line at the Hotter Totter’s booth at the North Dakota State Fair when his father grasped his hand to pull him away, Kurt blinked and shook his head. “Daddy?”*

*“Yes?”*

*“What was that?”*

*Doug Drevin stopped and shot him a quick glance—a wary glance. “What was what?” he asked, his tone oddly strained as he hurried Kurt along a little faster.*

*Kurt glanced over his shoulder only to find the monster staring right at him. “It looks like E.T. only bigger,” Kurt mused.*

*“Your mother’s probably waiting for us near the bathrooms,” his father went on, ignoring Kurt’s assessment.*

*“It looked all scaly,” Kurt continued.*

*“Did it?” Doug asked distractedly.*

*“Yeah, like a snake man or a lizard . . . Why didn’t he have skin?”*

*Doug glanced over his shoulder as he tugged Kurt along a little faster. Catching Kurt's gaze, he tried to smile. The smile was thin, weak . . . and the expression in his eyes was a mask of horrified dismay. "Uh, Kurt . . . Oh! There's Mommy! Hurry up."*

*Frowning at his father's strange preoccupation, Kurt hurried along beside him.*

*"I wanna ride the horsies!" Caroline hollered as she hopped up and down. Kurt made a face. He most certainly didn't want to ride a silly carousel . . .*

*"Sweetie . . . why don't we go back to the hotel? I've got a, uh, headache . . ."*

*Lainie Drevin's eyebrows drew together in a concerned frown. "Oh . . . okay . . . I've got some Tylenol in my purse . . . Let me —"*

*Doug forced a weak laugh, shuffling his feet as he glanced around with his hands on his hips. "It's okay; it's fine . . . I'd rather lie down, I think. You know how those migraines can be . . ."*

*Lainie stared at him for a minute then nodded slowly. "Okay . . . Come on, Carrie . . . We'll ride the horsies another time."*

*"Mom?" Kurt piped up suddenly, raising his voice to be heard over his sister's angry protests.*

*"Hmm?"*

*He pulled his hand away from his father's grasp and dashed forward to catch up with his mother. "Did you see the lizard-man, too?"*

*"Lizard . . .? No . . . no, I didn't . . ." she replied vaguely as she quickened her pace. Forcing a strangely bright laugh, she shook her head as she scooped up Caroline and kept moving. "You know, Doug, I . . . I just remembered that I forgot to check the garage door before we left home . . ."*

.”

“Houshi-sama?”

The quiet voice seemed to drag him up through the stifling layers of sleep that enveloped him. The lingering memory clung to him tightly—too tightly—as he struggled against it.

The sounds of that day seemed to have convoluted in his head: insane sounds . . . the canned music of the midway, the screech and clank of the mechanical rides, the distant hum of a thousand voices . . . a droning incontinence in a wash of white noise . . .

It had followed them, hadn't it? Through the crowds, along the walkways, the exits to the enclosed fair grounds . . .

“Houshi-sama . . .?”

That voice—again, that voice . . .

As though he were suddenly floating: floating above the throngs of people . . . that voice was calling to him, softly but steadily . . .

“Are you all right? Houshi-sama . . .”

His eyes flashed open, and he sat up straight, his heart hammering against his ribs with a painful intensity. Half-forgotten details that he hadn't really considered beckoned him, reminding him of things that he hadn't remembered for so long . . .

*‘The . . . the State Fair . . .’*

He hadn't understood why his father had been so worried at the time, had he? He hadn't

understood why his father had looked so horrified . . .

He hadn't wanted Kurt to see those demons, had he? He'd never wanted Kurt to see them, and Kurt, at that time, hadn't realized that not everyone could see the things that he could.

And they'd only gone back to the hotel long enough to gather their things and check out. Doug Drevin had been afraid, hadn't he? Afraid that the beasts had realized that Kurt could see them . . . and maybe afraid that they'd realize that he could see them, too . . .

But Kurt also couldn't remember a time that he hadn't been able to see them. Still, it was strange. The little demon still looked the same to him as it had the first time he'd gotten a good look at it. It shouldn't look like that, and he knew it. It shouldn't, but it did. Why?

A violent surge of utter rage shot through him. Why could it hide the things that he knew had to be there? Why could it hide the grotesque features, the hideous reminder that it certainly was not human? Why did it have to look so much like a . . . a . . . ?

Drawing a deep breath, he deliberately told himself not to think about it; not to consider what it really looked like. Those things—those vile, malignant beasts . . .

A strange and unsettling thought occurred to him, and he couldn't help it as he shifted his gaze without raising his head, stared at the demon with mounting suspicion. Were they . . . evolving . . . ?

It stood to reason, didn't it? Every living form, even humans, evolved. With every passing generation, things subtly changed. It had been so since the beginning of time. If that were true, then it would mean that those damnable monsters could, too . . . Was that it? Was that why he'd sensed such a different kind of power of late . . . ?

'No,' he thought, tucking his head securely between his raised hands, digging his fingers into his hair as a roughened groan slipped from him.

It should have been enough that they already possessed strange powers that defied human reason. It should have been enough that they were stronger than anything had a right to be. It should have been enough that they possessed no remorse for the things they did and the lives they destroyed. It should have been enough . . .

"You're all right, aren't you?"

Caught off guard by the softly uttered question, Kurt lifted his head, stared incredulously at the little demon. Sitting calmly, docilely, in the cage, it stared at him, its dark blue eyes candid if not a little concerned.

The concern, however, set him off, bringing forth an unnatural rage that seethed from deep within him. "Shut up," he snarled, his voice gravely, low. "Just shut up!"

It blinked at him, the concern in its gaze taking on a certain sadness that only served to further his outrage. Gritting his teeth as he turned his face away, he forced back the bitterness that ate at him. He had to get out of there, didn't he? Had to put some distance between them before he gave in to the rage.

Pushing himself to his feet, he stomped toward the door without any real destination in mind, pausing only long enough to activate the security walls and the barrier that covered the exit. Then he strode out of the room and down the long corridor, following the artificial glow given off by the vending machines that stood across from the elevators. Digging into his pocket for change, he dropped in enough for a cup of coffee and let out a deep breath.

*'Damn it . . .'*

He couldn't deal with it, could he? The anger, the rage . . . the hurtful memories . . .

It was because of that demon, wasn't it? All the memories, all the nightmares . . . the things he'd tried his entire life to forget . . . Everything was being dragged up all over again because of it.

Watching absently as a waxed paper cup dropped down and slowly filled with coffee, he shook his head. He couldn't do it anymore, could he? He couldn't keep coming in here to watch that thing, no matter how much money it might cost him. That thing was entirely far too dangerous to his sanity . . .

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“So you are telling me that you know nothing.”

Cain's gaze fell away as he nodded once, feeling the bitter surge of frustration well up deep inside. He was becoming far too friendly with that emotion, but standing there facing the one being who even came close to intimidating him was harder than he'd anticipated.

Sesshoumaru inclined his head, his expression completely devoid of any trace of what he was thinking. “Nothing.”

Cain drew a deep breath. “Nothing,” he allowed. “Well, we figure that she's being hidden,” he went on with a shake of his head. “A barrier or something. Kagome wants to go, but InuYasha insists that it's too dangerous. She thinks that she might be able to help locate the barrier, if there is one. I can't help but wonder if she could be right, and at this point . . .”

“At this point, you believe that the potential outweighs the unforeseen risk.”

Cain nodded. “Yeah.”

Sesshoumaru didn't respond right away. Striding over to the wall of windows, he intently stared at the falling snow. “It frustrates me to rely upon the miko in this,” he admitted at length. “She has done enough.”

“Naraku, you mean.”

“And there are no other options.”

Rubbing his forehead with a slightly shaking hand—a silent testament to the sleepless nights that he'd sat up, staring at the phone and willing it to ring—Cain shook his head. “Options? There haven't been any real ones from the start.”

Sesshoumaru nodded as though he'd figured that, too. “I trust that her mate can see to her safety.”

A soft knock interrupted the conversation. A moment later, Gin peeked around the door with an apologetic little smile. She looked like she was ready to retreat if given the word, but Cain forced a small smile to draw her forward.

She stepped inside with a tray of coffee and a small plate of various cookies and mini-muffins. “I thought you could use a break,” she murmured as she slipped the tray onto the desk and reached for the porcelain carafe. “It's good to see you, Uncle. Your flight was all right?”

Sesshoumaru turned and stared at her, his eyes taking on a slight glow as he nodded at Gin. “It was fine,” he assured her. “I trust you're keeping her out of mischief,” he said.

Cain shrugged and accepted the cup of coffee she offered him. “She’s an Izayoi. I don’t think it’s possible to keep her out of mischief.”

“Cain!” she chided, her cheeks pinking, shooting him a chagrined sort of look as she presented a cup to her uncle. “I don’t get into mischief,” she assured him.

Sesshoumaru took the cup and nodded. “Less than your brothers, in any case.”

Gin heaved a sigh designed to let them know how sorely put-upon she felt at the perceived slight. Cain’s smile widened just a touch as he pulled her over to kiss her forehead before she slipped out of the room with a wiggle of her fingers and a soft little giggle.

“She has not changed,” Sesshoumaru remarked as he shifted his gaze away from the door.

“Yeah,” Cain agreed.

“And she is holding up well, it seems.”

“A little too well,” Cain muttered as he lifted the coffee to his lips.

“What does that mean?”

Letting out a deep breath as his smile faded, as he stared thoughtfully at his cup, Cain shook his head slowly. “She tries to be everything that anyone might need,” he said in an almost distracted tone of voice. “Bellaniece needs a friend . . . her mother needs a daughter . . . Jillian needs reassurance, and Evan . . . God only knows what he’s ever thinking, but it’s never anything he’s willing to tell Gin, and even if he would, he’d never tell me . . . Sydney needs a mother . . . Bas tries not to need a damn thing . . . and all the while, she plays the hostess, and she says that everything will be just fine, but . . . But she’s worried, too, and I know she is, and she won’t tell me that, either.” Shuffling over

to the fireplace, Cain set the mug on the mantle and busied himself by dropping a couple hunks of wood on the dying flames, but he didn't stand up right away, staring at the fire without seeing it at all. "Isabelle and Alexandra act like strangers, exchanging only the most necessary of words . . . Everyone's walking around on eggshells, afraid to offend or upset someone else, and Gin . . . Gin's answer is just to try even harder . . ."

"And you try harder because she does."

Uttering a half-hearted chuckle, Cain shook his head, propping his elbow on his knee and rubbing his forehead. "I told her the other night that if she wanted to say something to me, I'd listen . . . You know . . . You know what she did?"

Pivoting on the balls of his feet when Sesshoumaru didn't respond, Cain barked out a harsh laugh as devoid of humor as it was full of irony. "She baked me a cake, of course."

Sesshoumaru chuckled—a rare sound coming from the formidable man. "Perhaps you are interpreting things wrong," he remarked at length as he sipped his coffee. "Perhaps it is not that she needs to be these things for everyone else. Perhaps, in truth, she needs to be these things for herself."

Cain considered that and nodded. In truth, he hadn't actually thought about it that way. Overly concerned that she was simply brushing aside the things that he knew to be true, he hadn't stopped to think that maybe, just maybe, she was dealing with the situation the only way she knew how.

Even still, it didn't alleviate the oppressive feeling that everything was desperately wrong, and that feeling . . . God, he hated it . . .

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“I quit.”

Dr. Harlan stopped with his coffee mug hovering near his lips as he slowly shook his head. “Quit?” he echoed. “Wh-what do you mean, Doc?”

“What do I mean?” he countered with a slight shake of his head. “It’s pretty straight forward, don’t you think? ‘I quit’ normally means that I quit.”

“You can’t quit!” Harlan exclaimed with a very loud, very fake laugh. “We had a deal, and—”

“Don’t tell me about deals,” Kurt interrupted impatiently. “You’re the bastard who keeps altering that deal, aren’t you? Forget it. I changed my mind. You’re going to pay me the rest of what you owe me, and you’re going to find someone else to watch your prize at night.”

Harlan made a face. It was obvious from the panicked expression on his face that the very last thing that he wanted to do was to try to find someone else to watch the little demon. Too bad Kurt didn’t really give a damn . . . “You know as well as I do that this is highly sensitive research. We can’t trust just anyone with the information, and you saw for yourself that someone else might not be able to handle her. You were right; she seems to be quite powerful, but—”

“And you’re missing the point! I hunt those things—that’s *all* I do. The rest of it is yours, not mine.”

“But without you—”

“Look . . . Authorize the rest of my payment unless you’d really like to see how long this place stays standing once I remove the barrier outside,” Kurt warned.

Harlan looked like he was going to panic for a few minutes before a strange sort of glint entered his expression. “You’re scared of her, aren’t you? Scared that you can’t handle her!”

It took every last bit of Kurt’s self-restraint to keep from beating the old bastard senseless. Narrowing his eyes, gritting his teeth, he planted his hands on the desk and leaned in close—close enough that it caused the self-serving smirk on the good doctor’s face to falter as he sat back. He could see every spidery blood vessel just beneath the thinning surface of Harlan’s face, could “I’m not afraid of that thing in the least . . . but then, I’m not the one grasping at straws because you’re too damn stupid to admit that you’re afraid of it.”

Harlan opened and closed his mouth a few times before clearing his throat and pasting on a tepid smile. “Okay, Doc, I’ll admit it. She’s . . . creepy . . . That’s a good word for it. Anyway, I’d like for you to reconsider. After all, it’d be a shame if I had to call the others and tell them that you’ve become . . . unreliable.”

“Unreliable? Is that so?” Kurt countered quietly. “You think they’ll believe you?”

“You think they won’t?”

“I think you’re bluffing,” Kurt retorted.

Harlan shook his head but only shrugged. “But you don’t want to find out, do you? As I see it, we need each other, right? You need us. We pay you, and we need you or else we don’t get the demons . . . Why are we arguing, anyway?”

Kurt could think of a few reasons why they would be arguing, but he leaned back just a little.

“I can offer you a raise; would that be acceptable?”

Kurt stared at him for a moment. “You really haven’t been listening to me, have you? I told you, I—”

“Think about it, why don’t you? A nice, fat raise on top of the amount we agreed on . . . not such a bad deal, is it?” Harlan straightened his tie and pasted on an indulgent smile.

Kurt narrowed his eyes on the man and slowly shook his head.

Harlan held out his hands in a pleading gesture and shrugged. “Look . . . if you’re not scared of her, then you really don’t have anything to lose, do you? You can’t tell me that hunting like you do in the dead of winter really appeals to you, does it? Think about it . . . I’m offering you a nice, steady income, and all you have to do is sit in a room all night and make sure that our girl doesn’t do anything stupid . . . Is that really so tough?”

Kurt snorted, more at the girl reference than in response to anything else that Harlan had said. Without bothering to reply, he turned on his heel and headed for the door, stopping just long enough to grab his knapsack off the table nearby before striding out of the office and down the hall toward the elevator.

That was the problem, wasn’t it? He wasn’t afraid of it. He never had been. In fact, he sincerely doubted that he actually possessed the capacity to fear anything at all anymore. After all, fear was a conditioned response when one felt threatened, right? Kurt hadn’t actually felt threatened for a very long time, not really. To be honest, he hadn’t actually felt real fear in years . . .

Because he wasn’t afraid of death . . . that was the real reason that he feared nothing. If he died, it wouldn’t matter, aside from the idea that he had yet to find the ones responsible for murdering his family. If he found them tomorrow—if he destroyed them—he wouldn’t have anything left.

He'd dedicated his entire life to hunting down and summarily destroying those demons, and if the only reason he had to get up in the morning was the potential to find them, then he'd figured that was enough, too.

*'If I stop coming here, then I can resume my search, can't I?'*

That was true, of course. He could. Still, he knew damn well that there was more that he could learn just from observing the little demon . . . things like weaknesses that they might possess—things he might not have considered before, like its susceptibility to extreme noise . . . What else could he learn?

Digging his hands into his jacket pockets as he stepped out of the building and onto the pavement, Kurt frowned when his fingers wrapped around a bottle. Tugging it free, he stared at it for a moment, unable to place what it was or where it had come from.

Then he remembered. He'd gotten the bottle out of the little demon's belongings, hadn't he? He'd stuck them in his pocket as an afterthought a couple days ago, thinking that he could steal some time in one of the labs to run a more in-depth analysis on the pills. That was the night that he'd come in, only to find that it was sick, so he'd forgotten to test them . . .

Staring at the bottle, turning it over in his hand, he considered his options and sighed. Common sense told him not to ever go back, but damned if he wasn't entirely too curious about the pills, especially after the little demon had gone to such lengths to avoid eating or drinking the tainted food the researchers had given it . . .

Heaving a sigh, Kurt shook his head and stuffed the bottle into his pocket once more. In for a penny; in for a pound—wasn't that the old phrase? And if he were stuck in it for a penny, he might as well take the pound, too . . .

Besides, he reasoned as he pulled the front of his jacket a little closer around himself, Memories were just memories, and despite what he might think when the lights were out, they really couldn't hurt him, either . . .



**Author's Note**

**E.T: The Extra Terrestrial** belongs to Stephen Spielberg and Universal Pictures, 1982.

Kurt's reference to temperature at the start of the chapter is in Fahrenheit.



**Final Thought from Kurt**

So much for quitting ...

## Chapter 19

# Loneliness

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“Fourteen twenty-two, please.”

Digging into his wallet for a ten and a rather crumpled five, Kurt handed it to the girl and waited for his change.

“You’re number ninety-seven. Please step down, and wait for us to call your number.”

It was a pain in the ass, wasn’t it? It was Thanksgiving, for chrissakes! What the hell were all these people doing, out and about, anyway?

The restaurant was inordinately busy, considering it was a holiday. For a guy who wasn’t particularly fond of crowds, anyway, the added stress was taking a serious toll on him.

When he was small, he remembered hearing his mother complain once because all the stores were closed. She’d run out of eggs and needed some for the turkey dressing she was making, and Kurt and his father had driven all over Crosby, trying to find somewhere that was open. In the end, they’d stopped just outside of town at a small farm that normally sold fresh eggs at the summer farmers’ market, and Doug had wheedled half a dozen eggs out of the farmer’s wife while Kurt sat in the car flipping through the radio stations.

It just proved that city folk were a strange breed. It amazed him, how many people would rather eat precooked dinners than make their own. He wasn’t nearly as picky, though, which was why he was standing in line at Burger King.

Besides, he had to get to the damn facility. No rest for the wicked, he supposed . . .

He was still of two minds about it. Even when he'd grabbed his knapsack off the table in the ramshackle apartment, he hadn't been sure that he really was going to go back. He didn't really care about Harlan's threats. Even if he did spout off about Kurt, the other places would change their tunes as soon as the needed demons and realized that no one else could supply them.

And if they didn't . . . well, he'd figure that out, too. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that there were things that he could find out from that little demon; things that could help him in his quest to find the ones who had destroyed his family . . .

"Number ninety-seven! Ninety-seven!"

Kurt stepped up and muttered a terse 'thank you' as he took the bag from the girl and turned to go. Maneuvering through the crowd, though, was a study in patience, and it took almost five minutes just to reach the doors. By the time he did, his patience was wearing thin, and he shoved the door open without paying much attention, blinking quickly as his senses lurched violently, as his eyes shot up to meet those of a very tall, very large . . . *demon* . . .?

"Oh, sorry, man," the demon said, offering him a quick smile despite its slightly haggard appearance, overall.

Kurt backed out of the building without taking his eyes off the demon, unsure exactly what to think. It had talked, hadn't it? It had actually apologized despite the fact that Kurt was the one who had bumped into it with the door . . . What the hell was going on . . .?

Ducking his head, he turned and quickened his pace as he strode away, opting at the last

moment to hop on the bus that was just stopping nearby. He didn't care where it went, did he? He dropped money for the fare into the tray beside the driver and hurriedly dropped into the first vacant seat he could find. Peering out the window, he grimaced. That demon was still standing outside the restaurant with a strange expression on its face, as though it had recognized something about him, and beside it . . . Kurt narrowed his eyes, unsure whether or not he honestly could believe exactly what he saw. *'Two . . .?'*

Clenching his jaw, Kurt shook his head. Way too many things bothered him about that, didn't it? Had he been so preoccupied with simply getting out of the busy restaurant to have noticed the excessive power in that demon's aura? He really hadn't thought it was possible, had he? After sensing the little demon's tremendous power, he had honestly thought that there couldn't possibly be a stronger aura, hadn't he?

Damn it, he had been wrong. The one outside the restaurant . . . *'Shit . . .'*

And the other one didn't look much better, in his honest opinion. Even through the distance that separated them, coupled with the barrier presented by the tempered glass windows of the bus, he could feel it, couldn't he? The combined strength of the two of them . . . Hell if it wasn't just a little frightening . . .

Even if it hadn't been remarkably strong in aura, though, he still would have noticed it. Damn it, that one had really been huge—tall and wide. Long hair mere shades darker than its golden eyes—startling eyes . . . and the second one—the one he hadn't seen at all when he'd gotten out of the restaurant—it wasn't that much shorter than the first one though it definitely wasn't nearly as broad of build as the first, but it had the same unsettling eyes though it had black hair, and worse was the feeling of easy power that fairly exuded from the damned creature . . .

Raking his hand through his hair, Kurt stood up to get off the bus at the next stop. He could see through whatever disguises they donned, couldn't he? So why . . . ? The black haired one had strange blue lines on its cheeks though he hadn't been able to discern

anything else at that distance, but the first . . .

Damned if that one hadn't looked entirely human.

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"What's the matter?"

Bas shook his head without taking his eyes off the bus that had just merged into traffic. "That was . . . strange . . ." he allowed almost absently.

"Strange, how?" Toga asked. Something about Sebastian's demeanor struck him as odd.

The bus turned the corner, and Bas sighed though the troubled expression on his face had yet to diminish. "I don't know," he muttered as he stepped back to allow some people who were waiting behind them to enter the restaurant. "Just a . . . feeling . . ."

Tamping down the feeling that he was playing the 'why' game with a toddler all over again, Toga shrugged. "What kind of feeling?"

Letting out a deep breath, Bas shook his head again. "That guy . . . didn't you feel it?"

Toga wasn't entirely sure what Bas was talking about since he'd lagged a little behind as he talked to Sierra on his cell phone, letting her know how much progress they were—or weren't, as the case was—making. "I didn't even see him. Why?"

Bas bit his bottom lip thoughtfully as he considered what he was about to say. "I sensed . . . something," he explained slowly. "Like a . . . a kind of power."

Toga frowned as he digested that. “You mean like a spiritual power?”

Bas nodded then grimaced, dragging a hand over his face. The young man desperately needed a good shave, and very likely, a good night’s sleep. Unfortunately, Toga knew firsthand that the latter wasn’t likely to happen until he found Samantha and brought her home because he was suffering the same thing, too. Letting out a long sigh, Bas stared at Toga for a moment. “Or maybe it was just wishful thinking . . .”

“Do you really think that?” Toga asked quietly as the two started down the street again.

Bas snorted, the strain of the constant searching starting to show through. “I-I don’t know . . . I mean, I don’t think so, but . . .”

*‘But maybe he wants to believe it too much,’* Toga thought. “Even then . . . did you get a good scent on him?”

Bas shook his head, a hint of irritation entering his gaze. “No, damn it. It was too fast, and . . . and there were a lot of scents coming out of that place, and . . . And *damn* it!” Stopping abruptly, the future North American tai-youkai raked his hands through his hair in a thoroughly frustrated way. “I didn’t expect . . .”

Toga sighed and clapped his hand on Bas’ shoulder. “You’re second guessing yourself. Don’t do that.”

Letting out a deep breath, Bas stared at Toga for a long moment then nodded. “Yeah . . . Maybe . . . maybe I just thought . . . Hell, I don’t know *what* I think anymore.”

Toga sighed and nodded, understanding the emotion a little too well. As if the search, itself, weren’t bad enough, Bas’ unborn child had to weigh heavily on his mind, too. “Maybe you should go on back to Maine, at least for a little while.”

Bas uttered a terse laugh and shook his head. “Can’t. Sydnie . . . She blames herself, and if I go back, she’ll insist on coming out here.”

And what could Toga say to that? As Samantha’s boss, it wasn’t entirely surprising that Sydnie would feel that way, even if no one else blamed her for it. In the end, Toga nodded. “Let’s go find the others. Maybe they’ll have an idea about that guy you saw.”

Bas nodded, too, though he still didn’t look entirely convinced. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Or maybe I’m just off my rocker . . .”

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The soft clink of dinnerware echoed in the quiet as Bellaniece lifted her gaze, peering up through her eyelashes at the assemblage of family around the huge Zelig dining table. It was completely wrong, wasn’t it? A holiday meal that just didn’t feel right; not because of who was there, but because of who was not.

Jillian slowly cut a miniscule bit of turkey and stuck it in her mouth, her eyes trained on the sparkling china plate before her. Isabelle sat beside her, pushing her food around more than she was actually eating. Alexandra sat at the opposite end of the table beside Cain, wordlessly sipping a glass of wine while Sierra and Nezumi did their best to eat, too. Gin was sitting at the moment though she kept hopping up to refill glasses or to grab something out of the kitchen that she’d forgotten to set out. Even Sesshoumaru and Kagura remained silent. Sydnie . . . the poor thing wasn’t even attempting to eat, and Bellaniece frowned. Sydnie had barely said two words to her since she’d arrived from Japan. She blamed herself for Samantha’s disappearance, no matter what anyone said to her . . .

Morio shot Meara a rather guilty sort of look, as though he didn’t think that he belonged

there, either. On the other side of him sat Mikio, fiddling with his twitching left ear as he, too, shifted his gaze around the table. He intercepted Bellaniece's glance and inclined his head just a little, his expression saying the same things that she felt: the entire affair bore more resemblance to some sort of warped play, didn't it, and the silence was more oppressive than anything that she'd ever felt before . . .

Had it only been a year ago that she'd sat down with Kichiro in the quiet of their home in the forest to a rather modest but entirely warm dinner where laughter and love had been far more prevalent than the necessity of food? Alexandra and John had flown in for the holiday, and Isabelle had called and spent a few hours just talking and laughing and catching up. Samantha had . . .

Of course, she'd called, telling her parents how much she missed them. They'd talked and laughed and reminisced, and in the end, Bellaniece had been so happy . . .

Letting out a deep breath, she shook her head and raised her chin. It was all wrong, wasn't it? Completely wrong, this air of impending doom . . . Samantha, with her smiles and her laughter, would never, ever want this. Wherever she was, Bellaniece had to believe that Samantha was smiling now, too, laughing the same as she had when she was a little girl and her father would dance with her all over the living room . . .

"You know," she said in a completely conversational tone, drawing the attention of everyone seated around the table, "I think that I'll go Christmas shopping tomorrow . . . the malls might have some good sales since it'll be the first official shopping day . . ."

As if no one else really knew what to say to her, they all exchanged surreptitious glances that Bellaniece supposed that she wasn't supposed to have noticed, so she smiled brightly and pretended not to, intent on playing out her part.

"If you want to," Sierra said quietly, tentatively. "I . . . I think that sounds great . . . Don't you think, Nezumi? Gin . . .?"

Nezumi smiled a little weakly, but nodded. “Oh, uh . . . yeah . . . a lot of fun . . .”

Gin’s smile was bright, hiding her concern a lot better than Bellaniece might have thought possible, though she didn’t miss the quick glance that she shot her mate before replying. “Of course, of course . . . That sounds fantastic!”

Bellaniece’s smile faltered just a little as her eyes flicked over Sydnie and back again. “What about you, Sydnie? Why don’t you come, too?”

The cat-youkai shot her a nervous sort of glance. “I . . .”

“You should . . . have you bought anything for the nursery yet? Daddy’s going to paint it, aren’t you?”

Cain blinked and set his fork down, staring at her for several moments before finally nodding just once. “If you want me to, Sydnie, I’d . . . I’d love to.”

She seemed genuinely surprised by the offer, as though she hadn’t actually considered that Cain would want to do that, and for some reason, that made Bellaniece sad. “Did you have anything special in mind, Sydnie, or are you going to wait until you find out whether you’re having a boy or a girl?”

The abrupt scrape of a chair interrupted the stilted and forced conversation. Without a word, Alexandra stood up and walked out of the room. Bellaniece sighed and watched her go before she started to get up, too. Cain motioned for her to sit back down as he stood up, instead.

He understood what she was trying to do, of course, and he knew that in her own way, Bellaniece was coping, but he also understood Alexandra’s upset because it mirrored his own. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he followed his granddaughter through the

living room and out the glass doors.

She was standing with her arms crossed over her chest, her gaze stubborn, defiant as she stared out over the horizon. She looked just like her mother, didn't she? And still . . .

"I take it you don't think Christmas shopping is a great idea," he said softly.

She shot him a quelling glance, obviously not appreciating her grandfather's misplaced attempt at humor. "Everyone acts like nothing matters . . . They all just laugh and joke like everything is just fine, and it's not."

"Do you really think that's what they're doing?" Cain asked carefully.

She nodded then shook her head and sighed. "I don't know, Grandpa," she muttered miserably then drew a deep breath, as though she was trying to get a grip on her rampant emotions, and maybe she was. "I know that's not what they're trying to do, but it feels that way, and this dinner . . ."

Cain reached out, grasped her arm to turn her around as he drew her against him in a warm hug. Her entire body seemed to resist him just for a moment before she threw her arms around him, clinging to him so tightly that Cain almost grimaced. "It's all right, Lex," he murmured, kissing her forehead as he wished yet again that he could fix the entire situation. "Let me tell you something. I'm not sure that you know it. See . . . a parent never wants to fall apart in front of their child. They're afraid . . . afraid that it'll frighten them, you see? But the truth of it is that sometimes . . . sometimes children should see that. They should see that a parent has emotions, too. Thing is, even if the parents know that in their heads, that doesn't mean that it's any easier for them to do. Your mother . . . She's coping the only way she can, just like you are."

Alexandra nodded slowly, her dark blue eyes so lost, so forlorn that it broke Cain's heart. "I . . . I just want Sami to come home," she whispered as the brightness of tears

filled her eyes. Nostrils quivering as she fought to keep those tears from falling, she couldn't hide the unabashed dread in the depths of her, the choking fear that she simply couldn't deal with. "I want her to, but . . . but I . . ."

"Lexi . . ."

Shaking her head, she spun away suddenly, lifting her hands to cover her face as a harsh sob slipped out of her. "Mama says that she can feel her, and Bitty says she can, too, but . . . I *don't*, Grandpa . . . Kami, I don't, so what . . . what does that . . . mean . . .?"

Taking the two steps that separated them, Cain pulled her back against him again, holding her close as silent tears racked through her. He didn't know what to say to her, didn't know how to comfort her, and as a single tear slipped from the corner of his eye, he closed them tightly as he wondered just how much more his family could take . . .

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"Hold on, damn it," Evan muttered as he stumbled toward the door of his hotel room, idly scratching his bare stomach. "I'm comin' . . ."

Glancing at the clock as he unlocked the door and turned the handle, he made a face. He'd only meant to take a short nap when he'd stretched out a few hours ago. "Shit," he growled with a heavy dose of self-disgust as he yanked the door open.

"Bas called," Gunnar said in lieu of a greeting as he brushed past Evan, stepping into the room. "Said that he thinks he ran into a guy that he thinks had some form of spiritual power, but he couldn't get a good lock on his scent."

"Why the fuck not?" Evan growled as he stomped over to snatch a shirt off the rumpled

bed.

Gunnar shook his head as he leaned against the wall and waited for his cousin to finish his grouching. “Take it easy, Evan. It was crowded, and the guy took off before Bas could really figure anything out.”

Dragging his hands over his face, he peered out from between his fingers. “Yeah, well, we could use all the help we can get right now, can’t we?”

“Anyway, Bas said that he got onto a bus, so we’re going to check around the stops to see if we can find any traces of him.”

“And you think it’ll work?” Evan countered, sparing a moment to cast Gunnar a dubious glance.

Gunnar stared at him for a long moment then shook his head. “Not really, but it can’t hurt to try. At this point . . .”

Evan nodded, understanding well enough, exactly what Gunnar was saying. “At this point, anything’s worth a shot.”

“Yeah.”

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Samantha bit her lip thoughtfully as she stared at the holy man who seemed to be taking his sweet time reading the newspaper. He’d barely said two words to her since he’d arrived, which wasn’t entirely surprising since he really didn’t seem to be one to stand upon small talk. Still, she’d rather hoped that he would be in a reasonably good mood

since he'd left in such a hurry before.

"I don't suppose I could have a drink of water," she ventured, breaking the silence that encompassed the room.

He turned the page of the newspaper but otherwise ignored her.

"Just a little one?"

Nothing.

Making a face, she wrinkled her nose and shifted her position in the cage. Placing her palms flat on the floor between her feet, she stared at the holy man, wondering if he'd had a bad day or something. "Can I ask you something?"

That finally got his attention though he still refused to lower the paper. "You can try," he muttered.

Figuring that was about as good as she was going to get, Samantha's ears perked up. "What's a C-Gen?"

"It's a machine that doctors use to see inside your body," he replied.

"You mean like a three dimensional x-ray?"

"Sort of."

"Oh . . ."

Letting out a deep breath as he folded the paper and set it aside, he finally looked at her, his gaze darkened with a suspicious glint. "Why?"

She shrugged. "The white-coats said that they're going to stick me in one tomorrow."

"Did they." Grasping the edge of the desk, he pulled himself out of the chair and strode over to retrieve the empty water bowl that she'd drained moments after he'd shoved it through the opening. "They say why?"

She shook her head. "Nope, though I suppose they want to see my innards."

"Well, that's disgusting," he muttered as he rinsed out the bowl and refilled it with clean water.

She giggled. "So this machine . . . they use it to look at your insides?"

"No, they use it to look at your bones."

"So why not just use x-rays?"

He hunkered down and pushed the bowl back into the cage. "Radiation," he replied with a shake of his head.

"And the C-Gen doesn't use that?"

Rolling his eyes, he gave her a look that stated quite plainly that he thought she was a little on the dingy side. Samantha ignored that. True enough, her parents and her sisters were doctors, but that didn't mean that Samantha had ever really paid attention to their boring medical talk, and while she'd heard the term 'C-Gen' before, she didn't rightfully know what it was or how it worked. "No, it doesn't."

"So what's the difference?"

He sighed and shook his head as she peered over the rim of the bowl at him, and for a minute, she didn't think that he was going to answer her. "C-Gens use sound waves to create three dimensional images of the bones. They're also far more accurate."

*'Sound . . . waves . . . ?'*

Scowling at his description, she lowered the bowl and pressed her lips together in a thin line. "Sound . . . waves . . ."

"Yes, sound waves," he repeated as he stood up again. "You stink."

She blinked, her mind still stuck on the idea of the sound waves he'd mentioned. "Like those tests?" she asked, unable to keep the hint of absolute dread out of her voice.

"You *really* stink," he stated once more. "Ugh . . ."

His statement sank in slowly, and she couldn't help the quite livid flush that crept up her cheeks at his callous appraisal. "I don't smell a thing," she lied. Okay, it wasn't a complete lie, after all. True enough, she'd caught whiffs of herself at different times, but she hadn't thought it was *that* bad. Then again, if it was bad enough that she could smell it, then it stood to reason that others could smell it much easier . . .

Not that it was her fault, damn it. She certainly hadn't volunteered to be locked in a cage for days and days on end without the ability to bathe herself. Still, knowing that she wasn't to blame for her deplorable state wasn't really working for her. "I wouldn't if I had a proper bath," she grumbled under her breath as her ears flattened against her head.

"You're downright offensive," the holy man went on.

She snorted, slipping her arms around her ankles and ducking down a little lower. "You don't have a girlfriend, do you?"

“What?” he barked rather sharply, looking less and less amused by the second, not that he actually had looked amused at all . . .

“Nothing,” she replied in a completely innocent tone.

He snorted loudly as he grabbed the handcuffs off the table nearby. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back,” he instructed.

“Why?” she countered dubiously.

“Because your stench offends me.”

Snapping her mouth closed as even more blood infiltrated her skin, she did as he had instructed since there didn’t seem to be any real way around it.

“Now your feet.”

Heaving a sigh of protest, she scooted around once more. To her surprise, though, the cuffs that he clamped around her ankles were connected by a much longer chain than the one she was normally forced to endure. “So what am I doing?” she finally asked as the embarrassment of his harsh assessment slowly wore off.

He shot her a ‘don’t-be-stupid’ sort of look. “You’re going to get cleaned up so you don’t offend me anymore—at least, not that way.”

No doubt about it, the man was hell on a girl’s ego, wasn’t he? Casting him a sorely injured sort of look as she wiggled her way out of the cage, she braced herself against the wire wall and pushed herself to her feet.

“Nothing stupid,” he warned, narrowing his eyes to emphasize his point. She blinked at

him almost mulishly but remained silent when he slipped the collar around her neck and fastened it closed with a slight yank.

She said nothing as he hooked her to the restraints nearby. In fact, her brain was in a quandary. On the one hand, she desperately wanted to get cleaned up. On the other? Well, she was really not looking forward to being blasted by that damned power hose, never mind the embarrassment of being naked all over again.

Then again, the naked part wasn't nearly as disconcerting to her as the stupid hose was. Maybe she'd spent entirely too much time here in that state, even if she hadn't been that way in front of the holy man, or maybe she'd just come to accept that she really couldn't do much about it. With the white-coats, she simply refused to give herself away. With the holy man? She stifled a sigh. He just wasn't going to give her a choice in the matter, she figured.

In any case, the idea of being clean—at least, cleaner than she was, was a far sight better than the residual embarrassment—all in all, a decent trade-off. The only thing that would help would be a nice bar of soap, but she figured that'd be pushing her luck, anyway.

He slipped his foot between hers and kicked them apart, and she noticed not for the first time that he wasn't cruel when he handled her. No, she'd consider his movements to be more clinical than anything, and that was fine with her. After spending days on the table, she'd come to understand that the white-coats might say that they despised her, and they really might, but they liked her body well enough, the bastards.

Gritting her teeth as the unwelcome memory of their assessments whispered in the back of her mind, she paid no attention as the holy man snapped the reinforced chains to the shackles around her ankles.

After a moment of deliberation, he let out a deep breath and strode over to her, stepping

behind her to unfasten one of the cuffs, and she understood. He might be willing to make sure she got cleaned up, but there was no way in hell he wanted to touch her. Whatever his reason was, she didn't care as a welcome surge of relief shot through her. Then again, she was pretty secure, wasn't she? The chains around her ankles, she knew, contained ofuda, as did the collar around her neck. She really wouldn't be going anywhere, even if she wanted to. The holy man was entirely too careful for that, wasn't he?

"Take that thing off," he commanded as he headed for the hose.

Biting her lip—she'd never been told to take her clothes off, herself, and it was a bit more daunting than she'd have thought possible—she did as she was told, yanking open the snaps that held the garment on her shoulders. She drew a deep breath and let it fall. It caught on her ankles as she automatically moved to cover her breasts with her freed hands.

He strode back into view, staring at the hose nozzle as he moved in front of her. Standing about five feet away with the hose pointed at the floor in front of her, he pulled the lever that started the water flow, adjusting his grip until there was a steady stream but nothing even close to full power before he lifted his arm, pointing the spray at her.

Samantha blinked—she really had expected him to turn the hose on her, full force, and it took her brain a moment to comprehend that he had no intention of doing that. Still, there was something oddly sweet about the way he scowled at the wall. Head turned just enough that he wasn't looking directly at her, he said nothing as he held the hose in place though she didn't doubt for a second that he could see her well enough out of the corner of his eye.

But it felt good, didn't it? Despite the frigid water, the steady stream felt good. Using her hands in lieu of a washcloth, she managed to get herself reasonably clean, and as the weeks of accumulated filth rinsed away, and as she did, her spirits lifted, too. There was

just something comforting about the idea of being clean, wasn't there? It was a feeling that she'd sorely missed.

He still said nothing as he slowly started to walk around her, and she scrubbed at her head as best as she could. There wasn't much she could do about washing her hair, but she tried, and that was good enough. She still felt much cleaner than she had in what seemed like forever, and by the time he turned off the hose, Samantha was smiling just a little despite the little tremors that she couldn't hide. The air inside the room was chilly—she couldn't remember it ever being truly warm or even close to comfortable for her—but in her sopping wet state, it was that much worse, and still she refused to complain.

The holy man strode over to a metal cabinet and grabbed another of those damned patient smocks. He still didn't look directly at her as he tossed it in her direction. She stared at it, unsure how she was going to manage to put it on since it had to go over her feet or her head, and both of those were still shackled.

He unsnapped the chain in her collar and stepped away. Samantha struggled into the smock—it was hard to put clothes on when one was soaking wet, wasn't it?

"Hands behind your back," he ordered about the second she'd managed to tug the smock into place. The water left in her hair had already soaked her back, and the front was clinging uncomfortably, but she was clean, and that was enough, she figured as she gritted her teeth to keep them from rattling and stuck her hands behind her back.

He secured her wrists before unhooking the chains on either side of her ankles that held her in place. "Get in the cage," he ordered.

She didn't say a word as she did as he'd ordered. He closed and locked the door before he reached in, waving his hand impatiently for the shackles. She stuck out her feet, the chain between them rattling since she wasn't quite able to control her shaking. He

unfastened those then dropped them beside himself before uttering a grunt to indicate that she was to turn around if she wanted her hands unbound.

She complied quickly, and no sooner were her hands free than she wrapped them around her raised knees in a vain effort to warm herself up.

He put the restraints away and strode back toward the desk.

Samantha let her temple fall against her raised knees and smiled to herself. She'd warm up a little when she was dry, and while she'd have preferred to be dry before she'd gotten dressed, she couldn't rightfully complain about that, either. Drawing a deep breath, she hugged herself a little tighter, realizing in a vague sort of way that she could smell something entirely familiar—entirely comforting.

As she started to drift to sleep, a gentle realization dawned on her. That smell that comforted her . . . it was her own scent—a scent that was a gentle mix of her mother and her father . . . and maybe the two of them weren't really as far away as she'd thought . . .



**Final Thought from Samantha:**  
Clean ...

## Chapter 20

### Reality

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The strangest sound awoke Kurt late in the night, and he blinked in confusion as he struggled to make sense of it. A constant rattle, wasn't it? A metallic jingle that just wouldn't stop . . .

Sitting up slowly, he shook his head as though to clear his mind. The sound was coming from the cage, wasn't it? It sounded like . . .

Shooting to his feet, he stomped across the room as he tugged off the black leather glove that covered his right hand. It was trying to escape, wasn't it? That was the sound he'd heard . . .

But as he drew nearer, his pace slowed, and his eyes narrowed.

It was lying in the corner of the cage, wrapped up as tightly as it could in a tiny little ball. As far as he could tell, it was sleeping, maybe, but it certainly wasn't trying to rattle the cage loose, which had been his initial thought.

'No,' he realized slowly as he stopped and crossed his arms over his chest. '*It's . . . cold . . .*'

Which stood to reason, he supposed, and he might have thought it sooner had the thing been human, to start with. The water that it had used to clean itself up had been straight out of the ground, he figured, and damn chilly, at that. Still, he hadn't stopped to think—hadn't actually cared, to be honest—that it might be cold after that makeshift shower.

Turning on his heel, he strode over to the desk. What did he care if it was cold or not? Why *should* he care? It was a monster, and those things—no matter what it looked like on the outside—those things . . .

Uttering a terse grunt as he dropped into the chair, he dug the notebook out of his knapsack and flipped through the pages.

*'Susceptible to variations of temperatures. Shows marked resilience, overall,'* he wrote, then gritted his teeth as he added in his head, *'and that shaking is driving me nuts . . .'*

Rubbing his eyes, he heaved a sigh and shook his head. *'So six of one, half a dozen of the other . . . at least it doesn't stink anymore . . .'*

Which was true enough, he had to admit, even if he really didn't want to think about that impromptu shower, not at all. What he'd seen had only served to reinforce his belief that the little demon had to be a creature born in the fiery pits of hell. For as diminutive as it was, it certainly had good form, which, of course, was more than enough to irritate him even more. He'd scoffed before when he'd read passages pertaining to succubae—demons who could take the form of women to entice men into having sex with them in return for their souls. He'd honestly thought that tales that those were absolutely ridiculous . . .

Was that the kind of demon that it was? If that were the case, he supposed it could explain the creature's outward appearance. Of course, the texts he'd read indicated that succubae tended to have very large breasts, which was not the case at all with the little demon. Still . . .

Shaking his head at his own absolutely ridiculous notions, Kurt scowled at the notebook and gritted his teeth.

That thing was not a succubus, damn it, and he didn't care what he had or hadn't seen. It was a monster, just like every other monster—an evil creature that just wanted to kill and destroy.

'*A . . . kind of pathetic one . . .*' he mused as his gaze unwittingly slipped back to the demon in question. The cage was rattling worse now, and for a moment, Kurt had to wonder why it hadn't been shocked by the papers he'd sealed inside the bars.

Heaving a sigh—the rattling was embedding itself in his brain, damn it—he stood up and strode over to yank one of the thin army-type blankets off the cot. Stomping over, he shoved it through the bars of the cage. “Now knock that off,” he grumbled, turning on his heel to adjust the temperature control on the main panel near the door.

The rattling stopped for a moment as the demon turned over to watch him. He heard it shuffling around as it covered itself up in the blanket. When it grew silent again, he almost sighed in relief—until the rattling started up again, signifying that it might take a bit longer for the damned creature to warm up enough to stop that infernal racket.

The groan and shudder of the heater roaring to life was enough to dull the sounds, though. Kurt shook his head. He supposed it was one of the drawbacks to having been raised out in the middle of nowhere with only a loony old man as company, but he had trouble concentrating when it wasn't very, very quiet, especially if he were trying to read or something like that.

Pushing the button to bring up the security walls of the cage, Kurt heaved a sigh and stomped out of the room, deciding that he might as well have a cup of coffee while he waited for the silence that he craved.

He was becoming entirely too familiar with that particular machine, he thought with a dour glare.

The groan and hiss of the vending machine echoed in his ears as he tapped his foot and waited impatiently.

Damn, it was strange, wasn't it? He'd stretched out, thinking about the demons he'd seen earlier in the day, and then he'd fallen asleep, too. He hadn't meant to, of course. Those demons bugged the hell out of him, didn't they?

*"Oh, sorry, man . . ."*

It had talked, just like the little one. It had spoken . . .

But the second one—the one he'd seen when he'd looked out of the window . . . What was it about that one that disturbed him? Wearing its power so loosely, it was . . . and yet it was the first one that had looked almost entirely human. The strange pupils, sure, but it hadn't opened its mouth wide enough for him to see the fangs. Those things aside, it looked entirely normal though he couldn't really say about the ears, either, given that the thing had long hair that had hung over where its ears should have been, and that was what really bothered Kurt the most.

Were they evolving somehow? Had they found a new kind of magic—some way of hiding what they really were better than they used to?

Without really thinking about what he was doing, he took the dropped more change into the machine and hit another button. *'Those things . . . Damn it . . .'*

Where were they all coming from now? Ever since he'd captured the little demon, he'd started to notice the strange auras, hadn't he? Stronger auras; more powerful, and yet . . .

Shaking his head as he blinked at the two steaming cups of coffee, he shook his head and carefully lifted them out of the tray before starting back down the hallway toward the holding area once more.

But he couldn't be positive that they had just suddenly appeared, either. Unable to tell whether or not they'd just started miraculously appearing or if they'd been there all the while and he simply hadn't realized it, it left him feeling as though he were beating his head against a wall or something.

He had felt that kind of aura before a few different times over the years. Always before, he'd chalked it up to a horde of those things gathering together for whatever reason. He knew now that it was simply because he hadn't wanted to believe that there could possibly be a single being that possessed that sort of power.

But he'd looked for them—it—before. He'd gone to search them out at the time, too, but he'd never actually found it. Recalling the image of the little demon, so effortlessly taking down the one he'd been stalking, was still fresh, vivid in his mind. He deliberately tried to remember that, to remind himself that regardless of what it looked like on the outside, it was quite capable of as much destruction as the ones he had seen for himself so long ago.

"Sit up," he commanded as he stopped in front of the cage once more. It was rattling worse than ever, and he rolled his eyes.

It complied slowly, as though it was loathe to give up the relative warmth of the blanket he'd given it. With a grunt, he slipped one of the cups through the bars.

It blinked at the offering for several moments before finally, hesitantly, reaching for it. "Th-thank you," it said in little more than a whisper.

Kurt didn't respond to that as he lifted his cup to his lips.

It took a deep swallow before it went on. "You know, I never used to like coffee at all, but this is really good . . ."

“Anything hot is good when you’re that cold,” he muttered.

“You’re probably right,” it agreed simply enough. Peering over the rim of the cup without blinking, it breathed deeply, inhaling the scent of the freshly brewed coffee. “This smell reminds me of . . .”

Kurt paused mid-drink to eye the demon. “Reminds you of what?” he prompted when it trailed off.

“Uh . . . oh, nothing,” it said with a shake of its head.

He grunted noncommittally.

It finished the coffee in silence. Kurt wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. He’d take it as good, though, all things considered. That little demon tended to talk a lot more than he figured it ought to.

Still, he had some questions of his own, and as much as he hated the idea of initiating any sort of conversation, he also knew that he wasn’t about to get answers if he didn’t. Peering out of the corner of his eye at the beast only to find it staring into the now empty cup with a melancholy expression on its face, Kurt figured that it was as good a time as any to find out. “Tell me something,” he said, drawing its attention. “Are there a lot of demons like you?”

“Like me?” it echoed with a shake of its head. “Like me, how?”

Narrowing his eyes to let it know that its flip answer wasn’t at all welcome, Kurt crouched down to look at it dead on. “Like you,” he repeated. “How many others are there?”

The little smile that had surfaced on its features dulled and faded away as it pondered his question. Biting its lip, it slowly shook its head then shrugged just a little as it lifted its gaze to meet his once more. “Not so many; not really,” it confessed. “I mean, back in my . . . in the old days, it was taboo to make others like me. These days, it isn’t really a problem, but . . . but there still aren’t that many.”

“They make you? Who makes you? What the hell does that mean?”

It blinked at the vehemence in his tone. “Everything is made, isn’t it, in one way or another . . .?”

Heaving a sigh, he leaned forward to snatch the empty cup away, his temper snapping at the coquettish answers he was getting. He should have known better, anyway . . . asking questions of something like that . . . He had to have been insane to think that he’d actually get answers out of a being like that, in the first place. How dare it smile at him and act like he was just trying to amuse it . . .?

He hated it—despised it and every other monster like it—and he’d be better off to remember that before he got any more stupid ideas about asking it questions in the future . . .

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Kichiro strode out of the police station with his father not far behind. “Fucking bastards,” InuYasha muttered under his breath as he shot a fulminating glower over his shoulder at the building. “*Damn* it!”

Kichiro shook his head and quickened his stride. “They have a point,” he had to admit despite the rampant surge of irritation that he had to admit as much.

InuYasha snorted loudly. "I'll shove Tetsusaiga up their asses and see what kind of point they got," he snarled.

Kichiro didn't reply to that since he was hard pressed to come up with a good reason why he shouldn't let his father do exactly that.

"Since when does someone get arrested for having a fucking rusty-assed sword?" he growled, flexing his claws in abject irritation since he was the one who had just been bailed out of jail for the offense.

Okay, so it might have been damn amusing at any other time, he figured. That the great Izayoi InuYasha, hero of Sengoku Jidai, had been arrested because the police had taken offense to the fact that the hanyou of legend refused to give up his sword . . .

But nothing really amused Kichiro anymore, and he was starting to wonder if anything ever would again, come to think of it . . .

In the end, it had taken Kichiro a lot of money as well as a few phone calls to his uncle, who fortunately was still in Maine though he was planning on flying in tomorrow with Kagome. In the end, Sesshoumaru had somehow managed to convince the authorities that InuYasha wasn't out to slice and dice anyone and that the sword he carried was more for show than anything.

Which, Kichiro figured, wasn't entirely a lie. InuYasha was much better these days about drawing the sword on people who ticked him off than he used to be, or so he'd been told.

Even so, he'd wasted the better portion of the day, arguing with the police, and the already suspect authorities were even more irritated when InuYasha had mentioned rather belligerently that his granddaughter was missing. Kichiro had covered his face with his hands right about then since he was pretty certain that the police really did think that

InuYasha had lost his marbles at that point. Given that the hanyou in question might actually look like he was around twenty-five years old, if that, then it was understandable, that the authorities eyed the hanyou as though they thought that InuYasha was about to leap onto the table that separated them to start spouting show tunes or something . . .

“At least they gave it back,” Kichiro pointed out calmly, jerking his head in the general direction of InuYasha’s sword.

“Keh! I’d’a liked to see them try to keep it,” he snarled. “Where the fuck is my phone?”

Digging the device out of his pocket—the captain had handed it over just before Kichiro had rushed his father out of the station—he handed it back to InuYasha. “Bas called earlier. Said that he met some guy he thought had spiritual powers.”

“He get ‘em?”

Making a face and shaking his head, Kichiro tried to ignore the police car that was half-assed trailing them. “No. Toga said that the guy slipped away before Bas could figure out if he really did have them or if it was just his imagination.”

“Helluva thing to imagine,” InuYasha grumbled. “They look for him?”

“Bas said he hopped on a bus. He and Toga, Evan and Gunnar are hunting around every stop that bus made to see if they can locate the guy.”

“Diggin’ for a needle in a haystack,” InuYasha muttered.

Kichiro sighed. He agreed with that . . . “Bas should have stopped him,” he gritted out.

“The pup ain’t never met anyone with spiritual powers other than your mama, and ain’t another one like her anywhere.”

He conceded his father's point, knowing damn well that Bas probably hadn't ever actually encountered someone with real spiritual powers other than Kagome, and her aura was tempered by InuYasha's. Having known her since birth, too, would confuse him, and even though Kichiro knew damn well that the pup was doing everything he had within his power to do, he couldn't help the anger—the frustration—that roiled inside him, just the same.

“Take it easy on him, Kich. He ain't to blame for any of this.”

Grimacing at the gruff censure in InuYasha's voice, Kichiro nodded. “I . . . I know,” he muttered with a shake of his head and a slight flattening of his ears. “It's just so . . . frustrating . . . I'm . . .”

InuYasha stopped short when Kichiro spun around to veer down an alley, seeking some sort of refuge from the people milling about on the sidewalk. Little by little, he could feel his carefully constructed façade wearing thin, could feel the layers of his psyche crumbling away. “It's been . . . almost four weeks,” Kichiro said in a harsh, broken tone. “Four weeks . . . where the hell . . .? M-my little girl . . .”

“Don't be so stuck up to think that she just belongs to you,” InuYasha growled, grabbing Kichiro's shoulder to stop him, to bring him around to face him. “She ain't, you know. Yours . . . your mate's . . . your mama's . . . mine . . . Hell, Sam belongs to all of us, and we're damn well gonna find her.”

Staring hard at his father, Kichiro felt the anger, the outrage that had sustained him for the last few weeks start to recede. The emptiness that surged up in its wake, though, was a painful, horrible thing. An incredulous bark of laughter welled up inside, constricting his chest, his throat as a sudden and burning ache erupted behind his eyelids. “I . . . I feel like I'm losing my fucking mind,” he muttered. “When I'm here, I feel like I should be with Belle—she needs me, doesn't she? But . . . But when I fly back to Maine, I feel like

I'm giving up on . . . on Samantha, and . . . *Damn* it . . .”

InuYasha nodded slowly, his trademark scowl firmly in place. “You do what you gotta do, Kich. That’s all anyone can expect from you.”

Dashing a hand over his eyes, he scowled at the telltale moisture that clung to his skin. “I never wanted to tell her what she could or couldn’t do . . . Never wanted to do that to any of my girls, but . . .”

Leaning against the grungy brick wall in the filmy light of the alley, InuYasha’s ears twitched as his eyes took on a more contemplative expression—an expression that Kichiro hadn’t seen very often through the years. “Did you know that the first time your brother went out on a hunt, your mama sat up the whole night with the phone in her lap and tears in her eyes?”

“Mama did?”

InuYasha nodded. “Hell, you pups have caused your mama more sleepless nights than Naraku ever did, but I tell you . . . not one of you ever knew it. Thing is, you do what you gotta do. Your mama knew that, and your mate knows that, too.”

“Yeah,” he replied in a tone that bespoke his quiet doubt. “Old man . . .”

InuYasha stared at him for several seconds then snorted. “Keh! We’ll find her, got that?”

Drawing a deep breath, Kichiro nodded. When he was a boy, he’d believed his father unconditionally. Whenever InuYasha said anything, he always made good on his word, no matter what, and now . . .

Now he desperately needed to believe that InuYasha could do the same this time, too.

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Frowning at the holy man as he read a thick old book, Samantha stifled a sigh.

She really wasn't trying to antagonize him; really she wasn't. She wasn't even certain why he'd gotten angry in the end. She'd answered his question to the best of her ability, hadn't she? What, exactly, did he want her to say?

It was true enough, she knew. The union of humans and youkai was no longer the taboo it used to be; didn't carry the stigma that it had in times gone by though she knew well enough that her family was the exception, not the rule. Many of the youkai still tended to gravitate toward one another, and while it might not have been a conscious decision to do so, there it was.

It still perplexed her, why he insisted on calling her a demon. She'd told him what she was, what her kind was called, yet he still seemed to cling to the name that he'd given her. Still, she was starting to realize from having overheard the white-coats talking about him that he was viewed as a bit of an anomaly, himself, and because of that, there was a certain hesitation, too. They feared him: who he was and what he could do. They feared him as much as they feared her. There was an almost perverse sense of fascination about him, as well, and she wondered not for the first time if they'd have locked him in a cage, too, if they didn't need him.

Why did humans feel the need to do this sort of thing to those things in the world that they didn't understand? Was it simply the need to prove that they really weren't inferior, after all? Samantha didn't see humans in that sort of light—at least, she didn't see all humans that way. Still, she had to ask herself exactly why it was that those white-coats could do what they did to her every day and still think that it was all right?

*'Because it's all done in the name of science,' her youki remarked acerbically.*

There was a certain truth in that, wasn't there? The name of science . . . *'Hardly,'* she scoffed with a very loud inward snort. *'Papa is a scientist, and he doesn't do anything like this . . . When I get out of here . . .'*

*'When you get out of here?' her youki contended. 'Do you really want out of here?'*

*'Of course I do!' she shot back hotly. 'That's the dumbest question . . .'*

*'Is it? Is it really? Because from where I sit, dollbaby, you don't seem too anxious to try escaping again.'*

Letting her temple fall against the bars of the cage as she pulled the blanket a little tighter around herself, Samantha heaved a quiet sigh. There was a certain measure of truth in that, too, wasn't there? A secret sort of truth that she wasn't entirely certain she wanted to admit, even to herself . . .

It wasn't exactly that she didn't want to escape. It was quite the contrary, actually. The problem wasn't her will to escape, her desire to return to those who loved her. The real problem was that she wasn't sure that she could stand the cost of her freedom. If she managed to do it—if she managed to escape . . . he'd just go out and catch someone else, wouldn't he? He'd catch another one, and he'd bring him or her here . . .

*'So you'll be a martyr? Is that really what you think you could do?'*

*'No . . . not a martyr . . .'*

*'Then what, Samantha? What is it that you think you'd accomplish by staying here? And maybe that's not fair for the next one who is dumb enough to get caught, but you know, we can't do it . . . we just . . . can't . . .'*

There was entirely too much truth in that, wasn't there? Entirely too much finality that she just didn't want to consider. Even still, though, did it matter? She couldn't stomach the idea of anyone else being subjected to the horrors that she'd already experienced, and worse, if they somehow managed to catch another . . . could she trade her freedom for that of her sisters? Of her parents? Of anyone she loved? And even if it weren't one of her own, did that give her the right to trade her freedom for someone else's child . . .?

And she knew the answer to that question; knew it as well as she knew her own heartbeat. She couldn't do it. She didn't have it in her. For every day that she'd live for the rest of her life, she'd have to wake up in the morning and wonder exactly who they'd caught to take her place . . .

No, as much as the thought scared her—shook her to her very core—she wasn't entirely sure that she could do a damn thing . . .

*'And you think that anyone will thank you for it? You think that your parents don't deserve to know? Your sisters . . . your aunt and uncles and cousins . . . what do they deserve, Samantha? What do you deserve?'*

She blinked in surprise as the overhead lights flickered to life, as the entirely too loud voice of the head white-coat rang out in the welcome silence. "Good morning, Doc!" he greeted. "Everything looks good in here."

The holy man didn't even bother acknowledging the white-coat's greeting as he slowly moved his feet off the desk and got to his feet. Without a word, he shoved his book into the worn old knapsack and reached for his coat.

"So how's our little demon this morning?" the white-coat asked as he swaggered over to the cage, eyeing Samantha like she were nothing more than a prized hog at the State Fair. When he shook his finger between the bars, she had to rein in the perverse desire

to bite the bit of wiggling pink flesh. Instead, she blanked her features, pasting on the dull, vacant expression that she strove to keep in place whenever those men were staring at her. It served her well, really. They were entirely convinced that the holy man was crazy since he'd apparently told them before that she could speak. The white-coats liked to make idiot jokes about how the two of them—the freaks, they'd said—were able to mind-link or some such ration of crap.

All right, so she felt a little bad for perpetuating the idiot persona, especially since the white-coats were already leery of the holy man. Still, she had to admit that she didn't feel nearly bad enough to open her mouth and speak to them. It was all a matter of pride, wasn't it? She'd be damned if she'd give them that last little bit of herself, too.

"She didn't give you any trouble, did she?"

That got the holy man's attention, and he paused as he tugged on his coat to glower at the white-coat. "*It* was just fine," he stated flatly.

"You gave her a blanket?"

"Is there a problem with that?"

The white-coat waved his hands and laughed jovially. "No, no problem, no problem . . ."

The holy man eyed the white-coat defiantly for another long second before snatching up his knapsack and heading for the door. Samantha watched him leave, forcing down the surge of loneliness that welled up inside her. Whenever he left, she felt that way, but she always just figured that it was normal enough. After all, he was the only one who was even halfway decent to her, even if he didn't really seem to want to be. At least he'd allowed her to go to the bathroom earlier, so that wasn't something that she'd have to worry about. That was the real difference between him and the others, wasn't it? He didn't like her, she knew that much, and he didn't think that she was anything more than



## Chapter 21

### Prejudice

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Kurt stomped his feet as he entered the facility, shaking snow out of his hair. It had started to snow around noon and showed no sign of letting up. He didn't mind that. At least it had dissuaded some of the insane people who enjoyed the mass-madness that was the day after Thanksgiving sales.

The door closed behind him with a loud bang, and he started down the hallway, heading for the elevator.

"Hey, Doc!"

Stopping short at the impromptu greeting, Kurt peered into the security office.

The researchers inside chuckled. One of them—Kurt thought that his name was Warren or something like that—was leafing through a stack of pictures while the other—Peterman—gestured with two fingers for Kurt to step inside. "What?" he asked, not bothering with any sort of pleasantries.

The two exchanged smug looks. "Now, now, don't be like that. We're all friends here, aren't we?" Peterman drawled.

"We are?" Kurt replied with a raised eyebrow.

"Sure, we are! We both work here, right?"

Kurt wasn't entirely certain how that could possibly make them friends, but he had to admit that he was somewhat curious as to what the two were up to.

"Well, you know . . . we just wondered if you'd be willing to take the night off . . .?"

"And why would I do that?" he asked rather casually.

"Ah, you know . . . figured we'd get a little more research in with our little demon," Peterman remarked.

"You don't have enough normal working hours to do that?" he countered mildly.

The two exchanged what Kurt could only consider to be shit-eating grins. "Well, Doc, just between us . . ."

Warren chuckled. "Let's just say it's a little . . . *private* research."

Narrowing his eyes, Kurt crossed his arms over his chest and slowly shook his head. '*Private* . . . what? *What is that supposed to mean . . .?*' Then again, did he really want to know . . .? "What the hell are you talking about?" he demanded.

"Look, man, she's got all the parts in all the right places, and maybe she's a damn freak, but she's a damn hot freak, you follow?"

"No, I don't follow," he countered, reaching over and snatching the stack of pictures out of Warren's hands. Snorting loudly as he leafed through the first few, he peered up at the two men.

"Have you lost your damn minds?" he growled, unable to wrap his head around what the two researchers were suggesting. "That *thing* is not a . . . *female* . . . and it could kill you."

Peterson chuckled somewhat smugly, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned against the panel of monitors, crossing his ankles as he regarded Kurt with what could only be described as complete asshatishness. “Oh, she’s a girl, all right. We checked her out today. Everything’s there . . . and I do mean *everything*.”

“Aw, come on, Doc! You saw the pictures! She’s hot—damn hot! And who the hell will care, anyway? It’s not like she’s human or anything,” Warren went on.

“You’re right,” Kurt growled. “It’s not human, and maybe you’ve forgotten what, exactly, it’s capable of. Stick your tiny little prick anywhere near it, and I guarantee you won’t have it long, so be my guest, if you’re really that stupid. Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Oh, Jesus! Like she can do a damn thing once we’ve got her rigged to the apparatus,” Warren scoffed.

Kurt wasn’t sure if what they wanted disturbed him nearly as much as the idea that they’d already put that much thought into it. Either way, he wasn’t going to be a part of it. Those things were hellspawn, damn it . . . How idiotic were they, anyway? “You’d compromise the entire project just to get a good fuck? You really are stupid,” Kurt remarked quietly.

Peterson shook his head in abject disbelief. “You can’t honestly say that you wouldn’t do her,” he insisted. “I tell you what . . . We’ll make sure she doesn’t try anything funny while you take a turn. That okay?”

“And just what do you think your boss would do to you if you actually do what you’re planning? You think Harlan’ll be all right with that? You think that he’ll appreciate you potentially ruining his prize puppy? Don’t be stupid. You do that, and it’ll fight back, and regardless of whether I want to or not, I’ll have to kill it . . . though I might wait until after it has a go at you, instead . . . Fair’s fair, after all . . .”

The two finally looked like they might actually be listening to Kurt. “Harlan know you ripped off these pictures to jack off in the John with?” he asked, tossing the stack of pictures onto the narrow desk below the monitors. “You two seriously need to get out more.”

That said, he turned on his heel and stomped out of the room, half expecting the two deviants to follow him. They didn’t. Kurt wasn’t sure whether that was a good thing or not, all things considered. It turned his stomach, what they were suggesting in any kind of capacity. Just what the hell were they thinking, anyway?

*“Look, man, she’s got all the parts in all the right places, and maybe she’s a damn freak, but she’s a damn hot freak, you follow?”*

Slapping the elevator call button, he scowled. What the hell did he mean by that? Even as he asked himself that, though, he snorted. Those pictures, of course. What in the world were they doing, anyway? What part of ‘research’ were those?

Those images looked like some sick masochistic peepshow, didn’t it? Strapped to the table completely naked with its limbs spread, it did look like it had all the parts of a female. Still . . .

Snorting at his own bizarre thoughts, Kurt stomped into the elevator and jammed the button for the lowest level of the facility. Those things could change their form, right? They could look however they wanted to look, and that one was powerful enough to hide exactly what it was, right? Enough so that it actually looked pretty damn human with a few small exceptions . . . There was no way to tell what sex it was, was there? Assuming that demons actually *had* a sex, to start with . . .

*‘And why the hell am I thinking about this at all?’* he fumed as the elevator ground to a squeaking halt. Stepping out of the claustrophobic box, he strode down the hallway. He

was so irritated that he didn't really notice that the little demon wasn't waiting for him in its customary fashion. Scrunched into the far corner of the cage, it barely moved when he crossed the room, thumping his knapsack onto the desk with a muffled curse. Too irritated to pay much attention to anything else, he paced the floor in a vain effort to alleviate his growing irritation.

Damn those idiots, anyway . . . If they did something as stupid as to try to force themselves on that demon, then they wholly deserved whatever they got for their efforts, didn't they . . .?

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It was late when Griffin stumbled into the house in the quiet cul-de-sac in Bangor, Maine, that he called home. The place was quiet—eerily so—without even the click of dog paws to greet him, and even the hideously ugly cat that Isabelle had brought home as a kitten so long ago was hiding. Isabelle must have taken both Charlie as well as the cat with her.

Then again, he wasn't going to be there long, either, was he? He'd just gotten back from Chicago where he'd been of absolutely no help at all. At least, that was how it had seemed to him, anyway. His initial thought was that he would head straight for Bevelle where Isabelle undoubtedly was, but he'd changed his mind, deciding that he really ought to take the time to shower and change clothes as well as check things out to make sure that everything was secure before he headed that way.

He couldn't figure it out. Everyone seemed so convinced that Samantha was still there, and yet he wasn't entirely convinced, was he? Certainly, the idea of someone with spiritual powers having gotten to her did pose a whole new array of problems that Griffin just didn't want to think about, but that didn't prove that she was still in Chicago, did it?

After all, some of the best trackers in the world were there, scouring the city, but the fundamental problem as he saw it was that they were looking for someone who was being hidden—who had to be hidden—and if that were the case, was anyone really going to be able to find her?

Yet none of the leads regarding those rumored to possess spiritual powers had panned out, either. Why?

Shaking his head as he moved through the familiar surroundings, he headed for the bedroom to grab some clean clothes for a quick shower before he headed to the family compound.

The true problem was that, with every passing day, it became increasingly difficult to hope for the best, and while no one would actually say it out loud, Griffin knew damn well that everyone had thought as much at least once in the weeks that had passed since Samantha's impromptu disappearance. That wasn't to say that they should give up hope. That wasn't what he meant, at all. Samantha was precious to him—to everyone, really—and Griffin would no sooner give up on her than he would give up on Isabelle if she were the one who hadn't come home . . .

He turned on the water taps before he went to find clean clothes since the old house didn't have the more modern conveniences and it took a bit for the water to warm.

He was tired, too: bone weary, pushing himself too hard and too fast so soon after the reconstructive surgery, and yet he couldn't help himself, either. He couldn't rest—none of them would—until Samantha was found.

So he ignored the twinges and little pains that were meant to thwart him as he hurried through his shower and make a quick attempt to shave. He'd just finished up when the cumbersome song that was programmed in to alert him when someone was trying to call him sounded.

“Hello?” he answered, wrinkling his nose at the Winnie the Pooh theme song.

“Ah, Griffin. How are things there?” Attean Masta, Griffin’s long time friend, greeted.

Grabbing a small hand towel to dry the counter around the sink, Griffin grunted. “Nothing yet,” he admitted in reference to the search for his sister-in-law.

“They say no news is good news,” Attean ventured. “Then again, I don’t hold much stock in those old sayings.”

Letting out a deep breath, Griffin scooped his keys and wallet off the counter, stuffing them into his pockets as he lumbered out of the bathroom. “You hear anything?”

“Possibly,” Attean replied. “At least, it *might* be something. I don’t know.”

“What’s that?”

“There’s a rumor of an old man with some kind of spiritual powers,” he said. “Lives somewhere up in the woods in northern Minnesota.”

“Who told you this?” Griffin asked sharply. To his knowledge, no one had been dispatched up that way.

“It’s just a rumor,” Attean repeated. “I don’t know if there’s any truth to it or not, and even then, from what I understand, the man is quite old. For that matter, he could well be dead, but I did not know whether this would interest the Zelig or not.”

“Thanks,” Griffin muttered, rubbing his temple as he plopped into his recliner and tried to tug on his socks with one hand. “You know where, exactly?”

“I’ve told you what I know,” Attean stated in an apologetic sort of tone. “However, if this man is there—if he isn’t dead or nothing but a simple legend—the chances are good that he will be hidden, and if that is the case, then I’m not sure that he can be found.”

Griffin grunted, having already figured as much. In the end, though, he let out a deep breath. “Can’t hurt to check it out,” he reasoned. “An old man, huh?”

“Yes . . . I’m sorry that I don’t have more information than that.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Griffin insisted. “I’m about to head to Bevelle, anyway. I’ll tell Zelig what you said.”

“If there is anything else I can do . . .”

Griffin let out a deep breath and shook his head, not that Attean could see it. “Just keep listening,” he replied.

“Absolutely,” he assured him.

The line went dead, and Griffin sighed, stowing the device in his pocket as he reached for his other sock. An old man with spiritual powers in Minnesota? Did it matter whether or not this rumor was true? At this point, they needed to check out every available lead, didn’t they? Time was working against them, and they all knew it, even if they didn’t say it out loud. Sooner or later, they’d have to get some sort of break. No one was that good. No one could possibly have thought this thing through to the very last detail so perfectly. It stood to reason that eventually, the youkai would uncover Samantha’s whereabouts. Rumor or not, it was worth looking into, wasn’t it?

Griffin could only hope that they weren’t too late . . .

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Kagome leaned forward on InuYasha's shoulder, her eyes scanning the area below as he dashed over the tops of buildings. It was a strange feeling; she couldn't rightfully remember the last time they'd traveled anywhere this way, bringing to mind a myriad of memories that she loved and cherished.

Yet this time, it felt so uneasy with an underlying desperation that she couldn't help but feel. It was enough to choke her as she struggled to remember that as much as she worried, her granddaughter needed her.

The ultimate goal of finding and defeating Naraku seemed to pale in comparison in her mind. Samantha needed her—needed them, and while Naraku had been evil, at least Kagome had known what she and InuYasha and the others were up against. This time . . .

This time there was no such luck.

The trouble was that they were relying upon her to detect a barrier—something she wasn't entirely certain that she could do. But she had to try, didn't she?

“Oi, wench . . . You sense anything?”

Huddling closer against his shoulder, she used his body to block the icy chill in the air. “Nothing yet,” she replied.

InuYasha grunted and kept moving. “Kich says she's still here in Chicago,” he went on to say.

Kagome nodded. “I know. Bellaniece says that she can feel her.”

“Feel her,” he echoed. “Sounds ‘bout right . . .”

She frowned, her optimism failing her as she gazed at the immense cityscape below. To sense a barrier . . . she’d done it before, but it always seemed to have been constructed by Kikyou, and she’d always wondered if she’d only been able to tell because they were Kikyou’s—because she was Kikyou’s reincarnation . . .

Stopping abruptly, he let her off of his back then shrugged off the fire-rat haori that he’d chosen to wear when the temperature had dropped. “Here,” he said, dropping it over her shoulders. “You need this more than I do.”

She blinked and smiled wanly, understanding what it was he was trying to say. He was trying to reassure her in his own way. It was something that she loved about him, and she nodded in agreement as he scanned the horizon once more. “Thank you, InuYasha . . .”

He spared her a little smile though his gaze retained a saddened sort of brightness. “When I find whoever took her,” he vowed solemnly, “I’m gonna rip ‘em limb from fucking limb.”

For once, she didn’t chastise him for the harshness of his remarks. For once, she might actually agree with him . . . It still made no sense to her, no matter how many times she considered it. Just who would want to hurt Samantha, and why? All right, she’d chosen to be a hunter, but the girl Kagome knew was too sweet, too gentle. Protecting those who were weaker than herself was a way of life that was not uncommon among those in her family, and while Samantha chose to do it in a most literal sense, every last one of them did that in his or her own ways, too. The young girl with the bright smile, the clear blue eyes that hid nothing . . . Where was she now? Where was she, and how on earth would they ever be able to find her . . .?

Kagome's concern must have showed on her face. InuYasha grimaced, ears flattening against his skull as he crossed his arms over his chest and tossed his head defiantly. "InuYasha . . ."

"Come on, wench . . . you're tougher'n that."

"Am I?" she countered though she couldn't help but smile at the high praise coming from the hanyou she knew and loved so well.

"Don't go getting all mushy on me," he warned, his cheeks pinking just a touch.

"Okay!" she exclaimed softly as he pulled her onto his back once more. "We'll look as long as we have to, right?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah . . . Let's get movin'," he muttered as he set out once more.

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Huddled in the corner of the cage with the blanket pulled up to her chin, Samantha gritted her teeth without taking her eyes off the holy man. Slumped into the chair behind the desk, he still looked entirely agitated.

Something was bothering him, and she didn't need to rely on her senses to tell her that, and as much as she wondered what it could possibly be, she had larger things to worry about, didn't she, and in the end, his preoccupation was helping her. He had yet to notice that she hadn't touched the fresh water he'd given her and that the soggy looking hamburger that he'd dropped through the bars still sat, untouched, nearby.

Shifting slightly, she bit down a little harder—hard enough that her teeth groaned under the force she was exerting; hard enough that her jaw ached.

She'd removed the top layer of stitches despite the overwhelming pain that it brought on. Now to pull the second layer . . .

That took a lot more out of her, though. The pain that shot through her brought a blackness to her vision, reducing it to mere pinpoints of light. Her hand was shaking terribly, but she managed to force her fingers to split the cut open, and she reached into her own body to snag the first stitch and slice through it.

The second and third ones were pretty much the same, but to her dismay, the pain was growing steadily worse, and there was another layer of stitches just below this one, too. *'Stop that!*' she chided herself sternly. *'One thing at a time . . .'*

Kami, it hurt . . . It hurt more than anything she'd ever felt before. Being shot had hurt, yes, but not quite like this . . . This was more of a slow, intense pain that just didn't let up. Cutting through another stitch drew a soft whine from her. Unable to staunch the sound, she blinked as tears filled her eyes, let her head fall back against the bars of the cage as she willed the incessant vertigo to pass.

"What are you doing?"

Blinking dully—she had distinct trouble focusing on the holy man's face—she slowly shook her head but didn't even try to speak.

Hunkering down and narrowing his gaze on her, he snorted loudly. "If this is some sort of ploy . . ."

A harsh sense of urgency shot through her despite the dullness of her brain. If he found out what she was doing, he'd try to stop her, wouldn't he? Yelping as the next stitch gave to her claws, she couldn't stop the slight keening as she gave voice to her pain.

The holy man's eyes flared wide when he reached through the bars to yank the blanket away. "What the . . . *Shit!*" he bellowed, slamming his hand against the lock release on the cage. "What the hell are you doing?"

He reached inside, seized her arms, and jerked her roughly out of the cage. She whimpered, rolling onto her side as she drew her legs up. He pushed them down and yanked on her blood soaked smock. "What are you trying to do? *Kill* yourself?" he demanded as he gaped at the incision that traversed her stomach.

She didn't try to answer. Gathering what was left of her strength, she pushed herself up against the cage wall, moaning as she pulled the wound open once more, as she cut the next stitch away.

He grabbed her hands and shoved them aside. "*Are you stupid? Are you insane?*"

She flopped back, her entire body breaking out in a cold sweat. She had to get those stitches out before she passed out . . .

The holy man stared at her in something akin to abject horror. "Why did you do that?"

Shaking her head, she could only look at him. "I have to take them out," she whispered. "I won't . . . won't heal . . ."

"What?"

Swallowing hard, breathing shallow, harsh, Samantha tried to lift her hands but couldn't. She was exhausted—completely exhausted. “My body . . . heals faster . . . than yours . . . Stitches . . . won't heal . . .”

“They don't heal,” he repeated, scowling at her as though he were trying to make up his mind whether or not she was telling him the truth. The scowl seemed to dissipate just a little, and he nodded as he pushed himself to his feet and strode over to the supply cabinet.

He returned with a sterile kit and a box of gauze pads. Ripping the pack open with his teeth, he pulled the a pair of rubber gloves out of it and tugged them on before letting the pack go, catching it in one hand as he pulled a pair of clamps and surgical scissors out with the other. The quick look he shot her spoke clearer than words. He understood, didn't he? He understood that she hadn't done this to herself, at all . . .

He worked in silence as Sam averted her gaze, staring at the clock on the wall as she willed the pain to go away. It didn't work completely—she hadn't figured that it would—but she was strangely comforted by the efficacy of the holy man's movements, and with a loud exhalation, he sat back on his heels. “They're out,” he muttered, letting the scissors drop from his fingers. “What did they do?”

She was slow in turning her head to face him, her smile weak and weary. “It seems they wanted to know whether or not I was a girl,” she murmured. “I guess they figured that looks could be deceptive . . .”

A strange sort of expression filtered over his features, but only for a moment. It was long enough, though. In that instant, she saw it: the complete revulsion at what he understood. The white-coats had cut her open just to see if she had 'girl parts' . . .

Of course, he probably didn't realize that she had been completely awake when they'd done it, and she wasn't about to mention it, either. Listening to their clinical description

of her uterus and ovaries was a little more than she really wanted to think about at the moment, anyway.

The holy man didn't say anything else as he carefully wiped her stomach with a clean, sterile pad. "These won't hurt you, will they?"

Blinking at the grudging tone in his voice, she shook her head when she saw the butterfly bandages he held up. "Those are . . . okay," she managed.

He nodded once then carefully applied them. That done, he bandaged her up before gathering up the mess and heading back toward the cabinet. The sterile kit clanged into the bin beside the cabinet, the rubber gloves were disposed of in the biohazard can. He took his time, scrubbing his hands—Samantha almost laughed. *'He had to touch me . . . how much did he hate that . . . ?'*

But he returned to the cabinet and rummaged around before heading back over to her once more. He held a clean smock in his hands, but as he stared at her, he sighed. "Can you sit up?" he finally asked in an irritated tone of voice.

She swallowed hard and nodded, but it took a bit longer to get her body to comply. She tried to tug the soiled garment off, but she just couldn't. As though all of her strength had been used in the stitches she'd been able to remove, she simply didn't have anything left, did she?

He said nothing though he did heave a sigh, sticking the clean smock under his arm and grasping the soiled one with one hand on either side. Then he tugged it over her head and tossed it aside before shaking out the clean one and helping her to put it on. To her surprise, he picked her up and moved her aside before striding over for the hose. Setting the untouched burger atop the cage, he sprayed out the cage then shut off the nozzle.

“Eat this,” he said, slipping the sandwich into her hand before putting the hose away again.

She stared at the sandwich and swallowed hard. To be honest, the idea of eating made her stomach turn over, but she understood what he hadn’t said. If she didn’t eat, she wouldn’t heal as quickly, right? So with that in mind, she bit into the sandwich and slowly chewed.

“They cut you open to see whether or not you were female?” he asked at length.

She nodded and swallowed a few times before nibbling on the sandwich again. “I guess so.”

He heaved a sigh and shook his head. “They could have just used an ultrasound to see that.”

“It was broken, they said,” she mused.

“Broken.”

She nodded again.

He regarded her for several moments while she finished the sandwich before jerking his head toward the cage. “Get in there.”

She did—at least, most of the way. Her legs were too shaky to move very quickly. She ended up crawling part of the way. She managed to scoot into the cage most of the way before her body just gave out. In the end, he had to pick up her legs and scoot them in, too.

She was asleep within moments.

She didn't feel the gentle fingers pull back the bandage, didn't see the trouble gaze as the holy man frowned at the angry gash that was already starting to seal itself closed. She didn't hear the soft sigh as he pressed the bandage into place once more, and she never knew that he knelt there in the opening of the cage for a long, long while with a frown on his face as he watched her sleep . . .



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
Broken ...?

## Chapter 22

### Coping

-----

*“Is he sleeping?”*

*Kurt snuggled deeper into the warmth of his sleeping bag, blinking in the murky darkness at the strange shadows cast by the living flames of the campfire.*

*“Yeah, he’s sleeping . . . Poor kid . . .”*

*“I worry about him. So young . . . everything he’s been through . . . a little boy never should have had to see that sort of thing . . .”*

*Uncle Marcus didn’t respond right away. Kurt crawled out of the brightly colored Power Puppy sleeping bag that Aunt Mary had bought especially for their camping trip and over to the flaps that were zipped closed. He wasn’t sure why, but for some reason, he just wanted to see the two of them. Maybe it didn’t make sense, and he didn’t know why. For some reason, though, he . . . he didn’t want to be alone . . . “I know you had your differences with your sister . . .”*

*Aunt Mary let out a long sigh as the crackle of the fire broke the stillness of the night as Kurt carefully unzipped the bottom of the opening, just enough to peer out of the tent, to satisfy the part of him that needed to reassure himself through seeing the two of them that he really wasn’t alone. “Can we not talk about that?”*

*Uncle Marcus slipped an arm around Aunt Mary and kissed her temple as he pulled her a little closer. “Sorry.”*

Mary leaned forward, rubbing her face with a weary hand. "The last time I saw her," she said, her voice dropping to barely more than a whisper, quivering, shaking with emotion that Kurt didn't really understand, "I told her that she was . . . was stupid . . . I told her that . . . that if she stayed with Doug . . ."

"Don't do that," Marcus insisted, sounding harsher than normal—or maybe that was simply Kurt's imagination. "She loved him, right? And she was happy . . . Isn't that all you can ask for someone?"

"It is," she said in a tone that made Kurt wonder if she really meant that at all. "She was . . ."

"Besides," Marcus went on with a little grin, "that kid is pretty cool, don't you think?"

She finally smiled, too, and she leaned up to kiss his cheek. "He is, isn't he?"

"I always wanted a boy," he ventured with a shrug.

She sighed and nodded. "Maybe we should cancel our appointment with the clinic? At least for a bit, until he's a little more settled."

He smiled encouragingly, gave her a quick squeeze. "We'll have a baby of our own, you know, but I have to admit, I think Kurt needs our full attention right now."

A strange noise interrupted the moment, an unsettling sound that made Kurt's blood run cold in his veins. The angry growl of an unseen creature, the unsettling brush of something sinister and malignant . . .

Uncle Marcus heard it, too, and he glanced around slowly, like he didn't trust what he'd heard. As he rose slowly to his feet, waving a hand at Mary to silence her, Kurt opened his mouth to yell a warning, to scream, to do something, and yet no sound would come.

*The low growl murmured again; a quiet sound that was not meant to be heard. Marcus reached for a flashlight, shining it into the darkness just outside the range of the rollicking flames. He gasped and jerked back, the beam of light flickering as his hand shook. “Wh—who are you?” he demanded. “What do you want . . .?”*

*The flash of movement, a blur of shadows . . . Kurt smashed his hands over his ears, cringing away at the deafening scream, the shriek that echoed deep within . . .*

Awaking with a smothered cry, sitting up straight on the thin little cot, Kurt could hear himself gasping, struggling to breathe as a thousand lights seemed to explode in his head. Bending over, clutching his head in his hands, he winced at the chill that streaked down his back—the same cold sweat that soaked the blankets and his clothing.

“Houshi-sama?”

The softness of that voice cut through the dull, aching fear, and for a moment, he had trouble placing it. Lifting his head, he saw the little demon, dark eyes blinking at him from the recessed shadows of the cage. It looked as though it wasn’t sure whether or not he wanted to talk to it. In the end, it just sat there with a candid sort of expression on its face, and he sighed.

Why did the anger, the pain, the fear drain out of him so suddenly? And it *was* gone, wasn’t it? Despite of the painful cadence of his own heartbeat . . . despite the overwhelming knowledge that those emotions really didn’t help him at all . . . But the emptiness that consumed him was a much more terrible thing—an endless void that neither time nor space could ever truly fill . . .

He’d come to understand so very long ago that any emotion, be it good or bad, meant that he was still alive—living for a reason; for a purpose, even if that reason was vengeance. So the complete and utter lack of emotion felt like a naked space where nothing could touch him and where he could not touch anything else, either.

Yet there was something in the little demon's voice—a sadness, a weariness that he could understand. It was that thought that brought him up off the cot, crossing the floor to kneel down in front of the cage. Without a word, he pushed its hands aside, pulling up the smock so that he could get a look at the incision. Shaking his head slowly, narrowing his eyes as he stared, he wasn't at all surprised to see that the wound had almost disappeared. Not even forty-eight hours since it had been cut wide open, and it was fine again . . .? Even less time than it had taken to heal the gunshot wound through its shoulder . . .

“What the hell are you?” he murmured: a rhetorical question in the hazy dark.

It—she?—uttered a soft sound—a chuckle? “I've told you,” she replied calmly. “I'm hanyou.”

“Half . . . youkai—magical creature . . . a creature that can heal itself . . .” he mused, his tone not friendly but not hostile either. “So you've said before. What's that make your other half?”

Its smile turned a little sad; its gaze skittering away as though it were trying to hide something from him. “Does it matter?”

Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head, abruptly pushing himself to his feet once more. What the hell had he been thinking? To get a real, genuine answer out of a beast like that? Not likely . . .

“Save your fucking riddles,” he growled as he stomped over to the desk. The rage was back in spades, or so it seemed. Unable to do more than gnash his teeth at the irritation that he'd actually bothered to ask it anything at all, he dragged his hands over his face and heaved a frustrated sigh.

“Houshi-sama,” it said again.

Kurt tried to ignore it.

“I . . . I need to go . . . to the bathroom . . .”

And he considered ignoring that quiet statement, too. Unfortunately, the idea of having to clean up after it was far worse than the irritation of having to cater to the damn thing’s needs. Still, he was fairly certain that he really was cursed as he pushed himself out of the chair and stomped over to it again. Heaving a sigh as he wondered whether the rest of the money were really worth this kind of frustration, he could only shake his head when the little demon wiggled around and stuck its hands behind its back.

*‘Guess it wasn’t lying,’* he thought dryly.

After making sure that both hands and ankles were bound, he let it out of the cage and, as normal, escorted it to the bathroom where he unfastened one of its hands so that it could take care of itself in there though he did remain in the doorway.

“You know,” it quipped in what could only be described as a teasing sort of tone, “I’ve heard that relationships end the moment that you’re comfortable enough to do this sort of thing in front of each other.”

Snorting indelicately, Kurt ignored the comment, pressing his lips together in a tight, thin line.

“You don’t have to come in here with me,” it went on in a conversational tone as it pulled paper off the roll. The metal holder squeaked horribly. Kurt gritted his teeth since that particular sound was akin to nails on a chalkboard to him. “I can’t take an energy form, so it’s not like I can just fly up the vent or anything.”

He was going to ignore that comment, as well, but he stopped and shot it a calculating look. “Some of your kind can do that?” he asked somewhat grudgingly.

“Some of them,” it replied. “Full youkai . . . but only really strong ones . . .” It stood up and flushed the toilet then shuffled over to the sink, the chain scraping the floor between its feet.

Rolling his eyes—it always took an inordinate amount of time in washing its hands, Kurt knocked on the doorframe and cleared his throat. “Get moving, little demon,” he muttered.

It stopped and blinked and stared at him. He could see the smile forming at the corners of its lips. “Little demon?” it repeated. “Is that what you’re going to call me now?”

“Move,” he growled, jerking his head in the direction of the holding area.

It giggled then scooted toward him, turning around and wiggling its hands for him to secure it once more. For some reason, he had a feeling that it simply wasn’t taking him nearly as seriously as it should . . . Shaking his head, he snapped the other cuff around its wrist and gave it a light shove toward the cage.

“Houshi-sama—”

“What’s that mean?” he demanded suddenly. For some reason, the term sounded familiar, but he couldn’t remember why or where he’d heard it before.

Shaking its head, it shrugged offhandedly. “It means . . . monk, basically . . . *Are* you a monk?” it asked as it crawled into the cage once more.

He stopped for a moment, narrowing his eyes. “*What?*” he demanded, unfastening the shackles around its ankles.

It shrugged and held still while he opened the handcuffs. “A monk,” it repeated again. “Or you could be a priest, I guess . . .”

A surge of indignant irritation shot through him, and he couldn't help the loud snort that escaped him, either. “No,” he stated flatly.

It scooted around in the cage and stared at him in apparent confusion. “But you have spiritual powers,” it said. “You have to be—”

“I'm not,” he insisted, cutting it off short. “Hard to be something like that when you know damn well that there *is* no God.”

“Is that what you believe?” it asked quietly.

Another rise of anger frothed over deep inside him. Without another word, he stood abruptly and strode away from the cage.

A monk? A monk . . .? A fool who dedicated his life to serving some entity that didn't give a damn about anyone or anything? What was that old saying? There was always a reason for everything? No, there wasn't. There really wasn't. There were just gross injustices and lives left destroyed, and all at the whim of some omniscient being? That wasn't it. That *couldn't* be it. He knew that better than anyone, didn't he?

Believing that there really was something out there controlling everything like some macabre puppet show was simply beyond Kurt's ability to reason. Choosing to believe in something like that . . .

That'd mean that he'd have to believe that his family was meant to die . . .

And that was simply something that Kurt could not—*would not*—accept.

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Kagome stepped out of the door that led to the roof of the hotel that they'd unofficially taken over as the center of operations. Situated roughly in the heart of Chicago, it had been the most logical place. Everyone had come in from their day spent scouring the streets of the city, and while everyone was optimistic, she'd felt the pervasive feeling of absolute desperation, too.

She'd watched as her son had slipped out of the suite where they'd all gathered to debrief. She'd thought that he was going out to look again, but when she'd followed him, she'd found him up here, instead. "How are you holding up, Kichiro?"

Kichiro drew a deep breath and let it out in a long gust. "Been better," he admitted, leaning on the four foot ledge that ran around the perimeter of the hotel roof.

Kagome nodded and sat beside him, casting him an encouraging smile as she leaned forward to rub his clasped hands. "You look exhausted."

"I can't rest till I find her, Mama."

"I know."

Letting his head fall back as he stared at the stars so high above, it struck him that they didn't look all that different from the ones that he saw every night from the half-dark of InuYasha's Forest. Like there, the glow of the city precluded the weak light that shone from the smaller ones, and yet if you looked hard enough, you could see them, couldn't you? "I, uh, keep remembering the day Sami was born . . . Belle-chan said that she wanted a boy because, you know . . . we already had two daughters. She said every man

needs a son to carry on his father's name, and I remember thinking . . ." Trailing off as though he needed a moment to gather his scattering thoughts, he shook his head and stared at the horizon, looking for answers that he simply didn't have. "The bows and the dresses and the . . . the dolls and the kisses . . . and the dancing and all of that . . . the things you don't always get from boys . . . I love those things . . ."

"We'll find her."

He laughed quietly, a broken sort of sound, as his gaze dropped to his feet, to the darkness below the rooftop's edge. "Do you know how arrogant I am, Mama?"

"I'd hardly call you arrogant," she countered gently.

"I thought those scent-tabs would revolutionize hunting. I thought that they'd . . . protect those whom we love." Shaking his head, he cleared his throat and shrugged. "I never thought that they c-could cost me my little girl. That was my arrogance," he murmured, dashing a hand over his eyes. "What if I . . . what'll I tell Belle if I can't bring her home . . .?"

"Do you think that Samantha would want you to blame yourself?" Kagome asked quietly. "Do you think she'd ever want to see her papa beating himself up like this?"

He shrugged and shook his head. "I don't . . . It's not that simple, Mama."

Kagome stared at him for a long moment, her gaze inscrutable in the dim half-light. "Right now, she needs you . . . She needs you to make sure that she has a place to come home to. She needs you to make sure that you don't fall apart. She needs you to be strong so that she can smile, and because you're her father, you'll do these things for her."

Kichiro finally looked at her, his eyes bright though no more tears fell. "I'm scared, Mama," he whispered.

She leaned up and kissed his cheek then hugged him tight, squeezing her eyes closed when she felt him trembling. “I am, too, Kichiro. I am, too.”

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She hadn't meant to make him angry.

Stifling a sigh as she rested her temple against the cold bars of the cage, she wondered why he'd said what he'd said.

*“I'm not. Hard to be something like that when you know damn well that there is no God.”*

Did he believe that? How could he believe that? Samantha might not call it God, and she might not even say that she believed that it was a single entity, but . . . but she had to believe in something, didn't she? Maybe she didn't believe in God in the strictest sense of the word, but she believed that there were things out there: things that were still beautiful, still pure. Remembering the vast colors contained in a single raindrop, the myriad of scents that flooded her senses just after a good rain . . . There was beauty to be seen, wasn't there? All one had to do was to look for it . . .

She had to believe it or she'd go mad. She knew that—knew that if she stopped believing, she'd die. Somewhere deep down, she believed that one day, she'd see those things again. Belief was the single thing that she had left, wasn't it?

And those she loved . . . where were they now? Shivering slightly, she pulled the thin blanket a little closer around herself, she hoped that they were all warm and happy. Maybe her father was playing the piano . . . and if he was, then Mama had to be close by

. . . Isabelle and Griffin . . . he'd be recovering from his latest reconstructive surgery, wouldn't he? And Alexandra . . . maybe she'd finally get around to marrying John.

Was Sydnie starting to show yet? Samantha smiled wanly. It was hard to imagine the tiny cat-youkai with a big belly, round with baby . . . *'Bas had better be good to her,'* she thought with a vague shake of her head. Their child would be the first of the next generation . . .

Jillian and Gavin, Evan and Madison . . . Kagura and Sesshoumaru . . . Toga and Sierra . . . Coral, Cassidy, Chelsea, and Charity . . . Rinji and Reiko . . . Shippou and Rin . . . Gunnar and Morio and Mikio . . . so many faces, so many memories . . . She'd always felt as though she had to run to catch up to them all. Always the youngest; always the baby . . .

She didn't want to think of them, out there looking for her. She didn't want to consider the worry, the panic that they'd feel . . . Grandma and Grandpa . . . She couldn't remember a time when InuYasha ever said that he loved her, yet she'd never, ever doubted it; not once in her life. Uncle Ryomaru . . . how often had he guided her training with a proud grin on his face that he hadn't been able to hide. "Not bad for a girl," he'd said so often, and she'd understood that he'd meant it as the highest of praise.

How often had she sat in the studio while her grandpa Cain worked in silence. It wasn't an unfriendly silence, though, and she'd marveled in the wonder of watching his hands as he bent and molded clay into the most intricate creatures, the most delicate beings so beautiful that she couldn't bring herself to call them 'women'. How many times had Gin read her stories—children's books that still made her laugh . . . how often had she sat with Kagome, listening to stories that painted a pictures of InuYasha as larger than life?

The memories were sweet, but they hurt her, too. The conflicting emotions were vindictive . . .

*'Sami . . . don't do this to yourself,'* her youkai chided gently.

Smiling sadly, she swallowed hard, swallowed the tears that welled in her throat. *'We'll see them again, right?'*

*'Of course we will.'*

The voice didn't sound positive, at all.

Glancing at the clock, Samantha stifled a sigh. It was almost five in the morning.

The mere thought of spending another day alone with the white-coats was a frightening thing. She didn't want to think about it; didn't want to consider what manner of testing they had in mind for today. It seemed to her that they were growing more and more daring with each passing day . . .

And yet it wasn't really as bad as it could have been, was it? The nights weren't so bad, aside from the cold. Gaze slipping to the side, she stared at the would-be holy man. If she said she was sorry, would he believe her?

"I'm sorry," she said quietly, breaking the stony silence.

He didn't look up from his book, but then, she really hadn't figured that he would.

"If you're not a monk, are you a taijya?"

He blinked and glanced at her, his gaze suspicious. "And what's that?" he asked tightly.

She sat up a little, pleased that he was at least speaking to her again, even if his tone wasn't exactly friendly. She figured it'd do. "Well, technically speaking, it means youkai

exterminator . . . of course, you haven't exterminated me, but it's kind of the same in theory . . ."

"You know, it doesn't matter what term you use to describe yourself. You're still a demon, plain and simple."

"And you're still a taijya," she quipped.

"So what language is that?" he countered.

Samantha blinked since she hadn't actually expected him to ask that question. "Language?" she repeated.

The expression he shot her stated very plainly that he knew damn well that she was trying to avoid the question. "Yes, little demon: language."

"What language do you think it is?"

He was not amused by her evasive responses, but Samantha wasn't entirely certain how much she really should tell him. After all, even though she might well think that he wasn't going to hurt her, she wasn't at all certain what he'd do with the information that he could get from her, if he had a mind to. No, she was much better off to keep her answers as general as she possibly could.

"How come you can see us?" she asked, hoping that he wouldn't notice her blatant attempt to change the subject.

He shrugged and turned his attention back to the book once more. "I don't know," he admitted absently. "Always have . . ."

“But humans can’t see through our concealments,” she continued thoughtfully. “You shouldn’t be able to, either.”

“Well, I don’t consider it to be a good thing,” he assured her. “Your kind is nothing but monsters.”

She smiled wanly, letting her chin fall onto her raised knees. “That sounds about right,” she murmured, wondering not for the first time if she ought to hate the part of her that branded her the same as the white-coats: the human part of her that was frightened and weak that cowered in the dark beneath her hanyou façade.

If she were full human, would she feel compelled to help the white-coats? She’d like to say that she never would, but how true was that? They didn’t believe that she was even remotely close to being like them because they didn’t want to believe it. But if she were like them . . .

“Oh, you agree that you’re a monster,” he scoffed. “Right . . . Sure . . .”

“There are some who are bad,” she reasoned. “Aren’t there humans who do bad things?”

“Bad things? Is that what you call it? You destroy every single thing that you come across, and you say that it’s just a ‘bad thing?’”

“Some youkai hate humans,” she admitted. “I don’t know why, but . . . Causing harm to humans is viewed as the gravest of offenses to us.”

“Is that so?” he said, his tone as clipped and measured as it was cold. “Hurting humans is an offense? Do you really expect me to believe that?”

“It’s the truth,” she replied simply.

“I’ve seen what you demons are capable of. I’ve seen it. Don’t try to tell me that you aren’t like that or that you don’t think it’s right or that you think it’s an offense.”

“I wish you didn’t think that.”

He snorted, jamming the book into his knapsack. “Of course you don’t. This discussion is over.”

Letting out a deep breath, she winced inwardly but remained silent. She might not understand a lot about him, but she did know one thing: whatever had happened to him in his past, it was safe to assume that some youkai had caused it. If that were the case, then she could appreciate his irritation.

The question was, exactly what had happened to him before . . .?



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
Offense, huh ...

## Chapter 23

### Unease

-----

Samantha sat up in the cage, feeling inordinately restless though she was hard pressed to put her finger on why. She'd felt that way all day, really, and while she'd been forced to endure another bout of being strapped naked to a table while the white-coats poked and prodded and basically pestered her, she'd stared at the clock, willing the minutes and hours to pass.

Today's research—if one could call it that—was what she considered to be the morbid fascination with watching how fast she healed. They'd been astounded with how quickly the wound in her shoulder had closed up—she already knew that—but when the incision in her stomach had also disappeared so rapidly, they'd decided that they should see it, first hand.

So she'd done her level best to ignore them as they inflicted wounds on her fingertips and feet. They hadn't cut her more than a few centimeters at a time, though, and she hadn't really bled much, either. All in all, she'd figured that it was more annoying than painful, and there was the added bonus that it had thoroughly irritated the white-coats that she hadn't really shown any remarkable reactions to their brand of havoc—a feat that she was quite proud of, really . . .

And she was also quite healed by the time they'd shackled her and walked her back to the cage, accompanied, of course, by a legion of security guards after she'd pulled her smock back on.

Shackles aside, she rather felt like a rock star.

That thought made her giggle. She wasn't entirely sure why. She'd gone to one of her cousin's concerts once, and the entire affair had amused her. Seeing Evan Zelig surrounded by a host of bodyguards was absolutely one of the funniest things she'd ever seen, never mind that he could probably have kicked all their asses, if he'd wanted to.

He'd said later that it was all just a ruse. After all, his fans were mostly human, and they wouldn't have understood why Evan really didn't need a bodyguard, in the first place.

That she'd managed to require more guards than he did, though . . . now that really *was* funny, in her opinion . . . and knowing Evan, he'd probably think that it was funny, too . . .

Glancing at the clock on the wall, she frowned just a little. It was nearly seven, and still the taijya had yet to arrive. She'd taken to calling him that since he really seemed to despise '*Houshi-sama*'. Besides, she had to admit that she liked taijya better. It sounded more dangerous, didn't it?

Smashing her hands over her mouth as another bout of giggles welled up inside her, Samantha shook her head and wondered if the white-coats had slipped her something when she wasn't paying attention. Why else would she be in that good a mood? She really figured that she shouldn't be, all things considered. After all, she was still quite trapped here, and that, alone, ought to have been enough to silence her amusement, right?

The door opened, and she sat up straight, but frowned when two of the white-coats stepped into the room. They normally left long before now, didn't they? What in the world were they still doing here?

"You really think this will work?"

“Sure . . . why wouldn’t it?”

The first guy didn’t look entirely convinced.

“Hands behind your back,” the second guy ordered.

Samantha didn’t move.

“Now,” he demanded, kicking the cage just enough to shock her.

Biting her lip and refusing to let them see how badly the jolt that slammed through her hurt, she didn’t blink and didn’t move.

As far as she was concerned, they’d had their time earlier, and she wasn’t nearly stupid enough not to have smelled the changes in their scents as they’d studied her, strapped spread eagle on that damn table. Their long lab coats might have hidden the obvious results from each other’s views, but she knew, didn’t she? And she’d be damned if she’d let them touch her, either.

“What the hell are the two of you still doing here?”

The white-coats whipped around to face a very bored looking taijya. Samantha almost cried in relief.

Neither looked happy to see him stride into the room and over to the desk where he deposited his knapsack and coat.

“Didn’t you get the memo?” the second one finally asked, apparently deciding that a show of mock bravado was in order.

The taijya nodded. “I got it,” he agreed mildly enough.

“Then you know that we’re going to be conducting a night study on her.”

“Weird, though . . . Harlan didn’t know a damn thing about it, and since all testing has to be cleared through him, then I guess it means that you’re not authorized.”

“W . . . it’s just . . . o-observation,” the first doctor finally said in a rather pathetically weak tone.

The taijya shrugged. “Then pull up a chair, boys, and observe all you want. Be a little boring, though, if you want my opinion. It doesn’t do a whole hell of a lot.”

Samantha might have thought that the situation were a bit more humorous if she didn’t need to pee. Fidgeting just a little, she concentrated on not thinking about it—no small feat, really. She didn’t dare speak in front of the white-coats, and even if she did, she wasn’t entirely certain that the taijya would take her to the bathroom with the impromptu audience . . .

But as luck would have it, the two miscreants seemed to settle in for the duration. She bit her lip.

“So, Doc . . . You give any thought to what we talked about the other day?” the more talkative of the white-coats asked. His clearance card had read ‘Peterman’, she thought . . .

The taijya pulled a newspaper out of his bag and shook it out. “Nope.”

The sleazy bastard chuckled, and Samantha had to tamp down the vindictive desire to shove a few of the man’s teeth right down his throat. “You sure about that? I mean, she isn’t very big, but I’m sure that there’s enough of her to go around.”

The taijya didn't respond to that.

"Maybe he's gay," the other white-coat muttered to his partner in a quiet tone that the taijya was probably not meant to hear.

"Maybe I am," the taijya agreed as he let his feet drop off the desk and slowly rose, tossing the newspaper down as he pinned both white-coats with a menacing glower, "I mean, nothing sounds quite as good to me right now as fucking the two of you up completely."

Peterman chuckled. "Oh, come on, now, Doc . . . Warren was just joking, right, buddy?"

The one who must've been named Warren nodded. "Just a joke," he echoed, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I mean, what's the harm?"

The taijya looked like he was sorely pressed not to lose his temper completely. "The harm? The harm? Look, I've yet to get my full payment out of that demon. You're not doing a damn thing to compromise that till I do. You got that?"

"We're not going to hurt her," Peterman insisted with a wide, fake grin meant to reassure the taijya, she supposed. "What's wrong with having a little fun?"

"I already told you," the taijya growled, jerking his head toward the door. "Now get the hell out of here before I lose my temper."

She couldn't help her sigh of relief when the two white-coats decided that it was in their best interests to comply. The taijya didn't back down until the two had left the room, and then he followed them to the doorway, watching, she figured, until they had gotten onto the elevator before he slumped against the frame and slowly shook his head. "Sick bastards," he muttered under his breath.

Samantha opened her mouth to thank him, but faltered. Something in his expression stopped her, didn't it; something that she didn't completely comprehend . . .? Anger, sure, and even a marked disgust, but something else, too; something much subtler, something . . . something she wasn't entirely certain of . . .

Pushing himself away from the door, he stomped over to the cage and made quick work of pulling the water dish out to refill it.

"Uh," she interrupted before he could move away.

"What?" he grumped, though she had the strangest feeling that his tone really didn't have a lot to do with her.

"I, err . . . have to pee," she muttered.

He stared at her for several seconds then heaved a sigh. "Why doesn't that surprise me?" he retorted dryly.

She bit her lip but couldn't help the contrite little smile that surfaced, either.

He shook his head and heaved another sigh, setting the bowl atop the cage and rolling his hand in a gesture meant to hurry her along. "All right; all right. You know the drill."

Samantha giggled then hurriedly turned around.

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Ryomaru glowered at the map spread on the table in the hotel room. "That's a hell a big area," he muttered, tapping the page with a tapered claw.

Griffin nodded but remained silent.

“It’s just another wild goose chase,” Kichiro growled, stomping away from the table and looking like he was ready to tear something to shreds. “*Damn* it!”

“Maybe,” Gunnar intoned as he eyed the map. “Maybe not.”

“I’ll go,” Ryomaru said. “Anyone know that area?”

Griffin shrugged and nodded. “I do.” All eyes turned to stare at him. “It’s been a while, but . . .”

Ryomaru stared at Griffin for a moment then slowly nodded. “All right. We’ll head out in the morning.”

“What the hell can some old bastard tell us about where my daughter is?” Kichiro went on angrily. “There’s nothing in Minnesota that’s going to help us!”

“You don’t know that,” Evan pointed out. “If we find the guy, even if he isn’t involved . . . maybe he knows something.”

“Look, Kich, Mother and the old man are still checking around here, and like it or not, she’s our best chance at the moment. If this old bastard can tell us anything, then we gotta go,” Ryomaru pointed out.

Kichiro didn’t look like he wanted to agree, but he finally nodded. “Then I should go, too.”

“The hell,” Ryomaru muttered with a shake of his head. “What if the old man gets himself arrested again? You’d better stay here . . .”

“I ain’t going to get arrested again,” InuYasha grumbled as he stomped into the room with Kagome right behind him. “Baka pup . . .”

“Any luck?” Bas spoke up from his spot where he was lounging against a wall with an untouched cup of coffee in his hand.

Kagome shook her head and sighed. “Nothing yet, but we’ve decided that it’s better to move around on foot. It’s hard to tell much of anything from the air.”

“Damn it,” Bas gritted out, his grip tightening on the tiny cup that looked like a child’s miniature in the man’s huge hand.

“Take it easy before you break it, Bas,” Gavin said, nodding at said-cup.

Bas blinked, his grip loosening just a touch though the irritation on his features did not wane.

Gunnar’s cell phone rang, and he nodded at the others to go on as he stepped to the side to field the call. It was his father, who had gone out for the day with Morio to check into a few places that they weren’t sure had been explored as yet. “Hello?”

“Mamoruzen? How’s everything there?”

Rubbing his eye, Gunnar let out a deep breath and glanced over at the gathering. “Griffin’s friend, Attean contacted him about a potential lead in Minnesota. Ryomaru and Griffin are going to head out tomorrow.”

“Minnesota? What’s up there?”

“Attean heard a rumor about some old man up that way who is said to possess spiritual powers. It may not have a thing to do with this, but it doesn’t hurt to check it out.”

“Ryomaru . . .” Toga sighed. “I don’t know that it’s a good idea to send him in. That’d be like sending Uncle Yasha in, only a little goofier . . .”

Gunnar was inclined to agree, but he shook his head. “He’s the best bet we have as far as tracking goes, Uncle Yasha aside.”

“I know, but Ryomaru tends to act first and think later—when he thinks at all, that is . . .”

“Kami, you’re starting to sound like Grandfather,” Gunnar pointed out.

Toga sighed. “I would rather avoid having your uncle blowing up the whole of the North American woodlands . . .” he admitted ruefully.

Gunnar rubbed the back of his neck as he pondered that, then made a face. “Then maybe you ought to get back here and warn him.”

“Afraid of your uncle, Mamoruzen?” Toga teased.

Gunnar smiled just a little. “No, but I do have a healthy respect for his swords.”

“Duly noted . . . we’ll head back right . . . Oi! What do you think you’re doing?”

Gunnar heard rustling in the background and shook his head.

“I’ve never seen a flower like that one,” Morio pointed out, his voice muffled by the distance between him and the phone receiver. “Meara would love it.”

“So take a picture of it, baka! That’s called breaking and entering, you know!”

“What the hell is he doing?” Gunnar couldn’t help asking.

Toga heaved another sigh, this one decidedly frustrated. “Someone’s got a bunch of plants in their window, and your cousin’s trying to jimmy it open . . .”

“I wasn’t going to *steal* it!” Morio complained. “But the light would just bounce off the glass if I tried to take a picture . . . you think they’re home?”

“We’ll be back as soon as I beat some sense into your cousin,” Toga grumbled. “Don’t let them leave before I get there.”

“Okay,” Gunnar replied as the line went dead. The irritated look on his face dissipated, and he smiled just a little. It put things into perspective, at least a somewhat. Maybe Morio didn’t take everything as seriously as everyone else, but maybe that was all right, too . . . His heart was in the right place . . .

When he turned around again, it was to see everyone staring at the map on the table. “Attean didn’t know anything other than ‘northern Minnesota?’” Bas asked. He’d traded the cup for his cell phone, probably talking to Cain at the same time as he was discussing the search plans.

“No,” Griffin mumbled. “He said it was just a rumor.”

Bas hit a button and set the phone on the table. “Rumor . . . It should still be looked into,” Cain’s voice came through on the speakerphone. “Has Ben made it there, yet?”

“I haven’t seen him,” Bas remarked.

“How’s Bellaniece?” Kagome asked as she looked away from the map.

Cain sighed. "She's all right. Went Christmas shopping today with the girls."

"Good," Kagome said with a wan smile. "And Gin?"

"Gin's fine, too."

"Have you heard anything else, Zelig?" InuYasha cut in impatiently. "Anything useful?"

Kagome shot her mate an unimpressed look. The hanyou ignored it.

"Nothing," Cain admitted. "I'll look into that rumor. I don't know what I'll be able to find out, though. If Myrna didn't come up with anything on her first search . . . I'll call if I find out anything."

InuYasha grunted. Kagome nudged him with her elbow before he could say anything contentious.

"All right," Bas agreed. "Tell Sydney I'll call her in a bit."

"Sure," Cain replied. The connection ended, and Bas shut off his phone and dropped it into his pocket.

"So the rest of us'll just keep searching on foot, then," Evan muttered, looking entirely irritated about it.

"That's all we can do," Bas said.

"We're not getting anywhere like this," Evan said, his voice thick with the frustration that everyone else was feeling, too. "Remind me not to come up missing if this is the best you can do, Bubby."

Bas shot his brother a warning look that Evan summarily ignored.

“*Goddamnit!* This feels so fucking pointless!” Evan snarled, pacing around the room like a caged animal. “Where the hell *is* she?”

“Evan,” Bas began in a warning tone.

Evan rounded on him, jamming a finger against Bas’ chest. “Shut the fuck up, Bassie! You don’t know any more than the rest of us do, now do you? So don’t pretend that you do, all right? Just spare me . . . Sam’s out there somewhere, and we’re all sitting here talking about some fucked up mountain man who may or may not have spiritual abilities? No! *Fuck* no! Stay here if you want, but I’m going back out there! I’m going to find her, and I’m going to bring her back, damn it!”

Bas sighed as Evan stormed out of the room. Kichiro glanced around, his gaze lingering on every face that he knew, and finally, he, too, turned and left. Clenching his jaw, Bas looked like he wanted to say something. In the end, he let out a deep breath and strode out onto the balcony.

Kagome stood still for a moment, the turmoil in her eyes speaking volumes about the worry in her heart and soul as she patted her mate’s back and hurried after Bas.

The night was cold—colder than she could credit—a deep-rooted cold that seemed somehow entirely appropriate in its unrelenting quality. Bas stood at the railing, staring out over the city, his back strong and proud as his hair whipped into his unblinking eyes. “He’s . . . he’s right, you know,” the young man said quietly. He hadn’t turned to acknowledge his grandmother’s presence. He didn’t have to. “That’s the hell of it, see? He’s right . . .”

“Do you think so?” she asked gently, pulling her sweater a little closer as she wrapped her arms around her chest and wandered over to his side.

“Grandma . . . Evan didn’t say anything that the rest of us haven’t felt. How hopeless is this?” He sighed and shook his head. “I’m not giving up; I just . . .”

“Sebastian, I’m going to tell you something, and it’s going to sound completely un-grandma-ish.”

He finally turned to look at her then pulled off his coat to drape it around her shoulders. “Un-grandma-ish?”

She nodded then sighed, letting the warmth of the garment encompass her for a moment before she spoke again. “Do you know how many knees I’ve bandaged or elbows I’ve kissed? How many bedtime stories I’ve read or how many times I’ve just stood and watched while my grandchildren have played? How many times I’ve helped one of you get back on your bicycles when you fell off or stood at the doorway, wondering if you intended to stay in the forest all night because you’ve lost track of the time . . .? And I always knew that you’d come back home because you always—*always*—did . . . Oh, your grandfather would grump and swear that he was going to thump you—all of you . . . The summer you boys took off—hiking through Japan, Mikio’s note had said . . . Afraid it was going to be your last summer spent together, and I worried, of course. I’m your grandmother. That’s my right . . .

“Your grandfather told me that I was worried about nothing; that you boys could take care of yourselves, and it wasn’t that I thought you couldn’t . . . I suppose I just didn’t want you to have to do it . . .” She smiled, uttered a sad little laugh. “And you came home, all safe, all happy . . . You never said so, but I know that you boys had had the time of your lives, so I . . . I never had the heart to scold you—not when you were right. It *was* the last summer you all spent together, wasn’t it?”

Bas nodded, the expression on his face stating plainly that he did remember that summer that seemed so very long ago. Kagome had fretted and worried, staring at her cell phone for hours on end, almost dialing it so many times until InuYasha had stomped into the kitchen and told her to leave the boys be . . . And when they'd finally wandered into the house weeks later . . .

How happy had they looked? How much closer had the four boys bonded? The next generation had somehow become this united front, and while they had retained their individuality, together, she'd realized, they'd become something entirely different. They'd deepened that friendship into something that would withstand anything that anyone else could throw at them. She'd been proud, hadn't she? Proud of the boys who had snuck out in the night, only to return home as full-grown men. Every child had a moment like that, when they were able to shed the mantle of the one only to step into their own . . . Looking back, Kagome could remember those insular moments in all those children's lives . . . all except Samantha—the silvery girl with the brilliant eyes and the laughter that had the ability to make everyone smile . . . and in Kagome's mind . . .

Her smile faded, and she shook her head. In her mind, Samantha was still that little girl, wasn't she? And maybe . . .

“Today, as your grandfather and I were walking through the city, we passed this window of a vacant store—one of those huge, sheet glass windows . . . easily fifty feet long . . . maybe twenty feet high . . . and all over that window, people had posted these flyers . . . men, women, children . . . They were all missing. Every last one of them had a face and a name and a home where someone was waiting for them . . . and the flyers were all different: red ones, white ones, yellow ones . . .” Blinking quickly, she shook her head and cleared her throat as emotion threatened to overwhelm her. “I looked at those flyers, and I thought to myself . . . if we posted a picture of Samantha there, would anyone see her? Would . . . would anyone care . . .?”

Shaking her head, she suddenly covered her face with her hands, her tears silent but poignant, drawing a grimace from her grandson as he quickly reached out to pull her into a comforting hug. She leaned against him for a moment, wondering in what crazy, messed-up world did the child become the adult, even if it were only for a second?

Drawing a shaky breath, she sniffled and swiped at her eyes. “Those papers were two or three layers thick . . . different faces, different stories . . . but how many of them ended with that child—that *person*—coming home? How . . . how many . . .?” She bit her lip, rubbed her arms, felt the warmth of Bas’ lips against her forehead. “And I . . . I couldn’t help but wonder if our Samantha . . . Is she just another number now . . .? Another face that some strangers might see and think, ‘*Oh, she’s a pretty girl,*’—if they even think about her, at all . . .”

“Grandma . . .”

“That’s why,” she said, her voice taking on a determined tone.

Bas shook his head. He didn’t understand, did he . . .?

“That’s why,” she stated again, an expression of sheer determination brightening her gaze as she slowly, steadily stepped back, stared her grandson in the eye. Bas blinked at the expression on her face, the absolute conviction in her resolve. “That’s why we have to bring her home,” she said. “Because *my* Samantha . . . she’s more than a face on a window plastered with the other faces of the lost souls. She’s more than a number—a statistic. She’s more than just a pretty girl, and she deserves more than just a fleeting glance of an uncaring stranger. She’s ours, and she *is* coming home.”

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“Shut up.”

That giggle again. “But—”

Kurt snorted and shook his newspaper to cut it—her?—off. “You already peed—twice. You ate. You had a drink. You have your blanket. You have everything you need, so shut up and go to sleep, demon.”

“I know, but I—”

“Shut. Up.”

“But . . . I smell chocolate.”

That gave Kurt pause, only because he actually did have a candy bar in his bag. The odds that he was sharing it with the demon, however, were slim and none. “Don’t know what you’re talking about,” he replied instead.

It uttered a terse grunt. “Hmph! But I *love* chocolate!”

Rolling his eyes as he tried to remember exactly why he’d wanted it to talk to him, in the first place, Kurt pulled the newspaper a little higher over his face and decided it was best to ignore the frustrating creature.

“Oh, come on,” it implored. “Didn’t you ever learn how to share?”

Folding down the corner of the paper, he peered over it at her and slowly shook his head. “If you don’t shut up,” he began in a warning tone, “I’ll gag you, and if you really don’t believe that I’d do it, then just keep talking.”

That, at least, seemed to stop it. Snapping its mouth closed on whatever it was going to say, it ‘hrmph-ed’ again, but it did remain silent.

*‘Talk about minor miracles,’* he thought, returning his attention to the newspaper once more.

He wasn’t entirely certain, exactly what had gotten into the creature tonight. Laughing, giggling, almost teasing, and Kurt really didn’t know what to make of any of it. It was unsettling. It was unnerving. It was completely exasperating.

*‘Maybe it’s just . . . relieved . . . after all, it can hear, right? Surely it had to realize what those two were trying to do to it—to . . . her . . .’*

Frowning at his own line of thinking, he had to admit that he really wasn’t comfortable, referring to the demon in such a way. Identifying it as a female . . . Okay, he could accept that, he supposed. Gritting his teeth as he remembered that night, he winced. Yeah, he’d seen for himself that . . . she . . . was definitely female.

He sighed. Yes, he had been the one to tell them not to trust everything they saw on the outside, wasn’t he? So why had it horrified him so badly, to see that they’d decided that they wanted affirmation that she was a female, after all? They cut the demon open just to see if it—*she* possessed reproductive organs . . .? Even if it hadn’t affected the creature long-term, just what did that say about the doctors? Kurt wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to answer that, either . . .

Yet he also knew damn well what it—she really was. He’d seen the carnage that those demons seemed to crave. He saw it in the depths of his nightmares, remembered it at odd times when he sometimes wished he didn’t. It was an inescapable truth to him, wasn’t it? Dangerous . . . and it only took a second for them to take away everything that Kurt had ever had . . .



## Chapter 24

# Unnecessary

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Kurt laid in bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to the traffic passing by on the street far below the windows of his tiny apartment. Though he'd always had trouble sleeping, today was much worse, wasn't it? The fact of the matter was that he'd given up on the idea of sleep long ago and was just trying to rest . . . and think.

It really *was* a female, wasn't it?

Why was that such a difficult thing for him to accept? Why was the very idea of that enough to make his stomach lurch unpleasantly?

Why didn't he want to accept that . . . ?

But it really was a female. He'd seen that for himself, hadn't he? When he'd taken out the stitches, he'd seen the parts that he really hadn't wanted or needed to see: her uterus . . . Sick bastards . . . just what the hell were they doing? True enough, he wasn't exactly a fan of those demons. That didn't mean that he thought they should be dissected alive, either . . .

And didn't that make them no better than those creatures? It wasn't all right, was it? It wasn't . . .

Yes, he believed that they needed to be destroyed. Beasts like them didn't need to have free reign to kill and to destroy without as much as a second thought, but . . .

Even if he accepted the idea that the researchers were just looking for answers, trying to understand the fundamental differences in biology, he couldn't accept the idea of what Peterson and Warren wanted to do. He'd seen the pictures, hadn't he? Why the hell had they needed to catalog every single facet of the demon's body, anyway? He hadn't looked at all the images—he hadn't needed to. He'd seen enough, hadn't he? Fastened to the table, unable to move at all—that hadn't bothered him nearly as much as the helpless images, of every part of the little demon so blatantly presented? They bothered him—the gross misuse of the term 'research' to blanket their sick and twisted desires . . .

He understood, of course, that Harlan viewed the little demon as his prized toy; as something that could be constructed and deconstructed at will.

What he didn't understand was why the little demon let it happen. He didn't even try to delude himself into thinking that it couldn't easily overpower the researchers—the white-coats, she called them. The things that they did to it—to her . . . how much more would she tolerate before she snapped? Before they put a bullet through her that didn't have a chance in hell to heal . . .?

It wasn't that he cared—hell no, of course not. It wasn't that the idea bothered him at all . . . One less . . . less demon in the world, right . . .? One less . . . monster . . .

Scowling at the ceiling as the gray light outside the window crept in like a gentle intruder, Kurt rolled onto his side and closed his eyes, trying not to think—not to think . . . not to think . . .

The police who had arrived at the house first had stared at him with undisguised horror—a little boy covered in blood, face streaked with tears and snot . . . He'd heard the whispers as he sat at the station, huddled in a blanket that smelled completely unfamiliar . . . Sitting in an oversized chair, feet drawn up as he shivered and stared, hearing whispers and sighs and words: so very many words . . .

*“—He’s too little . . . There’s no way he could’ve had anything to do with that . . .”*

*“—sister nearly decapitated . . .”*

*“—mother’s heart crushed inside her chest . . .”*

*“—father had to be ripped up by something like a pitchfork or something . . . Fucking Freddy Krueger . . .”*

And the questions . . . Detective Shonberg, the guy who looked like a round rubber ball with legs . . .

*“You mean you came home and there were monsters in your house? As in, what? The kind that hide under your bed and try to eat you?”*

*Kurt shook his head. “Demons,” he murmured, staring at the table. “Demons . . .”*

*“Look, son, don’t you want to help us find whoever did this to your family?”*

*“Demons,” Kurt said once more. “Demons . . .”*

*“So you wanna tell me that the closet monster came out and attacked your mommy and daddy and sister? You’ve gotta help us, Kurt. We can’t help you if you don’t try.”*

*He didn’t know how long he sat in that room. He didn’t know how many times Detective Shonberg asked him the same questions. He vaguely recalled his aunt and uncle arriving. They spoke to the detective for a few minutes, and then Uncle Marcus had picked him up, blanket and all, and had carried him out of the station.*

*But they hadn’t taken him to their house right away, either. He remembered that he couldn’t understand why they’d stopped at the hospital. He remembered telling them that his family*

*wasn't there. "The monsters tore Carrie's head off," he'd said—he thought he'd said . . .*

His aunt had cried—he remembered that, too. His lack of emotion had frightened her. He could understand that now, he thought with a wince. He'd felt so numb, so empty, so unreachable . . . so alone . . .

They'd checked him into the psychiatric clinic for a few weeks for observation, and maybe that had been the best thing for him. It wasn't that the doctors had made him talk or anything, but maybe what he'd needed at that time was just the quiet, the unobtrusive apathy of doctors and nurses who didn't try to coddle him, didn't try to force emotion onto him that he didn't want to feel. It was in that blessed and welcome silence that he had been able to begin functioning again. It was there that he'd been allowed to reach out at his own pace, away from the stifling hugs and overly rapt attention that he neither wanted nor needed.

By the time he'd left the clinic to go live with his aunt and uncle in a town about forty-five minutes away from Crosby, North Dakota, he was able to reach for Aunt Mary's hand. He didn't shy away when Uncle Marcus mussed his hair. He remembered seeing the relief on their faces, and, while he knew now that they hadn't thought that he was 'better', they also had known that he would get there . . .

And who knew, really? He might have . . .

Heaving a sigh, he sat up, raking his hands through his hair. Why was he thinking about all of this, anyway? What good did it do to relive the past? He couldn't change anything that had happened . . . He couldn't fix anything or bring anyone back . . .

Giving up on the idea of catching a nap of any kind, Kurt stood up and shuffled toward the bathroom, tugging the nondescript black tee-shirt over his head and dropping it on the floor as he went before unfastening his jeans and walking them off, too.

He could still remember the first time he'd met with Robert Harlan. Having just graduated from medical school, he'd been working at St. Benedict's on the outskirts of Chicago when he'd heard whispers about a facility that was researching the kind of creatures that Kurt was intent on hunting down. The first demon he'd caught was a freakish-looking thing with a rat-like face that didn't speak more than a series of grunts and growls. Kurt had brought that one in muzzled since it had an unnatural preoccupation with trying to bite. Harlan had walked around the beast, his beady little eyes sizing it up as Kurt stood back and waited. The old bastard had given him a hundred and fifty thousand for it, citing that he'd have paid more had Kurt not accidentally burned its arm. The limb was unusable, and Kurt had learned his lessons well enough. Though there had been a couple of the damn things that he'd inadvertently injured or even had given a little too much of a shock in the days before he'd learned how to regulate his power, He'd done well enough, he supposed.

He stood under the tap, letting hot water flow over him for a long, long time. Harlan had told him that he wanted to find out what made those things tick; wanted to know everything there was to know about them in order to find the most effective way to get rid of them en masse. *"It's all well and good to hunt them down, but what if we could devise a way to destroy hundreds of them—thousands of them—all at once?"* he'd said . . .

Kurt hadn't liked Harlan from the start, and he certainly didn't trust him, either. Still, he'd seemed earnest enough when he talked about his ultimate goal, and even if he weren't, did Kurt honestly care? Harlan had said that he'd never actually seen a demon before Kurt had entered his office. He'd heard rumors of these horrific creatures, he'd heard whispers of things that could not be explained; things like entire families found torn apart—one in Texas the authorities had claimed was a ritualistic gang murder . . . another in Tulsa that was blamed on a husband gone mad who had supposedly killed his wife and two children with a hatchet or other 'heavy, sharp instrument' before somehow managing to kill himself. Speculation had it that the wife had fought back, that she had managed to inflict the fatal wounds that had ended up killing the husband in the end.

Kurt knew better, hadn't he? He'd seen some of the pictures from the crime scene—some sick-o had stolen them out of the police station and had posted them online. It had only taken a glance for Kurt to recognize the wounds. They'd been inflicted by claws, and the police had to be stupid if they honestly thought that an injured wife could have possibly done that to her husband, too.

Those demons . . . They held no respect for life, no remorse for what they did, no reason to hate anyone enough to inflict that kind of pain. He barely noticed as the water cooled, as the steam that had built up in the air started to dissipate.

Thing was, he didn't care, did he? He just didn't have it in him to care . . . The families he'd seen or had heard about . . . he didn't care at all about the horrors that they had endured. He had his own issues to deal with, his own burdens to bear. If he could just find the ones responsible . . . if he could make them pay for what they'd done . . . He didn't think of it in terms of justice or punishment, but more of a leveling of the score.

Old Granger had asked him once if he thought that he was some sort of great avenger. Kurt hadn't answered. He had no intention of doing anything like that, not really. It wasn't a gross need to see the injustices of the world set right, was it?

No, his motivation was far uglier than that, far baser. He wanted to hurt them, needed to destroy them. There was no sense of doing what was right and no desire to vilify his actions. What he had was anger and hate and rage, and even if destroying the demons who had torn apart his family couldn't assuage those feelings, then at least they'd know for sure what they might have thought in the beginning: they should have killed him when he was a boy, when he'd been too small to protect himself, because he wanted them to know, didn't he? He wanted them to understand that *he* was the one who was doing the killing the next time . . .

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“Everything looks good, Sydney. Your baby’s doing just fine, though I’ll advise you that you should probably try to eat a little more, okay?”

Nodding slowly as she straightened her skirt, Sydney tried to smile at Isabelle. “Of course,” she murmured.

“I’m a little worried, too . . . you know, Bastian should be here with you,” she went on. “I think that everyone would understand if he came home.”

“I wouldn’t,” Sydney insisted stubbornly. “Not until they find Samantha.”

Resting on the edge of the bed, Isabelle nodded slowly. “Sydney . . . it’s not your fault,” she whispered as her gaze dropped away. “It’s no one’s fault . . . Sami’s fine—just fine. She’ll . . . she’ll come home. You’ll see.”

“Do you believe that?” Sydney asked quietly, rubbing her arms as she wandered toward the window.

“I have to believe it,” Isabelle remarked with a little laugh. “She never really said it out loud; not to me, but I know . . . Your support means so much to her. It always has.”

Sydney nodded slowly though Isabelle could tell that the cat-youkai didn’t really believe her. “My support is why she’s out there,” Sydney admitted at length, her arms wrapped protectively over the slight bulge of her belly. “I . . . I told Sebastian that she could handle it . . .”

“And she did, didn’t she? She did . . . She’ll come back; you’ll see, and you know she’ll want to see that baby, too.” Standing briskly, Isabelle hurried over and slipped an arm around Sydney’s narrow shoulders. “Now, come on. Mama bought a few things for that

baby . . . did you know that she's convinced that it's a boy?"

"D-does she?" Sydnie stammered, looking a little dazed.

Isabelle smiled brightly. "Yes. What do you think?"

She shook her head. "I . . . I hadn't thought about that . . ."

"Really? Well, you should! You know, I think that it's just what this family needs . . . a baby . . . and the next tai-youkai? That really would be fantastic, don't you think?"

Sydnie stopped and stared at Isabelle. Isabelle gave her shoulders a reassuring squeeze. "You'll see, Sydnie. Babies are blessings."

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A soft knock on the door drew Ben's head up as he dropped the pen on the desk and sat back. "Come in."

The door opened slowly, almost hesitantly, but he knew the youki well enough. Charity Inutaisho poked her head around the thick oak slab and offered him an apologetic smile. "Hi," she said. "Busy?"

"Always," Ben said but smiled. "What are you doing out so late?"

She stepped into the office, holding a beautiful arrangement of Christmas roses and holly and ivy. "I thought you could use something to brighten up in here . . ."

"They're lovely," he assured her as he rose out of his chair. "Thank you."

She nodded and set them on a table near the door before turning around to face him once more. “Any word?”

“No . . . but we’re still looking.”

Pushing an errant lock of black hair out of her face, the young woman sighed. “Less than three weeks till Christmas, and it doesn’t seem like it at all, does it?”

“We’ll find her,” he promised quietly.

“I know,” she replied, managing a wan smile. “It always surprised me whenever I saw her . . . I just can’t remember her growing up. She was the baby for so long . . .”

Ben sighed and shrugged, stepping over to retrieve two bottles of water out of the small refrigerator nearby. “Tell me about it,” he remarked. “Every time I turn around, I’m reminded of exactly how old I really am. Now Sebastian’s going to be a father, too . . . and I remember when he was just a tiny babe, and I’ll admit I was a little afraid that he would take after his mother in height.”

Charity laughed quietly, accepting the water that Ben offered. “I went out to the mansion earlier,” she confessed, toying with the sealed plastic cap. “Everyone seemed so . . . weird . . .” Shaking her head as her cheeks pinked, as though she felt that she was speaking ill of her family, she sighed. “Mama was sitting with Bellaniece, and . . . and they were laughing and carrying on, wrapping presents and singing Christmas carols . . . making up words when they couldn’t remember the verses . . .but the more they laughed, the . . . emptier it felt . . . like if they stopped laughing, they’d . . . they’d cry . . .”

Ben nodded slowly. He’d heard and noticed the same sort of thing, too. “They’re coping,” he murmured, wishing that he had a better answer to give her, knowing that he didn’t. “They’re trying.”

Charity suddenly barked out a harsh laugh as she ducked her head, as her hand shot up to swat at her eyes. “Sam would be so mad if everyone cried, right? I mean, she would; she really would . . .”

Grimacing at the angry sound of the woman’s voice, Ben stepped over to her, slipped his arms around her. “Charity . . . if it matters, I won’t tell her. If you want to cry . . .”

She resisted the comfort he offered her for a long moment before collapsing against him, muttering words that meant nothing at all and everything at the same time. Her worry, her pain, was a viable thing—the worry of an entire family that felt as though they couldn’t cry . . . This one woman had felt that, too, and maybe that was as much to blame as her own fears and concerns. Crying for the family that struggled to keep it together . . . crying for the ones who could not . . .

“We’ll find her,” he whispered, smoothing her hair away from her face as her sobs racked her body. “We’ll find her; I promise.”

“W-will we?” she stuttered.

Ben nodded. “Yes,” he said, his tone unyielding, full of confidence despite the underlying worry that he was speaking a lie. “We will.”

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“You know, I’m starting to think that this rumor’s nothing more than a lot of hot air,” Ryomaru muttered as he pushed away the half-eaten plate of food in the small roadside diner.

Griffin grunted and shrugged. He'd given up on trying to eat the greasy fare a while ago. "I don't know," he said. "Seems like a good place to hide if someone had a mind to."

"A holy man in these parts?" Ryomaru scoffed with a shake of his head. "I don't know if I buy it . . ."

"We've only been out here a few days," Griffin reminded him with a shake of his head. "What do you want him to do? Seek us out?"

Ryomaru rolled his eyes but shrugged belligerently. "Be a lot easier. Maybe the old bastard'll just jump out at us and toss an ofuda in our faces. Suppose it'd purify me or something . . . 'Course, it might do you more damage . . ."

Griffin snorted and sipped his water, making a face at the metallic tinge that hadn't been removed by whatever filtration they had set up. "You're a little cocky, aren't you?"

Ryomaru grinned. "Been called worse."

Griffin shook his head.

"Hey, sweeties . . . you want dessert? We got fresh cherry and apple pies, cream pie, peach pie, and our Christmas special, cranberry pecan," the waitress rattled off in a monotone as she stopped by the table again.

"No, thanks," Griffin muttered, ducking his chin and tilting his head to keep the scarred side of his face hidden in shadows.

"Nope," Ryomaru said. "But tell me . . . you from around here . . . Kay?"

The waitress smiled rather clinically, as though she thought that the hanyou were trying to hit on her. "All my life, sugar . . . married my high school sweetheart, too."

Ryomaru grinned and nodded. "So you'd know if I asked about someone?"

She looked a little surprised by Ryomaru's quick question. "I suppose," she ventured.

His grin widened by degrees. "We're looking for an old man . . . kind of a . . . um . . ."

". . . Hermit?" Griffin supplied when Ryomaru trailed off.

"Yeah, like that," Ryomaru agreed.

Kay shifted her weight, tapping her chin with the harrow side of the order pad in her hand as she considered their question. "Hermit? Hell, sweetie, half of the people up 'round these parts are hermits. You got a name?"

"No, we don't," Griffin muttered.

"He's supposed to be, like a holy man," Ryomaru added. "Spiritual powers and all that."

She blinked, staring at him as though she thought maybe he'd lost his mind. Griffin was ready to grab the hunter and drag him out of the diner. Digging some money out of his pocket, he started to get up when the waitress suddenly laughed. "Holy man? Like a voodoo-hoodoo witch doctor of the mountains or something?"

Ryomaru shot Griffin a quick glance then nodded. "Yeah, sounds about right."

"Well, I don't know anyone like that personally, but there was this story back when I was a kid 'bout this crazy man that lived up in the woods. Said he'd come down into town, and whenever he did, he threw this powder-stuff all over. They said that he claimed it cast out demons . . . My friends and I drove down there a few times, hoping to catch this guy out, but we never saw him. That was a while back now, though, about fifty miles

down the road, here, a little town they call Manitou.” Popping her gum, she shrugged offhandedly before digging into her dingy white apron for their bill. “Who knows? Probably just one of those stories—those urban legends, you know? Why are the two of you looking for someone like that?”

Ryomaru grinned. “We thought maybe he could help us.”

She laughed and took the money that Griffin held out. “Got a demon you need to get rid of?”

Griffin grunted and stood up. He heard Ryomaru following suit. “Could be,” he remarked. “Thanks, Kay.”

“You two be careful out there!” she called after them. “TV says that we’re in for a hell of a blizzard . . .”

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Something was bothering the taijya. In fact, it had been bothering him since he stomped into the holding area a few hours ago. He’d sloshed out half of her water when he’d stuck the bowl into the cage, and then he’d dropped the wrapped hamburger through the bars without bothering to see if she caught it. That was all right, she figured, but it seemed like the more he looked at her, the more irritated he became, and that was strange, wasn’t it?

She hadn’t done anything to antagonize him, had she? Well, she had asked to go to the bathroom a few minutes after he’d gotten his coat off, but she didn’t really think that warranted the hostility that he was displaying. In fact, it was the first time that she’d actually felt as though he was truly angry at her, and that just didn’t set well with her, at

all.

She considered asking him about it, but had discarded that idea. The foreboding scowl on his face had convinced her that it wasn't a wise idea. Not for the first time, she had to wonder exactly what his story was, why it seemed like the strangest of things tended to set him off . . .

*'Does it really matter, dollbaby? Maybe we should just leave well enough alone . . .'*

That was sound enough advice, she supposed. Shifting her gaze to the side, she frowned. He hadn't sat down yet, either, prowling around as though he were trying to get a grip on his anger.

*'You know, if he's this out of sorts, maybe we can use that to our advantage,'* her youkai voice suggested. *'If he's preoccupied, and you can get him to let you out of the cage . . .'*

She shook her head. *'Something happened,'* she thought abruptly. *'Something happened that's bothering him . . .'*

*'Earth to Samantha . . .! Does it matter that something's bothering him? You're entirely too preoccupied with that man, you know. Don't you want out of here . . .?'*

Grimacing inwardly, Samantha shook her head. She did want that, didn't she? To get out of here and to go back home . . .? So why was she hesitating . . .?

*'He's . . . he's worse off than I am, isn't he?'* she mused slowly. He stomped over and dropped into the chair behind the desk but couldn't quite get himself to stay there. A minute later, he was back on his feet and pacing once more. *'I mean, he might not be caged—at least, not like this, but . . . but maybe his cage is worse . . . and maybe he's been in his a lot longer than I've been in this one . . .'*

*'Samantha . . . that's crazy talk. That man . . . he's dangerous; don't you know? He wants to hurt you—destroy you . . . You're nothing but a paycheck to him! Nothing but a demon . . .'*

She shook her head slightly. *'You don't . . . you don't believe that, do you?'*

Her youkai sighed. *'It doesn't matter, what I believe . . . just like it doesn't matter what I know . . . In another lifetime, he would have been . . . but in this one—right now . . .'*

*'But you don't believe it. You've felt it, too, and you felt it long before I ever did . . .'*

*'He doesn't want us, you know? I've felt it, every time I've tried to . . . It doesn't matter, Samantha. No matter what we feel, he doesn't . . . and you have to understand that . . .'*

Her eyes flared wide as the taijya whipped around, as a spike in the air around him reached out, touched her. He didn't know it; she knew he didn't; and yet it was there, as plainly as she'd ever felt anything else in her life. *'It's pain,'* she thought with a shake of her head. *'He's . . . he's hurting . . . but he's been hurting for so long and so badly that he doesn't realize that's what it is anymore . . . He doesn't understand . . . and that confusion—that anger . . . It's all just an extension of that pain . . .'*

*'And you can't fix him! You, more than anyone else . . . you cannot fix him!' her youkai hissed. 'He put you here! Do you understand? He put you here, and he hates you—us! Hates what we are and everything we stand for!'*

She frowned, letting her head fall against the cage bars as she pondered her youkai's assertions—her youkai's confusion that mirrored her own. Her youkai . . . it wanted to believe—she heard it in the depths of its voice, and she understood that because she felt it, too. Her father . . . hadn't he always told her that everything happened for a reason? Hadn't he told her time and again that there was always something, even if she hadn't known what it was at the time? He'd told her this, and she knew that he believed it . . .

*'Maybe this is why . . .'* she thought slowly as a strange surge of something bright flared deep within her. Sitting up a little straighter, her eyes following the taijya's every movement, she started to realize, began to understand . . . *'This is why . . .'*

*'No . . . no . . . It can't be why . . .'* her youkai argued weakly. *'To put you through all of this, just so you can try to show him . . . But, Samantha, he doesn't want to see! It won't matter how hard you try; if he doesn't want to see . . .'*

*'But maybe,'* she rationed as the barest hint of a smile quirked her lips, *'maybe he does . . . maybe he's simply tired of the pain he's been living with . . . even if he doesn't realize it yet.'*

*'He's familiar with youkai, even if he doesn't know their proper name. You know he is, don't you? You know he's brought others here, and the ones he brought here . . . Well, they're not here now, are they? They're dead, dollbaby: dead . . . and if we don't get out of here, we'll be dead, too, only our death . . . It won't be the white-coats who kill us . . .'*

She knew that, yes; of course she knew that. But those others that he'd found . . . they were nothing like her, were they? Considered to be higher youkai . . . and if all he'd ever seen was the worst of them, how could he know what they really were? And while she acknowledged the truth in her youkai blood's statement, she couldn't help the burgeoning desire to help him to understand, either . . .

*'That's not what I meant, Samantha . . .'*

She swallowed hard and pressed her lips together. She understood what her youkai was trying to say well enough. She simply wasn't quite ready to admit that much; not yet . . .

It was the creed of the hunter, wasn't it? It was what she'd fought so hard to protect: the safety of humans—of all humans—even those who would harm her. Just because she'd been captured and brought here to this place . . . it didn't release her from her obligations, did it, because sometimes protection came in different forms—something she was only



## Chapter 25

### Indifference

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“Can I see that when you’re done?”

Kurt blinked and glanced over at the demon. Stretched out on its—*her*—stomach with her feet kicked up, crossed at the ankles. “See what?” he asked slowly since he wasn’t entirely sure what she was talking about.

“Your newspaper,” she replied in a tone that indicated that she thought he ought to know as much.

He snorted. “My paper? Demons can’t read.”

She rolled her eyes and sat up. “Well, maybe *demons* can’t,” she quipped, “but *hanyou* certainly can.”

“You know, you don’t really change a thing by changing the word that you call yourself,” he pointed out.

“Neither do you,” she replied lightly. “So can I read the paper when you’re finished?”

Peering around the edge, he stared at her for a moment then shook his head. “Nope.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t like dog germs.”

“Wh—y—I—I do *not* have dog germs!” she huffed indignantly.

“It stands to reason,” he replied.

“How do you figure?” she demanded.

“You look like a dog,” he pointed out reasonably.

“I don’t, either!”

He shrugged. “You have dog ears.”

She snorted.

Kurt wasn’t finished. “When you’re wet, you smell like a dog.”

Her voice dropped to a pouty sort of drawl. “You’re kind of mean, aren’t you?”

“You know, that wet-dog smell . . .”

“*Really* mean.”

Scanning the classifieds, he replied absently, “And you bark like a dog.”

“Now, I *know* I don’t do that,” she grumbled.

Kurt shook the paper. “You’re doing it right now.”

“And you’re *kind of* a jerk,” she amended.

“You know, that might bother me more—*if* you weren’t a demon.”

She rolled over and sat up, her face shifting into a marked frown that was more like a pout than anything. “But you just throw it away when you finish reading it,” she muttered.

“Why do you want to see it?” he countered.

She made a face, her ears flattening just a little in the process. “I just wanted to read the comics.”

“You mean you really *can* read? Such as it is, anyway . . . I’d hardly call the comics ‘reading’.”

She shot him a narrow-eyed look. “What can I say? I like the pretty pictures.”

“I think I’ll start reading the *Wall Street Journal*.”

“Then you wouldn’t get to see the pictures, either,” she replied pleasantly.

“Yeah, but I can read.”

She heaved a sigh, her chin falling to her knees as she wrapped her arms tightly around her ankles.

*‘It—she—wants to read the paper . . .?’* he thought as he turned the page. To be honest, he wasn’t entirely sure why he bothered to read it since it hardly ever had any anything good in it. Just the same stories, day after day . . . stories of deaths, accidents, one country threatening war against another . . . Was there really a point to any of it?

“You know, you aren’t getting paid nearly enough for me,” she remarked at length.

“Why’s that?” he asked against his better judgment.

She shrugged, rubbing at her teeth with her index finger. “Because they want to use me to create a strain of super humans,” she replied simply.

That got his full attention right quick, and he dropped the newspaper as he turned to stare at her, full on. “What?”

“That’s what the head white-coat said . . . Harlan, right?”

“What, *exactly*, did he say?”

She shook her head, telegraphing him a look that implied that he ought to know damn well what she was talking about. Still, she must have decided to humor him, just the same, because she ran her tongue over her teeth to finish the impromptu cleaning and rinsed her fingers in the bowl of water beside her. “He was talking to the other white-coats . . . They think that if they could isolate the part of my blood that makes me a fast healer that they could use it to inoculate their soldiers . . . or something to that effect . . . Anyway, if they were able to do that, then they’d make a lot of money, wouldn’t they? If they made a lot of money, it’d make what they paid you seem like . . . what’s that phrase?” Tapping her chin thoughtfully, she concentrated for a moment before snapping her fingers. “Ah, yes! Chicken scratch!”

“He said that,” Kurt repeated.

The little demon nodded though she looked entirely preoccupied. “Well, not the part about chicken scratch.”

A surge of anger rose inside him, a bitter feeling that he couldn’t repress. Damn, he’d known that Harlan couldn’t be trusted. He’d known it, but he’d chosen to think . . .

*'That bastard . . . that bastard . . .'*

If he'd known that was what Harlan had wanted, he never would have brought demons here . . . If he'd understood that the ultimate goal of the research was to somehow bridge the gap between those thing and humans . . .

"Maybe you should tell him you want more for me," she suggested, unaware that she'd inadvertently set off his temper.

"And this doesn't bother you? You want to be the one to . . . to infect countless humans with your blood?" he countered.

She shrugged and shot him a droll look. "It won't work," she said simply. "I mean, they could try, but . . ."

"Why won't it work?" he demanded. "How would you know whether or not it could?"

A strange sort of expression flickered over her features; a certain amusement that was tinged with a hint of sadness. "If it got that far, that is . . . I wouldn't let it happen."

"And you could do something to stop it?" he jeered, tossing the newspaper aside and stomping over to the cage. "You can't do anything, locked up like you are in there. You can't do a damn thing."

"You'd be surprised at what I can do," she murmured, her gaze igniting with a certain brightness. Then she sighed. "Our blood is different than yours," she finally said. "Human blood can be stored, right? In blood banks and stuff . . ."

"Yours can't?"

She shook her head. "No. Well, I don't know for sure, but . . . but I do know that if we

die, so does our blood. It's that simple."

He snorted. "So you're saying that if they tried to inject it into a human to create, as you say, some sort of super human, then you'd just kill yourself so your blood would die?"

She nodded slowly. "See? Simple."

"And how do you know that's true?" he demanded.

"I just know," she replied with an enigmatic little smile.

"Seems awfully convenient, if you ask me."

The little demon shrugged and pulled the blanket a little closer. "So about that paper . . ." she reminded him.

Kurt blinked and scowled then shook his head. "You've got a one-track mind, don't you?" he muttered. "And I'm not done with it, anyway."

"Is that your not-so-subtle way of saying that you're not going to let me see it?"

"Yeah, I think it is."

She heaved a longsuffering sigh and pulled the blanket up over her shoulders. "Fine, fine . . . if you insist on being that way . . ."

Kurt let out a deep breath and headed for the desk again. The demon looked like she was going to go to sleep, anyway, which was just fine with him.

Reaching for the paper, he settled down again, scanning the headlines for anything that might be of interest. Too bad he was a little too preoccupied to really read it, though. A

race of super-humans who possessed the demon's ability to heal itself? And just what sort of good could possibly come of that?

Kurt's scowl darkened a little more as he considered that idea. If what the demon said were true, then he supposed he could be thankful for that.

*"If we die, so does our blood . . ."*

Was it really that simple, after all?

*"If we die, so does our blood . . ."*

If he took that at face value, what did it mean? Did it mean, as she had said, that she would simply find a way to kill herself? But it wasn't that easy, was it? He'd seen for himself, how quickly the damn thing healed. Even if she wanted to, would she be able to do that . . .?

Still, it bothered him. Harlan's claims . . . the little demon's assertions . . . and what, exactly was the truth . . .?

Tugging the page of comics free, he glanced over at the cage, but shook his head. It was already asleep with the blankets pulled up over her head. He could tell from the rhythm of her breathing in the quiet.

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*'Five weeks . . .'*

Staring out the window of his office at the snow that gently fell from the sky, Cain

slipped his cell phone back into his pocket and sighed.

“I heard you talking, Daddy . . .”

Turning to smile wanly at his daughter, he held out a hand to her. “Yeah . . . that was Bas. Said that Ryomaru and Griffin called in a bit ago. They’re stuck at a motel on the interstate that runs through Minnesota . . . A blizzard, I guess.”

Bellaniece nodded, slipping her arms around her father’s waist and leaning against him with a soft sigh. “Six weeks feels like such a long time,” she murmured.

“I know,” he intoned softly.

“And tomorrow night . . .”

She didn’t have to finish her statement. Cain knew well enough what Bellaniece was talking about. Tomorrow night was the new moon—Samantha’s human night . . . and it scared Bellaniece.

“Sam’s a smart girl,” Cain assured her. “She’ll do everything she can to hide herself.”

Bellaniece laughed softly. “You know, when she was little, she was the only one of my girls who never cried on her human night . . . She didn’t mind it . . . She said . . . she said she liked looking just like her father . . .”

Cain remembered that well enough. How many times had Bellaniece called him, telling him that Kichiro had to go out looking for Samantha? She’d found it interesting to view the world through the eyes of a human, and while he knew well enough that everyone had tried to curb that tendency in her, he would have been surprised if anyone actually had been able to do that . . .

She shook her head and stared out the window at the darkness of the night, watching at the snowflakes stuck to the panes of glass, some of them melting, others creating a thin sheet that frosted the corners of the panes. “Do you suppose that we’ll all be together again? Next year or . . . or the year after . . . just sometime . . .?”

“Yeah,” Cain murmured, forcing a smile for his daughter. How often had he done that over the years? How many times had he smiled, just for her—smiled when he felt like breaking down . . .? How many times would he continue to do that? Just for Bellaniece . . . for Bellaniece . . .

“Daddy?”

“My lady?”

“I love you.”

He tightened his arms around her, blinked to disburse the moisture that clouded his vision. “I . . . I love you, too, Bellaniece.”

“Christmas is the season of hope, right?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

She relaxed just a little, only a little, and her voice was sweet and soft. “Then everything’ll be all right.”

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The dulcet sounds of the piano drifted through the quiet of the hotel restaurant. The

ambient clink of dinnerware being cleared away did not detract from the somber tones . . . Old songs that lingered in his memory, playing every single one of them by heart with his eyes closed and a sad sort of smile gracing his lips . . .

“Is he one of the guests here?” one of the waitresses leaned over to ask another as they stood at the end of the bar, dividing their tips.

“Hmm, yeah, I think that’s what I heard,” another remarked slowly. “He’s something else, isn’t he?”

“Oh, wait . . . isn’t he staying on the top floor? There’s a whole group of them, and they’re all just gorgeous,” a third waitress added.

“I don’t know . . . there’s something hot about a man who can play the piano like that, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely! You know, I . . . oh . . . oh, *my* . . .”

The three women fell silent, all three staring, wide-eyed as another man slipped into the restaurant. One of the busboys murmured something, probably telling the man that they’d just closed. The man nodded and lifted a hand before sauntering over to the one at the piano. His movements were like a study in harmony, a perfect collision of motion and grace . . . deep blue eyes that sparkled with a sober sort of expression, he drew attention as easily as he wore the tee-shirt and scruffy looking jeans that seemed to cling to him. He didn’t look around but headed straight for the piano with a purpose, flowing like water . . .

The two looked like they could be brothers—long silvery hair that seemed to shine in the gentle lighting. The piano player’s hair was caught back in a long braid while the other’s hair hung loose to his narrow waist. The second man said nothing to the one who still played, and to their surprise, the one playing just scooted over on the bench to allow the

other to sit. Without missing a beat, he joined in, too, playing a quiet harmony that perfectly matched the melancholy song.

The first waitress—Shelly—watched, mesmerized, without noticing as a tear slipped down her cheek. The two men . . . the song they played . . . the perfect symmetry of the sound . . . The men said nothing. They didn't even glance at one another, but then, they didn't really have to.

A few of the kitchen staff appeared in the doorway, holding open the swinging bombazine doors. Even the clatter of the clean up crew seemed to die down, as if everyone in the place had stopped, just to listen to the two strangers.

Without a word, without a glance, the song ended but flowed into another. Neither man missed a beat.

The waitress beside her sighed softly. The third had sat on a high barstool to watch. Shelly reached up, smashed her hand against her chest, wondered why it felt as though her entire being was crumbling.

There was an infinite sadness in the voice of the piano, an understated emotion, as though tears had been put into song. The one man was scowling at the keyboard as his fingers danced over it. The other man still had his eyes closed. Shelly knew the song; it was vaguely familiar to her, and yet she couldn't think of the name to save her soul.

When it ended, the entire establishment was silent, as though applause would only cheapen the effect, as though everyone was afraid to break the spell cast over them in such a beautiful way. The two men looked at each other; the second one smiled just a little. Neither said a word, though, as they stood up and walked out of the restaurant.

Shelly wasn't sure how long she continued to stand there, even long after the men had left. The rich tones of the piano had long since faded, and yet the song still lingered in

the air . . .

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Kurt closed his book and lifted his face to stare at the little demon. She hadn't said anything since she woke up, but she'd started humming quietly and had been doing it for the last few minutes.

It was a song that seemed vaguely familiar to him though he wasn't sure why since he rarely listened to the radio or anything. Crossing his arms over his chest, he wasn't sure why, but he was loathe to interrupt her, too.

What did she see when she stared off into the darkness? She wasn't focusing on anything in particular, was she? And yet, she didn't have to, either. He didn't have to move in closer to know that she was smiling. Maybe it wasn't a full smile, but . . . but he could *feel* it, couldn't he?

The song was sad, beautiful, bringing to mind emotions that he couldn't quite place. An exquisite melancholy, an ethereal pain . . . a fleeting thought of something just a little too distant for him to discern . . .

He didn't know if the song had words, but it didn't matter, did it? Something about it—about *her* . . . Something . . .

The song ended, and she sat back with the softest sigh. She said nothing, and if she noticed that he was staring at her, she didn't remark upon it.

There was something infinitely frightening about her in that moment; something that had little to do with her physical abilities or her demon nature. He couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, and yet he could feel it more acutely than he'd ever felt anything

before in his life. A slow trill of fear that gripped him, a silent understanding in the darkness . . . The absolute isolation that engulfed her . . . it was familiar, wasn't it? He knew it because . . .

Slamming the door on those thoughts, he yanked open the book once more. That wasn't possible, was it? It wasn't true; it couldn't be. Deliberately misunderstanding . . . because he just couldn't . . .

She was a demon—a monster—every single thing that he hated. Her kind had no regard for anything at all; wasn't that right? No thoughts, no feelings, no emotions . . .

Images solidified before him in the pages of the book: vile, unspeakable images of those things that he simply couldn't escape. All those things in his life that he'd seen, that he'd done . . . the grossly distorted faces of the demons he'd captured . . . the broken bodies of the family that he'd lost so long ago . . . Everything and nothing seemed to converge . . .

The vow he'd made as he stood at the foot of the three graves in the lonesome cemetery . . . The two graves in a Presbyterian church yard less than an hour away . . . He'd promised that he'd find *them*; promised that he'd destroy them, and all the anger, all the hatred that had sustained him for so very long writhed and twisted inside him with an ugliness that he could scarcely contain.

As if she could sense his rioting emotions, the little demon turned her head, and while he couldn't make out her features in the darkness, why did he know that she was still smiling—not a mocking grin or a condescending smirk . . . but a sad little smile . . .?

"They let me run today," she said quietly. "They let me run . . ."

He grunted unintelligibly, distrusting himself to give her a proper response.

She laughed softly—a warm sound that grated on him, nonetheless. "Almost all day,

really,” she went on, her eyes glowing steadily in the darkness. “It was . . . like *heaven*.”

“Running all day? That was a *good* thing?”

She nodded enthusiastically then heaved a little sigh. “I don’t suppose . . . I don’t suppose they’ll let me do that tomorrow . . .”

He didn’t respond to that as a bit of her ebullience faltered.

“It reminded me of . . . of running through the forest . . . barefoot with my hair blowing behind me . . . The scent of the trees, the decaying leaves . . . the feel of the sunshine on my face . . .”

She fell silent for a moment then sighed. “I want to do that again one day . . . just . . . run . . . to see the sky . . . the sun . . . the stars . . .”

Kurt stood abruptly, shoving away the strange and unwelcome emotions as he shot to his feet and strode over to the cage. “You’ll *never* get out of here, demon,” he growled, his voice thick and harsh. “You’ll live here; you’ll *die* here, and no one—*no one*—is going to give a damn.”

She stared at him for long seconds: owlish eyes glowing in the darkness—eyes that did not falter . . . eyes that still smiled just a little sadly. “Probably,” she admitted quietly.

He snorted, stomping past her as he paced the floor. “And you’re all right with that? You don’t care? You think I’m joking? I’m *not!* I don’t care what happens to you; do you hear me? *I don’t care!* You and all of your kind! You’re monsters—*monsters!* Just . . . just beasts that do nothing but kill and kill and . . .”

“I suppose you’re right,” she said. “I’ve killed youkai . . . a few of them . . .”

He uttered a terse grunt, feeling perversely vindicated and even emptier, at the same time. “Yeah, well, there you have it . . . So . . . so you might as well get used to it, demon, because the inside of that cage is the only thing you’re ever, *ever* going to see.”



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
... Never ... right ...?

## Chapter 26

### Diffusion

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*“So . . . so you might as well get used to it, demon, because the inside of that cage is the only thing you’re ever, ever going to see.”*

Samantha sighed inwardly as the truth behind those words sank in, but it wasn’t really his words that troubled her. The anger, the confusion so evident in his tone, as though he’d had to lash out at her, as though he’d had no other recourse.

And for the last three days, he’d said nothing at all. It had helped her a lot as she’d worried about trying to hide herself on her human night. He’d let her go to the bathroom and had fed and given her water. After that, though, he’d proceeded to ignore her, and at least for that night, that had been all right, too. Huddled under the blanket, she’d sat up all night. Fearing that he’d discover her secret, she hadn’t been able to sleep.

Luck had been with her, though. He’d said nothing to her until he let her out of the cage to go to the bathroom, but by then, she’d returned to her hanyou state, and that was all right, too.

The thing that bothered her about that, though, was the inner knowledge that she wouldn’t be able to hide it forever. What would they do if they found out? The white-coats . . .

Biting her cheek as she tried to ignore the painful intrusion of the pin sensors they’d placed all over her body, she willed herself to think about other things, to ignore the barrage of tiny shocks set off at timed intervals as the hateful machines spewed a steady

stream of paper—her reactions broken down into scribbled lines that measured her body's responses.

She really wished she'd managed to get the newspaper from the tajya. She'd told him that she wanted to read the comics, but the truth of it was that she wanted to see the date. She had no way of knowing exactly how long she'd been here, and while she knew that it had been over a month just because of the frequency of her human nights, she couldn't quite figure exactly.

Grinding her teeth together as an especially painful shock shot through her from the probes stuck into her nipples, Samantha was otherwise pleased to see the marked lack of response from her body on paper. That one was by far the worst so far. Still she stubbornly refused to allow herself to show the white-coats any kind of reaction.

The one they called Harlan slipped out of the room, muttering something about stepping out for a minute, which was also fine with her. The two miscreants who had tried to stay over the one night, though . . . they were staring at her, their gazes carefully bored, but she could smell them, couldn't she? They made her stomach turn.

Spending a moment jotting things on his clipboard, the one called Peterman cleared his throat. "Who'd have thought that a demon could look like that?" he murmured with a grin.

His friend nodded. "You know, I think that ol' Doc is trying to keep her for himself."

Peterson stopped writing, glancing at the other with a calculating sort of look on his face. "Maybe," he allowed at length. "I mean, without the camera in there, it'd be hard to prove, wouldn't it?"

"Wouldn't surprise me . . . Doc's always been a little weird."

“Yeah, but he acts like he hates her . . .”

Peterson rolled his eyes. “He doesn’t have to like her to fuck her, right? You don’t like her, do you? Hell, I don’t like her, either, but that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t fuck her . . . Besides . . . he’s just as much of a freak as she is. I mean, think about it. He can see these things? I don’t care what you tell me, that can’t *possibly* be normal.”

The other white-coat was silent for a moment before casting a concerned eye toward the doorway. “Didn’t Dr. Harlan say that he’s got those researchers from San Diego coming in today?”

“Yeah, so?”

He chuckled, stepping over to casually turn off the camera beside the door. “So that means he’ll be busy for a while, right?”

Peterson blinked and slowly grinned. “That’s true enough.”

Samantha could feel her panic rising. She’d have to be stupid not to understand exactly what those two had in mind, and regardless of what her upbringing had dictated regarding not causing humans harm, there was no way that she’d let them defile her . . .

But she wasn’t entirely sure how she could stop them, either.

“And this is our latest acquisition, gentlemen!” Harlan exclaimed in a loud, booming voice as he strode into the room with three other white-coats in tow. The bastard looked inordinately pleased with himself, like he’d been the one to apprehend her . . . Trapped between sheer relief that the two miscreants couldn’t try to do what they had in mind and abject horror as the new arrivals stared her casually up and down, she had to fight down the outrage that boiled up in her as she shifted her gaze to the clock on the wall.

“She doesn’t look like a demon,” one of the men remarked dubiously.

“She looks almost human,” another added.

“Looks can be deceiving, can’t they?” Harlan stated jovially. “She’s a demon, all right. Allow me to demonstrate.”

He stepped over beside her, grabbing a scalpel off the small tray beside the gurney where she was restrained. Without ceremony, he sliced her thigh. Samantha bit down on her lip to keep from making a sound. The smell of her own blood hit her hard, and she closed her eyes as a trickle of blood ran down her leg. “Wait a few minutes, and you’ll see for yourselves,” he offered generously. “Her healing powers are amazing!”

Those hateful men gathered in close, staring at her, their eyes traversing every inch of her body without even a hint of remorse or shame. “Oh, wow,” one of them breathed, leaning in closer to stare at the cut on her leg. “It’s . . . it’s closing up . . .”

“That’s right!” Harlan crowed. “The scientific ramifications of it are staggering!”

“A demon . . .” one of them murmured as the trace of a smile appeared on his lips. “Remarkable . . .”

“Our handler swears that these things are dangerous,” Harlan went on with a broad wink, “but this one is quite tame.”

“Does it talk?” the third one asked.

“Pity, but no,” Harlan said. “We think it has the ability to do it; it simply doesn’t appear to know how.”

“I’ve heard that some of them can hide in human form. Never thought it was true,

though . . .”

Harlan gave a hearty laugh and herded the visitors toward the door. “Come, come! Let’s go talk business, shall we? You two . . . You come along, too! I’d love for you to tell our guests about your observations.”

Samantha could have cried in relief. The two didn’t seem like they wanted to go, but they didn’t dare gainsay their boss, either. It was fine with her, wasn’t it? Though it was about an hour before she was normally put away for the day, she figured that her cage would be preferable than remaining fastened to this stupid damn table . . .

A few minutes after the last of the white-coats finally, blessedly left her alone, she was caught off guard when the taijya strode into the room. His step didn’t falter as he approached the table, the clink of the restraints resounding with his movements, though she thought she might have seen the faintest glimmer of irritation as he brusquely jerked the probes free.

She couldn’t contain the little whine that slipped from her when he pulled the needles out of her nipples. Those two were the only ones that had actually hurt. His expression was impassive, stony as he let the probes fall on the concrete floor, the metallic pings echoing in her ears almost painfully.

He finished that quickly enough before jerking the sensor pads off her skin. The measurement machines protested the abrupt loss of data, beeping obscenely as they kicked over into error mode. He turned those off with a flick of his finger and didn’t bother speaking to her as he unfastened one of the arm bands, which was just as well. Even though she knew that the camera by the door was off, she wasn’t entirely certain if there were others. Snapping the cuff around her newly emancipated wrist, he loosened the straps around her neck, upper arms, chest, and waist. Swiping up the slightly smudged smock that the white-coats had carelessly tossed onto the floor, he dropped it in her lap without a word.

She wasted no time, pulling it over her head, feeling at least a little better with the addition of clothing, such as it was. He fastened the shackle around her other wrist as soon as she'd let go of the smock.

It didn't take him long to finish unbinding her and snapping the cuffs around her ankles. Then he tugged her off the table and set her on her feet before jerking his head toward the door. She understood and complied, grimacing inwardly as the muscles in her body protested the movement. Those damn pain sensors always seemed to force her body into involuntary spasms for a few hours following the testing. Her left knee buckled, and she veered against the wall, wincing as her shoulder smacked hard against the cinderblocks.

He pulled her back and held on long enough for her to steady herself, and she managed to make it into the holding area without another incident.

He stopped her before she could kneel down in front of the cage. "Do you have to go to the bathroom?" he asked in a brusque tone of voice that reflected his behavior thus far.

She didn't really have to go, but she figured she might as well, and when he unfastened her wrists, she couldn't help the involuntary reflex as she lifted her arms to cover her sore breasts, glad for once that she wasn't facing the taijya—glad that he couldn't see the pain she couldn't hide.

It didn't take long for her to take care of her business. When she approached him after she was finished, though, he was staring over her head rather thoughtfully. She turned around so that he could secure her hands once more, and she frowned at the vent in the ceiling. He'd been staring at that, hadn't he? But she told him that she couldn't get out through there . . .

"You're here early," she said as she made her way back to the cage.

“I needed to talk to Harlan,” he muttered. “Anyway, I thought they already tested your pain threshold.”

She shrugged as she crawled into the cage and stuck her feet out for him to unlock the restraints. “I guess they didn’t like the first set of results,” she replied rather evasively.

He eyed her for a moment before unfastening the cuffs and pulling them away. “I’ll bet they didn’t,” he replied in a tone that she didn’t really understand. “Turn around.”

She did as she was told then scooted over into the corner to retrieve her blanket as soon as she was freed. To her surprise, though, he didn’t close the cage right away. Resting on the balls of his feet with a strange sort of expression on his face, he stared at her for a long minute then finally shook his head and sighed. “You stink again.”

Wrinkling her nose, she shot him what she thought was a decently formidable glower. He snorted at her attempt. “You know, you’re horrible for a girl’s ego,” she pointed out, “and it’s hardly my fault . . . It’s not like I’m offered use of a shower . . . or soap, for that matter . . .” Heaving a sudden sigh of longing, she leaned back, a dreamy expression flickering over her features as she shook her head slowly. “Ivory soap . . . and shampoo . . . You have no idea what I’d give for either of those things . . .”

“You’re a weird little demon,” he grumbled, carefully pushing the door closed before reaching around the side to pull the pan of water out of the cage.

“And you’re a grouchy old taijya,” she retorted. “Guess we’re even.”

He snorted at her assessment as he headed over to rinse and refill the bowl. “Harlan thinks that he can teach you how to speak,” he remarked, hunkering down in front of the cage after slipping the bowl back inside.

Samantha spared him a blank look before reaching for the water. “Does he?”

“Yep . . . so can he?”

She giggled quietly and waved a hand before helping herself to a long drink. “Of course not. I’m stupid, remember?”

He rolled his eyes but his expression said that he’d figured as much, already. “So you’re really going to let them think that you can’t talk.”

She shrugged offhandedly and sipped the water. “Why not? Besides, it’s much better if they don’t know that I understand them, don’t you think? Did you know that those two white-coats that stayed over the one night think that you only *act* like you hate me and that in reality you’ve been fucking me every night in secret?”

“What?” he said, his tone a lot flatter than she’d figured.

She nodded, setting the bowl aside. “Said that you’re probably just telling them all this so they don’t figure out that you *really* like me.”

“Is that what they say . . .?”

“Don’t worry,” she went on airily. “I know that you really do despise me and all that, so it’s all right, don’t you think?”

He didn’t answer. He seemed rather agitated, not that she could blame him, she supposed. He really didn’t like youkai, after all, and she knew that well enough. Still, he did come in early for whatever reason, so she figured that she owed him one . . .

The strange look he’d gotten on his face, though, as he’d started to pull the probes flashed through her head, and she frowned just a little. He’d looked almost . . . dismayed . . .?

*'You're reading too much into it,'* her youkai voice ventured. *'Don't go looking for things that just aren't there.'*

*'Right . . .'*

Even so, why did it bother her, anyway? Why didn't she care so much if those damned white-coats saw her body, leered at her, stared at her as though she were some kind of sex toy, but . . . but the idea that the taijya saw her that way . . .

Why did that seem somehow worse?

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Ryomaru stopped short, scowling at the forest that seemed to stretch on and on, dense and unyielding, in every conceivable direction.

And they'd been wandering around in it for a couple days now, damn it.

"This ain't getting us nowhere," he growled, shaking his head as he struggled to reign in his mounting sense of frustration.

Griffin glanced at him but kept moving, trudging steadily through the knee-deep snow. "Just keep moving," he muttered. "This area feels different, don't you think?"

Ryomaru spared a glance at the bear-youkai, considering Griffin's words carefully. "Different? Different, how?"

"There's something around here," Griffin remarked. "I don't know what, but I feel . . .

something . . .”

Ryomaru opened his mouth to tell the old bear that he was crazy but stopped suddenly, glancing around as a strange sort of premonition crept up his spine. “Someone’s out here,” he mumbled, narrowing his eyes as he tried to see deeper into the trees. He couldn’t smell anyone, but that wasn’t surprising if the person were standing downwind. The thing was, he didn’t know quite what to make of the strange feeling, either.

Griffin nodded but said nothing. Ryomaru cast him a quick look, and the bear nodded in understanding. Ryomaru veered away, moving off to the left in the hopes that they could intercept whoever was out there.

It didn’t take long to find him. A strange old man stood just beneath the barren branches of a maple tree. Using one hand to steady himself, he was using the cane in his other hand to scrape snow away from the base of the tree, muttering under his breath though Ryomaru couldn’t understand a word he was saying. But he was wearing some sort of old, rough robe with the hood pulled over his head though straggles of wiry gray hair had slipped free to blow in the bitter wind. All in all, Ryomaru wasn’t entirely sure what to make of the old guy, but he did notice a couple of things just from watching: firstly, the old coot did seem to possess some sort of spiritual power though not nearly enough to construct a barrier, and secondly? He had to be insane to be wandering around the forest in the cold with nothing but that flimsy robe for warmth . . .

“Oi, old man . . . what are you doing?”

The old guy turned his head and squinted to see him better before muttering to himself and resuming his task.

Ryomaru blinked. He wasn’t exactly sure what he was expecting, but he supposed that being summarily ignored wasn’t exactly it.

“Old man?”

“I heard you the first time!” the old man exclaimed irritably. “I ain’t deaf, y’know!”

“You need some help there?” he asked.

That got the man’s attention well enough. Moving stiltedly, he turned to face Ryomaru, waving his walking stick at the base of the tree. “I dropped m’choppers,” he muttered.

*‘Choppers? What the hell are choppers?’* Ryomaru wondered but stepped forward just the same. “Down here?”

The old man nodded.

With a grunt, Ryomaru stepped forward and hunkered down to dig through the snow.

“You . . . you’re one of them fairies, ain’cha?” the old man exclaimed suddenly.

Ryomaru blinked and turned his head to look at the old man. “I been called a lot of things, old man, but I don’t think I’ve ever been called a fairy before . . .”

“It’s the ears,” he mumbled, raising a gnarled old finger in the direction of Ryomaru’s ears. “Yeah, you’re one o’ ‘em fairies . . .”

“Have you seen any other fairies lately?” Griffin demanded before Ryomaru had a chance to digest that strange bit of information.

The man stepped back as Griffin lumbered out of the trees, his gaze intent on the old man. Lifting his finger from Ryomaru to Griffin, he shook his head slightly as the wind whipped his robe around. “You’re a fairy, too! Why ain’t you got them ears?”

Griffin grunted and shot Ryomaru a quick look. “Because he’s only *half* fairy,” the bear intoned.

Ryomaru snorted and flicked his ears. “*Half* fairy?” he growled.

Griffin ignored him. “So . . . have you seen any other . . . err . . . half fairies around lately? Maybe one that looked like him but, um, a girl?”

The old man scratched his head and looked duly befuddled by the question. “Huh? You mean that one ain’t a girl?” he asked, wagging his finger in Ryomaru’s general direction.

“Listen here, you old bas—”

“Shut up, *Aunt* Ryomaru,” Griffin interrupted.

“I’m a guy,” Ryomaru gritted out.

“You sure about that?” the old man demanded.

Ryomaru opened his mouth to tell the old crackpot that he was looking for his niece and that he could shove his idiot questions right up his ass. Griffin waved a hand at him to silence him before he could do it. “You . . . you can see us . . . what we are . . .?”

The old man nodded slowly, idly stroking his scraggly beard. “Eh . . . ain’t like you’re one of ‘em monsters—‘em demons . . . Them’s the ones you gotta watch for. Sneaky bastards, ain’t they? Prowlin’ around, waiting to ambush you . . . Killed m’boy some years back. Killed ‘em cuz he seen what they was . . . Him and his . . . for a damn thing like that . . .”

Ryomaru scowled at the ground, wondering exactly what the old man was trying to say . . . Demons? Demons . . . Narrowing his eyes as he caught a glimpse of something vaguely

silver buried deep in the snow, he reached down, pulled it loose, eyes widening as he blinked at what he'd picked up. "Oi, is this what you're—Ack! It's your fucking teeth!" he hollered, dropping the denture as though it were searing hot.

"Eh?"

Ryomaru gritted his teeth and forced himself to reach down to retrieve the dentures again. They were covered with snow and decaying leaves. Ryomaru wasn't about to touch them more than he already was, though, so he held them out and shook them in a vain effort to get the old geezer to take them back. "Here, you old nutbag . . ."

Griffin nudged Ryomaru with the toe of his boot for the choice of address. Ryomaru ignored him.

"Eh, you found m'choppers!" the old man gloated, snatching the denture out of Ryomaru's hand and jamming them into his mouth, dirt and all. "Now I'll be on m'way . . ."

"Ugh," Ryomaru grunted, making a face.

The bear didn't look much more impressed than Ryomaru felt at the display of grossness. "Wait! Where . . . where are you going?" Griffin called after him as he started to leave.

"Headin' to town," the old man called back over his shoulder. "Needs me some whiskey . . ."

Ryomaru straightened up, pausing long enough to brush the snow off his knees. "That guy was a nut and a half," he muttered as he slowly shook his head. "Fairy . . .?"

Griffin snorted and strode past Ryomaru, obviously heading to intercept the old man. "At least you're only half fairy," he muttered.

“Keh!” Ryomaru grunted and heaved a sigh as he followed along behind . . .

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Kurt stepped back, cautiously eyeing his handiwork with a nod of satisfaction. As far as he could tell, the tiny barrier he'd constructed over the air vent in the bathroom would do its job well enough. At least this way, he wouldn't have to keep escorting the demon to the john, right?

Besides, it was good enough, he figured. He wasn't scared of her, anyway. It just annoyed him to have to drop whatever he was doing just to let her out to use the bathroom; that was all.

That done, he turned his attention to removing the door. He might be willing to allow the thing to see to her own base needs, but he certainly wasn't stupid.

*'Except that the real reason you're doing this is because you felt sorry for her, didn't you? You felt sorry for her just a little, and no small wonder after you saw what they'd done to her all day . . .'*

Ignoring the gentle chiding of his conscience, Kurt knocked the pins loose that held the hinges tight. Besides, that really didn't have nearly as much to do with it as his far more juvenile desire to irritate the living, breathing crap out of that damned Harlan . . .

He'd come in early just to talk to that rotten lump of flesh. He'd demanded to know exactly what Harlan was planning on doing with the little demon. Unable to shake off her claims that Harlan was planning on creating some sort of super-soldier or something, he'd only gotten angrier and angrier. Just what the hell was that old bastard thinking? Kurt had warned him about exactly what those things could do, hadn't he? Playing with

that sort of power . . . did he really think that it was all just some sort of really big, really stupid joke . . .?

Harlan, the jackass, had just laughed and said that they'd be fools to pass up such a golden opportunity to help out their fellow man. Kurt had stared at him like the idiot had somehow managed to grow an extra head. Help out their fellow man? Help him do what? Get good and dead . . .?

*"If we die, so does our blood. It's that simple."*

Was it? Kurt frowned. Was it really as simple as that . . .?

Brushing aside the absolute irritation that he just couldn't shake, he grasped the door and carried it out of the bathroom, leaning it against the wall. There was still something about the entire thing that bothered him, damn it . . . The little demon . . .

"Won't you get in trouble for stealing company doors?"

Blinking quickly as the sound of the demon's voice broke through Kurt's silent contemplations, he shot it a quelling glance and deliberately strode past her cage.

"Or maybe that's the big plan," she teased as she rolled over onto her belly, kicking her feet in the air. "You're trying to get fired, huh?"

"Hardly, and you'd better be glad. If I quit, you'll be stuck with Dustin again . . . or worse."

She wrinkled her nose and propped her chin on her raised hands. "So what'd you bring me for dinner?"

Raising an eyebrow as he sat back and pulled his hand away from the nondescript white



## Chapter 27

### Gray

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Kurt pulled his coat a little tighter against the bitter December wind blowing off Lake Michigan as he lowered his shoulders and hurried across the street toward the small newsstand where he normally bought his paper. The bells above the door jangled merrily as he slipped inside, his body giving an unconscious shiver as he straightened up and sniffled.

“*Tribune*,” he said to the old guy behind the counter.

The man got up slowly and tottered to the end of the counter where he kept the few copies of the *Chicago Tribune* that he got in every day. “I tell you, son, those digital papers are going to run me out of business,” he said as he stepped back to the counter again.

Kurt nodded, understanding what the old guy meant. Newspapers, magazines, books . . . they were all readily available in digital format. The days of the old-fashioned books and dusty tomes, of the familiar musty smell of old paper . . . those days were being left so far behind.

“Just to make an honest living,” the man went on with a shake of his head. “Seems a little sad, doesn’t it? What happened to the days when people held magazines or spent hours in a book store? M’ granddaughter came home from school the other day, and I ask her where her books are. She give me this weird look and says, ‘Gramps, that’s why we have the laptops,’ . . . They do everything on those, you know? From kindergarten all the way up . . .”

“Sorry to hear that,” he replied.

“That be it for you?”

He opened his mouth to say yes, but a rack of tacky postcards caught his eye. Various greetings from Chicago were stenciled on each one with different pictures of the city’s landmarks, he would have ignored them, but one in particular caught his eye. Without a second thought, he grabbed it and tossed it onto the counter along with a bag of chocolate candy. “That’s it.”

“Five-seventy-seven.”

Kurt handed the man a crumpled ten dollar bill and waited for his change, stuffing the items into his knapsack.

“Stay warm, will you? They say there’s a blizzard moving in . . .” the old man called after him.

Kurt waved a hand as he strode out the door, grimacing as a frigid blast of wind hit him square in the face.

*‘A blizzard, huh . . .’*

He didn’t care about a damn blizzard. Even the worst of them didn’t seem too bad in the city, anyway. The longest he’d ever seen anything shut down around here was maybe twenty-four hours . . .

Turning a thoughtful eye to the skies, he blinked as the first fat flakes of snow landed on him. Even as he stood still, they fell thicker and heavier. That got him moving.

Hurrying away from the small store, he grimaced. Roughly fifteen blocks from where he needed to be . . .

All around him, people were scurrying to get wherever they were going, like rats running from the light. Kurt hunched his shoulders forward to block some of the wind and hastened his step as he plunged forward. The temperature was dropping; he could feel it.

By the time he reached the facility on the outskirts of the city, he was damn near freezing. Stepping inside was a bit of a shock to his system, and even though he knew well enough that Harlan tended to keep the place hellaciously cold, it was still welcoming and more than warm enough in comparison to the outdoors.

Letting out a deep breath, he reshouldered his knapsack as he headed for the elevator.

“Evening, Doc,” one of the guards—Tony, according to his clearance badge—said as he stepped out of the security room. “News said that we’re in for a helluva storm,” he remarked almost jovially as he pressed the locking panel beside the door to secure it.

“It’s already started,” Kurt muttered.

“Aww, shit. I was hoping it’d hold off till I got home,” he confessed. “Have a good one.”

Kurt didn’t reply as he continued on his way.

The rest of the trip to the basement was uneventful, blessedly devoid of doctors, and by the time he reached the holding area, his toes were throbbing with his pulse as the numbness wore off. When he stepped into the room, though, he wasn’t greeted by the sight of the little demon. With a frown, he dropped the knapsack on the desk and turned around just in time to see the legion of security guards escort her into the room.

They seemed relieved to see him, and they left her there, wrists and ankles shackled together, as they made their hasty departures. Kurt narrowed his eyes as he stared at her, and she ducked her head, unwilling to look him in the eye. Hair lopped off unevenly, a long, angry-looking welt that started at her knee and disappeared under the dirty smock, he opened his mouth to ask her what had happened to her, but snapped his mouth closed before the question came out.

Making a face at his own perceived stupidity, Kurt stepped closer to unfasten the shackles around her wrists before propelling her toward the bathroom with a brusque little shove.

She stumbled but caught herself—he'd forgotten that she was wearing the short-chained shackles—but she went willingly enough. By the time she'd returned from the bathroom, she seemed to be in slightly better spirits. Crawling into her cage, she stuck her feet out so that he could unfasten the shackles. He did it, then closed the cage door as Harlan wandered into the room.

“Ah, good. She's behaving herself again, is she?”

Springing a moment to glance over his shoulder at the fat old bastard, Kurt shrugged indifferently. “Was it misbehaving?” he countered, deliberately referring to the little demon as ‘it’ though mostly just to irk the researcher.

Harlan shrugged and pasted on one of his broadcast-news smiles. “Well, she had an incident and shoved Dr. Peterson . . . He's all right, but I think it took him by surprise. Anyway, just keep an eye on her. I think she's up to something.”

Kurt very nearly rolled his eyes at the censure in the doctor's tone. As though he had ever actually let his guard down around her . . . Damn fools, the lot of them. “Oh, absolutely,” he replied dryly. “Thanks for the warning. I'll be sure to watch out for any signs of trouble, yup.”

Harlan seemed a little confused by Kurt's acerbic answer, but he nodded at length and turned to leave. Kurt watched him go out of the corner of his eye and snorted. "Fucking moron," he muttered under his breath before turning his attention back to the little demon, that had scrunched herself up into the corner of the cage with what could only be described as a sullen expression on her face. "Going to tell me why you freaked out?"

"No, I don't think I want to," she replied tightly.

Why didn't that surprise him? Letting out a deep breath, he let his hands dangle between his knees as he eyed the little demon carefully. "Tell me anyway," he commanded.

"He's not a scientist!" she blurted hotly, her cheeks blossoming in indignant color. "He's a dirty, disgusting, foul, putrid piece of work, and I'm not sorry for pushing him away!"

Kurt's frown deepened as he continued to stare at her. An idea of what had happened was starting to form in his mind, and if what he suspected were true, he wasn't entirely certain that he could blame her for doing what she'd done. "What did he do?" he asked quietly.

She shrugged, ears flattening at the perceived censure in his tone. "Maybe I don't have any rights, but I don't think that he should be allowed to . . . to touch me wherever he wants, either."

And that spoke volumes as far as Kurt was concerned. With a terse nod, he pushed himself to his feet and strode over to the desk, somehow needing to distance himself from her though he was hard pressed to understand why he felt that way.

Her chart read 'regeneration testing', which, he supposed, explained the shoddy job of cutting her hair, and while he knew damn well that he'd done the same thing; knew

damn well that it would grow back without any real problems, Kurt couldn't help but wonder what was coming next . . .

The thing was, he knew that the other demons he'd brought in—those monsters who were barely cognizant enough to realize anything save for an inner bloodlust that Kurt could feel—hadn't lasted long in this place, and he was beginning to wonder exactly how much actual research had been done to any of them, given the circumstances. In truth, this was the first time he'd actually seen a demon once he'd delivered it, and while he knew enough to know that none of the others he'd brought in were still here, he didn't know particulars about what had ultimately happened to them, he knew well enough that they were dead.

Gaze shifting to the side, he found his eyes once more trained on the little demon. She was still pouting, wasn't she? Still very upset over whatever had transpired, and considering that he had a good notion as to what really had happened, he couldn't help but think that she had a right to feel that way . . .

*'Right?' his conscience spoke up suddenly. 'Since when do those things have any kind of right to anything at all?'*

Wincing inwardly at the deadly accuracy of that voice, he forced his gaze away as the sickened feeling in the pit of his stomach started to gnaw at him. What the hell was wrong with him? Feeling sorry for a creature like that . . .? He knew well enough what those things were capable of, didn't he? Knew damn well that it didn't matter what kind of package she wrapped herself up in, the bottom line was the same: always the same. She was a demon, no matter what kind of name she claimed. And demons only understood destruction, bloodlust, and carnage. As such, they deserved to be destroyed.

Didn't they . . .?

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“Zelig-san, have you heard from Griffin and Ryomaru?”

Cain turned and nodded as Mikio Izayoi slipped into the office with a nondescript black slim-file in his hands. “Yeah . . . Seems they tracked down the old mountain man, but according to them, he’s a little . . . crazy.”

Mikio nodded, his expression registering his disappointment though he didn’t look like he had really expected any different. “So he didn’t have spiritual powers, after all . . .”

“Oh, no, he did. Griffin said that he knew they weren’t human right off the bat, but . . .”

“But?”

Cain rubbed a hand over his face as he plopped down in the chair behind the desk. “He, uh, thought they were fairies . . .”

Mikio blinked in surprise, his left ear twitching madly as he absently reached up to fiddle with it. “Fa . . .? O-oh . . .”

Cain nodded as he dug a cigarette out of his pocket. “Yes, fairies. The two of them walked him to the nearest town—he was out on a whiskey run, I guess—but they weren’t able to get much more out of him. Neither of them think that he had anything to do with Samantha’s disappearance. In fact, Ryomaru said that he was pretty sure that the old guy couldn’t have found his way out of a plastic bag—I’m pretty sure those were his exact words, anyway . . .”

Mikio pressed his lips together as though he were trying not to find humor in the situation, but given that Cain couldn't help but find it oddly amusing, he couldn't rightly fault the young man for thinking so, too. "I . . . I doubt Ryomaru appreciated that . . ."

Cain cleared his throat delicately, hiding a vague half smile behind the cigarette. "Probably no more than he appreciated being called a woman . . ."

"The . . . the old man thought . . .? Oh . . . Did Ryomaru hit him?"

Cain finally chuckled. "Actually, no."

"W-wow . . ." Mikio spent a moment mulling over that before he shook himself slightly and made a face. "So we're back to square one."

Cain's amusement died with that remark, too, and he nodded slowly. "So it would seem."

Mikio let out a deep breath and flipped the slim-file open. Grimacing at whatever the file contained, he hesitantly leaned forward and handed it to Cain.

It was the mock-up of a missing person flyer with a smiling image of Samantha situated in the center. Below the large picture were three smaller ones, each from different angles and different distances. Below those were her statistics and a few contact numbers to call with information. Cain's gut reaction was to say no, to insist that the very idea was ludicrous. But Mikio had done what Cain understood should be done, hadn't he?

"I never wanted to go public with this," Cain ventured, his voice throaty, raw.

Mikio nodded. "Me, either."

Repressing the initial surge of irritation, he reminded himself that Mikio really was trying to do what he felt needed to be done, reminded himself that as hard as it was for him to look at such a clinical presentation, that it had to have been just as hard if not worse for Mikio to create.

I've been checking into it, and if we use Uncle's name . . . If we use his name, we can have this out in every major news outlet within hours."

Cain nodded slowly, staring at the small calendar on his desk. All the pictures for the different months were images created by his children as they'd grown up. Gin had compiled them into a calendar and had presented it to him last year. Frowning at the date, he shook his head. One week until Christmas, but it didn't feel at all like it . . .

"Let me talk to the others," he said at length. "I don't know how Kichiro will feel about this, but . . ."

Mikio nodded, understanding Cain's dilemma. As much as he might think that putting Samantha's face out there would be for the best, the level of impersonalization that always seemed to accompany such a thing was difficult to reconcile. "I just can't help but think that maybe someone's seen her . . ."

Cain nodded, smashing out the cigarette in the tin ashtray on his desk. "I know," he replied. "I know . . ."

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Plopping down on the high stool behind the counter with the row of monitors, Kurt frowned as he reached out to touch the control panel, his fingertip hesitating just over the master switch.

It had been bothering him all night, and as much as he was loathe to admit it, the little demon's strained silence was strange.

Pressing the button, he blinked as the monitors lit up, one by one. The three on the far end were changing displays of the security cameras located around the building—at this time of night, nothing to worry about. The one on the other end seemed to be the terminal screen, and the last one—the one directly before him, was caught up in a stagnant blue.

Pulling the keyboard shelf out, he read through the lines of text. It was a Marxim system: one often used in areas dealing with restricted information because it had a higher level of encryption. Most of the computers that ran it within a network, however, tended to be allowed certain levels of access. Kurt only hoped that this one had an open enough connection to get to the data he wanted.

“Enter access pass,” he mumbled, reading the screen. Glancing at the clipboard lying beside him on the desk, he typed in the words, “*Project Demon.*”

That worked, and Kurt brought up the main directories. Each one was presented as a cluster, and the top level clusters all seemed to be fairly straightforward. Clicking on the one called, ‘documentary’, he wasn’t surprised when the file opened, showing him list after list of daily video files. Some of them had locked icons on them, and he figured that if the system followed standard protocol, then the older archives had already been automatically written to some sort of hard backup, probably encode sticks. That was all right since he really wasn’t interested in the older archives, anyway. No the one he wanted was the one from earlier during the day, and that one was simple enough to find.

*‘Archive 12.22.2070?’*

Kurt typed in ‘confirmed’ and waited for the video to load.

It only took a few seconds for the video to buffer, and the blue screen flashed once, twice, then opened the file. Boring stuff, for the most part: Harlan murmuring their plans for the day into the ear mic that was set on 'record'. He and his cronies watching as security guards fastened the little demon to the neck collar and stints jutting out of the wall. Today's experimentation had obviously not been of too much concern to her, and while he could discern a certain wariness about her, she seemed calm, overall.

Arms outstretched, feet parted wider than her shoulders, neck secured to the chain that was anchored in the beams above her, she couldn't have done much from that position, could she?

With a grunt, he hit the forward button, scanning through the video since they didn't seem to be doing much to her at that point.

Stopping when Harlan stepped in front of the camera, Kurt frowned and backed up the video. "Here, Dr. Peterson . . . I need to make a few calls . . . my wife wants me to see if we can't get her parents into the Restaurant de Scion . . ."

Peterson took the earpiece and slipped it over his ear with a broad grin. "No problem, chief . . . I'll carry on without you."

Harlan moved out of the picture, the sound of his heavy footsteps moving away. Kurt glanced over at the cage. The demon hadn't moved and seemed to be sleeping—just as well, he figured, plugging in a set of earphones and positioning them on his head.

The bastard actually grinned and winked at the camera, rattling around with something that was just out of view. When he crossed over to the little demon again, though, Kurt saw the scissors in his hand. "Now be still . . . this won't hurt a bit," he said in an exultant sort of tone. To her credit, she somehow managed to keep a completely blank, even somewhat vague expression on her face as he snatched the length of her hair in his

hand and pulled firmly, forcing her to turn her head. He wasn't exactly cruel in the way he handled her, no, and certainly that couldn't have been what had set her off . . .

Peterson pulled his hand down a little and lopped off her hair with a loud 'snick' of the scissors, letting the silvery strands fall onto the floor as a little laugh escaped him.

She didn't react as he set the scissors aside and moved in closer, quickly tugging the snaps on her shoulders open—the snaps that held her smock up. She didn't even blink as it slipped down her body, only to gather around her knees that were spread too far for the smock to pass. With a chuckle, Peterson bent down, retrieved a long lock of her hair off the floor and using it to trail up and down the center of her body, between her breasts down to her belly button and back up again. She had her face turned to the side; Kurt couldn't see it, but Peterson, the bastard . . .

“Oh, you like it, don't you? See? You're not so different from a real woman, are you?”

The little demon didn't move.

He toyed with her a while longer, and with every passing second that he forced himself to watch the tape, the more disgusted Kurt became. That damned Peterson . . . Flicking the strands of hair over her nipples, reaching down with his free hand, fondling her between her legs . . . the sound of the bastard's heaving breathing was the only sound in the audio file—the little demon said nothing, did nothing.

Kurt was almost ready to turn the tape off—too disgusted to watch any more—when the idiot finally stepped back with a harsh laugh. “You want to touch me, don't you?” he asked in a ragged tone. “You'll be a good little girl, right?”

And all he could do was shake his head when the damn fool reached over and unlocked her wrist. What happened next was nothing more than a blur of motion as her hand shot out. Peterson screamed and flew back across the room out of the view of the camera.

The little demon just stood, staring, her free hand pressed against her lips, her eyes wide with a horrified sort of expression. Moments later, the thunder of footsteps preceded the entrance of the security guards. They rushed toward her—one of them smacked her thigh with a bobby stick—manhandling her as they forced her into the wrist restraints.

Kurt narrowed his eyes as he rewound the video, slowing it down to see if he could discern the actual attack. He couldn't be sure—the image was awfully blurry—but he thought that maybe she'd only slapped the doctor, albeit hard.

With a sigh, he hit the main power button, shutting off the system without bothering to do it the right way. The entire thing left a bitterness in him, one that he neither understood nor wanted to try to . . .

It bothered him, damn it. He'd told them numerous times that she could be dangerous, hadn't he? He'd warned them about letting her have even an inch, and yet . . .

And yet he couldn't bring himself to be irritated with her for it, either. What he'd seen had sickened him, hadn't it? So exactly what had she felt at the time?



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
Damn fool ...

## Chapter 28

### A chiles

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The strangest sound awoke Samantha, and she blinked and pushed herself up on her elbows as she tried to make sense of it. It took a moment for her to place it, and when she did, she frowned. Had it really been that long since she'd heard a telephone ring? '*Maybe . . .*' she thought with a marked scowl. That was a little more disturbing than she could credit.

"Lo," the taijya mumbled, having obviously just woken up, too. Samantha glanced at the clock as her frown deepened. It was almost nine o'clock—much later than he normally stayed . . .

"What?" he demanded sharply. He must have been able to wake up faster than she could. "Oh, no . . . No, no, no . . . I'm leaving; that's what I'm doing."

That got her attention quickly enough. Rolling over onto her stomach, she propped her cheeks on her fists and wished that she could hear what the other person was saying. He was too far away for her to do that, unfortunately.

"Absolutely not," he insisted. "Just . . . hold on . . ."

Dropping the receiver with a loud clatter, he stalked out of the room without a second glance. Samantha sat up, her ears flicking as she tried in vain to catch any sounds that might be coming from that phone.

Ten minutes later, the taijya stomped into the room once more, his expression completely foreboding as he swiped up the receiver once more. “You’d better find a way to get here,” he warned. “I’m leaving as soon as you do.”

He listened a few minutes then uttered a terse snort before slamming the receiver down again. Heaving a long, drawn out sigh, he shook his head and draped his hands on his hips. “Damn it,” he muttered, rubbing his hands over his face as he paced the floor. “That just figures . . .”

“Um,” Samantha interrupted, unsure if she really ought to say anything at all but unable to help herself, either. “I . . . I need to go to the bathroom,” she pointed out.

He started to open his mouth, likely to grumble at her since he’d started leaving her cage open while he was awake so that she could do those things herself, but he snapped it closed when he realized that he’d locked her in last night just before he’d laid down.

Letting out a deep breath, he crossed the floor and opened the cage, wiggling his fingers to get her to stick out her legs. She did, and he made quick work of fastening the long-chained shackles around her ankles.

She took her time in the bathroom, mostly because she was still getting used to the idea that he really would allow her to go by herself now. He’d muttered under his breath that it was a pain to cater to her, and while she really didn’t doubt that in the least, she had to wonder if that really was the only reason for the concession. Then again, she wasn’t about to second-guess him on it, either. It was amazing how much of her pride it allowed her, and even without a door, she couldn’t help but be pleased by it.

She sighed as she took her time washing her hands and face—that was the other nice thing about the bathroom. It didn’t have a shower, but it did have a hot water tap, and while the soft soap in the clinical dispenser left a lot to be desired, at least it was soap, and that, in Samantha’s mind, was good enough for her. Wetting down a coarse paper towel,

she used it to wash her vital parts—something else that greatly improved her mood. Even if she couldn't have a full bath or shower, that was better than nothing, and she wasn't about to complain.

After yesterday, she'd been almost afraid that the taijya would confine her to her cage again. She knew that the taijya thought that she was dangerous, after all, and she knew damn well that she had inadvertently made the white-coat bleed. The thing that she found most disturbing, though, was that . . . well, she didn't really feel sorry for it, either.

It was frightening, that. She'd reacted solely on instinct when he'd unfastened her wrist. She'd seen it in his eyes: he hadn't given a damn whether or not anyone caught him, didn't care what he was doing. He really would have raped her if given the chance. That he was stupid enough to unfasten one of her hands . . .

She'd only meant to slap him; really she had. Her claws had grazed his skin, though, and she'd been horrified enough by that after the fact. Still, she couldn't say that she regretted her actions. Had he honestly thought that she'd just stand there and let him do whatever he wanted to her?

*'And he thinks I'm a monster,'* she thought with a wry smile as she blotted her face dry with a paper towel. How naïve had she been, really? Believing that all humans were good . . . she had thought that not too long ago, and now . . .

Now she didn't know anymore. No, she didn't think that all humans were bad or even that most of them were, but she was starting to comprehend the truth that humans possessed the innate ability to be just as evil, just as malignant, as any youkai could be. Having been raised around such a loving family, she realized, had sheltered her from a lot of ugly truths about the world, in general, and while she still wanted to believe that humans were, on the whole, good, she had to accept that there were some who weren't so nice, so kind, so benevolent . . .

Those white-coats . . . The more she had to deal with them, the more she understood that some humans really did believe that they had the right to inflict their beliefs upon everyone else; that to be different in their eyes was some sort of sin. They honestly saw her as no better than a wild animal—maybe worse, actually. After all, would they treat their pets as horribly as they treated her?

“I think you’ve been in here long enough,” the tajjya remarked rather dryly as he appeared in the doorway, leaning on the frame and crossing his arms over his chest as he lifted an eyebrow and shot her a droll stare.

“I was washing my face,” she informed him haughtily. “But I’m done now.”

“Good,” he replied, pushing himself away from the frame and stepping back. “In your cage.”

She made a face but started to move. “Are the white-coats on their way?” she asked, unable to keep the hint of disgust out of her voice.

He shook his head. “Nope. They aren’t coming in today.”

She couldn’t help it when she stopped abruptly and shot him what could only be described as a hopeful look. “Really?”

He snorted, scratching at the back of his head. “There’re about three feet of snow outside with more dropping every minute and drifts up to the top of the doors.”

“Snow?” she echoed, her eyes lighting up at the mention of it. “Oh . . .”

He nodded toward the cage, and she sighed but started moving again. Closing the door behind her, he retrieved her water dish and refilled it without a word before slipping it back inside the cage.

“But you left the cage open last night,” she reminded him in a plaintive voice.

The taijya stood up and started to walk away. “Yeah, and now I need to use the bathroom, so I guess you can stay there till I’m done.”

Samantha snapped her mouth closed on the complaints that had been forming on her tongue, and she giggled. “Ah . . . sorry . . .”

He shook his head and kept walking. Samantha busied herself, folding her blanket and drinking the water he’d given her. Another little laugh escaped her at the prospect of evading the white-coats for the day. It seemed like a holiday, didn’t it? An unexpected gift . . .

It didn’t take him very long, and when he strode out of the bathroom, Samantha was a little surprised to see that his hair was wet. She pressed her lips together. The first time she’d seen him, the back of his hair was really short though the front was a little long and unruly. Now, though, the back was growing out a little, as though he had forgotten to get it cut or something. She rather liked the effect . . .

“You know, I’d love to see the snow again,” she ventured as he pressed the lock release and pulled the door open again.

“Snow’s a nuisance,” he replied with a shrug. “Damn it, I’m starving . . .”

“*You’re* starving?” she countered as she crawled out of the cage. “What are the odds you’ll let me have a shower today?”

“Well, you do stink,” he allowed rather acerbically.

She snorted indelicately, her cheeks pinking as she shot him a baleful glower. “Seriously . . . you don’t have a girlfriend, do you?”

He stared her for a moment, violet eyes oddly bright, and he shrugged. “Of course I do. Ten of them. They’re all mute with gargantuan breasts, and they love me and want to bear my children.”

“Oh, very funny. You don’t have time . . .” Trailing off, Samantha frowned. “*Did he just . . .?*”

“Of course I don’t,” he muttered with a shake of his head. “I’m too busy playing babysitter for a little brat demon.”

She opened and closed her mouth a couple of times like a fish out of water. “*B-brat?*” she squeaked.

“Yes, brat,” he reiterated. “Now stop being a pest, will you? I’m trying to think.”

“I’m a pest, too?”

“Yes, a pesky brat . . . or a bratty pest . . . whichever . . . both apply . . .”

Scrunching up her face in a marked scowl, she shook her head and watched as he dug into his pocket. He pulled out a nondescript keychain—actually just a simple silver loop with keys dangling from it—a slightly bent subway token, and a bit of grayish lint. He heaved a sigh and shoved everything but the lint back into his pocket as he strode toward the desk and grabbing his coat. It didn’t take him long to check those pockets, too, but he frowned when he pulled an unmarked amber pill bottle free. Turning it over in his hand, it took him a moment to figure out what it was, but suddenly, he looked at her, his eyes narrowing then widening as he tossed the bottle lightly and caught it in his palm.

“Little demon . . .”

“What?”

He shook the bottle. “What are these?”

Samantha started to tell him that she didn’t know then stopped. “Where did you . . .?”

He shrugged. “You had them when I caught you.”

*‘The scent tabs . . .’*

She wasn’t entirely sure what she ought to tell him. He must have seen it on her face, her indecision, because he snorted. “Don’t lie to me,” he warned.

She shifted just a little. Then again, what did it matter if he knew? Those pills weren’t really the big problem, anyway, were they? “They’re scent-tabs,” she confessed slowly.

He didn’t look like he understood what she meant. “Meaning what?”

“Meaning,” she said with a shrug, “they change the way I smell . . . makes it harder for other youkai to find me.”

“And why would you need that?”

Samantha stepped away, wandered around a bit restlessly. “I’m a hunter,” she whispered, unsure as to what, exactly, he’d say about that.

Shaking his head, he stared at her. She could feel his gaze locked on her. “What does that mean? A hunter?”

“It means that I hunt youkai . . . youkai who break the laws—our laws.”

“What? Like a cop?”

Smiling a little wanly, she nodded. “I guess you could say that.”

He snorted, and his voice was thick with sarcasm. “Right.”

She sighed, wrapping a long strand of hair around her finger as she paced the floor. “Youkai have their own laws . . . like hiding what we are.”

That earned her a significant scowl. “You hunt your own kind for not hiding what they are?”

“No.”

“Then why would you possibly hunt others like you?” he asked, his tone clipped, tight as his irritation spiked.

Biting her lip, she considered not telling him more. He didn’t seem as though he was interested in hearing it, anyway. Even still, she was what she was, and dancing around it . . . there simply wasn’t a point, was there? “Youkai aren’t allowed to hurt humans,” she said quietly.

“. . . What?”

She heard the deadly calm in his voice but didn’t stop to think about it. “Ones that hurt a lot of humans are hunted. It’s partly so that we aren’t discovered, but it’s also meant to protect humans since we’re stronger . . .”

“Is that so?”

Blinking at the hostility in his voice, Samantha tilted her head to the side and shot him a quizzical glance. “Yes . . .”

He didn’t respond right away, but she could feel the sudden change in his mood, the overwhelming anger—*hatred*—that boiled up inside him. “Shut up. Just shut up. Your kind . . . your kind are nothing but monsters—*demons!* Your kind only kill; that’s all they do, so just shut the hell up, will you? I’m done listening to the likes of you.”

Shaking her head as she tried to make sense of the taijya’s outburst, she could only watch as he stomped away, snatching up the book that he’d been reading the night before and summarily ignoring her though she had little doubt that he knew exactly what she was doing.

Maybe though . . .

Biting back a sigh, Samantha crawled into the cage and wrapped her arms around her knees. She’d be better off to keep from drawing too much attention from him for a while, she figured. He was far too agitated for her liking.

With a heavy sigh, she ducked her head. It had been nice, hadn’t it? Until she’d made the comments about hunting, that was . . .

*“Your kind only kills; that’s all they do . . .”*

Grimacing inwardly, she shook her head. His words . . . what was it about those words . . .? His secret was hidden beneath those words, wasn’t it? If she understood that, then maybe . . .

Her chin snapped up suddenly as her gaze unconsciously sought him out. That was it, wasn’t it? It made sense—perfect sense . . . Someone he’d loved . . .

Youkai had killed someone he'd loved . . .

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*'You know, you did see her do it.'*

Ignoring the voice in his head that kept pestering him about his harshness with the little demon earlier, Kurt turned the page of his book and pretended that he couldn't hear her babbling. Besides that, he wasn't entirely certain what he had seen that night; not really. Everything had happened so quickly, and while he had seen her take down the other demon, he couldn't bring himself to believe what she'd said, the day before, either.

Going on day two of being stuck in here with that demon . . . It was almost more than he could stomach.

Oh, she'd been quiet after his outburst the day before—on her best behavior, or so it would seem. Today, however, was an entirely different story. Kurt rolled his eyes and kept his gaze trained on the book he was pretending to read. If she didn't shut up soon, he was going to snap, he just knew it . . .

*'It's . . . convenient,'* he thought with a decisive snort, his mind slipping back to the little demon's assertion that she had been 'hunting' that other one. *'Too convenient . . .'*

It was, wasn't it? Easy for her to say that she was going after a demon that had hurt humans, but really . . . It just wasn't something that he could believe, was it? He'd seen too many things—way too many things—ugly things; horrid things, and her claim . . . It had ticked him off, and why not? Trying to put a benevolent face on those beasts was just a little more than he could tolerate . . .

They didn't know, did they? They didn't understand what it was like to have a family, to love them, to think that his entire life would be that comfortable; that secure; and then to have it all jerked away in the blink of an eye . . . It was something that he knew a little too well, didn't he? If those things just understood . . .

But they didn't; they *couldn't*. If they did, he wouldn't be where he was now, would he?

And it was something that he had never truly been able to reconcile. His father . . . His father had been able to see demons, too, hadn't he? He'd been able to see them, and he'd hidden it. He probably would have continued to hide it, too, had it not been for Kurt. Kurt couldn't remember a time when he hadn't been able to see them, and Kurt hadn't realized that he wasn't supposed to, and he certainly hadn't understood the idea that he shouldn't let anyone know, either . . .

Old Granger had said once that Kurt was the reason that everyone else had died. Those monsters were after him: the boy who could see them. He was a threat, or so he'd been told, and everyone else . . .? They'd just been in the way . . .

So by rights, he ought to hate her, shouldn't he? He ought to despise everything about her, and while he could say that he didn't trust her, he couldn't say . . .

*'Damn it . . .'*

"A big, fat steak—rare—with a baked potato and chocolate cake for dessert . . ." She slumped against the cage—she was sitting on the floor outside it—and heaved a longsuffering sigh since the odds that she'd get the aforementioned steak were slim and none. "Or Maine lobster, just caught and cooked fresh . . . with melted butter and a twist of lemon, and—"

"And you do realize that a lobster is related to a cockroach, right?"

The little demon just laughed at him. “Just because they’re both arthropods doesn’t mean that they’re *that* similar.”

He shot her a quick look, grudgingly surprised that she actually knew that word. “All the same, they’re a little too closely related for my liking.”

She wrinkled her nose and shrugged offhandedly. “Well, I suppose I’d eat one if it tasted like lobster.”

“Ugh,” Kurt grunted, shaking his head. “That’s disgusting.”

“I didn’t say I’d really eat one,” she shot back.

“Close enough.”

“All right, then, if you could have anything to eat, what would you ask for?”

Letting out a defeated breath, he sat back and crossed his arms over his chest. He’d ignored her for the better portion of the morning, at least until she’d started whining about being hungry. After about ten minute of her incessant chatter, he’d told her that she apparently didn’t know how to shut up, to which she had simply informed him that she was trying to get her mind off of being hungry . . . by talking about food.

“Ever stop to think that maybe—*just maybe*—talking about food is only making it worse?” he prodded.

She shook her head and waved her hands. “Oh, I know; I know! Why don’t you just order a pizza?”

“And how would it get here? That is, assuming that anyone is actually open, which I doubt. The whole city is shut down.”

She made a face and mumbled a little growl of frustration. “But I’m *starving* . . .!”

“You went for days and days without eating, and now you’re whining about having to go without for one or two days?” he shot back with an incredulous shake of his head. “You’re a little pathetic, aren’t you?”

“I’m smaller than you,” she pointed out. “That means that I get hungry faster than you do.”

Kurt heaved a sigh. “I swear that the next time they tell me that there’s going to be a blizzard, I’ll make damn sure I call in sick.”

It didn’t really surprise him when she giggled then groaned as she leaned over, clutching her stomach in an entirely melodramatic way.

She’d already had her makeshift shower, too, having used almost an entire bag of the soap dispenser refills. He’d read his book while she’d fussed with the hose. In the end, though, she’d stubbornly refused to ask for assistance—until she began shaking like a damn leaf since she didn’t have the common sense to dry off with something before struggling into the clean smock he’d tossed in her face. So he’d gotten her another one along with a pack of paper towels so that she could dry her hair a little. Funny thing, though. He’d offered to cut it off for her since it’d grow back, anyway. She wasn’t impressed with his offer in the least.

“Seared tuna . . . or a huge bowl of ramen . . .” she muttered.

Kurt rolled his eyes. As if he weren't hungry enough, as it was, her incessant chatter was only serving to make him hungrier, damn it. "Talking about it isn't really going to make you any less hungry, little demon," he pointed out reasonably.

She made a face as she crawled into the cage to retrieve her blanket. "Are you sure you don't have any money?"

"You saw me check my pockets. Twice," he reminded her as he checked them for a third time. The only money he had on him was a twenty dollar bill, and that just wasn't any help at all, given the circumstances.

"Why don't you carry more change?" she demanded since she knew as well as he did that there were vending machines just down the hallway.

"I would have had change if I didn't have to buy a cheeseburger for you on my way in here," he muttered.

"A *chee-eeseburger* . . ." she sighed happily.

Letting out a deep breath, Kurt shook his head and stomped back over to the desk once more.

"Roast beef . . . or a pulled pork sandwich . . ."

"I'm ignoring you now," he rattled in a monotone.

She was quiet for all of thirty seconds. "Can I ask you something?" she finally ventured.

"If I say no, will that stop you?"

“Hmm . . . how come you can see us? I mean, I know you’ve got ho—spiritual powers, but it’s still unusual, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” he muttered tersely as he dug a pad of Post-It notes followed by a small glass bottle of ink from his knapsack.

“Is anyone else in your family like you? Able to see us, I mean?” she went on.

Kurt shot to his feet, sending the chair careening backward with an obnoxious scrape as he stalked toward the doorway. The barrier was still activated—it always was whenever she was out, and even if he had a mind to force her into the cage, he was in too much of a hurry to do it. He needed to get away from her before he lost his temper.

He just didn’t like to talk about his family, and even if she didn’t know that, she really didn’t have a right to ask him things like that, did she? It wasn’t like he was there to visit, anyway. He was there to do a job so that he could collect his money.

Even still . . .

He hated when anyone asked questions about his family; it didn’t matter who it was. That it was her, however, was even more than he could tolerate, and yet . . . Rubbing his hands over his face in an infinitely weary way, he grimaced. Common sense told him that she wasn’t really trying to tick him off. Too bad he had very little room in his brain to listen to common sense.

The anger deep down just kept growing—spiraling up and outward like a thick, dense fog. Scowling at the damned snack machines, he didn’t think about what he was doing too deeply. Reaching out, he smashed his hand over the lock and released a surge of energy. The machine shuddered and groaned as the lock gave way, and he blinked as the door popped open with a soft hiss.

Well, it certainly wasn't high-class cuisine, by any means, but it *was* food . . .

Grabbing an armload of different snacks, he strode back down the hallway toward the containment area once more. Strangely, his irritation had been released with the surge of energy, hadn't it? He was still a little irked, but at least he didn't feel like he was going to explode anymore. Then again, the idea of eating something was a welcome enough distraction, he supposed . . .

And he wasn't entirely surprised to find the little demon huddling in her cage—her normal tendency when she perceived that she'd managed to piss him off. She remained silent but he didn't miss the way her ears twitched as he crossed the room with the pilfered bounty and dropped it onto the desk.

"I . . . I thought you didn't have any money," she finally ventured in a timid sort of way.

Kurt shrugged indifferently as he ripped open a bag of plain potato chips. "I didn't," he replied simply enough.

She digested that for a moment before she sat up a little straighter. "Then how did you get those?" she demanded.

He didn't miss the hint of censure in her tone, either. "I have my ways," he muttered around a mouthful of chips.

Her gaze turned even more accusing; he could feel it boring into the back of his head. "You broke into the vending machine, didn't you?" she finally asked.

He turned around slowly, regarding her with undisguised amusement as he reached back and grabbed a bag of corn chips. "Want one?" he countered.

Her cheeks blossomed in indignant color as her gaze brightened and she sat back. “W—I—No! And you shouldn’t be eating that, either! I can’t believe that you’d do something like—You realize, don’t you, that breaking and entering is a *felony!*”

He shrugged and dropped the bag of corn chips on the desk again. “Suit yourself, little demon, but don’t come crying to me that you’re hungry when I offered . . .”

She snorted indelicately and crossed her arms over her chest. “Keh!” she scoffed. “I don’t want your ill-gotten gains . . . Is . . . is that chocolate?”

Kurt didn’t pause as he ripped open a Hershey’s bar and bit into it. “Uh-huh,” he garbled. “Too bad you’re a dog.”

She opened her mouth then snapped it closed as another surge of color washed into her cheeks. Uttering a terse little growl, she dug into the bowl behind her, scooping up a handful of the dog food that had been sitting in there with her for at least three days. One by one, she chucked them at him, and while the flying kibble didn’t faze him, the absolute irritation on her features was a little difficult to ignore.

“You sure you don’t want some?” he asked, grabbing and waving the corn chips at her once more.

Her immediate answer was a barrage of kibbles.

He ripped open the bag and pulled one out, whipping it at her in retaliation. She caught it in her mouth and chewed it thoroughly before heaving defeated sigh and crawling out of the cage, her blanket wrapped around her and looking entirely like Yoda from *Star Wars* . . .

“Thought you didn’t want them,” he couldn’t help goading as she stomped over to him and swiped the bag out of his hand.

"I'm eating under duress," she informed him as she stuffed a few chips into her mouth. "You're a very bad man, taijya . . . You know, someone makes their living off of those machines, and you're probably costing him!"

He blinked and stared at her as he dropped an empty bag into the trash can and reached for another. "You'd think that I'd feel bad, wouldn't you?" he ventured at length. "And yet . . . I don't."

She heaved a sigh and shook her head but continued to eat the corn chips. "I am starting to wonder whether or not you really have a soul," she informed him.

He rolled his eyes. "Weren't you the one who kept barking and barking because you were hungry?"

She shot him what should have been a quelling glance but just wasn't. "I was not barking," she retorted haughtily.

"Oh? So what do you call it, then?"

She reached for a chocolate bar. He was faster. "It's bad for dogs," he pointed out as he tucked the candy bar into his pocket.

"But I'm not a dog!" she protested. "And even if I was, you don't need it either . . . it'll go straight to your love handles, you know."

"My . . . what . . .?" he growled, unable to staunch the indignant color that infiltrated his features. "I don't have—"

She shot him a droll look and poked his side. He jerked away, pinning her with a fierce glower that just made her smile widen. "Knock that off!"

She clucked her tongue, giving him the distinct impression that she was, in fact, humoring him. “Well, it isn’t like you have a full-on beer-gut,” she pointed out in an entirely placating sort of way—the kind of tone that one used when dealing with a sulking child.

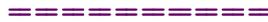
Kurt snorted very loudly and stomped over to grab the hose. Since she was out of the cage, he might as well wash it out. Turning it on with a vicious twist, Kurt snorted again. The little demon giggled, damn her.

*‘I don’t have love handles,’* he thought with a very loud grunt as he aimed the power hose at the cage.



**Author's Note**

Yoda and **Star Wars** belong to George Lucas.  
Because I needed to cheer me up today, I think I'll give y'all another chapter. E njoy!



**Final Thought from Kurt**

I don't have those ... Tch

## Chapter 29

### Intercession

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“Would you like something to drink? A cup of coffee, perhaps . . .?”

Kurt shook his head and stared at the old bastard, ignoring the thickly cushioned chair that Harlan had motioned to when he'd stepped into the office. Located on the third floor of the facility, Kurt had only actually been asked in there a handful of times. That he'd been invited up this time was more than enough to set little warning bells off in his head.

Damn it, he was tired, he was hungry, and he wanted a shower, though not necessarily in that order. Having spent the last couple days here, waiting until the snow had finally been cleared away enough to make travel possible once more, he was more than a little anxious to get the hell out of Dodge . . .

“Just tell me what you want,” Kurt said, blowing off the small talk since he knew damn well that there was absolutely no love loss between the two of them.

Harlan stood up and paced back and forth, fiddling with his left sleeve cuff, a nervous habit that Kurt knew well enough. Whatever Harlan wanted wasn't good, was it?

“Well, you see, we were thinking . . .”

Why did he get the distinct feeling that he wasn't going to like what 'they' had been thinking . . .? Kurt remained silent and waited.

Harlan cleared his throat and shot Kurt another of those fake smiles, as though he were trying to convince Kurt that he was harmless or some such other bit of nonsense. “We’d like you to capture another demon for us—one like her . . . but male.”

Kurt blinked. It took a minute for the ramifications of what the doctor was requesting to sink in. *‘Another . . .? A male . . .? What the hell do they need another— . . .?’* His eyes widened slightly as complete comprehension slowly dawned on him. *‘They want to . . .?’* Fu-u-u-uck . . .!’ Staring at the researcher, Kurt slowly shook his head. “You want to . . . breed them.”

“In order to get a full understanding of them, you see, it’s necessary for us to witness and document every aspect of their natures . . . Reproduction is crucial, of course.”

It was on the tip of Kurt’s tongue to tell Harlan that he could go straight to hell. Was the old bastard really so idiotic that he couldn’t see the problems presented in that area? Even if he could get the little demon to comply, Kurt wasn’t entirely convinced that any other he caught could or would cooperate, and if the two demons turned on each other . . .? Were they really willing to take that big a risk with her? After all, she was the first one that had complied with the testing thus far . . . If another demon were to become aggressive with her . . .

But he said nothing, simply staring at Harlan in a rather direct sort of way while giving no indication, one way or another about what should or should not be done. As far as he was concerned, there was no way in hell that he was going to do any such thing; not for Harlan, anyway.

Harlan must’ve figured out that he wasn’t going to get a reply right away, and he shrugged. “Well, you think on it,” he offered, sounding much more magnanimous than he ever actually was. “We figured that we should ask you first since you were able to capture her, right? I mean, that wasn’t a fluke, was it?”

He was deliberately trying to provoke him, and Kurt knew it. He brushed the comment aside, focusing instead on exactly what he was going to stop and pick up to eat before he headed to the apartment. Harlan really had to think that Kurt was a fool if he honestly believed that Kurt would agree. After all, even if he did go along—even if he didn't think that it was a really, really stupid idea—that'd just be shooting himself in the proverbial foot, wouldn't it? If they were able to breed them, what use would they have for him to catch them . . .?

“Did she . . . give you any trouble over the snow days?”

Kurt shrugged and turned to leave. “It was fine,” he replied tersely. “Stared at the wall kind of stupidly and didn't do a thing.”

He didn't miss the odd expression that passed over Harlan's features, but he didn't comment on it, either. He honestly didn't give a damn if the old bastard believed him or not. That said, though, he turned on his heel and stalked out of the office.

Smashing the elevator call button, only to discover that the damn thing was on the basement level, he uttered a frustrated grunt and stomped over to the enclosed stairwell. He needed to get out of there before he lost what was left of his temper, damn it . . . Breed those things . . .? Had they lost what little brainpower that they'd had?

*‘When hell freezes over . . . and maybe not even then . . .’*

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“Merry Christmas.”

Sesshoumaru didn't answer as Kagura slipped up beside him. In the quiet of the hotel suite, he had been looking over pages and pages of intelligence that simply wasn't getting them anywhere. It wasn't that the information they'd been able to gather was worthless, no, but it certainly wasn't actually helping them, either . . . "What are we missing, Kagura?" he murmured almost absently, his question directed more to himself than to his mate.

Kagura sighed and crossed the room, stepping behind her mate and rubbing his broad shoulders. "Sometimes I think that maybe we're a little too close to the situation," she confessed just as quietly. "As though we cannot see what is right in front of us because we aren't objective enough."

Sesshoumaru nodded. He'd thought as much, too. "How does one become 'objective' when it involves one's own child?"

Kagura let out a deep breath and shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine," she confessed.

"I believed we resolved this sort of trouble long, long ago . . ."

Kagura sighed and nodded before leaning down to kiss her mate's cheek. "I know this is hardly the time or place, but I did get you a Christmas gift," she said, stepping to the side and perching lightly on the edge of the desk beside him as she set a small package before him. Wrapped elegantly in gold foil with a simple bit of white ribbon, it glimmered in the light filtering through the window beside them.

He sat back, his golden eyes lifting to stare at her for a long moment as the barest hint of a smile shone through his expression. "Is that so?"

She nodded again as he reached for the package. True, Christmas wasn't exactly a Japanese holiday, but with as many family members as there were who did celebrate it,

Kagura and Sesshoumaru had taken to doing it, too. He tugged the end of the ribbon and let it fall onto the desk. The paper unfolded slightly since it was only held in place by the bow, and he opened the lid of the plain white box and chuckled quietly. “And what is this?” he asked as he lifted the single white feather—one of her feathers—from the carefully arranged bed of wine colored velvet.

Kagura smiled and took the feather from him, twirling it idly in her fingertips. “It’s just something that I wanted you to have,” she replied with a delicate shrug. “Besides . . . I hardly need this these days.”

He took the feather back, holding it lightly as he stared at it. “I have something for you, as well,” he admitted. Standing up, he strode over to the small table near the door and picked up a neatly wrapped package out of the stack. The rest of them were simply decoration placed there by the housekeeping staff. He had hidden her gift among them.

She opened the gift without a word and smiled at the fine platinum necklace inside. The pendant was a simple ruby about a half inch across cut into the shape of a heart. “It’s beautiful,” she told him, carefully pulling it out of the box. “Would you . . .?”

He took it from her as she slipped off the desk and turned around, her fingers touching it lightly as he draped it over her head and around her throat. He fastened it and let his hands fall on her shoulders as he leaned down and kissed the back of her neck. “I cannot tolerate this feeling of helplessness,” he said at length, holding her against him in an uncharacteristic show of affection.

Kagura sighed softly, leaning back against him, offering him her quiet support in a way that he would understand. “You’re doing the best that you can, aren’t you?”

“And that isn’t nearly good enough, Kagura.”

“Perhaps not in your eyes, but it is all that can be expected, Sesshoumaru.”

He didn't like her answer, and the expression on his face said as much.

"Come. I think you need to stop looking at all that, just for a while. Besides, Kagome's opened up Zelig's house in Wake Forest to cook Christmas dinner. She does not presume that everyone will join us, but they should stop by when they can." Leading the way out of the study, Kagura let out a deep breath. "Samantha would not want us to forego the season."

He nodded. As much as the idea of taking the time to sit down to a family dinner when half of that family was here and the other in Maine and back in Japan, he understood, and maybe this day was more for Samantha than it was for anyone else.

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"I thought I'd find you in here."

Kichiro didn't turn around at the sound of his mother's voice. "How's dinner?" he asked, hearing the perfunctory tone in his voice and loathing it.

"It'll be done soon," she assured him. "Did you . . . did you send the emails . . .?"

Kichiro nodded once without turning away from the window that overlooked the immaculate snow that covered the sprawling yard of the Zeligs' Wake Forest estate. "Yeah, I . . ." he swallowed hard, blinking quickly as a hateful sheen of moisture blurred his vision. Gritting his teeth hard, he nodded again. "Yeah."

Kagome let out a deep breath: not exactly a sigh, but close to it. "It was difficult, wasn't it?" she asked softly, her hand rubbing the small of his back gently.

“It, uh . . .” Letting his gaze fall to his hands, he closed his eyes and licked his lips but had to clear his throat before he could trust himself to speak again. “Kami . . . it felt like I was giv-giving up,” he muttered, ears flattening as he struggled to reassure himself that that wasn’t the case, at all. “It’s just . . . seeing it on paper like that . . .”

“But maybe someone, somewhere, has seen her,” Kagome said. “Maybe . . .”

Kichiro nodded. “That’s what I . . . keep telling myself.”

Kagome cleared her throat. Kichiro didn’t miss the tightness in the sound. “No one thinks you’re giving up, you know,” she insisted, her voice all the more powerful in its husky quality. “Samantha won’t give up, and you won’t, either.”

He didn’t respond to that. What was there to say? As much as he wanted to believe that she was going to come home, he started to doubt just a little as the days passed without a sign. Every morning when he got out of bed, he felt the same emptiness, only it was growing worse with every setting of the sun, too. Trying to remain optimistic was a painful thing, but to allow himself to consider the worst . . . He just wasn’t able to do that, either, was he?

And the growing feeling that he’d somehow failed her—Samantha . . . A father was supposed to protect his children, and he . . . Kami, he hadn’t done that, had he? No . . . and then he’d created those damn pills. There hadn’t ever been much of a chance, to start with, had there, not without her scent to follow . . . and that was because of him . . .

“I . . . I *gave* her to them,” he rasped out, his body racked by the pain of the guilt that had manifested itself in a living, breathing way. “I . . . I thought I was helping, and . . . my d-dollbaby . . . my . . . Sami . . . Kami, I . . .”

Kagome gasped softly as a bitter sob broke free of him, as he lifted his forearm and slumped against the window. Absently, he felt her arms around him and yet he couldn't feel them, not with his soul. The emptiness that surged through him precluded even the basest allowances of comfort. Weeks of worry, of frustration, of the strong front he'd tried to erect around himself came crashing down in a torrent of tears, in broken half-sobs that hurt . . . Kami, it hurt . . .

"You didn't. You didn't . . . You did no such thing," Kagome murmured, her voice choked with her own tears. "Kichiro, don't do that to yourself . . . p-please . . ."

But he couldn't stop that, either. Tears born of the desire to be everything that everybody needed and the absolute frustration that he couldn't do any of those things; not one . . . Kagome cried quietly, her own tears coursing down her cheeks though she made no sound at all. Torn between the mother's innate desire to fix things for her son—her baby—and her concern over her granddaughter, she was. And Kichiro had always tried to fix things by himself, hadn't he? He'd always hated to ask for help, and even now, even in this . . .

The flyers they'd emailed to all the generals, the world over—Mikio's flyers that he'd made because he'd thought that there wasn't anything else he could do . . .

They'd decided against mass distribution to start with. Afraid that the wrong people would see them and panic, they'd left the ultimate decision to Kichiro, and maybe that, in and of itself, had been a mistake. How much more could he take, really? Twenty years of a life condensed down in hard facts and statistics with images that paled in comparison to the beauty that was Samantha . . .

And it seemed that the harder he cried, the worse it grew, an ugly thing that he simply couldn't contain any longer.

Kagome closed her eyes tight, wishing that she could help him, that she could take away the pain he was feeling, that she could somehow make it better for him, and maybe for the first time, she could truly understand what the great miko, Midoriko had tried to do for her so very, very long ago . . . She didn't want to take away his memories, no, but she wished . . . Kami, she wished . . .

“Oi, wench, I . . .”

InuYasha trailed off as he stopped just inside the doorway, his eyes widening as he intercepted Kagome's helpless plea. If Kichiro realized that his father had just walked in, he gave no indication. So wrapped up in his own regrets, his own impotence, maybe he hadn't noticed at all.

The hanyou stood there for a few minutes, watching as Kagome sought to comfort their son. Kichiro was winding down, it seemed, though his upset was still a palpable thing. Without a word, InuYasha finally stepped forward, grasping Kagome's arm and giving her a curt nod. She understood—she always understood, and with one last squeeze, she let go of Kichiro and quietly stepped away.

“You . . . you ain't done that before, have you?” InuYasha asked gruffly though not unkindly.

Kichiro hiccupped and shook his head, looking entirely disgusted as he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “S-sorry,” he muttered.

“Keh! Don't apologize—don't *ever* apologize—for loving your pup,” InuYasha chastised.

Kichiro nodded though he still couldn't meet his father's gaze.

Stopping beside him, he stared at the window, understanding that Kichiro didn't want him to look at him like that. InuYasha was the same way, wasn't he? Hated to show

weakness . . . hated to feel that familiar insecurity that he simply wasn't good enough . . . "You . . ." he began after a moment as he felt Kagome's aura retreating. She was giving them privacy—him privacy—with his son. "You think that I never cried before?"

"Did you?" Kichiro asked grudgingly.

InuYasha didn't answer right away. Instances flashed through his head: moments in time that he simply hadn't been able to deal with, and while they might have been few and far between, he remembered every last damn tear, too. Almost losing Kagome and Miroku and Sango in the burning shrine . . . waking up to find that Kagome—stupid Kagome—had wished Kikyuu back to life; that she'd left him . . . the faces of twin sons and a daughter . . . and a little boy who didn't understand why he wasn't just like everyone else . . . holding his daughter's hand as a menagerie of machines kept her alive . . . some of the most horrifying and some of the most beautiful moments of his life, and the tears that had come along with them . . .

"Course I have," he muttered. "It ain't . . . it ain't weak." Grinding his teeth together, InuYasha cleared his throat. It'd taken him way too long to learn the lesson he was about to give his son, hadn't it? Too damn long . . . "Used to think that it meant that I was weak," he went on, his voice tinged with regret. "Thought it meant that I wasn't tough enough to keep things inside. But that ain't it."

Digging his hands into his pockets, Kichiro stared outside without seeing a damn thing.

InuYasha shrugged, struggling to find a way to put to words what he knew in his heart was true. "What it means . . . It means that you know what's important. Means you'll protect those things."

Kichiro swallowed a few times, as though he couldn't quite find his voice, before he managed to speak again. "And . . . and if I can't?"

InuYasha grunted. He never had been good with words, had he? “That’s why you got family.”

Kichiro nodded and turned toward InuYasha, his gaze saying everything that he just couldn’t voice. The boy he’d never understood had grown into a man, and a damn fine man, at that. InuYasha nodded once, acknowledging the things that Kichiro didn’t say—or maybe he’d said them much better than he could have with mere words.

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“Toothpaste.”

The taijya didn’t even glance up from the newspaper he was reading, and Samantha heaved a sigh. “Did you hear me?” she demanded.

“Trying not to,” he admitted as he shook the paper for added emphasis.

Samantha wrinkled her nose and used her claw to pick the bit of meat from between her teeth. “I ed ooth-aste,” she garbled without taking the finger out of her mouth.

That got his attention quickly enough. Quirking an eyebrow as he shifted a rather bored stare in her direction, he uncrossed his feet and dropped them to the floor from the top of the desk. “What was that? Demonese?”

She rolled her eyes but giggled as she popped her finger out of her mouth and shot him an entirely toothy grin. “I said ‘toothpaste’,” she reiterated.

He snorted. “And why do you need toothpaste?”

She scooped up the hamburger wrapper left over from her meal and strode over to toss it away. “Let me ask you: what’s the longest you’ve ever gone without brushing your teeth?”

“I don’t know,” he replied as he crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back in the squeaky chair. “A month or two . . .”

“Ugh!” she grumbled, backing away slowly. “And you think *I*’m an animal . . .”

“So you brush your teeth,” he shot back. “Big hairy deal.”

“And your teeth have been brushed; I can tell,” she retorted. “In fact . . . Hair!”

He blinked, his eyebrows lifting at her strange outburst. Without another word, she separated out a single strand of her hair and tugged. Rubbing her head where the hair had been yanked out, she held up the emancipated strand, eyeing it speculatively. ‘*Yep*,’ she thought with a satisfied little peal of laughter as she carted around and sped off toward the bathroom as fast as her chained ankles would allow her to go, she didn’t stop until she was staring in the cloudy old mirror over the sink.

The lighting wasn’t great in there, but it’d do. Leaning in closer, she wrapped the strand of hair around her fingers and started to floss her teeth.

“And just what do you think you’re—*yuck!*” the taijya blurted as he appeared in the doorway a moment later. “You’re using your *hair* to floss?”

She shifted her gaze in the mirror then giggled at the appalled look on his face before returning her attention to the task at hand. “I didn’t see you volunteering to bring me any,” she explained as she adjusted her grip on the hair. “What else was I supposed to do?”

“Urgh . . . that’s just nasty,” he complained.

“Then go away, and don’t watch,” she said.

He only grunted at that, but he did turn on his heel to stomp away.

Samantha finished her task quickly enough then rinsed her mouth with water, wishing for the life of her that she at least had a toothbrush. Still, the makeshift floss had worked just fine, and for that she supposed she ought to be thankful.

When she emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, the taijya was busy pulling her blanket out of the cage.

“What are you doing?” she asked, tamping down the momentary alarm at the sight of him taking her blanket.

He shrugged. “What’s it look like, little demon? I’m changing your bedding.”

She snorted, more at the word ‘bedding’ than at what he was actually doing.

He tossed the blanket into the canvas laundry cart nearby before heading for the hose. “Now explain to me why you’re so hyper tonight,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the ruckus the power hose made.

She squeaked and skirted around the spray. “I got to run again today,” she stated.

He shot her a look out of the corner of his eye. “And that *made* you hyper?”

“I like to run,” she stated simply. “I would’ve run all night if they would have let me.”

Shaking his head, probably at her strange idea of fun, he took his time washing out the cage before turning off the hose and putting it away. “You want to run,” he stated dubiously as he wrapped the length of the hose around his hand and elbow.

She nodded enthusiastically. “I miss it,” she explained simply. “When I was little, I used to run with . . .” Trailing off slowly, Samantha shook her head, unsure even now whether or not she was safe enough to mention her family. In the end, though, she couldn’t take that chance. The taijya didn’t seem to notice her lapse, though, as he hung the hose up on the hook once more. “Anyway, it’s good for you, right?”

He snorted. “A lot of things are ‘good for you’. Doesn’t mean I want to do them.”

Wrinkling her nose, she shook her head. “But you exercise. I mean, you look like you do.”

He shrugged. “I walk . . . and I hunt demons.”

She giggled. “Maybe you should try Pilates . . . I hear they’re great for getting rid of love handles . . .”

He spun around to glower at her. “I *don’t* have love handles,” he growled.

She waved a hand dismissively as she retrieved her water dish to get a drink. “Okay,” she agreed easily enough. “You don’t . . . But you know, you’re really in great condition for a man your age.”

“*W-wh-what?*”

She took her time, carefully drinking the water. “Well, that wasn’t an insult . . .”

“The *hell* it wasn’t,” he grumbled, cheeks pinking slightly as his irritation surged around him. “Just how the hell old do you think I am?”

Setting the bowl aside, Samantha leaned back against the sink and tilted her head to the side as she considered his question. True enough, he didn’t look that old, but he did have gray hair interspersed with the black hair on his head, though it all seemed to be concentrated in his sideburns. “Hmmm . . . forty . . . five?”

He choked. “Forty—*what?*”

“Forty-six?”

His scowl darkened.

“Forty-seven?”

He grunted indignantly. “Try going the other way with that, demon,” he grumbled.

“Oh-h-h-h . . . Um . . . forty-four?”

“I’m thirty-eight,” he stated. “*Thirty-eight.*”

“Really? You mean you’re *really* not over forty?” She narrowed her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“*Yes, I’m sure!*” he bellowed then shook his head and turned away, muttering under his breath about not really expecting much better from an ill-mannered little demon who probably wasn’t any older than twelve.

“I’m am, too, over twelve!” she insisted, her own cheeks blossoming in color.

He snorted but didn’t respond out loud.

“I am!” she insisted once more.

“Oh? Do demons just go through puberty later or something?”

She blinked and stared at him, unable to grasp exactly what he was implying. “What’s that mean?” she asked despite her resolve not to do any such thing.

The taijya shot her a rather bored look. “It means,” he said simply, “that it’s obvious enough that you haven’t even started to go through puberty yet.”

“I have, too!” she gasped.

“Is that right? So all female demons are flat-chested then?”

That barb struck home, and she couldn’t help the momentary expression of hurt that filtered over her features before she could stop it. She’d always been a little self-conscious about her relatively small chest, especially when both her sisters had inherited their mother’s ample bosom . . . Still, she knew damn well that she wasn’t entirely flat, the jerk . . . “I will have you know that some men rather prefer smaller, perkier breasts,” she retorted haughtily, using the really lame excuse that her father had told her more than once over the years. If she then pointed out that her mother had quite generous cleavage, Kichiro always seemed to change the topic, too.

“Yeah,” he responded acerbically as he plopped down at the desk once more and reached for the newspaper again. “Most of them are gay . . . or they will be eventually.”

She wrinkled her nose and crossed her arms over her chest with a pronounced ‘hrumph’, her ears twitching as a clear indicator that she was still irritated. “Is this your idea of retaliation for the forty-five guess?”



## Chapter 30

# Nightmares

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*He stumbled in the blackness, fumbling for something—anything—yet knowing deep down that there was nothing—nothing to grab onto, nothing to steady himself . . . Just nothing . . .*

*It was the darkness that he knew and despised. Negotiating the passages and the eerie corridors yet knowing deep down what he would find when he reached the inner sanctum . . . It was always the same, so why . . .?*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*A row of shackles hanging from the wall . . . five sets . . . five skeletons that laughed at him . . . one set that hung limply, the cuffs agape: waiting . . .*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*Candles burning on a table inside a room to the left, molten wax pooling around the misshapen stone candelabras . . . five empty plates . . . one filled with maggots and cockroaches and millipedes . . .*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*The steady, dull plop of something dripping just out of view: a constant, a never ending monotone . . .*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*A dull whine: almost a whimper . . . a scrape against the cold stone floor . . .*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*Slapping his hands over his ears, he ran deeper and deeper into the undulating, twisting maze. He wanted to escape, but he couldn't . . . He knew he couldn't . . .*

*Stumbling over something firm but yielding . . . a ragged cry; an unvoiced plea for help . . .*

*‘Not again . . . not again . . . not again . . .’*

*Cold, grubby fingers stretching out to grab him, trying to stop him, pulling him back and pushing him forward. The floor was soft and squishy under his feet, squelching like mud after a healthy summer rain . . . but . . .*

*It was flesh; a giant throat. The humid air was hard to breathe. ‘Carbon dioxide . . .’ The stench of bile that lingered, a putrid sourness . . .*

*Struggling onward; there was no escape—no turning back.*

*The countless groans and cries mingled in his ears. They meant everything, and yet they meant nothing at all. Grimacing, running, stumbling, faltering . . . The rattling of the two gold hoops dangling from his left earlobe rang in his head . . . He couldn't escape, couldn't escape . . .*

*But he couldn't tell if it was him or if it was a child version of him; the sounds, the cries . . . were they from a different place and time—a different Kurt . . . or . . .*

*The menacing laughter that filled the corridor echoed off the walls: laughter mixed with indeterminate sounds: not human and coming closer and closer and closer.*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*Panting as he tried to run faster, he could feel the hotness of breath hitting his face. Losing his footing, faltering, falling . . . Opening his mouth to scream, but no sound would come . . . Falling, falling . . . falling . . .*

*Landing on his knees in the midst of a slimy, pungent mass, Kurt grimaced and pushed himself to his feet, and this chamber . . . the entire room was pulsating, living . . . breathing . . .*

*The blackness seemed to thicken; the air was stifling, horrifying. He could hear the beat of a heart—a savage and bitter thing.*

*A slow haze congealed in the darkness; a glow that seemed even brighter against the stark black . . . “Uncle . . .”*

*Blood dripping everywhere: from the gash on his head, the ragged stump where his arm should have been . . . Blood gurgling and belching, tiny droplets spraying with each of his words: “What are you doing, Kurt . . .? What are you doing . . .?”*

*“N . . . no . . .”*

*His body faded as another appeared in his wake . . .*

*“Monsters, Kurt . . . why can you see those monsters . . .?” Aunt Mary, silvery tears streaking down her blood splattered face; her chest ripped wide open; her arms keeping her intestines from spilling out . . .*

*“How could you? You wicked, wicked boy . . .!”*

*“Mom . . .” he whispered, closing his eyes against the sight of her—her chest ripped open, her crushed heart in her hands . . .*

*“I told you not to tell, Kurt . . . I told you not to tell . . .”*

*“ . . . Daddy . . .”*

*Too much blood, too much gore, too much . . . just too much . . . Hands shaking, body quivering, too many memories—too much bitterness . . .*

*A tiny hand slipped into his. He screamed; he jumped, but the little hand hung on. Fearful, fearful . . . Looking down, he saw her . . . “C-Carrie . . .”*

*Her head was at an odd angle, her legs akimbo but holding her up. She smiled at him—a gruesome, vile distortion . . . “Kurt . . .”*

Awaking with a jerk, he sat up straight, chest heaving as he struggled to breathe. That dream . . . that dream—he hated that dream . . . Five consecutive days of that same nightmare . . . Waking up in a cold sweat, babbling . . .

Stumbling to his feet, he barely took two steps before he hit his knees, his stomach lurching, heaving, as he closed his eyes tight. The stench of his vomit brought back the nightmare with startling clarity, and he squeezed his eyes tight, pushing against the floor, drawing back into himself . . . Hating . . . loathing . . . despising . . .

It took several minutes for him to regain control of himself, and he sat back, closing his eyes, dragging in lungful after ragged lungful of air.

They were condemning him, weren't they? From the hell in which they were cast, locked together for all of eternity in a medley of hatred, they could see him, always, like angels with malice in their hearts, and he might well have believed that if he actually believed in heaven and hell . . .

He didn't. As disturbing as those dreams were, that's all they were: dreams. He'd stopped believing in everything and everybody a long, long time ago. The only one he could rely on was himself . . .

Himself and the vengeance that he craved . . .

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"What do you think you're doing?"

Isabelle shifted her gaze in the mirror as she fastened the simple diamond stud earring. Meeting her mate's troubled expression, she smiled wanly before turning around and smoothing the form-fitting black dress over her figure. "How do I look?" she asked, holding her hands out at her sides.

Griffin's trademark scowl deepened, and he slowly shook his head. "Why are you all dressed up?"

She waved a hand as she leaned over to pull on the two-inch heeled black pumps. "It's Papa and Uncle Ryomaru's birthday. You'd better get ready for the party."

"Party?" he echoed, eyeing his mate as though he thought that maybe she'd lost her mind. "I don't think—"

"We have this party every year," she reminded him.

"You think your father's going to want this?" he reiterated.

Isabelle's thin smile grew even more transparent. "Mama does."

“Your mama.”

She nodded. “Yeah . . . and . . .” faltering, she stared at her hands for a moment before lifting her chin once more, her smile back in place. “Sami would want us to have it, too.”

Griffin heaved a sigh, unsure whether or not he actually was buying into this, but Isabelle . . . She looked so damned determined, and maybe this was a small way for her to feel as though she were helping, even if it were only an illusion.

“I don’t know, Isabelle,” he muttered, shaking his head. The entire thing seemed so . . . so fake . . . and he wasn’t too certain that anyone else would welcome this particular idea . . .

“I’ll bet that she’s singing ‘Happy Birthday’ right now, wherever she is.”

Griffin didn’t say anything as he reached for the clothes that Isabelle had laid out for him and headed for the bathroom. In the end, he supposed it didn’t really matter, did it? Whether they had this party or not . . . but maybe it would help her mother, at least.

A crisp knock sounded on the door, and Isabelle stepped over to answer it. “Lexi,” she greeted. “You haven’t changed yet.”

“Have you lost your damn mind, Bitty?” she demanded without preamble, her dark blue eyes sparking dangerously. “A party? Are you *mad*?”

Isabelle grasped her sister’s arms and smiled gently. “Calm down, sweetie. You know as well as I do that we have this party every year.”

“Not *this* year!” she hissed, yanking herself away from Isabelle’s grasp. “What the hell has gotten into you? Don’t you get it? Samantha—*our baby sister*—is missing! *Missing!* Can’t you comprehend that?”

Isabelle flinched, blinking rapidly as a suspect brightness entered her gaze. “Of course I know that,” she replied stiffly. “This is for Mama. Isn’t that all right?”

Alexandra heaved a sigh and shook her head, glaring at her sister before turning on her heel and stomping out of the room, leaving Isabelle with a sad frown on her face as she watched Alexandra’s abrupt departure.

In truth, the party was the last thing that she really wanted to do, but . . . but Bellaniece had seemed so adamant that she simply hadn’t had the heart to gainsay her on it; to point out how entirely unwelcome some of the others, Alexandra included, would find it. Her mother seemed so damned determined to conduct things as though nothing at all were amiss, and as much as Isabelle could understand that, it frightened her, too.

With every day that passed, a little more hope slipped away: hope that Isabelle, like everyone else, was struggling to hold on to.

Griffin slipped out of the bathroom in the clothes that she’d put out for him. She felt his presence though he didn’t make a sound. A moment later, he slipped his arms around her, drawing her back against his chest in a comforting embrace. “You . . . okay . . .?”

“It’ll be two months tomorrow, won’t it?” she murmured quietly. “Two months . . .”

Griffin grunted in response then shrugged. “She . . . she’s all right.”

Isabelle nodded slowly, letting him offer her his silent support—his strength.

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“Zelig-sensei, are you ready?”

Cain looked up from the stack of papers he’d been reading over, frowning at the sight of his mate in the festive red dress. She looked like she’d just stepped out of some fashion magazine, and he knew damn well that he’d never seen that particular outfit before. Letting out a deep breath, he slowly set the papers aside and stood up.

“Let me straighten your tie,” she offered, stepping around the desk to adjust the bow at his throat. “There. Perfect.”

“Gin . . . Do you really think that this is a good idea?”

Her little smile faltered slightly before she could catch herself. “Sure, it is,” she insisted. “Bellaniece really wants it.”

He nodded and rubbed his face. “I know. I just don’t think . . .”

“Kichiro needs this, too . . . I think . . . I think he’s forgetting how to smile.”

“It’s not that,” he said.

She leaned back, staring up at his strange expression. “What’s the matter?”

He shook his head, shifting his scowl at the blackened windows behind his desk. “I’ve gotten no less than eight calls since those flyers were released to the generals: eight different youkai in eight different places who swear they’ve seen Samantha in the last few weeks.”

“But that’s good, right? Leads . . .”

“Maybe, but if we have to chase down every lead we get, only to find out that they’re flukes or . . . or someone’s damn idea of a joke . . . We’ll be wasting time . . .”

“If one of them is pans out . . .”

“That’s a big if . . .”

She nodded slowly. “But worth it if it’ll bring Samantha home.”

“Yeah.”

Gin smiled again and took his hand. “Come on. Kichiro and Ryomaru will be here soon. They called a while ago to say that their plane had landed safely.”

Cain said nothing as he let his mate drag him out of the study. The trouble was that not one of the leads had seemed solid enough to track, but he just didn’t have a choice, did he? He’d already dispatched all three of his hunters to check into the most promising leads, and even those were vague, at best. “*I might have seen her . . .*” “*I thought I saw her . . .*” “*Well, it rather looked like her but her hair must have been dyed . . .*”

The front door opened as they stepped out of the study, and a very worn-looking Kichiro stepped into the house with his twin brother. “Oh, surprise!” Gin hollered, hurrying over to greet them properly.

The brothers exchanged looks. Cain grimaced since neither looked very pleased about the apparent ambush. Having heard Gin’s exclamation, the others hurried into the foyer to greet the birthday boys, too. Cain stepped over and slipped an arm around Gin’s waist to draw her back, away from the two since it looked like Kichiro was about ready to lose his temper.

But the hell of it was that Cain couldn't really blame him for it, either. When Gin had first mentioned that Bellaniece wanted to throw the annual party, he'd told her that he didn't think that it was a good idea. Already pushed to the very limits of his tolerance, the hanyou looked like he thought that the entire thing was in poor taste. Unfortunately, Cain could understand Bellaniece's point of view, too. Desperately trying to cling to anything that she considered normal or status quo, she'd wanted—*needed*—the distraction to get her mind off the constant worry, the incessant questions. He could only hope that Kichiro would understand it, too.

To his credit, though, the irritation in his expression disappeared quickly enough, and he even managed a wan smile as he kissed his mate and daughters in turn. Ryomaru managed to sneak away, grasping Nezumi's arm to lead her into the living room. Isabelle called out, making her way through the gathering with a very large sheet cake with the brothers' names in blue icing.

Cain sighed and intercepted the strangely horrified look on Mikio's face. He was certain that Mikio understood what was going on, but seeing it happening was just entirely too much for the young hanyou to bear witness to. "What the hell is this?" he muttered, casting Cain the same kind of look that he had when he was younger, when he hadn't understood why Cain would ask him to do odd jobs during his visits: tasks that he never asked anyone else to tackle. Cain had understood back then, hadn't he? He'd known the unspoken battle deep within Mikio because he simply didn't want to be treated differently from his nephews or Gunnar.

"They—*we*—need something normal," Cain replied quietly.

"Something normal," Mikio repeated. "Y-yeah . . . I'm starting to forget what that means."

Cain nodded. To be honest, he'd thought the same thing, himself . . . but he also knew damn well that, until Samantha came home, nothing would ever be normal again . . .

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Alexandra fell back, skirting around the gathering that was smiling too widely, laughing too loudly. The entire thing was completely contrived, and no one played her part quite as well as her mother. Watching as though the entire thing were little more than a gross farce of a play—a tragic comedy, at best—Alexandra just couldn't bring herself to try to laugh, to carry on.

She couldn't understand exactly what they were doing; why they were doing it. It made no sense, did it? For all they knew, Samantha could be . . . Swallowing hard, she forced that thought away, unable to bear the idea of completing it, even if it were only in her head.

Still, with every day that passed, every moment that ticked away, she couldn't help the ugly voice in the back of her mind—the one that sounded cold, clinical—*reasonable*. Two months was just too long. If Samantha really were okay, she'd have tried to contact them by now, and Alexandra knew it.

She didn't want to think about the idea that Samantha might not come home, but . . . but she was also just a little too pragmatic to keep up the fake pretenses, too. "If we only knew . . ."

Slipping through the living room unnoticed, she indulged herself in a moment of relief as managed to step outside unnoticed. The cold wind was a balm on her raw nerves, and she breathed deep despite the burn in her lungs.

“You’re going to freeze out here,” John said as he stepped outside. “Shouldn’t you be inside wishing your father a happy birthday?”

She opened her mouth to tell him exactly what she thought of the gross display. To her surprise, a high-pitched, incredulous laugh surged out of her. “It’s entirely insulting,” she rebuked. “Am I the only one who hasn’t lost her mind? Throwing a party like Samantha . . . like she doesn’t even exist, and . . .”

“And you don’t really think that’s what they’re doing, do you?” he chided quietly, slipping his arms around her in an entirely placating sort of way.

“I don’t . . . I don’t know,” she admitted quietly. “I just know that it doesn’t feel right. Mama says that Samantha would want us to do this—Can you imagine . . .?”

John exhaled out slowly, his breath condensing in a hazy cloud against the sober hues of the night. “And if you were the one missing, Lex? Would you want your father to have his birthday party?”

His question caught her off guard despite the idea that it should have been the most natural one in the world. She shook her head, tried to consider it, but couldn’t. “I . . . I don’t know.”

He smiled gently. “You told me before that your parents have always stood behind you, no matter what, right?”

“Of course.”

Reaching out with a gentle hand, he tucked her hair behind her ear and rubbed her cheek softly. “Well, then, maybe you should think of this party as your way of . . . of supporting them—of supporting your mother.”

She knew deep down that John really did think that she'd tell him that he was right; that she'd march back inside, plaster on a happy smile, and go along with the charade. She couldn't. She really couldn't, and if that made her a bad daughter, then so be it.

"I can't do that," she muttered, shaking her head as she pulled away from him. "It's just not right. It's not like Samantha was just sent off to summer camp or something. She's missing. Someone took her. She's been missing for two months, and all I can do is go in there and pretend like nothing in the world is happening? I can't, John. I . . . I can't . . ."

"Lex . . ."

"No!" She drew a deep breath, staring at him, long and hard. "No . . . and if that makes me a bitch, then so be it."

He shook his head and smiled a little sadly. "It doesn't. No one can make you feel any way that you don't, just like you can't make anyone else feel the same way you do."

"I get the feeling that you're lecturing me," she pointed out with a sigh.

He shook his head and smiled just a little. "No, not lecturing."

Alexandra turned to face the ocean, wondering absently why nothing in nature ever seemed to change, even when her entire family was being ripped apart . . .



**Final Thought from Alexandra**  
**What a joke...**

## Chapter 31

### Tear

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Samantha sighed as she glanced at the clock and bit her lip, her ears flattening as she wondered just where he could be.

Nearly seven, and still no sign of him . . .

*'He'll be here. Don't worry.'*

He would be there, wouldn't he? Letting out a deep breath, she told herself not to look at the clock again just as her eyes shifted to the side to stare at it one more time.

*'Listen, dollbaby . . . he'll be here, and maybe he'll talk to us tonight. After all, his bad mood can't really last much longer, can it?'*

Sighing again at the vague optimism in her youkai's voice, she wrinkled her nose and huddled further into the corner of the cage.

He really had been in a weird mood lately—for nearly the last week, hadn't he? The problem was, she had no idea why. He'd barely spoken to her—barely looked at her, actually. Yes, he fed her, and he'd open her cage shortly after he arrived, grunting and motioning that she should stick out her feet so he could shackle them, but then he'd pretty well left her alone, and no amount of talking had gotten him to speak, either. Still . . .

*'If I knew what was bothering him . . .'*

*'You know something? I think maybe I was wrong about him. You know, I don't think that he's a bad person . . . I think that he simply needs to understand that you're not really so different from he is . . . Maybe he's just never met one of us who wasn't a monster . . .'*

*'A monster . . .'*

She frowned and sat up a little straighter. She wasn't sure when her youkai's attitude had started to change. The normally pragmatic voice had been completely against the taijya from the start. Lately, though, it had taken to trying to encourage her, hadn't it? Strange . . .

*'It made sense, what you thought before,'* her youkai pointed out. *'If he thinks he has a reason to hate us . . . you know? I mean, remember how Griffin said that he hated humans for a long, long time for what they did to his family?'*

That did make sense, didn't it? If only she had an idea of why he felt the way he did . . .

Making a face, she dug a handful of dog kibble out of the bowl and dropped them neatly down the drain. She knew well enough that the white-coats were just assuming that she had been eating the crap all along. It gave her a rather skewed feeling of accomplishment that she was able to fool them, though.

It was a little warped, wasn't it? Feeling like she was actually doing something to fool them when the taijya had been feeding her every evening for a while now.

Heck, despite his obvious irritation of late, he still brought her food every night, didn't he? That aside, she knew well enough that he wasn't actually angry at her. She didn't know why she knew that or how, but she did know . . . and wasn't that enough?

The dull thud of footsteps coming down the hallway outside the holding area drew Samantha's attention, and she couldn't help the way she sat up just a little straighter, watching the doorway, knowing the familiarity of the taijya's scent moments before he stepped into the room. His eyes were smudged with black shadows beneath, his face looked a little paler than it had even last night, but it was him.

Striding over to the desk to deposit his knapsack, he took his time removing the black leather jacket and gloves. She frowned. It wasn't the first time that she'd wondered about those gloves. In the end, she'd figured that he wore them to help contain his spiritual energy, and while he did take them off, he did tend to wear them a lot, too . . .

He rubbed his face in a tired sort of way before striding over to release the door. He said nothing, rolling his wrist to indicate that she should stick her feet out. She did, and he wasted no time in securing her ankles with the shackles.

That accomplished, he turned around to double check the barrier that covered the door. It must have been activated already, because he checked the panel over then returned to the desk once more.

Samantha took her time washing out the water bowl and refilling it again. He seemed even more agitated than he had been the rest of the week. She only wished that she knew why . . .

Digging into his knapsack, he pulled out two sandwiches wrapped in plastic. He dropped one on the corner of the desk and unwrapped the other. Samantha figured that was his way of telling her that it was for her, so she wandered over to take it.

She blinked and almost smiled at the peanut butter and jelly sandwich she unwrapped. She hadn't had one of those in years, she supposed, and it had always been a bit of a treat when she was a pup. Her grandfather, Cain would sometimes send care packages though Samantha had always suspected that they had come more from her grandmother than

from her grandfather. Still, there were always at least a couple jars of peanut butter inside, and Samantha had always loved the sandwiches that her mother made for her on the soft, white bread that was always sent, too.

“Are you feeling all right?” she ventured though she really didn’t figure that he’d answer.

He didn’t, and she sighed, heading back toward the cage since he didn’t seem to welcome her company.

After a minute, he got up and strode over to the monitors, reading through her chart in silence.

She ate her sandwich quite happily despite the obvious tension.

“Blood testing?” he finally said, obviously referring to the chart.

She shrugged since she really hadn’t done much other than just sitting there while they’d drawn a few pints of her blood again. “I don’t know what they were doing,” she admitted, popping the last of the sandwich into her mouth.

He grunted and walked back to the desk again.

Samantha sighed and drank the water, pondering exactly how she could get him to talk to her again. “Don’t suppose I could read the comics?” she ventured at length, wrapping her hands around her ankles as she scrunched up her shoulders and tried to look as innocent as possible.

“What makes you think I brought a newspaper?” he countered evenly.

“You always bring the newspaper,” she pointed out. “Please?”

He muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, "Pain in the ass," but didn't reply to that otherwise, either.

Samantha smiled to herself since that was probably the most like a real response she'd gotten out of him in days.

"I don't suppose you brought me *two* of those sandwiches," she ventured.

That earned her a suspect frown. "You don't need two of them," he replied.

"But I love peanut butter and jelly," she protested.

He shook his head. "What a pig . . . You should be saying 'thank you', not bugging me about having seconds," he pointed out.

"Thank you for the first sandwich. I really appreciate it; it was delicious. I don't suppose you brought me a second one so that I would be even more grateful, did you?"

That earned her a bout of eye rolling as he dug the newspaper out of his bag and set about ignoring her.

All in all, though, Samantha figured that it was all right. Even if he wasn't interested in a more in-depth conversation, at least he didn't seem to be as troubled as he had been.

So if she could just figure out how to get him to talk a little more, she'd be ahead of the game, right? Besides, she rather enjoyed his company, such as it was. The conversations that they'd had were interesting enough, and if she had to be stuck in a place like this, at least she'd found someone she could talk to.

Strange, though, really . . . He was the one who had captured her, yes, and he'd used his power against her when she'd freaked out upon seeing the cage, true. The thing was, he

still treated her with a modicum of decency—decency that she didn't get or expect from the white-coats. He wasn't a bad person, she knew that. She could tell that he wasn't, and while she couldn't put it into words, she could feel it, couldn't she?

Youkai and hanyou . . . they tended to be intuitive creatures. Many of their thoughts, their actions, were dictated by the things that they perceived, weren't they? Their ideals, their beliefs . . . all governed by the things that went unseen . . .

The taijya . . . There was a certain understanding, wasn't there? A part of her knew him, didn't she? A part of her that she hadn't realized was there for so long . . . Something about him spoke to her in quiet whispers and in breaths and murmurs, so subdued that she had to strain to hear it, and yet . . .

That was the reason that she'd never been scared of him, wasn't it? That was the reason she was able to hold onto a semblance of her sanity. *He* was that reason . . . He was the one who reassured her that everything really would be all right, and even if he didn't realize that he'd done it, he had, and no, it wasn't something that she would ever be able to put a face on or words to, but she knew . . .

A wounded heart, scarred so deeply that he didn't realize that he walked the earth in a constant shroud of pain . . . Samantha could sense it, could feel it, and she wanted to help him—to help him realize that it didn't have to be that way—to help him understand those things that she couldn't rightfully understand, herself. If she could just figure out what those dreams were that woke him in the night; if she could only discern those things that he hid behind those startling violet eyes . . . Those secrets that he held much too tightly . . . He was kept in a cage, too, wasn't he? Trapped in one that he'd created for himself a long time ago—a cage that kept the rest of the world from touching him; a cage with invisible bars that was much, much smaller than hers was . . .

He needed her, didn't he? He needed her even if he didn't realize it, himself . . . He needed her because he couldn't escape his cage by himself, and maybe he didn't even

know he existed inside one . . . He needed her, and she . . . she couldn't turn away from someone else who was suffering as much as she was—maybe more . . . because if she could . . . if she could just help him . . .

If she could do that . . . she could be free, too.

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“You heading back tomorrow?”

Gunnar started and turned around to face Bas. Hands dug deep in the pockets of his formal slacks, he had lost the jacket of his tux a while ago, untying the bowtie at his throat and letting it hang open on either side of the crisp white collar flaps. Black hair hanging loose, free, blowing into his face at the capricious whim of the wind blowing off the Atlantic Ocean, he shook his head slowly as he shuffled his feet and shrugged. “No . . . Cain asked me to check into a potential sighting in Philadelphia.”

Bas nodded. “I’m being dispatched to Miami,” he admitted. “God, what a fucking mess.”

Gunnar turned around, his gaze shifting over the familiarity of the place. “How much longer are we going to do this?” he finally asked, his tone quiet, flat—hopeless. “Every time we think that we’re getting somewhere . . . We’re no closer to finding her than we were in the beginning, and maybe . . .”

“You want to give up?” Bas challenged just as quietly. “You want to, what? Throw her away? Say we’ve done all we can and just walk away?”

Gunnar sighed and shook his head. “That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

“Then what are you saying?” Bas demanded through clenched teeth. “Just what the fuck are you saying?”

Gunnar finally turned back, his eyes glowing in the dim light filtering out of the living room—squares of false brightness like a beacon . . . like hope. “How many cases are lying on your desk right now? How many other parents are waiting for their children to come home while we’re fixated on this one? Sure, Sam’s family, and yes, I want to find her, but damn it . . . At what cost, Bas? At *whose* cost?”

“Those cases on my desk have been languishing for years. A few more months isn’t going to help any of them.”

Gunnar uttered a terse chuckle: a sound devoid of any real humor. “Is that what you think?” he demanded. “Is that really what you believe? Some of these families have been waiting a lifetime to get some sense of closure—to know that the person who hurt them cannot ever hurt someone else again . . . But ask yourself this: if Samantha wasn’t related to us—if we didn’t know her personally—would we honestly be dropping every single thing to look for her?”

Bas stared at him for a long moment, his gaze fierce, angry. Gunnar could understand that; of course he could, and he didn’t think that they should give up, either.

But the youkai world had come to a screeching stand-still, and while he understood it, that didn’t mean that he couldn’t see the other side of it, too—the people who still waited by windows, jumped at the sound of the telephone . . .

“And if it were your child out there . . . Would you be saying the same thing now?” Bas growled, narrowing his eyes on his cousin.

Gunnar sighed, rubbed his forehead. “You’re misunderstanding me, Bas,” he said.

“No, I don’t think I am,” Bas countered. “Look . . . I—”

“You fucking bastard . . .!”

Gunnar didn’t blink and didn’t back down as Kichiro shoved the door open and strode outside. Heading straight for him, Gunnar knew damn well that Kichiro was about to punch him, and he didn’t try to avoid it, either. Head snapping to the side, shoulders jerking back at the force of the blow, he ignored the explosion of pain as he slowly turned his head to face his uncle once more.

Shrugging off Bas as the younger man grasped Kichiro’s arms and tried to pull him back, Kichiro shoved him away before rounding on Gunnar once more. “You think that this would be different if you were missing? You think that I wouldn’t drop every last damn thing to look for your miserable hide? Damn you, Mamoruzen! *Damn you!*”

“That’s not what I meant, Uncle,” Gunnar explained slowly. “I want to find her as badly as you do. I just meant—”

“Come on, Kich,” Bas said, grasping Kichiro’s arm and dragging him back. “Infighting’s not going to help us, anyway.”

Gunnar said nothing as he watched the two go inside. Kichiro struggled for a few seconds, casting Gunnar a dirty look but finally seemed to decide that it wasn’t worth it. Jerking out of Bas’ grip, he stomped back inside. Gunnar heaved a sigh and shook his head.

“What was that all about?”

Turning slightly at the sound of his father’s voice, Gunnar shrugged. “I was trying to explain to Bas that I think that one of us should stay here and start looking at the files

that just keep piling up.” Balling up his fist, he rapped his knuckles on the high stone railing. “I wasn’t trying to say that we should stop looking for Samantha. I just think . . . I just think that we owe it to the rest of the youkai not to lose sight of them, as well.”

Toga let out a deep breath, wandering over to his son’s side. He held a steaming mug of tea. “Is that what you want to do?”

“I want to do all of it,” he admitted with a shake of his head. “But I cannot . . .”

“And you don’t think that Kichiro feels the same way?” Toga mused. “Wanting to be out there, looking for his daughter . . . feeling as though he should be here, watching over his mate . . . worrying about his clinic back home . . . Mamoruzen . . . this entire situation has us all on edge, but the last thing we want—the very last thing—is to give in to the anger and frustration . . . Surely you understand that.” Clapping him on the shoulder, Toga turned around and started back inside.

“Father . . .”

“Hmm?”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound as though I thought we should stop looking for her.”

Toga considered that and nodded. “I’m sure you didn’t, and I’m sure that Kichiro understands that, too, even if he is a little ticked off at the moment.”

Gunnar clenched his jaw.

He really hadn’t meant to irritate his uncle. He just wondered how they were supposed to go on from here? Two months of searching had availed them nothing. How much longer were they going to keep going on, ignoring all their other responsibilities in the process?

And how fair was it to the people who relied on them for answers? Everything—*everything*—had ground to a screeching halt, and while he understood and acknowledged that they had to find Samantha, he also understood far too well that there were others who needed them, too—others who had no way to help themselves.

So where did that leave anyone? Up in the air without any idea how or when they were supposed to remember those other obligations . . . ?

Unfortunately, there were no answers . . . the reason he'd asked Bas wasn't because he was suggesting that they call a stop to the search efforts, no . . .

It was in hopes that maybe Bas had a better understanding than Gunnar, himself, did.

“Damn it . . .”

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‘*One hundred seventy-nine . . . one hundred eighty . . .*’

“Please?”

‘*One hundred eighty-one . . . one hundred eighty-two . . .*’

“Pretty please?”

‘*One hundred eighty-three . . .*’

“Is there really something so wrong with wanting to read the comics?” the little demon demanded, crossing her arms over her chest with a pronounced huff.

Wrinkling his nose, he had to admit that it was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore her. That might be because she was currently sitting on the edge of the desk since talking to him from the cage hadn’t worked at all. The chain that joined the shackles around her ankles clanked against the metal leg, grating on his nerves even more.

*‘So give her the comics so she’ll shut the hell up already,’* his conscience prodded.

Pinning her with a longsuffering scowl that she completely missed since she was too busy looking around the room as she continued to kick her feet, he tugged out the page that she wanted and rattled it at her. “Take it,” he grumbled, hoping against hope that it shut her up, even if it were only for a few minutes.

She blinked and twisted around, staring at the newspaper page that he held out to her. “Really?”

“Now or never, little demon,” he growled.

He could only blink when she snatched the page and scooted off the desk, making a beeline to the cage as though she were afraid that he was going to snatch it right back from her.

*‘Weird little creature,’* he thought to himself as he shook his head and folded up the rest of the paper.

Digging the notebook out of his knapsack, he thumbed through the pages until he found a blank one. *‘Says she can read,’* he scribbled with a scowl. Too bad he wasn’t entirely certain that she could read or if she was just saying that.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. To be honest, he was still feeling a little out of sorts. That dream . . . he couldn't stand it—that feeling of being completely helpless and afraid . . .

Standing abruptly, he snatched up the paper to drop it in the trash can but stopped when he glanced at the little demon. Hunched over in the cage with the page spread on the floor, she looked like she was tracing her claw over something, but what?

He watched her for a moment. She picked up something—he couldn't make out what it was—and leaned back, pressing her hands over her chest as though she were cradling something dear . . .

*'What is she . . . doing . . .?'*

Frowning as he moved in closer, he hunkered down in front of the cage. "What do you have?" he demanded.

She shook her head, her eyes downcast. "N-nothing," she whispered.

"Don't give me that," he grumbled, reaching into the cage and snagging the newspaper page. His frown deepened as he stared at the page. She'd cut the dateline off the page . . .? Why? "Why did you want the dateline?" he asked, his tone telling her plainly that he expected her to tell him.

*"Is this . . . today's paper . . .?"*

Caught off guard by her softly uttered question, he blinked. "Today's . . .? Uh, yeah . . . well, for another twenty minutes . . ."

*"So . . . today is the thirtieth . . .?"*

He nodded.

She shook her head. “*December thirtieth?*”

Scowling at the almost desperate tone in her voice, Kurt nodded. “Yeah, so?”

“... Oh ...”

“What’s special about December thirtieth?”

A strange noise slipped from her—almost a sob but muffled. His ducked a little lower, trying to get a look at her face, and he drew back when he saw the huge, fat tears glossing over her gaze though they didn’t spill over.

“December thirtieth ...”

“Little demon ...?”

“Do you like parties?” she asked suddenly, her voice oddly strong despite the tears standing in her eyes. Her chin lifted defiantly, and she pressed her lips together as though she were struggling to keep herself from breaking down in tears.

“Parties?” he echoed absently, stupidly.

She nodded and drew a deep breath to steady herself. “Parties,” she repeated. “Like ... like birthday parties ... You know, with those silly hats and those things ... You blow into them, and they stretch out ... sometimes they make noise ...”

He shook his head, unable to comprehend exactly where she was going with her random questions. “I, uh ... I haven’t been to a ... a birthday party ... in a long time,” he admitted quietly.

She nodded slowly, as though whatever he'd said made perfect sense. "I made him a cake one year . . . it was . . . the saddest cake ever, I think . . ."

"Him?"

She nodded, her eyes glossing over, as though she were seeing a time and a place that Kurt couldn't, and in that moment, she wasn't really there, was she? Miles and miles away . . . with some elusive 'him' that Kurt couldn't see. "I was so . . . proud," she choked out with a soft laugh. "So proud . . . It was all undercooked and runny in the middle, and I guess I forgot to add flour, but . . . but he ate it all because I made it . . . because I stood beside him, watching him. And he just smiled and . . . and ate it . . ."

Kurt didn't understand—didn't want to understand. Something about the pain in her expression; something about the way she clutched that damned scrap of paper to her chest . . . Why . . .? Why did it hurt to watch her? Why did it hurt him to watch her struggling not to cry . . .?

She smiled sadly—a horrifying expression when coupled with the tears that still stood in her eyes. "They invite everyone every year . . . and I've never missed it—not once—till now."

A strange sense of foreboding crept up his spine. He wanted to get away from her, didn't he? And yet . . . and yet he couldn't. "Whose . . . birthday?" he heard himself asking, his voice much thinner, weaker than normal.

If she noticed, she didn't remark upon it. "It's supposed to be a surprise," she said with a quiet little laugh followed in short order by a snuffle. "It never is, but . . . but he always *acts* surprised." Her gaze cleared, shifted to meet his. "Do you . . . do you think they're having the party this year?"

He shook his head, unsure how to answer that; if he should answer it, at all. “Do you . . . do you want them to?”

She considered that then nodded. “I want them to be happy . . . I don’t want them to worry . . .” She suddenly laughed, as though she’d break down completely if she didn’t. “Warm and smiling and laughing . . . because they’ll . . . never find me, will they?”

“Looking . . . for you,” he muttered, his gaze dropping to the floor. He felt dizzy, nauseous . . . They were looking for her . . .?

“It’s okay,” she said quietly, lowering her hands, staring at the paper with a tiny smile on her face. “I hope they’re all . . . gathered around the piano, listening . . .”

Kurt winced, balling up his fist around the newspaper page in his hand. A vicious need shot through him. He had to know . . . and yet . . . “Little demon . . . whose birthday is it?”

Her smile faltered just a little as she bit her lip, and for one long moment, he thought that she was going to refuse to tell him. She swallowed hard, pressing a hand against her lips as though she were trying to contain her emotions—as though she were afraid of breaking down completely. “My papa,” she whispered, her voice shattering the silence. “Well, Papa and my uncle. They’re twins . . .”

“You have a . . . papa?”

She laughed a little sadly. “Doesn’t everyone?”

He flinched. The ache in his chest exploded as every single thing he’d believed flashed through his mind. Her papa? Her . . . papa . . . She had a papa . . .? ‘*Sbit* . . .’

“Mama wears this tiara every year—Papa bought it for her just before they were married, and . . . and Papa always wears one of those goofy party hats because they make Mama laugh . . .”

Listening to her soft voice, the emotion that delineated her words . . .

“Then Papa would sit down and play the piano . . . When I was little, I’d sit beside him, just to listen . . .”

She . . . she had a . . .

“My sisters have missed Papa’s birthday, but I never have . . . At least, I never *did* . . . till now . . .”

A family . . .

“Sisters . . .” he interrupted quietly. “You . . . you have sisters . . .?”

She nodded slowly. “Isabelle and Alexandra—Lexi . . . They’re older than me . . .”

‘*She’s the . . . n-no . . .*’

“They’re both doctors, like Mama and Papa . . .” she sighed quietly, a marked frown filtering over her features. “R . . . researchers . . .”

Kurt cleared his throat, struggled to keep a hold on his emotions. “Do you . . . do you have a large family?”

“I guess you could say that,” she ventured. “Aunts and uncles and cousins. I’m the youngest, though . . .”

“The . . . the baby,” he muttered.

“I-I’m not a baby!” she insisted sharply.

He blinked, feeling the blood draining from his features, hearing another voice at a different time . . . “*I’m not a baby!*” Carrie had insisted . . .

“Besides,” she went on, a hint of haughtiness in her tone. “My cousin’s wife is pregnant, so *their* baby will be *the* baby, right?”

He grunted, unable to do much more than that. ‘*She . . . she has a family . . .*’ he kept thinking over and over again. ‘*A family . . . that misses her . . .*’

“What about you?” she asked, the directness in her gaze startling. “Do you have family?”

A flash of the old defensiveness, the anger shot through him. “No,” he stated a little loudly. Drawing a deep breath when she winced, he shook his head, ground his teeth together. “No,” he repeated a bit softer. “They, uh . . . they’re all . . . dead.”

She seemed to consider that for a moment. Kurt closed his eyes, turned his head. The very memory of his little sister was enough to draw fresh blood, wasn’t it? And she—the little demon . . .

She gasped softly, her hands fluttering at her lips as her eyes widened, as her face paled, as her eyes filled with tears again. “Oh . . . that’s why . . .” she whispered.

He blinked and shook his head, unable to grasp exactly what she was implying. His mind was reeling, his emotions in overload, unable to discern what he thought, what he believed, and what he knew . . .

“That’s why . . . you hate youkai,” she murmured, her hands shaking, her nostrils trebling precariously. “Youkai . . . because you . . . because you saw them . . .”

He opened his mouth to lash out at her; to tell her to mind her own business—to tell her to leave him alone. The words died on his tongue, though, and he stared in mute wonder, in silent horror, as a single tear slipped down her cheek. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “So sorry . . .”

And he couldn’t stand to look at her, couldn’t take seeing the pain in her eyes, couldn’t tolerate the innate knowledge that her upset was genuine, that somehow, in the midst of her own private hell, that she was able to be sorry for something that she hadn’t done . . . Turning around, he collapsed against the bars of the cage, his head falling back, his gaze searching the rafters so high above as he struggled, as he fought, as he tried to comprehend . . .

He had to clear his throat before he trusted himself to speak, his throat rough, raw, aching. “Why?” he countered softly. “Why . . . would you apologize?”

He felt her shift in the cage, felt the warmth of her back against his through the bars. “The youkai I was hunting,” she began quietly, as though she were afraid that her voice could break her resolve—or his. “He killed fifteen children in Paris . . . Fifteen families, destroyed, and all because he didn’t like humans, and I thought he . . . he deserved to die . . . I thought that I was helping, but . . .” she trailed off with a sigh, pausing for a long moment before she went on. “There are youkai who despise humans—youkai who blame humans because we have to hide, but we’re not all like that . . . I know you don’t believe me, and . . . and I can’t blame you for that. If anyone hurt my family, I think . . . I think I’d hate them, too.”

A strange sense of numbness settled over him, a hollowness that he hadn’t felt in years. He understood—he recognized it: his brain couldn’t deal with it all, could it? He couldn’t make sense of it . . . to believe what she’d said . . . to believe her . . .

A thousand moments of his life, the nights he'd spent in the dusty back rooms of the library . . . the time he'd hunted down those beasts, and . . . and the feeling that he was doing the right thing—believing wholeheartedly that he was somehow saving another family from the fate that his had suffered . . . But not once had he ever thought—never once believed or considered—that they'd have families of their own: families that weren't necessarily as different as he wanted to think they were . . .

Everything he thought he knew; everything he'd told himself . . .

The laughing eyes of his baby sister . . . the silvery hair of a strange little demon . . . What was right? What was wrong? And what the hell was simple perception?

The silence in the room was deafening. The coldness that settled in his very bones had little to do with the temperature of the holding area and everything to do with the numbness.

He didn't know how long he sat there thinking of nothing and everything, remembering moments that came in no viable order; a chain of memories that had little to do with rhyme or reason . . .

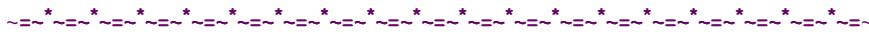
A slight pressure against his shoulder made him blink, and when he glanced down, he couldn't help but stare. He hadn't even noticed when the little demon had crawled out of the cage. How long she'd sat beside him, he didn't know, but somewhere during those moments, she'd fallen asleep, her cheek resting on his shoulder as though she just needed to know that she wasn't alone . . .

The oddest feeling crept over Kurt, gentle and soft and whispering. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt it, but it was familiar enough that he knew he had at some point in his lifetime . . . a gradual warmth, a foreign sense of comfort . . . It wasn't unwelcome, but it was unsettling.

That feeling was nudged aside, though, as another darker thought intruded. If what she'd said was true—if what she claimed was right . . .

*'What the hell . . . does it . . . mean . . .?'*

There was no answer; just the steady tick of the clock.



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
She's ... the baby ...?

## Chapter 32

### Ideology

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*'I don't know what to believe . . .'*

Holding the steaming mug of coffee as he stared out the window in the dingy little diner, Kurt let out a deep breath and wished for the thousandth time that he understood exactly what was going on.

He'd wandered in for a cup of coffee, having spent the better part of the day since leaving the facility just wandering around without a real destination. He'd stopped Harlan long enough to tell him that he was taking some time off. It hadn't struck him at the time, why the bastard was more than willing to allow it. Kurt knew now, though, that Harlan just assumed that he was going to hunt down another demon—a male. That's the only reason why the damned old fool would have grinned like a moron when Kurt said he was taking time off.

Honestly, though, Kurt didn't give a damn, what the man thought. He just needed to think . . .

He'd spent his entire life hating those things, hadn't he? He'd spent so much time believing that they were nothing but monsters . . . Having not one, but two families destroyed in front of him . . . He'd really thought that he was right . . . but now . . .

The absolute sadness on the little demon's face . . . the tears that pooled in her eyes but would not fall . . . Tears for the family who would be worried sick about the youngest: the *baby* . . .

*“Then Papa would sit down and play the piano . . . When I was little, I’d sit beside him, just to listen . . .”*

‘N . . . no,’ he thought, setting the mug down and digging his hands into his hair. ‘No . . . it’s . . . it’s a trick . . . It has to be a trick . . .’

He wanted to believe that, didn’t he? Wanted to believe it because . . . because admitting that he had been wrong . . .

Standing abruptly, he dropped two dollars onto the table and slipped out of the place. New Year’s Eve . . . the calm before the storm . . . People milling about, buying those last minute things that they’d need for their parties . . . Hurrying here or there as they muttered about waiting till the last minute . . .

And if he believed the little demon, then he knew that there was one family somewhere . . . one family that wasn’t watching fireworks or running all over town as they tried to find those items that had somehow slipped their minds . . . One family who was sitting near the telephone, hoping, wishing, praying it would ring . . . And if that were true . . . then it was his fault . . .

*‘Damn it . . .’*

But they were monsters, weren’t they? Monsters . . . beasts that killed and destroyed indiscriminately . . . They’d killed his family, and all because he could see them . . . and yet . . .

And yet, the little demon . . .

So where was the truth? Where was the understanding? How could he accept the idea that she wasn’t really so different from anyone else . . .? If that were true . . .

If that were true . . .

Hunching his shoulders against the wind that battered at him, he tugged on the black leather gloves and kept moving. If that were true . . . then who was the monster, really?

Everything that he'd ever thought; everything that he'd believed . . . was there any truth in it? Was there any real and true reason?

*“My sisters have missed Papa’s birthday, but I never have . . . At least, I never did . . . till now . . .”*

Pressing onward, he kept moving through a sea of unknown faces, against those beliefs that had become so ingrained in him over time that he hadn't thought to question them . . .

The door to a small shop crashed open, a little girl dashed outside. Crashing into Kurt's legs, she stumbled and nearly fell. He reached out to steady her instinctively, blinking when she smiled up at him. Deep blue eyes in such a tiny little face . . . corn silk blonde hair that whipped in the wind . . . a little dimple in her cheek . . . Human, yes, but . . . but if she'd had those ears—those little white dog ears . . .

Kurt stepped back as the knot in his stomach grew. She probably did look just like that when she was little, didn't she? Hair a touch paler, eyes a hue darker . . . a little girl's smile . . . a little girl who hadn't realized that there were some monsters out there who were infinitely worse than the ones that she might believe hid under her bed at night . . .

The child's mother ran outside, glancing curiously at Kurt before rushing her daughter back inside. He stared at the door for a long minute before forcing himself to move on.

*“The youkai I was hunting . . . He killed fifteen children in Paris . . . Fifteen families, destroyed,*

*and all because he didn't like humans, and I thought he . . . he deserved to die . . . I thought that I was helping, but . . . There are youkai who despise humans—youkai who blame humans because we have to hide, but we're not all like that . . . I know you don't believe me, and . . . and I can't blame you for that. If anyone hurt my family, I think . . . I think I'd hate them, too."*

And yet he knew, didn't he? After she'd tried to escape that first time, had she ever actually hurt anyone? Had she raised her claws to strike them down? True, there was the incident with Peterson, but . . . but even then, she'd only tried to shove him away, and while she had cut his cheek . . . Well, Kurt couldn't say he blamed her for that. Still, when the guards had come, she hadn't tried to fend them off . . . and somewhere deep down he understood, didn't he? She'd let them kill her before she'd willfully bring them harm, no matter what they'd done to her . . .

And somehow, that just didn't sit well with him, either, did it?

What kind of creature was she, to wield such power and yet to choose not to use it to help herself get out of there? He liked to think that he could control her, but if he were honest, he knew he couldn't. If she'd been set to gain her freedom . . . Safety was an illusion that he'd created because it had suited him to do so, and the one to suffer for his arrogance . . .

*"I'm sorry . . . so sorry . . ."*

With tears in her eyes, slipping down her cheeks—tears that she refused to let fall for herself, for her family . . . and yet she'd shed them for him . . .

For him . . .

Stopping on a strangely deserted street corner, Kurt lifted his head, stared at the gray skies that threatened snow that didn't fall . . . *'Like her . . . tears . . .'*

*“It means . . . monk, basically . . . Are you a monk?”*

A harsh, bitter sound surged out of him. He might have thought that it was a laugh if he had harbored the capacity to make such a noise. Eyes narrowing as he stared at the skies, he shook his head. *‘If . . . if there is a God or something—anything . . . if there’s anything at all . . . Then show me, can’t you? Show me exactly what I’m supposed to . . . believe . . .’*

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“I hate this place.”

“So you’ve said.”

Kichiro snorted and shot his twin a doleful glower. “Shut up, Ryomaru.”

Ryomaru sighed and shrugged offhandedly, leaning in closer to his brother as he avoided a woman who was hurrying along the sidewalk with an armload of shopping bags nestled in her arms. “Well, you know, baby brother, it really ain’t that bad . . .”

“Keh! I can’t believe that they still insisted on having that damned birthday party . . .”

“Yeah, but it made Grabby smile, so I figure it was for a good enough cause . . . ‘Sides, you see Zelig’s face when Gin gave us that cake? Looked like someone just dealt him the wedgie of the century . . . Good ‘nough, if you ask me.”

Kichiro shot his brother a completely frustrated look. “Good thing I’m not asking you, then, isn’t it?”

“C’mon, Kich . . . it wasn’t all bad, right?”

Kichiro shook his head. “You mean, before or after Baby-Belle and Lexi got into their shouting match?”

Ryomaru winced. “Yeah, okay, that was bad . . .”

Kichiro sighed, jamming his hands into his pockets. He’d known, hadn’t he, when Bellaniece had called to ask him hesitantly if he’d come home for his birthday . . . He’d known what they were planning, but he simply didn’t have the heart to deny her, either. Something quiet and strained in her voice . . . and he’d hopped onto the first flight he could get with Ryomaru in tow, and they’d flown back to Maine for the debacle of a birthday party, only to fly back into Chicago early this morning . . .

And maybe it was done with the best of intentions—a moment in time to remember the family he’d been neglecting of late, and he’d done his best to smile and to accept those well-wishes that sounded entirely too tight, too strained to be genuine.

But after his altercation with Mamoruzen—damn that pup and his pragmatic thinking . . . . And the hell of it was that Kichiro did understand what the young man was trying to say. That didn’t mean that Kichiro liked it or that he’d ever give up and stop searching. No, it only served to add to the weight of it all that was bearing down on him, and every time he turned around, he was reminded of the things he *couldn’t* be.

Then his daughters . . .

Stepping into the kitchen, hoping for a brief reprieve from the unsettling notion that everyone was watching him, just waiting for him to flip his lid, Kichiro had stopped short when he heard the raised voices inside . . .

*“You know, I think that everyone is having a great time,” Isabelle said as she pulled a few bottles of champagne out of the refrigerator. “I wish Grandma and Grandpa were able to come . . .”*

*Alexandra slammed the water glass on the counter and slowly turned to face her sister. "It's a joke, Bitty! Don't you get that? A huge joke . . . not one of those people wants to be here, especially Papa and Uncle Ryomaru . . . You dragged them home just to have this farce of a party when they ought to be out there looking for—"*

*"One night is not going to make or break anything," Isabelle cut in curtly. "In fact, it might do them both some good! Papa's running himself ragged, if you haven't noticed, and Uncle's not much better."*

*Alexandra narrowed her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest as she glared at her sister. "You can't even bring yourself to say her name, can you?"*

*"Don't be silly! Of course I can!"*

*"Then say it," Alexandra challenged. "Stop acting like there's nothing wrong! Stop acting like a child! Samantha's out there somewhere! For all we know, she could be—"*

*"Don't you say that! Don't you dare!" Isabelle cut in coldly. "She's fine—just fine! And you should feel that she's fine, too!"*

*"Yeah, well, I don't!" Alexandra countered. "You might, and Mama might, but I don't! And don't say that it means that I don't care, because I do! If I could bring her home right now, I would, but you . . . you live in this fantasy world, don't you? Do you even grasp it? Do you understand it at all? Samantha is gone—gone! She's been missing for two months! We don't know who has her or what they want, and even if we did, would it matter? Wake up, damn it! Wake up and look at the facts! Grandpa and Uncle haven't found her—the best of the best can't locate her! What the hell do you think that means?"*

*Isabelle strode over to her sister, glowering at her in a fierce sort of way that was entirely unlike her. "Don't you dare talk like that, especially not in front of Mama, do you hear? If you do, so*

*help me, Lexi . . . I'll never forgive you. Never!*

*"Girls," Kichiro said quietly as he strode into the room. "What are you doing?"*

*They both had the grace to look entirely ashamed, and Kichiro heaved a sigh. "Sorry, Papa," Alexandra muttered, hurrying over to kiss his cheek. He gave her a wan smile and a quick squeeze meant to reassure her though he doubted that it actually did.*

*Isabelle turned away, as though she needed a moment to compose herself, and maybe she did. Alexandra slipped out of the kitchen, and Kichiro sighed again. "Baby . . ."*

*She held up a hand over her shoulder. "I know; I know," she interjected quietly. "I'm the eldest; I should be an example, right? It's just . . . I feel it, you know? I know that she's out there, somewhere, and . . . and tonight, she's thinking about us, too . . ."*

*Kichiro didn't know what to say to that, either. In the end, he said nothing at all, simply wrapping his arms around his daughter, hoping that she understood the things that he just couldn't say; the silent promise that he'd bring her sister home . . .*

*"Listen, Kich . . . we'll find her, right? We'll find her, and she'll hug me and tell me that I'm the best, of course."*

*Kichiro snorted, knowing damn well that his irritating brother was just trying to irk the hell out of him, and damned if it wasn't working like a charm, too . . . "Shut up, baka."*

*Ryomaru grinned just a little. "You worry too much. You're just like Mother that way."*

*"Yeah, and you never worry enough, do you?"*

*Ryomaru snorted. "I worry just fine, baby brother."*

Kichiro didn't respond to that as the two of them continued along the street. Passing by buildings that they'd seen a hundred times if they'd seen them once, and it didn't matter from what angle they saw them, it was the same: no Samantha.

"Well, you know, she's always liked me better, anyway . . . not that I blame her. I'm hella fine, eh?"

Kichiro rolled his eyes. "If you're so hella fine, why don't you and Nez just have another one of your own instead of trying to steal mine?"

Ryomaru shrugged. "Been thinking about it."

That got Kichiro's attention quickly enough. After Nezumi had lost their baby a few years ago, Ryomaru hadn't mentioned trying again. "Yeah?"

Ryomaru's ears flattened for a moment then flickered back up once more. "Nez said that she . . . she wants to try again, but . . ."

Kichiro nodded. He could understand that, he supposed. Losing their baby had been hard on Ryomaru, even if he hadn't said as much out loud. Kichiro knew. Kichiro always knew, didn't he? "Well," he joked half-heartedly, "maybe it's better if you don't. After all, weren't you recently called a woman? A fairy woman?"

Ryomaru grunted and shot Kichiro a dark look. "A half-fairy woman, damn it," he grumbled.

Kichiro shrugged. "Sounds about right."

"Shut up . . . and I think that it's time for me to remind you that we're twins—*identical* twins—even though I'm better looking with softer ears—"

“And a bigger ass,” Kichiro added dryly.

“—so if I look like a woman half-fairy, then I suppose that means you do, too.”

Kichiro rolled his eyes. “Whatever, whatever . . . You know, maybe if you took some time off work . . . maybe it’d be better for Nez if you do decide to try again.”

Ryomaru let out a deep breath and nodded. “Yeah, I thought so, too . . .”

Kichiro suddenly chuckled.

“What’s so damn funny?”

Shaking his head, he turned the corner and kept walking. “Just struck me, you know . . .? We used to walk all over Tokyo, trying to figure out what girls we could pick up . . .”

Ryomaru chuckled, too. “We did, didn’t we?”

Kichiro let out a deep breath, his gaze roaming over the building fronts of the never-ending streets. “When did all that change?”

“Hell, I try not to think about it. Makes my head hurt.”

Kichiro rolled his eyes, wondering how many times he’d wandered this way, always searching, searching . . . and how many more times he’d have to keep doing the same. ‘*As long as it takes,*’ he thought with a sudden grimace, a tightening of his fists. ‘*As many times as it takes . . .*’

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The combined aura drew his attention; a power that he sensed long before he saw the demons. Lowering his head, he scanned the streets, eyes widening when he spotted . . . them?

Two of them, both with the same silver hair as the little demon; both with the strange dog ears, too. The strangest sense of déjà vu settled over him as he stared, as he watched the two. Tall—easily over six feet tall . . . powerful, yet there was something about them, wasn't there? A measure of . . . sadness . . . but it was more than that.

They could have been . . . *'Twins,'* he thought with an inward grimace. *Twins . . . 'It's . . . hopelessness, isn't it . . . hopeless because they can't . . . they can't find . . . her . . .'*

And even though he didn't know which one her father was upon first glance, did it matter? Hanging back far enough to avoid drawing their notice, he followed at a distance, repulsed yet compelled . . . They looked entirely too similar not to be related, not to bear that close of a familial bond. A sharp, stabbing pain shot through Kurt's chest as the two turned their heads, their ears twitching and pivoting to intercept any noise, any hint of something familiar.

The wind shifted slightly, blowing against Kurt's face, carrying sound to him that he might not have otherwise heard: a conversation . . . the bits of a conversation . . .

“. . . We'll find her, right? We'll find her, and she'll hug me and tell me that I'm the best, of course.”

“Shut up, baka.”

“. . . Just like Mother that way.”

“. . . never worry enough . . .”

“I worry just fine, baby brother.”

*‘Damn it . . . they really are . . . her family . . .’*

Digging his hands into his pockets, bracing himself against the bitter wind that the two demons didn’t seem to notice at all, he heard the voice in the back of his mind, telling him that what he was doing was stupid; foolish, that if he got caught, they’d kill him, not because of what he could see, but because of what he’d done to one of theirs . . .

But he couldn’t stop, either. Call it morbid curiosity or a sick sense of irony, Kurt trailed the two along the streets. If they had a real destination in mind, he couldn’t rightfully tell. It was all right, wasn’t it? After all, he didn’t really have anywhere he had to be . . .

The neater looking one—that was her father. Kurt wasn’t sure how he knew this. There was more of an urgency in his aura, more of a desperate quality, and while the other did seem concerned, his feelings were nowhere near as strong as the one. Long hair braided and hanging down the center of his back, clothes immaculate, worn easily, as though he took no notice of his appearance, and maybe he didn’t. Still, there was a quiet sense of frustration, an underlying anxiety, and Kurt understood that, too, didn’t he? He’d . . . he’d seen it before . . .

Kurt had been seven the spring when Caroline had slipped out of the yard. He’d said he’d play with her, but got sidetracked reading a comic book. The next thing he knew, his father was there, demanding to know where his sister was. It was then that Kurt had realized that the gate was opened just enough for her to slip out . . .

And they’d searched frantically all over the neighborhood. All the neighbors, the local police—everyone had come out to help look. The raw emotion on his father’s face . . . the tears that stood in his mother’s eyes . . . and the absolute relief when they finally found her.

The trill of a cell phone caught Kurt off guard. The two demons stopped while the one with the braid pulled out his phone and frowned at the display. A moment later, he opened the device and held it against his head where a human ear might have been. Kurt wasn't close enough to hear the exchange.

A fleeting glimpse of raw hope flickered to life on his features. Kurt moved in closer to the store window beside him, pretending to be interested in the items on display. Long ago, he'd learned how to mask his power if he wanted. It was one of the few useful things that Old Granger had taught him, but he had to concentrate to do it. It came in handy now, though he didn't doubt that those particular demons might find it odd if they caught him following them.

As fast as the hope had surfaced, though, it disappeared, only to be replaced but an unmasked air of complete and utter disappointment. "No," he said, his voice taking on a raw quality, a harsh sound. "No, that . . . that isn't her."

The twin shook his head, his expression taking on a commiserating slant, a harshness that was disbursed by the concerned lines near the corners of his eyes. "No luck?"

The little demon's father pinched the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes for a moment as he struggled to regain a semblance of his composure. "They, uh, said they saw her on Halloween in Sacramento, California. Said that they remembered because she was dressed up like a devil . . . but . . ."

"But she was here on Halloween," his brother muttered. "Damn it . . ."

The phone rang again. This time the father looked like he might consider smashing it instead of answering. Kurt grimaced as a crowd of kids who looked like they were on their way to some sort of party despite the early hour passed between the brothers and him. Weaving through the throng when the demons started to move again, he grimaced.

Everything she'd said . . . she'd told him the truth, hadn't she? About the family that missed her; the father she loved . . . Everything, everything, and . . . and he'd taken her away from all of that, hadn't he?

If Caroline had lived—if she were still there, that's what he would have wanted for her, wasn't it? A family who would search forever if they had to; search for the daughter that they couldn't find, the sister who had disappeared, the niece that they only wanted to see again . . .

But demons were real, and he'd believed for so long; believed that they only killed and destroyed . . . believed that they were the basest of creatures . . .

He'd never met anyone like her, no matter what she was, no matter where she'd come from. He'd never met someone who cried for him . . . concerned enough to try to wake him from those nightmares . . .

And it was just by unfortunate circumstance that he'd happened upon her: the sad little demon with the deep blue eyes . . .

He'd never once stopped to think, never once considered, that she had people who loved and cherished her, people who would hurt when she didn't come home. He hadn't thought enough of her to believe that she was anything more than the monster that he'd built up in his mind so very long ago, and yet she smiled at him, didn't she? She smiled, and she laughed, and she . . .

Kurt winced.

And she cried . . .

The ones that had killed his family—those were the monsters. They'd had no remorse,

no shame, no pity. They'd done what they'd done because they could; because there was no one to stop them. That was their crime, wasn't it? But the little demon? What had she done to warrant the disrespect of him and the researchers? What had she done that was so terrible that it warranted a lifetime inside a cold cage—a cage he'd constructed within barriers meant to protect humans . . .

A family who loved her, who missed her, who cried for her . . .

Kurt increased his pace, stepped up behind the two demons. Lifting his hand, reaching out to grasp him—her father . . . If he told him where she was . . .

*'They'll kill her . . .'*

Jerking his hand back as he uttered a harsh gasp, he stopped in his tracks as the realization sank in. If he told those demons . . . they would go after her; he didn't doubt that. If they went after her . . . the guards had guns, and even the little demon couldn't move faster than a bullet . . . If they went after her, how many humans would die? Would either of them make it out alive? And if it came to it, she . . .

She wouldn't fight back, would she? She wouldn't because she didn't want to hurt humans . . . If the guards came for her with their guns, fearing for their lives . . . if they pulled those guns on her . . .

And she . . . She'd stand there and let them do it, wouldn't she? She'd let them . . . she'd let them kill her before she would raise a hand against them . . .

And wouldn't it be worse for her? Should anyone she love get injured or killed just to save her? Knowing that your loved ones died . . . died for someone else's reasons in someone else's war . . . He knew what that felt like, damn it . . . He knew, and . . .

Caroline's face flashed through his head—the day she'd gone missing. His father had



## Chapter 33

### Fatalism

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Samantha leaned back and sighed softly, her eyes dark in the shadows of the blanket she had pulled over her head a few hours ago when she'd first felt the gradual decline in her youkai blood. The guard—she didn't know his name—was nodding off in the desk chair where the taijya normally sat.

*'Where is he?'* she wondered for the millionth time in the four nights since he'd last stayed with her. It worried her more than she cared to think about.

What if he'd decided to look for himself, to see if her family was out there somewhere, searching for her? What then? What if he ran into them?

That thought frightened her. Her family . . . if they figured out that he knew where she was . . .

*'Don't be stupid, Samantha. How could they? They don't know the taijya, and even if they met him, do you really think they'd be able to tell from first glance that he was the one who had taken you, in the first place? Don't worry about him. He's strong enough to take care of himself.'*

That thought was enough to bolster her flagging spirits.

But where was he?

She missed him. Desperately. It wasn't so much that she missed his companionship, per se, but she missed the familiarity, the innate understanding that, so long as he was there

that she wasn't alone. She'd noticed it before, hadn't she? He had a way of making her feel as though everything really would be all right, even if her happy ending wasn't the same as everyone else's. Somehow, she felt as though her future were intertwined with his, and even if she didn't know how that was, she knew—knew—that she was meant to be near him; that even had circumstances been different, she'd have had the same feeling, the same compulsion.

To help him, to show him . . . to make him understand that there were still things in the world worth seeing, still things worth fighting for . . . Why she wanted to do this, she wasn't certain, and why she knew deep down that he would be back weren't questions that she could answer, but she knew.

The incessant tick of the clock was the only sound in the silence. It was maddening.

Twisting a long lock of coal black hair around her index finger, she grimaced as she shot the guard another quick glance. She didn't really have to do that, she figured. He was snoring loudly enough to wake the dead. She really hated the feeling of vulnerability that was way too hard to ignore in this place. It was just a matter of time, wasn't it? One of these times, she wasn't going to be able to hide her secret from them, and what then? It wasn't like she really thought that they'd stop their research just because she was human once a month. There was something entirely cold and calculated about them, wasn't there? They didn't care, and whether she was hanyou or human, it wouldn't matter, and she knew that, too.

But . . . would it matter to the taijya?

Letting out a deep, dejected breath, Samantha shook her head. He . . . he would feel bad, wouldn't he? He'd hate that she was more like him than he'd first thought, and . . .

And he'd hate himself for it, wouldn't he? He'd think that he'd done something unspeakable—that was, if he could come to accept that she really was half-human. She

didn't really have a reason to believe it, but that didn't really matter. She knew it was true.

The last thing she wanted was to add to his list of regrets. He had enough of those already, didn't he?

But how long could she keep it a secret? How long before he figured it out for himself?

Her youkai was right before when it had pointed out that she wasn't trying very hard to escape. That was true enough, wasn't it? It wouldn't really be that difficult to push the guards away, especially in those moments when they freed her from her shackles so that they could bind her to the gurney, and they'd gotten a little more lax with her of late, as well. It wouldn't take much to gain her freedom—if she could escape without getting herself shot—and while she told herself that she stayed because she didn't want anyone else to go through what they were doing to her, there really was more to it, wasn't there . . .?

She stayed because . . .

Gritting her teeth as a slow understanding ebbed through her, Samantha closed her eyes. Trying not to think about it wasn't working, and really, if she did, would that actually help her at all? It wouldn't, and she knew it, and it might even have been funny if she were in any position to see the humor in anything. She wasn't.

*"I don't know, Samantha . . . it's different for everyone . . . I knew from the start that your mother was my mate—at least, my youkai blood did. It took me a while to catch up . . ."*

That was what her father had said when she'd asked him how he'd known that Bellaniece was his mate. Her mother had insisted that it had been a more gradual process for her, but that Samantha should take care to listen to that voice because it was never wrong, but more importantly was something else that Bellaniece had said . . .

*“He’s the one who feels familiar . . . and you’ll want to protect him, even if you think that there’s no way you can . . . because mates protect each other. Your father protects my heart, and I protect his in return . . .”*

Samantha heaved a sigh. She wasn’t entirely sure she wanted to admit something that monumental to herself, not yet, but . . .

But the taijya had been familiar to her from the start, hadn’t he . . .? She’d recognized something about him, something that had spoken to her, even when she knew nothing else about him at all.

Biting her lip as tears welled in her eyes, she let her forehead fall against the cold metal bars of the cage. Why did the understanding—the knowledge—hurt? The pain that swelled inside her was poignant, as bittersweet as the last days of summer, of realizing that one certain day, one special moment in time, could never, ever come again. As quickly as the arguments surfaced in her mind, they faded, gently but surely—as surely as she’d ever known anything else before. It really was hopeless, and she knew that, too. She couldn’t ask him to love her, not even a little; not when she knew what had happened to his family . . . not when she understood why he felt the way he did . . .

Even still . . . even if she couldn’t do more than show him that not all youkai and hanyou were the vile creatures that he believed them to be, that would be enough, wouldn’t it? To release him from the ghosts of the past . . .

Wrapping her arms a little tighter around herself, she smiled sadly into the darkness. Her grandmother, Gin had told her before that she couldn’t pick and choose the people whom she cared for; whom she loved. Samantha hadn’t understood that at the time, but now . . . She supposed that Gin had been right, after all.

And why did those truths make her feel even more alone than before . . .?

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“If you do it, you’ll be sorry.”

InuYasha snorted loudly and turned around to face his half-brother. “How the fuck did I get stuck with you, anyway?” he grumbled but pulled his hand away from the hilt of his sword. Okay, so he had been considering busting down the stone fence with Tetsusaiga, but only because he was feeling a little more frustrated than normal, at the moment.

Kagome rolled her eyes and tugged on InuYasha’s ear. “Don’t be starting a fight, InuYasha. We’re out here looking for Samantha, and Sesshoumaru is only trying to help.”

“Help drive me nuts,” InuYasha mumbled, inclining his head to alleviate the strain of Kagome’s pulling fingers despite the marked scowl on his face. “We got it under control,” he snapped. “Go the fuck away, why don’t you?”

Sesshoumaru didn’t even blink at the intended insult. “Miko, Toga tells me that you’ve already checked the areas closest to the hotel.”

Letting go of her mate’s ear, Kagome nodded. “We’re working out in a circle. It seemed like the most logical way to go.”

He nodded once, his eyes narrowing as he stared around at the dilapidated buildings rampant on this side of Chicago. They were tired, old; most of them wouldn’t pass a code inspection, yet it cost too much to rip them all down, so they stood, empty and forlorn—favorite spots for the less-than-savory members of society. Blocks away from the run down tenements and industries, the area was a bleak place, as unwelcoming as the

wind blowing off Lake Michigan. “What an ignoble place,” he mused, more to himself than to InuYasha or Kagome.

Kagome pressed her lips together and let out a deep breath. “I hope that we don’t find her here,” she ventured quietly. “Not in a place like this . . .”

“This place, that place—what the hell does it matter? We just find her and bring her home—end of story!” InuYasha growled.

“We will,” Kagome added, her smile much thinner than she meant for it to be.

Sesshoumaru shot InuYasha a bored stare. “Do not make me regret talking the authorities into letting you keep that.”

“Keh! As if you coulda stopped me, bastard.”

“All right,” Kagome interjected before the two could get into one of their full-blown name-calling bonanzas. “Let’s just go, okay?”

InuYasha snorted again, but started walking, his hand resting on the ancient sword’s hilt as his eyes shifted from side the side, his ears twitching as he monitored the area for any signs of danger.

Kagome rubbed her forehead. She’d figured that it would be something like this when the men had split up for the day. She wasn’t entirely sure that it was a good idea to send those two anywhere together, but everyone else was already gone, so there wasn’t really any choice. If they managed to get along for the duration of their search, she’d be genuinely surprised.

She had to admit, though. InuYasha was actually holding it together much better than she’d have thought. He’d never had much in the way of patience, and they’d been

searching for so long now . . . If anything, he seemed even more determined, even more focused. She smiled despite her glum thoughts. He always loved to surprise her, didn't he?

"And you have sensed nothing, Miko?" Sesshoumaru asked at length. He knew the answer to that, she was sure, but just wanted to hear it for himself.

"Nothing," Kagome admitted with a grimace.

InuYasha uttered a terse grunt. "Don't worry about it, bastard! We got it under control."

"Baka," Sesshoumaru muttered under his breath.

His cell phone rang, and InuYasha rolled his eyes, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for Sesshoumaru to answer it.

It didn't take long, and there wasn't much to discern from the actual side of the conversation that she heard. Sesshoumaru tended to answer in a series of 'yes', 'no', and 'mmm's, so it wasn't surprising when he hang up quickly enough. "I must go," he said, forestalling any contentious commentary from InuYasha.

"Go? Go, where?" InuYasha grumped.

"There is something that Zelig would like me to look into," he replied smoothly. "I trust you shall keep him on a short leash, Miko?"

InuYasha started to growl low in his throat. Kagome elbowed him in the ribs to cut him off. "Have a safe trip," she said instead.

The Inu no Taisho nodded once and turned to walk away.

“Keh! Why is it that he never does nothin’ but piss me off?” InuYasha muttered.

Kagome sighed and shook her head. “Come on, dog-boy. We’ve still got a lot of ground to cover.”

He snorted indelicately but fell into step beside her.

Kagome suddenly giggled and lifted a hand to flutter over her lips.

“What’s so funny, wench?”

She waved a hand dismissively. “I was just thinking . . . remembering . . .”

“Bout what?” he asked dubiously.

Winding down to a gentle smile that somehow looked a little sad, she sighed. “Just remembering what it was like, traveling all over with Sango and Miroku.”

“Yeah,” InuYasha intoned in a surprisingly quiet tone. “Could have used his help right about now . . .”

“Sometimes I miss them so much that it seems like only yesterday that we last spoke,” Kagome admitted.

“I wonder if he ever stopped groping butts,” InuYasha went on. “He was pretty helpful for a human—more helpful than that damned kitsune . . .”

Kagome rolled her eyes. “Shippou was a child back then. What did you expect?”

“Even youkai children can do more than he ever did,” InuYasha argued.

Kagome sighed. It never did any good to argue with him, did it? “You know, you were always so hard on him.”

“That’s because he was a pain in my ass.”

Kagome reached out and grabbed the kotodama rosary that he still wore around his throat. “You know, I could put the spell back on these,” she warned.

“Yeah, but you won’t,” he goaded. “This is shit! Where the fuck is she?”

Kagome fell silent. She had no answers for that, either. In the time they’d been searching, they’d covered roughly a third of the inner Chicago streets. It was a slow process, but what other choice did they have?

“Why you so quiet, wench?” InuYasha broke through the silence that had fallen between them.

Kagome shook her head, pulling her coat closer around herself. “No reason,” she lied, pasting on a little smile that she only hoped would fool her mate.

He didn’t look like he bought it, but he nodded just the same. “Let’s go,” he finally said, increasing his stride. “Sami’s waiting for us.”

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*‘So they seem to travel in pairs . . . Makes sense . . . more than two would be conspicuous; less than two would be foolish . . .’*

Lowering his binoculars, Kurt rubbed his eyes and drew back a little further into the shadows of the alley across from the Chicago Parisian Hotel. He'd followed the twin demons back here after he'd trailed them all over the city, figuring that he would be better off to figure out where they went and how they conducted the search for the little demon.

It also didn't take him long to realize a few things. For starters, if he just walked up to one of them and told them that he knew where they could find her, he'd be killed, dead, not because of what they were but because of who they were in relation to her, and while the idea didn't really bother him nearly as much as it should have, he'd come to some other conclusions, too. The biggest reason, however, was simple enough. If he died now, then he'd never be able to do what he planned after he got her out. He was going to systematically destroy the facility and all of the ones like it—destroy them so that they couldn't do this sort of thing to any other little demons who had family waiting back home. If her family wanted to kill him after that, then he figured that was fine, too . . . and with any luck, he'd be able to find the ones who had destroyed his family before the demons caught up to him . . . And the other reasons . . .? Lips thinning in a definite show of resolve, he shook his head. Other reasons . . . like . . .

Like the idea that he couldn't do anything that might jeopardize her life, and sending in her family to get her—after he took down the barrier outside the building, anyway—most certainly would. If the researchers panicked and killed her to get rid of the evidence . . . She'd been through enough because of him, because he hadn't understood her or her kind to begin with. The last thing—the very last thing—he'd do was to put her in danger just to assuage his own guilty conscience.

Like the knowledge that he couldn't let it go on; that he couldn't just get her out if there were even the smallest possibility that the researchers could hunt her down again and recapture her. No, when he got her out of there, it had to be in such a way that would allow him some sort of head start, enough lead time for him to get her home without the researchers being able to find her again. He'd considered getting her out and leaving her

where her family would find her—at the hotel or something—but the problem with that plan was that he would then have to rely upon them to see that she got home, to see that they got her out of Chicago before anyone came looking for her, and he didn't even try to fool himself into believing that they wouldn't try. He didn't give a great goddamn what happened to the white-coats—that's what she called them—but . . .

But if she refused to fight back against them now, then it stood to reason that she didn't like the idea of hurting them, even if they didn't feel nearly as benevolent toward her. If things went awry and there was bloodshed from either side of it, she'd blame herself, wouldn't she? Not only that, but to potentially lead the researchers right back to her and her family, as well . . .? That would only serve to scar her even more deeply than she'd already been. He couldn't do that. He just couldn't.

No, the entire thing had to be done in such a way that it allowed the little demon as much peace of mind as she could have, and he didn't even delude himself into thinking that it'd be easy. Hell, no . . .

Getting her out of there was going to be a task, in and of itself. Too many security cameras, too many potential risks . . . He needed to find out exactly how he could do it without causing too much suspicion until after he was out of there with her, and that might take some doing. As it stood, every inch of that place was monitored by security with the exception of Holding Area One, and that one was only unmonitored because he'd inadvertently taken out the camera with a power hose.

But before any of that, he needed to figure out the demons' habits because the last thing he wanted or needed just now was to run into any of them inadvertently.

He wasn't at all surprised, either, to see the same bronze haired demon coming out of the hotel earlier, though this time, he was with a black haired one who had the same kind of dog ears as the little demon. They'd headed downtown. A few minutes later, another silver haired one emerged. He'd had to look twice at that one. It had the same ears as

the little demon but the eyes were gold like her father and his twin brother. He was followed in short order by a huge one with short, shaggy hair and a marked scowl on his features.

They were frighteningly large, the lot of them, which only made him wonder why it was that the little demon was so tiny. Were all female demons that small? He frowned. He'd yet to actually see a female one other than the one he was trying to set free.

Still . . .

Shaking his head, he narrowed his eyes as another demon walked down the street, heading for the hotel, or so it seemed. Another silver haired one, though this one didn't have the dog ears. Lifting his binoculars, Kurt slowly adjusted them to get a better look.

What he saw, though, made him go dead still. Staring in mute fascination, he wasn't entirely sure that he wanted to believe what his eyes were telling him. The demon—definitely male—had the same coloring as the little one, right down to the dark blue eyes. As he observed, the demon pulled out a cell phone and spoke into it, and as he spoke, the worry marring his features seemed to deepen. Kurt wasn't entirely sure what to make of that one, but he couldn't help but wonder. The little demon hadn't mentioned having a brother. Still, they looked too much alike not to be siblings, didn't they?

The demon slapped the phone closed and stuffed it into the pocket of the black leather biker jacket that looked like it had seen better days before turning on his heel and striding into the hotel.

Kurt frowned. If only there was a way for him to get closer to them, for him to be able to eavesdrop on some of their conversations. It would make things infinitely easier, wouldn't it?

It was strange, though, wasn't it? He'd had more trouble coming to terms with the idea that the little demon wasn't the monster that he'd initially thought than he had in making the decision to let her go. Maybe it was simply because once he faced the realization that she wasn't at all like the monsters who had destroyed his family, the rest had been little more than common sense. Or maybe it was as easy as the knowledge that she really hadn't done a thing to try to hurt him in the length of time since he'd found and captured her.

Or maybe . . .

He shook his head, pushed away the irritation that he was letting himself get sidetracked when he had a job to do. Whatever the reason, she wasn't like those other ones, was she? She wasn't cruel, and she wasn't vindictive, and she wasn't trying to kill him. She was just sad and lost and lonely, and those were things that he understood, too, and if she could go home to a family who loved and cherished her . . .

Then he'd make damn sure that she did.



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
Their baby ...

## Chapter 34

### Separation

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“You hear about Doc?”

Samantha felt her ears twitch though she was careful to keep her eyes averted as the white-coats walked around the table.

“Doc? Did he quit or something? He hadn’t been in all week, has he?”

The one called Peterson laughed nastily. He was finally back to work though he still wore a butterfly bandage over the deepest part of the cut on his cheek. Samantha figured that she ought to feel worse about that than she actually did. Every time she thought about what he’d tried to do to her, it made her feel a little nauseous inside.

“No-o-o-o,” Peterson drawled. She intercepted the almost smug expression on his face and ground her teeth together. “He went out to catch another one of those,” he went on, flicking one of Samantha’s ears.

She flattened the appendage to elude his fingers.

“Another one? What for?”

“Don’t be an idiot, Warren. To breed them, of course.”

Samantha could feel the blood in her body run cold as those words sank in. It couldn't be true, could it? Sure, he hadn't been in over a week, and she'd been left to a different night guard, but . . . but surely he wouldn't . . . would he?

"Nah," Warren said after he considered the idea. "That'd just be stupid, wouldn't it? I mean, if we bred our own, then we wouldn't need him . . . He's not stupid enough to shoot himself in the foot, is he?"

Peterson snorted indelicately, glancing around to make sure that no one else was within hearing distance before answering. "Hell, he's no different from her, is he? Damn freak if there ever was one . . . 'Sides, what does it matter? I hear he won't be back till next week, anyway . . ."

Warren shook his head and tapped his pen against the clipboard in his hands. "No, thanks," he muttered. "Not after what she did to you."

Peterson rolled his eyes, shifting his gaze around once more before rather casually placing his hand on Samantha's breast, pinching her nipple so hard that she had to struggle not to make a sound when pain shot through her. "Makes it that much more fun, if you ask me. By the time I'm done with her, she'll be begging for more."

"I don't know. I think you're just asking for trouble," Warren replied dubiously.

Peterson chuckled, finally letting go of her nipple. "Old Harlan's going to let the new demon have at her. Might as well get some use out of her before that happens, don't you think?"

"And we're going to watch all that? Watch them . . . do whatever it is they do?"

"I don't know . . . might be a turn-on. Maybe they'll tear each other up. Who knows? A little blood might be hot."

“You’re kind of a sick bastard, aren’t you?”

Peterson shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

Samantha felt ill. Trying to ignore the two white-coats was nearly impossible. It wasn’t that she cared what Peterson said. He was scum, as far as she was concerned, and scum didn’t matter. What he did or wanted to do to her was entirely out of her grasp, anyway, and even if he did do something to her body, he would never, ever crush her mind. What did bother her, however, was the idea that the taijya was out there trying to find another ‘demon’, and why . . .

*‘He . . . he wouldn’t . . . would he?’*

Her youkai voice didn’t answer right away—something else to frighten her.

*‘He couldn’t . . . n-no . . .’*

*‘Of . . . of course he’s not, Samantha,’* her youkai finally piped up, but it didn’t sound too positive, in her estimation, either. *‘That would be . . . He wouldn’t do that . . .’*

To . . . to breed them . . .?

Samantha bit the inside of her cheek, fighting not to think about what that awful white-coat had predicted. That couldn’t happen. Even if he did capture another, he wouldn’t be that stupid. Another youkai would know who she was, and he’d never, ever . . . and even if he did . . . A stubborn harness entered her gaze as she considered the ramifications. She wouldn’t let it happen, no matter what.

She paid no attention as the guards filed into the room, as she was shoved back into her smock, shackled for the short trip back to the holding area. Body numb, brain slow, she couldn't wrap her mind around any of it.

True, the taijya had been gone for a few days, ever since the night that she'd broken down, that she'd told him about her family.

Had that been a mistake?

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard the door of the cage clang closed, the rattle of the outer cage coming out of the floor.

She hadn't meant to tell him all of that. She hadn't meant to tell him anything at all, but when she'd looked at the date on the page of the paper, she hadn't been able to help herself, either. She missed them so badly, so desperately, that it hurt, and the blatant reminder . . . Well, it was difficult to reconcile.

Tamping down the bitter fear that she'd somehow given the taijya ideas about capturing her family, she ducked her chin and glared at the water pan. The guy who had been coming in to watch her wasn't a bad sort, but he didn't bother to get her fresh water, either, and the dog food she was staring at was not appealing in the least.

All in all, she'd been coping, though she hated to admit the worst of it, too. She missed him terribly, that taijya. She missed his wry sense of humor—the few times she'd seen it, anyway. She missed the feeling that she wasn't alone, but as much as she wanted to think that he wasn't out there hunting again, she couldn't quite convince herself that it wasn't true, either.

That's what he did, wasn't it? Hunter. He captured youkai, and . . . and he sold them to this place . . . What could possibly stop him? After all, he thought they were monsters, right? He thought . . .

And she couldn't rightfully blame him for that, either. If his family had been killed by youkai, then she could understand his hatred, his malice. She'd hate, too, wouldn't she? If she'd only seen that sort of thing . . . That was how real prejudice started, wasn't it? By an insular moment of ugliness . . .

But even then . . . even if he came back . . .

Heaving a sigh, Samantha bit her lip. The night watchman strolled in, taking a moment to check the locks and make sure that she was secured before wandering through the barrier covering the doorway and down the hall for a cup of coffee.

Even if the taijya came back, she wasn't entirely certain that she could actually help him, at all. As much as she wanted to, she had to admit that making him realize that not all youkai were bad was a daunting thing, at best, and if his family had been murdered, then how open was he to change, in the first place?

But if he were out there hunting for another one—a male . . .

A surge of panic rippled through her, so fierce, so abrupt that she closed her eyes against it. Her family was out there, weren't they? They were out there looking for her; she knew it in her heart. What if he . . . what if he found one of them? She had little doubt in her mind that they'd be able to take care of themselves—that was, if they saw him coming. She hadn't, had she? But then, she'd also allowed herself to be a preoccupied, too . . . and that had made all the difference . . .

Or had it?

What if the taijya caught one of them?

What if they hurt or killed the taijya?

For reasons that she didn't want to consider, the very idea that he might be hurt, and by one of her family members, no less . . . *'No . . .'*

She . . . she didn't want her family to hurt him, did she? Whether or not he came back, she couldn't stand the idea that he'd be injured. She wanted to . . . to protect him from them, but she was helpless, wasn't she?

But what if he really was out there looking for a youkai for those damned white-coats to breed her with? That sounded so vile, so foul . . . The last of her dignity, her pride . . . There was no way they'd be getting that, too.

*'Don't worry, Samantha . . . he's not like that.'*

Grimacing at the soothing tone of her youkai voice, Samantha sighed. *'How can you be sure?'*

*'I . . . I don't know . . . I just know that he's not. It's there in his aura . . . He isn't like the others, those white-coats.'*

She nodded slowly though she didn't feel entirely certain at all. She wanted to believe it; she really did, but she also wanted to believe that someday she'd be free again, too, and as the days dragged on, she couldn't help but wonder, and every day, that dream seemed to fade a little more in her mind.

And that frightened her most of all. She wasn't entirely certain exactly how long she could last here, and with the taijya gone . . .

Quiet laughter interrupted her silent musings, and Samantha narrowed her eyes at the one who stepped into the room. Her guard wasn't there—she wasn't sure where he was,

really, but staring into the eyes of that damned white-coat, Peterson, she couldn't help the knot of trepidation that grew deep down within her . . .

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“So how's it going?”

Evan Zelig made a face as he strode along the sidewalk on the north side of Chicago. “It's going,” he muttered.

“Daddy says that they're not having much luck with any of the leads that have been called in, either,” Madison Cartham, Evan's long-time best friend replied.

“That's an understatement,” he said, feeling the bitter sting of frustration once more. “We'll find her, though. Don't worry about that.”

Madison sighed. In the background, he could hear the sound of the workmen who were trying to get Madison's new LA shop ready to open. “I wish there was something I could do,” she remarked. “I've been trying to think of something—anything—but you know, it all seems so . . . shallow . . .”

Smiling wanly despite his own ragged emotions, Evan shook his head. “Don't worry about it, Maddy. It's enough that you're thinking about her. ‘Sides, you have enough to do, don't you? Gotta get that shop open, right?”

She heaved a sigh. “Easier said than done,” she confessed. “There are too many damned ordinances around here. Anyway, who cares about that, right? Are you making any progress at all?”

“Actually . . . no,” Evan admitted with a grimace as he turned the corner and kept moving. “If we could just find something, you know? Kich is going crazy; about seven people have called him in the last few days with leads that just turn out to be nothing. Grandma and the old man are still combing the city on foot, though, but it’s taking so fucking long that it seems pointless, too . . .”

“I doubt they believe that it’s pointless.”

He sighed and nodded. “Yeah, but hell . . . it’s been over two months . . .”

“You’re not about to give up, are you?” Madison demanded, a hint of censure in her tone.

“Hell, no,” he barked. “That’d be a hella stupid thing to do. Just frustrated; that’s all.”

“I know,” Madison added in a consoling tone. “Samantha’s strong. She’ll come home. I’ll bet she’s just biding her time, waiting for the right opportunity to get away from whoever has her.”

Evan tried to smile. It didn’t really work. He believed that she would eventually come home; of course he did. That didn’t really offer him as much consolation as he’d like, though. In fact, it seemed pretty damn hollow, really . . .

Stopping outside an old office building that seemed like it was vacant, Evan sighed and shook his head, glowering at the surroundings. A hundred streets or more that all looked pretty much the same . . . If only . . .

Narrowing his gaze as he stared at the corner of the building, he uttered a terse growl. “Hey, Maddikins, I’ll call you later,” he said, clicking off the device before she answered and dropping it into his pocket.

It was barely noticeable, wasn't it? The old symbol etched into one of the bricks set into the corner of the building . . . If he hadn't been staring straight at it, he probably wouldn't have noticed it, at all. The shadows cast by the huge stone church beside the building didn't help, either, but there was something entirely familiar about that symbol. Something that he felt like he should recognize . . .

There was something entirely unsettling about the place, wasn't there? Striding up onto the small porch, Evan shook his head. He could feel it though it was harder for him to try to put the same feeling into words: something foreboding . . . like . . . like standing in a vacuum . . . as though parts of himself were being pulled away by some unseen force . . .

Backing off the porch, he stood back, trying to make sense of the strange sensation. It was obvious to him that it was a barrier of some sort, though maybe not in the strictest sense of the word. It wasn't set up to keep youkai out, per se . . . but he wasn't entirely certain what it was intended to do otherwise.

His gut reaction was to bust the door in if he had to, but a quieter and much more logical voice told him that maybe he should just wait. If the person came by who owned the place, maybe he'd get some questions answered without having to resort to violence . . .

Digging his phone out of his pocket, he dialed. "Hey, Kich . . . I . . . I think I might've found something . . ."

It only took him a minute to give the rest of the address before he hung up the phone and stood back to wait . . .

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He had to get back to the facility soon, didn't he?

Shaking his head as he tried to brush off the distracting thought, Kurt kept moving, keeping his gaze trained all the while on the silver haired demon across the street. It had occurred to him last night while he'd sat outside the hotel that the little demon was probably not eating or drinking again—a thought that bugged the hell out of him, really. Still, he really did need to do what he was doing, didn't he? She was tough, he knew that well enough, too, and while he wasn't overly pleased with the idea that she would probably be a little shaky when he went back, he assured himself that it would be better in the end, all things considered.

Watching the demons, memorizing their habits, figuring out how many there were, all totaled, was first and foremost in his mind now because it hadn't taken him long to figure out that the worst thing that could happen would be for them to find him in possession of the little demon on the way out. He'd devise a way to get her out of there, yes, and he'd figure out the best way to send her home without giving himself up too soon, too, and in the end, he could only hope that she could understand even if she never actually forgave him.

Rounding the corner, Kurt frowned, unable to shake the complete unease that he'd felt all day while he trailed the blue-eyed demon. He seemed more agitated than he had in the last couple days since Kurt had started to follow him, and the demon was far too close to Kurt's office, as well. Common sense assured him that there was no way that the demon could locate it, and even if he could, why would he? Still, when he stopped just outside the building, Kurt had to grit his teeth as he ducked into the alley across the street.

He was talking on his cell phone—he had been for the last block or so. Kurt hadn't been close enough to overhear any of the conversation. The demon closed the device and stowed it in his pocket as he slowly examined the corner brickwork. Kurt grimaced. He'd etched the symbols he'd found in an old book that was said to have the power to contain demon auras when he'd rented the derelict building during his first trip to

Chicago years ago. The demon stepped back slowly then strode up onto the small stoop, only to stop short when he realized that something was wrong.

*'Damn it,'* he thought, clenching his jaw as he watched the demon. He was trying to make up his mind, wasn't he? Trying to decide whether or not he could or should remain where he was, Kurt supposed.

He hadn't counted on them finding his office. That was going to complicate things a lot, wasn't it? Should those demons get inside, they'd find his books, his gear and the few records that he kept—at least that wasn't as much of a concern since Kurt wasn't actually known for keeping those, anyway. Still, the gear would be questionable enough, wouldn't it?

A nagging feeling kept tugging at him. He didn't pay attention to it right away. The demon got his phone out again and made another quick call. Kurt had a feeling that he was calling in back up . . .

He needed to get out of there, didn't he? Needed to put some distance between himself and that office before they found him. If they decided to bust in, there wasn't much that Kurt could do about it. No, it'd be much, much worse if they caught him, wouldn't it?

If they caught him, he wouldn't be able to get the little demon out safely. That was the most important thing now, wasn't it? Getting her out safely and without any violence . . . He'd have time to wreck the place afterward, providing he was able to come up with a reasonable plan . . .

But that would all be moot if he found him now, wouldn't it?

A taxi slowed down and stopped in front of the office, and Kurt shook his head as the one twin—her father—got out. The two exchanged words as they stared at the building. Kurt backed farther into the cover of the alley. He needed to get some of his stuff out of

there, but he didn't dare do it while they were outside. Cursing his luck, he broke into a run as he took off down the alley, intent on putting as much distance as he could between himself and the demons, at least for the moment.

He'd almost reached the end of the alley, the opening that brought him out near the subway when a strange feeling crashed down on him hard—a sense of foreboding, a complete dread that he could neither place nor give name to, and yet . . .

“Little demon,” he whispered, his eyes flashing open wide. Glancing at his watch, he grimaced as he tugged the sleeve of his jacket back down over his wrist. It was nearly seven o'clock, and for some reason . . .

*'She . . . she needs me,'* he thought suddenly, eyes flashing open as the thought solidified in his mind. He didn't know how he knew it; couldn't say why he thought it was true, but somehow he just knew, didn't he? The little demon . . .

Flagging down an approaching taxi, Kurt hopped inside and blurted the address of the facility to the driver. “Step on it,” he growled as he tapped his foot impatiently. The absolute urgency wasn't something he questioned. He didn't know how he knew or why, but it didn't really matter. In his mind, he could see her, the expression on her face as she'd tried so hard to pull the stitches that had held her stomach closed . . .

The feeling that something terrible was happening . . . the irrepressible fear that shot through him . . . A gentle pleading in those dark blue eyes . . . Why was he seeing it? What did it mean? She was scared, wasn't she? Scared yet angry . . . angry that she was feeling fear, in the first place . . .? But that's what it was: fear . . . and a sorrow so deep that it cut him to the quick. Something was happening; that much he comprehended. Something that she couldn't control and couldn't escape . . . and if he didn't hurry—if he didn't get there . . .

“Can't you move faster?” he yelled as unbridled desperation shot through him.

The driver muttered something in a language that Kurt didn't understand, and he heaved a sigh. The man better get him to the right address or there'd be hell to pay, damn it . . .

The sense of foreboding was growing worse by the second, and Kurt grimaced, silently willing the taxi to move just a little faster . . . *'Hold on, little demon . . . just hold on . . .'*



**Final Thought from Samantha**

**...A male...?**

## Chapter 35

### Intuition

-----

Kurt slammed through the service door at the facility at a dead run, breathing hard as he dashed toward the stairwell without bothering to mess with the elevator. The feeling was more than he could stand, and by the time that he broke out of the enclosed stairwell, he felt as though he were coming completely undone.

The hallway flashed past in a blur, his footsteps echoing around him. Catching himself on the corner of door jamb, he glanced around the holding area, seeing everything in a blur, in a second, in a moment.

Peterson had the little demon chained up to the apparatus where Kurt had first fastened her to give her a shower, her body naked and dripping from the water hose that hung limply in Peterson's hands. Angry red welts covered most of her skin—the bastard had turned the power hose on her full force, hadn't he—and a lone trickle of blood coursed from the left corner of her lips. The skin on her right thigh was already starting to discolor, taking on a nasty grayish purple hue, and yet she stood there, proud and unflinching, her expression completely blanked, her gaze clear and calm as a trickle of blood ran down the inside of each of her legs, spiraling around the limbs.

It was that blood that drew Kurt forward.

Peterson looked somewhat surprised to see him, his face contorting in a smug, stupid grin, as though he honestly believed that Kurt would think that what he was doing was all right. The smile didn't last long when Kurt barreled forward, flattening the man with a fist in the middle of his face. He felt the cartilage snap and crumble beneath his

knuckles just before Peterson fell back. Striding over to the fallen researcher, Kurt hauled him to his feet and flattened him again. "Get up, damn you!" he demanded.

Peterson blinked and started to shake his head.

Kurt yanked him upright again and sent him flying with a fist to his jaw. "Get up, you piece of shit!" Kurt bellowed as he stalked toward the fallen man. "Get—"

A small whine, the tiniest sound, stopped him dead in his tracks. The little demon, her eyes squeezed closed . . . she didn't want him to hurt the damned bastard, did she?

"Get the fuck out of here," he growled, flexing his fist, struggling to contain the absolute rage that demanded more retribution. "Get out now before I decide that you'd be better off dead."

"Have you lost your mind, Doc?" Peterson muttered, his words much tougher than his tone of voice. Staggering to his feet, he spit out a mouthful of blood.

"What the hell part of research was that?" Kurt demanded quietly, stepping slowly toward Peterson who backed away toward the door. "You make me sick."

Peterson opened his mouth to say something then snapped it closed again. Without another word, he covered his nose with both hands and stumbled out of the room.

Kurt didn't move until the sound of the elevator door banging closed sounded in his ears. Breathing hard, he slowly shook his head, willing his heart to slow. The little demon uttered a sound, half way between a sigh of relief and a sob, and Kurt wheeled around, unleashing a string of curses under his breath as he ran over to unfasten the bindings that held her in place. No sooner did he have her arms unhooked than she threw them around him, clinging to him as though her life depended upon it as she shuddered and buried her face against his chest. Late concern stopped him, and for a long second, he

just stood, immobile.

He'd never in his life ever tried to console someone, had he? Grimacing as the realization sank in, battling back his own still turbulent emotions, he started to put his arms around her, only to jerk them away when she squeaked and hissed out a harsh sound when he felt the momentary discharge of built up energy flow from his fingers into her. "Uh . . ." he gasped with a wince as she crumpled to her knees, her hair sticking to her, twisting around her like a silvery ropes. Shrugging off his coat, he draped it over her shoulders. "S-sorry," he muttered, unsure if he was apologizing for the jolt or for not being there to stop the attack before it had begun.

In the end, he figured that it was a little bit of both. The little demon did nothing as he strode over to grab a clean smock and blanket out of the supply cabinet. "Here," he said, his voice a little harsher than he'd intended.

She reached up for the items without lifting her chin, letting his coat fall away as she struggled into the smock. Unfolding the blanket a few times, he wrapped it around her before heaving a sigh as he hunkered down beside her. "What did he do to you?" he asked carefully, dreading her answer yet needing to know.

She shook her head, refused to meet his gaze, her hands trembling as she pulled the blanket closer around her shoulders.

"You need to tell me," he prodded.

"Did you catch one?" she countered, her voice throaty, raw, much like it had been the first time she'd spoken to him after days and days of not using it.

Kurt shook his head, unsure what she was talking about. "Catch one, what?"

She swallowed hard, sniffled quietly. "Another demon," she whispered. "A *male*."

“A . . . what?”

“Isn’t that where you were?” she challenged. “Out . . . hunting for another?”

“No!” he growled with a shake of his head. He wasn’t entirely sure where she got those weird notions of hers, but he didn’t like them, not at all. “No . . .”

She finally looked at him, her gaze completely vulnerable yet full of a cautious sense of hope. “R-really?”

“Why would you think that I was?” he countered.

“But they said—”

“Who said?”

She let out a deep breath and shrugged. “The white-coats. They said you were going to hunt one so they could . . .” She suddenly shook her head like she didn’t want to think about whatever they’d alluded. Kurt wasn’t entirely sure that he could fault her for that.

‘*Damn bastards . . .*’ Rubbing a weary hand over his features, he sighed. “That’s not why I was gone. Now tell me . . . why are you bleeding?”

She blinked a few times, as though she wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but her mouth widened suddenly and she shook her head. “I’m all right,” she assured him. “He just hit me, was all.”

Gritting his teeth at the surge of anger that shot through him, Kurt was careful to keep his voice level. “He hit you,” he repeated.

She nodded but smiled. "I'll be fine," she stated once more.

"Let me check you over."

Rolling her eyes, she pushed herself to her feet, but he didn't miss the slight grimace that she hid quickly enough. "They check me over enough during the day," she replied. "I'm okay now; I promise."

He didn't look like he totally believed her, but he figured that if she could move around well enough that she wasn't so bad off. The bleeding seemed to have stopped, in any case, and he wouldn't be surprised if she were healed up by morning, anyway. Still, he'd be sure to keep an eye on her, regardless . . .

"Don't suppose you brought dinner for me," she ventured in a contrived neutral tone.

Kurt grimaced. In his haste to get here, he hadn't bothered, but then, he hadn't actually planned on coming back tonight, either. She probably was damn hungry, too, all things considered. Glancing at her food bowl, only to see the regular kibbles of dog food, he sighed. "I figured I'd, uh, order a . . . a pizza," he lied, unwilling to admit that he'd rushed in because he'd thought that she might need him.

Her ears twitched. "Pizza?"

"Yes, pizza," he said as he dug through the supply cabinet for some sterile wipes for her. "Come here."

She did as he instructed, staring at him patiently as he carefully tore open a foil packet and opened up the moist towelette inside. "This might sting," he murmured, his gaze trained on the small cut on her lip. It was already starting to heal up, and for that, he was thankful. She didn't wince or flinch as he dabbed at the wound. "Good."

She smiled just a little. “Careful, taijya, or I might start to think that you don’t hate me completely.”

“Of course I do,” he scoffed dryly, turning away quickly before she could discern the hint of redness that had filtered into his cheeks. “Here.”

She took the packets of towelettes that he waved at her. “What . . .?”

He grunted, jerking his head toward the bathroom as he continued to avoid her gaze. “I figured you’d want to clean up . . .”

“Oh . . . okay . . .”

He said nothing as she padded off toward the bathroom, his gaze darkening as he watched her, her back straight, proud—unbroken. If he’d been any later . . .

Grinding his teeth together as he purposefully refused to think about what might have happened, Kurt shook his head. If he didn’t stop thinking about it, he’d be hard pressed not to go after Peterson to make sure that the bastard never, ever tried anything like that again . . .

It struck him, too, and not for the first time, how very gentle the little demon really was, how much dignity she held so loosely—a quiet grace that should have been far more evident to him from the start. Then again, he hadn’t wanted to see it, had he? Hadn’t wanted to acknowledge the idea that she really wasn’t the monster that he’d wanted to think she was . . .

Yet he knew damn well that the ones who had killed his family . . . they were bad . . . even as her words came back to echo in his head. “*There are youkai who despise humans—youkai who blame humans because we have to hide, but we’re not all like that . . .*”

“Not all like that,” he murmured. Maybe she was right when she’d said that there were good and bad ones, just as there were good and bad humans . . . at any rate . . . maybe it was all right to believe that . . .

Maybe . . .

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Cain heaved a sigh and sat back in the chair that groaned in protest of the sudden and harsh movement. Tossing the ink pen onto the desk, he let his head fall back, staring at the ceiling as he methodically deconstructed the information that Myrna had just given him.

The office building . . .

Ben Philips strode into the office, leafing through a few pictures that Cain had printed out earlier. “So these are . . . Christian symbols?”

“Catholic, Myrna thinks, though she admitted that she could be wrong,” Cain muttered without looking at the panther-youkai. “Some sort of symbol used during demon exorcisms back in the seventeen and eighteen hundreds. The texts she looked over had symbols very similar listed for a handful of different religions. Hell, according to one of them, it was damn close to the inscription that was carved into the tree where Judas Iscariot hung himself.”

Ben nodded, dropping the pictures atop the blotter in the center of the desk. “So what are they doing on that building?”

“It’s not completely unheard of for different religions to etch symbols into their buildings

as a preventive to ward off evil. That building used to be owned by the church beside it, and that church has belonged to several different religious factions over the years, but without a bit of study, figuring out exactly which church would have used that exact symbol, we can't really tell."

Ben considered that for a moment then shot Cain a troubled scowl. "But the one who put up the barrier around the area where Samantha disappeared used ofuda."

"I know."

"Any way you look at it, it's hard to connect them, isn't it? I mean, for one that uses ofuda to use another religion's symbols . . . Why?"

Cain nodded slowly, sitting up and pulling the pictures over. The images were a little blurred but not bad. There were more coming, too, since Evan had mentioned that Kich had gone after a disposable camera. "I feel like I'm grasping at straws," he admitted, unable to keep the trace hint of bitterness out of his tone.

Ben inclined his head in agreement. "It's entirely possible for the barrier to have been there for years—decades . . . a century or better . . . Humans wouldn't have sensed it, would they? And youkai . . ."

"Youkai might not have, either. Evan said he didn't actually feel it until he went up on the stoop. All the same . . ."

"Hmm?"

Cain set the images aside and pulled out the paper where he'd jotted notes during Myrna's phone call, and he scrawled the name onto a clean sheet of cream colored fine linen stationery. "Here's the name of the person who's currently renting the building. There's no listing for a business at that address, though. Myrna's working on getting

more information, but I figured maybe you could find out something, too.”

Ben took the paper and frowned. “Ed Smith? Seems a little generic, if you ask me.”

Cain nodded then shrugged and sighed. “I thought so, too. Still, unless the owner of the building is a complete idiot, there’d have to be some record of ‘Ed Smith’, right?”

Ben agreed though he still looked rather dubious. “I’ll let you know what I find out,” he said as he folded the paper and stowed it in the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket.

“Thanks.”

Cain sat back again, watching in silence as Ben exited the study, feeling like he was chasing a ghost in the mist. This lead really didn’t seem any more promising than the others that they’d chased down in the more than two months since Samantha’s disappearance. One of these times, they had to get lucky, didn’t they? One of their leads had to go somewhere, so not following up on them simply wasn’t a viable option . . .

He could only pray that it was sooner rather than later . . .

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“Goddamn self-righteous, father-knows-best *bullshit!*” Evan snarled as he snapped the cell phone closed and glowered at his surroundings.

Kichiro sighed and slowly shook his head. “I don’t know, Evan,” he began slowly. “I hate to say this—and I *do* mean that I hate to say this—but he has a point.”

Evan snorted, planting his hands on his hips as he stomped the length of the building on

the sidewalk and back again. “Fuck! You’re agreeing with Cain?”

Running a hand over his face, Kichiro jerked his head once in a nod. “It used to belong to that church . . . It could easily be that someone put the symbols there years ago . . . it could be that the barrier has absolutely nothing to do with this. I mean, the one was done by someone versed in the Japanese—he or she used ofuda. This one . . .” Shaking his head in a completely frustrated sort of way, Kichiro sighed again. “This one uses western symbols.”

Evan shrugged. “I’m going to wait for whoever rented this place to show up,” he muttered. “I want to know for sure that it has nothing to do with her before I give up completely.”

Kichiro stared at him for a long moment then finally nodded. “Okay,” he agreed. “Sure.”

Evan nodded brusquely and stepped back. Kichiro watched him without a word. The young man strode over to and leapt onto the building beside the office to get a better view of the area, Kichiro supposed. He could understand Evan’s reasoning: better to be sure than just to go on assumption, and at this point, all they had was conjecture of one kind or another.

Staring at the building for another few minutes, Kichiro slowly shook his head. He could understand Evan’s frustration—he knew that emotion just a little too well, himself—but he also wasn’t entirely sure that he could disagree with Cain’s reasoning, and this place . . . Wasn’t it just grasping at another straw?

Besides that, he had been asked to meet with Martin Sandstrom, one of Cain’s generals. He wanted to get more information on Samantha so that they could better search the west coast area where he had jurisdiction, and while Kichiro thought it was a long shot, he couldn’t say that he didn’t think that they ought to try, either. At this point . . . at this point, anything was worth a try, right?

Evan scowled as he watched Kichiro head off down the street, ignoring the sting as his hair was whipped into his eyes, his face. He didn't care what the rest of them said; there was definitely something here; he could feel it. Something . . .

The problem was that Cain wasn't here to feel it, himself, wasn't able to make an accurate judgment because he was back in Maine, and even if Evan didn't like that, he had to allow that he understood why that was, and as much as he'd like to think that his father was taking the coward's way out, he knew better, didn't he?

That didn't mean that Evan agreed, and even if it were nothing more than wishful thinking on his part, he couldn't help but think that there really was something to the barrier, and before he could just brush it off, he had to know—had to be sure. Samantha deserved that, didn't she? Because Evan would be damned if he'd let it go if it had even the remotest chance that it was important . . . The little girl who had followed him around during his summers spent in Japan . . . the girl with the dark blue eyes . . . He owed her that, and come hell or high water, he'd make sure that she came home . . .

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"Pizza! Pizza, pizza, pizza, pizza, piz—" Skidding to a stop, the little demon's ears flattened as she drew away from him as he strode into the room with the freshly delivered pizza. "Eww . . . it has green stuff on it!" she grumbled.

Kurt shot her a quick glance but kept moving toward the desk. "What? Green peppers? Damn straight, it does."

Wringing her hands, she slowly, cautiously, shuffled toward the table. "But I don't like green stuff," she whined.

Kurt blinked and stopped, turning just enough to stare at her over his shoulder. “Oh, Christ, did you just whine at me?”

She bit her lip then nodded. “M-maybe . . .”

“Does your family think you’re this big a pain in the ass?”

She thought that over then shook her head. “Probably.”

He stared at her for a long moment then let out a deep breath. “Probably . . .?”

She nodded. “They never actually said . . .”

Kurt snorted and turned his attention back to the pizza once more. “I offer you pizza when you haven’t had a thing to eat in days, and all you can say is that you don’t like green stuff?” he countered.

She shrugged. “I do have my standards,” she pointed out as she twisted her fingers together in a knot of writhing flesh. “I don’t like green stuff.”

“So pick them off,” he said, grabbing a piece and biting into it with gusto. He hadn’t realized how hungry he was, had he?

She stuck her tongue out as she scrunched up the right side of her face in a show of abject disgust. “But it’ll still taste like them . . . ruined a perfectly lovely pizza with those nasty bits . . .”

Kurt snorted. “Nasty bits?”

Nodding emphatically, she hunkered down beside the monitor station, wrapping her

arms around her legs and burying her chin against her knees. “Yes,” she reiterated haughtily, “nasty bits.”

“You’re a strange little demon,” Kurt tossed back. “Anyway, beggars can’t be choosers, so either eat or shut up.”

She uttered a little ‘hurmph’ and continued to sulk. “No, thank you,” she muttered.

Kurt rolled his eyes, folding the rest of his slice in half like a sandwich. “Then don’t complain to me if you’re starving. I bought you food, and you rejected it.”

She was quiet for all of a minute, as though she were considering a new tactic. “You . . . you could order another one . . . one without the green stuff,” she ventured a little too innocently.

That earned her a long look as he slowly chewed and swallowed. “What? No way! It’s not my fault if you’re being picky for no good reason.”

“I have a perfectly good reason,” she huffed. “I don’t like green stuff!”

Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head. *‘Of all the stubborn, crazy . . . I am not—not—ordering another damn pizza . . .’* Glancing at her again, he had to do a double take when he noticed that her ears were not only flattened but were also stuck out to the sides, as well. “Knock that off!” he growled incredulously, forcing his gaze away from the pesky little demon.

“Knock what off?” she replied.

He snorted loudly and shoved the rest of the slice of pizza into his mouth. “That . . . that *ear* thing,” he muttered around a mouthful of dough.

She forced them back up, but they drooped once more a moment later. “But I’m *hungry*,” she complained.

“Then eat the pizza I ordered,” he shot back, “because I’m really not ordering another one.”

“You know, just picking off the green stuff isn’t really going to make any difference.”

Those ears smashed down again, and Kurt heaved a sigh. ‘*If she’s that hungry, she can damn well eat what I ordered, to start with,*’ he growled to himself, nudging aside the misplaced feeling that he was being entirely mean, and for no good reason. She said earlier that she liked ‘everything’. She hadn’t mentioned possessing a general disdain for all things green, had she? She could deal with it one time, damn it, because he was not about to give in and order a second one, right?

He snorted, jaw tightening as stubborn resolve set in. ‘*Right.*’



Final Thought from Kurt:  
Those ears ...

## Chapter 36

### Ears

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Kurt rubbed his arms and pulled his coat a little tighter as he leaned against the side of the building, waiting for the gaudy green pizza delivery car to arrive.

*'Damn it . . .'*

He still wasn't entirely certain why he'd given in, though he had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with those dog ears of hers. Something about the drooping appendages was just incredibly hard to ignore, and worse, how she'd managed to make him feel like a complete and utter ogre for having ordered a pizza with 'green stuff' on it . . . well . . .

And that wasn't even the half of it; not by a long shot . . .

When she'd figured out that he was calling to order another one, she'd done this strange little half-shuffle, half-scoot thing that completely reminded him of an excited puppy that he'd almost—almost—smiled. But she'd made such a racket while he was trying to order that pizza that she'd nearly driven him nuts, too . . .

*"Yes, one deep dish meat lovers, small—"*

*"Large," she corrected, leaning over his shoulder where he sat in the chair behind the desk. He covered the mouthpiece and pinned her with a bored stare. "I'm hungry," she hissed in a stage whisper.*

*He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Large," he amended.*

*"With extra meat."*

*The bored stare turned a little darker. "You don't need extra meat," he pointed out. "It's meat lovers . . . that's a hell of a lot of meat, to start with."*

*"But I like meat, and by the time they get here, I'll need it since I've been smelling your pizza, and it's making me hungrier . . ."*

*Pressing his lips together when her ears did that hideous droopy-thing again, he heaved a sigh. "With extra meat," he muttered.*

*"Well, sir, you realize that'll be an extra five bucks per meat you double . . ." the kid on the other end of the phone said.*

*"I know," Kurt stated, wondering if he ought to have stopped by an ATM before he came in. "It's fine."*

*"Okay, so that's one large deep meat lover's with extra meat, right?"*

*"Yeah."*

*"That'll be . . . fifty-three twenty-nine," the kid said.*

*Kurt grimaced. Five bucks times seven meats plus the base price for the pizza, to start with . . . yeah, that sounded about right . . . "Fine."*

*"Okay, we'll be there in thirty minutes or less."*

*Snapping the phone closed, he turned to face the little demon, only to stop short when he saw the flattened ears again. "Wh-what?" he blurted, eyes widening at the obvious attempt on her part to make him feel bad.*

*"You forgot the extra cheese," she said in a really quiet tone.*

*He stared at her for almost a minute before yanking open the phone once more.*

*"Mario's Pizza. We deliver everywhere," the same kid answered.*

*Kurt grimaced. "Yeah, hi . . . I just ordered a large pizza with extra meat . . .?"*

*"Oh, yeah! Right."*

*"Could you add extra cheese to that, too?"*

*"Hold on." Covering the receiver, he heard the kid's muffled voice call out. "Hey! That pie with the boatload of meat? Add extra cheese, too!"*

*"Thanks," Kurt muttered.*

*"Not a problem, dude. Anything else?"*

*"Oh, I think that's more than enough," Kurt remarked.*

*The kid laughed. "All right. They're getting ready to bake your pizza now, so we'll be there shortly."*

*"Great," Kurt replied. The line went dead, and Kurt snapped the phone closed.*

*The little demon cleared her throat.*

*“What now?” he demanded, almost afraid of what her answer was going to be.*

*“Well . . . you need soda when you have pizza,” she pointed out a little too reasonably.*

*“Soda . . . There’s a machine for those just down the hall,” he reminded her.*

*“But the white-coats said that it’s been broken since the night that you were snowed in here. They say you broke it. Did you? You realize, don’t you, that some people make their livings off machines like those, and if you go around breaking them—”*

*“I only broke the snack machine and only because a particular little demon kept whining about being hungry.”*

*The ears flattened just slightly as she scrunched up her shoulders and forced a tight little smile.*

*“That’s okay . . . I don’t need a drink, too . . .”*

*Heaving a sigh, shaking his head, a part of him seriously having trouble believing that he was having this particular conversation with the demon, Kurt shot her what should have been a quelling glance—if she had been looking at him. She wasn’t. Hitting redial on the phone, he could only grimace when the kid who answered asked him if he’d remembered something else. “Soda,” Kurt said. “A two-liter of Coke.”*

*“Umm . . .”*

*“What now?” he demanded as he closed the phone.*

*The little demon winced and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Well . . . I like orange soda better,” she confessed.*

*Shaking his head—he should have known—he didn't say a word as he opened the device and dialed the number yet again. "Orange soda," he said when the kid answered the phone again.*

*The kid laughed and hung up. Kurt wasn't going to call again, damn it, no matter what the little demon thought of next . . .*

*"Wait, wait, wait . . ."*

*Kurt shot her a look as he snapped the phone closed. "Now what?" he demanded, almost afraid to ask.*

*She shot him a sheepish grin and shrugged. "I . . . I wanted some bread sticks, too."*

*"Absolutely not," he insisted.*

*Those damned ears flattened again. "But I haven't had anything to eat in days," she reminded him.*

*Kurt snapped his mouth closed and made a face as he flipped open the phone once more, wondering absently if it wouldn't be easier to put the pizza place on speed dial. "Add an order of breadsticks, please?"*

*The kid chuckled. "Sure thing . . . cheese or marinara sauce?"*

*Gritting his teeth, he started to ask the demon then thought better of it. "Can you just bring extra of both?"*

*"No problem . . . We'll be there soon."*

*"A candy bar would have been nice," she ventured at length as he closed the phone yet again.*

*He snorted. "Don't push your luck, little demon," he warned.*

*She heaved a sigh that he supposed was meant to make him feel bad. It didn't work, considering how much her stinking pizza was costing him . . .*

*As luck would have it, though, he didn't have to call back. Oh, no, the kid figured that he should call Kurt before the delivery guy left, to make sure that they didn't need anything else. Kurt grunted as the little demon yanked on his wrist to bring the phone down to her level. "Bring me a Hershey bar, please!"*

And now, he was standing outside, freezing as he waited for the delivery. The watchman who was sitting in the monitor room had laughed and asked him if he were extra hungry or something.

At least it gave him some time to consider what to do about the silver haired demon who had found his office. That was going to be trouble—more trouble than he'd anticipated. Still, maybe he would give up if Kurt laid low for a while. After all, he didn't use that office unless he'd captured a demon, so it wasn't like he had to go back there. He had books there, yes, and some of his equipment, but there wasn't actually anything there that would lead them directly to him, as far as he could tell. That didn't really offer him much in the way of reassurance, though . . .

It wasn't that he was trying to hide her now, exactly, but . . . but there were too many things that he really needed to get straightened out before he set her free—things to ensure that she wasn't captured again. When he had sat down earlier to make a list of things that he had to make sure of before he tried to get her out of there, he'd realized one glaring thing that he needed to have verified before he ever tried to move her. Harlan had told him once that they'd gotten in a few of the very newest tracking devices; ones that could easily be inserted just below the skin—one that was so tiny that regular sensors wouldn't pick it up: about the size of the head of a needle. Rich husbands put them on their bored wives sometimes to make sure that those wives weren't cheating on

them. It had all been a joke to Harlan at the time, and Kurt, as usual, had only been listening halfway since nothing that Harlan had to say was of much interest, as far as he was concerned.

Now he wished that he'd paid just a little more attention. He didn't rightfully know whether or not Harlan had put something like that in the little demon, but he'd be a damn idiot if he didn't make sure that there wasn't one before he got her out of there. If the little demon knew, he could ask her. The trouble was that it could have easily been injected into her without her even realizing it, and once implanted, those things could transmit back the target's location via satellite network, right down to a street address anywhere in the world . . .

There was the security footage, of course. He'd be able to tell from watching those, whether or not they'd put something like that in her. Still, that was a hell of a lot of footage, wasn't it? But he didn't really have a choice in the matter, either . . . If he didn't check into it—if he got her out of there without bothering to make sure . . . a device like that wouldn't just put her in danger, it would also mean that her family was at risk, too, since he was going to make sure that she went straight home . . .

That aside, the other very real problem was that they came in every day, seven days a week. If they'd take weekends off or even just Sunday, he'd be able to get her out and allow at least a twenty-four hour lead time before they realized that she was missing. As it was, he'd be lucky if he could get a twelve hour head start, and that wasn't nearly enough to reassure him.

There were some very real drawbacks to his rough plan, and as much as he hated the idea of keeping her here, he wasn't entirely sure that he dared to try to get her out of there before he verified whether or not a tracker had been injected into her . . . She'd never forgive him, would she?

He sighed. Not that she was likely to forgive him now, that was . . . and with good reason, of course.

The headlights of a car slowed down on the street and pulled into the alley. Kurt pushed himself away from the wall and dug his wallet out.

“Seventy-five twenty-nine,” the kid who got out of the car said.

Kurt blinked at the total as the kid’s grin widened. Shaking his head slowly, he dug money out of his wallet and handed it over, muttering for him to keep the change. The kid laughed again as he handed it over. “Sorry, man . . . the pizza was too tall for the box, so we sort of had to fake it . . . Have a good one!”

Letting out a deep breath as he grasped the paper sack that contained the soda, breadsticks, and probably her candy bar, Kurt shook his head and pushed the after hours clearance button beside the door with his elbow. A moment later, the buzz sounded that signaled the lock release, and he leaned against the door to let himself inside.

*‘She’d better appreciate this,’* he thought as he headed toward the elevator. He never should have ordered a large pizza, damn it . . . she’d never be able to finish it . . .

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“I can’t believe you ate the whole thing . . .”

Samantha made a face as her stomach protested movement but managed to turn far enough to face the taijya, who was standing there with his arms crossed over his chest and a really weird look on his face. Caught somewhere between complete and utter shock and absolute horrified fascination, the end result was amusing at best—or would have

been if laughing wouldn't have been so blasted uncomfortable. "It was really delicious. Thank you."

He shook his head and let out a deep breath. "You're going to be sick; I just know it," he predicted darkly.

"No, I won't!" she argued with a flutter of her limp wrist. "Ohh, my stomach hurts . . ."

Shaking his head, he leaned back in the desk chair and stared at her for a long moment. "Tell me something," he finally said.

Samantha drew her feet up where she was perched atop the desk. "Tell you what?"

"Your family," he said in a carefully casual tone. "How big is it?"

Samantha's pleasant mood faltered. "My family? Why?"

He shrugged, as though her answer really didn't interest him that much. "Just asking."

She considered his answer, and while she didn't entirely buy into his reasoning, she figured that it was a good enough one to have asked. "Well, my immediate family isn't that big, not really . . . Just my sisters and my parents and me . . ."

She didn't see his scowl as he stared at her since she was frowning at her feet. "No . . . no brothers?" he asked.

She almost smiled, but the reminder of her family was a harsh one. "No, no brothers. Lots of cousins, though . . . and aunts and uncles and . . . well, you know: family."

"Just sisters . . ."

She nodded then sighed. “My sisters . . . they both look like Mama . . . really pretty . . .”

“They’re pretty?”

“Mhmm . . . Mama . . . she’s taller than me with this . . . gorgeous long bronze hair—not quite golden but not brown, either . . . Papa always says she’s the prettiest woman anywhere, and he’d probably right. I mean, I don’t think there’s anyone prettier than her, either. My sisters both look like her—Well, Isabelle has golden eyes like Papa, but Lexi looks exactly like Mama . . .”

His frown deepened. “So . . . you look like your . . . your papa.”

She smiled a little sadly, her ears drooping just a little as the image of her father’s face flashed through her mind. “Mhmm . . . I mean, Papa’s a good-looking man, but . . . but I’m a girl, and . . .” She trailed off, biting her lip, hating to admit to her own insecurities. She supposed that it was natural enough. Having grown up in a home full of beautiful women, she figured it was normal to feel a little like the ugly duckling living amongst swans.

He was quiet for a moment. “Bronze hair . . . golden eyes . . . Is there a . . . a male demon . . . who looks like that . . .?”

She blinked at his question then glanced at him. He was staring at his boot—he was sitting sideways with his right ankle crossed on his left knee. “Sure . . . my cousin—err, uncle.”

He did a double take. “Your . . . what?”

“Well, he’s my uncle, but he’s also my cousin,” she reiterated. “See, my papa and my grandma are brother and sister—well, technically Grandma’s my step-grandma, but I call her grandma, anyway . . .”

He stared at her for a long moment. "You're . . ."

"No!" she insisted, cheeks pinking since she knew what he was going to say. "Not at all. My grandpa was married before, and he and his first wife had my mama, but she died just after Mama was born. Then he later met and married my papa's sister. There's none of *that* involved."

He narrowed his gaze, leaning back a little more and crossing his arms over his chest. "You know, that explains a lot," he remarked.

Her mouth dropped open and she snorted loudly. "That's not even funny, taijya," she countered as she turned around and started to scoot off the desk. "I think I'm going to bed now."

"Wait."

She stopped and, against her better judgment, she spared a moment to look at him.

Without a word, he reached over and grabbed her wrist to tug her across the desk. "You're not bleeding anymore, right?"

She felt her cheeks heat at the indelicate reminder. "I'm fine," she replied quietly, lifting her chin defiantly.

"I'd feel better if you'd let me look," he said.

She shook her head and carefully pulled her wrist away. "I'm fine," she repeated.

He didn't look like he believed her entirely, but he also didn't look like he was going to argue with her, either. "Here," he blurted, suddenly grabbing his knapsack and rooting

around inside. He pulled out a small cardboard rectangle and stared at it for a moment before hesitantly holding it out to her. "I . . . I bought this a while back . . . It's not much . . ."

Samantha slowly reached out and took it, gasping quietly as her eyes widened, as she stared at the postcard. "Oh . . ." she breathed, blinking quickly as a suspect moisture glossed over her vision. "The . . . the sky . . ."

And it was. A picturesque image of the afternoon sky over an empty field with a tree and a steadily flowing creek . . .

"I saw it at the newsstand when I stopped to buy the paper," he explained, as though he had to explain why he'd purchased it, to start with.

"The sky's so blue," she murmured, unable to tear her eyes off the image. "Do you know where this field is?"

"W-I . . . no," he admitted. "No . . ."

She giggled then sniffled. "That doesn't matter, does it? So pretty . . . so pretty . . ."

"You . . . you like it," he asked quietly.

She nodded rapidly, a brilliant smile breaking over her features as she finally lifted her gaze to meet his. "You brought me the sky . . ."

For some reason, he looked pained. "It's . . . it's just a postcard," he muttered weakly.

"Absolutely not," she insisted. "I really wanted to see it again, even if it could only be a picture."

He didn't look like he knew what to say to that, and maybe he really didn't. In the end, all he could do was nod. "Well, it's, um . . . yours."

She started to giggle but stopped abruptly, and she shot him an almost nervous sort of glance. Slowly, hesitantly, she stared at the post card one last time then held it out to him. "Could you . . . would you . . . keep it for me? If they took it . . . the white-coats . . ."

He nodded, understanding her worry, taking the post card and staring at it for a long minute before he suddenly stood up and walked toward the cage. "Here," he said, digging a pocket knife out and carefully slicing through the top layer of plastic that covered the ofuda he'd plastered all over the top of the cage. He worked them aside carefully slipped the post card under the ofuda then straightened the layer over them and smoothed down the plastic again. "How's that?"

She stared at him for a long moment then slowly crawled into the cage. With a happy little squeal, she reached up, touching layer of plastic over the postcard through the bars of the cage. "It's like a window," she finally said, her smile still firmly in place. "The bars are kind of like a frame . . ."

His voice sounded oddly strained when he answered, but she couldn't see his face; she could only see his legs. "Y-yeah . . . a window . . ."

She tugged her blanket over herself and giggled. "I can fall asleep, looking at this," she said. "Thank you."

He didn't reply as he moved away. She noticed that he didn't go back to the desk, but instead sat at the table where the row of monitors were set up. That wasn't nearly interesting enough to hold her attention, though; not when she had a makeshift window to stare at . . .

*'He brought me the sky,'* she mused, reaching up, touching the picture once more. The plastic was cool against her fingertips, smooth like a pane of glass.

*'And pizza,'* her youkai added.

Samantha's smile widened seconds before a yawn interrupted her. *'He really is nice, isn't he?'*

Her youkai laughed softly. *'We missed him, didn't we? And he . . . he knew to come back . . . he knew that we needed him . . .'*

Samantha pulled the blanket a little closer as her eyes drifted closed. *'Of course he knew,'* she thought drowsily. *'He's our . . .'*

*'He is . . .'* her youkai admitted with a sigh. *'Yes, he is.'*



#### **A author's Note**

It's entirely possible to hit a female in the gut where the uterus is and to cause bleeding without actually hitting her too hard as long as you know where and how  
... and that's what Peterson did



#### **Final Thought from Kut**

Now to get to work...

## Chapter 37

# Little Victories

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Kurt stifled a yawn with the back of his hand and shook his head, groping for his coffee mug with his free hand as he tried to keep himself awake. Glancing at the clock on the wall, he sighed. It was almost time to go in, and he'd only been able to get through two of the surveillance videos that he'd stolen out of the facility. At the rate he was going, it was going to take him two months just to watch them all, not to mention that they were ongoing.

Raking his hands through his hair, he leaned forward and closed his eyes for a moment. It was taking too long, damn it. He hadn't realized that it was going to be so hard for him to leave her there when he'd gotten up this morning. Staring at her sleeping form huddled in the cage, she'd looked so tiny—so very tiny. Why hadn't he ever noticed that about her before . . .?

How was it that she could smile and laugh when she was trapped like a rat in a cage? Why could she seem so happy about something as stupid as a simple postcard? Her laughter was both welcome and . . . and frightening, awakening long dormant memories that were best left in the past . . . weren't they?

Slugging down the tepid coffee in the mug, he made a face and turned off the archive video. At least those were small enough that he was able to sneak over a week's worth of cards out of the security room without detection. The cards were only about half an inch long by a quarter of an inch wide and roughly the thickness of a credit card, and they played just fine in the media palmtop he'd bought expressly for the purpose of checking them over.

That was something else he'd quickly decided as he'd scanned through the first few minutes of tape. Those things were dangerous, and he was going to get rid of them before it was all over, too. The plan was to wreck the place so that viable research would never be possible there again, but those tapes . . . They were going to be the first things to go, damn it . . .

He hadn't known before, hadn't seen what those damn bastards called 'research' . . . or maybe the other demons he'd taken in there simply hadn't lasted long enough for any of their witchery . . . In any case, the things that he'd seen thus far . . . Was that even really 'research'?

Even then, he had to admit that he'd never cared to know exactly what was going on there, was he? He'd never given it a second thought, and the little demon . . .

Glancing at the clock, Kurt sighed. It was still a little early, but they'd mentioned something about testing her sense of smell today, and that hadn't sounded too great to him, either. Standing up so abruptly that the chair that he'd been sitting on skidded back on the barren floor, Kurt grabbed his coat and knapsack and headed for the door.

He knew damn well that her sense of smell was light years beyond his. She could smell a chocolate bar wrapped in foil and stuffed into his knapsack without any real effort. He'd heard her make commentary more than once regarding food or things of that nature. When he'd first realized that, he'd grimaced, worrying that those demons he'd seen at the hotel had somehow managed to get a good scent of him, and while he didn't think they had or they'd have confronted him, wouldn't they, he couldn't help but worry about it, just the same.

So he'd considered taking one of those so-called scent-tabs that he'd found in her pocket, but he wasn't entirely certain that it'd work on him, and even still, he probably should see if she'd tell him more about them before he went off and swallowed one.

Those things aside, though, he took the subway—something that he normally tried to avoid since he hated it—but since it brought him out at a station less than a block from the facility at the longest end of the commute, he figured it was a necessary evil. Besides, if he were lucky, he'd be early enough to do a little bit of poking around without anyone being the wiser. He really needed to get into the monitoring room alone, though, so that he could get an accurate count on the number of cameras hidden through the lower levels up to the ground floor, and he wanted to make certain that they were all the old Nantech 8000 series. If they were, then it'd be a simple thing to put them on a timed tape loop so that they thought they were running through the security cycles when they really weren't. If they were the newer Nantech 9000 series, though, he'd have to figure something else out . . .

Still, though, the most daunting part of the entire process was figuring out if they had put one of those tracking devices into the little demon, and even if they had, the problem was in removing it since those things had no real way of doing that. When the devices were first introduced less than a year ago, they were touted as, of all things, mother's little helper—track your children should they get lost or abducted, and a lot of parents jumped at the idea, thinking that they were one of the best inventions, ever, and while they weren't a bad idea, there were always those who would take advantage of such technology, too, and Harlan and his gang of bastard thugs, otherwise known as 'scientists' were some of those . . .

The subway ride across Chicago—or under it, as the case were—took almost forty-five minutes, but that was still shorter than walking. Still, by the time Kurt climbed the steps that led back to the sidewalk, he couldn't help the slight anxiety that churned inside him. He didn't know why he felt that way. It wasn't nearly the same as yesterday's strange feeling that something was not right, but it was there, nonetheless.

Stopping long enough to pick up some cheeseburgers and fries before heading toward the facility, Kurt couldn't quite make sense of the strange emotion that grew heavier with

every step he took. It was vaguely familiar to him, as though he'd felt it before, even if he didn't completely recognize it. It was almost as though . . .

His step faltered, and he blinked suddenly as it dawned on him. The strange emotion . . . the feeling . . . it was the same one he'd had when his father had told him that they would be going to Disney World during summer vacation, wasn't it? Had it really been that long since he'd felt that sort of thing? And now . . . he was looking forward to seeing the little demon . . .?

But that really was it, wasn't it? The anticipation of seeing her, of hearing her laughter . . . Her eyes really did sparkle when she laughed, didn't they? He hadn't actually thought that anyone's eyes could do that; he'd believed that it was something only written in sappy books that he had no use for . . .

It had bothered him, just how excited, how pleased she'd been by that simple postcard. There was something entirely too . . . final . . . in her reaction, as though she knew somewhere deep down that she'd never be free to see those things again—as though she knew it, and she'd accepted it, too . . .

And that bothered Kurt more than anything could . . .

Grasping the doors and yanking hard, Kurt stomped into the building as the black clouds of abject irritation rose inside him. How dare she give up, damn it! How in the hell could she think that it would be all right if she never got out of there? It wasn't right, and he wouldn't accept it . . . and he'd be damned if he'd let her accept it, too . . .

"Hey . . . you're early, Doc!" one of the security guards—Mazer, Kurt thought his name was—called out as he passed.

Kurt waved a hand but didn't stop as he moved toward the stairs. The building was emptier than normal, too, which was just as well with him. By the time he reached the

lowest level, he had to restrain the desire to break into a full-out run.

She wasn't in the holding area—not really surprising since he was about two hours early. They weren't on this level, either, which surprised him. In any case, though, it was as good a time as any to start checking the cameras stationed in the hallway. Digging a handful of change out of his pocket, he figured that pretending to use the vending machines would work just fine. Staring at the cameras he passed—they were stationed about every twenty-five feet—he recognized them easily enough as the 8000 series. At least that was good . . . Tinkering with those wouldn't be a problem at all.

Feeding money into the coffee machine—it was the only one that wasn't broken—Kurt was still waiting for the coffee when the doors to the freight elevator off to the right slid open. Six guards strode out, two of them supporting the little demon on either side. Her head was bent forward, sort of just lolling rather listlessly, and Kurt frowned. “What'd they do to it?” he demanded, careful to keep his tone a little flat.

One of the guards shot him a look and shrugged. “I think they were testing her sense of smell,” he replied. “She passed out a few hours ago, and they were hoping she'd wake up again, but, well . . .”

Kurt nodded slowly and turned away. The guards dragged her down the hallway toward the holding area as Kurt's gaze slipped to the side to watch them without turning his head. *‘Testing her sense of smell, huh . . .?’*

He supposed that those idiots had tested her sense of smell about the same way that they'd tested her hearing before, though this time, at least, she didn't seem to be throwing up from it. It struck him again, exactly how warped he thought the entire situation really was. Were those bastards the kind of children who had to deconstruct every toy they were given, just because they could? The little demon wasn't a toy, but the principle was the same. Worse, though, was the innate knowledge that it was his fault that they were able to do such things to her, in the first place, all because he hadn't

realized that some demons weren't really as awful as he wanted to believe . . .

Pulling the cup out of the machine, he followed the guards down the hallway and stood back as they filed out of the room again. They uttered things that he figured were little more than perfunctory niceties as they passed, and Kurt just nodded.

He wasn't surprised to find her in her cage, and it seemed to him that the guards had pretty much just tossed her in there before closing the door. His initial instinct was to pull her out and check her over to make sure that she was all right, but he stopped himself. He'd do that just as soon as he was sure that the researchers had left for the night, and he could tell she was breathing. Reaching for her wrist, he stared at the clock. Her pulse was strong if not a little erratic, and that was enough to reassure him for the moment.

He'd just stood up and turned away from the cage when Harlan strode into the room with one of his patented smiles that reminded Kurt of a coffin-maker scoping out the morgue. Kurt ignored him, figuring that he could damn well speak first. "Evening, Doc," Harlan said in a loud, booming, very falsely bright tone.

"Evening, Dopey," he muttered under his breath, not particularly caring whether or not Harlan actually heard him.

He didn't, which just figured. "I guess she doesn't like some smells," Harlan went on without an ounce of remorse.

"Hmm," Kurt intoned. "Just like she has better hearing and probably better vision and better . . . well, everything. Big deal. You should have realized that a long time ago."

Harlan laughed as he strode over and settled himself on the edge of the desk. "So . . . I take it you didn't have any luck in finding a male demon for us?"

It took everything Kurt had to keep himself from decking the old bastard. “I don’t think I ever said that’s what I was doing,” he remarked blandly.

“I thought we’d talked about this. I assumed—”

“And maybe you shouldn’t make assumptions,” Kurt cut in. “I thought that you wanted to get rid of those things; not perpetuate them,” he reminded him, playing the part, and playing it well, he figured.

Harlan’s smile widened, as though he actually believed that Kurt was buying all of it. “It’s all one in the same, Doc! All one in the same!”

Kurt didn’t respond to that. There wasn’t a point, really. All he was doing was humoring the damn doctor, anyway.

Harlan said some other things, none of which was of interest to Kurt, and he finally left.

He sighed, rubbing his eye in a distracted sort of way as his gaze shifted to the huddled form of the little demon in the cage. It was still something that he was trying to reconcile himself to this whole thing, this . . .

It was simple to think that he wanted to let her go; it was easy to believe that the gentle creature that he’d come to know deserved to be free, but . . .

But would that freedom have a cost? She said that they didn’t hate humans; that they fought to protect them, and he . . . he wanted to believe that . . . or was something else—something he was only beginning to grasp—clouding his judgment when it came to her?

*‘She . . . she’d never do that sort of thing to anyone . . . what those demons did to my family . . .’*

But how had he *known* that? And he had known that, didn’t he? How was it that he

had known without question and without hesitation that she . . . ?

Letting out a deep breath, Kurt cut himself off abruptly. For some reason, those questions . . .

Reaching for the newspaper he'd bought earlier in the day, he slowly shook his head. He wasn't entirely certain that he wanted to know the answers . . .

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Bellaniece sat at the table in the breakfast nook in the kitchen with a cup of tea that was gradually growing cold and an untouched peach muffin on a sparkling white china plate as she stared out the window at the fluffy blanket of snow that steadily fell from the slate gray skies.

She'd been awake for hours even though she'd only come downstairs about forty-five minutes ago. Gin had smiled encouragingly as she stepped into the kitchen, and within moments, she was seated here with a cup of tea and a still-warm muffin.

She'd had the strangest dream, hadn't she? It wasn't anything that she understood, and she wasn't even sure exactly why she'd have dreamt anything even remotely like that, in the first place, but . . . but it had bothered her, and more to the point, it bothered her more because she couldn't remember much of it, and she felt that she should, that it was *important* . . .

All she could remember was a picture: a field with a tree and a small creek . . . and impossibly blue skies high overhead . . . and bars . . .

"Morning, Belle . . . Sleep okay?" Sierra asked as she slipped into the nook across from

her.

Bellaniece shook herself and smiled automatically—the same sort of smile that Gin had given her earlier. “Not so bad,” she lied. Okay, not completely lied . . . dream aside, she had slept well, hadn’t she? Better than she had in a long while, anyway.

Sierra gazed out the window, too, her eyes cloudy with the concern that hadn’t completely left her gaze in the time since she’d arrived in Maine. “No word?” she asked quietly.

Bellaniece shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Maybe today,” Sierra replied as she reached over to squeeze Bellaniece’s hands. It was the same thing that she said every morning. Funny thing was that it sounded just as genuine today as it had every day before it.

“Morning, Belle-y!” Kelly Cartham greeted brightly as she strode into the kitchen. She had a huge cardboard box of . . . something . . . and a bright smile on her face.

Bellaniece stood up and hugged her longtime friend. Kelly had taken it upon herself to bring the strangest things over in the hopes that they would get Bellaniece’s mind off things, at least for a little while, and normally, they worked. “What have you got there?” she demanded, poking the box with an articulated claw.

Kelly grinned then hurriedly greeted Sierra with a quick squeeze, too. “Oh, you’ll love this,” she insisted as she dug into the box and dragged out a gaudy, garish, hot pink feather boa. With a giggle, she wrapped it around Bellaniece’s neck and tossed the end over her shoulder. “What do you think? Remember when we were little, and we used your dad’s Mokomoko-sama like this? Didn’t we tell him we were going to join the Rockettes or something like that? Poor ol’ Cain . . . I don’t think he ever quite got over that . . .”

Bellaniece smiled wanly at the memory. They really had told Cain that they were practicing to join the Rockettes, and he'd just smiled and said that he was sure that they'd both make it despite the hint of worry in his eyes as the girls tugged and yanked on the Mokokoko-sama . . .

"I guess we forgot to go audition," Kelly said with a wink.

Bellaniece nodded then hugged her friend. "Thanks."

Kelly sighed and shook her head as she reached for the end of the boa. "Don't mention it . . . it's the least I can do, isn't it?"

"Is Cartham back from New Mexico yet?" Sierra asked as she sipped a mug of tea.

"Hmm, no, but he called this morning to say that he'd be back around noon unless his flight's delayed."

"Morning," Nezumi mumbled as she stumbled into the kitchen with a wide yawn. "Ugh, I need coffee . . ."

Bellaniece fell silent as she sank back down at the breakfast nook. Gin hurried over and took her cup to refresh it, pausing long enough to give her a gentle squeeze on the shoulder before she turned away.

Meara wandered in, smiling just a little as she stared at her cell phone. The women asked her what flower Morio had sent her for the day as Bellaniece's attention shifted back to the window again.

She felt as though she were slowly going crazy, and while she loved her friends and family, she couldn't help but wish that, maybe just for today, they'd leave her to her

thoughts. Their support meant the world to her, and every last one of them loved Samantha almost as much as she and Kichiro did, but . . .

*'A stream . . . and a tree . . .'* she mused to herself. Why did she feel as though it had some significance? If she could remember her dream, maybe she'd understand that, too . . .

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Samantha groaned and slowly opened her eyes, her head thick and dull as she tried in vain to shake off the lingering stench that seemed to be clinging to her nasal passages.

"You all right?"

Blinking at the taijya, she nodded and forced a smile that she was far from feeling. "I'm okay," she lied. Well, it wasn't a complete lie—more of a fib, really. "Guess I didn't cooperate with their testing today, did I?"

Shaking his head at her rueful assessment, he rubbed his face as he pushed himself to his feet to walk away.

Samantha groaned quietly as she rolled onto her side, realizing a little late that she wasn't in her cage. No, she was . . . on his cot, wasn't she? He must have put her there, didn't he? He turned around quickly when she started to sit up. "Lay back," he commanded as he strode over to her once more.

Letting out a deep breath, she did as she was told, though mostly because she simply didn't have the strength to argue with him. Besides, the cot was comfortable enough, wasn't it? "I'll be all right in a little bit," she assured him.

He grunted and stared at her for a long moment before he moved away again. “So . . . you . . . your kind . . . you have strong senses of smell, I take it?”

“Mhmm,” she murmured, “we can identify people by scent . . .”

“And that’s why you use those pills.”

“Yeah . . . as a hunter, if someone wanted to get revenge for what we have to do, it can get dangerous. It’s a safeguard . . .” she admitted.

“Do those pills just work on demons?”

She blinked slowly. “Why? Would they work on humans, you mean?”

“Sure.”

She thought that over as she pushed herself upright. “I suppose,” she ventured at length. “Yes, I’m sure they’d work . . .” Staring at his back for a moment, she smiled suddenly. “Are you going to take one?”

He shot her a quick glance. “Maybe.”

“Why? I like the way you smell.”

He started to grunt something but stopped suddenly and turned to face her as he crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head to the side. “What do I smell like?”

She stared up at the ceiling as she considered it, then shrugged. “You smell like . . . sandalwood . . . and ocean water that washes up on the shore first thing in the morning.”

He looked vaguely amused by her assessment. “Sandalwood . . .”

She nodded then shook her head. “Why would you want to change the way you smell? It’s like a fingerprint; did you know? You can smell similar to someone else, but there are never two people who smell exactly alike—even twins.”

“Is that so?” he countered, leaning against the desk and crossing his ankles casually.

“Well, take my father and uncle, for example. They’re identical twins, and they smell similar—enough so that people who just meet them for the first time don’t always realize it.”

“Okay . . . well, assuming that I believe you about those pills . . . how long would the effects of one last?”

She raised an eyebrow at the dubious quality in his tone. “Why wouldn’t you believe me? And it lasts about seven days, give or take . . . You’re not really going to take, are you?”

He shrugged and pulled the bottle out of his pocket, idly tossing it into the air and catching it again. “Because you’re a demon,” he reminded her though his tone lacked any real rancor, “and since you’re a demon, you could be trying to fool me, couldn’t you?”

“But I’m not,” she replied, scrunching up her shoulders.

“I could take one of these and see if they do what you say they will.”

“You could,” she agreed easily enough.

“Of course, you might be wanting me to do exactly that, especially if they’ll kill me or something . . .” he mused.

“I wouldn’t kill you,” she snorted. “You feed me . . .”

He cocked an eyebrow at her as he shook a pill out of the bottle. “That’s the only reason why you wouldn’t kill me?”

She giggled. She couldn’t help it. “Well . . . and you do have a nice butt.”

“I-I don’t think that’s . . . You . . . Eat your cheeseburger,” he grumbled as he tossed a cheeseburger at her, chin snapping up at that as he blushed. He *actually* blushed. It was enough to draw another round of giggles from her, as well.

“So you *do* blush,” she mused.

He snorted loudly, shaking his head and turning around, though she had a feeling that his blush was darkening instead of going away.

‘*He really is cute,*’ her youkai voice admitted.

Samantha’s smile widened just a little. ‘*He is . . .*’

‘*Though you might want to tone it down. Poor guy looks like he might choke if you don’t . . .*’

She watched him stomp around the desk and flop into the chair, staring at the pill in his hand for several moments before popping it into his mouth and gulping down some water to chase it.

‘*He’s been different since he came back, hasn’t he?*’

Her youkai blood was quiet, as though it were considering her observation. ‘*He has . . .*’

‘*Why do you suppose that is?*’ she wondered as she unwrapped the cheeseburger and bit into it.

*'I don't know . . . but it's a good thing.'*

*'It is, isn't it?'*

*'M . . . maybe it's not as impossible as I thought . . .'*

A stuttering warmth brightened inside her, growing steadily brighter as she gazed at the taijya, who was making faces at the bitter aftertaste that the scent-tab left in his mouth. It wasn't her imagination; she knew it. He really was different, and while she couldn't exactly put her finger on it, it was definitely a positive sign. Her youkai blood had chosen him, and she knew it, but more than that . . . More than that was the encompassing feeling that maybe . . . as long as he was with her . . .

Everything would be all right, wouldn't it?



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
... I have a cute ... butt ...?

## Chapter 38

# Quid Pro Quo

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Samantha's ears twitched at the familiar sound of rattling plastic as she tried not to be too obvious about the fact that she was trying desperately to smell what the taijya was opening. She couldn't see what he had in his hands, but she could smell chocolate . . . and damn it, she wanted that chocolate . . .

"Okay, little demon," he began without turning around. "We're going to play a game . . . sort of."

"A game?" she echoed, pushing herself up on her tip toes as she tried in vain to see around him. "What kind of game?"

"I'm going to ask you some questions, and you're going to answer them, and if you answer them truthfully, I'll give you a piece of chocolate."

She blinked and stared at him, then shook her head. "Oh, no, because you'll just say you don't believe me, and I won't get any of that," she countered.

"Then answer truthfully," he shot back. "First question: have the researchers given you any sort of strange injections that you know of?"

She considered that then shook her head. "I don't think so . . ."

He stared at her with a marked scowl for a few minutes. She was starting to think that he was going to accuse her of lying. "You're sure?"

Biting her lip as she tried not to stare at the small bag of Hershey's Kisses in his hand, she nodded. "I don't think so," she repeated.

For some reason, her answer didn't seem to appease him, but he tossed a Kiss into her lap, and she squealed.

"Good *God*, how can that *not* hurt your ears?" he complained, smashing the heel of his hand against the side of his head.

She popped the candy into her mouth and shrugged. "It just doesn't," she replied, holding out her hand for another.

He stared at her wiggling fingers and shook his head. "I haven't asked the next question yet," he pointed out.

She nodded emphatically. "You did. You asked how come I didn't hurt my own ears."

He blinked and stared at her for a long moment then rolled his eyes, but he did drop another candy into her hand, just the same. "So if you're the baby of your family—"

"Youngest," she corrected around a mouthful of chocolate.

"Isn't the baby usually the youngest?"

She shook her head. "I'm not a baby," she informed him.

He snorted. "Incidentals. Anyway, if you're the *youngest*—also known as the *baby*—"  
She interrupted him with a little growl of protest that he summarily ignored, "—then why in the world would they let you do something potentially dangerous, like what you call 'hunting'?"

She pondered that for a moment as she finished the candy in her mouth. “Youkai are different from humans,” she pointed out slowly. “Fighting is something that nearly everyone learns to do early on . . . it’s tradition, you know? And youkai—*honorable* youkai—would never stoop to using a gun in a real battle.”

He quirked an eyebrow and shook his head. “You were carrying a gun when I captured you,” he reminded her.

She made a face and heaved a sigh, her ears flattening for a split second before popping upright again. “My family insists,” she muttered, obviously disliking the idea. “As I’ve said—honorable youkai fight without guns, but not all youkai that are hunted are exactly honorable creatures.”

“So your gun was for your family’s peace of mind?”

She nodded. “Yes, and that was two questions,” she said happily.

Kurt made a face but handed over two more pieces of chocolate. “Who gives you these hunt orders?”

“My boss.”

Kurt snorted again. “And who is your boss?”

“Well, I can’t really tell you that,” she hedged.

“Why not?”

Her grin widened. “Because I want you to give me more candy?”

“You have yet to actually answer my questions,” he pointed out.

She shook her head and held out her hand. “My boss gives me my orders; that’s really all I can tell you,” she insisted. “We deal with highly classified information, you know.”

Okay, so he had to allow that one even though it was starting to sound more and more like the youkai version of the CIA . . . or the mafia . . .

“All right, then answer this: if youkai are so much more powerful than humans and so much tougher and all that, then why do you hide what you are?”

Her expression took on a much more serious light, and she considered her answer before she started to speak. “A long time ago, we didn’t. We didn’t have to. Back then, it was safe because we were stronger, but there has always been more humans than youkai, and even then . . . Youkai have always been a bit more ruthless than humans, that’s true, and some of them . . . weren’t so kind. They’d kill humans, not because humans were weaker, necessarily, but because they were in their way. But then, humans invented gunpowder and guns, and there isn’t a youkai alive who could outrun a bullet, you see? So when humans were able to harness that kind of power, they rose up against youkai. I guess . . . I guess it was natural, all things considered . . .”

“So youkai went into hiding because they were threatened with guns?” he replied with a shake of his head. “You’ve got to be kidding me . . .”

She frowned and carefully smoothed out one of the small foil squares from the candy. “Not exactly . . . see, the greatest among the youkai . . . He said that we should hide what we were, not because we were frightened, but because it really was the only way we’d ever survive—to let our kind fall into the darkness of history and legend . . . and it wasn’t so bad for a long while. Most of the lesser-youkai were hunted down and exterminated—ones that couldn’t hold onto human form . . . ones that were too much like animals to

even try . . . I guess you could say it was like Darwinism at it's finest. The problem is that the longer you leave things alone, the more likely it is that history will repeat itself."

"Are you saying that youkai are going to rise up against humans?"

She sighed. "No . . . I meant that some of those youkai who survived were the head of certain clans, and as the head, they were stronger, and they were able to retain their concealments even though their kin were commonly considered to be lesser-youkai, but . . . but as their bloodlines weakened with passing generations, some of them . . . degenerated, giving rise to the lesser-youkai these days. What were once proud and noble families have been reduced to barely sentient creatures, and most of the time, those are the ones I'm sent out to hunt down."

A strange expression flickered over his features, gone before Samantha could really make sense of it. With a nod, he tossed the rest of the bag to her before turning back to his desk once more.

He hadn't gotten angry this time, though, had he? He hadn't told her that she was a monster or a demon, and that was progress. Come to think of it, he'd been pretty nice to her ever since he came back from whatever it was that he'd been doing. She supposed she didn't much care, curiosity aside, as long as he wasn't hunting down a male for the white-coats to try to breed with her.

The very idea set her hackles rising all over again, so she deliberately forced her attention to the candy, instead. If he wanted to trade Hershey's Kisses for information, who was she to argue? Popping one into her mouth, she glanced up, only to find him staring at her, and she smiled.

Too bad she didn't have something she could offer him in order to get a few questions of her own answered . . .

*'Give it time, dollbaby. I think he's coming around . . .'*

Smiling at the encouragement her youkai voice offered, she nodded. *'I . . . I really like him,'* she admitted quietly.

Her youkai laughed. *'So do I . . . so do I . . .'*

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"Any luck?"

Evan grunted but didn't turn around to look at his brother as he watched the building below. "Not yet," he admitted despite the irritation that he'd been stalking out the place for a few days now, and not a single soul had even glanced at the front of the building.

Bas sighed and knelt beside Evan, bracing himself with one hand between his knees. "Hey, Evan, listen . . ."

"If you're gonna tell me that I'm wasting my time, just blow it out your ass, all right?"

Bas shook his head. "That's not what I was going to say."

Evan shot him a quizzical glance before shifting his gaze back to the building he was watching. "What, then?"

"I, uh . . . I thought you could use some company," Bas finally said.

He glanced at Bas again, unable to mask the hint of surprise on his features. Of all the things that he'd expected to hear, that wasn't actually one of them. "Relax, Bubby. I ain't gonna fuck this up."

"I didn't think you would," Bas replied. "You . . . you know, right? If you were missing—"

"I know," Evan mumbled, scowling at the darkened building below. If he were the one who hadn't come home, Bas really would turn everything upside down to find him, and even if they didn't see eye to eye all the time, Evan . . . Evan would do the same for Bas. "Me, too."

Bas stared at him for a couple minutes, as though he were trying to make up his mind about something. In the end, he cleared his throat and uttered a little cough. "Evan . . . you've been out here for days, haven't you? Why don't you go back to the hotel for a couple hours? I'll stay here till you come back."

Evan shook his head stubbornly. "No. Look, I know what Cain says about this place, and I get his logic, but . . . It's just a feeling—a gut instinct. There's something here . . ."

Bas nodded slowly. "The old man always said to trust your instincts, right? Evan . . . don't run yourself ragged, okay? Just go get something to eat, clean yourself up, maybe catch a nap. I swear I won't leave here."

Evan let out a deep breath. "I can't, Bas . . . You were older . . . Hell, she wasn't even born when you went to Japan to train. I was. I didn't get to fuck around with Gunnar and Morio and Mikio. It was just me . . . and Sam." Sitting back, he smiled just a little. "Tagged around behind me everywhere I went. She just . . . and for once, I was the older one—the *perfect* one." He chuckled quietly and shook his head. "I was you, Bubby . . . the way I used to see you when I was just a little shit." Gaze shifting to the decrepit old

buildings that were pervasive in the area, Evan let out a deep breath and shrugged. “She’s gonna come home.”

Bas clapped him on the shoulder and nodded, lifting his head, letting the wind blow his hair off his face. “Absolutely,” he agreed, a quiet conviction tingeing his voice. “I tell you what: I’ll go get some coffee. You want anything else?”

Evan shook his head as Bas got to his feet and strode away. As much as he disliked the idea of leaving this spot, he had to admit that the company—even Bas—just might be all right, and maybe it’d be okay to call an unspoken truce with his brother, at least for the duration.

It had surprised him, hadn’t it? Fully expecting Bas to insist that Evan stop being stupid and go back to the hotel, Evan had been ready to rise to the challenge if he had to. Maybe he’d spent a little too long as the younger brother—the screw up, but what he’d said wasn’t a lie.

His summers spent in Japan were synonymous with having Samantha underfoot. Unlike Bas, who had first traveled to Japan for training when he was fairly young, Evan’s first summer there had been when he was ten. Samantha had been right around a year old at the time, and she’d just learned how to walk. She’d followed him around that whole summer whenever she could, and hers was the first face he’d seen when he’d walked out of the airport the next year, too. Summers spent with a tagalong—a little girl with wide blue eyes that looked like she really could have been his baby sister, and Evan . . . Evan had enjoyed telling people that she was as Samantha had smiled and hidden her face against his shoulder in a moment of bashfulness . . .

He’d learned more during those summers from his uncle, Kichiro than he had from Ryomaru or InuYasha—learned about music and feeling and emotion. For that, alone, he owed them something, and if that meant that he spent days and days out here in the

snow and the cold, then so be it, because one way or another, he wasn't going back until Samantha came home . . .

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Kurt sat up straight and stretched, grimacing at the soreness that had set in between his shoulder blades as he'd watched the hours of tape while the little demon slept soundly.

Peering over his shoulder, he frowned at the tiny form. Hair so long that it spilled over the side of the cot that he normally used, it hung like an iridescent sheet, shining softly in the dim light of the room. He'd left her out of her cage, and she was sleeping soundly. How was it that she could do that? If the situation was reversed, he'd never sleep so well, would he? *'No doubt about it,'* he thought with a shake of his head as he turned back around to face the monitors once more. *'Definitely going soft . . .'*

*'But she's a demon, Kurt . . . How could you . . .?'*

Grimacing as the words echoed in his head—an accusing voice that sounded a little too real—Kurt bit his lip and opened the next video file.

He knew damn well what she was. Of course he did. He knew better than anyone that she was a demon, but . . . but he also knew that she wasn't mean or cruel or vindictive. She wasn't those things that he had believed for so long . . . She wasn't . . . and more . . .

He knew her, didn't he? Knew the familiarity of her and understood it, even if he didn't know what it all meant. It was unsettling, sure. In all his life, he'd never actually thought that anyone would ever be able to look at him and know, just from that insular moment, exactly what he was thinking . . . and why . . .

And yet, it made him feel a little less like a freak, didn't it? His entire life, he'd always felt like an outsider; like someone who wasn't accepted—wasn't wanted—by the normal reaches of society. One of those humans who had seen too much, right? Those things had only served to ostracize him before he'd ever gotten a chance to try to fit in, at all.

*'But . . . she's not a demon, is she? That word she said . . . youkai?'*

*'Youkai . . . magical creatures. Though there are a number of youkai that are able to harness the power to control the elements of nature, many also are the manifestation of wild creatures. . .'*

She'd said another word, true—hanyou . . . He didn't understand that one, though. He couldn't seem to find any real definitions or, in fact, any mention of it, anywhere, and she didn't seem to want to explain it, either. He figured that was all right, though. He wasn't too keen on delving into some of the things regarding himself that she might be curious about, either.

He sighed. Three days had passed since he'd returned, and with the passage of those days, he felt as though he were no closer to finishing the surveillance videos than he had been in the beginning. Every day he spent, sitting at his table in the depressing little apartment, watching the data cards he'd smuggled out of the facility, and every night after the demon had fallen asleep, he sat up, watching the day's recordings so that he didn't fall further behind. He needed to tell her to be leery of injections, but he wasn't entirely certain if he could do that without tipping her off. He wasn't ready to tell her of his plan; he figured that'd just be a thousand times worse, in the long run. Telling her that he was eventually going to get her out would only make her time left that much harder to bear, wouldn't it? He couldn't do that to her . . .

Besides, the last thing he wanted was to tell her that when he still wasn't entirely positive *when* he could get her out . . . Until he watched all the tapes to make sure that they didn't put a tracker on her . . .

“Oooh,” the little demon whined as she turned over on the cot.

Kurt rolled his eyes—why she couldn’t seem to wake up without moaning and groaning, he wasn’t sure. She seemed to do that just about every time . . .

“Is it morning?” she asked, her voice still thick with sleep.

Glancing at the clock, Kurt shook his head. “Nope.”

She yawned loudly, and the cot squeaked as she shifted around. “What time is it, then?”

“One-forty-five,” he replied. “You know, don’t you have better vision than me? Can’t you see the clock from there?”

She yawned again. “You’re closer.”

“Go back to sleep,” he said without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Am I bothering you?”

“Yes,” he replied automatically.

The little demon laughed then slowly fell silent.

Kurt glanced at her and frowned. sitting with her back against the wall, she had her feet drawn up, her arms wrapped around her legs, her chin buried against her knees . . . but she looked troubled, and he didn’t rightfully understand why. “What’s wrong with you?” he asked, deliberately inflicting enough boredom into his voice to mask his own feelings.

She shook her head, those ears drooping just a little. He grimaced. “I’m okay,” she lied.

Heaving a sigh as he stared at the surveillance tape long enough to memorize the time stamp, he shut it down and rotated the chair to eye her. “Yeah, that’s a lie,” he countered quietly.

Her ears flattened a little more. “I was . . . was just thinking . . .”

Crossing his arms over his chest, he narrowed his gaze on her. “About what?”

Scrunching up her shoulders, she gave a little shrug. “N . . . nothing . . .”

“Tell me.”

She winced at his no-nonsense tone of voice. “It’s just . . . what you said the other day? That you weren’t looking for a . . . a male . . .”

“Yeah,” he said slowly, shaking his head, unable to grasp exactly where she was going with this.

“Did you mean . . . did you mean that you were just not looking for one then or . . . or that you *wouldn’t* look for one, at all . . .?”

The breath rushed out of him in a sudden gust. “That’s what’s bothering you?” he could help asking incredulously.

She grimaced and nodded once.

“I wasn’t planning on it, no.”

She nodded again, her ears perking up just a little as a sudden scowl of defiance filtered over her features. “Well, good . . . because it wouldn’t work, anyway!”

He blinked at the vehemence in her voice. “It wouldn’t?”

She shook her head, her chin lifting a notch. “No youkai you could capture would dare touch me like that.”

“Why?” he blurted before he could think about it. There was definitely something strange in her answers, wasn’t there?

She shot him a rather nervous glance, as though she’d said something that she hadn’t meant to. “They just . . . just wouldn’t,” she said again.

He snorted as his mind flashed to those demons that had attacked his family. No scruples, no values, no sense of right or wrong—just beasts. “Why? What are you? Some sort of . . . princess or something?” he scoffed.

A strange sort of expression filtered over her face, and she shook her head. “N-no . . .” she murmured. “It just wouldn’t happen . . . and even if it did . . .”

“Even if it did, what?”

Her gaze fell away to the coarse blankets on the cot, and she shrugged. “I wouldn’t do it,” she replied quietly. “I’d never allow my child—my *baby*—to be born in a place such as this. I’d . . . I’d kill myself, first.”

Kurt snapped his mouth closed, an unreasonable rage roiling in the pit of his stomach as he stared at her, as he saw her absolute conviction. She would do it, wouldn’t she? That she was trapped . . . that was enough, wasn’t it? And as much as it appalled him, he couldn’t say he didn’t understand her feelings, either . . .

She was quiet for a long minute, and when she started to speak again, her voice was so low that Kurt had to strain to hear her. “I can stay here as long as I have to,” she murmured,

her chin dropping to her knees once more. “They can do whatever they want because . . . because it doesn’t matter . . . but I . . . I want to believe that I’ll be free again, someday . . . even if that’s really only a lie . . .”

“Little demon . . .” he whispered, horrified by the steadiness in her gaze, the blankness in the depths of her eyes. A part of her knew, didn’t it? Knew that she’d never get out of there, and worse: she’d accepted that, too . . . All of the laughter and the smiles . . . they were her way of coping, just as anger and apathy had become his . . .

She shook her head and turned to look at him, her expression shifting into a smile—a real smile—a smile that broke something deep within him, leaving him feeling torn and bleeding, and the brighter it grew, the deeper the wound tore. “Tell me something, taijya . . . is there snow outside?”

He nodded, unable to speak, unable to force a sound past the suspect thickness that choked him.

Her gaze took on a dreamy sort of quality as a quiet laugh slipped from her. “I miss the snow,” she said. “It didn’t snow so much when I was little . . . Some every now and then, but it melted so fast, even in the forest . . . Sometimes Papa would drive Mama and me out to the country, just so we could play in snow . . .”

Kurt grimaced and let his eyes fall away. He just . . . he couldn’t look at her, could he? Couldn’t stand to look at her and know that he was the one who had taken her away . . . “It’s all . . . all tired and dirty now,” he murmured harshly. “Plowed and re-plowed . . . and all the dirt and slush . . . that exhausted look it gets after Christmas is over . . .”

She closed her eyes and lifted her face, her smile widening just a little at whatever it was she saw in her head. “I’ll bet it isn’t as bad as all that,” she finally said. “I still miss it . . . Sometimes when you come in, I can smell the snow on you.”

“You can?”

She nodded. “Mhmm . . . then I feel better.”

He cleared his throat, rubbing his burning eyes as he tried not to think about what she’d said. “You know . . . why don’t you go back to sleep? You’ve still got a while before they come in . . .”

She lay back down but didn’t answer. The silence wasn’t at all uncomfortable. Kurt sat still for a long time, just staring at her as her breathing evened out and steadied, and he knew that she was sleeping . . .

This little creature . . . what was she? And what kind of power did she possess that could reach him in a way that no one else ever had? A lifetime of laughter wasn’t enough for her, was it? To be surrounded by those who loved and cherished her . . . that was what she deserved . . . The family that searched for her every single day, the ones he knew damn well made her look like she wanted to cry whenever she thought about them . . . That she was willing to give them up because she didn’t want to risk hurting anyone . . . just what did that say about her—and about him?

*‘I’ll . . . I’ll get you out of here, little demon . . . and maybe someday . . . maybe someday, you’ll forgive me . . .’*



**Author's Note**

**Hershey's Kisses are trademark belonging to the Hershey Food Corporation**



**Final Thought from Bas:**

**Like me ...**

## Chapter 39

### Snow

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Kurt stomped his feet on the soggy red industrial mat just inside the service door as he brushed snow off his shoulders. Mass transit was in a tizzy, and the snow that just kept falling was thick and heavy.

“Wow, Doc! Did you walk from home?” the security guard asked as he leaned in the doorway of the monitoring room with a cup of coffee in his hand.

Kurt grunted a half civil, “Of course not,” and headed for the elevator.

He’d almost made it all the way downstairs and into the holding area when Harlan hailed him. Stifling the desire to lay the man flat on his ass, Kurt stood still and waited for the old bastard to catch up with him.

After having spent the last few hours watching surveillance footage before heading in for the day, he was growing increasingly irritated with the lot of them, enough so that all he really wanted to do was lock them all in cages and see how well they liked being treated worse than a dog. The tape he’d watched was from fairly early on, and while they hadn’t done anything overly horrid to her, they had jeered and belittled her when she’d been forced to relieve herself on the table where they’d strapped her. She’d kept her face turned away, but he could sense her acute humiliation, and that was bad enough. That the bastards had called her names and then hosed her down with the power hose, though, taking extra care to ‘clean’ her privates . . . Well, Kurt had to wonder just how bad four thousand five hundred pounds of pressure would hurt if he turned the damn thing on their bare-assed peckers . . .

“What do you want?” he demanded, unable to summon even a token measure of civility.

Harlan either didn't notice or figured he'd be better off to pretend otherwise. “I'm about to take off,” he explained quickly. “But you'd better keep a close eye on our girl, and call me if she doesn't seem right.”

“Why wouldn't she seem right?” Kurt made himself ask.

Harlan laughed. “Oh, nothing big. We injected a trace amount of the influenza virus into her, though. You know, to test out her immunities.”

“You injected something into her to make her sick,” Kurt reiterated just for clarity's sake.

Harlan smiled, as though the entire affair was of absolutely no significance. “Well, the labs showed that her blood is extremely resistant to infection, so we aren't really worried, but there's something to be said for trying out the hypothesis on a live specimen as opposed to the controlled environment of a Petri dish . . .”

“So you're starting small? Going to work yourself up to . . . what? Injecting mass-amounts of HIV virus into her? Implant a few cancer cells? You sick bastard.”

Kurt started forward only to stop when the little demon was escorted out of the testing room down the hall. She avoided looking at him as she passed, which was just as well, all things considered. Moving in closer as the guards put her in the cage, Kurt narrowed his gaze on the miscreant doctor and shoved him out into the hallway—and hopefully out of earshot of the little demon. “Are you really reckless enough to take that kind of chance that she won't get infected? Are you fucking stupid? Do you think that your investors would look kindly on your killing another one of the demons that they're paying for?”

Harlan stared at him for a long moment then suddenly chuckled almost nastily. “Careful, Doc . . . you almost sound like a jealous boyfriend.”

“I don’t give a shit, what I sound like,” he growled back.

Harlan sized him up then slowly nodded. “Have a good night, Doc . . .”

Kurt frowned as Harlan walked away. Something about his demeanor bugged him more than usual, which was saying a lot, really. The guards shuffled past him, but Kurt didn’t go inside until they’d gotten into the elevator.

Oddly enough, the little demon remained silent as he lowered the security walls that the guards had put up before their departure. “What? No hello or anything?”

She still didn’t say anything.

He hurried over and set his bag down before striding over to hunker down by the cage. “You sick?” he asked, staring at her, trying to figure out if she were feeling ill from the injection.

She shook her head and stared at him for a long moment before purposefully lifting her gaze to stare at a fixed point over his shoulder.

He turned to look, too, and blinked. Affixed to the wall just over the monitoring station was a brand new camera. ‘*Bastards . . .*’

Standing up, he strode over to the control panel beside the door and activated the outer security walls around the little demon’s cage for the sake of the camera before wandering over to inspect the device. It was trained on the cage so he was out of view. At least it was one of the 8000 series. Cheap idiots . . . they’d just made it a hell of a lot easier for him to mess with them.

It only took about ten minutes of computer hacking to set the camera up on auto-loop, which gave him a good fifteen minutes to fix the problem. Climbing up on the table, he made quick work of causing a 'short' in the camera by pulling one of the wires loose. It'd short out by itself quickly enough, he figured. The red light that indicated that it was working flickered and went out as he dropped to the floor again.

"Are you going to get in trouble for doing that?" she asked quietly.

"Are you going to tell on me?" he countered as he headed over to drop the outer walls once more.

She actually had to think it over for a moment before she answered. "I suppose not," she quipped.

He snorted and shook his head as he stomped over to the cage to let her out. "You had to *think* about it?"

"Not so much, no," she replied.

He snorted again and waved a hand for indicate that she should follow him. "Come here," he said as he sauntered over to the supply cabinet. "Let me check you over."

She wrinkled her nose—he'd figured that she would, considering she didn't seem to like doing anything of the sort. He supposed he couldn't rightfully blame her for that, either, all things considered. After being poked and prodded all day, why would she want to go through it at night, too? "I'm not your science experiment, too," she pointed out.

Rolling his eyes, he pinned her with a no-nonsense look as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I didn't say you were, so move it."

“I don’t want to, and anyway, I’m all right.”

“Just humor me.”

Her response to that was a marked flattening of her ears. “But—”

“Knock that off!” he grumbled, cutting her off. “Look, I’ll tell you what. You let me give you a check-up, and I’ll get you a chocolate bar. Fair?”

Her ears quirked upon mention of the unexpected treat, and she considered the offer slowly before she gave a terse nod. He nearly snorted again. Okay, so bribing her with candy was probably not the smartest of things to have done, but hell . . . Climbing up to sit atop the desk, she waited patiently while he listened to her heartbeat and then her lungs, though she did jerk back just a little since the stethoscope he found in the cabinet was probably a bit on the cold side. Still, she behaved quite nicely, and it only took a few minutes for him to check her over. “Good,” he mumbled, frowning since she really did appear to be just fine. “And you’re feeling all right?”

She nodded, scrunching up her face as she tried to get the feel of the tongue depressor he’d used out of her mouth. “Fine,” she insisted. “They injected something bad into me, didn’t they?”

He frowned, deliberately taking his time as he gathered the equipment together and put it away. “They injected a strain of the influenza virus into you, yes,” he admitted. “So you need to tell me if you start feeling even a little sick, okay?”

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes dark, mysterious, and suddenly, she smiled—an expression full of irony and very little actual humor. “I don’t know whether that’s incredibly appalling or the funniest thing that I’ve ever heard in a completely ironic sort of way . . .” she finally admitted.

“Ironic?”

She shrugged and pushed herself off of the desk. “We don’t get sick,” she said. “Never.”

“Never’s a long time. What about diseases?”

Shaking her head, she peered over her shoulder at him. “Huh-uh . . .”

Letting out a deep breath, he wasn’t sure whether he should be impressed or completely horrified by that. “You demons . . .”

She suddenly shook herself, as though she’d been thinking about something that wasn’t quite as pleasant then changed her mind about it. “Enough of that, taijya . . . where’s my candy?”

Kurt blinked and shook his head. “You’ve got a one-track mind, you know . . .”

“You *did* promise,” she reminded him.

He supposed that was true enough, and judging from the look on her face, she wasn’t going to leave him alone until he made good on it, too.

“All right,” he relented. “I’ll go get it. No funny business; got it?”

She agreed easily enough, and he couldn’t help the sigh that slipped from him as he headed out of the room. What was it about that little demon and chocolate, anyway . . .?

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Glowing at his cell phone, Kichiro considered heaving it off of the hotel roof for several minutes before he stuffed it back into his pocket.

Kami, he was sick of getting calls that sounded so promising, if only for a moment, only to end up being nothing at all, which were only made worse by the calls that actually sent people moving, flying here or there to check into them, and yet they always seemed to come up short.

It made no sense, damn it. Where the hell could she be?

Telling himself that he'd find her was just not working as well as it used to. He still believed it, at least most of the time, and he knew damn well that suffering doubts was also a normal thing, but that didn't help to make him feel any less horrible, did it? What kind of father really thought, even for a second . . .?

The trill of his cell phone interrupted his musings, and he couldn't stave back the loud growl that slipped from him. "Hello?" he answered, frowning at the number that he didn't recognize.

"Yeah, you're the dude with the missing kid?"

Frowning at the ease in the man's voice on the other end of the line, Kichiro braced himself. "Yes, my daughter," he corrected.

"Yeah, yeah . . ."

Gritting his teeth at the boy's flip attitude, Kichiro reminded himself that it was all for Samantha. "Do you know something? Have you seen her?"

"Oh, sure! In fact, I fucked her last night!"

The kid hung up, his obnoxious laughter echoing in Kichiro's head long after he'd clicked off the phone. Tamping down the desire to hunt that kid down and beat some sense into him, he rubbed a hand over his face and let out a long breath. "Damn bastard . . ." he muttered.

"You want I should hunt 'em down and put the fear of the hanyou into 'em?" Ryomaru sneered as he strode over to Kichiro. He hadn't heard his twin step outside.

"Yeah," Kichiro gnashed out.

"Don't let it get to you," Ryomaru added despite the irritation that was entirely too evident in his voice.

"How am I supposed to do that?" Kichiro countered. "I just want to shut the damn thing off, but I . . ." Trailing off with a sigh, Kichiro scowled out over the city that he despised. "But if she tried to call, and I didn't answer . . ."

"So what are you gonna do?"

Letting out a deep breath, he shook his head. "I don't know."

"Keh!" Ryomaru grunted, his gaze following Kichiro's out over the landscape. "If you don't know, then I don't know, either. Hell . . . I ain't the voice of reason . . . I just . . ." Heaving a sigh, he shook his head, looking more frustrated than Kichiro could credit. Pinning Kichiro with a darkened glower, looked like he was struggling to say something . . . "I'm . . . I'm worried about you, Kich," he muttered.

All the anger that had roiled up inside him seemed to disburse with his brother's confession, leaving him feeling empty, lost. "Don't worry about me, Ryo. I'll be just fine."

Ryomaru stared at him for a minute then nodded, though he didn't look like he believed him. Trying to smile, he clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't stay out here too long," he warned as he turned to go. "It's getting colder, you know, and Mother . . . Well, you know how she is . . ."

Kichiro nodded and watched him go, heaving a sigh as he slowly turned around again to stare out over the city with eyes that didn't really see anything at all. Somewhere in the distance, a clock struck midnight. A sad little smile quirked on his lips. "Where are you dollbaby . . .? Daddy . . ." Trailing off as he held out a finger to catch a fat flake of snow, he watched as it melted: slowly around the edges, the water seeping into the center as the whiteness paled and thinned and then disappeared altogether. For some reason that he didn't dare consider, the snowflake reminded him of his daughter.

"Daddy loves you . . ."

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Samantha sat on the cot with her hands tucked under her thighs as she bounced the balls of her feet against the cold cement floor. She supposed she'd never actually been good at waiting, and this time was no better, was it? She was trying to be good, wasn't she?

*'What kind of special surprise do you suppose he has for us?'* she asked her youkai voice.

*'Hmm, I don't know, but you know, those damned white-coats have told you that before, and look what their idea of 'special' was . . .'*

Samantha wrinkled her nose. *'That's just not amusing in the least.'*

*'The truth rarely is.'*

She sighed. That was true, she supposed. Still . . .

Oh, it had all begun innocently enough. He'd been eyeing her a little too closely all evening, and she knew—just *knew*—that he was waiting for her to get sick. When he'd broken down and asked her if she was sure that she felt all right for the eighth time, she'd lost her temper a little and told him that she wasn't going to talk to him if he wasn't going to listen since she'd already told him that she was 'fine, just fine' at least eight times, too . . .

So after spending about two hours completely ignoring him, he'd suddenly announced that he had a 'special surprise' for her, and after admonishing her to be good and that he'd be 'right back', he'd strode out of the holding area and hadn't showed his face since.

A strange scraping sound interrupted her musings, and she sat up a little straighter in her effort to see exactly what he was bringing into the room.

She didn't have long to wait. Stepping inside with a large, utilitarian trashcan in tow, he didn't even glance at her as he pulled it into the center of the room and stopped.

Sniffing the air, she frowned since she really couldn't tell exactly what he had. He smelled like the wind and the snow, but she couldn't rightfully discern anything else.

He reached into the can and did—something. From her vantage point, she couldn't actually see what he was doing, but she gasped when he whipped around and chucked a softball-sized white mass at her. She squealed when it hit her, breaking apart in globs. "Snow!" she shrieked then ducked when another snowball flew at her.

The coldness was beautiful, and it smelled so fresh and clean, and just for a moment, she felt as though she were outside once more, able to breathe in the crispness, to revel in the welcome sensation of the season . . . Scooping together all the snow that she could, she

packed it and whizzed it back at him. He blocked it easily and, while he didn't smile, his violet eyes were shining in a completely pleased sort of way.

Giggling happily, she dashed over and stared at the piles of white inside the trashcan. He'd filled it almost completely to the top. "I'm going to make a snowman," she announced as though it were of the utmost importance.

"I don't think there's enough in there to make a snowman," he countered mildly.

"So it'll be a little snowman," she retorted then laughed. "Did you make snowmen when you were little?"

He didn't answer right away, and she was too preoccupied as she scooped up snow and started to pack it that she didn't notice his reluctance.

"I . . . don't remember," he said quietly. "I suppose I must've . . ."

She didn't look up as she formed a basketball-sized lump for the base of the small snowman. "I used to like to make snow angels, too—that's what Mama called them, anyway. I'd make them all over the yard, then I'd go inside, and she'd laugh because I brought tons of snow in with me . . ."

Setting the snow on the floor, she hurried back for more. "Sometimes I talked Papa into making them with me. I think he felt bad because there wasn't really anyone else my age around."

Heaving a bittersweet little sigh, she worked in silence for a while. "It never seemed like the snow lasted long . . . It normally melted within hours, and it always made me sad . . . Actually, we didn't get snow very often, so I really liked going to my grandfather's house for Christmas because there's always so much snow in Maine . . ."

“Your grandfather lives in Maine . . .”

“Mhmm . . . right on the ocean . . . It’s gorgeous there—so different from where I grew up . . . There! Now all he needs is a head . . .”

The taijya uttered a little sigh. Samantha finally looked up at him. Something about that sound had been so melancholy, and she blinked at the faraway expression in his eyes. “My . . . sister . . . She loved to make those, too,” he said quietly.

She almost smiled, but something in his tone stopped her. “You . . . you have a sister?”

He shook his head slowly, his gaze dropping to his knees. Sitting with his back against the cage, it struck her once more that he really was just as trapped as she was . . . and maybe his invisible prison was worse than hers ever could be . . . “No,” he replied, his voice thick, ragged. “Not anymore.”

“Did she look like you?” Samantha asked hesitantly, unsure if her question would set him off. Why did she have the feeling that it’d been a long, long time since he’d talked about his sister . . . or any of his family, for that matter?

He sighed and shook his head again, his jaw taking on a firmer set, and for a moment, she almost apologized for asking so personal a question. “She had . . . golden hair . . . like my mom. I, uh . . . I guess I looked like my dad.”

*‘How old were you when they died?’* she wanted to ask. She didn’t, though, not because she was afraid that he would be angry, but because she knew that it would cause him more pain, and that . . . that was something she simply couldn’t do.

He sat still for another minute then suddenly shook himself like he was just waking up from a dream and got to his feet. “It was a long time ago,” he said, as though that was answer enough.

She stared at him then slowly smiled. “Don’t suppose you’d help me put a face on him, would you?” she ventured.

He blinked and glanced at the snow man. “He doesn’t have a head,” he pointed out as he opened one of the desk drawers and started rummaging around.

She mashed together more snow into a somewhat lopsided head then carefully arranged it on the snowman’s body that was already starting to melt, much to her chagrin. “So what do you think?” she asked proudly, stepping back to examine her handiwork.

“Not bad,” he allowed slowly. “Not *good*, but not *bad*, either . . .”

“I think he looks *fantastic*,” she retorted.

“Here,” he said, handing her two pill bottle lids and a fat black marker. She took them and placed the eyes and marker-nose. The taijya narrowed his gaze, tilting his head to the side as he crossed his arms over his chest, regarding the snowman with a critical eye. “He looks a little . . . creepy,” he decided at length.

Samantha rolled her eyes and leaned way over to dig the last bit of snow out of the trashcan, packing it idly as she wrinkled her nose at the disparaging man. He hunkered down to straighten out the poor, lopsided snowman, and before she could consider the ramifications, she tucked the misshapen lump of snow down the back of his tee-shirt.

“*Ahhh!*” he hollered, shooting to his feet as Samantha smashed the snow between the shirt and his skin. He did a half-scoot dance step, contorting his body as he tried to shake the cold stuff out. Samantha covered her mouth with her hands and giggled. “Oh, now, see? You *are* a damn demon!” he grouched, which only served to make her laugh harder.

Her laughter died away, however, when he suddenly yanked the now-wet shirt over his head as he headed for the desk. “O-o-oh . . .” she breathed quietly, her eyes widening as she stared at him. He didn’t seem to notice as he grabbed his knapsack and dug around inside it.

His chest wasn’t nearly as broad as many of the men in her family, and he wasn’t as well-defined as they were, either, which wasn’t to say that he was out of shape. Quite the contrary, actually . . . She could see his muscles under his skin, but he wasn’t completely chiseled . . . and those love handles . . . barely there, to be sure, but enough to enthrall her, just the same.

But the thing that caught her attention and held it was the sparse hair that was sprinkled over his chest—just a little bit of fine black hair that spread over his chest, only to taper down to a thin line that disappeared from her view before it actually ended . . . She could feel the breath catch in her throat as she lifted a hand to flutter over her lips.

He didn’t seem to notice her rapt attention, though, which was probably good, all things considered. She seemed to have forgotten every last bit of manners that her mother had so painstakingly instilled in her from the time that she was a child . . .

‘I . . . *wo-o-o-ow*,’ she breathed.

‘*Ni-i-i-ice*,’ her youkai agreed. ‘*You don’t suppose he’ll leave his shirt o—Oh, damn!*’

She couldn’t have said that better, herself, and she sighed inwardly as he fished another tee-shirt out of the knapsack and tugged it over his head, muttering under his breath about the evils of demons and that he ought to have known.

Luckily, though, her equilibrium was slowly returning to normal by the time he finally looked up at her. “You think you’re just funny, don’t you?” he demanded though his tone lacked any real irritation.

She forced a smile then laughed a little weakly. "Who? Me?"

He rolled his eyes and rubbed the side of his head, the black locks so stark against the skin of his hand. "Yeah, don't try to convince me that you're innocent. I know damn well you're not. Anyway, you'd better play with your snow before it all melts."

The poor snowman was ready to lose his head since he was now leaning way over. She let out an exaggerated sigh, though the giggle that slipped from her gave her away. "Thank you," she said as she knelt down to try to repair the snowman, to no avail.

"What for?" he asked.

She shrugged and peeked over her shoulder. When she met his gaze, she winked at him. "For this . . . for bringing me snow."

He didn't answer her, and she turned back to scoop together the rapidly deteriorating pile of snow.

"You're a nice man," she said quietly, almost more to herself than to him.

She heard the creak of the desk chair as he sat down and shook out the newspaper. "I'm not nice," he muttered, "and that . . . that was just . . . snow."

"But you didn't have to," she countered in a distracted sort of way. "I'm glad that you did, though."

He sighed and rattled the paper once more. "Don't thank me," he told her. "It wasn't a big deal."

She smiled to herself. He might not think that it was a big deal, but to her, it was. It was a *huge* deal . . . and she adored him for it, too.



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
She's evil ...

## Chapter 40

### Restless

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*'Gotta hurry . . .'*

Grimacing as he stuffed the last box of books into the back of the rental car, Kurt heaved a sigh of relief and closed the trunk and glanced around. So far, so good. He hadn't seen the demon that had been camping out atop the roof on the building beside the run-down office that he'd rented, and that was just as well. Maybe he'd gotten tired or something; who knew? Either way, Kurt figured that it was good enough, all things considered. The last thing he wanted or needed was to be confronted by one of the little demon's family members, especially when he was slowly making progress on the things that he needed to get done in order to get her out of that place.

*'Admit it, why don't you? The real reason you're dragging your feet . . .'*

Slipping back inside the building using the service door in the back, he strode back into the building and down the steps into the basement to check things over; to make sure that he hadn't forgotten anything. All the drawers were empty; all the gear that was hung from metal hooks on the wall had been taken down and packed up. Hell, he'd even emptied the trash can with a wince. He'd forgotten, hadn't he? Her things were in there—her clothes . . . the length of her hair that he'd cut off to remove the duct tape gag . . .

He was ignoring the question that his conscience had presented with almost perverse resolve.

*'Ignore it if you want, but you know damn well that the reason you're dragging your feet is because you know that when you let her go, you'll never, ever see her again.'*

Grimacing as he tried in vain to refute that knowledge, Kurt rifled through the cabinets, checking and double checking to make sure that everything was gone. That wasn't the reason; not really. That . . . that couldn't be the reason . . .

That . . . couldn't be it.

Shaking his head as he strode up the steps, he stopped long enough to touch the Post-It notes he'd stuck to either side of the doorway, activating the barrier that should keep the demons out of there if they got the notion to search the place. Satisfied that it would work, he pushed the old door closed and headed out of the office again, he paused just inside the door to peer outside. The back door opened into the narrow alley behind the building, and it was hard to see much of anything. Still, he didn't sense the demon's presence, and that was good enough, he figured.

Sparing a moment to toss the tied trash bag in and checking the trunk of the car and the rear doors to make sure they were locked, he reached for the driver's side latch when the approach of a powerful aura intruded on his senses.

It was the one from the roof, damn it. Kurt could feel his eyes on him and gritted his teeth as he slowly opened the door.

Kurt heard him drop to the alley behind him. The demon didn't actually try to mask the sounds he was making; maybe he wanted Kurt to know that he was approaching. Either way, Kurt had to tamp down the unreasonable urge to get into the car and take off.

"Hey, buddy. Got a minute?"

Kurt closed the door and squared his shoulders, unsure why he felt such an overwhelming reluctance to face the demon. Tugging the leather glove that covered his right hand—a glove that he'd carefully stitched a symbol into: a symbol meant to repress his power so that demons couldn't sense it, Kurt slowly turned to face him.

Strands of long, silver hair seemed to float on the air as he met the demon's eyes. He didn't look entirely unfriendly, but he did look exhausted. Dark smudges under his eyes, face pale, drawn, and looking like he could benefit from a good shave, the demon nodded at the building that Kurt had just emptied out. "You from around here?" he asked

Kurt shrugged and shook his head. "Not really."

"But you came out of that building." It wasn't a question.

"Sure . . . I was looking at it to see if I wanted to rent it," he replied.

A flicker of emotion passed over the demon's face—irritation, Kurt supposed. "Rent it," he echoed. "I don't suppose you'd let me take a look around in there? Just for a minute . . ."

Kurt shrugged again. "Sorry. I gotta go."

He started to get into the car, but the demon grabbed the door before he could close it. "Wait a minute," he blurted. "You know how I could get a-hold of the guy who owns this place?"

"Uh . . . no . . . I just . . . just had a number," Kurt muttered.

"You wouldn't happen to have it on you, would you?" he pressed.

Kurt snorted and shook his head. “Look, man, the last place I looked at was snapped up by some guy who asked me how to contact the owner. Forget it,” he said, jerking on the door to dislodge the demon’s hand.

To his relief, though, the demon backed off, and with an inward sigh of relief, Kurt started the car and got out of there.

Still, that was damn close—*too* damn close. He didn’t dare risk running into any more of them, not until he’d gotten her out of the facility safely . . .

He took his time as he drove back to his apartment. He didn’t think that the demon followed him, but he’d rather be safe than sorry. As he stopped at a red light, he glanced at his watch and sighed. If he hurried, he’d have enough time to unpack the car and drop it off before he headed to work.

At least it shouldn’t take too much longer. He was getting through the surveillance videos a lot faster than he’d thought at first, mostly because he could skip over stuff that didn’t have anything to do with the one thing that he wanted to know. The thing was, the more he watched those tapes, the more irritated he grew. Seeing what those damned doctors did to her, and all in the name of science . . . just what the hell was wrong with them . . .? There was a strange and pervasive sense of a ‘because we can’ sort of mentality, and it bothered him, didn’t it?

And yet he seemed to learn more and more about her every night, too. Comfortable enough to speak of her family quite often, she’d told him stories of her youth, her childhood—stories that had made him wonder if Caroline had lived, how different would the two females actually have been? Would she, like the little demon, have grown up, surrounded by the careful love of a family who obviously cherished her? He liked to think so. Being around the little demon . . . why was it so damned easy? How was it that she could remind him of things that he’d almost forgotten without ever really trying?

Blinking when the car behind him blared its horn, Kurt let out a deep breath and pressed the accelerator.

Maybe he was going soft. That was the only really good way to rationalize it. The little demon was going to be the death of him; he just knew it. So why didn't that idea really bother him as much as it should?

He sighed. There really was no telling, was there? All he knew was that when she left—when he finally sent her on her way . . .

He was going to miss her, wasn't he?

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“You having any luck?”

Evan heaved a sigh and didn't answer right away. “Nope, not a damn thing.”

Cain stuffed his hand into his pockets as he wandered along the beach, as the wind off the ocean whipped his ponytail over his shoulder, into his face. Tightening his hold on the cell phone in his hand, he sighed. “Yeah . . . Ben's still trying to trace every single one of the Ed Smiths that came up in Myrna's name search of the area. He's about halfway through now, but it could take another couple weeks to get anything concrete.”

“We don't fucking have two more weeks, Cain.”

Ignoring the frustration evident in his son's tone, Cain nodded slowly. “I know, Evan, but we're doing the best we can. Myrna's been running the special crimes office pretty much alone these days, and—”

“And you can shove the special crimes right the fuck up your goddamn ass! She’s your granddaughter, and—”

“And that doesn’t mean that I can pick and choose the things that I have to deal with, and you ought to know that, too,” Cain shot back. He had a sneaking suspicion that it didn’t matter what he did, it’d never be good enough for his youngest son . . . “Evan . . . I’m just as concerned as you are. We’re doing everything we can on this end.”

“Yeah . . . maybe that just ain’t good enough,” Evan growled.

Cain grimaced. How many times had he thought the very same thing? “You just be careful, all right?”

“Sure. Whatever.”

Letting out a long sigh when the line went dead, Cain snapped the phone closed and dropped it into his pocket. It just didn’t sit well, did it? Evan, the one who normally moved through life in a fairly good, if not completely mischievous mood . . . It wasn’t the first time that he’d felt as though his entire family were falling apart at the seams.

He could understand Evan’s frustration well enough, too, since he’d felt that, as well. There were times that he despised his birthright: his role as the North American tai-youkai, and now . . .

His heart wanted him to go out, to find his granddaughter, to destroy the ones that would do her ill, but as the tai-youkai, he couldn’t do that, could he? What he could do was to sit here and wait and worry . . .

The cell phone rang. Cain pulled it out of his pocket and scowled at the number. It wasn't one he recognized, not that it mattered. He didn't have a choice about whether or not he answered the call, did he? "Zelig," he said.

"Hello. I'm calling about the missing girl?"

"Samantha, yes."

The woman on the other end of the line sighed. "I thought I saw her the other night: long silvery hair and blue eyes, right?"

"Uh, yeah," he said as he stopped short, as his heart slammed against his ribcage hard. "Where?"

"At the restaurant where we ate the other night . . . She was with a very tall man—dog-youkai, I think . . ."

The bitter wash of disappointment washed over him, and Cain made a face. "Wait . . . New York City, right?"

"Oh, yes," the woman replied. "Not her?"

Patting his pocket for a cigarette and realizing a moment too late that he'd left them on his desk, he sighed. "Uh, no . . . that sounds like my daughter. She and her husband live there."

"I'm sorry," she blurted. "I didn't mean to waste your time . . ."

"No, it's . . . it's okay. Thanks for looking out for her."

"She's the same age as my little girl," the woman went on. "I pray you find her soon."

“Thanks.”

Pressing the phone against his chest to close it, Cain heaved a sigh and shook his head. The bitterness that always followed a moment like that, when all hope was so suddenly dashed, was hard to swallow. Trying to convince himself to be positive was growing increasingly difficult every day . . .

“Hmm, mind if you had some company, Zelig-sensei?”

Cain turned and tried to smile as Gin pulled her coat tighter around her body and wandered toward him. “You should be inside where it’s warm, baby girl,” he replied.

“I’m hanyou. I’m tough,” she assured him. Her smile faded slightly as she caught sight of the cell phone clutched tightly in his hand. “One of these leads . . .” she trailed off.

“. . . Will pan out; I know,” he finished for her with a nod. “That’s what I keep telling myself.”

“Even a rock can crack,” she murmured as she slipped her arms around his waist and hugged him tight.

Smoothing her hair as he stared out over the ocean, he considered her words with a frown. She was talking about him, and he knew it, but . . . but it applied to her, too, didn’t it? Up before dawn, dropping into bed well after everyone else in the mansion, day after day after day . . . She busied herself by taking care of everyone, and while he understood why, he couldn’t help the slight pang of guilt that he’d somehow been neglecting her of late, too. “The rock won’t crack as long as there’s sand to cradle it,” he told her.

She uttered a soft laugh and buried her face against his chest. “Samantha . . . she . . . she will come home, won’t she?”

Frown deepening at Gin’s worried tone, at the quiet sense of desperation behind her words, Cain sighed. “She will,” he heard himself say, and if he didn’t know his own heart, his own worries, better, he might even have believed himself. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe—no, never that . . . What worried him most was the idea that the hope that sustained him—sustained her—was becoming harder and harder to summon.

She sighed and stood still for a moment before leaning back to gaze up at him, her eyes wide and clear, sparkling in the late afternoon watery sunshine. “Did I tell you? I saw a falling star last night . . . and I made a wish. I don’t know if it’ll help, but . . .”

“It’ll help,” he whispered. “Wishes on falling stars always come true.”

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Kurt sat down and kicked his feet up on the desk as he shook out the newspaper, fully aware of the deep blue eyes that were trained intently on him.

The little demon cleared her throat to gain his attention. He rattled the paper again.

“So . . .”

“Hmm?”

She sighed quietly. “Uh . . . nothing . . .”

He turned the page to scan the headlines.

He could hear her moving around: pacing, as it were. She was striding around the perimeter of the room like she did whenever he read the newspaper, but he could still feel her gaze on him.

She wasn't going to last much longer, was she? She had to break soon, he figured. After all, she'd mentioned that she was hungry a while ago, and she hadn't had a thing to eat since . . .

"You really didn't bring me anything at all?" she asked in a strangely timid tone.

Kurt blinked and lowered the paper. That really wasn't fair at all, was it? Ears drooping rather pathetically, shoulders slumped, she looked entirely discomfited, and that just figured, didn't it? "Now, that's low," he countered in a mumble. "Besides that, you didn't ask me for food, did you?"

Her ears perked right up at that, which just figured. If he didn't know better, he'd swear that she knew that he'd cave in if he saw that . . . "Did you bring me something?" she demanded as a grin broke over her features.

Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head. "Guess I walked right into that," he grumbled. "Okay, little demon. If you can tell me by smell what I brought, you can have it."

She giggled and rubbed her hands together as she skittered over to the desk and leaned across it to sniff at the knapsack. Her laughter slowly faded, though, as a confounded expression replaced her gloating amusement. "I can't smell anything," she finally said. "That really *is* mean!"

"Relax. I did bring you dinner," he said as he dug into the bag for the two plastic, air-tight containers that he'd wrapped in about five layers of plastic wrap as well as a plastic

zipper bag for good measure. Her dinner was in the red one; his was in the blue one, and when she reached for it, he pulled them back. “You can’t smell it? Really?”

She shot him a pouting half-glower that wasn’t nearly as intimidating as it should have been. “You wrapped it better than a Christmas present,” she grumbled.

The disgruntled expression, coupled with the absolute chagrin in her tone made him chuckle. He couldn’t help it. Something about her . . .

She blinked, her eyes widening as she stared at him without a word. Mouth rounding in a little ‘o’, she slowly lifted her fingers to hover at her lips.

“Wh-what?” he asked with a shake of his head.

“You laughed,” she whispered, as though she were afraid that her own voice could ruin the moment. “I liked that.”

Letting his gaze drop away, he cleared his throat and sat up, his feet falling onto the floor as a foreign sense of heat filtered into his face. “Here,” he muttered, pushing the red container toward her.

“You should do that more often . . . laugh, I mean,” she replied as she pulled the plastic bag open and cut through the plastic with her claws. A second later, she gasped as the aroma of her dinner filled the air—all the smell that had been trapped under the layers of plastic released. “Oh . . .” she breathed. He peeked up at her in time to see the expression of absolute bliss on her face, the complete wonder inspired by the mere scent of her meal. “You brought me . . .”

“You going to eat it or are you just going to sniff it all night?” he asked mildly.

“I’m afraid to open it,” she confessed. “You aren’t trying to trick me, are you?”

He stared at her for a minute then shook his head and snorted. “No, but it was a little expensive, so if I have to just throw it away, I might be a little irritated.”

She yanked the container toward herself, protecting it with her arms, lest he try to take it back, ears flattening, fangs flashing as a low rumble—a growl?—escaped her. He raised an eyebrow. “Are you threatening me?”

She shook her head and finally pried open one corner of the container with a giggle of delight. “Lobster!” she gasped as she yanked the lid off and set it aside. “Oh, I can’t believe you brought me lobster!”

“It just *looks* . . . ugh,” he muttered as he sat back and watched as she picked up the crustacean and turned it over.

“It’s a female,” she announced happily.

Narrowing his eyes, Kurt couldn’t quite make out whether she was being serious or not. “What?”

The little demon grinned, flashing her dimple at him once more. “It’s a female. See these? They’re called swimmerets, and on females, they’re all soft. On males, these ones are hard,” she said, flicking the two little appendages closest to the lobster’s main body.

“Well, that was information I don’t know that I needed,” he muttered with a shake of his head.

She giggled as she twisted the legs off and made an elaborate production of getting to the meat in the legs.

“Ugh,” he muttered when a particularly loud crack announced that she’d succeeded in removing the first of the creature’s claws. “You know, that’s about the same sound that a cockroach makes when you step on it,” he pointed out indelicately.

“Best cockroach I’ve ever had,” she shot back.

He curled a lip and stared at his untouched dinner with disdain. “That’s just gross,” he pointed out.

She shrugged as she cracked the tip of the claw with her bare hands. He grimaced. “You brought it up,” she replied pleasantly.

“Hmm, and I’m a little sorry that I did.”

“Did you get a lobster for you, too?”

Casting her a look that told her plainly that she ought to have known better, he finally reached for his wrapped container. “Nope. Steak.”

“I’d rather have this,” she assured him.

It took him longer to get into his dinner than it had taken her to do the same, but he didn’t miss her interested glance as he pulled the lid off the blue container and set it aside. Then she went back to picking at her lobster. She did it with a delicate precision that surprised him though he wasn’t entirely sure why. Sparing a moment to dip each bite into the plastic cup of clarified butter, she giggled happily and moaned in an entirely unsettling way.

Forcing his eyes away as she raised her hand to catch a drip of butter that was running down the side of her hand, he poked at the wilted salad with a plastic fork. Was she trying to get to him? Between the moaning and the licking, he wasn’t entirely sure what

to make of it, and while common sense told him that she wasn't trying to do any such thing, common sense didn't exactly rate high on his list of priorities at the moment, either.

*'Maybe she is a succubus . . .'*

Snorting at his own capricious thoughts, Kurt jabbed the fork into the meat then sighed when it broke off.

The little demon blinked and stared at him curiously. "Do you want mine?"

"I told you, I don't eat lobster," he grumbled, tossing the broken end of the fork into the nearby trashcan.

She giggled and held out the plastic fork he'd put in her container. "No, I meant this," she said.

Heaving a sigh, he grudgingly reached for the utensil and muttered, "Thank you."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you," she corrected casually. "I mean, it's enough that you come in every night and stay with me, but you . . . you remember things I tell you, like when I told you I wanted to see the sky again . . . or the toothbrush and floss . . ."

He didn't answer right off as he slowly cut into the steak. Of course he'd brought her the floss and toothbrush, especially after seeing her horrendous display with her hair the one day . . . but . . . "Don't thank me," he said, unable to keep the absolute disgust out of his voice—disgust at himself for having brought a creature like her to this place . . .

"I have to," she replied. "If it weren't for you—"

Standing up abruptly, sending the chair screeching back, he strode away from the desk. Unable to sit and endure her quiet appreciation . . . *'Damn it, what the hell is wrong with her? Why doesn't she . . . she hate me?'*

She ought to, shouldn't she? He was the one who had captured her with hate in his heart and malice in his eyes. He'd taken her away from every single thing that she cared about without a moment's hesitation . . . All of the things that he'd seen on the tapes—the things that he had yet to see . . . And he . . .

"Someone dear to me . . . my brother-in-law . . . he lost his family, too, but . . . but humans were the ones who killed them. They fooled his family into thinking that they wanted help, and they . . ." trailing off, she shook her head, as though the mere thought of what had happened was just too much for her to think about. "My sister told me once that he had lived with hate and regret for so long that it had become a sort of prison without bars but there, and every day he woke up, he hated himself for being the one to survive, and I . . ." She heaved a sigh, shook her head as she slowly, hesitantly, met his gaze. "I don't want you to be trapped anymore . . . trapped like Griffin."

He slowly turned to look at her, and when his eyes met hers, she smiled just a little—a sad smile; a compassionate smile . . . a smile that reminded him of . . .

"Your, uh, lobster's getting cold," he muttered, clearing his throat, unable to make sense of the hotness, the stabbing ache behind his eyes.

"Only if you're going to eat with me," she insisted.

Letting out a deep breath, Kurt considered that for a moment then walked over to the desk once more, and as he ate, he couldn't help but think about what she said.

It was an ugly thing, wasn't it? The hatred . . . the inescapable feeling that everything he thought he knew wasn't right, at all . . . The little demon . . . Why was she able to touch

him so deeply without touching him at all? What was it about her that spoke to him in the quietest of whispers in places so dark, so deep?

And why was it that he knew deep down that once she walked away from him . . .

He wouldn't have anything left at all.



**Final Thought from Samantha:**  
**Lobster!**

# Chapter 41

## Cleanliness

-----

*'I'm damned. Damned. Damned and . . . and stupid . . .'*

The sound of sloshing water mingled with the soft giggles as the little demon splashed in the makeshift tub—a trash can that he'd cleaned out for the endeavor.

To be honest, Kurt had felt rather stupid as he washed it out, as he'd sprayed the inside with industrial disinfectant so that it was all right to use. He'd also felt a little bad since he wasn't happy with the idea of sticking her in a garbage can, but considering he didn't really have any other options short of installing a bathtub, and that would only serve to raise suspicions . . .

Really, though, it hadn't been all that difficult. He picked up a water spout converter like the kind one used to affix a portable dishwasher to a sink and hooked up a few lengths of hose to fill the can with hot water from the bathroom.

In all actuality, he'd felt much more freakish in the store as he'd painstakingly sniffed bottle after bottle of body wash and lotions and shampoos. At first, he'd grabbed a bar of the cheapest soap since that's what he tended to buy for himself, but he'd stopped to watch as two young girls had headed down the aisle toward the body wash, giggling as they compared scents.

It was then that he vaguely remembered the different bottles his mother had kept in the shower when he was smaller. She'd always smelled like summer flowers, hadn't she? If

his mother had liked scents like that, then it stood to reason that the little demon might like them, too . . . right?

He wasn't even sure why he'd wanted to do any such thing for her; not really. He wasn't sure about anything anymore . . .

He sighed. With every passing day, he felt that he was getting closer to . . . something—something he couldn't quite understand, couldn't quite grasp—something that frightened him as much as it exhilarated him, too . . . but . . .

What the hell was he doing? Playing house with the demon? Had he lost his mind?

He grimaced as he spared a peek at her only to find her peering over the top of the can. He could only see her eyes, her soapy hair, complete with the old smock folded and laying atop her head. Not that it mattered, because it didn't. He knew damn well what she looked like inside that damn can, didn't he? He'd seen her a few too many times not to know . . .

And when his thoughts had shifted from the idea that she was just a monster hidden inside a pretty form to the knowledge that she was actually female, that maybe she wasn't quite as different as he'd wanted to believe . . .

No doubt about it, he was a damned man, wasn't he?

“Um . . . taijya . . .”

No doubt about it; definitely damned . . . “What?”

“I don't suppose you'd wash my back . . .?”

*'And there's the proof,'* he thought with an inward snort. "No," he stated, distrusting himself to elaborate as to the why of his refusal. *'Shit . . . I'm no better than that fucking Peterson, am I?'*

A loud gurgle of water, and he supposed that she sat up a little. "Please?"

He sighed again. He was doing that a lot this evening, wasn't he? "No."

"But I can't reach it," she pointed out.

Kurt almost snorted out loud as he gritted his teeth together and glowered at his hands. "No," he stated once more.

No doubt about it; he was a pervert. He had to be one, didn't he, if he actually was attracted to that little demon, but there was no way—*no way*—he was going to wash her back for her. That'd be a fate worse than death, wouldn't it, because . . .

Grimacing when she uttered a plaintive little sound, Kurt wasn't entirely sure why he stood up and moved toward her. At least all of her scrubbing had created a layer of bubbles on the surface of the water, obstructing his view of her underneath. Telling himself over and over that this was a really bad idea, he took the half-empty bottle of body wash and squeezed some into the palm of his hand. He hadn't thought to bring her a washcloth, and that just figured. He hesitated before touching the shining skin of her back, swallowing hard.

It was worse than he'd imagined—much softer, much smoother, much warmer, and as he started to rub the soap around, she leaned toward him. "This is so nice," she breathed.

*'Speak for yourself,'* he thought with an inward snort.

“I can’t believe you brought me a bath!” she went on, either not noticing his reluctance or not bothering to remark upon it. He figured it was the first of those. “Do you make baths for your ten girlfriends, too?”

“Uh . . . yes, all the time,” he deadpanned. Anything to get his mind off what he was doing . . . It wouldn’t have been so bad if she didn’t keep sitting there, moaning quietly, as though the absolute pleasure of having a bath weren’t the closest thing to heaven on earth. Then again, who the hell was he trying to fool? Of course it was bad, any way you looked at it. It was bad. Touching her like that only served to remind him of exactly how tiny she really was; how delicate—how perfect she felt to him. It was as disconcerting as it was welcome, and the overall sensation was almost more than he could stand.

*‘Knock it off, damn it!’* he told himself furiously. It made no sense to him, did it? Or maybe it did. He’d spent more time with her than he ever had with another person, he supposed. Even when he’d lived with Old Granger, it hadn’t been the same. Old Granger was too weird, too unsettled to be a real companion, and somewhere along the way, Kurt had forgotten what it meant to actually let someone near. Something about the little demon . . .

She was familiar.

“I feel so *clean*,” she murmured, bringing her arms up, crossing them on the edge of the trashcan as she rested her cheek on her forearms, her eyes closed. “I can’t remember the last time I felt so clean . . .”

He sighed and frowned, deliberately slowing down the motion of his hands as he washed her back. She shivered, tiny goosebumps surfacing under his fingertips, only to be smoothed away as he ran his hands over her. The soap lent a slight barrier against the feel of pure skin, but didn’t provide nearly enough of one, and Kurt shifted, biting down hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from groaning, himself . . .

“So warm,” she said after a moment.

*‘Damned . . .’*

She sat up a little straighter suddenly, as though she’d just had a thought or something. “Oh . . . Th-thank you,” she blurted suddenly. “I think I’ll, uh . . . just soak a while . . .”

He blinked and sat back, letting his hands dangle into the water and concentrating on drawing deep, fortifying breaths for a minute, willing his body to forget what he’d just been doing. It didn’t work so well. “You need to get out of there soon or you’re going to look like a prune,” he muttered as he pushed himself to his feet and turned away.

She sighed softly. “Just little longer?” she pressed.

Kurt grimaced. The last thing he wanted to do was to sit there while she finished her bath, but . . . “All right,” he agreed at last.

She giggled and settled in for a longer soak.

Kurt heaved another sigh and strode over to the desk, snatching up the newspaper and determined to ignore her, even if it killed him, and it just might, all things considered . . . Little demons and bath water . . . What a horrid combination . . .

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Bas slipped into the darkened bedroom, and smiled a little wanly as the welcome touch of Sydnie’s youki brushed over him. God, he’d missed her. In the weeks since Samantha’s disappearance, the one thing that he could complain about, really, was the constant

presence of his mate that had been sorely missing during his time spent in Chicago, and while he was going to be heading back out soon, he'd come home for a couple days to make sure that Sydnie was all right, and because he simply wanted to be near her; to reassure himself that she was safe and that their unborn child was doing well.

Careful not to wake her, he didn't bother to undress before he stretched out beside her. Without waking up, she scooted closer, cuddling against him as Bas slipped his arms around her and pulled her onto his chest—her preferred place to sleep. Her stomach was bulging just a little, attesting to the life she nurtured inside her, and he gently rubbed her belly, marveling at the very idea that their child really was on the way. The beat of her heart comforted him, and he smiled sadly, wondering if it was horrible of him to feel so completely content, even if it were only for an insular moment.

"Mm, puppy," she murmured, her voice still thick with sleepiness. "Missed you . . ."

"I missed you, too, kitty."

She yawned and pushed herself up far enough to look down at him, her gaze taking a moment to focus. "Did you find her?" she demanded breathlessly.

He shook his head. "No."

"Then why are you—?"

"I'm just home for a couple days," he assured her. "I'm going back soon enough."

She looked like she wanted to argue with him despite the grudging sense of gladness that he really was there. He supposed he could understand that well enough. She missed him as much if not more than he missed her, didn't she? As much as she wanted him home, though, she also wanted him to be out there, looking for Samantha, and he could understand that, too.

“How are you feeling, baby?” he asked gently, still rubbing her slightly distended belly.

She stared at him for a long moment then cuddled against his shoulder. “I’m fine,” she assured him though she said it with a slightly pouty tone. “Isabelle says that this one is just fine.”

“Good.”

She sighed. “Your father’s had a lot of calls, but nothing solid as yet.”

“I know,” he replied. “So has Kich . . . along with a few prank calls from little bastards who think it’s funny to make light of the idea that someone is missing like that.”

“Your father’s gotten a few of those, too,” she mused.

Bas sighed. Thinking about those idiot calls was more than enough to upset the delicate balance of his emotions, and with that in mind, he figured he’d better change the direction of his thoughts quickly, before he ended up completely and thoroughly pissed off all over again. “You want some milk, kitty?”

“I’m all right,” she murmured.

“Let me go get you some,” he said. To be honest, he wasn’t entirely sure that she’d allowed anyone else to get the drink for her in his absence, and since he was home, he intended to make sure that she drank as much as she needed.

“Hmm,” she intoned but didn’t try to stop him as he gently moved her aside and got up.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised.

The mansion was silent as he headed down the stairs and toward the kitchen. The clock on the mantle in the living room struck twice, and he sighed. He was home, yes, but it didn't feel like home, did it? There was an invisible sort of feeling that just wouldn't go away; this pervasive cloud of foreboding that even he could sense. Everyone in the house was waiting, wondering, worrying, and he supposed that had as much to do with it as anything else could.

Stepping into the darkened kitchen, he stopped short and shook his head at the sight that greeted him. Sitting at the breakfast nook and silhouetted in shadows upon shadows in the semi-darkness, staring out the window . . .

"Hey, Belle," he said quietly so that he didn't startle her. She ought to have known that he was there, and she likely did . . . or she was so deep in thought that she hadn't noticed him, at all.

"Bastian," she greeted wanly as he sat down across from her. "I heard you come in . . ."

"How are you holding up?" he asked as he stared at her: shades of blues and grays and shadows in the dark. Her marbled skin glowing with a certain incandescence, her hair tinged by the frosty hands of the frigid light filtering through the corner of windows . . . even her eyes, fathomless, deep, and a melancholy so poignant, so bittersweet that he had to swallow hard and look away.

"I'm fine," she whispered in an ironic tone. "I'm *always* fine. It's my daughter that I don't know about . . ."

"But you can feel her, right? You know that she's . . . that she's okay."

"Do I?" Bellaniece challenged suddenly, her gaze flicking over him: startlingly direct. "Do I really know that or . . ." Trailing off as she swallowed hard, her stare faltering just for a moment before she leveled it at him once more. "Do I?" she whispered again, as

though the sound of her own voice could hurt her. Her eyes dropped to the table, her head slumping forward. Hair falling over her like a veil, she sighed, her hand trembling as she reached for the white porcelain mug in front of her. “Do I know it, or is it just what I want to think?”

“I think you know,” Bas replied. “I’d like to think that you do.”

She didn’t respond right away. The tick of the wall clock was obscenely loud. “Next week,” she finally said. “Next week, she’ll be human again . . . and it . . . terrifies me . . .”

Bas nodded. He understood that well enough. He remembered the times when he became human. It was long enough ago that it wasn’t something that he considered often, but he remembered. There was a certain level of helplessness that had come along with the change, a distinct disadvantage of every one of his senses seeming to shut down all at once. Hard enough to be at home during those nights, and even surrounded by family, he’d always felt a little isolated. How difficult was it for Samantha, wherever she was?

Bellaniece sighed and sat back, her gaze shifting to the window again. “I’ve sat in this spot every night for the last eighty-five nights, staring out this window, watching the ocean as it never, ever really changes . . . Eighty-five nights out of the eighty-eight since anyone last heard from my daughter . . . and with every day that passes, I feel my family falling apart little by little by little . . . and I have to wonder how much more we can take before we all just crumble to dust?”

Bas let out a deep breath and slowly nodded. He’d wondered the same thing, himself, and while he hadn’t been here to witness the strain, he knew well enough what the constant searching was doing to the others—especially to Kichiro . . . “Samantha’s one of the smartest people I know,” he said with a half-smile. “Guess she gets that from you . . . Anyway, wherever she is, she’s fine, and . . . and I know that she’s just as worried about you and Kich as you are about her.”

Bellaniece sighed and shook her head as she tucked a long strand of bronze hair behind her ear, but she finally smiled just a little. “Thank you, Bastian,” she said as she reached over to squeeze his hand.

He nodded, relieved to see the smile on her face even if it wasn’t a full one. It had always seemed to him it was second nature to her. Seeing her so sad just seemed completely unnatural, didn’t it? “We’ll bring her home,” he promised.

Her smile widened—a genuine smile even if it wasn’t as brilliant as her usual expression. “I know you will.”

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*‘This is . . . so nice . . .’*

Samantha smiled as she pulled the collar of the oversized, nondescript, faded black sweatshirt up over her nose and breathed deep. It smelled like him: the taijya—at least, it smelled like him before he’d taken the scent-tab. Of course, it baffled her that he had obviously taken more than one, and why he’d want to do that was completely beyond her, but he’d only shrugged and pretended not to have heard her the one time she’d asked him about it, and she figured that he had his reasons, after all.

After he finished dumping three buckets of warm water over her head to rinse her, he’d tossed a towel at her and set out a pair of sweatpants and the shirt she was wearing now—his clothes. The warmth of the clothes was a beautiful feeling, and she’d been unable to stop herself from breathing in the clean scent of them as she quietly and happily ate the cheeseburger he’d brought her.

But the absolute best thing, as far as she was concerned, was the marked change in his scent as he'd scrubbed her back. She'd almost missed it. As euphoric as she had been by the idea of a simple bath, even if it was in a scrubbed out trash can, she'd been completely sidetracked when she'd first started to realize that his hands were shaking, that his scent had changed . . . that marked change—slightly darker, deeper, more unsettling—the subtle difference that she'd never actually smelled from someone who was paying attention to her . . .

He . . . he wanted her . . .?

It was a novel idea, wasn't it? The knowledge was heady, leaving her feeling a little giddy, and even if it was impossible, given the situation, did it really hurt to think about it, at least for now?

*'Of course he wants you,'* her youkai voice pointed out reasonably. *'Still, that doesn't mean that he understands any of it, either, you know.'*

She did know. She could see it in his eyes sometimes, couldn't she? His feelings confused him, unsettled him . . . the emotion that she saw when he thought she wasn't looking made her wonder if she weren't doing something ultimately stupid, not because of her feelings, no, but because of the conflict that she knew it caused deep inside him.

It was enough for her, though, wasn't it? Just to be close enough, to know that he would be there at night; that she didn't have to be completely alone . . . But then, how selfish was that, really? With every day that passed, she could feel it, couldn't she? The bond that comforted her was tearing him up inside, wasn't it? And yet she couldn't distance herself from him, either. The very idea of trying to do that was just a little more than she could stand. She wasn't a saint, and she wasn't a martyr, and the taijya . . .

He'd come to mean the world to her . . .

“You’re plotting something. I can see it in your eyes.”

Blinking as she pushed away the lingering gloom of her thoughts, she shook her head and shrugged. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she countered lightly.

“Like hell,” he retorted. “Let me guess: you’re plotting to off me while I sleep.”

“Of course not,” she said, waving her hand dismissively. “You’re the only one who brings me decent food. Why on earth would I do that?”

“Such a pain,” he muttered as he tugged the comics out of the paper and dropped them on the table in front of her. “Anyway, don’t drool on that page. I haven’t gotten to read it yet.”

“I don’t drool,” she snorted, glancing at the dateline: January 28, it said . . . “Wow . . . it’s almost February,” she murmured softly, deliberately blocking any thought as to exactly how long she’d already been here from her mind. “So what are you going to do for me for Valentine’s Day?” she quipped.

He rolled his eyes, sparing a moment to peer around the edge of the newspaper. “That’s just another one of those commercialized holidays designed to make losers who don’t have a chance in hell of finding a date feel even more loser-ish than they already do. By the way, did you know that statistically speaking, Valentine’s Day ranks right up there in the suicide ratings?”

“You are such a fatalist,” she pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

“I consider myself to be a pragmatist,” he corrected.

She laughed softly then sighed, setting the paper aside as she sat back, drawing her knees up as she savored the feeling of the soft fabric against her skin. “Have you ever had a real girlfriend?” she asked at length.

He seemed surprised by her question, and he shook the newspaper and cleared his throat before answering. “Uh, no, I don’t suppose I have.”

“Why?”

He shook his head, letting the newspaper crumple onto his lap, his gaze narrowing as he frowned at the far wall. “I don’t know. I just never . . . never felt anything for anyone; not like that. I mean . . . there have been women, but no names; no faces . . . Nothing that could . . .”

He trailed off without finishing that thought, but then, he didn’t really have to, did he? *‘Nothing that could hurt him . . .’* So why did that thought make her happy on some level? Why did it please her to think that way? The very idea that she’d feel that sort of thing about the fact that he’d never felt that kind of love . . . It horrified her. That she could possibly be so base, so shallow . . . And maybe she really was the monster that he’d thought she was, from the start.

“What about you?” he asked suddenly, his voice much closer to the tone she knew.

She blinked and shrugged, but couldn’t meet his gaze. *‘Am I really so awful . . .?’*

“Little demon?”

Shaking herself out of her own malicious thoughts, Samantha couldn’t help the slight blush that dusted her skin even as she reminded herself that fair was fair, after all. “N-no . . .”

“No, what? No boyfriends?”

She tried to keep herself from turning completely red in the face; she really did. Years of hearing her sisters telling her that she ought to get out, to date someone, even if she knew he wasn't her true mate . . . “*Just to get some experience in dating,*” they'd said . . . Samantha had always turned red and run away, trying not to think about it.

“No,” she muttered, her eyebrows drawing together in a marked frown as her eyes fell to the table. “My sisters always thought I should, but I . . .” Waving her hands as though to dismiss the entire thing from her mind, she sighed and grimaced as her ears flattened momentarily. “It always seemed so pointless,” she explained. “I mean . . . boys my age were so stupid, always talking about this girl or that one . . . girls who knew how to flirt and would sleep with anyone who gave them the time of day, so I . . . I just never . . . never really wanted to . . .”

She laughed suddenly, shaking her head as she forced herself to shrug as though it didn't matter to her at all. “Anyway, I suppose that sounds stupid, doesn't it? Really stupid and really lame . . .”

“No, it doesn't,” he replied, a strange sort of emotion flickering over his features for only a moment before he managed to mask it.

“You want to laugh at me,” she pointed out, wrinkling her nose.

“No . . . no I don't,” he assured her. For a moment, he looked like he wanted to say something, but he must have changed his mind, because he shook his head and smoothed out the newspaper instead.

She blinked as his voice, as clearly as if he'd spoken out loud, whispered in her head. *‘In another lifetime . . .’*

'... *We really could have been together* ...' she finished in her own head.

She smiled a little sadly and nodded. She understood completely. It was something she'd thought to herself more than once in the last few weeks, during those long days of testing, those thoughts that she couldn't understand, not at all. She knew what they meant for her, of course. The innate knowledge that would ultimately mean that her life really was over—already *was* over—had *been* over from the moment she'd met him, that second she'd felt the stirrings deep down that he was familiar to her; more familiar than he should have been . . . because there wasn't a world that could accept them as they were; not together. His world was too dark, too set, and hers . . .

It was too full of his brand of monsters.



**Final Thought from Samantha:**

It ... really is hopeless ...

## Chapter 42

# Negotiation

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“Hey, Doc, you got a minute?”

Kurt narrowed his eyes and hesitated before stifling a sigh and heading into the darkened observation room. He almost smiled when he spotted Dr. Peterson. The bastard’s nose finally looked normal again, which was a damn shame, considering. *‘Shoulda broken his goddamn arm . . . or shoved his fucking pecker down his throat . . .’* The doctor refused to meet Kurt’s gaze, which really didn’t surprise him at all. “What do you want?” he asked without preamble.

“Any idea what happened to the new camera we put in Holding Tank One?” Harlan asked casually—too casually.

“Nope,” Kurt said without batting an eye.

“Security said that it just shorted out the same night we had it installed.”

“Then I guess it shorted out,” Kurt replied.

Harlan gave him a tight little smile. “Yes, well, that matter aside . . . I wondered if you’d given any more thought to the idea I tossed at you around New Year’s.”

“Tossed at me,” he repeated. “And what idea was that?”

“A male demon,” Warren chimed in, nodding toward the sheet glass wall. On the other side of it, the little demon was running along on a treadmill. Kurt watched her for a moment and almost discerned the hint of a smile though he highly doubted that the others did.

“Oh, *that* idea,” Kurt drawled, frowning and rubbing his chin as he pretended to ponder the idea. “Hell, you haven’t finished paying me for that one, have you? Think I’d be dumb enough to bring you another one when you still owe me on that one?”

Harlan laughed heartily. “That’s our Doc . . . pragmatic till the bitter end.”

“You can kiss my pragmatic ass,” Kurt muttered under his voice before clearing his throat to add, “even then, you actually think you can breed them in captivity?”

“Why not? Rumor has it that a facility in California did it,” Peterson added grudgingly.

Kurt didn’t react though he was hard-pressed not to. He hadn’t heard that before, no . . . and it didn’t set well with him, either. “Rumors are just rumors,” he pointed out. “What do you think? That you can breed them? Tame them? Teach them tricks and show them off to your friends? Don’t be fucking stupid. Those things aren’t meant to be tamed, and even if you could, why the hell would you want to?”

Peterson’s gaze narrowed. Kurt knew his type. Brave enough when he was in the majority, wasn’t he? It was just when the playing field was leveled that the bastard would show his true colors. The memory of the things that he’d done to the little demon flashed through Kurt’s mind, heavily, angrily. There were a number of things that he’d dearly love to do to the demented little shit . . . it was all just a matter of time, wasn’t it?

“What are you testing her for now?” Kurt asked in an affected bored tone.

“Endurance levels,” Harlan said. “She’s remarkable, isn’t she?”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” Kurt intoned, his gaze returning to the little demon once more.

“She exhibits remarkable regenerative powers, too. I mean, if we cut her hair off in the morning, it’s grown back just like that by evening. Claws, hair . . . even fangs . . .”

“What?” Kurt demanded sharply.

Harlan didn’t seem to notice Kurt’s inflection. “Oh, we yanked one of her fangs this morning. It’s already grown back, you see.”

Grinding his teeth together, Kurt had to count to fifty before he trusted himself to unclench his jaw.

“Makes you wonder what’d happen if you cut something else off . . . maybe dock her ears or something,” Warren mused, almost more to himself than to anyone else.

“*No*,” Kurt blurted before he could stop himself. At the mention of her ears, he hadn’t been able to contain himself. “Don’t touch those.”

It wasn’t until after he’d spoken that he realized that he shouldn’t have said it; at least, not that way. All three white-coats turned to gawp at him. “Oh? Does she matter to you?” Peterson asked nastily.

Kurt snorted, inflicting far more bravado into his tone than he felt, given the circumstances. “Do you remember the last time you screwed around with her ears? Tested her hearing, you called it? She was vomiting all night, if you’ll recall. I, for one, don’t feel like dealing with that again.”

“Is that the only reason?”

“What other reason could there be?” Kurt countered.

The white-coats exchanged significant looks. Kurt snorted. “I’m not the one who keeps trying to molest her, am I, *Dr. Peterson?*” he challenged in a dangerously quiet voice. “If that’s all you wanted, then I’m outta here, but I warn you: don’t touch her ears. If you do, and she gets sick, I promise you, you won’t like what I do to you.”

That said, he turned on his heel and stomped out of the observation room. He must have decided that their testing for the day was over, too, because a minute later, he stomped into the room where she was chained to the treadmill, yanking the sensors free and tossing them aside.

“What do you make of that, Dr. Warren?” Harlan asked at length without taking his gaze off the hunter and the demon.

Warren shrugged and cleared his throat. “I, uh . . . I don’t know, exactly . . . seems a little suspicious, doesn’t it?”

“I wouldn’t put breaking the cameras on purpose past him,” Peterson added thoughtfully.

Harlan nodded slowly. Doc didn’t say anything to the demon, but he didn’t have to. Her face said it all, didn’t it? Such wide eyes, staring at him with almost a childlike sense of awe. She didn’t fight him, either. In fact, she seemed more than willing to comply with his orders . . .

“He did seem oddly reluctant to find another one, didn’t he?” Warren added speculatively.

“He did, didn’t he?” Harlan mused.

“What a damned hypocrite . . . attacking me for doing something that he’s probably doing every night,” Peterson grumbled. “Bastard . . .”

Harlan grunted. He didn’t particularly see the desire to have sex with a demon, but he didn’t judge the others if that’s what they had a mind to do. In fact, he rather hoped that they did, in all honesty. It’d be interesting to find out the results of that sort of testing, even if it weren’t something that could be reported in the official records . . .

“Maybe we should be less obvious the next time we install cameras, then,” Harlan mused as he rubbed his ruddy cheeks. “Let’s see what really goes on in there at night . . .”

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“Did you check into the reported sighting in Calumet City?” Gunnar asked as he strode into the hotel room where his father had retired for a quick shower and shave.

Toga dropped his cell phone onto the untouched bed, draping his hands on his lean hips and the towel he wore to cover himself. “Not yet,” he replied with a shake of his head and a sigh. “Damn it . . .”

Gunnar frowned. “What’s the matter?”

Digging clothes out of the suitcase and tossing them toward the bed, Toga uttered a low, terse growl of frustration before slamming it closed and dropping the towel on the floor. “Akira called,” he explained as he snatched up a clean pair of boxer shorts and tugged them on. “Apparently a group of snake-youkai is causing trouble since they’ve found out that both your grandfather and I are here. A string of human disappearances in and around Hokkaido—fifteen humans that have been linked to the youkai; more that are

unconfirmed but suspicious . . . They figure that since we're not there and since we've dragged Japan's top hunter out of the country, too, that they're safe to do what they will."

"What'll you do?" Gunnar asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

Toga heaved a sigh as he fastened his jeans and grabbed a plain black cotton shirt. "What can I do?" he challenged. "*Damn* it."

"Have you talked to Grandfather?"

Toga shook his head and buttoned the shirt from about the center of his chest down before striding past Gunnar toward the door. "I'm going to, right now."

Gunnar followed him into the living room of the suite and toward the study. "Father."

Kichiro stood up as Toga and Gunnar strode into the room. Sesshoumaru glanced at them before setting his ink pen aside and giving them his full attention. "Yes."

Toga cast Kichiro a quick glance, obviously not wanting to let him think for even a moment that the current problems in Japan had anything at all to do with him. "Akira called," he admitted with a sigh. "There's been some trouble with a group of snake-youkai around Hokkaido."

Sesshoumaru nodded though he didn't look at all surprised. "The disappearances," he said.

Toga nodded. "Yes."

Sesshoumaru considered it for a moment then stood, slowly walking around the desk and clapping Kichiro on the shoulder. "I shall deal with them," he said. "You . . . *and* your mate . . . are needed here."

“Thank you,” Toga said. Sesshoumaru nodded and strode out of the room.

Kichiro sighed. “If you need to go home, Toga . . .”

“No,” Toga said when Kichiro trailed off. “Samantha is important to all of us. You’d do the same if it were one of mine.”

Kichiro looked like he wanted to say something, but he slowly nodded, then he turned and walked out of the room, too.

Gunnar let out a deep breath and shook his head. “I can’t stand this feeling that we’re completely useless,” he finally gritted out.

Toga nodded, understanding his son’s frustration since it mirrored his own. “Aunt Gome and Uncle Yasha aren’t having any luck, either, so far,” he admitted. “I know there’s still a large portion of the city that they haven’t searched yet, but it feels so . . .”

Gunnar rubbed his eyes. “We are supposed to be the elite,” he muttered. “It feels like we’re running around in circles in the dark.” Wandering over to the window, he stared out over the city as he stuffed his hands into his pockets and slowly shook his head. “Someone out there knows something, and that son of a bitch is laughing at us.”

“We’ll keep doing what we’re doing,” Toga replied with a sigh. “Keep looking; keep investigating. It’s all we can do.”

“Is it enough?” Gunnar challenged quietly. “Is it *really* enough?”

Toga let his gaze drop for a moment, wishing that he had a better answer, a clever rebuttal. “It has to be enough, Mamoruzen. It’s all we’ve got.”

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*He was walking through Disney World, weaving through the milling crowds, spaces, bodies with the scent of blood hanging thick in the air, the stench of the putrid sheets of disintegrating flesh, as he eyed the sea of demons.*

*Demons everywhere—everywhere. Some of them were big, some were small, some were grotesque facsimiles of humans . . . They all stared at him with complete malice . . .*

*The red sky overhead seemed to burn his skin as he walked, moving deeper through the paths and thoroughfares, though the ins and outs as the music twisted and converged, swirling into something far uglier, far more tainted.*

*“The little demon . . . where is she? Where is she? What have you done to her? What have you done? Monster . . . bastard . . . monster . . .”*

*Bearing their dripping fangs; hissing at him from the oily darkness of the furthest shadows; claws reaching out to grab him; the accusing stares of a million glowing eyes . . .*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*The melodic voice, the familiarity of the name that drew him further, deeper, faster. She was looking for him, wasn't she? She was trying to find him because . . .*

*“It's okay, Kurt, it's okay,” the voice echoed in his mind. “It's okay . . .”*

*Gasping loudly as the voice came from beside him, he looked down and blinked as he stared into the wide eyes of his sister. Hair matted with her own blood, her head in the right place despite*

*the jagged, angry incision that traversed her throat, her doll dangling limply at her side as she hurried along beside him. "C-Carrie . . ."*

*She hoppity-skipped beside him then past him without looking back. She wanted him to follow, didn't she? She wanted him to, but . . . but he didn't want to, did he? Didn't want to see the things that he knew were waiting there, didn't want to hear the condemnations . . .*

*His family . . .*

*"Daddy said that you weren't supposed to tell, Kurt . . . Daddy said that you were supposed to live . . ."*

*The heat grew more oppressive, more stifling.*

*"Daddy said that you were supposed to live . . . live . . . live . . .!"*

*"Carrie? Carrie . . . I am alive . . ."*

*She stopped for a moment, her little feet, dancing as she spun around in a circle, her bloody dress a ghastly thing. "No, no, no . . . alive but not living . . . Alive but dead inside . . ."*

*He reached out to grab her. She darted away before he could, slipping through his fingers like the wind . . . "She's waiting, Kurt . . . don't you want to see her? Hurry . . . hurry . . . Let's go see her together . . ."*

Eyes flashing open, Kurt let out a ragged breath and rubbed his face. The dream . . . that dream . . . He didn't know what it meant . . . She was trying to show him something, wasn't she? She wanted to show him something that Kurt didn't really want to see . . .

Leaning forward to shut off the monitor where he had been watching the day's testing, he stood up slowly, walked over to the cot where the little demon lay sleeping. Even in

the prefabricated light of the fluorescent bulbs burning in the security sockets high overhead, he was struck once more by the richness of her aura: something so warm, so inviting, and so very, very sad.

How he'd ever actually believed that she could hurt anyone was beyond him. He'd made a split-second judgment based on things that he thought he knew, and he'd been wrong; so very wrong. Because of that, he would have left her here; walked away without ever looking back. If it hadn't been for Harlan's refusal to pay him . . . and he'd never have known, would he? He'd never have been forced to confront those things, to gain the understanding that he was just coming to terms with now.

He almost had it, didn't he? The plan . . .

The plan was so simple that it was almost stupid, and yet he knew that it should work. All he needed was a few more days—maybe two weeks—to finish making sure that they hadn't put a tracker in her; to make sure that everything was going to unfold the way he'd planned it out.

Then he would do what he should have done from the start: to let her go, to watch her walk away, to send her home to the people who loved her; who were waiting for her. The rest of it would have to be done once she was safely gone; to make sure that they didn't have a damn thing that could ever help them in locating her ever again and to eradicate every last bit of evidence that they had that she'd ever been there, in the first place.

She looked so tiny, didn't she? Lost in the copious folds of his sweatshirt and sweatpants that he'd brought in again since he let her take another bath last night, she seemed even more diminutive than usual. Kneeling beside her, his hand reaching out to touch her—to feel her hair, he winced and pulled away as a vengeful sense of self-loathing shot through him. He didn't have a right to, did he? He'd done too much to her, had cost her so

much time, and her family . . .? He'd seen for himself, hadn't he? Because of his prejudice, he'd caused them all so much pain—a lifetime of pain . . .

And he knew damn well that it wouldn't matter in the end. She'd never be able to forgive him, would she? Of course she wouldn't, and she shouldn't. Would she ever be able to walk down a street again without looking over her shoulder? Without peering into the darkest corners without the fear that someone was there, lurking just beyond the range and scope of her vision?

*'If I'd met her in another time or place or life . . .'*

That was the hell of it, wasn't it? If he hadn't known her or what she was before he'd figured out *who* she was . . . If things had been different, he really would have . . .

*'And what's the point of thinking about it?' he suddenly thought as he pushed himself to his feet, as his anger spiraled higher and higher. 'Some things can't be fixed, right? Some things just don't go away . . .'*

Swallowing hard as he tried not to think about the things that he couldn't change, he glanced at the clock and sighed. He could let her sleep for another twenty minutes or so before he had to get her up and make her change before Harlan and his lackawits showed up for the day.

Rubbing his neck as he headed for the doorway, he dug into his pocket for change.

Those damn bastards. Dock her ears just to see if they'd regenerate? Kurt's eyes darkened as he dropped the money into the machine and pressed the button. If they did it, he'd dock something off *them* to see if it grew back . . .

Snorting loudly as he grabbed the cup of coffee and headed back down the hallway once more, Kurt wasn't surprised to see the little demon sitting up and rubbing her eyes as she yawned. "Morning," she greeted in a sleepy tone.

"Mm," he intoned as he sipped the hot drink. "You'd better go get changed," he warned, his voice echoing in the waxed paper cup.

She wrinkled her nose and looked entirely discomfited by the idea, but pushed back the blankets and got to her feet and shuffled off toward the bathroom.

Kurt set the cup down on the desk and double checked to make sure that he'd shut off the monitors. At least the assholes hadn't done too much to her the day before. In fact, she enjoyed it, he knew, considering that they'd let her run pretty much all day—at least, they had after they'd yanked out that fang of hers. She had sworn that it hadn't hurt; not really. He hadn't believed her but knew damn well that he wasn't actually going to get her to admit to it, even if it had.

By the time she shuffled out of the bathroom in her smock again, he'd finished the coffee and tossed away the cup. Without a word, he strode past her as she stashed the sweats under the blankets on the cot since the white-coats never actually looked at them.

He was in the middle of washing his hands when he heard the voice outside the door, and he couldn't help the hissed curse that slipped from him as he shut off the taps and shook his hands, foregoing the paper towels as he hurried out of the bathroom. The little demon was inside her cage—she must have heard or sensed the intruder's approach, but the door was still hanging wide open.

"You're early," Kurt muttered as he narrowed his gaze on Harlan.

Harlan stared at the demon for another minute before slowly shifting his eyes to Kurt. "She's not secured," he pointed out, his mouth twisting in a contrived smile.

“She’s secured enough,” Kurt growled as he strode over and closed the door.

“You leave her out at night?”

“Don’t be stupid,” Kurt retorted. “Are you really going to question my judgment?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Harlan assured him as that nasty little grin of his widened. “Not in a million years, Doc.”

“I’m sure,” Kurt replied just as tightly.

Harlan looked him over as though he were trying to size Kurt up. “Well, I’m here now, so you can go. See you later, of course.”

Kurt didn’t dare glance at her as he strode over to the desk to collect his things. Cursing his laxness when it came to getting her back into her cage on time, he grabbed his knapsack and coat. “Don’t forget what we talked about yesterday,” Kurt reminded Harlan as he headed for the door.

Harlan laughed, the ass. “Of course; of course,” he replied.

Not at all sure that Harlan would listen, Kurt very nearly decided to stay. Glancing at his watch he shook his head. Harlan had come in early, hadn’t he? Just what was that fat old fuck up to, anyway?

In the end, the only reason that Kurt kept moving was because he wanted to get through the video; to make sure that she didn’t have a tracking device embedded in her so that he could get her out sooner than later. He’d figure out why Harlan had come in early when he came back for the night . . . As for the others? Well, if they made good on their threat . . .



## Chapter 43

### Discoveries

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Striding into the holding area, Kurt wasn't surprised to see the little demon sitting calmly in her cage. Her ears twitched toward him, as though she was listening to his every move, and they seemed to be completely intact, which was a welcome relief. No need to deny it, he'd been worried about that all day, to the point that he'd had to rewind and rewatch parts of the surveillance footage because he simply couldn't seem to pay enough attention to it the first time around.

But when she didn't speak after he'd set down his knapsack and coat, he turned to look at her more closely. "What's wrong with you?" he asked as a sudden suspicion crept up his spine.

She slowly lifted her eyes but not her head to stare up through her eyelashes at him; her expression grave, serious, as though she were willing him to understand.

It didn't take much. Kurt leaned down a little further and reached in to rattle the bowl of food. "They tap the room again?" he asked in a tone that only she could hear over the din of the clattering dish. She nodded. "Just one?" She tapped a claw two times. "All right."

Standing up, he wandered over to the desk and sat down, shaking out the newspaper to use as a diversion as he slowly glanced around. The little demon stretched her legs out a little, hiking up her right foot and tapping her heel against the bars hard enough to rattle them but not nearly hard enough to get her shocked.

He didn't see any cameras out in the open—not surprising, that, he figured. Just what the fuck did those bastards think? With a mental snort, Kurt narrowed his eyes. He knew damn well what they were thinking, didn't he? Those sick assholes really did think that he was fucking her, didn't they?

*'As if that'd be a bad thing,'* a voice in the back of his mind retorted.

Kurt snorted out loud that time. A bad thing? Absolutely . . . though he wasn't entirely sure if it was the idea or the knowledge that, if he did . . .

Shaking his head to dispel the unwarranted thoughts, Kurt concentrated on trying to locate the cameras . . . two of them, she'd said, which meant that she probably knew exactly where they were, too. The problem was that she couldn't tell him; not while they were taping every fucking thing in the room—if they weren't sitting somewhere, watching right now, that was. He already knew that they had a couple more security guards upstairs than they normally did. One of them had mentioned that they were training the new guys, but still, it didn't set well with Kurt, did it? *'More security guards . . . damn it . . .'*

Sick sons of bitches, anyway . . .

She kept tapping her foot.

Kurt's head rose a little, his eyes flaring wider as he realized that she was trying to tell him, wasn't she? She was trying to tell him where the cameras were . . .

Peering around the edge of the paper, he saw her, toes outstretched as she methodically tapped on the bars of the cage. She wasn't looking at him; she didn't have to. The camera . . . was it mounted under the sink? He couldn't actually see under there from where he was sitting, but . . .

Now where was the other one?

Staring at her for another minute, he wasn't entirely surprised to see her shift her eyes to him for a moment, and she must've figured out that he knew what she was saying because she sat up a little and heaved a sigh as she shifted around a bit.

He was starting to wonder if she actually were trying to tell him anything at all when she finally leaned against the other side of the cage and stretched out her feet once more, this time pointing her toes toward him, toward the corner behind him . . .

Kurt didn't move for a while, taking his time as he finished scanning the newspaper. If one of the cameras was under the sink and the other was in the corner behind him . . . but there wasn't anything behind him, was there? Nothing at all . . .

Turning in his chair, he picked up the knapsack and dug around inside it as he ducked his head and looked around. Nothing there . . . nothing but . . . the ventilation grating . . .

They'd stuck a camera in there, had they? And even as the thought occurred to him, he could see the slight glimmer of the camera lens. Of course, he'd be in trouble if they weren't such cheap-assed bastards, wouldn't he? He seriously doubted that they'd spend the money to buy the smaller, easier to hide cameras, and he could be thankful for that, at least . . .

The first camera was easy enough to deal with. The vent was just set in place and pushed in to hold it. He pulled it open and then jammed a rubberized plastic handled screwdriver into the lens. It shot out a few sprays of sparks but nothing serious, and satisfied that it was out of commission, Kurt replaced the vent cover and headed over to find the other camera.

This one, he didn't bother looking for. Grabbing the hose, he turned it, full force, under

the sink. With a crackle and a sharp hiss, a small shower of sparks, he figured that was good enough.

Still, it bothered him. If they figured out that the little demon was telling him where they were, then they'd try to install them when she wasn't there, wouldn't they? Even so, it pissed him off worse that they were actually spying on him, like he was another of their test subjects . . . Well, that wouldn't be happening, damn it, not if Kurt had something to say about it . . .

He hung the hose back on the hook and turned to face her. "That it?" he asked.

She nodded happily, smiling broadly, her dimple flashing as she leaned forward. "Can I get out now? I need to go pee . . ."

Kurt made a show of rolling his eyes, but walked over to release the lock. No sooner did he do it than she crawled out and scurried off to toward the bathroom.

He frowned. Maybe he should think of something worse to do to them . . . like bring in a portable television to hook up in front of the next security camera so they could watch a night's worth of infomercials or something instead . . . Sounded like torture to Kurt, anyway . . .

It was entirely insulting, wasn't it? After all, just who the hell did they really think that they were dealing with?

He sighed and shook his head. No doubt about it; he had to get her out of there soon, before they got any more stupid notions . . .

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Kichiro slumped down in the booth in the darkest corner of the hotel bar with a glass of whiskey in one hand as he stared dully at the electric candle flickering in the center of the table. *'Ninety-one days . . .'*

Ninety-one days, and still no closer to finding her, to bringing her back home, than they had been at the onset. How could that possibly be . . .?

The glass doors opened, and Ryomaru stepped inside. It only took him a moment to locate his brother, and he strode toward him after muttering something to the waitress who was standing nearby. "Figured I'd find you down here," he said as he slipped into the booth across from him.

"Just wanted a drink," Kichiro muttered without bothering to tell Ryomaru that it was probably more like his tenth or twelfth.

Ryomaru nodded, his ears twitching with every sound in the place. "Yeah."

"Mama and the old man back yet?" he asked since they hadn't been when he left the debriefing going on upstairs.

"Yeah, just a little bit ago. Mama's lying down. Guess she's pretty exhausted. The old man said he was going out to look for Evan."

"Evan's probably still staking out that office building," Kichiro said with a shrug. "That's where he's been for the last . . . what? Couple weeks, at least . . ."

"I dunno . . . maybe there's something to it," Ryomaru mused.

"Maybe," Kichiro said, dragging a hand over his face. "Cain said that the phone number that Ed Smith used to rent the building was bogus, though."

Ryomaru shrugged and handed the waitress a couple bucks when she came over with a bottle of beer for him. “All the more reason to check into it, don’t you think?”

“What the hell are we supposed to do? Break the damn door down?” Kichiro growled, scowling at his brother.

“May not be such a bad idea, would it?”

“Keh! I’m not fucking bailing you out of jail, Ryo.”

Ryomaru sighed and shook his head, sitting back as he idly turned the sweating bottle of beer in his fingertips. “Listen, baby brother,” he said slowly, “The old man and I . . . We were thinking that maybe you ought to go on back to Maine for a week or so.”

“No,” he stated flatly, his eyes flashing as the last strands of his reason snapped. “No.”

Ryomaru ducked his head for a moment and sighed, and when he finally lifted his head again, his eyes were bright, his features contorted as he struggled to hold back the emotion that was rising fast. “Your mate needs you, too,” he pointed out.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Kichiro wondered what alternate universe he’d stumbled into; one where Ryomaru was the voice of reason . . .? “And you think that she’ll be happy to see me? Without my daughter? Are you out of your *fucking mind?*” he hissed.

Ryomaru snorted indelicately, draining half the bottle before slamming it down on the table and pinning his brother with a fierce scowl. “And who the hell’s there with her at night when she’s crying and wondering where her daughter is? You think you’re doing a damn bit of good here? You ain’t! You’re driving yourself crazy, and you’re falling apart! Do you really think that Sami would want this? *Do you?*”

“How the hell should I know what she wants, Ryo? How the hell should I know what *anyone* wants? She’s not here, damn it! She’s not here, and I don’t know where the fuck she is!” Glowering at him for a long moment, Kichiro suddenly sighed and slumped down even farther. “I don’t . . . know where . . . she is.”

Heaving a sigh, Ryomaru shook his head as his gaze dropped to the tabletop. “No one’s saying that you shouldn’t be looking for Sam, but a few days—a week . . . it’d do you some good. The damn prank calls are killing you; the leads that go nowhere . . . Go home. Hug your mate. Hell, cry with her, if that’s what you want to do . . . then come back and help us look for Sam, because I gotta tell you . . . when I talked to Nez on the phone earlier, she said that Grabby’s not doing so great.”

“She said she was fine,” Kichiro countered stubbornly. She had said that an hour ago when he’d called to check on her.

“You think she’d say any different? Hell . . .” Shaking his head, Ryomaru finished off the beer and waved at the waitress to bring another. “Nez said that she’s been having this dream . . . something about a field and a stream and a tree . . . Said that she and Sam were dancing, but Sam was just a pup, and Grabby said that at the end—always at the end, Sam tells her to come and find her.”

Kichiro frowned. Belle hadn’t told him any of that, had she? “Like hide and seek?”

Ryomaru shrugged. “Maybe. Your mate thinks it means that Sam wants to come home.”

Rubbing his forehead, Kichiro let out a deep breath and slowly shook his head. He had no idea what he was supposed to do, did he? Trapped between the proverbial rock and a hard place . . . and his daughter was trapped somewhere in the middle.

The hell of it was that what Ryomaru said about taking care of Belle . . . it made sense,

too. She wouldn't have told him anything if she thought that it would upset him. She'd always been that way, hadn't she? Too kind, too sweet . . . too ready to take on burdens that she'd be better off sharing . . .

Without a word, Kichiro dug his phone out to call the airport. As much as he hated the idea of leaving Chicago for any length of time, he had to admit that it had been far too long since he'd last slept the night through with her. He missed her so desperately that he ached, and yet he knew damn well that it just wasn't going to be right until he brought Samantha home, too.

"O'Hare International Airport. This is Marissa. How may I direct your call?"

"Yeah," Kichiro said when the friendly female voice greeted him. "I need to book a flight . . . the next flight out to Maine . . ."

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"You're a sorry lookin' sight, pup."

Evan didn't move as InuYasha hunkered down beside him. Hair plastered against his head from the thick snow that had landed on him, only to melt, he gripped the lip of the roof and continued to watch without blinking, his face contorted in a marked frown. "The longer I sit here, the more I'm convinced that there's something in there," he muttered.

InuYasha frowned at the building for a minute then nodded. "You think so?"

Evan let out a long breath and wiped his face with the sleeve of his leather jacket impatiently. "You always said to trust my gut, right? Well, right now, my gut's telling

me that there's something down there . . .”

“But you can't get in,” InuYasha added thoughtfully.

“Yeah.”

“What's your old man say about the bastard that's renting it?”

Making a face, Evan shook his head. “Says that they're trying to track him down. The phone number he gave was bogus or a prepaid cell or something. Anyway, it doesn't work now.”

“Well . . .”

Casting his grandfather a speculative look, Evan quirked an eyebrow. “You're not suggesting we break the law, are you?”

InuYasha snorted. “I ain't suggesting no such thing,” he countered with a loud snort. “But if that door should just *happen* to open when you turned the handle, then hell . . . that ain't breakin' and entering.”

Evan stared at InuYasha for a moment before shifting his gaze to the building once again. “I met the guy who was looking to sublet it,” he ventured. “Wouldn't give me the owner's number. Thought I'd snatch it out from under him.”

InuYasha grunted and flicked his ears. “C'mon, pup. Let's go try them doors . . .”

Evan nodded and dropped to the ground behind InuYasha. The barrier covering the front of the building once more gave him the weirdest feeling of being caught in a vacuum; as though the very nature of his youki were being stretched and pulled and thinned. InuYasha made a face and squared his shoulders. “Do you feel it, old man?”

Evan ventured.

“Keh! Yeah, I feel it. Fucking barrier,” he growled. Grasping the door knob, he gave it a good yank. The door rattled and creaked then popped open with a snap as the token lock gave way. “See? Open,” he muttered.

The inside of the building was dark and stale with a dusty, dingy, moldy smell. Evan wrinkled his nose—the oily dust was thick, pervasive—as he dug into his pocket for a lighter. The back of the door had a few installed metal catches where padlocks were probably used to keep the door secured—crude but effective, Evan supposed. Sniffing loudly, he moved his hand to flick the weak and paltry light into all the corners of the room. The dark wood paneling only added to the bleak feel of the place, and Evan had to wonder when it was actually used.

All of the four rooms on the ground floor were empty, and all of them looked pretty much the same. InuYasha headed up the creaking steps that led to the second floor as Evan closed his eyes tight for a moment. They felt hot and dry, doubtless from the dust in the air. Opening his eyes, he stared at the slatted wood door situated under the stairs. The boards were so shriveled and dry with age that they had shrunk, leaving gaps between them.

Evan reached for the blackened old wrought iron knob—the archaic kind that he hadn’t seen but a handful of times in his life. He almost grasped it when something made him jerk his hand back—the strangest feeling that something just wasn’t right. Shifting his gaze over the frame, he scowled. There was nothing that he could see, was there? So what . . .?

“Tell me you and the old man didn’t break in here,” Bas said as he stepped through the doorway with a disapproving grimace on his face.

“Okay, then don’t ask, Bubby,” he shot back.

“What the . . .? What’s that?” Bas said as he stared at the closed doorway.

“Dunno,” Evan replied. “It feels . . . weird.”

Bas stared at him for a moment then slowly reached out, only to do exactly what Evan did as he pulled his hand away. “Another barrier . . .” he muttered.

Evan nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I figured.”

“A barrier inside a barrier . . .? Really . . .”

“Ah, I thought I smelled your reek,” Bas said as Gunnar walked in behind him. “How about that lead you and your dad went to check out?”

“Nothing,” Gunnar stated flatly. “There’s another barrier in there?”

“Yeah, and it’s different from the one outside,” Evan said.

InuYasha stomped down the stairs and shook his head when he spotted the others. “Lemme guess: that bastard of a brother of mine said that you two should make sure I didn’t break nothin’,” he grumbled.

Gunnar smiled just a little. “No, but would you honestly expect otherwise when you’re out with that one?” he asked, nodding at Evan. “Neither of you knows the meaning of the word ‘restraint’ . . .”

“I ought to thump you for that,” InuYasha growled as he lifted a hand to touch the door. Nothing happened, but his frown darkened. “A barrier, is it?” he mumbled. “Well, we’ll just see about that . . .”

“Old man—”

“I don’t think—”

“Holy damn!”

The boys moved back out of the way as InuYasha yanked Tetsusaiga free in a burst of light and a gust of wind, as the rusty old sword transformed into the legendary Sword of the Fang. “You pups better duck and cover,” InuYasha said as he leveled his sword at the door. “Ever seen me break a barrier?”

“But grandma said that it only works on barriers created by—” Bas started to say.

It was too late. “*Akai Tetsusaiga!*” InuYasha bellowed, bringing the sword up over his shoulder and smashing it into the door. The old wood creaked and groaned then blew apart in a thousand splinters. Bas shielded his face with his forearms as the unnatural wind shot through the old building, as the framework groaned and creaked and swayed. “What the . . .?”

Uncovering his face only to shy away again when another burst of light enveloped the room, Bas blinked and scowled as the sword transformed back into the rusty blade with a dull hiss. “Shit . . .” he mumbled, staring at his grandfather.

InuYasha looked even more irritated than usual. “Fuck,” he muttered, dropping his sword into the scabbard. “Damn it all to hell . . .”

“The barrier nullified the transformation?” Gunnar muttered with a shake of his head.

“Could Grandma remove it?” Evan asked.

InuYasha shrugged and grunted. “Wench’s sleeping,” he remarked at length. “I’m going

in.”

“What?”

Bas grabbed InuYasha’s arm. The hanyou shook him off. “You stay back,” InuYasha demanded, narrowing his eyes on his grandson. “It’ll probably kill you . . . Me . . . it’ll just purify me.”

“I think we should wait for Grandma,” Bas said with a shake of his head.

“Yeah, too bad. You’re outvoted, Bubby,” Evan retorted.

InuYasha stuck his hands out and walked toward the barrier, grunting and grimacing as he started to push his way through. A low hum grew steadily louder as the barrier rose up around him, and with a harsh yell, InuYasha was thrown back, blown across the room until he impacted with the wall hard. “Damn it,” he muttered, slowly pushing himself to his feet. “It repelled me . . .”

“I’ll go get grandma,” Bas said as he started for the door. “Maybe she can remove it.”

InuYasha grunted and nodded, knocking away the hand that Gunnar had reached out to help him. “Yeah,” he grumbled.

“What the fuck is down there?” Evan muttered as he eyed the darkened doorway.

“I don’t know,” InuYasha growled, his eyes taking on a menacing glow, “but I aim to find out.”

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Kurt frowned as he stared at the little demon. He'd been waiting for her to go to sleep for a while now so that he could watch the day's video, but . . . But she seemed restless—she'd been that way all night, even after the cameras were taken out . . . Why?

“If you keep tossing and turning, I'll stick you back in your cage,” he said, inflicting just enough dryness in his tone to let her know that he wouldn't really do any such thing.

She sighed. If she'd done that once tonight, she'd done it a hundred times . . . “Sorry,” she whispered.

Kurt sighed, too—maybe it was contagious . . . “What'd they do to you today?”

She pushed herself up, leaning her back against the wall as she shrugged offhandedly. “Nothing out of the ordinary,” she replied quietly . . . listlessly . . .

“Okay,” he replied. “So humor me.”

Her ears drooped slightly as she pulled her legs up, as she buried her face against her raised knees. “They gave me a shot,” she muttered, her voice muffled by her skin. “Tuberculosis, I think they said . . .”

“What?”

She acted like she didn't hear him. “That was after they took about five or six bags of blood from me . . .”

The scrape of his chair drew her attention. Kurt strode out of the room without bothering to explain. The vending machines in the hall had been repaired, luckily, and Kurt shoved money into the drink machine for a couple cans of orange juice before he headed back again. *‘They took damn near half her blood? What the . . .? Are they trying to*

*kill her?* he fumed. Snapping the top open as he hurried over to her, he shoved one of the bottles under her nose. “Drink,” he commanded in a tone that left no room for argument.

She blinked and took the bottle, saying nothing as she slowly sipped the juice. He stared at her for a moment before heading over to grab gear from the supply cabinet. True, she seemed to be fine and not suffering any real side effects, but he’d rather check her, himself. *‘Damn them . . . damn them . . .’*

“I think this is the worst juice I’ve ever had,” she ventured but sipped the drink.

He kicked the cabinet door closed and hurried over to her. “That bad, huh? Did they give you anything? Juice? Hook you up to a saline drip? Anything?”

She shook her head. “No, but I’m okay.”

“Humor me.”

She wrinkled her nose but didn’t protest as he checked her over. That she really did seem to be all right—at least her vitals—was good. Still . . . “You promise me that you’ll tell me if they do that sort of thing again, understand?”

She stared at him as he took the empty can and popped open the other one. “Here.”

“Why does it matter?” she asked quietly.

“What do you mean, why does it matter? The juice’ll help—”

“No,” she cut in, quietly, albeit firmly, “I’m going to die here anyway, right? That’s . . . that’s what they said . . . that’s what *you’ve* said . . .”

Dropping the equipment he was going to put away, he turned to stare at her in something akin to horror. “Little demon . . .”

“What does it matter, right? I’m hanyou, but . . . but it doesn’t matter, does it?”

Caught off guard by her softly uttered question, he shook his head. “What does that mean?” he asked. She’d always eluded that question before . . . He wanted an answer.

“I’ve told you,” she began with a little shrug, an almost angry movement. “I’m half-youkai.”

“And your other half?” he challenged quietly.

A sardonic little grin twisted her lips; a sad little thing that was far more terrifying than anything else he’d ever seen, even if he didn’t really understand why. “The other half?” she murmured. “Monster, of course.”

He sucked in a sharp breath, his temper rising at her flip response. Before he could say anything, though, she spoke again.

She shook her head, forced a little smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I’m all right with that,” she pointed out. “It’s not that I really expect any different, but . . . but it struck me, today, hooked up to that stuff . . . I really . . . really *am* going to die here, huh?”

Kurt couldn’t speak. The knot that formed in his stomach was thickening by the second, and he sank down on the cot beside her and shook his head while the words just wouldn’t come.

“It’s all right,” she said again, her smile widening, her eyes taking on a soft glow in the half-shadows of the room. “I decided . . . I don’t want to live here forever like this . . .”

“Y-you won’t,” he promised, unable to meet her gaze, unable to look her in the eye.

“I mean, after you’re gone . . .”

He shook his head adamantly, stubbornly. “I’m not going anywhere,” he told her.

“Everyone goes away sometime,” she whispered. “Even if it isn’t right away, you’ll go, too . . . and then . . .”

“I-I . . . I . . . won’t leave you here,” he said.

She didn’t look like she believed him, and he supposed that she had a right not to. He was the reason she was here, in the first place, wasn’t he? “You must understand,” she went on calmly in an almost detached tone of voice, “I’m not like you. Humans count their lives in decades. We don’t. I’ll live . . . for hundreds—for thousands—of years . . . and I can’t . . . not here . . . and not like this . . .”

“You can’t . . . no one lives for that long . . .” he rasped out incredulously.

“You call us demons,” she replied. “Nightmares that pass from parent to child and never fully go away . . .”

“You’re not a . . .” Closing his eyes tight, Kurt swallowed hard once, twice, and the thickness that gathered just wouldn’t let go enough for him to speak.

“How much do they owe you?” she asked suddenly.

Kurt blinked and shook his head. “What?”

She sighed and shrugged, wrapping her arms a little tighter around her ankles. “How

much more do they owe you? For me?”

“Oh . . . uh, I don’t . . . don’t know . . .” he replied, confused as to why she’d ask him that, in the first place.

She nodded slowly, and when she spoke, the sadness that she couldn’t hide opened up a wound so deep, so wide, so painful that he couldn’t breathe. “You’ll leave when they finish paying you, won’t you?” When he didn’t answer, she forced a small laugh and nodded again. “I want to ask you for something . . . *please*.”

A terrible sense of foreboding shot through him—slammed through him—angrily, hurtfully . . . “What?” he asked despite the voice in his head that told him that he didn’t want to hear it.

She met his gaze, her expression serene, calm . . . resigned. “I want you to kill me before you go.”

He froze. He couldn’t have heard her right. He couldn’t have. The little demon who refused to eat dog food because she wasn’t a dog; the little demon who would rather suffer in silence than to let them know that she could understand and talk as well if not better than them . . . the little demon who smiled and cracked jokes because she’d go crazy if she didn’t . . .

“*No!*” he growled, shooting to his feet, stomping around the room as his brain shut out everything—*everything* . . . Everything and nothing . . . and she was the only thing that remained. “Are you *stupid*? Have you lost your fucking *mind*? Do you honestly think that I—?”

“Please,” she whispered with a shake of her head, her eyes brightening suspiciously. The melancholy in her—the months of torment that she’d so carefully kept hidden—was unleashed, coursing over him in wave after raw, painful wave . . . and he understood.

And damn it, he understood . . .

“Did you know?” she asked quietly, a little giggle as horrifying as it was beautiful, her eyes full of tears that just wouldn’t fall as her lips twisted in a gentle smile. “Every day . . . every single day, I lay there, and I stare at the clock, and I think, ‘*Only nine more hours till he comes*’ . . . ‘*Only three more hours till he comes*’ . . . ‘*Only fifteen more minutes till he comes*’ . . . and that’s how I get through every single day . . . And what’ll become of me if I don’t have that? Will I . . . will I just waste away . . .? Or will I become so angry, so bitter, that I lash out against everyone and everything, including myself? So they get to have the satisfaction of putting a bullet through my head or my heart? So I . . . I’ll become the demon you always thought that I was . . .?”

He whipped around, stared at her, unable to grasp the simplicity of her wish as every single thing that he’d ever come to know of her was proven in that very instant. She’d rather die than to become a monster . . . but that she could ask that of him . . .

He didn’t think; didn’t consider, didn’t care, could only comprehend on the basest of levels that she . . . that she was hurting far more than anyone else he’d ever known; more than anyone else ever should, and whether he was the demon or the saint, it wasn’t clear anymore, was it? The little girl . . . her family, her people . . . and he . . .

She gasped when he strode toward her, when he grasped her by the shoulders and yanked her to her feet, only to let go long enough to drag her into a stifling hug; one meant to reassure her, to tell her that she wasn’t alone; that he’d never, ever leave her alone . . . She stood, rigid, as though she were afraid of him, of herself, of every single thing or maybe nothing at all. “I . . . I won’t leave you here, little demon . . . do you hear me?” he whispered.

And suddenly, she collapsed against him, her tears silent, painful, racking her body as she sobbed without a sound. The months of her strength, and one final breakdown . . . and

the absolute horror of one man who hadn't realized that the most beautiful eyes in the world would stare at him from the face of his enemy . . .



**Author's Note:**

**A ~~ki~~ Tetsusaiga** Red Tetsusaiga. A attack capable of breaking barriers created by youkai. The doctors took roughly 5-6 pints of blood from her. The human body normally contains around 6 quarts, which is 12 pints. A Class IV Hemorrhage is considered to be anything more than 40 percent of a body's circulating blood. The doctors took nearly half of hers. If one dies from massive blood loss, he or she has fallen into this range.



**Final Thought from Kut**

Little Demon...

## Chapter 44

### Remembrance

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*“Afternoon, Doc.”*

*Kurt ignored the pleasantries as he stomped over to Harlan, grabbing him by the front of the shirt and bearing him back against the wall. The old man wheezed and grunted, tugging pathetically at Kurt’s hands, unable to budge them. “You damned old fuck,” he growled as he slammed Harlan back again. “You try to spy on me again, and I swear on your grave, I’ll yank down the barrier surrounding this place faster than you can say ‘Project Demon’. You got that?”*

Kurt set the newspaper aside with a chuckle.

The little demon looked up from the paper carton of stir-fried beef that she’d been eating—she was frighteningly good with chopsticks—and blinked at him. “What’s so funny?” she asked slowly.

He shook his head. “Oh, nothing . . .” he replied. “You want to read the comics?”

“I’m still eating,” she said, “and it’s not nice to laugh and then to say that it’s nothing . . . but you do have a nice one . . .”

He blinked and stared at her. “A nice what?”

She rolled her eyes as she popped a bite of beef into her mouth. “Laugh,” she muttered. She chewed and swallowed. “You should do it more often,” she stated matter-of-factly.

“Should I?”

She nodded and snagged another bite, but this time, she extended it to him. “So why were you laughing?”

He waved a hand to dismiss the food. “No real reason,” he replied. “Had a talk with Harlan on my way in, was all . . . so what did they do to you today?”

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head as though she didn’t want to dwell on it. “What’d you talk to him for?”

“Told him not to try tapping the room again. I doubt he’ll try . . .”

“Why do I get the feeling you manhandled him?” she asked with a hint of censure in her tone.

Kurt rolled his eyes. “He’s not human; he’s a bastard, and I didn’t manhandle him . . . I just . . . roughed him up a little.”

She heaved a sigh and sat back, crossing her arms over her chest as she leveled a look at him. “Even bastards shouldn’t be completely disrespected,” she pointed out.

“Tell it to the jury. Those asses deserve it. So tell me what they did to you today.”

She said nothing as she twisted her fingers in the hem of the oversized sweatshirt. She looked a million miles away, and he frowned. “Little demon?”

She shook herself suddenly and smiled—it was fake, and he knew it, but he didn’t call her on it, either. “Nothing much,” she replied. “Are there other hunters like . . . like you?”

He frowned at the entirely too casual tone in her voice. "Other hunters?" he echoed. "Well, sure, but . . . but most of them don't really know what they're doing. They might have gotten lucky once or twice, but they're jokes, really. Why?"

She stood abruptly and chucked the leftovers into the trashcan. "No reason," she lied.

"And you think I'm buying that?"

She shot him an almost guilty glance and shrugged. "They . . . they mentioned that one of them . . . Hastings?" she paused and looked at him, probably to see if he recognized the name. He did. Hastings, he knew, had actually caught at least one or two demons, but as far as Kurt could tell, those were entirely by accident. She grimaced. "They said that Hastings agreed to hunt for a . . . a male . . ."

"Really," Kurt said flatly.

She nodded. "Yeah."

Snorting as he got to his feet, he shook his head. "Don't worry about it. Hastings is a joke, but even then . . . Just don't worry, all right?"

She didn't look completely reassured, but she did relax a little.

He eyed her for a moment. "Come here."

She did as she was told. He frowned as he stared at her, as he felt her forehead. "Are you all right?" he asked. She was pale, wasn't she? Even a little warm . . .

"I'm okay," she assured him with a smile that was almost believable.

"You're sure?"

She nodded. “Maybe this place is just getting to me . . .”

He didn't fully believe her. Sure, he believed that the facility was getting to her, but he didn't think for a second that it was the reason she was a little pale . . . Unfortunately, he knew damn well that she wasn't going to tell him if she wasn't feeling all right, either. *‘Stubborn little demon . . .’*

She shuffled over to the cot and curled up, and it didn't take long for her to go to sleep, either, which wasn't really surprising, he figured. She hadn't slept so well the night before, if at all . . .

Still, he didn't have any time to lose, either. He'd finished watching the backlog of videos before he'd come in for the night, and he could safely say that he was about ninety-nine percent certain that they hadn't thought to put a tracker in her. He supposed that they were just showing their own arrogance in that oversight, which was just fine, as far as he was concerned. After everything else he'd seen that they'd done to her, it was a small compensation, really . . .

Sparing a minute, he walked over to her and pulled the coarse blanket up over her, tucking her in as though she were little more than a child as the barest hint of a smile touched his lips. Even as the time drew closer, and even though he knew that she needed to be set free, the idea of never seeing her again . . . It was painful . . .

She'd taught him a lot without really trying, hadn't she? Taught him that sometimes, things weren't as they appeared, and while he knew damn well that she never was the monster that he'd wanted so desperately to believe, she'd done so much more than that, hadn't she? Taught him things that he hadn't wanted to learn . . .

The little demon . . .

Heaving a sigh, Kurt shook his head and rubbed a tired hand over his face. ‘*No rest for the wicked,*’ he thought wryly as he trudged over to the monitor panel. Just a few more details, right? A few more things to hammer out in his head . . .

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Evan scowled at the barren room; no more than a cell. It was the only one in the entire building that had any furniture in it, at all, not that it did a fat lot of good. He couldn’t sense any lingering youki here, though he was starting to realize that it was likely because of the barrier outside. ‘*Damn it . . .*’

“This whole building feels eerie,” Bas muttered as he opened and closed drawers. “Like . . . like my youki is being drawn out . . .”

“Or being repressed,” Kagome said as she stepped into the room right behind InuYasha. It hadn’t taken her long to remove the barrier: actually, she’d just stepped through it and pulled down the ofuda on either side of the frame. She’d mentioned that it would have been harder had the person who had constructed the barrier been meditating on it to strengthen it. Obviously, the person who had put it up either hadn’t considered the idea that they might have someone like Kagome—someone both human as well as possessing enough spiritual power to have no trouble removing the ofuda, in the first place, or they just didn’t care . . . Evan figured it was the first of those reasons.

“Keh! What the hell? So you’re saying this building is a giant Fuyouheki?” InuYasha demanded.

“Well, kind of,” Kagome said. “Same idea, anyway . . .”

Gunnar shook his head. "I can't feel her here," he admitted grudgingly. "And even then . . ."

"I can smell someone," InuYasha stated. "If we just follow that scent—"

"Won't matter, old man," Evan said with a shake of his head. "I only smell that guy—the one I saw in the building before, and he was just looking it over to rent it." Cabinets, a rickety old table . . . nothing much—not nearly enough.

"Damn it . . ."

"Is that really surprising?" Kagome interrupted. "Didn't you guys say that this entire place is like a giant youki vacuum?"

"There's gotta be something around here," InuYasha grumbled though he nodded to indicate that he heard Kagome's comments. "It just don't make sense, damn it . . ."

Kagome stood back and let the men do the searching. They had the better noses, anyway. There was something familiar about it, though, wasn't there? But she couldn't figure out why . . . It felt as though someone she knew was here, and while she hesitated to say that it was Samantha, she couldn't help but feel that something was entirely too . . .  
*'Too . . . what . . .?'*

"I can't smell a damn thing in here other than that guy," Bas stated irritably.

Evan frowned and straightened up. He had been looking under the bed. "It just don't make sense. If that guy was only here to look around, why's the entire place smell like him?"

"I was wondering that, myself," Bas muttered.

Gunnar nodded. Judging from the look on his face, he'd already thought about that, himself. "Me, too."

"What's he look like?" InuYasha demanded.

Evan rubbed his eye and shrugged. "Black hair . . . violet eyes . . . not short . . . maybe six feet tall or so . . ."

The men exchanged looks and nodded. "Evan, take Kagome back to the hotel," InuYasha instructed. "And get some sleep, baka pup . . ."

Evan slipped an arm around his grandmother, but Bas didn't miss the peculiar glint in Evan's eye, either. "He's not going to listen to you, old man, after he takes Grandma back to the hotel.

InuYasha snorted indelicately as he stomped out of the room in the wake of his grandson and grand-nephew. "Yeah, I didn't figure he would," he said. To be honest, he'd have been surprised if that particular pup did do as he was told . . .

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*The warped and twisted Disney Word . . . a thousand voices, a thousand sounds of gnashing teeth . . .*

*Claws, fangs, glowering eyes in the darkness . . .*

*"Don't run that way! Caroline!"*

*Dashing through the cloistering crowds, chasing the little girl . . . “We have to go see her!” she bellowed. “C’mon, Kurt! C’mon!”*

“Caroline!”

*She ran faster and faster, her hair streaming out behind her. Running, running . . . always running . . .*

*He grimaced and shoved a demon away; a demon with a beast’s face—a demon that was trying to grab Caroline . . . She was leading Kurt, peering over her shoulder, her voice echoing through the air. “C’mon, Kurt! C’mon!”*

*She screamed as a hideously twisted creature lunged in front of her, yanked her off the ground by her arm. Flinging her around like a rag doll, her shrieks rising, loud and long, rattling through him with a voracious tenacity. “Let her go!” he opened his mouth to bellow. No sound could be heard over the din. ‘But she’s already dead,’ a voice in his head kept repeating. ‘Dead, dead, dead . . .’*

*He yelled her name as the swell of a thousand demonic voices chimed in, a crazy chorus uttered in guttural groans and grunts, a bloodlust so debilitating that it seemed to take on a recognizable tone, a throbbing pulse . . .*

*The pulse grew louder, louder, deafeningly loud. Kurt smashed his hands over his ears as he crumpled to his knees. The unified sound was too much for him, wasn’t it? His arms felt leaden, heavy, awful. The demon that had grabbed Caroline hefted her high over his head, opening a beak-like mouth, unleashing an unnatural howl.*

*Another lurched forward, the earth shaking under its gangly feet, the plodding steps escalating faster and faster. Leaping into the air, grabbing hold of her hair, it gave a vicious jerk, a yank.*

“No!” Kurt yelped without making a sound. “No . . .!”

*Too much or not enough . . . those monsters passed her head around, over the masses as her blood rained down on them, bathed them in the crimson shades of a faded moon . . .*

“Taijya! Hey! Taijya! Wake up! Please wake up . . .”

*The insistent voice was like an invisible pull, dragging at his subconscious, pulling him back. He started to slide through the mass of demons. As if they'd just noticed him, they snatched at him, grabbed at him, but the soft but insistent voice continued to draw on him . . .*

“It’s just a dream! A dream! Taijya, open your eyes!”

With a gasp, a start, he jerked awake, eyes wide, dilated in the half-dark. The little demon stood beside him—he’d fallen asleep in the chair as he’d watched the footage of the day’s testing, hadn’t he? “It-she-they,” he babbled.

“It’s all right; it’s okay,” she murmured, crooned, smoothing his sweat-matted hair back off his face. “It’s just a dream,” she said. “It’s just a dream, and dreams can’t hurt you . . .”

“C-can’t they?” he whispered, the pain in his chest refusing to let go. He grasped her wrist, not tightly enough to hurt her, but firmly, forcing her to look at him. “They . . . they can, you know,” he told her. “They can, and they do . . .”

“But they shouldn’t,” she said. “They shouldn’t.”

He let go of her wrist, slumped back in the chair, smashing the balls of his palms over his eyes. “I was . . . I was seven . . . you know? Seven . . .”

Pushing herself onto the desk in front of the monitors, she said nothing, as though she were content to let him say whatever it was he wanted to tell her.

“My . . . my mom and dad and . . . and Carrie—Caroline. These . . . monsters—demons. I came home from school, and they . . .”

“Youkai killed your family,” she whispered. “I’m sorry . . .”

He shook his head, not so much to refute her, but because . . . maybe the years of carrying it around inside . . . maybe . . . “I just . . . stood at the back door, staring inside. I wanted to help them, but I . . . I was afraid, and . . .” He uttered a terse laugh, a bitter thing, then choked it off with a stifled sob. “I was just a kid. What the hell could I do then?”

“Why?” she murmured then grimaced, likely thinking that she’d asked a stupid question.

“Old Granger said . . . said they came after us—came after me—because I could . . . because I could see what they were.” Unable to repress the surge of anger that rose inside him, he shook his head. “I was a kid,” he repeated helplessly. “I didn’t know I wasn’t . . . wasn’t supposed to see it—they. I thought everyone could.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” she said, her voice taking on a harder edge. “You can’t think it was because—”

“It was,” he interrupted quietly. “I know it was. After I got out of the hospital where they put me after . . . after all that, I went to live with my aunt and uncle. I don’t know how long I was with them . . . a month? Maybe two? And they thought that we could go camping . . . It was starting to get cold so . . . so I guess I was eight by then . . . And they . . . they came again: the-the demons . . .”

“Oh,” she breathed. “Oh . . .”

Taking a deep breath, Kurt swallowed hard and met her gaze, unable to comprehend the tears that stood in her eyes. “I see them in my nightmares,” he admitted quietly. “But . . . nobody is how they should be . . . bits and pieces and parts and . . . and so much blood . . .”

She stared at him for a long time, an emotion in her gaze that he couldn't quite place: a sense of finality, as though she finally understood . . . as though the things that she realized made perfect sense to her.

He cleared his throat and shook his head, gathering his thoughts as best as he could. “That's why,” he finally murmured. “I promised I'd find the ones that killed my family. I promised that they'd pay—not because I'm an avenger or for any sense of misplaced nobility. I want to kill them so those nightmares go away . . . because I'm . . . I'm selfish and petty and . . .”

“You're neither selfish nor petty,” she corrected him, her ears drooping slightly even as she smiled. “You want to fight back now because you couldn't as a child—for yourself . . . and for your family.”

He blinked and started to shake his head, wanted to refute what she'd stated, but . . .

She'd made it sound so simple, hadn't she? So very simple when nothing in the world was ever quite so cut and dried. Or did she really understand him so well? How could she? What was it about her that was able to comprehend things that he'd spent a lifetime, struggling to understand?

Too much anger, too much pain, and a lifetime of bitterness that he'd believed was his legacy . . . He'd thought so often that it was all he'd ever have, and the ugliest truth of them all was that maybe he was more than a little afraid—afraid of letting go of her . . . afraid of losing the this beautiful—horrifyingly beautiful—thing . . .

“You’ve been alone for a long, long time, haven’t you?” she said, more of a statement than a question, really.

“No, I . . .” Trailing off, he couldn’t finish that thought. It was true, wasn’t it? Even though he’d been taken in by Old Granger . . . and yet he couldn’t recall even one incident where the old man had ever reached out to him, touched him, cared for him. Hell, he’d gone for months at a time without talking at all, hadn’t he? He was too old to need that sort of thing now, or so he’d thought. He’d thought . . .

“Everybody needs somebody,” she said as a silvery tear slipped from the corner of her eye, “and a child . . . a child needs people—people who love him and cherish him and make him laugh . . . and let him know that it’s all right to cry sometimes, too.”

He winced and reached out, brushing away the solitary tear with trembling fingers. “Don’t cry for me, little demon,” he said. “I’m the last person who deserves it.”

She shook her head as her smile widened. Touched with an innate sense of sadness, of loss: the radiant smile of a condemned angel . . . “It’s not because you deserve it. I’m more selfish than that, too, you see.”

He shook his head, unable to grasp the meaning of her riddles and her sad little smile. “You’re not . . . not selfish,” he rasped out, his throat constricting around the words even as he struggled to say them. “The . . . the very last thing you are . . .”

“But I am . . .” She drew a quivering breath as her smile trembled on her lips; as another tear fell. “I’m selfish, too . . . because that’s all I can give you—all I’ll *ever* be able to give you.”

His gaze fell away from hers, unable to keep the contact. In that moment, in that instant . . .

She was so far away that he knew deep down that he'd never, ever be able to touch her; that she belonged only in a place where the ugliness that surrounded her wouldn't break her, couldn't tarnish her . . .

In a world—in a time—in a space where a man like him could never exist . . .



**Author's Note**

**Fuyuhiki** unmgc: banier. Reference in the **InuYasha** manga was around chapter 337. It was the banier created to conceal Naraku's heart and anchored by a protecting stone—*mandai ishi*



**Final Thought from Kut**

She's ... beyond me ...

## Chapter 45

# Horified

-----

“Afternoon, Doc . . . you’re early tonight . . .”

Kurt spared Mazer a quick glance as he adjusted the knapsack over his shoulder.

“Hey, Doc! Come say hi, why don’t you? This, here, is Crowley . . . I’m training him. Crowley, this is Doc. He takes care of security in the basement.”

Crowley looked like a serious sort, and he pushed his wire-rimmed glasses up the bridge of his nose as he slowly looked Kurt up and down then nodded. “Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Yeah, Dunkirk’s around here somewhere with the other trainee,” Mazer went on, rubbing his buzzed, salt-and-pepper hair as he leaned back in his chair like he was trying to be some kind of big shot.

Kurt nodded without a word and headed for the basement.

*‘Five more days . . .’*

Letting out a deep breath as the elevator door closed, he punched the ‘B’ button that would take him down to the basement. Five more days before he set his plan into motion. Five more days with her . . .

After careful thought and a lot of planning, he figured that it would be best to try to break her out on a Friday night. The confusion in the city would help him a lot, allowing him to blend in a little easier into the weekend crowd as he got her away from the facility. The plan was to walk her right out of the building in the middle of the night since he knew damn well that the guards upstairs tended to sleep on the job more often than not. It wouldn't be a problem at all; not really. Setting the fifteen cameras between Holding Area One and the service doors to run on a loop for roughly forty-five minutes would allow him the window of opportunity that he'd need. By the time they realized that she was gone, he'd have easily gotten her as far as South Bend, Indiana, where he'd send her on her way in a rented car so that they'd never be able to find her . . . and then he'd return . . . to tie up loose ends, as it were.

In fact, the idea of getting her out of the facility was far less daunting to him than the more difficult orchestration of the rest of the plan, itself. He couldn't afford running into one of her people. They'd kill him on the spot—he didn't try to delude himself into thinking otherwise—and while he could appreciate and understand the why of it—hell, he even believed that it was no more than he'd deserve—he couldn't allow that to happen; not yet. There were too many other things that he had to get done before then—things he owed her, at the very least, even if she never really knew about them . . .

Five more days . . .

He'd thought about it all day, hadn't he? After he'd broken down and told her everything about his family the night before, he'd realized one thing: sometime during the next five days, he had to show her that he was sorry.

*'As if showing her . . . will ever be enough . . .'*

All was silent as the doors slid open, and he stepped out of the elevator. His footsteps echoed around him in the otherwise empty hallway as he strode down the corridor toward the holding area. Maybe they had her up on one of the other floors—they did

that from time to time. They'd bring her down shortly, he supposed, as he turned to walk through the doorway.

He stopped short, his eyes narrowing when he spotted her, lying in the cage. She looked like she was sleeping, and he figured that was all right, too.

Setting the knapsack down, he dug out the new toy he'd bought earlier today from a guy named Shakes who lived on the east side of the city and tended to come up with some of the best gear available, even if it was damn expensive. It was in one's best interests not to ask too many questions as to where the items had come from, and as long as Shakes trusted you not to squeal if you got squeezed, he was more than happy to part with his goods—for a price, of course.

This particular thing, though, was necessary, as far as Kurt was concerned: a scanner created to trace energy feeds. He didn't think that Harlan would be dumb enough to try to tap the room again, but . . . well, Harlan hadn't actually ever come across as any too bright, either. Shakes had told him that regular electrical lines would show up on the scan as blue lines, and batteries would show as green. Solar generated cells would show as red 'hot spots', and unidentifiable energy fields—fields that generated enough of a current on their own—would show as yellow. Hard wired cameras would be blue, then, and battery operated ones would be green blips. As long as Kurt was reasonably certain where lines ran and where they led, he'd be able to find if something else had been added to the grid of an area.

It didn't take him long to scan the room. Either Harlan had actually listened to his threat or he was busy trying to come up with some other bit of nastiness. Kurt didn't care, as long as the bastard wasn't bothering the little demon . . . Satisfied that they weren't being watched, he opened her cage but let her sleep. All curled up in her blanket, wasn't she? Kurt frowned and made a face as he strode over to turn up the thermostat. It was a little colder in there than normal, wasn't it? It bothered him to see her sleeping in

that damned cage, but he figured that he'd leave her alone if she were comfortable enough where she was.

That done, Kurt wandered over and sat down with the newspaper. The Sunday paper always seemed like such a waste, and he used to skip buying it since it only seemed to be a fiesta for those who religiously clipped coupons, but the little demon liked the comics, and since there was a huge section of them, and in color, he figured that she'd get a kick out of them, anyway.

He'd brought her really gnarly looking bunch of steamed crab legs for dinner. She'd mentioned them shortly after her adventure with the lobster. In his days of following her family, he'd overheard a few things here and there, and he'd heard one of them—the black haired one with ears like hers. He'd said something about 'the office in Maine', and while he wasn't completely positive, he figured that was where she was from, though not originally. She was very articulated when she spoke, and he was sure that she'd worked hard to rid herself of her accent, but sometimes, he could hear it though he still couldn't quite place it.

Kurt stifled a yawn and rubbed his eyes as a wave of drowsiness washed over him. Shaking his head, he heaved a sigh and blinked a few times to shake off the lethargy that lingered around the edges. He supposed he had been working a little harder than normal, trying to go over every last detail of his plan—at least the ones that he had control over. It was as close to perfect as he could possibly hope for, and that was all that mattered.

Catching himself staring at her, he frowned. He'd been trying not to think about exactly how much he'd miss her once she was safely on her way back to her home, her family. She'd be able to see the sun she missed, to play in the snow and to run through the forest . . . all those things that she'd said that she longed to see and do again . . .

And he . . .

He'd take care of the things that he needed to do; the things that he'd promised himself that he'd do . . . things for her . . . things for his family . . . and then . . .

And then . . . what? Would anything be left for him in the end, anyway? A divine sense of justice . . . or a lifetime of regrets . . .?

Would he wake up in the morning and still see those dark blue eyes long after the memory of her had diminished and faded with the passage of years? Would he be walking down the street, only to hear a young woman's laughter and remember another time, another place . . . and a beauty that was never meant for a man like him to touch?

She was . . . she was . . .

She was his best friend, wasn't she? The only friend he'd had in the span of time since he'd lost his family . . . Did she have any idea? Did she know at all . . .?

*"Every day . . . every single day, I lay there, and I stare at the clock, and I think, 'Only nine more hours till he comes' . . . 'Only three more hours till he comes' . . . 'Only fifteen more minutes till he comes' . . . and that's how I get through every single day . . . And what'll become of me if I don't have that? Will I . . . will I just waste away . . .? Or will I become so angry, so bitter, that I lash out against everyone and everything, including myself? So they get to have the satisfaction of putting a bullet through my head or my heart? So I . . . I'll become the demon you always thought that I was . . .?"*

Closing his eyes for a moment, he sighed. Ironic, wasn't it? Ironic that he'd understand her so completely—understand her because he felt that way, too . . . Staring at the clock and thinking, *'Just a little longer; a little longer . . .'* Wondering what she'd like for dinner . . . Standing in the middle of the aisle in the store as he sniffed his way through body washes and shampoos, trying to decide if she'd like this scent or that one . . . buying fabric softener to make the clothes he brought her just a little softer . . . for her . . .

And he would do what he had to do because if he didn't, it would kill her. He'd taken enough from her already . . . but if he could give it back . . .

If he could give it back—give back her life, her family, those whom she loved . . .

That would be enough, wouldn't it? And maybe, in that . . .

Maybe it could set him free, too . . .

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“You know, I think you're the only one still up.”

Kichiro didn't even glance up from the papers he was looking over; contracts and things pertaining to the clinic that he'd been neglecting for the last three months. If he could just get through them and maybe do a little pre-ordering, he'd have that under control . . .

.

“Why don't you come to bed for a little while?”

“Not now, Belle-chan,” he muttered as he flipped to the next page of the document he was scanning over.

She let out a deep breath and nodded. Rubbing her arms as she crossed the floor to the glass doors that led to the balcony, she tried not to think about the strange sense of melancholy that just wouldn't let go of her. If anything, it was growing stronger, wasn't it? The unsettling sense that everything was coming to a head; that they'd either find a

way to keep it together or they'd fall apart completely, and she wondered if he could feel it, too . . .

"Sierra says that Toga's been getting messages . . . that the youkai back home are starting to sense that something isn't right . . ."

"I couldn't give two shits less about the youkai back home," he growled without looking up from the small desk where she used to do her homework years ago. "Let them beat each other down for all the good it does, and if they all kill themselves, then who gives a rat's ass?"

She turned and stared at him, her eyes darkening as a worried frown surfaced on her features. "Kichiro . . ."

"Look, could you just be quiet? I need to get this bullshit done and out of the way so I can go back out there and look for my daughter."

"Your daughter," she repeated with a wince.

Kichiro snorted, and Bellaniece had to wonder if he even realized that he was speaking out loud. "Yes, mine . . . *Mine!* I don't see anyone here doing a damn thing to find her! Your damn fucking father doesn't do a fucking thing but sit behind his kami-forsaken desk and—"

Striding across the room, her eyes igniting in indignant fire, she uttered a low growl and slammed her hand down on the paperwork Kichiro was reading over. "How dare you!" she gritted out, her own anger rising to match his, to surpass his. "You have no idea what Daddy does or doesn't do! How could you? You're too busy running around Chicago like a chicken with your head cut off!"

Shoving the chair back, he shot to his feet and brushed past Bellaniece. The spike in his youki bespoke his own anger, his own frustration. “You have no idea what I’ve been doing out there!” he bellowed, his eyes glowing as he pinned her with a bitter cold glower. “You haven’t got a damn clue! You haven’t been out there, have you? You haven’t looked out over that damn city and felt the hopelessness—thought that there was no way in hell that you’d ever be able to find her! You told me that she’d be fine, damn it! You told me that she was strong! She said she wanted to be a hunter, and you said—”

“I know what I said!” she snarled. “You want me to go out there? I will! *I’d be happy to!* Maybe I can find her since all you damn men can do is whine and bark and scratch your asses!”

He caught her arm when she swung around to grab her suitcase. “What the fuck are you doing?” he growled, giving her a good shake. “*Have you lost your damn mind, Belle?*”

Her anger gave way to tears of frustration, and more anger that she couldn’t staunch the tears, at all. “Maybe I have!” she screeched. “You didn’t carry her for nine months! You didn’t love her and nurture her and talk to her! I did! *I did it!* I did it, and someone took her, and I’m going to get her back!”

He drew back at that, as though her words had dug deeper than any physical wound. But she didn’t back down; couldn’t back down. Rage and the overwhelming sense of helplessness . . . and a sorrow so great, so deep, so wide . . . “Belle . . .”

“I hate you,” she whimpered, covering her face with her hands. “I . . . I hate you, and I . . . and I love you . . . and I . . .” Drawing a ragged breath, she lifted her head, pinned him with a fierce glower, a quiet pleading, a vastness of complete uncertainty that was hateful and bitter and thick. “*Where* is she?” she whispered brokenly. “Where is my little girl . . .?”

"I know," Kichiro said, his voice cracking, shattering as he pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. "I hate me, too . . ."

She hung onto him, clutching handfuls of his shirt, gripped them tightly, afraid to let go. "I'm sorry," she sobbed one time, ten times—a hundred times, as her tears became his, as her heartache merged with his. She'd wanted to be so very, very strong, and she'd failed . . . God, she'd failed. All she wanted—the only thing she wanted—was to wrap her arms around those she loved, to hold them tightly so that they knew . . . Her baby girl, so very much like her father . . .

And it was because of that, she knew . . . because she saw Kichiro every time she looked at Samantha . . . That was the real reason why . . . because Kichiro was strong, wasn't he? He was strong, and so was she . . . The same strength in her eyes . . . the same . . .

"I'm sorry," she whispered, squeezing her eyes closed tightly, wishing she could take back those hurtful things she'd said, hating herself for lashing out at the one person who knew exactly what she felt. "I didn't mean it—any of it . . ."

He forced a little smile, paper-thin and full of sadness, of pain. "I know," he replied. "I'm sorry, too."

"What's happening to us?" she asked as he rubbed her back, as she heaved a weary sigh.

"We'll be fine . . . and so will Samantha," Kichiro assured her.

Bellaniece leaned back, stared at him, searching his face for whatever he could give her. In the end, all he could do was smile half-heartedly, his eyes darkened with emotion—with doubts—that he simply couldn't hide, not from her.

Still, she nodded, forcing a smile of her own, understanding intuitively that it was something that he so desperately needed to see from her . . .

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Kurt awoke with a start, blinking as he sat up with a grimace in the half-light. He didn't remember falling asleep, and when he glanced at his watch, he made a face. '*Nearly eleven . . . ?*'

Stifling a yawn, he frowned. Why didn't the little demon wake him up already?

Shaking his head, he rubbed his face as though to wake himself up more. He might as well take a look at the day's tapes to see why she was so tired . . .

Letting out a long, drawn out breath that lifted the bangs off his forehead, Kurt considered getting a cup of coffee while he waited then decided he was too lazy to do it.

The bulk of the tape seemed to be the same standard, stupid stuff . . . He fast-forwarded through what seemed to be a few hours of the little demon, strapped to the table, naked of course, but left completely alone, at least. The timestamp on the video read sixteen-forty-seven when they all filed back into the room. Kurt slowed the playback speed to normal.

He couldn't tell what they were doing, but he did hear the rattle of something. The little demon still didn't move. A quick flash of light caught his eye, but it was too blurry to make out. Kurt backed the tape up a few times, altering the speed of playback, to no avail. Snorting indelicately since he highly doubted that she'd tell him what that was, even if he asked her, he gave up for the moment and let the playback resume.

He couldn't make out what they were saying. They seemed to be discussing something in rather hushed tones. The little demon's ears twitched almost nervously, and he frowned when she suddenly seemed to tense up, fighting against her restraints.

"Hold her still," Harlan grunted.

"I'm trying . . .!" Peterson insisted.

Kurt erupted in a low growl at the very sound of that bastard's voice . . .

"N-no . . . Please, no . . ."

The blood in his veins seemed to freeze upon hearing the sound of that quiet plea. The little demon . . .? Begging . . .?

Hitting the keyboard to send the file to manual dump, he shook his head. She was begging in earnest now on that tape . . . "What the fuck did they do?" he hissed under his breath. Glancing at her cage, Kurt's gaze narrowed. She hadn't moved, had she? At least, she didn't look like she had . . . Stranger still was the marked lack of her aura. He'd never actually noticed that before . . . What did it mean?

"Damn it," he muttered as he got to his feet and strode over to the cage. She was breathing—he could see the faint rise and fall of her shoulder. Curled on her side, she had the blanket tugged up over her head. In fact, all of her was wrapped in the blanket, wasn't she? Was she really that cold . . .?

But no, there really was something strange going on. The closer he got to her, the more he noticed the thinness of the aura that normally surrounded her. *'What the hell . . .?'*

“Little demon?” She didn’t respond as he hunkered down beside the cage. She was turned away; he couldn’t even see the shadows of her face, and he reached inside to touch her leg. “Little demon?”

Still no reply, and when he shook her just a little, she lilted back and forth as though there were no life left inside her at all.

“Hey,” he said, crawling halfway into the cage. He slipped a hand under her shoulder to pull her upright a little and gasped when one of her arms fell out of the blanket, grimacing at the hot sliminess that coated his hand as he lifted her. “What the . . .?” he muttered, moving her gently, bringing his hand up in front of his face. Staring blankly for a moment, unable to reconcile himself to the sight of the blood that covered his hand—covered her . . . His hand shook slightly as his gaze fell to her arm that had slipped out of the blanket, blinking as his brain slowed to a crawl; as the heart in his chest froze for a painful moment. The angry gash that ran the length of her forearm from her elbow to her wrist dripped blood. “Oh, God . . . *God!*” he growled as he pulled her out of the cage. Scooting back just enough to pull her into his lap, he blinked for a moment, unable to comprehend what he saw.

It wasn’t her . . . it wasn’t her . . . The blanket had fallen away from her face when he dragged her out, exposing her in the harsh light of the fluorescent bulbs high overhead, but it wasn’t her face that he saw, was it? Sooty black hair that hung in stringy locks over her face, and the little white ears that he couldn’t resist were gone . . . ashen cheeks so pale—deathly pale . . . lips tinged with the morbid shade of grayish-blue . . .

Shaking his head as he grasped her arm, pulled it up to elevate it, he stared at her fingers in complete disbelief. ‘*No . . . no claws . . . ?*’

It wasn’t her, was it? It *couldn’t* be her . . . Maybe her face was shaped the same, and maybe the eyelashes, but . . . The girl in his arms looked completely . . .

*“Hanyou . . . It means that I’m only half-youkai.”*

She . . . she was . . .



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
**... What did they do to her ..?**

## Chapter 46

### Desperation

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*“Half . . . youkai—magical creature . . . a creature that can heal itself . . . So you’ve said before. What’s that make your other half?”*

*“The other half? Monster, of course . . .”*

The . . . the other half . . .

Kurt sucked in a sharp breath—a painful breath—as his eyes widened, as he gawped stupidly at her. *‘Her . . . her other half . . . is . . . human . . . and the humans . . . are the biggest monsters of them all . . .’*

Those damn white-coats . . . they had done this to her; broken her until she begged then cut her wide open . . . They’d hurt her over and over again, and . . . and he’d done nothing . . .

*‘But she can’t be . . .’* Kurt thought as he stared at her, as he struggled to make sense of what his eyes showed him. *‘Why didn’t she . . .?’*

Grimacing as soon as the question whispered itself in his head, he knew the answer, didn’t he? Would he have believed her? Would he have wanted to? And even if he had . . . why the hell would she ever want to be anything like that when humans were the ones who had done this to her . . .?

“*Shit!*” he hissed, remembering a moment too late that she was hurt—gravely so. He was sitting there pondering the mystery of her, and she . . .

“Hold on,” he told her, his voice rough, raw. Somewhere deep inside him, the trained doctor part took over; the part of him that knew what to do even as the rest of his brain struggled to function. Snatching up the stethoscope he’d commandeered from the supply cabinet, he checked her vital signs: pulse weak and thready but steady enough . . . her breathing was a little shallow but not too labored . . . Pupils dilated—she had dark brown eyes . . .? He needed to get that bleeding stopped, damn it . . . It was hard to say how much blood she’d already lost, and that was a problem, but . . . It was the most difficult thing he’d ever done, to move her aside so that he could stand up, so that he could grab the supplies out of the medicine cabinet. Bastards hadn’t bothered to even bandage her, had they? What the fuck were they thinking . . .?

Who cared what they were thinking? He wasn’t going to leave her here for them to abuse. He was a damn fool for not getting her the hell out of there sooner, wasn’t he?

“She needs blood,” he muttered as he yanked the stethoscope off and tossed it aside. She needed it desperately . . . but . . . “Stay with me, little demon. Stay with me . . .”

*“That was after they took about five or six bags of blood from me . . .”*

His chin snapped up as those words faded from his mind, and he stumbled as he rolled to his feet, taking off at a dead sprint. They kept blood on the second floor, didn’t they? Without bothering to try the elevator, he smacked the door to the stairwell open without breaking his stride, racing up the steps, stumbling, faltering, but moving onward with a purpose, and that purpose . . .

“*Fuck!*” he bellowed as he grasped the handle and rattled it hard. The door to the lab where the blood was kept was locked, not that he’d actually thought it wouldn’t be. Uttering a string of curses under his breath, he spotted the fire extinguisher hung on the

wall nearby and strode over to yank it down. Panic was warring with reason inside him. She needed blood, didn't she? She needed it desperately . . . Lifting the extinguisher over his head, he stared at the Bio-lock as he quickly took aim.

Suddenly, though, he stopped. If he broke the Bio-Lock, he'd get in, maybe, but not without setting off the security alarms, which would bring all four of those idiots up here, fast, and while he figured he could take them all easily enough if he had to, the little demon . . . He wasn't entirely sure of how bad her condition really was, did he, and doing something stupid, like starting a fight with the guards . . . that was something that he really couldn't risk; not right now . . .

'*Shit!*' he blasted as he dashed for the stairs again.

The trip back down to the basement took less time than it had in going up. Vaulting over the railing to get downstairs faster, he grimaced when he landed hard but kept moving. Even then, using her blood for a transfusion was the best idea, but even if he had managed to get in there, it would have taken some time for it to warm up enough to give it to her, anyway, and time wasn't something that he had.

She was still breathing though it sounded a bit more labored in his ears. Hunkering down beside her, he spared a minute to check her vital signs again before he reached for bandages. She'd told him once that she couldn't be stitched, that she wouldn't heal, but as he stared at her arms, he wasn't so sure. Hands shaking, he forced himself to pull the lacerations open, to see what those bastards—the white-coats—had done to her. Cut straight down, clean to the bone, or so it seemed. From the position of the wounds, he knew damn well that they'd likely cut into her artery and either they hadn't meant to and therefore didn't too badly or her body had already healed the most dangerous wounds. She was still bleeding fairly heavily from both arms though her left one seemed to have sustained worse injury than her right . . .

“Why didn’t you tell me . . .?” he muttered once more as he worked, as he wrapped bandages around her arms. He had to get her out of there, and he had to do it now . . . The sound of her, begging them not to do it, echoed in his head—that pitiful plea . . . but why? After all the weeks that she’d been put through hell after hell after hell, why now? Why would this have broken her down . . .?

Glancing around wildly, he scanned the room for something—*anything*—that he could use to get her out of there—hopefully something that wouldn’t draw too much attention. The trashcan that he’d cleaned out for her baths stood nearby, and he flinched. The idea of putting her into something like that to get her out of there was almost more than he could stand, but . . .

But he had to try to get her out without the security guards noticing, and he couldn’t carry her and fight them off at the same time, if it came to that. “I’m sorry,” he muttered over and over again as he scooped her up and carefully set her into the sturdy plastic can. Why did she seem so much more diminutive in human form?

Grabbing his coat and knapsack, Kurt covered her with the coat to hide her from the security cameras and hit the panel to deactivate the barrier over the doorway before he headed for the door, carrying the trashcan and moving as fast as he could toward the elevator.

He punched the button and waited, making a face when he realized that the damn thing was all the way on the tenth floor—the top floor. Digging out his cell phone, he dialed a local taxi company. “Yeah, hi . . . I need you to send a taxi over to 298645 Levone . . . in the alley beside it—the service doors,” he said, checking the pulse in her throat and grimacing. It was weakening . . . “Hurry.”

“Is that a business?”

“Yes. Bradford Medical.”

The dispatcher rattled something, and he hung up, dropping the phone into his pocket as the elevator doors slid open.

*'Damn it, this isn't how this was supposed to go . . .'* he thought as he pulled the can into the elevator and smashed his fist against the '1F' button.

"Hold on," he muttered, smashing the heels of his hands over his eyes and rubbing hard. "Just hold on, okay . . .?"

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"It was a barrier . . . another barrier . . . a barrier inside a barrier . . ."

Pacing around the office with a glass of scotch in his hand, Cain said nothing, simply listening as Kichiro told him everything that InuYasha had told him over the phone early this morning.

"They've got a scent, but Evan said it was some guy who was looking to rent the place. I don't know, though . . . seems awfully suspicious that the only room they could really smell him in was that one in the basement . . ."

Cain nodded slowly. "Go on."

Kichiro sighed and rubbed his eyes. "According to the old man, that whole building felt like . . . like a vacuum . . . The barrier outside wasn't constructed to keep youkai out as much as it was to . . . hide whatever was inside there . . . At least, that's how sounded to me . . ."

Mulling that over for a moment, he considered it with a frown. “Like a . . . a what? Like a youki privacy fence or something . . .?” Cain mused.

Kichiro snorted at Cain’s oversimplified description. “Yeah, something like that . . .”

“But they haven’t found the guy yet?”

Kichiro shook his head. Cain frowned. It struck him, just how much older, how much more haggard the hanyou looked these days, not that he could blame him. He felt that way, himself . . .

Of course, seeing the hanyou in human form for the night . . . Well, that was more than a little odd, too. It also served to remind him that it also meant that Samantha was, as well, and that was more than enough to make Cain nervous, and he could feel Kichiro’s own worry, as acute as it was. That he was in here with Cain instead of out there with Bellaniece because he didn’t want her to sense it, too . . . that spoke volumes, in Cain’s opinion . . .

“And your mother?” Cain asked, more to keep Kichiro talking than anything else. Distraction was the name of the game, and while Cain would be the first to admit that he thought Kichiro was an assmonkey, he’d also have to allow—at least, to himself—that the hanyou was a decent husband to his daughter, and a damn good father, too.

“Mama was able to remove the inner barrier. She’s been looking for the guy along with the old man, but . . .”

“But?” Cain prodded when Kichiro trailed off.

Kichiro shook his head and leaned forward, scowling at the floor. “But it could just be coincidence, right? This guy . . . maybe he was just looking to rent the place, and if that’s

the only room that had anything in it—that’s what they said—then it makes sense that he might have taken more time, looking around in there than he might have otherwise.”

Cain nodded but didn’t really respond. He could understand, of course. Kichiro was loathe to get his hopes worked up, only to have them dashed yet again, wasn’t he? Ever since they’d sent those flyers to the generals, it seemed like the creeps were crawling out of the woodwork. Cain had gotten a couple prank calls, sure, but Kichiro had gotten more, and whether that was because Cain was tai-youkai so they didn’t dare tease him or because Kichiro was her father, Cain didn’t know. Either way, it pissed Cain off. After all, the man’s daughter was missing. Did he really have to endure some idiot’s twisted idea of a perverse joke, too?

Crossing the floor, staring out the window, Cain let out a deep breath. “When are you going back?”

Kichiro let out a deep breath and shook his head. “In a couple days,” he replied. “Couldn’t get a flight till Wednesday . . .”

With a nod, Cain drained the last of the scotch in his glass and set it on the small table beside him with a heavy thud. It frustrated him beyond all reason, to be stuck here like this, unable to do a damn thing but make calls that led nowhere and take calls that meant nothing, and yet it seemed like it was all he could do, didn’t it?

He heard Kichiro stand up, heard him sigh as he headed for the doorway.

“You know,” Cain said, stopping him in his tracks. Out of the periphery of his vision, he saw Kichiro stop and turn, dark eyes unfathomable in the ambient light. “I wish I could do more,” he admitted at length.

Kichiro uttered a terse snort, digging his hands into his pockets, he leaned in the doorway and stared at his feet for a minute. “Don’t want you out there,” he muttered after a significant pause.

Cain turned to stare at him, his eyes darkening at the perceived slight. “Is that so,” he challenged quietly.

Kichiro shrugged and slowly shook his head. “No. If you were out there . . .” Lifting his chin, he scowled across the study, his eyes unfocused, his expression thoughtful. “Belle needs you here, and I . . . I appreciate it, too . . . Besides, if . . . if Samantha were to call . . . Well, she’d know that you’d make sure she was safe.”

Caught off guard by the quality of his words, Cain nodded and smiled just a little. “You’ll find her,” he said quietly, the strength of his conviction delineating his words. “You’ll find her, and you’ll bring her home.”

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The hallway was clear, but he could hear voices punctuated with laughter coming from the security office. If he could get her out of there without raising their suspicions, then . . .

“Hey, Doc! Where you going?” Mazer called as Kurt strode past.

Kurt didn’t answer as he kept moving. The guard followed him into the hallway. “Hey, Doc!”

He didn't dare stop; he really didn't. "Just taking out the trash," he gritted out, his irritation surging in an almost perverse way. '*Trash, indeed . . . damn them . . . Damn them . . .!*'

Mazer shot him a speculative look; a suspicious glance. He stepped toward the trashcan, as though he wanted to look inside. Kurt let go, his hand snapping out to grasp Mazer's wrist. "It's just . . . trash," he growled under his breath.

Mazer stared at him for a long moment without blinking. "Then you don't mind if I look."

"Yeah, I think I do," Kurt replied, stepping between Mazer and the trashcan, only one thing repeating in his head: he was not going to let them see her; not like that—not *ever* like that. "Step back."

The guard didn't take his eyes off Kurt as he tilted his head to the side as though he were sizing Kurt up. "Why are you covered in blood?" he asked slowly.

Kurt narrowed his gaze on the man. "I don't know," he replied tightly.

"You do something to the demon?" Mazer pressed.

Kurt didn't deign to answer that.

Mazer didn't look happy with Kurt's lack of a response. "I think I need to ask you to step away from that trashcan," he said.

"Get out of my way, Mazer," he growled.

"If you don't have anything to hide, then you won't mind if I take a look, right?"

“I told you that I *do* mind,” Kurt growled, stepping into the security guard’s path and catching him by the shoulder. “Now if you’re smart, you’ll get out of my way. Understand?”

Mazer stood still for a second then stepped back as he drew his gun and leveled it at Kurt’s chest. “Don’t make me shoot you, Doc,” he warned.

He kicked his foot up and back, sending the trashcan scooting down the hallway a few feet—out of danger, at least for now. “I don’t have time for this,” Kurt growled.

“I’m going to get a cup of—”

Kurt didn’t glance at Crowley as the younger man stepped out of the office. He glanced back and forth between Mazer and Kurt a few times with a thoroughly confused look on his face. “Wh-what’s going on?”

Mazer didn’t take his eyes off Kurt, and he didn’t lower his gun, either. “Go check that trashcan, Crowley,” he instructed.

Crowley shot him a questioning glance, but started to walk forward. Kurt waited about two seconds before barreling straight into Crowley, unleashing a surge of energy that sent him careening into Mazer. The gun fell on the floor and slid to the side, and Kurt gave it a hard kick to send it spinning away. Mazer was trying to shove a dazed Crowley out of his way, and Kurt ran at them, shoving them back into the utility closet beside the security office.

He yanked the door closed and ran over to the trashcan. The little demon hadn’t moved at all, and he winced at the pale grayish shade in her skin as he retrieved the pad of Post-It notes from the inner pocket of his coat. He could hear the two guards inside as they struggled to right themselves, and he lunged at the door again, catching the knob just in time as Mazer started to open it. He jerked it closed, grasping the pad of notes in his

teeth and using his right hand to slap the seal on the door. Touching the writing with his fingertips, he felt the discharge of energy that formed the seal, and while he wasn't entirely sure that it'd work on humans, he figured that the barrier would hold until he got her out of there, at the very least.

"Doc! Let me out of here!" Mazer yelled, his voice muffled nicely by the heavy door.

Satisfied that they were out of his way, Kurt dashed into the security office, glancing at the monitors long enough to see the two other guards in the break room playing a game of darts. It only took a few minutes of hacking to shut down the telephone systems—he doubted that any of the guards would be smart enough to be able to bring those back online any time soon, and he turned to leave but stopped for a moment when his eye caught on the extended tray of the dump writer. Grabbing it along with the box of archive cards, he stuffed them all into his pocket.

The little demon was deathly pale, the bandages that he'd wrapped around her arms soaked through with her blood as he carefully lifted her out of the trashcan. Wrapping her in his coat, he strode toward the doors and turned around to use his back to shove them open as he tried to shield her against the blast of frigid air that hit them as he exited the facility.

The taxi's bright headlights turned into the alley, and Kurt hurried over as it pulled to a stop, negotiating the door with minimal effort.

"She ain't gonna puke, is she?" the driver asked dubiously as he stared into the rear-view mirror.

"Uh, no," Kurt replied as he pulled the door closed and adjusted her against his chest, shielding her as best as he could.

“My ex couldn’t hold her liquor, either,” he went on as he fiddled with the toll counter, resetting it to zero.

Kurt only nodded, shifting her as he checked her pulse again. If the cabby wanted to believe that she was just drunk, he figured that was all right with him. The only reason he hadn’t seen the blood that covered the both of them was because of the darkness in the alley, and even then . . .

“Reports say there’s another blizzard blowing in,” the driver went on casually as he put the taxi into gear and started slowly down the alley. “Say it’ll hit tomorrow or—”

The driver shrugged offhandedly, and it wasn’t the first time that Kurt had to be thankful for the general apathy that Chicagoans tended to display. “If you don’t mind, I’m in kind of a hurry,” Kurt cut in.

“All right,” he said, pushing the brim of his cap back and scratching at his thinning hairline as he glanced in the mirror in a completely bored sort of way. “Where to, buddy?”



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
... Human ...?

## Chapter 47

# To Save a Life

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‘Where . . . am I . . .?’

*Everything was white, so white . . . white and soft and airy . . .*

*A sound that she couldn’t identify . . . a beautiful, shining place . . .*

*She looked down and giggled: a whispery white dress with a flaring skirt that billowed out around her when she spun around on her toes . . . airy, formless sleeves that just barely kissed her arms . . .*

*The brightness slowly seemed to fade just a little, just a touch. Grass poked gently at the soles of her feet, tickling her toes. The sound of water rose in her ears; the call of distant birds . . .*

‘It’s . . . my picture . . .’

*The tree bowed in the gentle breeze that touched her face . . . The sun—the glorious sun—warm and bright and shining . . . So peaceful . . . so quiet . . . so . . . perfect . . .*

*A million flowers—every flower she’d ever seen in her lifetime or more . . . the brilliance of laughter that bubbled up from somewhere deep down inside . . . A thought, a word, a dream . . . The gentlest wash of emotion that carried her forward; that made her want to dance . . .*

*So many thoughts flitted though her mind, half-formed ideas that faded before they could solidify, wisps of thoughts that were as fleeting as a season or even a moment in time . . .*

*beautiful things . . . wonderful things . . . Gentle whispers and silent sighs, all ensconced together in a menagerie of fluid, in a breath of a promise . . .*

*“ . . . Mommy will love you forever, Samantha . . . ”*

*“ . . . My dollbaby . . . ”*

*“ . . . Miss you, Sami . . . ”*

*“ . . . Love you . . . ”*

*“ . . . If you eat all those cookies, you'll ruin your dinner . . . ”*

*“ . . . Get that sword up! You want I should take a chunk out of you . . . ? ”*

*“ . . . Take time to see beautiful things, Samantha . . . ”*

*“ . . . Look so much like Kichiro . . . ”*

*“ . . . You'll be a damn fine hunter, Sam . . . ”*

*“ . . . Snap the trigger; don't pull it . . . ”*

*“ . . . Sure, she's my baby sister . . . Looks just like me, don't she . . . ? ”*

*“ . . . Cain tells me you're looking for a job . . . ”*

*“ . . . Not half-bad, Sam . . . ”*

*“ . . . So you're the one who caught Isabelle's bouquet . . . ”*

*“ . . . Better hunter than I ever was . . . ”*

*A myriad of voices, the flash of every face that she knew and loved . . . They were smiling, wishing her well, making her giggle . . . The ones she cherished. Rising up on her tiptoes, she threw her arms out, spun around and around and around. Laughing so hard that she fell back, she landed in the cushion of the warm grass. There was nothing more she could possibly want; nothing else that could make her any happier than she was in that instant.*

*The world faded around her, and she was floating again; floating high overhead. Looking down, she gasped softly. Everyone was there in that field, weren't they? Waving at her as she floated away. Her mother blew her a kiss. Her father laughed and lifted his hand. Isabelle and Alexandra hugged each other and smiled and yelled something that she couldn't make out . . . Everyone she loved . . .*

*And she floated through clouds; felt the moisture of them condense on her body like a fine mist. A whisper spoke to her, but she couldn't discern it; a voice so quiet that she had to strain to hear . . .*

*“Little . . .”*

*She gasped softly, looking around for the source of the whisper. She knew that voice, didn't she? Knew it; knew it; knew it . . .*

*She stopped moving, finding herself sitting in a chair made of clouds; layers of white upon white.*

*A long corridor opened before her, beckoning her forward. In the distance, she could hear the softest laughter, a dull sound that was neither female nor male but was an amalgamation of a thousand voices . . .*

*Standing slowly, she cocked her head to the side, her silvery hair falling over her shoulder as she waited and listened. Something about the laughter compelled her, pulled on an invisible part of her—a part of her that wanted to belong there. Breaking into a half-run, she felt the laughter*

*well up inside her. It was a beautiful place, wasn't it? A beautiful place . . . waiting for her . . .*

*Reaching the end of the corridor, she reached for the white porcelain knob. If she opened that door, she'd see it, wouldn't she? The place of dreams . . . of ethereal dreams . . .*

*"Little demon . . ."*

*She stopped, her hand poised just over the knob, close enough to touch it, and she wanted to, didn't she? Why did she hesitate? What was it about that voice that seemed entirely familiar to her . . .?*

*Slowly, ever so slowly, she turned to look back the way she'd come. A man stood there in the opening of the hallway? Silhouetted in the brightest light, his face lost in shadows . . .*

*She knew him, didn't she? Though she couldn't see his face and didn't know his name, she knew him . . . As she stood still, staring at him, he leaned his shoulder against the wall, lifted a hand toward her, his palm outstretched, waiting for her to take it. "Would you stay a little longer?" he asked, his tone gentle, soothing.*

*She didn't reply as she took a hesitant step. The laughter in the room beyond the door grew louder, but suddenly, it simply wasn't as bright as it had seemed mere moments before.*

*As she drew closer to him, she blinked. She knew his face. Violet eyes reflecting the light that pooled in them when he smiled at her, lips turned up with the barest hint of a smile. He, too, was clad in white, his coal black hair a startling contrast. He was still holding out his hand, for her—just for her. "You can't leave me just yet, little demon," he said quietly.*

*She reached out to take his hand, closer and closer. A sudden fissure of light sparked to life behind him, and he laughed.*

*Closer their hands came, fingertips nearly touching. 'Just a little more,' she thought with a*

*giggle. Just a little nearer because I belong with . . . him . . . forever . . . and if I touch him . . .*

*“I’ll be lost if you leave me, little demon . . .”*

*She caught her breath, hesitated as she met his steady gaze, mesmerized by the way his hair was lifted and fingered by the invisible hands of the gentlest breeze—the same breeze that brought his scent to her nose, allowing her an instantaneous and comforting reassurance of everything in the world. “Because . . . you . . . love me . . .? Or maybe you will one day?”*

*He chuckled at her breathy tone, lifting his other hand, reaching out to stroke her cheek—fingers so close that she could feel the warmth of him radiating from him to her—a beautiful thing. “Because I love you,” he agreed. “Because you’re everything in the world that I never knew existed . . .”*

*An airy laugh—one without a sound that could be heard deep within the heart—and she reached out to take his hand, to let him lead her back . . .*

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Bellaniece awoke with a start, her heart hammering hard against her ribcage. Smashing a hand over her mouth to staunch the scream that welled up inside her, she closed her eyes for a moment, drawing a few ragged breaths.

*‘It was just a dream; just a dream . . .’* she told herself—chanted to herself like a mantra.

“Belle-chan?”

Swallowing hard at the sound of that voice—both welcome and painful at the same time,

Bellaniece cleared her throat. "I'm sorry . . . I didn't mean to wake you . . ."

Kichiro sat up and rubbed his face. "You didn't," he admitted. "I couldn't sleep. What's the matter?"

Casting him a fearful glance, she slowly shook her head. "S-Sami . . . she's in trouble . . ."

Instant alarm registered on his features, and he quickly leaned over to turn on the lamp beside the bed. "What do you mean? How?"

She shook her head as a sob welled up inside her, unable to put words to the terrifying emotion, unable to make sense of the nightmare that hadn't seemed like a nightmare, at all. "She was all white and glowing," Bellaniece finally said, gripping handfuls of the comforter to keep herself from screaming. "She . . . she . . ."

"And that's bad," Kichiro said slowly.

Bellaniece choked back a sob. "No, but . . . everyone was there this time . . . in the meadow by the stream . . . Everyone was . . . was laughing and speaking in whispers that I couldn't hear, and . . . and I kept thinking that it was all right; that she'd . . . she'd be happy . . . happier . . ."

"What do you mean?" he asked slowly. "Princess?"

Shaking her head again, she hunched forward, propping her elbows on her knees; smashing her fists against her burning, aching eyes. "I . . . I kept . . . kept thinking it was okay . . . okay to . . . let her go . . ."

"To let her go," he repeated in a whisper. He understood, didn't he? What she was afraid to say; what she had felt in her heart—in her soul—in those precious few moments

...

“It wasn’t a dream, Kichiro,” she whispered, turning her head, imploring him with her eyes to gainsay her. “Samantha . . . she . . . she . . . she was saying . . . goodbye . . .”

He licked his lips, his brows drawing together in a marked scowl, his black hair glistening in the warm light of the lamp beside the bed. Eyes dark, fathomless . . . a pain so intense, so deep that it killed her a little inside to see it, as he slowly shook his head. “It was . . .” Trailing off, he cleared his throat, glancing at her for a moment then looking away too fast. “It was a dream,” he told her, but his voice sounded hollow in her ears. “Just a dream . . . She’ll be fine. You’ll see. We’ll . . . we’ll bring her home, and . . . and you’ll see . . .”

Bellaniece nodded slowly, desperate to cling to what he was saying, desperate to believe that the man who had given her the fairy tales and the reassurance that things could be right . . . She wanted to believe him this time, too . . . Wanted to believe it because the alternative was just too painful for her to bear.

“Come here,” he said, his voice gentle, coaxing.

She stared at him for a long moment then slowly let him pull her close. Nestled under the blankets beside the warmth of him, she shivered. “I remember when she tried to help us decorate the Christmas tree . . . do you remember that, Belle-chan?” he murmured as he kissed her forehead and rubbed her back.

Bellaniece nodded. “She was so small . . . You always put her on your shoulders so she could put those bells she loved up higher . . .”

He chuckled, but it sounded entirely sad to her ears. “And she’d sing Christmas carols with me . . .”

She nodded slowly, cuddled closer against his side, wishing that the warmth that surrounded her could reach her heart. A thousand memories of a little girl with silvery hair whose eyes shone so brightly whenever she smiled . . . a single tear stung Bellaniece's eye, traced a path over the bridge of her nose . . . That bright and joyful little girl . . .

And Bellaniece couldn't help but wonder as that bittersweet flood of memory washed over her . . . Samantha, that beautiful little creature . . . Could it really be that she was never meant to linger . . .?

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Running a hand over his face, Kurt forced his eyes open and let out a deep breath as he shifted his weight, slumping back against the wall with a weary sigh.

The little demon's color was a little better, he thought, though to be honest, he was having distinct difficulty in focusing on anything. It took all his efforts just to keep himself from falling asleep, didn't it?

'*She . . . she looks like she's sleeping . . .*' he thought absently, reaching out with his right hand to touch her cheek with his fingertips. He frowned. She didn't look quite right, did she? Her silver hair . . . her ears . . .

He missed those.

Why had she done that? Why had she turned human? After he'd gotten her back to his apartment, he'd been unsure as to what he was supposed to do for her. Her heartbeat was growing weaker, her breathing shallower and even more labored, and the ashen color of her skin had frightened him, the bluish gray tint that had touched her lips, reminding him all too vividly of those he had lost so long ago . . .

Their faces had taken on a strange, grayish tone—smooth and cold and lifeless. He didn't know how to save a demon; not really, but he did know how to save a human, so he'd done the only thing he could think of: he stitched her up and started a blood transfusion. He was type O-negative; he could give blood to anyone, and while he wasn't entirely sure that it'd work on her, he had to try, didn't he? So he'd given her a shot of Herstenfurol, a prescription pain reliever that should help with her pain should she wake up but wouldn't induce blood thinning before he'd dug out the blood transfusion kit he had stashed in his closet.

He . . . he had to try . . .

"Little . . . demon," he murmured, a little smile quirking the corners of his lips as he continued to stare at her. He needed to check her vitals; he really did, but . . .

Damn it, he was tired—exhausted, actually. So very, very weary . . .

Reaching for the glass of sugar water that he'd mixed up just before he started the transfusion, he closed his eyes to center himself when he missed for the third time. His vision was a little off . . . and he was already feeling light-headed. He needed to stop the transfer, but he couldn't; not yet. Too worried that he hadn't done enough for her, he sipped the water and shifted his gaze to the darkened window.

*'After four in the morning,'* he thought idly. She'd be all right, wouldn't she? She had to be—had to be . . . *'Damn those bastards for doing this to her . . .'*

And damn him, too.

It didn't matter what face he put on it, the bottom line was that he should've gotten her out of there sooner—*much* sooner, and while he'd told himself that it was because he wanted to make sure that those assholes hadn't implanted a tracker chip in her, that had

only been a part of the reason—the true reason—hadn't it?

The idea of letting her go, of never seeing her again . . .

Pushing himself up, he gritted his teeth and made as quick of work as he possibly could in unhooking the transfusion apparatus. Her color was much better now, and if she were still in her demon form, he doubted that she'd have been that bad off, to begin with. He frowned as he checked her pulse. Stronger than it was but still a little erratic and weak . . . He only hoped that the transfusion had been enough, but if he gave her much more . . .

Drawing a deep breath, he slumped back against the wall once more. '*She . . . she knew, didn't she?*' he suddenly thought, his frown deepening as he stared at her. She knew that she was going to be human, which meant that it wasn't an uncommon thing. That was why she'd begged them not to do it . . . That's why she'd been so afraid . . .

She wouldn't be able to heal herself like she normally did, would she? Because humans didn't heal like that, and she knew that, too . . .

"Half youkai . . . half . . . monster," he mumbled as he ran the side of his index finger along the curled edge of her hand. "Monster," he repeated. "Monster . . ."

The monsters—the *true* monsters—he'd given her to them without a second thought, would have walked away from her without a backward glance . . .

"I'm the monster," he said quietly, his eyes, hot, dry, burning. "I'm sorry, little demon . . . so sorry . . ."

Heaving a sigh, he crawled off the bed, running his hands through his hair as he stumbled a few steps. As much as he wanted to sleep, he couldn't. There were too many things that he needed to do, too many things that he had to make sure of . . . too many arrangements . . .

He'd considered taking her straight to her family for an insular second. He'd changed his mind quickly enough. Taking her to them in her condition . . . He couldn't die; not yet. There'd be time enough to own up to his mistakes later, after he kept a few promises . . .

Stumbling over to the closet, Kurt pushed it open and grabbed a second knapsack off the shelf. He shoved the surveillance footage into the bag along with a change of clothes and what was left of the scent-tabs. Emptying the other knapsack on the table, he frowned. Her things . . .

He'd gotten them out of the office when he'd cleaned it out: her gun, her shuriken, her jacket, her boots . . . her cell phone . . . Those things went into the knapsack. He'd get some money out of the bank in the morning; enough to get her wherever it was that she called home . . . Maine . . .

Rubbing his forehead with the back of his hand, he grimaced at the clammy feel of his own skin. He felt like hell . . .

Turning away from the table, he had to stop and hang onto the edge when a rather sharp bout of vertigo hit him hard. He'd given her too much of his blood, hadn't he? Closing his eyes for a moment while the room stopped spinning, he blinked slowly. His gaze focusing on the tiny form lying on his bed, he stared at her for a long minute. Her coloring did look a little better though that wasn't nearly enough to satisfy his concern. She whimpered and grimaced though she didn't wake up. Kurt glanced at his watch and bit his lip. He'd administered the Herstenfurol over four hours ago, but he'd cut her dosage a bit shy because of the weakness in her vital signs. If those were stronger, he could give her another small dosage . . .

It seemed to take forever for him to cross the floor, to sink slowly onto the edge of the bed. Checking her pulse, he was pleased to note that it was stronger, not quite so erratic, and her skin was warmer to his touch. Her eyes were still dilated, but her blood pressure

was better—a lot better.

He unwrapped her arms as gently as he could to change the bandages. The lacerations were still seeping blood, but they did look like they were starting to clot. She'd scared the living hell out of him, hadn't she, and he knew damn well that he wouldn't relax until she woke up, until she looked at him—until she smiled at him . . .

After carefully wrapping her arms in fresh bandages, he forced himself to focus as he drew a dose of the pain medication. *'Let her . . . sleep through this . . .'* he thought as he clamped the syringe in his teeth and reached for a packet of alcohol swabs. *'When she wakes up . . . maybe she'll believe this was all just a really, really bad dream . . .'*

He administered the shot along with a mild dose of Arzophen, the same drug that he'd used when he'd first captured her to put her to sleep.

Staring at her for long moments, he smiled wanly, touching her hair—stark black against the dinginess of this place, and he knew, didn't he? In a world that had abandoned him so very long ago, he'd found her; just her. Because of her, he'd do what he had to do, wouldn't he? Because she deserved that much from him—because she deserved *everything* from him.

Because . . .

“Because you're everything in the world that I never knew existed . . .” he murmured. A sudden warmth seemed to seep over him, a feeling that came from deep within. Beautiful . . . noble . . . frightening . . . and that feeling came from her, didn't it?

Then he crawled stretched out beside her, hesitantly, slowly drawing her into his arms. *'Just . . . need to . . . rest . . . just a minute . . .'*

He didn't feel his eyes slip closed moments later as he buried his nose in her hair, as he



## Chapter 48

# Morning

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*Wandering through the strangest place; a vast cavern filled with the deepest fog, a vile air, he covered his nose and mouth against the fumes that he couldn't place. Despair—despair so ingrained in him that he couldn't escape it if he tried . . . just what were they saying? Those voices . . . He knew them, and yet . . .*

*Stumbling as the last of his strength seemed to be sucked out of him, he reached out to lean against the wall, noting in the back of his head that the wall was soft, fleshy. Struggling to breathe, sinking to his knees, he tried to shake off the paralysis that was slowly draining him.*

*A song . . . a low, sad song . . . hummed under the breath . . .*

'Why is that . . . familiar . . .?'

*He'd heard it before, hadn't he? He couldn't remember where or when, but somehow, it lent him strength. Pushing himself to his feet, his grip on the strange staff he carried tightening, he trudged onward, deeper, further into the darkness . . . The song—that song . . . how did he know it . . .?*

*A low growl, a pair of glowing eyes . . . the glimmer of fangs . . . 'A . . . hellhound . . .?'*

*Out of the deepest shadows, the eyes moved closer, the reek of something wild and unnatural, ready to rip him to shreds; a guardian of the beast . . . a creature spawned in the bowels of hell . . .*

*Reaching into the folds of his clothes, he yanked out a paper charm. "Be gone!" he mouthed—no words were spoken—as he hurled the charm at the beast. It struck true, and the creature howled, exploding in a blast of putrid wind and a flash of purple light that condensed on his skin the moment it hit him. As the wind died down, the song grew louder, beckoning him onward.*

*The cavernous space closed in on him as the song grew louder. Stumbling forward, how did he know that if he could reach the source of that sound that he would be saved?*

*He stopped at a junction, unsure which path he should follow. One led to death . . . the other . . .? But which one should he take . . .?*

*Closing his eyes, he tried to concentrate on the song, tried to discern where it was coming from. 'Trust . . . my senses . . .' he thought suddenly. "Trust in . . . her . . ."*

*He walked a few steps, altering his course, taking the left corridor. The air was thicker here, fouler, denser. Lifting his forearm to breathe through the fabric of his sleeve, he pressed onward. The darkness seemed to congeal around him, and he had to fight against it to move, leaning on the staff he carried. With every step he took, his body seemed heavier, leaden, but the song compelled him forward.*

*Stopping short at the wall that blocked him, he gritted his teeth. That song . . . it was coming from the other side of the wall . . . That's where he needed to be . . .*

*Reaching into his clothes once more, he pulled out another paper charm, smashed it against the pulsating wall of flesh. Closing his eyes again, muttering an incantation that he'd never heard before . . . the wall dissolved, and he blinked as fresh air, as daylight, flooded over him. The wall had been a simple illusion; nothing more, nothing less . . .*

*Slowly, wearily, he stepped out of the cavern as the crisp breeze lifted the dampened bangs that hung over his forehead. A field—a familiar field, though he couldn't recall how he knew it . . .*

*and in the center of that field, sitting beside the single old tree and the babbling stream that ran beside it . . .*

*Facing away from him, her back straight and proud, she sat in the grass with her feet tucked under her, and she was humming under her breath, the song that he remembered . . . a song to lead her out of the darkness, too . . .*

*He stepped toward her, his hand resting on the gnarled old trunk of a stout, thick tree, and he couldn't help the small grin that surfaced on his features.*

*Her song ended, and she lifted her chin though she didn't turn to look at him. Staring at the pale blue sky so high above, she heaved a small sigh. "You're late," she said in a quiet tone that reached him somewhere deep inside, neither angry nor accusing in a foreign voice that he hadn't heard before but he knew it, just the same.*

*Pushing himself away from the tree, he moved toward her. "I apologize," he murmured. "I didn't mean to keep you waiting . . ."*

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The strangest sensation awoke her: a steady warmth that she couldn't quite credit. It didn't make any sense to her oddly clouded mind, did it? After so long and perpetually being cold . . .

Slowly opening her eyes in the filmy light, she blinked and looked around, unable to understand exactly where she was or why. A room in a wash of grays and blacks—a small kitchenette, a little table . . . bookshelves and boxes . . . a door . . . a certain brightness that didn't dispel the somber feel as much as it enhanced it . . . She was incredibly warm,

yes—a sensation that she wasn't entirely sure existed outside of the fog that enveloped her head, but . . .

Her senses felt dull, blocked, congested, but that didn't account for the heaviness of her body, the clumsiness that she couldn't understand. The cheap alarm clock on the small table beside the bed read 5:13, but whether that was morning or night, she was too disoriented to know . . .

She couldn't easily move, either, could she? Something was holding her down—well, not down, exactly, but it felt like . . . *'Like . . . someone's arms . . . ?'*

It was the taijya, wasn't it? An instant surge of absolute relief washed over her as she shifted enough to see him. Face pale and even a little sickly looking in the weak and filtered light—the hazy glow that she vaguely remembered—he was holding her, wasn't he? Wrapped around her like a blanket . . .

It was welcome, and she closed her eyes for a moment, wondering idly why everything seemed so disjointed, so warped . . . everything but the sensation of his arms around her, that was . . . *'Nice . . .'*

Blinking, she grimaced at the strange sense that something was tugging just beneath her skin on her arms. She started to scratch at them, but stopped when the dull edges of her fingernails met up with the gauze wrapped around her limbs. Why . . . ?

Unable to shake off the sluggish, slow feeling, she gave up for the moment, allowing herself to bask in the comfort that she couldn't credit. It seemed to her that she ought to realize something, but her mind was simply too lethargic to comprehend what that could possibly be. It was enough, at least for now, for her to know that she was safe, warm . . . protected . . .

Letting her eyes closed, she snuggled a little closer to the taijya. He didn't mind, did he? Not for now, anyway . . .

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Kurt groaned and opened his eyes cautiously, loathing the intrusion of coherent thought when his head ached so badly that it hurt to breathe. *'Damn . . . why . . .?'*

And slowly, like ice melting in the first days of springtime, he remembered . . . The cuts, the panic, the fight, the tense trip from the facility to the relative safety of his apartment, the hours of anxious watching and waiting, and . . . everything; everything . . .

"Little demon!" he gasped, eyes flashed wide open. An unreasonable surge of panic gripped him despite the quieter, more logical knowledge that she was right there beside him; her body warm and soft . . . he started to sit up, only to fall back once more as a wave of light-headedness crashed down on him. "Damn it," he grumbled, lifting a hand to rub furiously at his forehead.

He'd given her a little too much of his blood, hadn't he? He hadn't thought about anything but the idea that she desperately needed it; that she . . .

"Shit!" he hissed, forcing himself upright as he glanced at the clock beside the bed and winced. Nearly six in the morning, but . . . Blinking rapidly, he rubbed his eyes. The room slowly came into focus, and even the grayish-black shadows that surrounded him were welcome.

He hadn't meant to fall asleep. He should have stayed awake. But one glance at her was enough to reassure him that she was still breathing, and much easier than she had last night—still sleeping comfortably . . . Reaching over to grab the stethoscope from the

nightstand, he let out a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment, willing away the slight fuzziness that lingered in his head—a fuzziness that he couldn't completely shake off.

Her heartbeat was stronger though still not as steady as it normally was, her pulse also more stable. In fact, she looked much better, and while he wouldn't really rest easy until she woke up, until she explained why she was human, he felt a definite weakening in the trepidation that had gripped him so tightly . . .

Still he allowed himself a minute to just stare at her, to feel the absolute comfort of her nearness before he carefully pulled away from her and got to his feet.

The first thing he needed to do was to get more liquids into himself. Some sort of electrolyte solution would be best, but he was unwilling to leave her alone in order to run to a store, so he settled for a glass of water with a couple tablespoons of sugar stirred in, and as he sipped that, he tried to pull together the plan that had gone so awry.

He needed to get back to the facility before they discovered that she was gone—if they didn't know already, that was. He hadn't wanted to fight with the guards, but he hadn't had much of a choice, either. It was bad enough that they knew he'd broken her out of there; the last bit of knowledge that he wanted to arm them with was the idea that she was human, too.

It made no sense . . . Just how could she possibly be human? Even if she were half human, why the complete and total change in her? Heaving a sigh since he wasn't going to get an answer about that until she woke up, and that was only if she'd tell him anything at all, he shook his head. No, better to concentrate on how to get her out of here, instead . . .

Those damn researchers would be out looking for her soon. He didn't even try to delude himself into thinking otherwise, and while they didn't know where he lived or where to

find him, he couldn't rest easy until he had gotten her safely out of the city, and what was more: he had to go back, didn't he? To ensure that she would forever be safe, that she could leave her home without the fear that they'd find her . . .

*'And let's not gild the lily, here . . . I've got a few bones to pick with them, myself. . .'*

Setting the empty glass down with a dull thud, he shuffled to the bathroom with a sigh. Blinking in the bright and artificial light of the stark room, he shifted his gaze around slowly, as though he didn't quite recognize it. Staring at the empty bathtub, he moved forward without really considering what he was doing. She'd wanted a real bath, hadn't she? And he, bastard that he was . . . he'd filled a fucking trash can and said that it was the best he could do . . .

"I'm sorry, little demon," he murmured as he sank down on the edge of the empty tub. A miscellany of images flew through his head, each one painful and poignant . . . Pulling the cast-off sandwich out of the trash to feed her . . . Her smile and absolute delight when she'd realized that he'd cleaned out and filled the trashcan for her to bathe in . . . Her huddled and lifeless form, so tiny, so desolate, in the confines of that hateful cage . . . the blood-soaked blanket . . . the pitch black hair . . . the sound of her voice, begging those bastards not to do it; not to hurt her . . . because she knew, didn't she? She knew that she wouldn't be able to heal herself; not this time . . . and the last image, the very last one . . . carefully settling her into that trashcan, her small form curled over onto herself . . . The feeling that he'd thrown her away like the rest of them; like garbage . . .

Common logic told him that he'd done no such thing. Common logic reminded him that he'd done what he had to do to get her out of there; to set her free. Common logic didn't help him now, and no excuse in the world could even come close to sanctifying his actions, could it? The little demon with the eyes so blue . . . and yet she chose to smile at him time and again . . . and yet she'd chosen to cry for him . . .

He reached out, pulled the lever to plug the tub, and turned the old-fashioned water taps. They were in a hurry, yes, and he had to get her out of there without question. He also owed it to her, to allow her the things that he'd taken from her, even if it were something as base and ridiculous as a bath . . . but maybe . . . maybe in the end, she'd understand . . .

“Taijya . . .!”

Sitting up straight when the sound of her voice called out, he stumbled to his feet and out of the bathroom, stopping short at the sight of her, sitting in the middle of the small bed with the blanket pulled up to her chin and a terrified look on her face. “Hey,” he murmured, shuffling across the floor to her side. “It’s all right,” he told her.

Her wide, scared eyes met his, little more than shadows in the dim light filtering out of the bathroom. “Where . . .?”

“You’re with me,” he told her quickly, reaching out to touch her shoulder, to gently push her back down again. “You’re going to be okay.”

Her confusion was a palpable thing; a bitter thing. Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head as he eyed her. “Are you in pain?”

She nodded slowly, wincing as she folded her arms over her chest. ‘*Stupid question,*’ he thought with a shake of his head. ‘*Of course she’s in pain . . .*’

“Okay,” he said, turning his back on her to grab the pain medication. She whimpered, and he shot her a wan smile over his shoulder. “I’m not leaving you,” he assured her.

He got her a couple pain killers that he knew to be safe to use with the medicine he’d already given her and a glass of water. She stared at the pills in his hand for a moment then hesitantly reached out to take them. Her hands were clumsy, though, and she

couldn't hold onto the glass, so he sat on the edge of the bed, slipping an arm around her to help her. "It'll take a bit for those to kick in," he told her. "Do you want a bath?"

"A . . . bath . . .?" she repeated with a shake of her head, as though she didn't understand.

He nodded and stared at her for a moment. In all actuality, he wished that he could give her a little time to recover, but he just didn't dare try. They had to get moving, and the sooner the better . . .

In the end, he picked her up and carried her into the bathroom, noticing not for the first time, exactly how small she really was. Just a little wisp of nothing, really, and she snuggled against him with a soft exhalation, her eyes drifting shut.

"Here," he said, sitting her on the closed lid of the toilet. "Just, um . . ."

He turned off the water and shrugged. "I, uh, don't have anything pretty," he explained. "Take as long as you want."

He started to close the door after he stepped out of the bathroom. A sudden cry from her, though, brought him right back. "What's the matter?"

Her eyes were wild, frightened. "Where . . . where are you going?"

Kurt frowned and shook his head. "I'm just going out here," he said, nodding at the room behind him. "I'm not leaving."

Her panic was painfully obvious, and for a moment, he thought that she was going to break down into tears. "Y-you can't leave me," she whispered.

He opened his mouth to try to reassure her, but he couldn't do it. The brightness in her wide open eyes was enough to kill him just a little inside, and he slowly nodded. "All

right,” he agreed, knowing in his heart that it was a really bad idea but unable to summon the will to tell her ‘no’.

She looked relieved enough though the acute fear still hadn’t left her gaze, and in the end, Kurt had to help her undress since her hands just didn’t seem to want to cooperate. Not really surprising, he figured. He’d be surprised if there weren’t some kind of nerve damage there. ‘*Damn them,*’ he thought, having to fight off the white hot anger that surged through him.

But she just sat in the tub, staring blankly at the wall in front of her. Kurt washed her, careful not to get her arms wet. Lost in a world all her own, she was, and with every passing second, he could feel her mind slipping slowly away from him . . .

“I’m going to get you something to wear,” he told her, clearing his throat. She didn’t blink, didn’t move, didn’t seem to have heard him at all. It only took a minute to grab a clean pair of sweatpants and a plain black tee-shirt, and she hadn’t moved at all when he stepped back into the bathroom. “Here, I . . .”

Trailing off as his eyes widened in shock, Kurt could only blink and stare as the black locks started to fade, shifting back to the silver color that he had come to know. The little ears that so easily reflected her mood seemed to pop out of nowhere, and when he glanced at her hand, he wasn’t surprised to see her claws spring out in the space of an instant. “Welcome back,” he muttered, shaking his head slowly. “Little demon . . .”

She didn’t respond, and he heaved a sigh of relief, somehow feeling reassured that she’d be all right, after all. He’d seen her healing powers in that state, hadn’t he? It was enough to know that she was back to normal, at least.

He scooped her out of the tub and quickly towed the moisture from her. By the time he’d finished helping her into her clothes, his hands were shaking, and he couldn’t help the irritation at the entirely inappropriate thoughts that plagued him, even knowing that

she wasn't in any condition to help herself. Still, she managed to shuffle out of the bathroom under her own steam, but she didn't go far. Dropping into the chair at the small kitchen table, she blinked, her eyes slowly coming to focus on him as he pulled her foot into his lap to tug one of his socks over it. "We're not . . . not at that place anymore, are we?" she asked, her voice as empty and vague as her gaze had been mere minutes before.

"Uh, no," he replied, sparing a moment to glance at her before turning his attention back to the remaining sock and foot.

She digested that for a long moment, running the fingers of her right hand over her left forearm idly. "Where are we?"

He didn't like the almost spacey quality in her tone; not at all. "This is . . . my apartment," he admitted, tugging the hem of the sweatpants down over the socks. They were way too big, the heel extending well up past her ankle. "We've got to get moving."

"Something itches," she said suddenly, her gaze falling to the bandages on her arms.

"Oh . . . the stitches," he muttered with a shake of his head. "You won't heal with those in, right?"

She stared at him for several moments before she finally shook her head.

Kurt stood up and grabbed his cell phone, dialing the number of a cab company as he filled two glasses of water and dumped sugar into both. It only took a moment to ask them to send one over, and he hung up, dropping the phone into his pocket before returning to the little demon's side and handing her a glass. "Drink that," he told her firmly but gently as he took a sip of his and set it down on the table. She did as she was told while he carefully unwrapped her arms and snipped the stitches. He frowned, wondering if she really were going to be all right as he stared at the angry gash. It looked

just as bad as it had the night before, but at least it wasn't bleeding anymore. "I . . . I'm sorry," he whispered, concentrating on her arm, unable to look into her eyes. "I should have gotten you out of there sooner . . . Hell, I . . . I never should have taken you there, in the first place."

She didn't respond as he unwrapped her other arm and repeated the process. After he'd removed all the stitches, he wrapped her arms in gauze once more. Only then could he look at her.

She was frowning at her arms though she didn't seem to see them at all. She looked like she was trying to understand something but was having trouble doing so. "Drink this," he prompted again, patting her hand that held the glass he'd given her. He had very little doubt that the medicine that he'd injected into her hadn't fully worn off yet, and while he wasn't certain he should have given it to her, he couldn't say he was entirely sorry for it, either.

She drank the water, however, and let him take the glass. For a second, he considered getting her boots out of the bag he'd packed with her things, but discarded that idea since they had heels, and he wasn't sure she'd be able to negotiate those, at least at the moment.

Standing up, he stalked over to the window just in time to see the bright yellow cab pull to a stop in front of the dilapidated old building where he lived. Taking a deep breath, he reached for the coat that he'd tossed over a chair last night. "Come on, little demon," he said quietly, holding out the coat for her.

She shot him a questioning glance but slowly stood.

Settling the coat over her shoulders, he gently pulled her hair out of the collar and reached for the duplicate knapsacks on the table, smiling just a little as he gestured



## Chapter 49

### Promises

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*‘Why . . . does everything feel so . . . odd . . .?’*

Staring out the car window as the land sailed past in a blur, Samantha rubbed her forehead with a trembling hand. It made no sense, did it? The taijya had said . . . “Home,” she whispered. The word seemed wholly unfamiliar to her. *‘Home . . .?’* What . . . what, exactly, did that . . . mean . . .?

Everything felt strange to her: fuzzy, vague, illogical . . . She’d returned to her hanyou self, hadn’t she? But she couldn’t feel it . . . Her youkai blood remained strangely silent, as though it were being diluted . . . as though it were being repressed somehow . . .

“Little demon?” the taijya said. She winced at the startling loudness of his voice in the otherwise quiet. He wasn’t trying to frighten her, and she knew it. She couldn’t seem to help herself, though. “You okay?”

“Y-yes,” she forced herself to say, even if she wasn’t sure that she was telling the truth. Her mind was too confused to comprehend much of anything.

He heaved a sigh and tapped on the steering wheel. “Tell me something . . .”

A minivan full of children passed them. The ones in the back seat turned around and waved.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

“Happened to me?” she echoed. She could feel his gaze on her as she fidgeted in the tan microfiber seat. “I-I . . . don’t . . . know . . .”

He fiddled with the digital map console and sighed. “Why . . . why were you human?” he clarified.

One of the children in the minivan stuck his fingers into his mouth, stretching out his lips and crossing his eyes. Samantha nearly smiled. “I’m always human . . . on the night of the new moon . . .”

He didn’t answer right away, as though he were considering her claim. “Is that . . . so?”

She nodded vaguely, running her fingertips over the slowly-healing incision on her right forearm. She was glad to be away from those white-coats; glad that he said that she wouldn’t have to go back there . . . Still, she couldn’t quite wrap her mind around the rest of what he’d said, could she? What, exactly, did he mean? “Are . . . are you taking me to another researcher?” she asked suddenly, blurting out the question that had been tumbling around the back of her head ever since he’d talked her out of the taxi at the rental car agency on the outskirts of east Chicago. “W-will you watch me there, too?”

He glanced at her for a moment then suddenly pulled the car off the road and slammed it into ‘park’. “Little demon,” he began in a gruffer tone than she was accustomed to, “we’re not going anywhere like that,” he said with a sigh and in a much gentler voice. “You . . . You’re going home. Don’t you understand that?”

She shook her head, unable to grasp the intricacies of his words. *‘It’s . . . it’s like he’s saying . . . n-n-no . . .’*

With a grimace, he shook his head, gently reaching over to catch her chin with a crooked finger and making her look at him. “Remember? You . . . you told me about your mama

and your papa and your sisters . . .? They miss you, right? And you . . . you miss them, don't you?"

A vague spark of recognition ignited somewhere deep within her. "M . . . mama . . ." she murmured.

"Yeah," he replied quietly, as though he feared that he'd hurt her if he spoke any louder. "You want that, don't you? To go see your mama and your papa?"

"Yes," she whispered, "but . . ."

"But?" he prompted when she trailed off.

She shook her head, caught his hand to rub against her cheek. "Will you . . . will you come with me?"

He blinked and stared at her, quiet sort of pain lending his violet eyes an independent glow, as though her soft plea had hurt him somehow.

"Y-you promised," she reminded him, desperation coursing through her with a vengeance, an ugliness, that she couldn't credit. "You promised you wouldn't leave me . . ."

He swallowed hard, his gaze shifting out the windshield of the idling car. "I promised I wouldn't leave you in *there*," he muttered. "That's what I promised . . ."

Samantha let go of his wrist, her hands falling to her lap as though they were cast of iron. Her temple fell against the doorframe, her eyes glazing over. She couldn't seem to hold on to the basest of conscious thought, and she wondered rather absently if she were losing her mind . . . Why? Why? Why . . .?

He said nothing as he put the car in gear and pulled onto the road once more. They drove for a while before he spoke again, and when he did, she jumped. "We should get you some shoes," he remarked at length, his voice oddly strained, a little too bright. "Have you . . . have you ever ridden a bus before?"

"Busses . . . smell funny," she murmured, her eyes widening as a few sporadic flakes of snow hit the window and melted. "They make me nervous."

"Nervous," he repeated. "Can you drive, little demon?"

She frowned at his question and scooted lower in her seat as a huge semi blew past them. The overly-large vehicle seemed ghastly to her, frightening. The vague recollection of seeing those things before registered somewhere deep down. They . . . they didn't used to intimidate her, did they . . .?

"Can you drive?" he repeated.

She nodded, rubbing her forehead in a vain effort to alleviate the clingy thickness that she couldn't shake loose.

"Tell me more about your family," he urged quietly. "You said your grandfather lives in Maine . . . Is that where you live, too?"

"I live in a cage," she replied automatically, her gaze fixed on the landscape of buildings that grew steadily larger, encompassing the windshield as they drew nearer and nearer, rising up higher and taller above them, around them, on all sides of them.

He didn't respond to that, and maybe that was just as well. They passed a sign that read, *'Welcome to Toledo, Ohio'* . . .

"Are you hungry?"

She blinked and turned to look at him. He was staring at the road. “Uh, yes,” she replied, somehow knowing that he wanted to her say that she was. The idea of eating, however, turned her stomach, and she flattened her ears as she swallowed hard. That didn’t matter, did it?

But . . . but what really did . . . ?

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She wasn’t all right; he could tell, damn it. Even if she weren’t babbling, he’d have realized it. She couldn’t seem to focus on anything; didn’t comprehend a thing that he tried to tell her. If he’d told her that she was going home once since they’d left Chicago, then he’d told her fifty times, but she kept forgetting, asking him where they were going, asking him if he’d still come in to watch her at night . . . asking about the cages and the white-coats . . . and every time, he told her that she wasn’t going back, that he wasn’t taking her to another facility, and every time that she asked, it made him feel just a little worse for the entire situation, didn’t it . . . ?

It hadn’t taken him long, however, to figure out that it had to be the medicines he’d given her that were just not wearing off like they should, and he could likely blame her significant blood loss for that. To be completely honest, he’d been surprised that she was able to function as much as she was, given the sheer amount of blood she’d lost before he’d even realized that she was hurt, at all. Those things just exacerbated the situation, didn’t they? He should have known that removing her from the contained environment she’d been forced to endure for the last three months was going to be a shock to her. Add to that the confusion brought on by the medicines and the disorientation of her condition, and, well . . .

“Where’s my picture?” she asked suddenly.

Kurt blinked and shot her a quick glance, only to find her twisting a long lock of hair around her finger. “Picture?” he repeated, unsure exactly what she was talking about.

“My window,” she reiterated. “You bought it for me so I could see the sky.”

It took him a moment to figure out what she was talking about, and when he did, he grimaced. “The postcard? I, uh . . . I forgot it.”

“Can we go back and get it?” she asked. She sounded calm enough, but he could feel the sudden rise in her anxiety level.

“N-no,” he told her. “If we go back, they’ll . . . they’ll put you in that cage again. You don’t want that, do you?”

“I want my picture,” she whispered as she slowly shook her head. “You can hide it on my new cage, can’t you? You . . . you can do that, right?”

Gritting his teeth together at her candid mention of another cage, he had to count to ten before he trusted himself to answer her. “You aren’t going to another place like that,” he reminded her. “You’re going home.”

“But it’s my picture,” she argued, her ears flattening, though whether it was because of her upset or her rising agitation, he couldn’t tell. “It’s mine!”

Letting out a deep breath, Kurt raked his hand over his face and shook his head. “I’ll get you another one,” he promised, hoping it’d be enough to appease her before she worked herself up any further. “Is that all right?”

She considered that, her expression still mulish, at best. “Okay,” she agreed despite the

hint of upset still evident in her tone.

That seemed to do the trick, though. Staring out the window with the fascination of a child, she looked entirely mesmerized yet completely frightened, all at the same time. The combination just didn't set well with him, at all, and he sighed again.

*'It's not going to work . . .'* he thought as they sat in the drive through of a small restaurant near the outskirts of Toledo, Ohio. The abbreviated plan he'd come up with was to drive her out of Chicago and to put her on a bus heading in the right direction, but . . .

But he really didn't think that it was going to work, that plan. As it was, he could only hope that her concealment was clinging to her. Since they'd passed a number of cars without anyone giving her strange looks, he was reasonably sure that it was. Unfortunately, he didn't know the first thing about putting one of those on her or he might have done it, himself . . . Still, he'd feel a lot better if he were sure . . .

He sighed. It had taken him nearly twenty minutes to coax her out of the car at a department store he'd found in South Bend, Indiana. The goal had been to buy her some shoes. She'd only managed to step into the place when she'd freaked out, ears flattening, eyes wide and terrified, and in the end, he'd had to put her in the car alone to run back inside long enough to buy her a pair of clunky tennis shoes and a thick, downy coat. By the time he'd emerged from the store fifteen minutes later, she'd been ready to freak out. It had taken nearly an hour of driving with the radio off and without speaking before she'd managed to calm herself down enough that she didn't shriek whenever a car passed them.

When they'd reached Toledo, he'd found an ATM to withdraw money. His daily limit was two thousand dollars, and he'd gotten out that much. It should be enough, he figured. Enough to get her where she needed to be . . .

He paid for the food and handed the bag to her. She didn't say a thing, and the girl in

the drive through window didn't act like anything was out of the ordinary, much to his relief. He wasn't entirely sure how her concealment worked, but as long as it did, then he figured that was all right, too. She didn't even try to open the bag, and he sighed. He'd considered traveling further or finding a hotel room for the night—at least long enough for her to regain a semblance of her composure, but . . .

But if Harlan and his band of cronies weren't already searching for her—for them—then he couldn't afford to take any longer than necessary, could he? Time was working against him now, and he had to make damn sure that they didn't get to her . . .

Checking the auto-nav screen, he keyed in the address of the nearest car rental agency. He doubted that Harlan would be able to trace the car that he'd rented early this morning just before they'd left Chicago, but he'd rather be safe than sorry . . .

He left her in the car while he went in to make the switch. She had looked a little panicked, but when he said he'd be right back, she calmed down quickly enough—a good sign, he figured, and as luck would have it, it only took about ten minutes to make the switch. She'd seemed a bit baffled when he'd gotten her out of the white sedan and into a newer model midnight blue Phazar Elektiva, but she didn't complain, either. Handing the keys of the white car to the attendant, he heaved a sigh of relief as he started the Elektiva and nudged them back onto the highway once more. Glancing at the clock, he rubbed his forehead. To be honest, the smell of the food that was still in the bag untouched was more than enough to turn his stomach, but she didn't seem interested in eating, either, which was all just as well, he supposed.

Pulling into a gas station, he turned toward her and dug a sandwich out of the bag. "Here," he said, sticking it into her hands. "Eat this, okay? I'll be right back."

That look of complete panic surfaced on her features once more. "Where—?"

"I'm just going to top off the tank and buy a few things," he assured her. "Won't take me

long.”

She stared at him for a moment as though she were trying to decide whether or not he was telling the truth, then nodded. Satisfied that she wasn't going to freak out completely, he got out of the car.

It didn't take much to top off the gas tank. He hadn't figured that it would, but he'd rather be safe than sorry, all things considered. He peeked in to make sure that she was all right before he headed inside. Nibbling on her sandwich, she seemed calm enough, and while the worry that knotted his stomach didn't abate completely, he was starting to think that maybe she would be all right, too.

He grabbed a few bottles of water and juice and a small bag of Hershey's Kisses for her then headed to the cashier, grabbing a post card—not the same, but the picture was outside, and it was a pretty enough view. Hopefully, it'd satisfy her well enough, at least until she understood that she'd never have to go back to a hellhole like that, ever again. “That be all for you?” the older guy asked as Kurt set the items on the counter.

“Yeah, I put seven bucks on pump two. Uh, could you tell me if there's a bus station around here?”

The guy started ringing up the stuff and nodded without dragging his attention off his task. “Yeah,” he replied a little absently. “Just head down the highway about ten miles, and you'll see it.”

Kurt thanked him and paid for the stuff then gathered it all up and headed back outside.

She was standing outside the car. He grimaced when he realized that she wasn't wearing his coat, but she didn't seem to notice the briskness in the air, either, as she slowly looked around. “You ready to go?” he asked a little uncertainly.

She glanced at him, a strange sort of darkness filtering into her deep blue eyes as her ears twitched nervously at the sounds of passing traffic. “But I don’t have to get in there,” she said slowly, nodding toward the car. “Right?”

Her question surprised him. “Well, uh . . . n-no,” he replied. “Not if you don’t want to, but . . .”

His answer seemed to quell her suspicions, though, and she nodded vaguely as she opened the door. “But I don’t have to,” she repeated. This concept seemed to please her, and Kurt let out a deep breath as he strode around to the driver’s side and got into the car.

“Did you eat your sandwich?” he asked as he started the car and pulled out of the gas station.

She nodded, rubbing her arms. “Yes,” she replied. “I threw the wrapper away.”

She sounded a little more like herself, didn’t she? The knowledge offered him a measure of relief though he didn’t delude himself into thinking that she wasn’t still a little disoriented. He could see it in her eyes, couldn’t he? A subtle hint of suspicion . . .

“Here,” he said, handing her the post card he’d just bought.

She stared at it for a moment then smiled a little vaguely. “It’s different than the first one,” she ventured at length. “Like I’m moving or something . . .” That thought amused her, and she giggled. Kurt didn’t know what to say, and in the end, he opted not to say anything at all, concentrating instead on the road before them.

The bus station wasn’t hard to find. Kurt glanced at her and heaved a sigh, trying to decide whether or not she understood where they were, at all. “You . . . stay here,” he told her. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes wide, almost expressionless. Finally she nodded, though, and so did Kurt as he got out of the car and headed inside the small office building.

“What can I do for you?” the woman behind the desk asked when Kurt stepped inside.

“Do you have any busses going to Chicago?”

She nodded as she sipped from a rather stained coffee mug. “Yep, in fact, we got one leaving at two p.m. Next one won’t be through till Wednesday, though.”

Glancing at his watch, he made a face. It was almost one-thirty now . . . which meant . . . “Do you have a seat on the two o’clock?”

“Yep,” she said with a smile. “Just one adult? Discounts?”

Digging his bank card out of his wallet, he shook his head. “No discounts, and just one.”

“Okay, then that’ll be seventy-nine fifty-four . . . Your name?”

Glancing out the window, he saw that she was still in the car. “Uh, Drevin,” he supplied. “Kurt Drevin.”

“Okay, Mr. Drevin. Do you have luggage?”

“No, just a knapsack that I’ll keep with me.”

The woman nodded as she keyed the information into the computer. “Okay, the bus will be here in few minutes, but since you don’t have any luggage, it shouldn’t take long to get you through security. Do you have any concealed weapons?”

“N . . . no,” he replied.

“All right,” she agreed, taking his card and running the number for payment then handed it back. “They’ll want to have a look at your knapsack, but it shouldn’t be too big a deal. Fair enough?”

He nodded and put the card away. “Thanks.”

She handed him a plastic token and a receipt. “Give the token to the driver when you board the bus,” she told him, “and have a good trip.”

He stepped outside and scowled at the surroundings. He’d tried to explain to her earlier that he would only be going so far with her, but . . . but she hadn’t understood that, had she? She . . . she hadn’t . . .

She looked entirely relieved when he opened the car door and got back inside. “What is this place?” she asked slowly as she narrowed her eyes at the area.

“Little demon . . .” he began, unsure what he could possibly say to make her understand. “It’s time for you to go home,” he told her. “Do you understand?”

She shook her head slowly, as though she were trying to understand but couldn’t. “But . . . you’re coming with me, aren’t you? Who . . . who will visit me at night . . .?”

“I . . .” snapping his mouth closed, Kurt shook his head. “You won’t need me to do that,” he told her, forcing a smile that he just didn’t feel. “Remember? You said . . . your family . . .? The . . . the baby you wanted to see? Remember all those things you told me about? Now you need to go see them.”

“You promised,” she whispered. “You . . . you said you wouldn’t leave me . . .”

Closing his eyes for a moment, he couldn't meet her gaze as he reached for the two identical knapsacks. Shoving most of the money he'd gotten out of the ATM earlier into the bag with her clothes, he shook his head as he shoved them both into the back seat. "I bought you some stuff to drink . . . juice and water . . . and a bag of chocolate," he said, his voice catching, harsh. *'Don't look at her; don't look at her,'* a voice in the back of his mind chanted. If he looked at her . . . "My bus will be here soon, so you have to listen to me. When I get on that bus, I want you to get back in this car and drive. See this highway?" he said, pointing to the stretch of road they'd been traveling on. "You get back on that road, and you go that way."

"But . . ."

He swallowed hard, keying in the directions that would at least get her to Maine—that's where her grandfather was, right? That's where she belonged . . . "No, listen," he said, cutting off her protests. "As soon as you're on the road, you need to call your father. Your . . . your papa? Tell him . . . tell him you're coming home, okay? Can you do that?"

A fleeting spark of recognition flickered to life behind her eyes, and she nodded slowly, very slowly. "P-papa . . ."

He nodded, wondering for the thousandth time if what he was trying to do would be okay. She looked so lost, so confused, but . . . but in his heart, he knew. He'd kept her away for far too long, kept her to himself because . . . because he would be the lost one without her . . . and maybe it really was the only thing he could do, to send her home, back to the people who loved her . . . back to the people who missed her. "You need to go tell him happy birthday, remember?" he said quietly.

She shook her head, grabbed his hand, her absolute desperation ripping him wide open in places that she'd never see. "You . . . you can come with me," she blurted. "You . . ."

“I can’t,” he interrupted quietly, despising himself for the tears that rose in her eyes. “I . . . I need to go back. Do you understand? I need to go back—to make sure that those men . . . that *no one* can ever hurt another little demon again . . . okay?”

The bus pulled in, and Kurt winced as a violent surge of absolute panic seemed to grip her, reaching out to him as certainly as it would if it were a palpable thing. “Please,” she whispered again.

Kurt didn’t look at her. If he looked at her, he’d give in, wouldn’t he? If he looked at her . . . “Here,” he said, the flatness of his voice completely at odds with the warring sense of misery, but whether it was hers or his own, he didn’t know—never *would* know. She deserved so much more than a cold cage in an empty room where humans put her on display, laughing and jeering and testing her in ways that no one should ever have had to endure. She deserved . . .

She blinked as he stuck the rest of his money into her hand. With a grimace, he closed her hand around the money and shook his head. “I put my number into your cell phone, okay? The cell is in your bag. As soon as the bus leaves, I want you to call your papa . . . and as soon as you get home, and you’re safe . . . c-call me . . . let me know.”

“You . . . you’re not taking me to another cage,” she said.

Her words were flat, as though she finally understood what he’d been trying to tell her all day. He had to swallow a few times to force down the thickened lump that choked him. “No one will *ever* put you in a cage again, little demon,” he promised.

She sat there, immobile, as though she really didn’t comprehend what he had instructed her to do, and with a last attempt at a smile, he made himself open the car door and reached back for his bag. “I gotta go.”

He didn’t dare look back at the car, did he? Forcing himself to walk away from her as a

million regrets raced through his head, he quickened his pace. The clock that hung over the entrance to the station read five minute till, and the security officer looked a little irritated as Kurt handed him his bag.

It was better this way, wasn't it? Sending her home was the right thing to do, and even if . . . even if . . . He winced inwardly. No, it was better, wasn't it? Better not to think about those things that just didn't matter, not in the end. After everything he'd taken from her in the blink of an eye, it was the very least he could do . . . and if she never understood just how much it cost him to let her go, then that was for the best, too . . .

*"Taijya!"*

He spun around at the sound of that raw cry. Standing in front of the car with the wind whipping her hair into her face, into her eyes, and a pain that he just couldn't stand tingeing her aura, she'd called out to him as all of her fear, all of her sadness converged on him—the waif-like creature with the eyes so blue with the scent of tears so thick in his nostrils that he couldn't discern if it were truth or just a demon's illusion . . .

And without a second thought, he turned and started to walk back to her, unsure what it was that he wanted to do, to say, but knowing deep inside that if he didn't touch her just one last time . . . "Little demon," he whispered as she ran to him, throwing herself at him, her momentum making him step back to steady them both.

"I can't; I can't!" she sobbed, burying her face against his chest. "Please . . . I can't . . ."

"You've got to," he forced himself to say. "Do this . . . for me . . ."

That seemed to reach her; his simple request. Sniffling, she leaned away far enough to stare up at him. "Will you come for me?" she asked, her eyes pleading with him, begging him for something to cling to—for whatever hope he could give her.

“I . . .”

She shook her head, her body shivering, and he realized a moment too late that she didn't have her coat. “Please,” she whispered, and it was that whisper . . . that one broken murmur, that broke him, too.

“I . . . promise,” he lied.

And yet it seemed to do the trick. With a nod, she seemed to draw reassurance from that.

“Now you promise me you'll get into that car and drive, okay? Promise me.”

She choked back a sob and nodded, seeming to understand that he really wasn't going to go with her, and whether that was a blessing or a curse, Kurt didn't know. “I . . . okay.”

It was enough. It had to be. “Promise me you'll call your papa, too, as soon as you start driving, you'll call him.”

She nodded again. “I promise . . .”

“Good,” he murmured, “I have to go now.”

He glanced down at her and sighed, realizing a moment too late that looking at her was the biggest mistake of his life. The misery in her was a bitter thing to see. Nostrils quivering as tears streaked down her ashen cheeks, and she looked so lost, so very alone, as though her soul was being split in two, and he . . . he understood that just a little too well, too, didn't he? The existence he'd led for entirely too long . . . and she . . .

The tears that spiked on her eyelashes, the feel of her body against his . . . as if everything that he'd ever thought or believed had led him here, to this moment, in this parking lot

that reeked of oil and stagnant smells ingrained into every ounce of the pavement below their feet, and she . . .

*'Youkai . . . magical being . . .'*

Without a second thought, he leaned down, brushed his lips over hers in a kiss meant to tell her everything that he'd never be able to say—a million things, a single thing . . . but she clung to him, holding onto his shirt as though her very life depended upon it, upon this . . .

And even the understanding that he was probably doing more damage in that one instant than any of the white-coats had ever inflicted upon her . . . because he . . .

“Buddy! You coming?”

The intrusion of the security officer's voice cut him deep, and he stepped back, letting go of her, and knowing that this one image of her, of her pain and her misery . . . It would linger in his memory long after everything else faded . . . long after her own laughter and her own memories of the entire thing paled, his memories would remain . . . the beautiful thing that was never meant to have touched the likes of him . . .

“Go, little demon,” he whispered but knew that she would hear him. “Go home.”

He stared at her for another moment then turned to stride away. Her voice stopped him one last time.

“Sam!” she yelled. He stopped, slowly pivoted, staring at her in confusion. She shook her head, a final sense of absolute desperation delineating every single thing about her—an image that would haunt him for the rest of his life . . . “M-my name,” she murmured. “My name is Samantha.”

The moisture that clouded his vision was foreign to him; something that he'd forgotten that he could do a long time ago, and as a single tear coursed down his cheek, he tried to smile for her—just for her. “Kurt,” he rasped out. “I’m Kurt . . .”



*Final Thought from Kurt:*  
... Samantha ...

## Chapter 50

### Darkness

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*'She's not . . . going . . .'*

Kurt scowled out the rear window of the bus as it started to pull onto the highway, staring at the tiny woman standing in front of the dark blue car in the bus station parking lot. She hadn't moved at all, not since he'd walked away from her, pausing just long enough to grab the knapsack from the security guard, who looked entirely irritated that he'd been kept waiting.

He grimaced. She . . . she really wasn't in any condition to be driving half way across the United States, was she . . .? And he . . .

Reaching out, his fingers hovering just above the emergency stop button, he was ready to push it when she finally moved, turning slowly, trudging around the car to the driver's side.

And for some reason, that bothered him even more, didn't it?

He sighed. That wasn't true. She was going home, wasn't she? Going back where she belonged . . .

She'd never forgive him, would she? Once the entire thing was behind her and she was able to put things into a better sense of perspective . . . once she understood—really understood—that the reason she was there was because he'd caught her and sold her to those bastards; that the reality of it was that he was just as bad as the lot of them . . .

And that was how it should be, right? She ought to hate him, to curse him . . . She should because it was no more than he deserved . . . and even after all was said and done, he'd come up with excuses not to get her out of there when he knew he should. She'd be all right as long as he was there to keep those bastards from hurting her too badly . . . wasn't that what he'd thought?

And as much as he'd tried to put a nice face on it, he knew damn well that the real reason—the only reason—he'd kept her there was because . . .

Because he was frightened, wasn't he? Scared of what would become of him once she was gone . . .

That beautiful creature . . . the little demon . . .

*'Samantha . . .'*

And why did it surprise him that she'd actually had a name all along? A name . . . a face . . . people who loved and cherished her . . .

Staring out the back window as the bus headed away from that place, he sighed. The dark blue sedan had started to move, creeping to the intersection . . . waiting . . . then turning, heading in the direction he'd told her to go in . . . heading home.

A sudden surge of worry swelled deep inside him. She would make it home, wouldn't she? As long as she called her father, he'd go wherever she was . . . As long as she was safe, then that was all that mattered . . .

He'd stopped believing in everything so long ago, hadn't he? Forgotten how to believe in love or God or even the devil . . . Something about the little demon—Samantha . . . something had changed him, something he wanted to trust . . . Her laughter, her smiles,

her unshakable grace . . . And she'd made him understand, hadn't she? With those things, in her own way . . . and now . . .

Now she was alone, moving toward the home and the people who missed her . . . She had to get there, had to make it . . . and if there really was a God . . . Closing his eyes, feeling the same sting of tears that had nearly undone him as he'd said goodbye to her . . . If there really was a God up there . . .

*'Let her be safe; let her make it home . . .'*

It should have made him feel better, shouldn't it? It should have reassured him that he really was doing the right thing . . . She was going home, where her family would be able to protect her, where men who called themselves doctors and scientists couldn't cut her open to see if she'd heal . . . to those who understood without having to be shown that she was a precious thing—those who had known that from the very beginning . . .

*'They . . . they'll keep her safe . . .'* he told himself as he settled against the back of the seat, as he wondered how much different things might have been . . . It was easy to think of things like that, wasn't it? Easy, he knew, but also entirely pointless. *'Add another one to the win column, Kurt . . . You don't know how to do anything but destroy every single thing you touch . . .'*

Gaze darkening as a hardened expression filtered over his face, Kurt nodded slowly. *'Destroy . . .'* he thought slowly, deliberately. *'That's all I know . . .? Then . . . so be it.'*

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Sam wasn't sure how long she'd driven. The roads all looked the same. Fingers cramping, wrapped around the money he'd given her, she couldn't make sense of much,

even as the words kept tumbling through her head: “*Now you promise me you’ll get into that car and drive, okay? Promise me.*”

That’s what she was doing; she was doing exactly what he’d told her to do, right?

“*Now you promise me you’ll get into that car and drive, okay? Promise me.*”

She’d promised, and if she kept that promise . . .

“*Now you promise me you’ll get into that car and drive, okay? Promise me.*”

. . . Then he’d keep the promise he’d made to her, too . . .

“*Now you promise me you’ll get into that car and drive, okay? Promise me.*”

He’d promised that he’d come for her . . .

She didn’t understand, though, did she? Too much had happened in the last couple days, things that she didn’t have a hope of ever comprehending. She vaguely recalled the white-coats discussing her healing abilities, could remember them talking about testing those out a little more thoroughly, but . . .

But she couldn’t remember anything beyond the need to make them understand that they didn’t dare cut her, not when she was about to be human for the night . . .

Letting go of the steering wheel with one hand, she rubbed her knuckles over the bandages that the taijya had wrapped around her arms.

No, not the taijya . . . ‘*Kurt . . .*’

It was getting harder to see, wasn’t it? Scowling at the landscape that rushed past her,

she shook her head. *'Why . . . ?'*

*'It's dark outside, dollbaby . . .'* her conspicuously absent youkai-voice spoke up wearily.  
*'Turn on your headlights . . .'*

"Oh," she breathed, switching the low-burning daytime running lamps over to full night headlights. *'Why . . . why are you being so quiet?'*

Her youkai sighed. *'Those drugs,'* it volunteered, the voice hard to discern, even in the quiet of the car. *'They're dulling your senses . . . making it hard for you to hear me . . .'*

She had to strain to hear the last of that, and she sighed. The night was closing in fast, and even the lights of the car did little to disburse it . . . somewhere along the line, she thought she might have taken a wrong turn, too, and the road she'd ended up on . . . There was no one . . .

But the shadows lengthened, stretched, ominous and frightening. The moon was weak and cold and hateful, and with a soft whimper, she swatted away the wash of tears that suddenly blurred her vision. He was the one who took care of her at night, wasn't he? He kept her company, kept her from feeling lonely, kept her from being afraid of the things that she couldn't see that moved just beyond the circle of light . . .

*"Now you promise me you'll get into that car and drive, okay? Promise me."*

*'I am,'* she thought suddenly, a determined frown coming to light on her face.

Still, she couldn't quite grasp the other thing—the thing that had been nagging at her all day—the sense that there was something that she just hadn't been able to understand, not yet—something that she ought to know, even if it didn't make a damn bit of sense to her . . . something *important* . . .

Rubbing her nose—she couldn't smell a damn thing, but it itched like crazy—she blinked and forced herself to focus on the road ahead of her. Snow was piled in muddy heaps on either side of the road, ugly and dirty and defiled.

“Just drive,” she muttered under her breath. “That’s what he said . . .”

Glancing at the clock on the dashboard, she shook her head. It had to be wrong, didn't it? Nearly 1:30, it said, but . . .

But where was she? And why couldn't she make sense of anything . . .?

Still . . .

The hint of panic she'd been fighting all day kept creeping in around her, the nagging truth whispering just outside the range of her hearing, something that she ought to understand, but . . .

She blinked as the car sputtered, jerking in time with the coughing. It died and coasted to a stop. Samantha uttered a harsh little sound caught between a sob and a growl as she tried to start the engine, to no avail. “No,” she muttered, slamming the sides of her fists against the steering wheel. He had told her to drive, and she'd promised, hadn't she? She'd promised, and . . .

If she broke her promise . . .

“No,” she whimpered, her fingers trembling as she fumbled with the key once more. The engine groaned and grunted but didn't fire, and she smashed her hands against her eyes to keep herself from crying. “What am I going to do?”

Murmuring the same question over and over again, she couldn't help the tears that coursed down her cheeks, the feeling of complete and utter despair. She didn't know

where she belonged, did she? Couldn't figure out what or when or why . . . Only one thing made sense to her: a solitary name . . . the image of a sad little smile that she knew . . . a face that was more precious to her than anything would ever be again . . .

*"Now you promise me you'll get into that car and drive, okay? Promise me."*

"I promise," she whispered, her fingertips fluttering loosely at her lips. He'd kissed her, hadn't he? Kissed her one time . . . "I promise," she said again, her voice a little stronger.

Reaching behind the seat, she grabbed the knapsack that he'd left for her and with a smothered little cry. Gathering her courage, she forced herself to open the car door and slowly got out.

The wind hit her hard, and she gasped, stumbling away from the car as the door chimed weakly. The night seemed to close in around her, and she rubbed her eyes. Senses still dull and hindered, she couldn't make sense of her surroundings.

Everything seemed to converge on her, the wind blowing her, nudging her forward along the dark and desolate stretch of road. Wrapping her arms tightly around the knapsack, she trudged on. A sudden screech off to the left made her jump as she whirled around, her gaze wild, frightened. *'It was . . . an animal,'* she told herself furiously. Nothing that could get her; nothing that could harm her . . .

*'Cold . . . so cold . . .'* she thought. There were no stars in the sky, only a lonely sliver of a desolate moon . . .

It was hateful, wasn't it? Stare at it long enough to feel your heart swell with hope, only to realize that the same moment only served to make the shadows that much darker, that much denser, that much more terrifying . . .

Everywhere she looked, she could feel them, couldn't she? Eyes and ears and

breathing—sounds that were as foreign to her as they might have one day been familiar. Her fear was a viable thing, rising above the quieter sense of herself, looming larger and larger over her. The cry of an owl, the understated hum of the very trees of the forest that surrounded the lonely stretch of road. The headlights paled in the distance, the false sense of security that she'd known within the man-made box of a car long past.

Stumbling over some ice on the road, she almost fell but caught herself. A low rumble cut through the night, and she gasped as a car pulled up beside her. She made herself keep walking as the passenger side window was lowered, kept her eyes carefully averted despite the terrible pounding of her heart. The horrible throb of the loudest music caused a sharp and stabbing pain just behind her ears. She shied away from the bright lights, the sounds. The boys in the car muttered unintelligible things punctuated by raucous laughter. “Hey, honey! Need a ride?” one of them called out, leaning his torso out of the window.

She shook her head furiously, held the bag a little closer, scrunched up her shoulders a little further into the recesses of the coat that the taijya had bought for her. One of the boys handed the one in the window a flashlight, and she gasped and blinked when he shone the light into her eyes. “What the . . .? *Dude!* Check out those *ears!*”

Her ears flattened, and she stumbled back, reaching up with one hand to touch the ears that he shouldn't have been able to see. Did he have holy powers like the taijya? Was he able to see through her concealment? No . . . she didn't sense any spiritual powers—none, at all. The boy muttered something to his friend and started to open the passenger side door. “Come here, honey! We won't hurt you!”

The boy—his laughter—the very sound of it . . . she'd heard laughter like that before, hadn't she? Heard it and loathed it and . . .

With a strangled cry, she whirled around and ran, dashing into piles of snow, diving headlong into the darkened cover of the trees. She could hear the boys yelling at one

another behind her but ignored them, ducking her head to avoid low hanging branches as she ran and ran and ran . . .

She didn't know how long she ran, didn't know how far. The air she gasped in burned her lungs, and with a smothered sob, she tripped over a gnarled old root sticking out of the ground. Her arms protested the impact, and she squeezed her eyes closed as she willed the sharp, stabbing pain away. It hurt so badly that she wanted to cry, and a moment later, she could feel the heat of her blood seeping into the gauze bandages that the taijya had wrapped around her arms this morning . . .

A sound off to the left made her gasp, her eyes flashing open wide. Those boys were chasing her, weren't they? They wanted to capture her, to hurt her, to take her back to the white-coats . . .

Unleashing an outraged shriek, she vaulted off the ground, her claws slicing through the air as an arc of blood splattered high, ghastly, greasy in the inky night. The smallish squeak of an unseen creature resounded in her ears then went silent, and it took Samantha a moment to realize exactly what she'd done.

It was a . . . a raccoon, wasn't it? She'd attacked a raccoon . . .

A sudden and vicious emotion rattled through her; a melancholy so great that it threatened to consume her. Her brain was dangerously close to shutting down, and she scooped up handfuls of snow, scrubbing her hands in a frantic sort of way as the smell of the creature's blood hit her hard, made her stomach churn.

Picking up the knapsack she'd dropped when she fell, tumbling forward without really realizing that she was moving at all, she wandered aimlessly through the trees, through the forest, cringing away from the headlights of the occasional car that passed by on the road not far away. Her head hurt, throbbing with a pain that brought a darkness that ringed her vision, her body ached . . .

“Don’t stop,” she whispered as she stepped out of the forest and stopped. Standing at the top of a rather steep slope, she blinked at the artificial lights of the small convenience store. Outside the store was a giant cow—white with black spots, and without another thought, she stumbled forward, wading through the calf-deep snow, nearly tumbling down the hill as she stared intently at that cow . . .

“S . . . Sydney,” she murmured, her eyes darting to and fro in the darkened parking lot. The store was closed, the windows dark and cold, but the cow . . .

With a little sob, she sank down in the shadows, her back resting against the thick concrete slab that stood a good three feet high. The cow stood atop that, staring across the street at the little gas station. She could hear people talking from a distance but couldn’t make out their words. Hugging the knapsack close to her chest, she could feel her ears flatten as an encompassing sense of sheer hopelessness washed over her.

Reaching up to touch her ears, she grimaced. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a voice that sounded like her youkai blood but so quiet that she had to strain to hear it told her that she needed to secure her concealment; that it had slipped, and that’s why those boys had seen her ears . . . No spiritual powers at all . . . and it was okay, wasn’t it? She’d be okay . . .

*‘Why?’* she thought absently as she hid her face against the rough bag. *‘Why did he leave me . . . ? Why . . . ?’*

It was too much, too much . . . bone weary, mentally drained . . . unable to make sense of anything . . . *‘The taijya . . . Kurt . . .’*

And yet that name . . .

Sitting up a little straighter, Samantha sniffled and wiped her eyes with her cold-numbed

fingertips. “Kurt . . . said . . .” she murmured.

The sound of laughter filtered through her head. It wasn’t there, and it didn’t come from anyone, but she knew it.

*“Kichiro . . . if you don’t put her down and stop that, she’ll get sick . . .” The laughter . . .*

*“Nah, princess. She likes it! Don’cha, dollbaby . . .?”*

Laughter, laughter . . . Her head was spinning, a giddy shriek—giggles . . .

*“Again, Papa!”* A child’s voice . . .

More laughter, friendly laughter—laughter that she knew . . .

*“Okay, okay . . .”*

*“Go, little demon . . . Go home.”*

“He said . . .” she whispered, her eyes widening as she held tight to the knapsack. “He said . . . go home . . .”

Using her shoulder to push herself to her feet, she crouched behind the pedestal and slowly looked around. She didn’t know how she would get there, did she? She didn’t know . . .

But the wind was growing colder as a few token flakes of snow started to fall. She couldn’t get home, but she’d promised him . . .

“What do I do, taijya?” she whispered into the night.



# Chapter 51

## Breaking Down

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Kichiro carefully got into the bed, trying not to wake up Bellaniece since he knew that she hadn't been sleeping very well, especially since the dream she'd had last night.

It was frustrating him beyond all reason, wasn't it? Gunnar had called earlier to tell them that they weren't having much luck in tracking the scent they'd located in the old office building. It seemed like everything they did was useless, pointless, and the battle against hopelessness was one that Kichiro was winning, but barely.

Samantha . . .

He hated to consider exactly how many days she'd been missing, since anyone had heard from her. Someone, somewhere had to know something, didn't they? Someone . . . but who?

Youkai were starting to take advantage of the chaos, too, which only served to exacerbate the feeling that everything was falling apart. Sesshoumaru had gone back to Japan to quell the troubles there, but Kichiro had overheard Cain and Ben talking earlier. There had been a rash of killings of late—youkai daring the tai-youkai to show or roll over, as it were.

But no one was willing to give up, either—something that Kichiro truly appreciated, even if the questions that Gunnar had posed before were looming ever larger in his own head. Just how long could they do this? How long could Kichiro ask everyone to ignore their own responsibilities? It didn't matter that he knew well enough that no one actually

thought of it in that manner, and he'd keep looking, come hell or high water. He'd search everywhere, anywhere. He'd make damn sure that his daughter came home . . .

The trill of his cell phone cut through his glum thoughts, and he glanced at the number but flipped the device open before it could disturb his mate. "Hello?"

"Uh, yeah, is this the guy with the missing daughter?"

He frowned at the sound of the young man's voice. "Yes. Do you know something?"

"Um, sure," the pup said, "I'll tell you what I know if you send me twenty-five thousand bucks."

With an irritated growl, Kichiro slapped the phone closed.

The phone rang a second later. Gritting his teeth, he answered it. "Hello?"

"You really don't care about your daughter at all, do you? Cheap assed bastard!"

Again, he slapped the phone closed, scowling at it as he considered shutting it off. His thumb was poised above the power button: he almost pressed it, but it rang for a third time before he could. Anger shot to the fore; outrage that scum like that would try to coerce money from him. On a whim, he scribbled the caller ID number onto the tablet of paper on the nightstand before answering the call. "Listen, you little fuck! If you know something, then you'd damn well better spit it out now, or I swear on all that is holy, I'll hunt you down and kill you, myself!" he snarled.

The pup didn't answer. Kichiro gritted his teeth. In the background, he could hear trace sounds; a car passing by, mumbled voices . . . and soft breathing.

"Who the hell is this?" he demanded, his patience, such as it was, rapidly dwindling.

Still there was no answer. The breathing on the other end stuttered and choked.

“Damn you,” he growled, his grip tightening precariously on the phone. “If you got something to say, just say it!”

There was another catch in the breathing. It was enough to set his hackles skyrocketing. “What the fuck ever,” he hissed, ready to hang up.

“ . . . Papa . . . ?”

Kichiro went stock still, his heart dropping in his chest as the air whooshed out of his lungs. For a painful moment, he honestly thought that his mind was playing tricks on him. The sound of a semi’s horn erupted on the other end of the line, though, and he didn’t miss the little whimper. “. . . S . . . S-Sami . . . ? Dollbaby . . . ?” he whispered.

Bellaniece gasped, sitting up straight, all traces of sleep vanishing from her face. “Kichiro?”

He waved a hand at her as he strained to listen. “Samantha? Is that you?”

“P . . . papa,” she repeated, her voice little more than a whisper. “He . . . he told me to . . . to drive, but I can’t . . .”

“Dollbaby, where are you?” he demanded, struggling to keep his tone gentle, to keep from sounding entirely frantic. “Where?”

“I . . . I don’t know,” she admitted. She sounded like she was a mere breath away from complete panic.

“Samantha? Baby? It’s Mama!” Bellaniece exclaimed. “Where is she?” she demanded.

“H-here, sweetie. Talk to your mama,” Kichiro instructed as Bellaniece reached for the phone. “Stay where you are, all right? We’ll be there.”

Grabbing the pad of paper where he’d written the number, he dashed out of the room. “Baby, where are you?” Bellaniece asked.

She sniffled. “He . . . he said to call Papa,” she said. “That’s what he said . . .”

“And you did,” Bellaniece insisted as she tossed back the blankets and stumbled out of bed. “You did exactly what you were told . . . Can you see anything where you are? Any . . . signs or anything?”

She breathed hard, and the phone creaked as though she were straining the cord. “There’s . . . a big cow,” she finally said in a strangely vacant tone. “Really big . . .”

“A big cow,” Bellaniece repeated as she pulled on the first dress she laid hands on. “Okay, okay . . . Anything else?”

“It’s dark,” Samantha whispered. “He told me to drive, but the car stopped . . .”

“Who told you to drive?” Bellaniece asked.

“The taijya,” she replied. “Kurt . . .”

“Taijya? Samantha . . .”

Samantha sniffled as though she were crying. “I want to come home, Mama,” she whined.

The line cut out a couple times, and Bellaniece nearly screamed as she dashed a hand over her eyes and ground her teeth together. It had never been easy for her to see her children upset, and now was especially bad. If she could just see Samantha's face . . . "Sami? Sam? Baby?"

She almost thought she'd lost Samantha when she finally spoke again. "They . . . they want more money," she muttered. "I don't have anymore . . ."

Bellaniece grimaced as she hurried out of the room and down the hallway. "Sweetie—"

"I . . . to go . . ."

"Sami! Baby, don't hang up! Talk to Mama! Please!"

The line clicked and went dead, and Bellaniece nearly sobbed, but she hit redial and waited. No one answered. She hung up and tried again. Dashing down the stairs as quickly as she could, she almost collided with Kichiro and Cain as the two strode out of the office. "Is she still—"

"She hung up," Bellaniece blurted, hitting redial for the third time. "She said they want money! *Who* wants money?"

Cain caught his daughter by the shoulders and leaned down to look into her face. "Bellaniece, it was a pay phone," he told her as Kichiro dropped her coat over her shoulders. "She's in Massachusetts, and she probably meant that she didn't have more money for the call," he told her. "We can be there soon. Come on."

"But why didn't she call collect?"

Kichiro shook his head as he propelled her toward the door. "Maybe she didn't think of it," he told her. "It's all right, princess. We know where she is."

“She said there was a huge cow,” Bellaniece went on as she hurried out of the house.

Kichiro nodded and waited as Bellaniece slipped into the back seat of Cain’s SUV and climbed in beside her, pulling her close and wrapping an arm around her. “It’s okay, Belle-chan,” he promised. “How long is it going to take us to get there?”

Cain shook his head and started the engine. “Not too long,” he assured them as he put the vehicle into gear and pulled out of the driveway. “Not too long, at all . . .”

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Samantha shivered and huddled in the darkness, clutching the knapsack tightly against her chest. Every little noise she heard seemed magnified; every little movement just outside of the wan light given off by the stagnant fluorescent bulbs that illuminated the port over the four gas pumps . . . The roar of cars was deafening, creating a throbbing in her head that made her want to scream, and too many smells—too many sounds—too many *everything* . . . The stench of the raccoon’s blood that had splattered her coat was overwhelming, and as her slowed senses returned, a panic set in so deep, so harsh, that she felt like screaming . . .

Whimpering quietly, she winced when the sound of footsteps approached. Common sense told her that she was well enough hidden; common sense had little to do with her instincts at the moment, though. The footsteps were quiet, hesitant, and the person heaved a sigh, muttering under his breath about crazy people in general. “Samantha?” he called in a bored tone of voice. “Samantha Izayoi?”

The sound of her name rattled through her, jarring her already shaky nerves as she retreated just a little further into the recesses of the shadows. The young man who had

called out to her sighed again. “Sorry, dude. There’s no one out here . . . I am looking, and— . . . All right; all right. I’ll look around one more time . . .”

She breathed a sigh of relief as the feet moved away again, letting her temple rest against the rough, cold bricks of the building. “Papa,” she whispered, wincing as a fierce sort of emotion surged through her. He was coming for her, wasn’t he? He would . . .

*‘I . . . I just want to go home,’* she thought suddenly as a sob rose to choke her. *‘Home . . .’*

But as quickly as the thought had come to her, another one prodded her. The warmth of the taijya’s arms . . . the feel of his heart beating against her cheek . . . The gentleness of the kiss that he hadn’t been able to resist . . . That kiss had solidified everything that she thought she’d known before, hadn’t it? He really was her mate, and she knew it, and he’d promised, hadn’t he? He’d promised that he’d come for her . . . The family that she knew, the ones she heard laughing in the back of her mind, gently calling to her, drawing her back to the place where she’d come from, but the taijya—Kurt—his home . . . Wasn’t that hers, too? Wasn’t that truly where she belonged . . .? And if that were true, then where? Where was her true home?

She closed her eyes and uttered a soft cry, a moan. She couldn’t think anymore, could she? She couldn’t think, and she couldn’t deal, and . . . and maybe she needed to stop trying, at least for now . . .

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The SUV pulled into the gas station on the outskirts of Lowell, Massachusetts, in record time, having made the nearly two hundred mile journey in little more than two hours. Kichiro and Bellaniece tumbled out of the vehicle before it came to a complete halt. She

blinked and frowned, casting Kichiro a worried look. “I don’t . . . I don’t smell her,” she murmured.

Kichiro nodded. “Just look around. I can . . . I can feel her . . .”

Bellaniece squeezed her mate’s hand as her father jogged toward the station.

Kichiro headed toward the right side of the building, calling for Samantha. Bellaniece moved off toward the other side. That was true, wasn’t it? She could feel her daughter’s presence, but . . . but why couldn’t she smell her? ‘*No*,’ she thought as she stared around at the darkness. ‘*That’s not quite right, either . . .*’

“Samantha? Baby, it’s Mama,” she called, her eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of her daughter. Turning her gaze upward, toward the top of the building, she couldn’t help but feel that Samantha was near, but . . . But was it because of the length of time that had passed, the unsettling notion that this was all some sort of elaborate hoax, too . . . .?

“Samantha? Sami . . .? We’re here . . . Papa and I are here . . .”

Stepping deeper into the shadows cast by the building, Bellaniece frowned. There was nothing there; nothing at all. In the distance, she could hear Kichiro calling out for Samantha. He sounded rather far away, as though he’d gone across the street to check around the giant cow that Samantha had mentioned.

Rubbing her arms, she headed further into the shadows, rounding the building and slowly looking around. The rusty old dark green trash dumpster was situated beside the steel door in a slight shelter where the back of the gas station jutted out in an ‘L’ shape. About fifty feet away on the other side were trees—the forest, and Bellaniece winced. If Samantha were frightened, would she have retreated into the shadows of the trees to hide . . .?

But no . . . no, Bellaniece could feel her nearby, couldn't she? She could *feel* her . . . "Sami? Baby?" she called, purposefully keeping her voice low. The panic in her daughter's voice during that brief phone call . . . She was scared, and Bellaniece knew it . . . she could feel anxiety so thick that it was a choking, bitter thing, but it was so dense that it was impossible to figure out where it was coming from . . . "Sami?" she called again.

Stepping forward, her eyes scanning the area for anything—anything—that might lead her to her daughter, she bit her lip. "Sami? Sweetie . . .? Where are you? It's me . . . it's Mama . . ." The thickness of tears rose to choke her, and she blinked to stave them back. "Baby, where are you . . .?"

The slightest noise drew her attention. It sounded like a vague scratching. "M . . . ma . . . ma?"

Bellaniece gasped, the blood draining from her face as she suddenly forgot to breathe. "Sami," she breathed, her eyes widening as she turned around in a circle, trying to look everywhere at all once. She gasped softly as she stared at the dumpster again, dropping to the pavement in the thin blanket of falling snow. "Baby," she exclaimed quietly when she saw the blinking eyes shining at her in the darkness. Huddled between the wall and the dumpster, she sat—her daughter—her heart. "Oh, Sami . . ." Turning her head slightly, she called out, "Kichiro! Daddy . . .!"

She started to crawl in after her. Samantha whimpered and pushed back with her feet, propelling herself deeper into the shadows. Bellaniece froze for a moment, her heart breaking at the absolute spike of fear that surged from her daughter. "I-it's me, Samantha . . . It's Mama . . ." she coaxed, her voice trembling, faltering.

The girl blinked, and the panic in her youki receded just a little, just enough to weaken the thickness of the invisible hand that was squeezing Bellaniece's heart. Slowly, painfully slowly, she held her breath, creeping forward, reaching out a hand, desperate to

touch her, to assure herself that Samantha really was right there; that she could finally take her little girl home. “You know me, right? You know your mama . . .”

“Mama . . .?” Samantha murmured.

*‘Just a little further,’* Bellaniece told herself. Her fingertips brushed over the smooth flesh of Samantha’s cheek. A harsh little sob slipped from her. A moment later in a blur of motion, Bellaniece could only sob and hold on tight as the tiny form of her youngest daughter threw herself against her chest. The scent of their tears mingled as the months of worry and panic receded, as the million questions about where Samantha had been dissolved before they were ever uttered.

It didn’t matter, did it? Didn’t matter at all. She . . . she was going home . . . She was going home.

“Belle-chan . . .?”

Bellaniece laughed and sobbed, wrapping her arms a little tighter around her daughter. “We’re here,” she called, her voice faltering, breaking. “We’re here . . .”

“Kami,” Kichiro breathed. A moment later, his arms were around them both, his tears mingling with theirs, and he sat without a word, content to hold onto them . . . his girls . . .

The dumpster groaned slightly, moving away from the wall as Samantha gave an involuntary cry. It stopped moving, and Bellaniece looked up, her smile radiant as she met her father’s brightened gaze. Leaning against the wall behind Kichiro, he said nothing as tears coursed down his cheeks, too, and when he met Bellaniece’s gaze, he smiled.

"I'm sorry, Papa . . . I missed y-your birthday," Samantha murmured, her voice muffled by her mother's chest.

"Oh, dollbaby," Kichiro choked. "Sami . . ."

"Grandpa's here, too," Bellaniece said.

Samantha nodded but didn't seem at all interested in letting go of her mother, which was just fine with Bellaniece.

"Daddy . . .?"

Cain nodded and pushed himself away from the wall, skirting around the dumpster to scoot in behind Samantha. He said nothing as he reached out to stroke her hair, leaned down to kiss her head.

Kichiro sniffed and wiped his eyes and smiled weakly despite the concern still lingering in his gaze. Bellaniece leaned against him, and for a moment, she closed her eyes, savoring the absolute relief that she hadn't felt in months.

"Hey," he said, clearing his throat. "Why don't we go home now?"

Kichiro nodded, and without a second thought, he scooped up both Bellaniece and Samantha, following along behind as Cain led the way around the gas station and the SUV.



**Final Thought from Bellaniece**  
**My baby girl...**

## Chapter 52

# Hel Hath No Fury

-----

Kurt didn't even blink when the high-pitched shriek announced the return to consciousness of the pathetic being huddled and bound in the cage. The punctuated sobs that followed only served to disgust him as he stared at the trigger of the power hose nozzle, and, pondering if he ought to turn it up a little, he squeezed.

Another unearthly shriek from the cage occupant, and Kurt slowly shook his head. "Wow . . . you're a little sad, aren't you?" he muttered.

The fat man seemed to be having trouble moving around in the makeshift prison. With as much trouble as Kurt had faced in trying to stuff the old bastard in there, he wasn't inclined to feel too sorry for him, at least, not at the moment. "D-Doc?" the man blubbered, his eyes wide and afraid as he slowly focused on Kurt's face. "Doc, what are you d-doing?"

"Shut the hell up or I'll gag you," Kurt replied in a rather dry tone as he ambled over to the cage and hunkered down beside it. "Now I want you to listen, Dr. Harlan. Think you can do that?"

Harlan nodded without a word; nodded so vigorously that the extra flesh hanging off his jowls jiggled.

"Good, good . . . Now, I want you to make two phone calls, okay? Just two, and if you say anything at all about what's going on down here . . ." Trailing off as he took careful

aim with the power hose once more—aimed it directly at the good doctor’s family jewels, Kurt raised an eyebrow. “You like standing when you piss?”

Harlan’s eyes rounded, and he nodded once more.

“Glad we could come to an understanding,” Kurt replied almost pleasantly despite the cold, hard glint in his eyes. “Now, the first call you need to make is to your wife. I expect she’ll be a little surprised when she wakes up, only to figure out that you’ve disappeared, right? So you tell her that you’ve had to leave town on unexpected business for the next couple weeks or so.”

Harlan swallowed hard—funny that Kurt could actually make that out considering how much extra baggage the old bastard was carrying around . . . “And the other . . .?”

“Oh, that one’s easy. I want you to call the head of security upstairs and tell him to give himself and the rest of his team the next couple weeks off.”

“Two . . . two weeks . . .?”

Kurt nodded slowly. “No funny business, Harlan. There’s only one reason you’re alive right now, and if you push me, I might forget that I give a damn.”

That said, he moved around the cage, using a pocket knife to slice through the duct tape he’d used to secure the man, then pulled the doctor’s cell phone from his pocket and handed it over.

It only took Harlan five minutes to make both calls, and when he was finished, he handed the phone back without incident.

“W . . . what are you going to do to me?” Harlan finally asked as he watched Kurt toss the phone into a basket inside the supply closet.

Kurt slowly glanced over his shoulder at him and shrugged. “Oh, nothing,” he replied lightly, conversationally. “At least, nothing you didn’t do to the little demon . . .”

That didn’t seem to comfort Harlan much. Kurt didn’t comment as he slowly gathered up the length of hose and hung it over the hook once more. “Get comfortable, Harlan,” he goaded. “It’ll be a while before you get out of there—if you ever do.”

Striding out of the room, he shook his head at the panicked little whimpers slipping out of the man in the cage. Maybe he should have left him asleep—a direct result of the shot Kurt had given him before he’d managed to drag the old bastard out of his office and down the hall to the elevator early this morning. He was the last of them, too.

In all actuality, Kurt hadn’t had encountered much of any real trouble. When he’d sneaked back into the facility the night after he’d broken out the little demon, it hadn’t taken much to convince the four security guards that they really didn’t want to say anything to anyone about him. In fact, all it had taken was a single discharge of energy straight into the main computer terminal that rendered it useless to convince them that they’d rather not find out how that would feel on living flesh.

And, of course, the few smoke bombs and flaming torches he’d set in the hallway to accentuate his warnings, along with a remote detonator set up to go off when he pushed the right buttons didn’t hurt, either, he supposed. Smoke and mirrors, but whatever worked, right? Those four had actually decided that they’d take the week off, not that Kurt blamed them, and he was more than happy to allow it—especially after he’d located those trackers that Harlan had gloated about. Thanks to that, every one of the guards was now the proud owners of those devices, and Kurt had already logged each one, too. All four swore that they’d never say a thing about the limited stuff that they did know, which was fine, as far as Kurt was concerned. He didn’t really have a beef with them, anyway . . .

After that, though, he'd first gone to Dr. Warren's apartment. The little snake lived in a decently secured building—at least, on the inside. Warren figured that he was safe since he lived on the twentieth floor, which was all well and good, but it hadn't taken that much skill to breach the building, either. It had proven tricky, though, to get the man out the window that Kurt had used as a door, especially after the shot that had knocked the man out. Still, Kurt was nothing if not resourceful, and he'd managed that with relative ease.

Peterson, the bastard, had been the easiest one to acquire. He'd been out at a bar near his apartment, and Kurt had simply waited outside until he'd started staggering home.

Harlan, though . . . After the struggle he'd had with Warren, Kurt had figured that he'd do better to let Harlan come to him, and he'd headed back to the facility with the two trussed-up doctors in the trunk of the car he'd rented. Since the four guards had preferred not to know what was going on, he hadn't had any trouble at all in installing those two into cages well before he headed upstairs to wait in Harlan's office . . . Then he'd stripped all three of them and stuck them in the cages, sealed all doors out of the basement with Post-It notes, and sat back to wait till they woke up.

Striding down the corridor that led to the other three holding areas, Kurt shook his head but kept moving. To be honest, he was tired. He hadn't had any actual sleep since the night that he'd broken the little demon out—over thirty-six hours ago and counting. Besides that, he highly doubted that he'd actually be able to sleep, anyway.

It was crazy, wasn't it? He'd known damn well that he'd miss her after he sent her home, but . . .

But the absolute ache that he could feel swelling somewhere deep down was so much worse than anything he'd ever actually contemplated . . .

*'Knock it off, Drevin,'* he told himself sternly as he paused just outside Holding Area Two. *'You can miss her later. Right now . . . right now, we owe her.'*

Warren still hadn't woken up yet, which was just as well. He'd be just as easy to move unconscious as he would be, otherwise . . .

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"Where do you think she was?"

Kichiro shook his head without taking his eyes off the huddled form of his sleeping daughter, cuddled close between her parents as she slept. "I don't know," he replied with a sigh. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the slam of the front door—not surprising since Cain had called to let everyone in Chicago know that Samantha was on her way home—and while Kichiro had questions of his own, he figured that they could wait for now. It was all right, wasn't it? Letting himself feel the sheer and total relief . . . He could ask his questions later.

But it had worried him. By the time they'd pulled into the driveway just after eight this morning, everyone had come running to greet them, and Samantha, who had just started to relax a little, had been terrified by the sudden inundation, and even though Kichiro knew that they meant well, it had been just a little too much for her. Breaking down in tears as she'd hidden her face against his chest, as she'd trembled and shook, he'd carried her upstairs and had given her some medicine to help her sleep.

Unfortunately, the most vexing question was the one that Samantha had brought up, herself, as she babbled herself to sleep between her teary-eyed parents. *"Where is he . . .? My mate . . ."*

It had taken Kichiro a few minutes to figure that out when they'd finally found her, hunkered down behind that damnable trash dumpster. The reason they'd had trouble locating her scent was because, well, she didn't smell entirely like herself anymore. It was quite obvious that she'd somehow managed to take a mate, and that bothered him more than anything else.

He sighed. At least he could assume from her words that she'd willingly taken this mate, whoever he was, and that was a bit of a consolation. If he thought for a moment that someone had taken advantage of or raped his daughter, there'd be hell to pay, but her candid question was enough to convince him that he didn't need to worry about that, even if he did have questions as to where this faceless mate was . . .

"This mate of hers . . . he's human, isn't he?" Bellaniece asked at length.

Kichiro heaved a sigh and nodded. "Yeah, but where is he?"

She shook her head. "I want to give her a checkup," she ventured.

Kichiro smiled at her. "I'd feel better if you do that, too."

She smiled in a weary but brilliant sort of way, but as quickly as the smile had surfaced, it faltered as she touched Samantha's cheek with infinitely gentle fingers. "Her arms, Kichiro . . ." she murmured.

He understood what she meant. They'd checked her arms as she'd drifted off to sleep, and while the injuries were healing, it hadn't taken them long to figure out that they had to be purposefully inflicted. They were too deliberate, too precise—too *clean*. "No use jumping to conclusions, Belle-chan," he told her with more of a smile than he was actually feeling. "She's home, and she's safe, and we'll keep her that way."

A soft knock sounded on the door, and Bellaniece carefully scooted off the bed to answer it. They'd asked that everyone give Samantha a chance to settle down before they rushed her again, but they could also understand that everyone just wanted to see her for themselves, to reassure themselves that she really was home, safe and, hopefully, sound.

Isabelle and Alexandra strode into the room with trays laden with food, and Kichiro blinked, feeling his stomach reminding him that it had been a long damn time since he'd actually felt very hungry. Alexandra started to shake, the tray rattling precariously as a round of silent sobs squeezed out of her. Bellaniece hurriedly grabbed the tray as Kichiro held out an arm to his daughter. "She's so skinny," Alexandra whispered as she fingered a lock of Samantha's hair.

"But she'll be fine," Kichiro assured her, kissing her forehead and giving her a quick squeeze.

Isabelle set her tray on the nightstand and slipped into the place that Bellaniece had abandoned to answer the door. "Poor thing . . . she looks exhausted," she crooned.

"But where was she?" Alexandra murmured.

Isabelle shook her head. "I don't care where she was," she retorted though not unkindly. "It's enough that she's home now. More than enough."

Bellaniece nodded, sinking onto the bed beside Isabelle. "Hmm, I agree."

Alexandra finally smiled though it quivered on her lips just a little. "I can't believe it . . ."

Kichiro snorted and waved at the tray on the nightstand. "You girls keep chattering, why don't you? Give me one of those biscuits."

Isabelle giggled and handed her father one, but only after she added a touch of butter and a sausage patty. Bellaniece reached over for a steaming hot pancake and sat back, content to let her daughters fuss over their sleeping sister.

“The guys just got back and wondered if you’d come down and give them an update,” Alexandra said as she kissed her father’s cheek.

“I’ll be back,” Kichiro said as he carefully stood up. “Take it easy on her, okay?”

They waved him away with a chorus of good natured jeers, and Kichiro couldn’t help the smile that surfaced on his face as he kissed Samantha’s forehead and headed out of the room.

It was a good day, he decided as he ran down the stairs, heading for the study. Nothing could really overshadow the fact that his daughter was home, and while he didn’t delude himself into believing that everything was in the past, he knew well enough that things would be all right. She was home, and that was the important part. Everything else, including this unseen mate . . . Well, he’d deal with that, too, as long as she was home, and as long as she was all right . . .

“How’s Sam?” Cain asked as Kichiro strode into the room.

“Sleeping,” he replied, accepting the steaming cup of coffee that Gin handed him. She leaned up to kiss his cheek before hurrying out of the room with the empty carafe and the promise that she’d bring the men more as soon as it was finished. “She’s sleeping. The girls are upstairs with her now, though.”

The absolute sense of relief in the room was almost a physical thing, and as Kichiro looked around from one face to the next one, he couldn’t help but smile.

“Cain said she’s a little disoriented,” Toga commented with a shake of his head despite the relieved grin on his face. “Normal?”

“I don’t know about normal,” Kichiro ventured with a shake of his head, “but I’ll take what I can get. Just give her some time. She was pretty scared when we found her.”

Bas nodded, his gaze bright with tears that didn’t fall. “I’m glad she’s home,” he remarked.

“No idea where she was?” Griffin asked in his customary quiet manner.

“No, but . . . but for now—today—I think that I’ll just focus on the idea that she’s here.”

“Zelig says that she has a mate,” Sesshoumaru commented, his voice clear on the intercom.

“Yeah, but I she hasn’t said much about him. She did ask where he was just before she fell asleep, though,” Kichiro said. “I’m sure she’ll say more when she’s got her bearings a little better.”

“Good,” Sesshoumaru went on smoothly. “I trust you’ll find whoever thought that they had a right to touch her and take action accordingly.”

Cain nodded, his smile faltering. “Fully intend to,” he replied.

“Where’s the old man?” Kichiro asked suddenly.

Ryomaru snorted and rolled his eyes, his grin widening into the goofier expression that Kichiro knew a little too well. “Right now? I imagine he’s sitting on the balcony outside your window. Said he won’t let his guard down just because Sami came home.”

Kichiro shook his head but his grin widened. Somehow, that sounded about right, too, didn't it?

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"W-what are you doing? Where am I?"

Kurt ignored the panicked pleading of the so-called researcher as he slowly, methodically walked around the gurney in the center of the room. Purposefully stepping down hard, letting the thud of his footsteps ring in the man's ears, he took his time, shaking his head in abject disgust. Strapped to the gurney completely naked with a blindfold over his eyes, Peterson's acute distress was a viable thing. Two steps from tears, or so it would seem . . . That figured, didn't it? *'Damn coward . . .'*

"Come on, Peterson . . . you're not really going to cry already, are you?" Kurt asked.

"D-Doc . . .?"

"So you're not a complete idiot," Kurt replied evenly. "Good."

"What's going on?" Peterson asked, inflicting more bravado into his tone than he really ought to have, all things considered. It smacked Kurt of belligerence, and considering that he had a bone to pick with Peterson in particular . . . well . . .

"If I asked you to stop researching demons, would you do it?" Kurt asked, ignoring Peterson's question.

He shook his head, obviously confused. "What?"

“You heard me.”

Peterson swallowed hard. “Y-yeah, sure, buddy . . . whatever you say . . .”

Kurt shook his head and leaned over to catch the blindfold and yank it loose. Peterson blinked a few times, his eyes slowly adjusting to the harsh light of the room. “I think you’re lying,” Kurt said.

The researcher swallowed hard, looked like he was trying to make sense of whatever he thought Kurt wanted. “What’d you do with the little demon?” he asked, latching on the first thing that he could think of. “Y-you steal her back so you could have her all to yourself?”

Kurt didn’t respond as he reached over and picked up the syringe he’d prepared with a bit of saline solution . . . and something special for the good doctor. By necessity, the needle was a slightly larger gauge one, and Kurt figured that it probably would hurt like a son of a bitch, at least where he intended to stick it. Too bad he just didn’t care . . . Too bad for Peterson, at least.

“What’s that?” Peterson demanded, his voice rising with the level of his panic. Straining against the restraints that held him in place, he tried to watch as Kurt slowly walked a few paces away from the prep table.

“This?” Kurt deadpanned, holding up the syringe and flicking it, making sure that there were no air bubbles. “You really want to know what this is?”

“Yes,” Peterson said.

“Saline,” Kurt replied with an offhanded shrug.

“Saline?”

“Yep . . .”

“Why would you stick me with that?”

Kurt spared a moment to cast Peterson a really nasty smile. “Maybe I’m gay,” he replied, grasping Peterson’s penis and jabbing the needle under the base of the head, just under the slightly loose skin. Peterson howled as Kurt depressed the plunger, and when he finally pulled the syringe away, he yanked off the bright teal colored latex gloves and tossed all of it aside.

Peterson whimpered, breathing hard, his lower lip jutting out and sucking in with every breath he drew. Shaking his head in complete disgust, Kurt reached over to unfasten the two restraints that held Peterson’s right arm in place.

“Jack off,” Kurt said.

Peterson stopped whimpering long enough to cast Kurt a half-scared, half-disbelieving look. “Wh-what?” he choked out.

Kurt leaned back against the counter behind him and shrugged again. “You heard me, you sick bastard. Jack off. Now.”

“N-no way,” Peterson blurted, his cheeks exploding in humiliated color. He started to yank at the clasp that fastened over his chest. Kurt flipped a small remote device that controlled the electrodes he’d affixed to the metal buckles. Peterson yelped as the electricity shot through him.

Kurt held up the device so that the idiot doctor could see it. “I wouldn’t advise that,” he said evenly. “Not if you want to live through this, anyway. Now are you going to cooperate, or do you want to see how much pain you can tolerate?”

Peterson's lips quivered, his eyes glossing over as a sheen of tears surfaced despite the absolute rage on his features, but he did as he had been told, reaching down, wrapping his hand around his penis and slowly, jerkily, rubbing.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Kurt shook his head. Peterson grunted and shook his head. "I . . . I can't," he half-whined.

"What? You need a visual aid?" Kurt demanded in a bored tone. "By all means then . . ."

Digging into his pocket, he pulled out a picture of the little demon—one of the ones that he'd caught Warren eyeing in the security office weeks ago. The little demon, strapped spread-eagle on a table like this one, naked and vulnerable and afraid . . . "How this? Help?" Peterson tried to look away, his cheeks reddening a shade deeper. Kurt flicked the remote control. "Don't look away."

The doctor uttered a little whimper and stared at the picture. Kurt wasn't sure if he was more disgusted that the bastard didn't try harder to look away or that he actually was getting hard, just from the picture. Stuffing the picture back into his pocket again, Kurt had to tamp down the surge of rage that shot through him. "Enough," Kurt gritted out, tossing the remote onto the counter behind him and grabbing Peterson's arm to secure it once more.

"What are you t-trying to do," Peterson asked, trepidation thick in his voice.

"Me? I didn't do much: just injected a tracker into you. You're the one who moved it. God only knows exactly where it is now, but it's somewhere in your penis." Pausing long enough to savor the way Peterson's face paled to a sickly yellow color, Kurt almost smiled—almost. "What? You didn't really think I wanted to watch you jack off, did you?"

“A . . . a tracker?”

“Sure. That’s the general name, anyway, but see, these trackers are state of the art—so state of the art that there’s no way to remove them—at least, not yet. Maybe in another fifty years or so. Thing is, they’re about the size of the head of a pin, and once they’re under your skin, they can migrate . . . if they have a fluid that acts as a roadway, of sorts. That’s what the saline was for, and you, you perverted monkey . . . Well, you see the irony, right? So basically, I’m going to know where you are and what you’re doing at all times unless, of course . . .”

Peterson swallowed hard and shook his head, nostrils quivering as an expression of complete and total horror surfaced on his features. Eyes so wide that Kurt could see a ring of white around the irises, he looked completely stupid—and even a little pathetic. “Unless . . . what?” he choked out.

Kurt shrugged, as though it were of no consequence to him, and maybe it wasn’t, not really. “Unless you’re willing to chop your dick off,” he replied. “I suppose you’d have to be pretty damn desperate to do that, though . . . wouldn’t you . . .?”

Peterson’s pallor shifted into more of a greenish-gray shade. “Wh . . . why are you doing this?” he whispered.

Kurt grabbed a pair of headphones off the counter. “Because I want you to remember, Dr. Peterson. Every single time you go to fuck one of your whores, I want you to remember how much of a bastard you really are. Because I want you to spend the rest of your miserable life looking over your shoulder to see whether or not I’ve decided to track you down, because I *can*, you see? Because I want you to look into the mirror every single day and remember that you cried like a baby before I was through with you.”

Peterson gulped and shook his head, uttering protests that fell upon deaf ears. Kurt slipped the earphones over his ears and pressed the button on the side to connect it to the

base unit two rooms away. Peterson gasped and grunted as the sound inundated him: high pitched enough to damage his hearing if he was exposed to it for a long period of time; not nearly enough to give him the pleasure of passing out. Satisfied with that, Kurt strode out of the room. He had two more patients to check on, after all, and their sound therapy had already been going on for quite a while . . .



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
So be it ...

## Chapter 53

# The Waiting Game

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“Please . . .”

Glancing up from the newspaper, Kurt shrugged offhandedly. “Need something?”

Peterson looked distinctly uncomfortable, which wasn’t entirely surprising, all things considered. Unlike Harlan and Warren—Kurt had unstrapped the both of them and had returned them to their cages for the night—Peterson was nearing twenty-four hours on the table since Kurt figured it was the best place for him.

Peterson strained against the straps that held him in place. His face reddened, and he shook his head in a futile effort to deny something. “I . . . I need to go to the bathroom,” he half-whined.

Kurt shook the paper and turned his attention back to the headlines once more. “So go,” he replied carelessly.

Peterson jerked against his restraints a little more. “W-wh-what?” he stammered.

Kurt didn’t bat an eye, staring at the paper but seeing instead that damned surveillance footage; the little demon’s acute humiliation and their scorn and ridicule when they forced her to shit and piss all over herself . . . “That’s what you did to her, right? Made her go wherever she was . . .?”

“B-but—”

Kurt stood abruptly and strode out of the room. His anger was too potent, too thick, and if he remained in that room with Peterson . . .

“D-Doc . . .?”

Stopping outside the first of the holding areas—the one where the little demon had been kept—Kurt slowly turned to stare at the very sorry looking form of Dr. Harlan. The fat ass barely fit into the cage, and the only real reason that he was completely naked was because they didn’t have any smocks that would fit him, anyway, but since the object of this venture was complete and total humiliation, Kurt figured that was just as well, too.

The ashen-cheeked doctor grasped the bars of the cage and stared at Kurt in what he supposed was a look of pleading. “I’m a little hungry,” he said in as close to a tone of humble groveling as he likely could.

Kurt didn’t bat an eye as he nodded slowly. “You already ate the food I gave you?”

Harlan blinked and shook his head in confusion. Kurt stared at him for a moment longer then jerked his head toward the bowl in the cage. “Your food’s right there. Doesn’t look like you’ve even touched it.”

The horrified disbelief that very slowly surfaced on the old man’s ruddy, round face was almost comical, really. At least, it might have been comical if Kurt could find his sense of humor these days. He couldn’t, which was a bit of a shame, he supposed. Then again . . .

It was simple, really. Every time he looked at those three, the angrier he grew, and the angrier he grew, the more he wanted them to understand exactly what they’d put the little demon through; how it had felt for her to be locked away in one of those cages every night, to miss her family, to have no conception in the world as to why she was being

made to suffer . . . He wanted them to understand those feelings, and he wanted them to understand that they were not gods.

“B-but that’s dog food,” Harlan rasped out, his eyes round and appalled.

“That’s what you gave her to eat, isn’t it? Don’t worry. I added some stuff to your food, just like you did to hers. I’ll leave it to you to figure out what.”

Turning on his heel, he walked away, ignoring the doctor’s pleas that echoed in his wake.

He took the elevator up to the second floor, figuring that he might as well get to work on destroying the facility. He’d already systematically wrecked two of the four labs, carefully making sure that anything that might be somehow traced back to the little demon was completely and utterly demolished. Blood samples, cold storage, tissue samples—everything . . .

Too bad he knew damn well that it was all a ruse; a cover for the things that he really was thinking and feeling. Waiting and worrying and hoping . . . that was all he’d done since he’d gotten onto the damned bus in Toledo, Ohio . . . Did she make it okay? Did she get back home? Was she able to find her way?

Surely she was. When he’d gone out earlier to run a few errands, he’d purposefully taken a taxi past the hotel where her family was staying, but he hadn’t sensed them there, and while he figured that might mean something, he also had to allow that it could very well be nothing more than wishful thinking on his part, too.

And maybe this entire thing was more to assuage the feelings of guilt and remorse that he couldn’t shake off. He’d stopped trying to figure out what part of his actions bothered him most because it was all the same in the end. He’d captured her, and he’d handed her over to them on a silver platter, hadn’t he? Everything that had happened to her in this place had happened because of him . . .

Sweeping the two-hundred-fifty-thousand-dollar microscopes off the counter and onto the floor did little to pacify the fresh wash of guilt and shame. All he could do for her now was to make sure that places like this didn't exist, and if that weren't enough, then he figured that was all right, too.

It didn't take long for him to systematically destroy everything in that lab, too. There actually wasn't much in it since they tended to do most of their testing in the first two he'd wrecked.

As he pulled the door closed behind him, he sighed. He'd programmed his number into the cell he'd found when he'd captured her, and he'd asked her to call him, to let him know that she made it home all right . . . Common sense told him that he really didn't have to worry yet. After all, if she'd opted to stop at a hotel or something, he could understand that, too. He just wanted to know that she'd made it home okay . . .

Harlan was still hollering when Kurt stepped out of the elevator. Kurt ignored him as he strode past, heading back to the room where he'd left Warren. That poor bastard looked quite sick, really, and considering he'd spent the last twelve hours chained to a table with a set of earphones stuck on an audio loop of the highest tones that a human could hear—the same ones he'd subjected Peterson to before . . .

He didn't even try to fight as Kurt unfastened him from the table, binding his hands and ankles then snapping a long, thick chain through the loop in his collar. "Let's go," he said, jerking on that chain.

Warren stumbled but complied, his legs visibly shaking as he was led back to Holding Area Three. He even crawled into the cage rather willingly, collapsing in a quivering mass as Kurt closed the door and secured it. He'd had to alter the cages just a little—not really a difficult thing to do. Adding a touchpad lock to the system was fairly simple, so the only one who actually could open the cages was Kurt. He'd also added an electronic

field to it, so if the men thought that they could touch the lock, they'd figure out quickly enough that it was a bad idea—at least, if they didn't like getting a nasty shock when the system didn't accept their fingerprint, anyway . . .

Satisfied that Warren wouldn't be going anywhere till morning, he strode out of the room and down the hallway, but stopped short in the doorway of the testing room where he'd left Peterson.

The man was crying—sobbing, actually. The room reeked of urine and excrement, and Kurt considered turning around and leaving him right there for the rest of his two week tour. It disgusted him for a few different reasons, and the main one had nothing to do with his general disdain for cleaning up after him. No, it was the understanding that this was exactly how the little demon had felt that was more than enough to draw Kurt forward.

Snatching a pair of biohazard gloves out of the box in the drawer of the cabinet nearby, he yanked them on before reaching for the power hose. The icy spray hit Peterson hard, and he shrieked as the full force of the power hose hit him square in the balls. Deliberately taking his time as he hosed down the doctor and the rest of the room, Kurt ignored the imploring cries for mercy. By the time he was done, Peterson was crying in earnest, and the very sound of it just pissed off Kurt even more. How dare he cry and beg for mercy? How dare he whimper and sound so weak? The little demon—Samantha—she never, ever had . . . She'd never begged, never pleaded . . . not until the end when she knew . . .

When she knew that she'd die if they did what they were planning . . . and that they ignored her then . . .

Kurt bound the researcher and dragged him down the hallway to the room where his cage waited. Peterson sobbed the entire time, quiet tears that only served to deepen Kurt's resolve. He made quick work of putting him into the cage and secured him for the night.

It sickened him, fed the rage that simmered just below the surface. How was it that one little woman could possibly possess more integrity—more inner strength—than a handful of men who thought that they held the world in the palm of their hands . . . ?

Heaving a sigh as he slapped Post-It notes onto the doorways of the holding areas to activate the barriers that would keep the humans from getting out, should they manage to escape their cages—completely unlikely, all things considered—Kurt headed for the elevator once more. Now that they were secured for the night, he could get back to the business of destroying the place, bit by bit . . .

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Samantha stared out the window at the gray skies overhead. It was the first time she'd felt comfortable enough to sit in the window seat, even though it had always been one of her favorite places to relax. Something about the wide open feel of windows tended to frighten her a little—an emotion that never failed to irritate her. Being afraid of something as simple as an open window? She sighed. She just wasn't entirely used to any of it, was she? She hadn't anticipated that freedom could be both welcome and entirely scary, all at the same time . . . "It looks like it's going to snow," she murmured, closing her eyes for a moment.

Jillian smiled as she carefully pulled the brush through Samantha's hair. "I'm going to call Maddy later and have her send something over for your hair. It's so dry, sweetie . . ."

She sighed again but didn't comment.

In the couple of days since she'd been back home, she hadn't been left alone for more than a moment at a time, and she supposed that she could understand the irrational fear

that she was going to somehow disappear out from under their collective noses, and, to be honest, it was kind of nice. Spending the last couple nights, cuddled between her parents had afforded her the feeling of security that had ultimately allowed her to sleep, and Isabelle and Alexandra had mentioned something about a 'slumber party' of sorts for tonight.

They kept her from missing the tajjya too much. She missed him something fierce, especially at night, well after the sun had gone down. But the constant chatter and the happy laughter was enough to quell her rising anxieties.

Still she could sense the questions that no one dared to ask. As though they were afraid that she'd break down if they pressed for answers, everyone was cautious and considerate—almost overly so—whenever they spoke to her. She figured they'd get around to asking her where she was; why she never called or contacted them, but for now, she was thankful for the reprieve. Even Evan, who tended to say whatever he had on his mind, hadn't asked. No, he'd looked her up and down, shot her that million-dollar, cocky grin of his, and told her that after he took care of a few things, like finishing out his tour, he'd schedule a few weeks to take her on a vacation with him when it was over in a couple months—something about taking her skiing up in Canada, he'd said . . . First, though, he'd mentioned something about meeting up with InuYasha to tie up a few loose ends, but his manager probably wasn't thrilled with the delays, even if he could understand why Evan would take off mid-tour.

Evan had understood—they all did, didn't they? She just didn't want to talk about it; didn't want to think about it. The parts with the tajjya were too personal, too intense . . . and the rest of it? Biting her bottom lip, she frowned. No, she really didn't want to think about any of that, and she most certainly didn't want to tell her family about it, either; not ever . . . To talk about it would be akin to bringing it all right back—all of the humiliations and indignities . . . It was simply too much for her.

And it hadn't been until yesterday, as she'd been wandering through the mansion, touching the paintings in the private gallery where so many gorgeous works of art were kept—paintings and sculptures that would never see the light of the public—works Cain had created solely because he had been inspired to do so—images of his family that Samantha had always adored.

Wandering through the rooms that were normally kept closed off from the rest of the mansion, she'd smiled at the silly image of her as a baby, sleeping soundly on her grandfather's chest. Grandma Gin had painted that one, and it was one of Samantha's favorites. A quiet sound had drawn her attention, and she'd peered over her shoulder with a wan smile as Cain shuffled out of the shadows with his hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his rumpled khaki trousers, that endearingly lopsided smile that always seemed a little far away on his face . . .

*"You're not hiding, are you, Samantha?" he asked in his quiet way.*

*She shook her head and stepped toward him, accepting the hug that he offered. "No," she said with a little shrug. "Just . . . regaining some perspective."*

*He sighed and nodded. "This room's good for that, isn't it?"*

*"Yeah," she murmured. "Yeah, it is . . ."*

*He leaned down to kiss her forehead, gave her shoulders a quick squeeze. "So . . . you going to tell me about this mate of yours?"*

*She blinked and blushed, unable to turn her face away fast enough for her grandfather to miss the bashfulness that had surfaced in her expression. That had been the first thing she'd realized when she'd woke up this morning; the change in her scent, and she'd understood that that change was the reason why everyone had been giving her questioning looks. She hadn't realized it sooner, she supposed. Her senses had been so messed up during those hours after he'd gotten her*

*out of the facility and her frenetic trip back to Maine, and she distinctly remembered her father giving her a shot of something that he'd said would help her sleep. All those meds, Kichiro had said, coupled with the massive loss of blood . . . It would take a while before her senses straightened out. Even now, her senses weren't completely normal, but they were much, much closer than they had been in days . . .*

*Drawing a deep breath as she stepped away from the shelter and protection of her grandfather's arms, she let out a deep breath. "He saved me," she confessed quietly, standing near the window and staring outside, but not moving directly before it.*

*"Saved you," Cain echoed gently. "Did he?"*

*She nodded slowly, hesitantly. Having kept all of her thoughts of him so close to herself, it felt odd to talk about it now, and yet . . . and yet staring at her beloved grandfather's face, it also seemed like the most natural thing in the world to do, too, didn't it? "Yeah . . . he did," she confessed quietly.*

*"I'd like to meet him—to thank him."*

*A sudden smile broke over her features, and she turned to stare at Cain. "He said he'd come for me," she admitted. "He will; he promised."*

*He nodded slowly, smiling that almost bashful smile of his as he pondered her claim. "Then he will," Cain allowed with absolute conviction. "What's his name?"*

*Her smile didn't falter, grew brighter as a little laugh escaped her. "Kurt," she replied happily, and just for that moment, he didn't seem nearly as far away.*

*"Kurt, eh? That's a good name," Cain replied. "Just . . . just promise me that you won't let him take you too far away. At least, not for a while . . ."*

*She laughed and hugged him again.*

“Samantha? Sweetie, I drew a bath for you,” Bellaniece said as she hurried into the room.

Samantha blinked and nodded at her mother. “All right,” she agreed. “Thank you.”

Bellaniece smiled as Samantha shuffled off toward the bathroom. Jillian laughed and set the brush on a nearby table. “She’s doing so much better today!” she remarked.

Bellaniece nodded. “She really is, isn’t she?”

Jillian gave her a quick hug and hurried out of the room, chattering something about giving Madison a call.

Bellaniece sighed happily and stepped over to straighten up the bed.

“Cain says she told him that his mate of hers is named Kurt, and he saved her,” Kichiro said as he sauntered into the room.

“Kurt?” Bellaniece repeated thoughtfully. “Did she say anything else?”

Kichiro shrugged and slipped behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and drawing her back against his chest with a sigh of contentment. “Just that he promised that he’d come for her.”

Bellaniece shot him a somewhat droll look. “Well, of course he will,” she countered mildly. “Mates belong together.”

A fleeting shadow flickered over his face but disappeared before she could discern too much.

“What?” she asked, her smile fading just a little.

He shook his head and forced a smile. “Uh, nothing. Just wondering why he didn’t come *with* her; that’s all.”

Bellaniece considered that then shook her head. “Maybe he had things to do before he follows her.”

Kichiro didn’t look entirely convinced, but he didn’t argue with her, either. “Yeah,” he finally said with a sheepish grin. “I’ll look forward to meeting him when he does show up . . . In any case, I have to get back downstairs. Cain said that Cartham and Larry should be here soon. They’ve still been searching Chicago for that guy. . .”

She nodded as he kissed her cheek and smiled.

Of course she wanted to know where Samantha had spent the last three months, but she could also count her blessings and just be happy that she’d finally come home, too.

Besides, the last thing she’d ever do would be to upset Samantha. If she didn’t want to talk about it, then Bellaniece could deal with that. After all, the most important thing to her was that her daughter was home, safe and sound. That was the main reason that no one had questioned Sami about it yet. Bellaniece and Kichiro both felt that, if they all focused solely on her return, Samantha would eventually fill in the blanks, herself.

Moving around the side of the bed to finish pulling up the blankets, she frowned and glanced down when her foot caught on something. It was the knapsack that Samantha had been clutching so tightly when they’d found her . . . It must have fallen off the bed at some point after they’d come back home. She shook her head. It had taken them about an hour to get her to open her hand—she’d been holding two hundred-dollar bills in her hand the whole time, and she hadn’t wanted to let go of the knapsack at all, either . . .

With a mental shrug, Bellaniece picked it up and scowled. There didn't seem to be anything in it, but she opened it, anyway. "What . . .?" she murmured as she pulled out the small case. Small data cards were stored inside along with a few loose ones, and on the cover of the case were the words: *Project Demon*. The cards were all etched with a series of numbers but nothing else. "What are these . . .?" she asked into the silence.

Biting her lip, she shuffled out of the room without taking her eyes off the cards. She didn't know what they were for or why Samantha would have them, but that name . . . She didn't like it; not at all.

*'Project Demon . . .?'*

"Daddy," she said without preamble as she strode into Cain's office. The gathered men stopped talking and stared at her curiously. She ignored them as she headed straight to her father's side. "What are these?"

Cain reached out and took them from her, scowling as he turned them over in his hands. "These are data cards, Bellaniece . . . where . . .?"

"They were in Samantha's bag," Bellaniece explained. "What are they . . .?"

Cain shook his head and dug into one of his desk drawer for the media reader that he rarely used. He flipped the card over a few times in his fingers before sticking the loose one into the card-reader. "Password . . ." he muttered, staring at the file. He heaved a sigh then keyed in something. A second later, the card reader indicator light blinked.

He watched the monitor for a moment then snapped the lid closed calmly. "Bellaniece, would you mind getting me a cup of coffee?"

An instant trill of absolute trepidation shot down her spine, and she shook her head. "What is it?"

He smiled and shook his head. "I just wanted some coffee, please."

She didn't believe him, and the expression on her face must have said as much, and she opened her mouth to argue with him when a pair of strong hands suddenly grasped her shoulders. "I could use some, too, Belle-chan," Kichiro said, giving her a reassuring squeeze.

She spun around and stared at him. He smiled, and she finally nodded.

Kichiro waited until she was out of the room before he turned to face Cain. "What is it?" he demanded in a tone that left no room for argument.

Cain cleared his throat and set the media reader down, pushing it across the desk.

Kichiro stared at him for a moment, trying to interpret the strained expression on Cain's face. He finally picked up the media reader, though, painfully aware that everyone in the office was staring at him, and he drew a fortifying breath before he lifted the screen.

His daughter, strapped to some metal table, stripped naked as men in white lab coats wandered around her. '*Researchers . . .*' he realized as a sickened sort of bile rose in his gut.

"Project demon," Cain muttered.

A rage so fierce, so intense, shot through him that he grimaced as every single part of him felt as though he were going to crumble apart if he didn't do something. The intensity of the emotion was painful, and he had to grind his teeth together so hard that his jaw ached in order to rein it in.



## Chapter 54

# Loose Ends

-----

“C’mon! Get your fucking sword up, or I’ll take a chunk outta your shoulder, ba-a-a-aka-a-a,” Ryomaru goaded.

Kichiro grunted and yanked his sword back, spinning around in a circle as he swung again.

Ryomaru grimaced but chuckled as the blades met, sending out a waterfall of sparks from the fissure where they met. “Not . . . bad, baby brother,” he gritted out.

“Back off, fat ass,” Kichiro growled, heaving his entire body against the blade to send Ryomaru skidding back.

Ryomaru grinned and dodged Kichiro’s next swing, whipping to the left to avoid the descending blade as he brought his up to meet Kichiro’s again. “Holy damn, you’re really pissed off . . .”

“Of course I am,” Kichiro countered. “Damn those bastards . . .”

“Yeah, well, think about it this way, will you? Sami’s home now, right? Ain’t that all that matters?”

Kichiro snorted, stepping back and jabbing the end of his sword about six inches into the frozen earth. “Hell, no, that isn’t all that matters! Did you see what they did to her?” he bellowed.

Ryomaru dropped his sword into the scabbard and shook his head. "I know what they did," he agreed, his eyes brightening as his own outrage rose. "Look . . . We'll find the bastards; I promise, and as soon as we do, we'll make damn sure they never think about doing something like that, ever again."

Kichiro didn't look satisfied in the least. How could he be? Having spent the last week, watching those damn video files in Cain's study with the rest of the men, he was ready to murder somebody. How telling was it, really? Most all of them had gotten up at one point or another; had to walk away from those videos . . . Kichiro hadn't. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't. That was his daughter, wasn't it? His little girl . . . One way or another, someone was going to pay . . .

Those bastards had systematically abused and humiliated her, treated her worse than a common beast. Stripping her naked and strapping her to a metal table, performing all manner of atrocities on her . . . Leaving her all trussed up for hours upon hours, making her void wherever she was, only to ridicule and mock her, then blasting her with a water hose aimed at her private parts to 'clean it up' . . . They'd only managed to watch the first three weeks' worth of footage thus far, and despite the other men's advice that Kichiro had seen more than enough, he stubbornly insisted upon watching them all. Maybe if he did bear witness to what she'd been made to suffer . . . maybe then she wouldn't have to carry the brunt of the burden alone . . .

Worse, though, was Bellaniece. Day after day, she asked to see those videos, and day after day, Kichiro refused her. The last thing he wanted or needed was for her to see the awful things that those bastards had done to Samantha . . .

Kichiro sighed, yanking his sword loose and scowling at the unmarred blade. Maybe he wasn't as good as his father and brother when it came to fighting, but he was more than good enough to deal with bastards like that . . .

InuYasha, Kagome, and Evan had gone back to Chicago with the three hunters: Cartham, Larry, and Moe Jamison, to see if they could locate the facility where Samantha had been kept. In one of her discussions with Isabelle, she'd said that this Kurt—her mate, at least, according to her—had gone back there to take care of some stuff, but she didn't seem to know what 'stuff' that was, either.

Ryomaru reached over, slapping Kichiro's arm.

He scowled at his twin brother, but followed the direction of his gaze, only to see Toga step out of the trees with Sierra in tow. She was fussing with her hair, and Toga was carrying a blanket, despite the frigid temperature. Kichiro snorted and rolled his eyes.

"Balls . . . I don't even wanna know what they were doing; do you?"

Kichiro snorted. No, he didn't think he did, either . . . Suddenly, though, he laughed, earning a suspect glance from Ryomaru.

"What's so damn funny?" Ryomaru finally demanded.

Kichiro shook his head though his humor didn't wane. "That's how it should be, isn't it? I mean, hell . . . Samantha's home now, right? Maybe I forgot for a while . . . She didn't forget how to smile, did she?"

Ryomaru shrugged and shot his brother a rather wolfish grin. "They look so happy, don't they?" he ventured, leaning back as he crossed his arms over his chest and stood beside Kichiro.

Kichiro could almost hear the wheels turning in his brother's head. "I don't think that's such a good idea," he warned though, to be honest, he couldn't really think of a good reason why Ryomaru shouldn't do what the miscreant had in mind, either . . .

“Did you just figure that out?” Ryomaru countered.

Kichiro rolled his eyes but grinned just a little. “Must’ve.”

“Anyway, don’t you think he looks a little too smug there?”

Kichiro nodded slowly as he took in the slight swagger in Toga’s step, the huge grin that the baka didn’t even try to hide. “Does, doesn’t he?”

Ryomaru snorted. “Keh! Ah, well . . . you go that way.”

A moment later, Kichiro was left alone when Ryomaru hopped into a nearby tree.

*‘Okay, so this is pretty juvenile and stupid,’* he thought as he crouched low and made his way around the other side.

*‘Well, sometimes there’s something to be said for ‘juvenile and stupid,’* his youkai pointed out.

*‘This . . . is entirely true . . .’*

His youkai blood laughed. *‘Never mind that if Nez catches Ryo doing this, there’s a good chance that she’ll clobber him.’*

Kichiro’s little grin widened. *‘There’s that, too.’*

Circling around behind the two, he didn’t miss the way Toga stopped for a second to glance here and there, as though he sensed something. Counting on the idea that their cousin would know they were there but not necessarily expect an ambush, Kichiro hunkered down a little lower and waited.

Ryomaru silently positioned himself, ready to spring. InuYasha had said more than once in the past that it was a little bent, the way that Ryomaru could only seem to sneak quietly if he were trying to get at Kichiro or Toga . . . Kichiro supposed that some things just never, ever changed, and that was just fine with him, too.

“Something wrong, Toga?” Sierra asked, blissfully unaware of the twins’ diabolical plot.

“Uh, no . . . just thought I sensed something,” he replied.

She slipped her hand into his as they slowly made their way back toward the mansion.

Kichiro snorted. *‘Aww, don’t they look sweet?’*

His youkai snorted, too. *‘Sure . . . almost sweet enough to choke me the hell up . . .’*

Kichiro nodded. That’s pretty much what he was thinking, too . . .

In a blur of movement, Ryomaru dropped from the tree, landing directly on Toga and bearing him down to the ground. Kichiro shot forward, grasping the waistband of Toga’s jeans and jerking hard. A very loud ripping noise erupted, and with a muttered curse, Toga kicked Kichiro off and heaved Ryomaru aside.

The twins got to their feet, chortling like lunatics as Toga stood, shaking the snow out of his hair as he pinned each of them with a fulminating glower that only made them laugh a little harder.

“Helluva tai-youkai with his fuckin’ pants around his ankles,” Ryomaru guffawed.

Sierra smashed her hand over her mouth as she struggled not to laugh, too.

Toga tried to hold his pants up and grab for the nearest twin—Ryomaru, at the moment—at the same time. Ryomaru ducked to the side to avoid Toga's swing.

It worked—sort of. In his haste to thwart Toga, Ryomaru seemed to have forgotten the first, last, and only rule of pantsing: trust no one.

Grasping the sides of the simple hakama that Ryomaru always wore to train in, Kichiro gave them a good yank.

Sierra burst into laughter as she spun away, just in time to avoid being presented with the very blatant sight of Ryomaru's bare essentials, since he'd never actually gotten into the habit of wearing any kind of underpants despite his mate's constant reminder that he really ought to.

Ryomaru, however, had been born shameless, and he simply reached over, grabbing the bow that held Kichiro's hakama up, and yanked.

"I can't believe you two!" Toga growled as he held his pants up.

"Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle," another voice cut in. "Quick, Meara! Turn around—unless you wanna see where I learned how to hang it . . ."

"Ach, mon! Dinnae be stupid!" Meara complained as she buried her face in her hands.

Kichiro blinked as he tugged on the belt to resecure his pants. He'd only actually ever heard the girl speak with an actual brogue once or twice before, since she only tended to do it if she were highly discomfited.

"Like father, like son!" Ryomaru exclaimed, grasping his son's jeans and yanking them down, too. Morio howled in laughter, falling on his ass in the snow.

“Here, baby!” he said, holding up the blood red flower that he’d nabbed out of Gin’s small greenhouse.

Meara took the flower, laughing despite the livid flush on her face.

“Aww, look at that,” Toga sneered good-naturedly. “He’s still a runt, after all . . .”

“Oi!” Ryomaru growled at the deliberate slur aimed at what Ryomaru tended to call ‘the family legacy’.

“What do you ‘spect?” Morio shot back with a shit-eating grin, “It’s hella *cold* out here!”

Toga rolled his eyes.

“Put those back on!” Meara demanded, waving a hand at her mate’s misplaced pants.

“Oh, kami . . . Ryomaru, you did *not* pants your own son, did you?”

At least the baka was smart enough to tie his hakama up again before he turned to face his mate. “Oi, wench! Would I do that?”

“Yes,” a chorus of voices replied.

Ryomaru opened his mouth to argue, then snapped it closed again, since he had done it, in the first place. Then he grinned. “Now, Nez—” he began.

“Save it, baka!” she said flatly.

Kichiro shook his head as Ryomaru took off after his mate.

“It’ll take him all day to convince her to forgive him,” Toga muttered.

“Doubt it,” Kichiro replied. “She’ll forgive him in less than an hour, but she’ll let him grovel all day.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while since he had to buy a power tool,” Morio allowed. “This one ought to be good for that new hydraulic compressor she’s been eyeing . . .”

Sierra laughed and leaned up to kiss her mate’s cheek. “How come that never works for me?” she complained.

He shot her an endearingly shy sort of smile and kissed her back. “Now, Sie, if you want a new hydraulic compressor, I’ll be more than happy to buy you one . . .”

\* \* \* \* \*

Kurt tapped the end of the pen against the clipboard in his hand as he slowly walked around the three tables situated in a rough circle around the base unit he’d brought in for the experiment. Setting the clipboard aside, he glanced at each of his test subjects and cleared his throat. “Well, I think you all know the drill,” he remarked casually enough, ignoring the abject fear in the eyes and faces of the three men strapped to gurneys around him.

“Wh-what are you doing, Doc?” Warren whispered, licking his raw bottom lip. He’d damn near chewed it off a few days ago during the first round of pain threshold tests that Kurt had run.

“Well,” Kurt said with an exaggerated sigh, “the last round of results weren’t nearly as satisfying as I’d have liked, so I figured another round was in order, only this time . . .” After tugging on a pair of biohazard gloves, he picked up the last three probes and

headed over to Warren's gurney. "This time, I think that we should try a more sensitive spot, don't you?"

That was all it took to bring tears to Warren's eyes. Kurt narrowed his gaze as he jammed the first probe into the end of Warren's penis. The other two couldn't see where Kurt had stuck the doctor, but they had no trouble at all hearing Warren's screams. Kurt turned around and stuck the next one into Harlan's penis.

"Y-you can't," Peterson half-growled, half-pleaded as Kurt walked toward him. "Y-you can't; you can't; you ca—*Aaaaah!*" he shrieked as Kurt stabbed the probe in deep.

It was almost funny—*almost*. Three grown men, reduced to little more than sobbing bitches. Too bad Kurt wasn't really in the mood to find humor in much of anything, and every time they cried or begged for mercy, Kurt grew a little angrier, a little bitterer. They hadn't listened to the little demon's pleas, had they? They hadn't given two shits for her or her pain . . . and even if he weren't really any better . . .

Flicking the knob that controlled the level of electricity, Kurt pressed the green button. It was set on a three second timer, meaning that it would only discharge a three second shock—more than enough to send the monitors hooked to the three researchers into a tizzy of motion. Screams, sobs, whines . . . The general racket the men made was obnoxious—a far cry from the absolute silence that the little demon had endured and maintained.

Gritting his teeth, he turned the power up just a notch and hit the green button again. Just the thought of her—of the little demon—of Samantha . . . it was painful, wasn't it? Painful . . .

The echo of her laughter resounded in his head, and not for the first time, he wondered where she was. Had she made it home? Surely she did, but she'd never called to let him know that . . . Worse, too . . . he couldn't help but wonder if it hadn't been a huge

mistake to send her on her way alone. He'd known damn well that she wasn't completely clear-headed, but . . .

But he simply hadn't been able to stomach the idea that these bastards—as miserable as they were at the moment—might have sent out someone to find her; to track her down. He'd gotten back in time to prevent that, since he'd captured Harlan before he could do any such thing. Still . . .

Still, he knew damn well that if he'd stayed with her any longer, Harlan would have.

Too bad that idea set off another round of rage in him, rage so fierce, so consuming that he notched up the power once more and hit the green button. Somewhere in the back of his head, a logical, cool, calm voice was telling him that if he turned up the voltage any higher, he'd send them all into cardiac arrest, which might not bother him in the least, but the little demon . . .

“W-why . . .?” Harlan sobbed pitifully. “Why . . .?”

Kurt shook his head. “Why?” he repeated in a deathly quiet voice. “After everything you okayed in the name of what? Science? Discovery? You fucking bastard . . . don't you dare fucking ask me why,” he growled as he strode over to Harlan, slapped his face to make him look at him. “How about we inject something into you? How about we stick you full of diseases and viruses? Let's see how good your system is, shall we? Let's see if your fat old body can take it.”

Warren wailed behind him. “I didn't do anything! I didn't . . .! Just what I was told! I-I *swear!*”

Kurt rounded on him, too. “Is that right?” he challenged. “You did nothing, right? Staring at pictures of her, strapped to one of these? Eyeing her like she was nothing but a toy? Did you jack off while you were ogling those pictures? *Did you?*”

Warren whimpered, fat tears squeezing out of his eyes, rolling down his cheeks.

“You just did as you were told,” Kurt gritted out. “Didn’t it ever cross your mind that what you were doing wasn’t fucking research?”

Warren sniffled and choked out a sob.

Kurt wasn’t finished; not by a long shot. “You would have raped her—you and that bastard over there, right? You would have raped her because she was just a monster . . . But you did nothing, right? Nothing at all.” Yanking the probes out of his penis and nipples—the only places Kurt had bothered with, in the first place—he unstrapped Warren from the gurney and yanked him upright after slapping restraints around his wrists and shoved him toward the gurney where Peterson was secured. “You want to rape something so bad? Rape that. Go ahead. I don’t think he can stop you.”

He stood still for a moment, letting the two men cry, letting them feel the full brunt of the shame and humiliation—the complete and utter degradation that they’d tried to force upon the little demon. It wasn’t nearly enough. The rage inside Kurt was not satisfied, was not even remotely quenched as the memory of the tiny body, of the ashen skin and the coal black hair flickered to life in his mind along with the sound of her quiet voice, her panic, her pleading that went ignored.

“What’s the matter, Warren? Peterson not your type?” he growled.

Warren’s sobs grew louder.

“How about it, Peterson? You want to have a go at him?”

Peterson’s lips quivered as silent tears streaked down his face, and he shook his head.

Kurt smiled nastily. “You sure? I could chain him to the wall, if you think that’ll help. It all feels the same—isn’t that what you said? Pussy or ass, what does it matter? Hmm? How about you, Dr. Harlan . . . you want to fuck or be fucked?”

The old doctor blubbered and whined.

Kurt shook his head, snapping a chain on Warren’s collar and dragging him out of the room. Down the hallway, into the holding area, he shoved the pathetic man into the cage and secured the lock. Both the food and water bowls were empty, but Kurt had already figured that much. The miserable vermin had given in and eaten the dog food a few days ago despite knowing that Kurt had added things to it; things like laxatives and purgatives—not surprising since he’d made a huge mess earlier on the treadmill when Kurt had made him run for a few hours. All three of the bastards had been eating whatever Kurt gave them, and that really didn’t surprise him, either. Those three . . . they’d rather live, however they had to live, than to show a modicum of pride and refuse on general principle . . .

Kurt grabbed the bowls and refilled them, sprinkling a generous helping of crushed laxative pills onto the food and stirring it into the water before he slipped them back into his cage. Warren didn’t touch the bowls as he huddled in the corner and sobbed. Didn’t matter, though, did it? The food and water would be gone by morning, and if Kurt was lucky, the damn doctor wouldn’t be covered head to foot in his own shit . . .

Striding back down the hall and into the room where the two doctors were still secured, he shook his head. “Come on, you fat old fuck,” he said as he gave a vicious yank to the probes, pushing in before jerking them free to let them clatter onto the floor before he reached over to unfasten Harlan’s restraints—first his arms so he could shackle those with the cuffs that lay on the prep table beside him. Dragging him out of the room, too, he made quick work of putting him away and filling in food and water bowls exactly as he had done to Warren’s.



## Chapter 55

# The Coward's Way

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Kurt rubbed his forehead with a tired hand as he refreshed his grip on the steering wheel. The road was starting to blur—a direct result of his fatigue, he supposed, but he had to get out of Chicago before he could afford to rest—and to think.

Two weeks.

He'd kept those damned bastards in cages for the last two weeks, giving them back just a taste of the treatment that they'd subjected *her* to . . . and even now, it wasn't nearly enough. The problem was, all he'd really wanted to do was to kill them all, and that emotion was frightening. As though all the anger and hatred he'd stored up over the years had somehow managed to shift to those pathetic bastards, with every day that had passed, the desire to ensure that they never got out of that basement grew larger and larger . . .

In the end, he'd decided that they could damn well stay right where they were, at least until someone found them. Kurt didn't figure it'd take too long. The security guards should have been back to work today, and Kurt had made sure that there were cameras on the three of them. In fact, those three cameras and one central monitor he'd directly connected inline were about the only functioning things in that building . . .

*“Now, if you're smart, Harlan, and I know that's assuming a helluva lot, but if you are, then I'll advise you not to say even one word of this to anyone: no police, no authorities—no one. I put a tracking device in the three of you, and with the exception of Peterson, there, I don't feel inclined to tell either of you two where those devices might be. You'll never find them, but that hardly*

*matters. I've got you both keyed into my monitor, so don't think that I won't come back and finish you off if I have to. If you breathe a word to anyone—if you call and notify any of the other research facilities—I swear on all that's holy, I'll come back and make the last two weeks seem like a vacation. Do we understand each other?"*

Harlan had nodded, his already pasty face paling just a little more. No, he seriously doubted he'd ever have any more trouble out of good ol' Dr. Harlan or the rest of his cronies, and to be honest, he didn't so much mind letting him and Warren live. The one he'd wanted to kill was Peterson, but in the end . . .

*"Wh-what are you going to do with that?" Peterson asked, sweat beading his brow despite the lowered temperature of the building on a whole.*

*Kurt didn't respond as he dragged the tip of the scalpel up Peterson's body, over his face, along his forehead, down his body once more.*

*"Doc . . .?" he whined. When Kurt still didn't answer, Peterson panicked, rearing up as far as he could. "Answer me, damn you!" he bellowed.*

*Kurt raised an eyebrow and turned to face him. "Scream at me all you want, Peterson. That really doesn't change a thing, does it? I'm still the one calling the shots . . . and you're still my bitch, aren't you?"*

*Peterson's dark eyes widened just a little as his lower lip trembled precariously. "Why?" he whispered without taking his eyes off the blade that Kurt held before him. "Why are you doing this to m-me?"*

*"Where should I cut you?" Kurt asked instead. Stepping closer, he dragged the tip of the blade along the man's inner arm from the wrist to the bend at the elbow. "Here? Will you beg me not to? Will you plead with me like she did? And do you think that I'll listen to you any more than you listened to her?" Peterson swallowed hard as Kurt glared at him and moved the scalpel*

*lower, scraping the tip of the blade over Peterson's scrotum. "How about here? How about we cut you here and see whether or not you actually have . . . boy parts . . .?"*

*"Oh, God," Peterson whimpered, eyes brightening though no tears came.*

*Grabbing a pair of teal rubber gloves, Kurt yanked them on then reached for the scalpel once more, jabbing the tip of it into the slight vale between Peterson's testicles. He screeched when the first trickle of blood appeared. Kurt stopped. "Did she cry when you cut her?" he demanded quietly. "Answer me or I'll rip you to shreds."*

*Peterson swallowed hard and shook his head. "N-no," he whispered.*

*Kurt chuckled suddenly. "So you're telling me she has bigger balls than you do."*

*Peterson blubbered something that was completely incoherent as Kurt pushed down on the scalpel just a little more. The man keened softly, and Kurt jerked the knife loose with a loud snort of complete disgust, only to jam it into the table between Peterson's legs, close enough that the cold stainless steel brushed against Peterson's scrotum. "You make me sick, and you know, I'm going to let you live. I'm going to let you go because I want you to remember this moment for the rest of your life, and I want you to remember that the only reason that you're alive is because killing you would upset her, miserable bastard that you are."*

Blinking and heaving a sigh as the last of that memory faded, Kurt rubbed a tired hand over his face and tried to focus on the stretch of road ahead.

He missed her; missed her so desperately that he ached somewhere deep down—somewhere around where his heart should have been. He'd realized it a few nights ago, hadn't he? As he'd sat in the security office, watching his captives, missing her . . . She . . .

*Digging the cell phone out of his coat pocket, he turned it on and scowled. He'd been hoping that she had called, but there was nothing.*

*'Stupid,' he thought as a bitter anger tinged with a hint of regret assailed him. Even if he'd asked her to let him know that she'd gotten home safely, why the hell would she? There really was no reason for her to do that, and every reason for her not to. After all, he was the one who had brought her here; the reason she was made to suffer. Still, he had hoped, even if it were nothing more than a fool's wish . . .*

*Rubbing his gritty, burning eyes, he sighed. He'd hoped that she'd at least let him know that she'd made it home to those who loved and cherished her . . . the kind of place that a girl like her ought to be . . .*

*With the vaguest hint of a smile, he picked up the postcard he'd removed from the cage when he was making alterations to it. The postcard that had meant so much to her . . . The smile faded as a dampness that he couldn't quite credit blurred his vision.*

*Maybe it was simply because he was so damn tired. Maybe it was because, somewhere in the back of his head, he could still hear her laughter. Maybe it was simply because she'd made him remember things—feelings, emotions—that he'd forgotten so very long ago . . .*

*But the God-awful emptiness that she'd left behind was so painful—too painful. He . . . he . . .*

*The first sob that escaped him was such an ugly sound, born of an ache so deep, so intense, that he just couldn't deal with it anymore. As though every single thing about her was just too hurtful to dwell on, and yet he couldn't stop, either; could just as soon stop breathing . . . The last thing that he could stand to lose . . . the little demon with the beautiful smile . . .*

*And all the regret, all the recrimination could not save a man who had condemned himself so very long ago, could it? How many times could he say that he was sorry before it stopped meaning a damn thing . . .?*

*He'd given up his chances for salvation years ago, hadn't he? He'd given it up when he'd bought into the lies and the hate and the pain . . .*

'Taijya . . .'

*Jerking upright, he gasped and blinked. That voice—her voice . . . he'd heard it in his head as clearly as he would have if she were standing there beside him. Sniffing, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, he almost smiled . . . almost . . .*

*That hollow feeling deep within him . . .*

*He'd given her his heart when he'd said goodbye to her, hadn't he . . . ?*

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Samantha gasped and sat up straight, unable to think, unable to breathe. Covering her face with her hands, she choked back a sob and struggled to breathe.

Something about the dream she'd had . . . something about the taijya—Kurt . . .

He was hurting, wasn't he? She couldn't remember a thing about the dream, but she could remember the pain—the awful pain—a pain so deep, so encompassing—that it frightened her. But . . . why . . . ?

"Sami? Baby?"

Choking back her tears, Samantha hurriedly wiped her face on the sleeve of the soft cotton nightgown, praying that her mother wouldn't see the upset on her face. Wishful thinking, she supposed. Still . . .

"What's the matter?" Bellaniece asked quietly as Kichiro reached over to turn on the lamp beside the bed.

"N-nothing," she said, perversely proud of the steadiness in her voice at the blatant lie. "It's okay . . ."

"You . . . you want to talk about it?" Kichiro asked slowly as he rubbed her back.

She shook her head, forced a small laugh that sounded so hollow that she grimaced inwardly. "I'm fine," she lied again. "I . . . I think I'm going to go get some water."

"You want me to get it for you, sweetie?" Bellaniece asked.

Samantha quickly shook her head as she scooted off the end of the bed. "No, Mama. You two just go back to sleep."

For a moment, she thought that they were going to follow her as she hurried out of the bedroom. They didn't, though she had a feeling that Bellaniece had tried. She'd have to thank her father for that later, she supposed. Right now . . .

Collapsing against the cool wall just outside her parents' bedroom, Samantha heaved a sigh, letting her head fall back as she closed her eyes just for a moment. "Taijya," she whispered into the darkness.

For a moment—a curious moment—she felt a strange sense of warmth, as though he were right there with her, and she smiled. It wasn't enough to brush aside the sense of

worry that gnawed at her, but it was something, and at this point, she'd take whatever she could get.

Pushing herself away from the wall, she padded down the darkened hallway full of familiar auras as she headed for the stairs. '*Strange, really,*' she thought as she moved through the mansion. There were different kinds of darkness, weren't there? The semi-darkness of the facility had been so cold, so frightening, and though the mansion was even darker still, there was a subtle warmth that never really went away, and it had nothing to do with the gorgeous decorations that her grandmother had so painstakingly selected over the years; nothing to do with the furnishings or rugs or colors. It was the family, itself, wasn't it . . . ?

The vague and hazy memory of the taijya's bleak and somber apartment flashed through her mind, and she bit her lip. Where was he now? Sitting in that impersonal room that bore little resemblance to a real home . . . ? Did he miss her at all; even just a little . . . ?

"A-are you all right . . . ?"

Samantha started and turned in time to see Mikio sitting at the breakfast nook, quietly sipping a cup of tea. He intercepted her glance and smiled, left ear twitching madly as he reached up and rubbed it. "I didn't see you there," she admitted.

Mikio nodded toward the stove. "I heated water for tea if you want some," he offered.

She said nothing as she measured leaves into a cup and poured some hot water over them. "Why are you still up?" she asked as she slipped into the nook across from him.

Mikio grimaced and shrugged. "Oh, uh . . . I'm leaving in the morning . . ." He shook his head. "Planes . . ."

She understood that well enough. Mikio was always a little anxious before flying; always had been, and she really couldn't fault him for that. She wasn't entirely fond of the process, herself . . . "I'm sorry I put you to so much trouble," she murmured.

Mikio frowned. "No . . . not at all . . . I'm just . . . relieved . . ." Twiddling his ear, he stared out the window for several minutes. It was nice, really, the silence. It seemed like everyone had done nothing but talk to her since she'd gotten home, and while she understood and appreciated it, there were moments when she just wanted to sit and think . . . and maybe Mikio understood that better than anyone.

Clouds moved across the sky, blotting out the moon one moment only to reveal it again. A few stars twinkled overhead, but they seemed so very far away, and it struck Samantha as a sad, sad thing . . . "Mikio?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you ever wish that you could touch the stars?"

Her question seemed to catch him off guard, but he smiled shyly and shrugged. "Sure. I suppose everyone does."

She shook her head slowly. "I don't think so. I think there might be people who have forgotten what stars look like . . . or maybe they never knew, to begin with . . ."

"That's . . . entirely depressing," Mikio commented as he got up to refill his cup. "Are you talking about anyone in particular?"

She didn't answer until he had returned to the table and sat back down again. "He's lonely," she murmured, her voice as soft as the night. "I thought I could help him, but . . . but he's the one who helped me, instead . . ."

“Your . . . mate?” Mikio asked in a completely neutral tone.

Her smile was sad as she nodded. “He promised that he’ll come for me,” she said, “and when he does, I’ll show him . . .”

“The stars?” Mikio mused.

She shrugged, her smile widening just a touch as she turned her head to meet her uncle’s gaze. “Everything.”

Mikio digested that for a moment then cleared his throat, as though he wanted to ask something but wasn’t entirely sure how she’d take it. “He’s, uh, human, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” she replied. “It’s funny, you know?”

“Funny?” he echoed with a quirked eyebrow.

She nodded again. “Mhmm . . . I can feel him, even though he isn’t here . . . like if I think about him hard enough . . .”

“That’s not it,” Mikio countered with a shake of his head.

“No?”

He smiled. “No . . . I think . . . I think when you feel him like that? It means that he’s thinking about you.”

She laughed softly and reached across the table to squeeze his hand in hers. “I love you, you know,” she told him, “and I’m really glad you came.”

“I love you, too,” he replied, and even in the dim light, she could tell that he was blushing. “You’d better get back to bed before your mama and papa come looking for you.”

“Okay,” she said as she got up and leaned over to kiss his cheek before grabbing her cup and heading over to rinse it out. “Have a safe flight.”

He made a face at the blatant reminder and muttered something that she was probably better off not hearing. She laughed as she rinsed the cup and set it, upside down, on the clean towel that Gin had left on the counter beside the sink. Heading for the doorway, she stopped long enough to look over her shoulder at him once more. He was staring out the window again, lost in his thoughts, and she smiled as she turned to leave him alone.

*“I think when you feel him like that? It means that he’s thinking about you.”*

Her smile widened as a stuttering warmth spread through her. If that really were the case, then she’d have to make sure that she thought about Kurt often, wouldn’t she? That way he’d hopefully feel it, too . . .

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Letting out a deep breath, Kurt locked the hotel room door and strode over to set up the slimline computer he’d brought along to check up on the three bastards he’d left back in Chicago. It only took a minute to get the system up and running, and five minutes later, he was pacified to find that all three were in their respective homes, and that was just fine with him. Obviously, the security guards had found them, then—not at all surprising, though Kurt would be lying if he didn’t admit that seeing their faces when they walked into the holding areas might have been well worth the potential trouble . . .

He'd reached the Missouri-Oklahoma border when he'd finally decided he'd do well to stop for the night. Too exhausted to go any farther, he figured that he might as well try to get some sleep. Then again, he wasn't entirely sure that sleep was even possible. Still, he had to try . . . He'd run himself ragged over the last two weeks, and while he was used to operating on minimal sleep, he wasn't so used to going completely without, but the couple of times he had managed to doze off, he'd been assailed by dreams that were more memories than actual sleep—memories of a beautiful girl with eyes that were too blue to be real, with silver hair and a dimple in her cheek . . . and those little dog ears of hers . . . Those dreams had hurt, hadn't they? Hurt far more than he could credit, reminding him of exactly how much he missed her—everything about her . . . and of what he would be willing to give in order to see her just one more time . . .

Rubbing his face, he grimaced. Sleep aside, he desperately needed a shower, a shave, and something to eat—and likely a haircut, too, since he hadn't had one of those since before he'd captured the little demon. As it was, his hair hung just past his collar, and considering he'd always kept his hair fairly short, it was a bit of a nuisance; enough so that he'd recently taken to clubbing it back in a low little ponytail at the base of his neck. Too bad none of that seemed possible, given that he couldn't seem to summon the strength to even sit up . . .

He left the computer on—it would beep if any of those bastards entered any address that he'd already programmed in—addresses like any authorities in the greater Chicago area, as well as a hundred mile radius around the city, among other things.

Turning his head toward the low bureau where a television and an empty coffee maker stood, he frowned. The knapsack . . . He'd brought it in from the car. He was planning on sticking the data cards into a safety deposit box to keep as leverage in case he needed it, and while he had considered doing that in Chicago, he'd figured that it'd be smarter to put them somewhere else; somewhere only he knew of.

With a sigh, he pushed himself to his feet and shuffled over to retrieve the bag, scowling at the familiarity it provided . . . He'd used it so often, it seemed . . . used it when he was with her . . . A bitter pang shot through him that he tried to ignore.

Plopping down on the edge of the bed again, he reached for the bag and yanked it open.

“What the . . .?”

Kurt's scowl shifted into an expression of utter shock. “Shit . . .” he breathed with a grimace. He had the bag with the little demon's things . . .? “Then that means . . .”

A low groan escaped him as the ramifications of the blunder sank in. Kurt dropped the bag and heaved a sigh, leaning forward and raking his hands through his hair in a completely defeated sort of way.

If she had the data cards, then that meant that her family likely had them, too, and if that were the case, then it also meant that they'd probably watched them, too—at least, what they could tolerate of them, anyway . . . and that, in turn, meant . . .

“I'm a dead man . . . *Damn it . . .!*” he hissed, dropping back on the bed with a wince. He wasn't on many of the cards, but he was there enough, wasn't he? He was on the first card—they'd see that he was the one who had brought her in, and it wasn't that he was trying to hide that fact, but he figured there was a good chance that he'd just made their task of finding him that much simpler.

That was . . . that was all right, wasn't it? As long as he got the things done that he needed to do, then that was fine . . .

And if they caught him and killed him for what he'd done to her?



## Chapter 56

# Miles Away

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*“Kurt! Come on!”*

*Turning slowly, he frowned at the little girl. Bouncing on the balls of her feet with her hands clasped behind her back, she was waiting for him, wasn't she? “It's . . . It's you,” he mumbled.*

*She giggled softly. “Don't you want to come with me?”*

*He frowned, staring at the small hand she reached out to him. “Where?”*

*Twisting a lock of hair around her finger, she blinked. “You know where!” she laughed. “Come on, Kurt! Come on!”*

*But he didn't move as she tapped her feet and danced in little circles. “Don't you miss her? Don't you?”*

*He wanted to frown at her, but he smiled, instead. Of course he wanted to see her . . . but . . .*

*But . . .*

*With a happy little squeal, she grabbed his hand and tugged. “You want to see her; you want to see her; you want to see her; you want to see her, too!”*

*“W-wait . . . Carrie . . .”*

*She didn't listen. Dragging him out of the empty chamber and into a dark, dank corridor . . . The familiar reek rose around him like a fog, like a mist, like a veil, as he stumbled over the hem of his clothes.*

*"Wh-what . . .?"*

*Letting go of his hand, she skipped on ahead, humming a little song that seemed wholly out of place in the darkness. "Ring around the rosie; a pocket full of posies . . ."*

*'N-no,' he thought suddenly as he stopped dead in his tracks. He didn't, did he? He didn't want to see . . . her . . .*

*"You don't want to see me, Kurt?"*

*Flinching away from the encompassing sound of the voice that was both familiar and frightening, he sank to his knees. "M-Mom," he whispered.*

*"How could you not want to see me—your own mother?"*

*"I . . . I didn't . . . That's not . . ."*

*He was standing again, though he didn't remember having done it, either. His feet seemed to move of their own accord, down the passage that he'd walked a thousand times in the depths of his nightmares. He slipped and slid, hitting his knees on the squelching ground . . . The chamber after the fall . . .*

*But the overwhelming sense of fear didn't assail him this time. No, just the sickened sense of resignation . . .*

*"Where have you been, Kurt?" his father whispered somewhere out of the range of his vision.*

*“Why have you tried to avoid us, sport?”*

*“I . . . I’m sorry . . .” he murmured, wishing that he could see their faces, yet on some level, thankful that he could not . . .*

*“Ashes—ashes—we all fall down!”*

*Gripping his forehead in both of his hands, he shook his head. “I’m sorry . . . I . . .”*

*“You were punishing humans for researching demons,” his aunt’s voice hissed. “But why? Why? Did you forget?”*

*He hadn’t forgotten; of course he hadn’t, but . . .*

*“She . . . she’s not a demon,” he muttered. “She’s not a demon . . .”*

*“Because she calls herself youkai? And you think that it matters?”*

*“It does matter!” he bellowed, his anger snapping though he wasn’t sure why. “It does!”*

*He heard the whispers but couldn’t discern them. They were vindictive, hateful—accusing.*

*“It matters,” he repeated again, albeit in a gentler tone. “It matters . . . to me . . .”*

*“You can’t, Kurt . . . You can’t . . . If you say you can see them . . .” his father said in a broken whisper—a monotone. “They’ll find you, and they’ll kill you . . .”*

*Pushing himself to his feet once more, he slowly shook his head. “If you knew her—”*

*“She’s a demon, Kurt—a demon.”*

*He blinked quickly when a spark of light that he knew grew brighter. "Don't you miss us, Kurt? Don't you love us?"*

*Forcing his eyes away from the gaping hole in his mother's chest, he scowled at nothing in general and everything in particular. "That's not . . ."*

*"Not what, Kurt? Fair? It's not fair . . .?" A harsh laugh escaped her—a high-pitched shriek of laughter that was completely devoid of humor. "And is it fair that you lived—only you? Your sister was just a baby, and you father and I . . . your aunt and your uncle . . . we all had dreams, too, didn't we? We had dreams and hopes and wishes, and you . . . you lived. Only you."*

*He shook his head, trying in vain to refute her words, her anger, her hostility. Something felt strange, didn't it? Something he couldn't quite put his finger on . . . yet there it was; this ugliness . . .*

*"No," he whispered, getting to his feet, backing away from her—from them. "No . . ."*

*They started to reach for them, all of them illuminating in a flash of light. Kurt kept trying to back away; trying to keep his distance. If they touched him . . .*

*"Don't forget your promise, Kurt!" Carrie half-sang suddenly. "Rain, rain, go away . . . come again another day . . .!"*

With a sharp gasp, Kurt's eyes flashed open. His heart was beating fast in an erratic rhythm that was almost painful, but he couldn't say that he was as unnerved as usual after one of those dreams, either . . .

Sitting up, he sighed, dragging his fingers through his hair. Everything was so warped, so twisted in his dreams, weren't they? "Mom . . ." he murmured with a sad little shake of his head. "Why . . .?"

Why was she always so angry, so hateful, in his dreams? The woman that he remembered used to kiss his knee when he scraped it while he was learning how to ride a bike . . . the woman who did the Power Puppy Polka whenever he watched the cartoon, just because it made him laugh . . .

*'Pull yourself together, Kurt. Dreams are just that. You know, right? That's not really any of them . . . It . . . it can't be . . .'*

Heaving a sigh, he nodded to himself. He knew that, didn't he? It was simply a little easier to forget that, especially when he was asleep.

Rubbing his right eye with the back of his left hand, he stood up, wandered across the nondescript hotel room floor to stare out the window at the early morning sky. Irritated, certainly. He hadn't meant to sleep so late. He should have been on the road a long time ago.

The blue sky—impossibly blue . . . Despite his troubled thoughts, he smiled wanly. *'Samantha . . . can you see it, too . . .? Wherever you are . . .'*

*"Sam . . .! M-my name . . . My name is Samantha . . ."*

"Samantha . . ."

Pushing himself away from the window, he slowly shook his head. The truth of it was that the not knowing was driving him crazy inside. Just to know that she'd made it home—that was all he wanted, right? As long as he knew that she was safe . . .

Striding over to the coffee maker, he slapped a paper filter into the machine and dumped a packet of complimentary grounds in. He dumped in a pitcher of water and turned it on then shuffled over to the small table to check on the white-coats.

Breaking into a humorless smile, he wasn't at all surprised to find that not one of them were at the facility. '*Of course not,*' he supposed. They were all probably at home, calling around to order more illusory security—or on the phone with realtors . . .

They could try to run away; he didn't care. Too bad it wouldn't get them far. No, he'd made damn sure that not one of them would ever, ever sleep peacefully again, hadn't he?

Shoving the computer back on the table, he dug into the small case where he'd stashed all the files with information on the other facilities. There were five that he knew of—he'd sold demons to all of them at one time or another. He'd checked Harlan's files pretty thoroughly, too, and he'd grilled the old bastard well enough that he'd have squealed if he had known anything. Hell, the miserable jackass would have sold his own mother for spare parts if Kurt had demanded it . . .

'*Claxton in Houston, Texas . . .*' That was the one he was heading toward now. Whether he tortured them or not depended upon their willingness to listen to reason. Four white-coats there, and Kurt had trackers for all of them . . . "As long as they stop . . ."

Standing abruptly, he strode over and grabbed a plain white cup from the small arrangement of cups beside the coffee machine and poured himself a cup. He slugged down the entire pot before he headed off to take a shower.

If he could close all those places down; if he had the information on all the so-called researchers . . . If he had all that on hand, should the demons—her family—come after him, maybe he could buy enough time—time to keep that one promise he'd made so long ago . . .

If he could just do that, then he didn't care what they chose to do to him. Maybe it was entirely selfish of him to want that, but . . .

But his family deserved that much, didn't they? For the hopes and dreams and innocence that had died with them that day . . .

Because he understood now, didn't he? He knew the answer to the question that used to elude him; the answer that used to keep him awake all night for hours at a time and for days on end. His purpose for living, surviving . . . He was only alive in order to exact vengeance . . . He was a destroyer. It was all he'd ever known how to do, wasn't it?

*"My sister told me once that he had lived with hate and regret for so long that it had become a sort of prison without bars but there, and every day he woke up, he hated himself for being the one to survive, and I . . . I don't want you to be trapped anymore . . . trapped like Griffin."*

A hardened expression surfaced on his features as her words echoed in his mind; as he slowly shook his head.

"I'm sorry, little—Samantha . . . There never . . . never was any hope of saving someone like me . . ."

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Gin yawned and snuggled closer against Cain's chest, happy enough despite the acute sense of guilt that she'd inadvertently dragged him away from something important. "I'm sorry," she murmured, knowing that she ought to tell him that she'd be okay if he wanted to go back downstairs, but wishing that he'd stay in bed with her for just a little while longer.

"What for?" he asked, tightening his arms around her, savoring the smell of their entwined bodies, of the closeness of her heartbeat.

She sighed and buried her face against his chest. “You’ve been spending a lot of time in your office,” she pointed out. “It has something to do with those data cards that Bellaniece mentioned, doesn’t it?”

Cain shifted slightly, as though he were uncomfortable with the current topic. “Yeah,” he admitted quietly, lifting a handful of her hair and letting it fall through his fingers.

“Bellaniece says that Kichiro doesn’t want her to see what’s on them,” she said. “Is that true?”

“She doesn’t need to see them, no,” he replied quietly.

“But she has a right to. I know that I’d be upset if you refused to let me see something that might involve one of our children,” she chided.

Letting out a deep breath, Cain shrugged. “Gin . . . It’s . . . it’s not pretty.”

Gin frowned and shook her head. “But doesn’t she have the right to know?”

“It’s not about rights,” he countered stiffly.

Gin snorted, a belligerence entering her stare. “Why? Because she’s a woman, and women are delicate and breakable and should be sheltered from ugliness?”

Untangling himself, Cain tossed the coverlet back and got up, stalking over to the window without bothering to reach for the clothes he’d left, strewn on the floor. His youki churned with his agitation, abrasive, rough. “That’s stupid,” he growled, stabbing her with an intense glower. “I never said that, did I?”

“Then why?” Gin demanded, sitting up, her own irritation rising fast. “If it were Sebastian or Evan or Jillian—”

“Then I sure as hell would never let you see them, goddamnit!” Cain bellowed. Gin gasped softly, unused to hearing him yell at her. Cain let out a deep breath and shook his head, struggling to get a grip on his temper, or so it seemed. “Look . . . it’s not about rights,” he gritted out then suddenly pinched the bridge of his nose, shoulders slumping. “She was kept at a research facility, and they . . .” Trailing off with a long, drawn out sigh, he rubbed his face, his eyes troubled, tortured when he slowly turned to face her again. “The things they did to her . . . No parent should ever have to see their child like that; not ever . . .”

She bit her lip, her ears flattening as she contemplated what he’d said. No, she supposed, no parent should . . . Was it so terrible—so horrible . . . so unspeakable . . .? Glancing at Cain, she winced inwardly. The pain in his expression was almost too much for her to bear. “And that’s what’s on those data cards . . .”

“Y-yeah . . .”

She didn’t know why tears suddenly filled her eyes. She wasn’t sure why she suddenly felt such an overwhelming sadness. Cain had tried so hard to fix things, hadn’t he? Tried so hard to please everybody while shouldering so much without a word, and she’d made it worse, hadn’t she? So many months of trying to be strong while everyone else fell apart . . . so many nights when he was still wide awake when she finally succumbed to sleep . . . and her task was to make his life easier, wasn’t it? But she hadn’t. Questioning his reasons, second guessing him without knowing everything . . .

And the solitary memory of a beautiful little girl, running through the doorway with an armload of half-crushed flowers that she’d picked from Gin’s garden . . . That memory was full of such beguiling innocence, such untainted joy, and while Gin knew well enough that Samantha was somewhere in the mansion, that memory . . . “Why?” she

whispered as a hot tear spilled over, ran down her cheek. “Why would anyone do such a thing to her?”

“Baby girl . . .” Cain breathed, striding across the floor again, sinking down on the bed beside her, only to pull her into his lap.

But the flow of tears couldn't be stopped; the tears she'd so carefully kept at bay the entire time that Samantha had been missing . . . As though the emotional release was something that couldn't be avoided, one tear led to two, and two led to a million. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew that Cain was holding her; that he was trying to comfort her despite the knowledge that he, once more, was forced to be the strong one, and that just served to make her cry harder still.

“It's okay,” he told her. “She's home now, right? And she's safe . . . It'll be fine . . .”

Gin nodded though the tears didn't abate, and in the end, all Cain could do was hold her and kiss her forehead . . . and sigh . . .

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Bas looked up as Gunnar stomped into his office with his cell phone in one hand and a marked scowl on his face. “Something wrong?”

Gunnar shook his head and pocketed the device. “Not really. Maybe . . .”

Tossing the ink pen he'd been using down on the desk with a marked arching of one eyebrow, Bas sat back and shook his head. “What the hell kind of answer is that?” Bas demanded.

Gunnar narrowed his eyes. "I thought you were busy, driving Sydnie crazy," he countered without bothering to answer Bas' question.

"Yeah . . . she wanted me to come in and grab a couple files for her."

Pondering this for a moment, Gunnar slowly shook his head. "And you think it's okay for her to be worrying about this stuff while she's pregnant?"

Bas shook his head, too, since he'd already said pretty much the same thing to her before he'd left the house. "She insisted."

Cocking an eyebrow, Gunnar didn't seem impressed, his expression stating rather flatly that he thought Bas was being weak. Bas ignored it. After all, Gunnar's idea of a relationship and his . . . well, as far as Bas was concerned, Gunnar was just plain warped, anyway. "And those data cards?" Gunnar asked.

Bas blinked since he'd managed to do a complete change of topic in the space of a single breath. Gunnar, though, had only watched one of those data cards thus far since they'd gotten a tip about a case that had been untouched for the last twenty-five years. Bas, on the other hand . . . well, he'd seen more than enough. What those bastards had done to Samantha was entirely unforgivable . . .

Heaving a sigh, he sat up a little more and scowled at Gunnar. Gunnar intercepted the expression and slowly shook his head. "All right. What's that look for?"

Blanking his features, Bas shrugged offhandedly. "What do you mean?"

"You know damn well, what I mean," Gunnar countered mildly. "So whose imminent demise are you plotting?"

Bas grimaced and slouched to the right, popping his elbow on the arm of the chair and resting his cheek on his fist. “Dunno what you’re talking about,” he lied.

Gunnar shook his head. “Yeah, I’m not completely stupid,” he countered.

Bas shook his head, but got to his feet when Connie tapped on the door with her elbow then strode into the office with two steaming mugs of coffee. She handed one to each of the men then left the room as quietly as she’d come. “The stupid thing is entirely debatable,” Bas remarked as he lifted the coffee to his lips and carefully took a sip.

“Cute, Bas-tard,” Gunnar shot back.

Bas bobbed his broad shoulders and set the cup aside, reaching for the files that he’d been looking over to shove into the leather attaché case.

“Oi, baka . . . and bigger baka,” Morio Izayoi commented as he breezed into the room. “It’s a convention of baka-ness . . .”

“Hmm, and now that you’re here, I suppose the party’s complete,” Gunnar commented.

Morio grinned. “Now, that was cold. So cold,” he pouted.

Gunnar stared at him for a moment then slowly shook his head. “What’s that phrase I want, Bas?”

Bas shifted his gaze to the side and raised his eyebrows. “Get over it?” he supplied.

“Yes, that’s the one.”

Morio’s grin widened. “Aww, you know you guys missed me.”

“What are you doing here?” Bas asked, cutting in before Gunnar could respond to that comment in kind.

Morio shrugged and held up a flower. “What do you think? Eh? Pretty nifty, right?”

Gunnar didn’t comment as Bas rolled his eyes. “It’s great. She’ll love it. You’ll be her hero forever,” he rattled off in a monotone.

“You think so? Good enough to get me some ‘luvins?’”

“Kami, I hope not,” Gunnar muttered under his breath as he headed for the door. “And if it is, I don’t want to hear about it, all right?”

Morio chuckled as Gunnar strode out of the office. “He seriously needs to get laid,” he remarked as he sniffed the pale peach blossom.

“Another something I’d rather not think about,” Bas commented as he stuffed the files into the case and zipped it closed. “You heading back to the mansion?”

Morio’s grin widened. “Well, funny thing, that . . .”

Pausing as he started to lift the case off the desk, Bas shot his cousin a look. “What about it?”

“See . . . It was pretty nice when I got up this morning . . . all brisk and, you know, wintery . . .”

“Wintery.”

Morio nodded emphatically. “So I decided I’d run into town . . . literally.”

Rolling his eyes, Bas broke into a little grin as he strode toward the door. “And you want a ride back?”

“Something like that. So how ‘bout it, Bas?”

Bas thought it over and shook his head but smiled just a little. “All right, but I swear to God, if you start singing, I’ll dump you out in the tallest snow bank I can find.”

Morio thought that over then nodded. “Okay,” he agreed easily enough. “Sides, I forgot my ukulele back in Japan . . .”

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Samantha sighed as she sat in the window seat and stared out over the broad expanse of forest situated behind the Zelig mansion. The sun was peeking out—a welcome change since it seemed as though the last couple weeks since the tajjya had set her free that the skies had been nothing but overcast, gloomy. Or maybe it was just that her mood had been so precarious . . . who knew? Those first few days after she’d gotten home had been frightening—terrifying . . . and she’d felt more lost than she ever had before . . .

Her family was trying so hard to make her comfortable that it was having the opposite effect, wasn’t it? So busy hovering and fretting and fawning over her that she could scarcely get a moment alone to breathe or to think, and while she understood their worries, she knew deep down that it was just too much. The problem was that she just couldn’t bring herself to do it; couldn’t hurt them, even if they did seem bent on driving her nuts . . .

It was bad enough last night, wasn’t it? When she told her parents that she wanted to sleep in her own room: the room she always stayed in whenever they’d come to visit her

grandparents, her mother had looked completely panicked for a moment before she managed to hide her distress behind an overly-bright laugh. Her father had smiled gently and reminded her that she should keep in mind that their door was always open to her.

She shook her head and sighed. They'd escorted her to her room, and while Bellaniece fussed over arranging Samantha's blankets, her father had checked and double checked all the windows and the balcony doors, admonishing her not to open them for any reason, whatsoever . . .

She'd begun to think that they were never, ever going to let her alone when they'd kissed her forehead and reminded her once more that they weren't far away if she should need them, and then finally—blessedly—left her in peace.

And she'd almost been asleep when her sisters had slipped into the room, only to crawl into bed with her: Isabelle on the left, Alexandra on the right. They'd slept there all night, too, and Samantha had to wonder when she woke up this morning, pinned down by her sisters' arms and legs, if she'd ever be left alone again.

It really wasn't so much that she was upset with any of them, no, and she loved that they all so obviously cared, but . . .

But . . .

*"I put my number into your cell phone, okay? The cell is in your bag. As soon as the bus leaves, I want you to call your papa . . . and as soon as you get home, and you're safe . . . let me know."*

With a quiet gasp, Samantha stumbled to her feet. She'd . . . she'd forgotten that, hadn't she? She'd forgotten that he'd asked her to call him . . . The idea of hearing his voice again was enough to bring tears to her eyes, and she uttered a little cry as she ran over to her mother. She'd been sitting with Nezumi and Sierra and Gin, talking in hushed

voices. Samantha's distress was a palpable thing, and she couldn't help the tears that streaked down her cheeks. How could she have forgotten something so important, so very important? He was her mate, and she'd forgotten . . . "Mama!"

Instant alarm washed into Bellaniece's features as she shot to her feet and grasped Samantha's arms. "Sami, baby! What's the matter?"

"Where's my bag?" Samantha demanded, shaking her head adamantly. She didn't have time to explain right now, did she? She had to call him—Kurt . . .

"Bag?" Bellaniece repeated with a confused shake of her head. "What bag . . .?"

"The one I brought home with me!" she bellowed in frustration, yanking against her mother's firm grip. She could vaguely feel her aunts' hands on her back, rubbing her back as though they were trying to soothe a crying infant. "Mama!"

"Calm down, sweetie!" Bellaniece commanded, lowering her head to look into Samantha's eyes. There was something else there, too; something that Samantha didn't dwell on in her haste to get to that bag. "What do you need out of that?"

"My cell phone!" she blurted. "Kurt wanted me to call, and—"

"Sweetie, there was no cell phone," Bellaniece said quietly, calmly. "The bag was, um . . . e-empty."

"It wasn't empty," she countered. "He put my cell phone in there! I have to call him; I promised!"

Bellaniece frowned thoughtfully, considering Samantha's words. "There was no phone, Sami," she said slowly.

"You're lying," Samantha stated flatly, eyes flaring wide as a warped sense of realization dawned on her. "*You're lying!*"

"No, baby, I'm not," Bellaniece replied, reaching out to smooth the hair back off Samantha's face.

"No," she said, shaking her head, her upset spiking painfully as she knocked her mother's hand away. "Why are you trying to keep me away from him? Why?"

"I'm not," Bellaniece assured her. "Sami . . ."

"It's not his fault!" Samantha blurted. "He didn't know!"

"Know what?" Bellaniece asked, her gaze registering her confusion.

Samantha shook her head violently, stubbornly. They were trying to get her to condemn him, weren't they? That's what this was all about . . . "He didn't do anything wrong!" she yelled. "Where is my phone? *Where?*"

"I'll get Kich," Nezumi murmured.

Bellaniece nodded. "There was no phone, Samantha," she said in a slightly firmer tone of voice. "Do you hear me? No phone."

Samantha tried to pull away again. "No, no, *no, no, no!*" she screamed, arms flailing as she tried to fight off Bellaniece's hold on her. "No!"

She gasped when her balled-up fist connected with Bellaniece's jaw. Her mother's head snapped to the side, and Samantha tried to jerk away.

"Samantha, sweetie!" Bellaniece said, her voice rising as her panic spiked.

“No! You’re trying to keep me away from him, but it won’t work! It—it won’t! He’s my—my mate! *My mate!*”

“No one is trying to do anything of the sort, baby! We aren’t—”

“*I hate you!*” she screeched, shoving against her mother, hard enough to send Bellaniece careening back. Sierra caught her before she hit the floor, and Samantha blinked at her sudden freedom. All the anger and desperation seemed to drain out of her all at once, and with a lone, choked out sob, she crumpled to the floor, smashing her hands over her face as hot, hateful tears were wrung from the very depths of her soul. “I’m sorry,” she muttered, her hands muffling her voice. “I’m sorry, Mama . . .”

“It’s okay,” Bellaniece assured her, her arms wrapping around her as she pulled her daughter into her lap. “It’s okay . . .”

“What’s going on?” Kichiro demanded as he hurried over to the two of them.

“It’s my fault,” Bellaniece said, her own voice choked with emotion, with tears. “She got upset, and—”

“I’m sorry; I’m sorry,” Samantha sobbed. “I’m sorry . . .”

“Sam wanted that bag,” Sierra explained quietly. “There was supposed to be a cell phone in it, but . . . Sami accidentally hit Belle . . .”

Kichiro sighed, pulling both women into his lap as he sat on the floor. “There was no cell phone, Sami,” he said, unable to summon the will to be angry with Samantha for striking her mother, whether by accident or design, not when Bellaniece turned her pleading gaze on him and shook her head. “Don’t cry, okay?”



## Chapter 57

### Small Things

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*'It'd be asking for trouble, wouldn't it?'*

Scowling at the pay phone through the window in the small gas station where he'd stopped to fill the tank, Kurt tapped his foot as he waited in line to pay for the fuel he'd just finished pumping.

Of course it'd be asking for trouble. He could think of a million and one reasons not to do it; everything from inviting trouble to tipping them off about his whereabouts to confirming that she really did detest him, after all . . . Maybe she'd figured out by now that he was no better than the damned white-coats; was worse, actually, all things considered. After all, he was the one who had handed her over to them, wasn't he? He knew well enough that it was only a matter of time before she figured it all out for herself. He simply wasn't sure that he wanted that kind of confirmation . . .

Still, despite the host of reasons why he shouldn't do it, there was only one reason that he could think of why he should.

He had to know, didn't he? He had to know that she'd made it home safely . . .

And that, he supposed, was reason enough to do it, wasn't it?

It only took him a couple minutes to pay for his things, and as he walked out of the building, heading toward the solitary pay phone booth, he frowned, his gait slowing but

not faltering. The time had come, hadn't it? It was something that needed to be done; something he had to know. It was . . .

Smiling a little sadly as he stopped in front of the phone booth, he raised his gaze to the heavens and sighed. He'd shut down four of the five facilities thus far and was on his way to the last one—the one in San Diego, California.

It was a bit frightening, really. Those facilities were simple to close down. Only one of them had any viable research to destroy, and he'd restrained the resident white-coats for about a week at each place to give them a taste of what it felt like to be researched while he took his time in systematically demolishing everything inside and seeking to gather information, as well, though none of them seemed to have any knowledge of other facilities in the States. One of the doctors at Claxton mentioned hearing about one place in Prague, but he didn't know anything concrete, and nothing Kurt found gave any evidence of such a place existing.

Maybe it was just because he didn't know any of them and hadn't seen how they operated, first hand, but he couldn't help the sense of apathy as he'd dealt with those centers. Still, he did gain a measure of satisfaction in the end—satisfaction in the knowledge that they wouldn't be hurting another innocent little demon, ever again. That was enough. It *had* to be enough . . .

In fact, the only unsettling part of it all was the female researcher he'd found at the last installation. Too bad she'd proven to be just as twisted as any of the men he'd encountered thus far, maybe even worse. What was it about women that they could easily be crueler and more insular-minded than any man could ever hope to be?

So he'd dealt with her without prejudice. It was laughable, really. The damn bitch had thought up until the very end that Kurt was just dying to rape her. Fat chance. He wasn't interested in any cold, callus bitches . . . Or maybe that was really the gist of the problem . . .

Now he just had one more facility to go . . . and then . . .

And then . . . he'd figure out what came next, wouldn't he?

Scratching his head, he let out a deep breath and reached for the receiver. He supposed that it was pretty telling, really. The three numbers programmed into the phone . . . He'd memorized them a long while ago . . .

So before he could talk himself out of it, he fed a ten-dollar-bill into the phone and dialed one of those numbers.

It rang a couple of times before someone answered. "Inutaisho."

Frowning at the man's voice, Kurt clutched the phone tighter. "Uh, hi . . . I'm . . . I'm calling to check on . . . on Samantha."

The man paused. He'd been shuffling papers, but that sound stopped, too. "Come again?"

Clearing his throat as a surge of trepidation raced down his spine, Kurt glanced at his watch. "Samantha . . . did she . . . did she make it home all right?"

"How do you know her?" he demanded suspiciously—not hostilely, but definitely not friendly, either.

Scowling at the resistance he was meeting, Kurt hesitated before replying. "I . . . I just need to know that she's safe. Please," he added, almost as an afterthought.

"Who are you?" he challenged instead.

Gritting his teeth, Kurt grimaced. He couldn't answer that, could he? "Please," he repeated. "Did she get home okay?"

"And I told you: you tell me who the hell you are before I'll tell you a damn thing."

With a frustrated growl, Kurt slammed the receiver into the cradle. "Damn it," he hissed, smacking the side of his head hard against the tempered glass wall. Who was that guy? Had Kurt seen him before? And certainly, Kurt could understand the wariness when it came to the little demon, but still . . . He wasn't asking to talk to her, was he? He only asked if she'd gotten home . . . Even still, he had to admit deep down that he'd have been alarmed if the if he'd just handed out the information that Kurt was after, too. Damned if you do, and damned if you don't, right . . .? Rubbing his eye, he heaved a sigh. That phone call . . . It didn't tell him a damn thing . . .

He stood still for a long moment, listening without really hearing as the call of birds flying out over the ocean shore across the stretch of road that he'd been traveling sounded in his ears. He didn't have a choice, did he? He had to know, had to know . . . had to know . . .

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"You want anything, baby? A glass of milk or something? *Anything?*"

Sydney snuggled against Bas' shoulder and shook her head. "I'm fine, puppy; just fine."

He chuckled softly and kissed her forehead. "I don't mind getting stuff for you," he pointed out.

“It’s enough that you stayed home today,” she murmured as her eyes drifted closed. “I’ve missed having you underfoot.”

He grimaced. She didn’t see it. Having spent days on end for the last four weeks in his father’s study with the rest of the men, watching hour after hour of those God-forsaken videos in chronological order, from the day Samantha was taken there until the day she was nearly killed. The dates said it all, as far as Bas was concerned. The last day . . . She’d known that she was going to be human that night, and after months of steady silence as they’d done unspeakable things to her . . . She’d begged that day: begged them not to hurt her . . .

After seeing all of that, he’d needed to take today off, hadn’t he? Needed to spend some time with Sydnie, just being near his kitty . . .

“Have you told anyone yet, puppy?”

With a soft chuckle, Bas shook his head. “Figured you’d want to do that, yourself, baby.”

She laughed softly and leaned up to bite his chin. “Will he be a big, strong puppy like you?” she teased.

Bas made a face but blushed as he touched the mark—his mark—that had changed to be that of the future tai-youkai . . .

“Are you sure you don’t want anything?” he asked again. She hadn’t had anything to eat for breakfast, and he worried about that since she’d never been very big, to start with.

Sydnie rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I’m fine, puppy—just fine.”

“You didn’t eat breakfast,” he reminded her.

She shot him a calculated grin, arching her eyebrows as she let her fingertips trail down his chest, slipping them beneath the waistband of his boxer shorts and running her hand back and forth. “Well, if you insist . . .”

He groaned and shivered then reached down to gently pull her hand up, kissing her knuckles before rubbing her hand against his cheek. “I don’t know that it’s a good idea to do that,” he hedged.

“Are you kidding?” she countered, eyes wide; incredulous. “Of course it’s safe! You think I’d suggest it if it weren’t . . .?”

He made a face and shook his head. “For normal women, maybe . . . but kitty . . . you’re really little, you know . . .”

She giggled suddenly. “And you’re so *big*.”

He groaned, blushing furiously and trying to avoid her gaze, which only served to heighten her amusement, which just figured, didn’t it? The trill of his cell phone cut through the tranquility of the moment. Snorting when he glanced at it, he wrapped his arms around her a little tighter.

“You’re not going to answer it?”

Bas snorted again. “It’s just Gunsie. I don’t want to talk to his ugly mug today . . .”

Sydney laughed and scooted off the bed, snatching Bas’ phone off the nightstand as she sashayed out of the room. Bas heaved a longsuffering sigh but didn’t complain. “Hi, puppy! I haven’t heard from you in a while . . . Are you avoiding me?” she pouted.

Shaking his head as he watched her exit, he rolled over onto his side and considered getting up. ‘*Nope,*’ he decided as he flopped onto his back. He’d promised that he’d stay in bed all day, damn it, and that was exactly what he aimed to do . . .

Tucking his hands behind his neck, he settled back to wait for Sydney to return. Almost six months pregnant, and she was quite adorable with the distended belly and almost tipsy gait . . . It had taken a little longer than normal for Bas’ mark to change, possibly because there wasn’t much difference between them, and possibly because , in the chaos surrounding the last few months, they’d rather forgotten to look . . .

But they’d discovered the subtle changes about two weeks ago. They simply hadn’t gotten around to telling anyone yet because of the data chips.

Another phone rang, and Bas sat up with a frown. It took him a moment to locate it, but he finally did. Tucked neatly in Sydney’s nightstand, he could tell from the ringtone that the call was forwarded from her work line. Glancing at the number, he gave a mental shrug. He didn’t recognize it, but that didn’t mean much in the long run.

“Zelig,” he said after connecting the call.

“Uh, hi . . . Um, I-I was just . . . just wondering if you could tell me something.”

“I can try,” Bas replied slowly, frowning at the man’s apparent show of hesitation.

He sighed. “Could you . . .? Err, that is, did Samantha . . . She’s okay, right?”

Bas’ frown dissipated as he considered that question. Though he really didn’t have any grounds to think so, he couldn’t help but wonder . . . “Uh, is this . . . Kurt?”

The man didn’t answer right away, as though Bas had taken him by surprise. “Y-yeah,” he replied. “Yeah.”

“Sami’s talked about you a little,” Bas said. “She said you got her out of there.”

“Is that what she said.” It wasn’t a question.

Bas smiled. “Yeah. Thank you.”

“Oh, uh . . . don’t thank me,” he insisted, sounding completely uncomfortable with Bas’ quiet praise. “But she’s . . . she’s all right?”

“Yeah, just fine. Do you want to talk to her?”

“I-is she there?”

“No, but I can give you her cell phone number, if you want.”

“Wha—? No . . . no,” he said. “As long as she’s all right.”

Bas’ frown returned. “Yeah, but—”

“Thanks.” He cleared his throat, heaved a relieved sigh. “Thanks.”

“Wai—Ah . . .” Bas stammered. Letting out a deep breath when the man hung up, he scowled at the phone for a long moment.

“What’s the matter, puppy?” Sydnie asked as she wandered back into the room.

“Uh, nothing,” he replied, forcing a smile as she crawled back onto the bed.

“Hmm, well, my other puppy would rather talk to you than me,” she pouted, holding out his phone.

Bas took it and spared a moment to kiss Sydnie on the forehead before he got to his feet. "I'll go get some milk for you, okay?" he offered.

She nodded as he started out of the room.

"Didn't I tell you that I was taking the day off?" he grouched, foregoing any pleasantries since he was sure that Sydnie had already showered Gunnar with more than his fair share of those.

"I got a phone call, Bas," Gunnar replied in similar fashion.

"Oh?"

"Yes. Some guy at a pay phone in California, asking about Sam."

Tugging the refrigerator open, Bas grabbed a gallon of milk. "So that's where he is . . ." he muttered.

"What?"

"Yeah, he just called here, too."

"What'd you tell him?"

He poured a tall glass and put the milk away. "I told him that she's fine."

"*What?*" Gunnar growled.

Bas rolled his eyes. "It was that guy—the one she says is her mate—Kurt."

“And how do you know that?”

“Because, you moron,” Bas said as he picked up the glass and headed toward the bedroom again, “I asked him.”

Gunnar snorted. “And you think I didn’t?”

“Knowing you? You demanded his name, he wouldn’t give it, and you got all obnoxious, right?”

“Keh! All right then, Bas, how did you get him to tell you, then?”

“I asked if that was his name.”

Gunnar didn’t reply for a minute, and Bas had the distinct feeling that he was glowering at the phone. “. . . You just asked him.”

Bas sighed, handing the milk to Sydney. “Yes, I just asked him.”

Gunnar heaved a sigh. “Did you tell him anything else?”

“No, I didn’t,” Bas shot back. “That’s all he wanted to know, and then he hung up.”

“Damn it,” Gunnar grumbled. “If he’s her mate . . .”

Bas nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed with his cousin’s unspoken statement.

“And she’s not breaking down, either,” Gunnar mused.

Bas grimaced. He’d thought that, as well.

“Maybe Uncle’s right.”

Bas sighed. Kichiro had mentioned the possibility that Samantha might have been too confused to accurately make a judgment when it came to this guy—her savior. They’d been discussing the idea that Samantha did seem well enough. She’d even gained a few pounds back though she still had a way to go, and while she might not be gaining her weight back as quickly as she might, no one seemed to be overly concerned about it. Then again, Kichiro had also said that maybe they hadn’t actually resolved anything, ergo, there was no real rejection. As for Samantha? Well, she maintained that he said he’d come for her—was absolutely positive of it, actually—so Bas had to wonder if that weren’t the ultimate reason that she was still all right . . . “I don’t know,” Bas said slowly. “They might need to work this out, themselves.”

“*Ri-i-ight*,” Gunnar remarked sarcastically. “Easy for them to do that when the damned bastard won’t show his face around here.”

“Leave it alone, Gunsie. You don’t even believe in mates, remember?”

Gunnar snorted. “Just because I don’t want a mate for myself doesn’t mean that I know nothing about it.”

Bas sighed and shook his head. “I’ll go over later and tell Dad that he called.”

“You do that,” Gunnar retorted.

Hanging up the phone, Bas tossed it onto the bureau as he raked his hands through his hair.

“I heard that,” Sydnie remarked.

“Did you?”

She nodded. "Samantha says that he *is* her mate, absolutely," she pointed out.

"I know," Bas said.

Rolling onto her side, Sydnie curled up and patted the bed beside her. "She said he had some things to take care of."

"But she's been home over a month and a half."

She shrugged, as though it were of no real consequence. "Maybe it's just taking him a while to do whatever he needs to do."

He nodded but didn't look entirely convinced.

"Anyway, puppy, why don't you come over here and lay down with me so I can take a nap?"

He chuckled despite his abysmal thoughts. "We just woke up an hour ago," he pointed out, glancing at the clock. Nine thirty in the morning, and Sydnie wanted a nap?

"Having a baby is hard work, puppy," she informed him with a wide yawn. "Just call it a catnap; how's that?"

Bas chuckled and shuffled toward the bed. He'd head over to see Cain after Sydnie went to sleep . . .

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*“What . . . do you want . . . from . . . me . . . ?”*

*“Tell me where she is, Doc . . . Tell me where you hid the demon!”*

*He struggled to open his eyes but couldn't. The right one was darkened, ringed with purple and midnight blue, and he groaned quietly as blood trickled from his fattened lip. “I . . . I don't know . . .” he rasped out.*

*Shaking his head slowly, as though he were deeply distressed over something, he clucked his tongue. “Now this just makes me sad, Doc . . . I mean, I really hate to have to do this to you . . .”*

*The taijya grunted as the white-coats jabbed pain probes into his body, but he shrieked when the savage jolts of electricity was shot through him.*

*“Does it hurt, Doc?” Peterson sneered as he leaned in, his face hovering inches from the taijya's. “Give her back . . . unless you like suffering. Give her back.”*

*Kurt shook his head slowly. “I . . . I don't,” he gasped as sweat beaded on his forehead, dampening his hair, his absolute pain excruciating. “You . . . won't have . . . her . . .”*

*Peterson's face contorted in an ugly mask of absolute rage—the façade of a madman . . . Jerking the chain of the monster within . . . a darkness that grew and spread like a malignance . . . Tossing his head back, his eyes rolling up into his skull, cranking on the control that regulated the electrical current as a guttural roar flowed from him in a fount of filth . . .*

The taijya's scream echoed through her head, and with a sharp gasp, she sat upright, her heart hammering against her ribcage in a painful cadence. Clutching at her chest, stifling a rising sob as she bit down on her lip, she whimpered quietly.

“They're hurting him,” she whispered, a complete panic rising fast. Because of her . . .

Stumbling out of the bed, she stubbornly refused to cry as she yanked on whatever clothes were nearest. A bulky pink sweater, a pair of faded jeans . . . pausing only long enough to rifle through the drawers for the daggers she'd been using to practice with . . .

The faint scars on her arms seemed to throb in time to her heartbeat, and she tossed her cell phone and purse into the knapsack that Kurt had given her. Out the door, down the hallway, she sprinted for the stairs. The consuming sense of urgency was ugly, harsh. She had to get to him; had to save him . . . *'Taijya . . .'*

She'd almost reached the door when her father grabbed her arms. "Sami, what are you doing? Where are you going?" he demanded.

"They're hurting him!" she blurted, struggling to fight back the cloying tears.

"Who? Who's hurting someone?"

"Kurt!" she yelled, tugging against her father's hold. "Papa, they're hurting him! I have to go back to Chicago! I have to save him!"

"How do you know this?" Kichiro asked. "Sami, how do you know?"

Choking out a bitter sob, she shook her head and pulled away. "I saw it! Let me go!" she yelled, writhing, jerking, fighting against Kichiro's grasp. "You don't understand! They're going to hurt him! They're going to *kill* him because of me! They had him strapped to a table, and—"

Bas strode out of the office, having obviously overheard the ruckus, shaking his head as he gently touched her arm. "No, Sami, he's . . . he's fine . . . and he's not in Chicago."

"I have to go! Let me go, Papa!" she screeched, clawing frenetically at her father's hands, raking his flesh under her sharp claws. The smell of his blood loosened an even wilder need to be freed, and she whimpered, struggling against Kichiro's hold in earnest.

"Sam, he called," Bas repeated, louder this time. "He called, and he asked if you made it home all right . . . Okay?"

She blinked, her frantic gaze finally focusing on Bas' face, scanning his features for any trace of a lie.

Bas licked his lips and leveled a solemn look at her. "He called, Sami," he repeated calmly, evenly. "He called about an hour ago."

She couldn't have heard him right; *couldn't* have . . . it sounded like he'd said . . . but . . . "He . . . he called . . .?"

Bas nodded and let out a deep breath as Kichiro gently took her bag. "He just wanted to know that you made it home safely."

"I . . . I have to talk to him . . ."

Letting out a deep breath, Bas shot Kichiro a look that Samantha didn't miss. "He called from a pay phone, dollbaby, and he didn't leave a number," her father said quietly.

"W . . . where . . .?" she asked. "*Where?*"

"The area code was California," Bas said.

"California," she repeated thoughtfully, almost absently. "Okay, then I have to go to California . . ."

“Hold on,” Kichiro said, loosening his hold but not letting go. “I don’t think he’d want you to,” he went on in a soothing, calm tone. “He called here, right? Wanted to make sure you got home safely . . . I think he wants you to stay here . . . to . . . to wait for him.”

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she heard the hint of doubt in Kichiro’s tone, and she shook her head. “He *promised*,” she gritted out stubbornly. “He promised he’d come for me.”

Kichiro sighed. “Then you need to wait for him,” he went on. “You can do that, right? You can wait for him.”

“I . . . y-yes,” she allowed at last, her shoulders drooping as she plopped down hard on the steps behind her. Shoving aside the disappointment that she hadn’t gotten to speak to him, she drew a deep breath, finally heard the voice of her youkai blood and the words that it had been telling her all along.

*‘He’s fine, Samantha—just fine . . . That was a dream, you know? A nightmare . . .’*

“It was so real,” she murmured, shaking her head as she dashed away the sudden tears that sprang to her eyes with her hand. “So real . . .”

Kichiro managed a wan smile as he sank down beside her. Reaching over to smooth her hair back off her face, he let out a deep breath. “You . . . you said he promised he’d come for you, right?”

She nodded vaguely. “Yes . . .”

“Then you’d better just wait for him, don’t you think?”

She managed a little smile as her emotions slowly quieted. “You’ll like him, Papa,” she told him. “You’ll really like him.”

He chuckled and kissed her forehead then stood up and reached down to help her to her feet, too. “Of course I will, Sami. He sent you back to us, right?”

She gasped suddenly, eyes flaring wide at the sight, the scent of blood that trickled down Kichiro’s hands where she’d dug her claws into him. “Oh, Papa,” she whined, ears flattening as more tears came.

“What? Those? Those are just scratches,” he assured her. “It’s all right, Sami. You’ll need to try harder if you want to hurt me.”

“I’m sorry, Papa,” she whimpered, covering her face with her hands.

“Don’t apologize, dollbaby,” he insisted, pulling her close, kissing the top of her head. “See? They’ve already stopped bleeding, anyway.”

She shook her head, unwilling to allow him to let her off the hook quite so easily. “But—”

He smiled and shook his head, too. “Tell me about this Kurt of yours,” he encouraged.

She blinked. It was the first time that he’d sounded even remotely interested in listening to her, at least about Kurt. “He brought me the sky,” she whispered.

“The sky, eh?”

“Yes . . . and lobster. He said that they were like giant red cockroaches.”

Kichiro snorted. “Sounds tasty.”



## Chapter 58

# Understanding

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Kurt stared blankly at the assembly before him, wondering if he ought to wake them up or wait for them to do that on their own. Four white-coats; all of whom were entirely too easy to capture—so easy that it had almost seemed a little sad to truss them up—almost.

Deciding that he might as well let them sleep a while longer, he got up, grabbed the sterile bag that contained some pilfered strands of one of the researcher's hair, and strode out of the room.

Heading down the stark white hallway of the state-of-the-art facility, he figured he might as well check the basement first. This place was smaller than the others, but the building was constructed fairly recently, and unlike the other places, the powers-that-be felt it wise to invest in slightly more impressive technology, including bio locks on all the doors, complete monitoring that he'd already disabled, the best of equipment that he'd take pleasure in destroying, and, unlike the other facilities, this one employed five security bots that Kurt had already put out of commission from the onset.

What had made the white-coats here easier to catch, though, was that every single one of them actually lived in the building on the upper floors that were decked out as luxury apartments. Those actually had outer entrances that were up a rather steep flight of stairs that ran the length of the front of the building and up the side, as well. That was how he'd managed to catch them. How easy was it when all he had to do was wait for each of them to step outside?

He didn't sense any demons when he stepped off the elevator. Even so, he had to check to see how many holding cells they had in here since he'd actually never been downstairs before, and since this was the one facility that he hadn't dealt with more than once or twice over the years. If they didn't have enough cells for the white-coats, he'd make due, as he'd had to do in the Houston facility. They'd only had two cages, and while he wasn't above finding the humor of seeing two full size men stuffed into each of those tiny things, he had to admit that it did make moving them from area to area taxing, at best.

There were four doors, though: three of which were open. Those three were holding areas, but they didn't contain the rough little cages. No, these holding areas were fitted with glass cubicles built out of Flagmar plate—quite possibly the strongest material that man had ever produced: created to withstand a nuclear blast, or so they said. Kurt, himself, wouldn't trust it, but he tended to be a little skeptical when it came to claims of super durability and the like. Those Flagmar plates were embedded deep in the floor and extended up through the ceiling, creating reinforced glass cells. Still, given what he already knew about their brute physical strength, he had to wonder if those really could contain a demon . . .

Shaking his head, he dug a hair out of the bag and dropped it into the analysis tray. It closed with a soft hiss, and he heard the airlock release with a dull hiss. Reaching for the doorknob, he paused suddenly. He could feel a strange aura that he hadn't noticed before. Weak and thready, it was . . .

Frowning at the strange sense of trepidation that wrapped around him, he grasped the knob and turned . . .

The room inside was almost completely dark with only one pitiful fluorescent bulb burning back in the corner. The silence was thick and cloying, but . . .

Staring at the darkened cubicle, he saw nothing. The aura was stronger in here though he wouldn't actually call it 'strong', by any means. So where . . .?

The barest hint of movement caught his attention, and Kurt narrowed his gaze. There was something in that cell, huddled in the corner . . .

Glancing at the control panel near the door, he brought the lights up and blinked. Harsh, bright, he groped for the knob to adjust them. The creature in the cell behind him scrambled around as though he'd frightened it.

Turning, he glanced at the cage and stared. He didn't know what he thought he'd see, but . . .

It was a little girl—a child—probably no more than three, maybe four. Long black hair that was completely ratty and bedraggled, as though she'd never combed it in her life, and maybe she hadn't . . . a pale, peaked face—such a tiny face—such a serious face . . . huge, owlsh eyes that seemed to glow in the shadows where she cowered, back in the far right corner. He couldn't discern the color of those eyes, but they contained such a wariness, such a lost, frightened light . . . Just the smallest waif of a child—long, spindly arms and legs so thin that he could probably wrap his hand around them easily . . . hair too long to see her ears . . . She looked . . . a trill of trepidation raced down his spine as he stared, but it wasn't because of what she was, no . . .

*'She looks . . . human . . . but they still keep her . . . in a cage . . .?'*

"H . . . hi," Kurt said softly as he slowly moved toward the glass column. "What . . . what are you doing in there . . .?"

She jumped and smashed herself back into the corner a little more as he approached. Hunkering down outside the wall that was fitted with an airlock door, he sighed, forced a little smile. "What's your name?"

The child stared at him, blinking methodically without a hint of recognition that she'd

even understood his question at all. The oversized adult smock she wore covered her legs and feet. If she stood up, would it be too long for her to walk in? He shook his head. “Where are your parents? Your . . . your mom and dad?”

She blinked again.

*‘She . . . she doesn’t understand . . .’*

He sighed. Of course she didn’t. What the hell . . .? Where had they managed to capture such a small child? He shook his head. Did that matter?

Standing up—the child made a mad scramble all over again—Kurt pulled another hair out of the bag and unlocked the door. It slid open with an obscenely loud hiss. The girl whined softly, clawing at the glass walls, as though she wanted them to open up so she could run and hide elsewhere. He leaned into the tiny space—no larger than the one where Samantha had been kept for so long, even if this one did extent up to the ceiling—squatting down once more, holding a hand out to the child. “Why don’t you come out of there?” he prodded gently.

The girl whimpered again and tried to shrink away from him.

Kurt sat back on his haunches and shook his head. That wasn’t working. He wasn’t getting anywhere . . .

“Okay,” he said, staring at her thoughtfully. How to coax her out of there . . .? Shaking his head, he let out a deep breath. If it were the little demon—Samantha—all he’d have to do was offer her chocolate . . .

Sitting up straighter, he patted his pockets. He’d bought a candy bar earlier, but he’d stuffed it into his knapsack, and he’d left said knapsack upstairs . . .

He got up and left her there, left the door wide open and didn't bother trying to secure the room. It only took him a few minutes—maybe ten—to trek upstairs and grab the candy out of his bag, and he wasn't at all surprised to find her still huddled in the corner of the cubicle where he'd left her, either. Ripping the wrapper open as he strode back into the room, he broke the corner of the candy bar off and offered it to her. "Oh, come on . . . you don't like candy?"

She stared at him with a sense of complete befuddlement. She really didn't know what it was, did she?

Leaning into the cage, he carefully forced the bit of chocolate into her mouth. She whined and whimpered then suddenly stopped, her eyes growing large—round—as she sucked on it. He almost smiled as he broke off another piece and held it out to her. "You want it?"

She nodded enthusiastically—at least she understood 'yes' and 'no'. Kurt held the piece of candy in his flattened palm and let her take it from him. Her hand reached out—she didn't have claws—slowly, hesitantly, and when she took the candy, she moved so quickly that he didn't rightfully see it. One second the candy was there with her hand hovering nearby. The next, it was gone as she shoved it into her mouth.

"Wow . . . you're kind of a piggy, aren't you?" he murmured.

The child blinked at him as she chewed the candy then grunted a little as she stared at the bar in his hand.

Kurt heaved a sigh. He should have known. The little demon—Samantha—she was the same way, wasn't she? "Give you an inch . . ." he mumbled as he broke off another piece and offered it to her.

She took it a little slower this time, as though she were starting to trust that he was

actually giving it to her. This time, though, she uttered a little sound. It took a moment for Kurt to understand. It was a giggle, wasn't it? Rough and ragged, as though she didn't do it often enough . . . but a laugh, nonetheless . . .

"You want the rest of this?" he asked, waving the candy bar at her.

She stared at it, her eyes growing even larger—they were gray, weren't they? A really deep gray—the skies just before an autumn storm . . . She nodded quickly, casting him a nervous glance. Did she think that he was going to hit her or something, just because she'd said 'yes'?

Face shifting into an expression of abject disgust, he heaved a sigh. Yes, she probably did, didn't she? Poor kid . . .

He backed out of the cubicle and got to his feet. "If you want it, you'll have to come out of there," he said.

She whined and whimpered and scooted around like she was afraid to do what he'd told her, but he could see it, couldn't he? The desire to have more of the candy was winning over her initial fear. A sudden and intense rage rose in him—a blackened disgust that a child should behave in such a way. Human, demon . . . did it really matter? That girl . . .

Would she have started to act like that? She—Samantha . . .? If he'd left her there, if he hadn't gone back . . . would fear have eventually overcome her?

*'No . . . no . . . she was too . . . too proud . . . They couldn't have broken her . . . They . . .'*

The smallest of tugs drew him out of his reverie. The child was beside him, staring up at her in an entirely dreadful way. Her desire to have the candy was warring with her sense that she was doing something wrong, and the resulting expression on her face was enough to make him blink, to bring a sheen of moisture to his gaze. "Here," he said,

unwrapping the rest of the candy and holding it out to her. “You don’t have to get in that cage anymore, okay?” he told her. “Go home . . . do you understand? Go . . .”

But even as he spoke, he knew it was no good. She didn’t understand this concept of ‘home’, did she, and even if she did . . . Maybe she didn’t have a home to go back to . . .

Still, it was a little disconcerting when he strode out of the room a few minutes later. He could feel her following him, albeit at a distance, and he sighed. He couldn’t leave her here, could he, but the problem was, he wasn’t entirely certain what he could or should do with her, either . . .

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Bellaniece sorted through the mail, dropping the junk into the trashcan without bothering to open them. If she stopped to consider it, it was actually rather amusing. Cain tended to get the most eclectic mail, really. Everything from pre-approved credit cards to solicitations for donations from this place or that one that she was certain neither he nor Gin had ever actually considered giving money to, in the first place. The ones today were from the Save the Snail foundation and the Old Oak Tree fund in Managakoqua, Minnesota. He’d also gotten the standard letter from the local museum, asking him to attend their annual fundraiser drive soiree. That one she kept since Gin might actually want that one, but the rest of the junk she tossed away.

Heading toward Cain’s office, she smiled slightly. The early spring breeze blowing off the ocean was wafting through all the windows that Gin had opened this morning, filling the house with the crisp, clean smell that only came in the spring. It fit, didn’t it? Spring, the time for reaffirmation and life . . . and with Samantha back home, it just seemed right.

The office was empty since all the men had headed down to the youkai special crimes offices. Gunnar had called earlier and said that there was something going on with one of the old cases and wanted Cain to go take a look. Bas and Ben had gone, too, and Ryomaru had headed back to Chicago to help his father, who had called last night, saying that he thought that maybe they'd found the facility where Samantha had been held for so long.

Kagome had insisted that they wait for Ryomaru, too, since she wanted to make sure that there were enough men that they could handle whatever waited for them inside the building. From what she'd told Kichiro, it was no wonder they hadn't found it earlier. Located on the very outskirts of Chicago, there had been traces left behind of a barrier that would have masked any youkai presence on the inside.

That barrier had been removed, though, and it hadn't taken them long to find it once they'd gotten into the area. According to Kichiro, they'd told him that they were almost positive that it was the place, and while Kichiro had wanted to go, too, everyone, including Bellaniece, was convinced that it wasn't a good idea. Killing anyone was out of the question—Samantha would be even more upset by it—and with as angry as Kichiro was, and with excellent reason, they were quite afraid that he really would snap.

So Kichiro was in the back yard practicing with Samantha and John, and she thought that Gin might be out there, as well—that was, if she'd gotten back from the airport already. Aside from driving Ryomaru there, she'd also taken Toga and Sierra, as well, since they were heading back to Japan.

Setting the mail on Cain's desk, Bellaniece reached over to grab the overflowing ashtray with a grimace of disgust. She'd have to get onto him again—she'd been on his case about quitting for years, as it was—but she stopped suddenly, frowning at the computer. One of the data chips was still in the card reader.

Kichiro had told her time and again that he didn't think she needed to watch them, but .

. . . but she'd seen the strain in all the men's eyes whenever they thought she wasn't looking. She understood why he didn't want her to watch them, but still . . . Samantha was her daughter, too. She had a right to know, didn't she?

Sitting in the thickly cushioned chair behind the desk, she flicked the mouse to dismiss the screensaver, biting her lip as she navigated through the system. The file was already open, and, ignoring the trill of foreboding that shot through her, she started the playback.

It looked like some kind of medical facility—Kichiro had told her that much, anyway. Bellaniece frowned. According to the timestamp, the footage was shot at 3:23, a.m. The room, however was empty. Scanning through the submenu, she opened the master control. It divided the image screen into about twenty-five different thumbnails—different cameras in the facility, she figured.

Opening the master dialogue box, she clicked on the option, 'advance to'. A new box opened, asking for a specific time. Bellaniece typed in 12:00 p.m. and waited while the images reloaded.

Clicking on the one thumbnail, she grimaced as the full screen view came up. "Sami . . ." she whispered, flinching at the sight of her precious daughter, strapped to a metal table, naked, vulnerable . . . Three men in white coats were examining her—checking every single thing about her. Samantha had her face turned away, but she looked like she might have had her eyes closed . . .

One of the men reached for a scalpel, and Bellaniece flinched and gasped as he cut a straight line across Samantha's stomach, and she watched, horrified, as they pulled her open to look inside. Glancing at Samantha's face, Bellaniece could feel all the blood in her body turn cold. She was awake, wasn't she? Wide awake while those monsters cut her open . . .

"Oh, my God," Bellaniece whispered, her shaking hands covering her mouth. "What did

they do to you?"

"Hey, Belle-chan, I . . ." Kichiro stepped into the office, his words trailing off when he spotted her. With a muttered curse, he strode over, closed out the window on the computer and pulled Bellaniece to her feet. "Belle! Hey!" he growled as he gave her a little shake.

Her eyes slowly cleared, shifted to meet his. "What did they do to her?" she whispered.

He heaved a sigh and pulled her close. "It's over, okay?" he told her. "Don't worry . . . don't worry . . . Samantha's fine. You know she's fine, right? She's just fine."

The tears started slowly, as though she were half numb, unable to piece together the things she knew. Samantha, her darling child . . . "Why?" Bellaniece whispered. "*Why?*"

"You weren't supposed to see those," he chided, though his tone was more apologetic than angry. "Princess . . ."

She choked out a sob, her arms clutching Kichiro tight, collapsing against him as her grief took over. How many atrocities . . .? How was that right? How could they have done that to her?

But there were no answers in the quiet; no sense of finality or any satisfaction at all. Her daughter, her daughter . . . it was too much to bear. "I should have . . . protected her better," she whimpered. "I should have—"

"It's not your fault," Kichiro rasped out, his own voice as raw and roughened as hers. "Belle . . . She's home now; she's safe. She's all right . . . She's all right . . ."

She didn't know how long she stood there; didn't know how much time passed as she clung to him, as she cried and sobbed and railed, venting her anger, her frustration, and

yet it seemed to grow within her, larger, darker, uglier . . . “*Why?*” she shrieked, her entire being tense, angry . . . sad.

Kichiro held onto her, shook his head because he had no explanation. It was all he could do, and yet . . .

And yet, it wasn’t nearly enough. “I want them dead, Kichiro! Dead!” she screamed, jerking away from him, sinking her hands into her hair. “I want them to feel what she felt! I want them to understand what they did to her!”

He nodded quietly, crossing his arms over his chest. “I do, too,” he said, his voice quiet, barely more than a whisper.

She shot him a fierce glower, dashing her hand over her eyes to staunch the tears as a steely glint entered her gaze—the resolve of a mother. “I want them dead,” she repeated again. “So help me . . .”

Kichiro sighed and nodded again. She could see it in his stare, couldn’t she? He wanted it as badly as she did: revenge for their daughter . . . and maybe a little for themselves . . .

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Kurt pressed the button that sent a jolt of electricity through the man—Cabot, his name was—feeling absolutely no satisfaction, whatsoever when the man’s screams echoed in the room. Strapped to a gurney much like the ones in the facility in Chicago, he grunted, chest heaving as he struggled to draw breath.

He’d had to lock her in that room again, as much as he was loathe to do it. But she’d followed him back up to the next floor, trailing behind him, a ghost or a shadow or . . . or

a constant reminder. In the end, he'd sought out a snack machine, bought more candy, then locked her back in the holding room with one of those bars of chocolate so that she couldn't see what he was doing.

And yet she'd strengthened his resolve, hadn't she? Waking the researchers with a blast from the power hose, he'd questioned them for hours, to no avail. None of them were willing to tell him a damn thing about the child—about where she'd come from, where her parents were . . . not a thing . . .

This guy had told him that he'd only been working at this place for about four years or so. Younger than the other men, a little quieter, a little more reserved . . . Kurt figured he'd be the first to break.

Without a word, he reached out to hit the button again. The man groaned, whined. "I . . . I can tell you . . . I can tell you what you want to know . . ."

Kurt paused with his finger hovering over the button as he slowly turned his head to stare at the doctor. "Can you?"

Cabot nodded. "Y-yes . . ."

Veering to the side, Kurt hit a button that tilted the table where the man was strapped. Cabot winced and blinked, as though he were trying to clear his vision.

"So talk," Kurt demanded, crossing his arms over his chest as he stared at the doctor.

Cabot wheezed but nodded. "Her . . . her mother . . . They had her here before I came in . . . I don't know how long . . . a couple years, maybe . . ." Swallowing hard, he winced again as sweat trickled down his body. He'd been on the table enduring the shocks for the better portion of the morning. Enduring it rather commendably, all things considered—enduring it better than most of the doctors Kurt had dealt with thus far,

anyway . . .

“She . . . uh, didn’t speak . . . maybe she couldn’t . . . b-but she—she was just quiet . . . and pretty . . . She didn’t have a name that we knew of, but we . . . we called her Kay.”

Lip curling in disgust, more at the implication than at the idea. “Pretty,” he repeated.

Cabot nodded. “She never tried to hurt anyone; never tried to escape . . . Long black hair, like the girl . . . black eyes . . . You . . . you ever seen those Spanish girls?”

Kurt snorted, but nodded.

The man sighed. “That’s what she looked like . . . pretty like that . . .” Trailing off, he seemed to be trying to figure out where he was going with his ramblings. Kurt just wanted him to get on with it. “Kay . . . she hummed, you know? These songs . . . no words, just humming . . . One night, I went to check on a culture in the lab, and I heard her . . . humming . . .

“So I went downstairs—I didn’t really mean to, but . . . but it was the song; something about it . . . But when I went in the holding area, she . . . she wasn’t there. I mean, she was, but she looked . . .” He winced and shook his head, as though he didn’t want to admit whatever it was he was trying to say. “She looked human. I mean, she didn’t look any different than usual, but her hair was lighter . . . her eyes were paler. I thought for sure that I was seeing things, but . . . The others told me later that it seemed to happen once a month or so, but no one . . . no one really knew why . . .”

The image of Samantha—of her black hair and dark eyes . . . the woman they’d had here . . . she’d been like Samantha, hadn’t she? “Get on with it,” Kurt growled. The story was interesting enough, but . . .

Cabot nodded quickly, swallowing hard as he ventured a deeper breath. “One of the

doctors—Thurman . . . He was sneaking downstairs sometimes . . . some nights . . . Fucking her.” He laughed suddenly—a dry, sad little sound, and he couldn’t meet Kurt’s gaze, either. “At first it was just . . . now and then, but . . . His apartment is next to mine, and if I were up late working on something, I’d . . . I’d see him . . . Then he started going more and more often . . . I don’t know if Dr. Kelvin knew or not, but . . . but if he did, he didn’t care . . .”

“Kelvin . . . the main researcher.”

“Y-yeah . . .”

Narrowing his eyes, Kurt shook his head in disbelief. “W-wait . . . are you saying . . .?”

Cabot hung his head, winced. “She got pregnant . . . That guy . . . He’d sneak in there at night, but he told everyone during the day that it was an experiment . . . and he’d cut her to see how fast she healed or spray her down with the water hose if she made a mess, and . . . and all that stuff, but he’d screw her, anyway, and . . . And it was sick, you know? You know? He could do whatever he wanted, and she’d just . . . just smile at him . . .” Uttering a terse, incredulous laugh, the poor bastard looked like he wanted to cry, instead. “He killed her,” he whispered, a sense of hysteria rising just below the doctor’s façade. “She . . . she had the baby, and when they tried to take her, Kay freaked out.”

“You took her baby away from her?”

Cabot nodded then shook his head, as though he were trying to admit to and yet to justify their actions, all at the same time. “She got up—God, she was bleeding everywhere—got up . . . and she tried to attack Kelvin. He was the one who took the baby, you see? Thurman stuck her with a tranquilizer, but it didn’t work; she kept coming . . . beating on Kelvin as he tried to get out of there. The . . . the baby was crying, and Kay was reacting to that, and . . .” Drawing a ragged breath, Cabot shut his eyes. “Thurman . . . he broke open one of those emergency kits, and he grabbed the . . .

the axe . . .”

Kurt grimaced as Cabot broke down into a quiet sob. He really didn't need to hear more, did he? It was much harder to wrap his head around the idea that one of the doctors had fathered the child . . . “So . . . so if she is his child, why is she kept in one of the cells?” Kurt demanded quietly.

Cabot sniffled, shook his head, couldn't meet Kurt's angry glower. “Thurman said . . . said she was just a test . . . subject . . .”

“Son of a bitch.”

“There was another doctor here at the time . . . He . . . he tried to sneak her out one night. He . . . he disappeared. Thurman said . . . said he wasn't a threat . . . anymore . . .” He shook his head again. “I wanted to get her out of here, but . . . I was scared, and . . .” With a gasp, a grunt, an angry sound, Cabot broke down in tears once more. “I was scared,” he whimpered.

Kurt didn't respond to that. Unable to get a grip on the rage that was building inside him, he stalked out of the room instead. He wanted to hurt Cabot; hurt him for being a coward, for fearing for his own miserable existence when he knew what he should have done, to start with . . . Thurman? Thurman . . .

Kurt gritted his teeth, fought for a measure of control that he just didn't have. The trusting eyes so blue . . . the little demon . . . and in his mind's eye, he could see the entire thing, only the one named Kay was Samantha, instead, and Thurman . . . Kurt shook his head, as though to dispel the horrific images that he just couldn't ignore. The little demon who had smiled, just for him . . . the sound of her voice in the silence . . . That Thurman could do that kind of thing to his own child's mother . . . Disgusted, horrified, and yet . . .

And yet, how different was he from Cabot? From Kelvin? From Thurman? From . . .  
from any of them . . .?



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
It's *payback* time ...

## Chapter 59

# The Hunter

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“So . . . I think it’s time I went back to work.”

All of the conversations swirling around the Zelig dinner table died out as Samantha stared serenely down at her plate. Taking her time in cutting off a bite of steak, she continued to eat calmly.

“Back to work,” Kichiro repeated, the first to break the stunned silence.

Samantha nodded. “Yes,” she replied simply. Out of the corner of her eye, she didn’t miss the significant looks that passed between her parents. Her mother’s seemed to say something akin to, ‘*Stop her!*’ while her father frowned just a little and barely shook his head.

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?” Kichiro went on in an entirely too-reasonable tone; the kind of tone that she’d get whenever she told him that she thought the moon really was made of cheese and that there was a troll living under her bed when she was a little girl.

“Of course,” she reasoned quietly. “I’m just as good as I ever was, right? Uncle Ryomaru said so yesterday.”

Bellaniece cleared her throat. “There’s, um, no question that you’re fully capable, sweetie,” she said with an overly bright smile. “But you’ve been through so much . . .”

“What your mother means to say is that maybe you should let yourself recover a little longer,” Kichiro added for good measure.

Setting the knife and fork aside, Samantha pasted on a tolerant little smile. “I appreciate everyone’s concern, but I think getting back to work would be the best thing for me, all things considered.”

“Sami,” Cain began with a shake of his head, “are you sure about that? It’s only been—”

“I know how long it’s been, Grandpa,” she cut in with a tight smile. “I also know that sitting around, feeling useless is not doing me any good.”

“You’re hardly useless,” Cain replied. “Have you talked to Bas and Sydnie yet?”

“No, I haven’t,” she admitted. “I’ve thought about this,” she went on. “Life doesn’t just stop because I was kidnapped, you know. There are other families out there who need and deserve to know that the ones who have hurt them cannot hurt anyone else.”

“Excuse me,” Bellaniece said, standing abruptly and hurrying from the room. Samantha sighed as her father got up, paused long enough to squeeze her shoulder but followed his mate.

“I was careless,” Samantha went on, her cheeks pinking as she forced herself to admit to the ugly truth of it. “I got angry because you’d sent Larry in to usurp me, and because of that, I wasn’t as careful as I should have been.”

Cain heaved a sigh and nodded, his expression saying that the thought had already crossed his mind. He rubbed his eye, tilted his head to the side to stare at her. “Sami . . .”

“I think what they’re trying to tell you is that they don’t doubt your abilities, Samantha,” Gin said gently. “It’s just that fear, you know? However irrational it is . . . it’s still there, and . . . and every time you go out on a hunt, they’ll worry.”

Samantha smiled wanly and stood up. “I know, Grandma,” she said, pausing beside her to kiss her cheek. “I know, because I . . . I feel it, too.”

With that, she strode out the back door, down the path to the beach. Feeling the warmth of the late March sun, rubbing her arms against the briskness that blew off the ocean on the wind . . . The feelings that she hadn’t thought that she’d ever feel again, and yet . . .

What was it worth, really? What was anything worth? With every day that passed into sunset and shadows; with every dawn that rose with the steadiness of the inevitable, those darkened days seemed to fade just a little more in her memory, but as welcome as the reprieve was, it troubled her, too. The taijya . . . he was fading, too—fading but never forgotten. Without hearing the sound of his voice, seeing the complexity of emotion that he rarely voiced but that she could feel within the very depths of herself, she sustained those feelings somewhere deep down, but those were the things . . . those were the very things that killed her just a little inside every night when she closed her eyes and every morning when she opened them again. Clinging to the promise that he’d made her on the cold February morning in the desolate parking lot of the bus station: a promise not spoken in words in the fleeting but all too real moments . . . It was in those moments that he’d forgotten that he was a taijya, a hunter, an avenger, and she wasn’t a demon. In those moments, he was just a man, and she’d known as surely as she’d ever known anything that he loved her . . .

But she was driving herself crazy, wasn’t she? Lingered near the windows, staring at the expanse of driveway for headlights, for a sign, for something . . . for *him* . . .

“Samantha . . .”

Turning at the sound of her grandfather's voice, she managed a little smile and waited for him to catch up with her. Baggy black shirt caught on the breeze, whipping his ponytail over his shoulder, he wandered toward her with his hands dug deep into the pockets of his rumpled khaki pants, and he shot her a lopsided grin—not quite happy but not unhappy, either. “You know,” he said as he stepped up beside her, placing himself between the wind blowing off the ocean and her, “Bas mentioned something about needing someone in the office who can help investigate some of these more recent leads they’ve gotten.”

Samantha let out a deep breath, ears flattening for a moment as she considered what her grandfather was saying. “They don’t want me as a hunter anymore?”

“That’s not what I’m saying,” he assured her. “I just mean that maybe . . . for now . . . for everyone’s peace of mind . . . The last few months have been hard on everyone—your parents, your grandparents . . . your family . . . and you. It’s not that you can’t do it. We know you can, but . . .”

“But you’d all rather that I don’t,” she concluded.

Cain shrugged and dug a wrinkled pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. “Is it bad that we’d like for you to stick around closer to home for a little while?”

“No,” she ventured, crossing her arms over her chest, rubbing them as a slight chill set in.

“And what if your young man shows up while you’re out there?”

She hesitated in her step for a mere second, but Cain didn’t miss it, either.

“He promised you, didn’t he?”

Sparing a glance at him, she sighed. Cain was staring at her as though he had read her mind, and maybe he had. “Am I that obvious?”

He chuckled and blew out a slow stream of smoke that rose in the air and was swept away. “Nope, but you know . . . going to look for him won’t really help. Maybe it’s better to let him come to you when he’s ready. You can’t force it, even if you wanted to.”

Letting out a deep breath, she couldn’t hide the grimace at the accuracy of Cain’s words. She hadn’t thought to go looking for him, per se, but she had thought that maybe she’d hear something . . .

“Why hasn’t he called again?” Samantha asked quietly. “Why hasn’t he called *me*?”

Sucking in his cheek, he considered that. In the end, he shrugged and slowly shook his head. “Maybe he’s trying to give you some time—time to heal, to regain a sense of who you are.”

“You think so?”

He smiled, chuckled again. “Hell, I don’t know,” he confessed. “But I do know that if he loves you, he’ll be here. Love has a funny way of making you do things sometimes . . .”

“Is that why you made Grandma your mate?” she teased.

Cain shrugged, his smile widening as a slight blush filtered into his cheeks. “That was just plain dumb luck on my part.”

“You think so?”

Lifting his eyebrows, he sighed. “Hell, yes,” he admitted.

“I miss him, Grandpa,” she admitted quietly, her voice dropping low.

Cain didn’t reply as he slipped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her close to his side.

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Ryomaru made a face as he wandered through the debris.

“So what the fuck happened here?” InuYasha grumbled as he stood back, as he surveyed the carnage that they’d found.

“Looks like someone beat us to it,” Evan muttered, scooting what used to be a microscope with the toe of his boot. “Did a hella good job, wrecking the place, whoever it was . . .”

InuYasha snorted as he turned on his heel and strode toward the door. There wasn’t anything up there that drew his interest, anyway. A bunch of mangled equipment in what he figured used to be a laboratory. It wasn’t familiar in the least, not from what he’d seen on the few bits of footage that he’d seen. Ryomaru had brought a couple of those damned data cards with him so that InuYasha could see exactly who and what they were looking for.

Heading for the stairwell, he didn’t bother to wait for the other two. The three hunters were upstairs, checking those levels. He figured that they’d find the same thing up there, anyway. Whoever had decimated this place *had* done a hella good job with it . . .

Grimacing when his cell phone vibrated against his hip, he pulled it out of his pocket as he jogged down the stairs. “Oi, wench,” he greeted.

Kagome sighed. “Find anything?” she asked.

InuYasha grunted. “Keh! The place has been abandoned,” he remarked. “Someone already busted it up, too.” He could hear Ryomaru and Evan following close behind.

“Sesshoumaru called a bit ago. He wants you to call him back after you’ve talked to Cain.”

“Damned bastard. He wants answers, let him come down here, himself,” he muttered.

“Gin called, too,” Kagome went on smoothly, ignoring InuYasha’s outburst. “She said Samantha wants to go back to work.”

InuYasha made a face as he pushed out of the stairwell. This level—the basement—there were a hell of a lot of unpleasant smells, damn it . . . All manner of base odors, all wrapped together in a putrid stench . . . “She ready for that?”

Kagome sighed. “That’s just it. No one is completely sure.”

InuYasha covered his nose with his arm and grunted. “Call you back later,” he muttered.

“Okay,” she agreed. “Bye.”

Stowing the phone in his pocket once more, InuYasha sneezed and flicked his ears.

“Jesus God,” Evan complained as he stepped out of the stairwell with Ryomaru close behind.

“No shit,” Ryomaru grumbled.

The three split up, checking the rooms along the corridor. InuYasha yanked open one door only to jerk it closed once more. The entire room was covered in human waste, or so it seemed. Splattered up on the ceiling, the walls . . . he hadn't gotten more than a glimpse of it, but that had been enough. It was one of the ones from the surveillance video . . .

Gritting his teeth as tears sprang to his eyes, he stuck his arm out, smashing the next door open.

It was a containment area of some sort. Uttering a low growl, InuYasha narrowed his eyes at the ominous looking cage in the middle of the room. Stepping inside, his scowl deepened as an eerily familiar aura resonated in his mind; one that ought to know but couldn't quite place . . . and another . . .

Buried below the more overwhelming odors . . .

Following the scent that he recognized, he strode over to the small cot against the wall. Lifting the blanket, he brought it to his nose, wincing as the scent came to him: the unmistakable scent of his granddaughter. There was another smell, too, one that InuYasha recognized: the one she swore was her mate. He didn't dwell on that, though. On the one hand, he was satisfied enough that they'd ultimately located the place where Sam had been confined for three months. On the other?

Damn, it ticked him off that he wouldn't be able to wreck the place, himself.

Ryomaru strode into the room and stopped short—so short that Evan barreled into him, sending Ryomaru stumbling forward. With a very pronounced snort, the hanyou whirled around, clouting Evan on the head with his fist. Evan shot his uncle a grin. “Sorry, man,” he said.

InuYasha stomped over, tossing the blanket at his son. “Well?”

Ryomaru sniffed it and nodded. “So she *was* here.”

InuYasha snorted. “She met him here?” he demanded, waving a hand at the blanket.

Evan sniffed it and shook his head, his expression serious all over again. “I don’t know,” he admitted, looking entirely irritated.

Ryomaru shrugged and wadded up the blanket. “Makes sense, dunnit? I mean, he got her out of here, right?”

InuYasha shook his head, unsure what to make of it.

“You don’t think . . .”

Both hanyou turned to stare at Evan, who was scowling at the floor.

“Think what?” Ryomaru demanded.

Evan shrugged off handedly, a little too casually. “You don’t think he’s one of the doctors, do you?”

InuYasha’s gaze darkened as his jaw clenched tight. “He’d damn well better not be,” he muttered. “I’ll rip him apart if he is . . .”

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The man gasped and moaned softly, shaking his head as he hung limply from the restraints that held him upright in the center of the room. Kurt kicked the lever that pulled the chains a little tighter, pulling his feet apart, pulling his arms out straighter. The only things holding him up were those chains. As they groaned and creaked, Kurt ignored the pained screams, the cries to God or whatever entity was out there. Arms and legs held so taut that Kurt could see every single muscle in those limbs, he kicked the lever once more to turn it off. "Tell me again, Dr. Thurman . . . is she your child?"

"I . . . I don't . . . no . . . kid . . ." Thurman gasped.

Striding over to the bastard's side, Kurt reached out, slapped his face. "Wrong answer," he gritted out.

Thurman's head bobbed slightly as he turned to look at Kurt, his gaze filled with terror, horror . . . fear.

"You killed her mother, didn't you? You fucked her, you knocked her up, you took her baby, and you killed her."

"It w . . . was just . . . an experiment," he half-whined. "Th-they're not human . . . not human . . . not human . . ."

A flash of memory shot through Kurt's head: a little demon with black hair and brown eyes, stuck in the body of a human . . .

"Not human," Kurt growled, striding over to the control once more. "Well, if you're human, let's see if you go to meet your God when you die."

"*No!*" the man cried, breaking down into pathetic sobs. "No, please, no!"

Kurt snorted and kicked the lever, letting it pull his body another fraction of an inch before he turned it off once more. ‘*Six feet tall, blonde hair, blue eyes—the all-American boy,*’ Kurt supposed, ‘*and complete and total bastard, through and through.*’

“Give me one good reason not to kill you,” Kurt ground out.

Thurman sobbed, blubbered incoherently.

“You’re running out of time, and I’m running out of patience,” Kurt pointed out.

Thurman sniffled and choked back a sob, looking entirely defeated, like a man waiting on death row. “I-I’m engaged,” he blurted, his voice rising with the one wild hope.

“Oh, yeah?” Kurt said, his eyebrows lifting. “Get married? The little wife? A dog? Maybe a cat to keep her happy?”

Thurman’s gaze lit up just a little. He really thought he was getting to Kurt, didn’t he? “Y-yeah . . . yeah . . .”

Kurt nodded, pacing slowly as he crossed his arms over his chest and rubbed his chin. “Couple kids? Move into a small house in the suburbs with a white picket fence and a minivan?”

“Yeah . . .”

Kurt strolled over to the prep table nearby, pulled on a pair of biohazard gloves. “There’s just one thing wrong with that,” he said as he picked up the scalpel and held it up for Thurman to see. “You already *have* a daughter, you son of a bitch, and if you think someone like you deserves to propagate your spawn, think again.”

The man's shrieks drowned out the sound of anything else as Kurt grasped his balls and cut them off. Tossing them onto the floor along with the scalpel, the deafening screams echoing in his head. Kurt ground his teeth together as he grabbed the state-of-the-art, portable cautery unit he'd found in one of the examination rooms and sealed the wound. As Thurman sobbed, Kurt strode over, grabbing the severed scrotum off the floor. Dropping them into a jar that he'd already prepared with formaldehyde, he topped it off with the liquid and screwed a cap onto it. "Here you go, Dr. Thurman," he said, setting the jar onto the floor in front of him with a dull thud. "You can keep those."

"You bastard!" Thurman sobbed, his pupils slightly dilated but his incoherent babble deafening. Kurt figured that the pain would have been enough to put him into shock. Obviously not . . . "You bastard! She isn't a child! She's a monster! A demon! She never should have been born! Don't you get it? I'll kill you! I'll—"

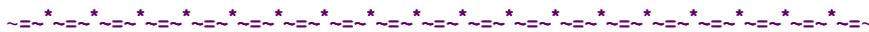
"Like you killed the doctor that tried to get her out of here? Is that what you mean?" Kurt cut in. Yanking off the teal rubber gloves, tossing them aside, he strode forward, grasping the fire axe he'd broken out of one of the glass emergency stashes. The effect might have been more impressive had the bastard-doctor even noticed. As it was, he was too busy sobbing and crying like a child, too busy muttering dire invectives that he had no way of backing up. "Shut your miserable face," Kurt growled.

A small sound drew his attention; a little whine, a little scrape. Kurt blinked and looked down, wincing at the sight of the tiny girl. Staring up at him through eyes so wide, and she slowly held up her hand. She wanted more candy, didn't she? That's why she'd ventured out of the room where he'd left her earlier after he'd tried to get her to eat a little sandwich, to no avail. She didn't seem to understand, preferring to eat the dog kibble that was tossed in a bowl in the cubicle where she'd lived for far too long.

Thurman's reddened gaze fell on her as another round of sobs broke free. "On second thought," Kurt said, turning her, shielding her from seeing what she clearly did not understand. "I'll let you live, but don't forget. I stuck a tracker in you, Dr. Thurman. I'll

know where you are and what you're doing, every single moment for the rest of your miserable life." Carefully scooping up the child who whined and pushed against him as he headed for the door, Kurt paused in the doorway and looked back at him once more. "Give your daughter's regards to your fiancée," he said.

Then he turned on his heel and walked out of the room.



**Final Thought from Belnicce:**  
**Back to work ...?**

## Chapter 60

# Kurt's Cross-Country Odyssey

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“You’re not going to find candy there, you know.”

With a squeak and a mad scramble of arms and legs, the little girl tumbled off the bed, scampering under the one he’d put her in the night before in such a way that it reminded Kurt of a spider scooting up a wall . . .

He sighed. Waking up with a child frisking him for candy was definitely one of the stranger ways to start the day . . .

“I left it all in the car,” he told her, knowing damn well that she really was listening. Since he’d opened his eyes yesterday, only to find her covered from head to foot in chocolate, he figured that the car was the safest place, all things considered . . . That was only bad since he’d had to fight for nearly an hour and a half to get her into the bathtub right before bed, too . . .

Shaking his head as he looked away from the large and unblinking owlish gaze peering out from under the bed at him, he sighed once more. He didn’t know how it happened. He hadn’t meant to bring her along. The trouble was, he had no idea what to do with her otherwise. She was too little to leave by herself, of course, and given where he’d found her, he couldn’t just dump her off at the welfare department, either, and even if that a remote possibility, she’d freaked out when he’d walked outside the facility with her, raking at him—it was a damn good thing she didn’t have the razor sharp claws that the little demon possessed—and trying to climb further up his body—she was already held against his shoulder—to the point that she’d ended up, wrapped around his head until

he'd managed to talk her down, promising her candy if she'd just let him carry her, instead . . .

Then was her first car ride, and that was just not something that he wanted to remember, at all. He'd planned on at least getting over the border into another state, but with the absolute volume in which she could screech convincing him otherwise, he'd found a hotel pretty quickly. The concierge gave him the weirdest look—not surprising, he figured, given her bedraggled appearance in the filthy smock, and given the idea that she was still wailing and trying to scramble up his shoulder onto his head again . . .

So the first order of business was coaxing her into the bath—a huge mistake, if ever there was one. Oh, she was fine as long as she sat outside the tub and peered over the side, but once he made to stick her in it, she screamed bloody murder, wrapping all of her spindly limbs around his leg and holding on for dear life. So he'd had the bright idea to stick his leg into that tub, and that was a mistake, too. Shimmying up his body, and once more wrapping herself around his head, it had taken nearly all evening just to get her pried away and cleaned up. Of course, it didn't help that the poor girl was chafed all over; reddened and ruddy from half-assed care. Grimacing as he tried to wash her thoroughly but gently as she clung to his arm and sobbed, he wasn't entirely sure what to do with her.

In the end, he was afraid to leave her in the room by herself, but he also didn't feel quite up to tormenting her by forcing her into a store, either. A quick call down to the front desk and the mention of a nice payment for anyone willing to run to said-store for him solved the dilemma. Twenty minutes later, one of the bellhops was knocking on the door with a bag from a nearby drugstore that contained cream for the diaper rash that covered most of the child's bottom. Unfortunately, it was too late by the time he got around to noticing that he didn't have any kind of undergarment for her to wear, he'd heaved a sigh and duct taped a hotel towel around her since the stores had closed by the time he'd realized his folly.

And then, of course, was the Hair Debacle of 2071, or so he'd deemed it. When he'd thought that she hadn't had her hair combed in a while, he'd been wrong. If she'd ever had it combed, he'd eat his boots. Upon the first tug of his comb, she'd howled once more, this time loudly enough to bring the staff upstairs to ask if he needed 'assistance'. In the end, he'd given up, taking a pair of scissors he had in his bag and cutting off all her hair. It was, of course, back by morning, and smooth and glossy, thank goodness.

But her hair would have been the least of his worries, as far as that went. So exhausted the night before from fighting her into the tub, he'd neglected to check one very important thing—a thing that he'd discovered to his absolute horror the next morning.

She wasn't potty trained, not in the least. The bed he'd put her in was entirely soiled. Apparently her candy diet was a really, really bad idea, and he'd had to repeat the whole bath trauma with her.

Then she didn't have any clothes since he'd tossed the smock into the trash can, so he'd pulled one of his tee-shirts over her head. It hung like a sack on her tiny frame, but at least it was clean . . . So after paying the hotel a lot extra for having ruined a perfectly good set of sheets—and the mattress too, more than like—he'd finally put her in the car he'd rented and drove to the nearest department store where he'd learned that they frowned upon opening bags of diapers to test the size against the girl's bare bottom. The entire time he was trying to size her up, she kept her face buried against his shoulder, crying softly with her hands smashed over her ears—ears that looked entirely human though perhaps a little rounder.

The saleswoman who brusquely informed him that opening all the bags was simply unnecessary had given him the sternest look he'd gotten since primary school. He could see the wheels turning in her head. She'd thought that he was one of those no-account fathers who didn't know what the hell he was doing. Then he'd grabbed about ten boxes of baby wipes, a family sized bag of Hersey's kisses, nabbed a few dresses and a pair of shoes that she'd yanked off her feet and chucked out the window twenty minutes later on

the Interstate. He'd dressed her and diapered her in the car—another adventure that he didn't particularly care to think about—and they were off . . .

Now if he could just convince her that she didn't need to crawl onto his head whenever she got freaked out, he'd be ahead of the game . . . maybe . . .

Sitting up with a sigh and wondering how well she'd cooperate if he tried to get her to go to a real restaurant, he shot her another glance. She hadn't moved out from under the bed, but she was watching him intently. "Aren't you hungry?" he asked, holding out a hand to her. She shrank back a little further, and he scratched his head. No doubt about it, he had his work cut out for him . . .

"If you don't come out of there, I can't give you candy," he pointed out with a raised eyebrow.

She seemed to scoot forward just a bit.

"You want some candy?" he asked.

She scooted forward a little more.

"Come on," he coaxed. "If we get moving, you can have the candy when we get into the car."

She might not have understood all of what he'd said, but she did understand 'candy' and 'car'. With a little whine—she didn't like the car at all—she shook her head but edged closer to the side.

Smothering a yawn with the back of his hand, he stared at the child thoughtfully. "C'mere, stinky-butt," he muttered, leaning over and stretching out his fingers to reach the bag of diapers he'd dropped there last night.

She giggled. He shook his head. Pulling out a diaper and the box of wipes, he got up and grabbed a little blue dress out of the plastic department store bag. She crawled out a little farther, eyeing the dress with avid interest and watched as he pulled the sticker price tag off the garment.

Scampering out from under the bed, she slowly edged toward him.

“What?” he deadpanned, giving her the eye. “You like this?”

She nodded slowly.

“Well, let’s check your diaper first. Then you can put it on,” he said.

She frowned at him since she’d done nothing but cry the day before when he’d changed her diaper. Not surprising since her parts were completely chafed and raw. It had been enough to tick him off all over again, hadn’t it? Those assholes hadn’t bothered to take care of even the most essential of her needs. There was something fundamentally wrong with that. Even on the basest of levels, that they hadn’t taken care of their overall investment had been stupid, and he knew enough from her behavior to understand that they hadn’t done a damn thing to try to teach her anything. If he believed the story with which Cabot had regaled him, then either her mother hadn’t been able to speak or . . . or she had chosen not to. He didn’t know which one of those reasons were the truth, but either way . . .

Crawling onto the bed, she flopped down, spread-eagle, exactly the way he’d told her to when he’d tried to put that first diaper on her. She wasn’t stupid at all, was she? In fact, Kurt reasoned as he pulled the tapes open and made a face, pulling the diaper back, he rather thought that she was fairly bright.

“And smelly,” he muttered, squeezing his eyes closed as he tried not to breathe too

deeply. “Ugh . . . you’re kind of gross; you know that?”

She just blinked at him as Kurt grabbed about ten wipes to clean her off. “Why couldn’t you be a boy?” he muttered, stuffing the used wipes into an empty bag and reaching for more. “At least I’d know how to clean up a boy . . .”

Stuffing her fingers into her mouth, she laughed suddenly. Kurt shook his head. “God, you reek,” he informed her as he tossed and reached for even more wipes. Satisfied that he’d gotten it all off of her, he used another handful of wipes to shove the used diaper into the bag and tied it closed. “How about we make a deal?” he ventured as he grabbed a few tissues and the tube of diaper rash ointment to smear it around. He wasn’t sure why it surprised him that she wasn’t nearly as red and raw as she had been yesterday. She was like Samantha, right? Surely she had to heal fast, too. He just couldn’t quite credit how fast. Still, he went ahead and slathered the ointment on her for good measure . . . “You don’t do *that* for the rest of the day, and I’ll give you more candy,” he promised.

She looked thoughtful for a moment then smiled a little bashfully. “T . . . tanny?” she said in a very tiny, very high pitched and very cute tone of voice.

Kurt blinked and stared at her. “Did you . . .? Did you just say ‘candy?’”

She held up both her hands as though she were asking for something. “Tanny?” she repeated. “Tanny?”

“Ah . . . you . . . you did,” he breathed then barked out a terse laugh. “All right,” he agreed. “Just let me check on those bas—those men,” he amended since he wasn’t entirely certain exactly what words she’d pick up just from hearing them.

She whined a little as he tossed the soiled diaper bag and tissues into the can near the bureau. It only took a minute for him to wash his hands, and when he stepped out of the bathroom a moment later, it was to find her crouched atop the dresser, rifling through

the knapsack. “No,” he said, hefting her off the furniture and setting her on the floor then tugging the rumpled pink cotton dress over her head. “Go put your dress on.”

He hurriedly checked all the doctors’ whereabouts. Not surprising, really . . . all of them seemed to be more than happy to stay the hell away from their perspective facilities. Frowning at the strange sense of emptiness that assailed him, he sighed. He’d figured that there’d at least be some small bit of satisfaction after he’d closed them all down. There wasn’t; not really, just a quiet resignation, and the deep rooted knowledge that the little demon was safe.

Doing a double take when he glanced at the girl, he shook his head but smiled wanly. She’d managed to pull the dress on part way, but she was struggling to get her head through the neck hole and as a result, she was turning circles. Closing the computer, he heaved a sigh and rolled his eyes, then stood up and wandered over to tug her dress down. “Better?”

She smiled up at him and held up her hands. “Tanny?” she said.

Kurt chuckled and shook his head. “All right; all right,” he agreed as he gathered their things together. “Come on . . .”

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*“Kurt . . .”*

*Groaning softly, he blinked at the blood red sky that floated overhead. “N-n-n . . .”*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*“Sleepy,” he muttered, rolling onto his side and letting his eyes drift closed once more.*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*The gentlest brush of fingertips on his cheek . . . They tickled . . .*

*“Kurt . . .”*

*“Hmm?”*

*The soft giggles . . . he knew that sound . . . “Isn’t it time, Kurt?”*

*“T-time . . .?”*

*“You said you’d go there. You promised.”*

*Opening his eyes a crack, he frowned as he slowly focused on the little girl’s face. “C-Carrie . . .”*

*She scampered to her feet and spun around in circles, giggling softly—always laughing . . . “Can we go now?” she asked suddenly. “You want to see her. I do, too!”*

*“I . . .”*

*She shook her head, her golden curls bouncing with her movements; eyes shining, bright . . .*

*“Why do you make me wait?” she pouted.*

*“Carrie . . .?”*

*Cheeks touched with a hint of pink, she finally smiled at him. “C’mon, Kurt! You promised; you promised; you promised . . .”*

*Gripping his forehead tightly, he frowned. She . . . she looked . . . normal—completely normal . . . The little sister he remembered . . . and not the ghastly visage he'd come to dread . . . "Carrie? How . . .?"*

*"Aren't you going to keep your promise? Your promise is a vow that you make before God . . ."*

*Scowling at those words—his father had said them to him, hadn't he?—Kurt shook his head slowly. "I'm trying, Carrie . . . I'm trying . . ."*

*"No, you're not," she said, planting one hand on her hip and wagging a finger in front of his face. "You promised, but you aren't going to do it, are you? You promised, but you're not . . ."*

*"I don't know where to find them," he confessed quietly, feeling the absolute pain of loss all over again. "I've been looking . . ."*

*"No, no, no," she sang. "You know where to find her. She's in Maine."*

*". . . Maine . . .?"*

*Carrie shrieked in laughter suddenly, throwing herself into his lap. "Samantha, Kurt . . . you promised we'd go see her."*

*Kurt's gaze widened as he stared at Caroline's curls. "S . . . Samantha . . ."*

*"Because you like her, right? Because she made you not so sad anymore."*

*"But she's a . . ."*

*Caroline wiggled around, leaned up to kiss his cheek. "She's not a monster, Kurt. She sings to me."*

*“You . . . you like . . . her?”*

*“Can we go see her now? Can we? Can we? Please?”*

Kurt’s eyes popped open in the semi-darkness of the hotel room with the dream still thick in his mind and the sound of her name still touching his lips . . . “Samantha,” he murmured into the quiet. *‘Carrie . . . wants to . . . see you . . .’*

The tiny body beside him wiggled a little closer, and he pushed himself up on his elbow. He’d put the girl in the other bed; he knew he did. It figured she wouldn’t stay there . . . Come to think of it, he’d yet to meet a woman who actually *did* what men told them to do . . .

Heaving a sigh as a little smile touched his lips, Kurt shook his head and pulled the blanket up over her tiny body, tucking it securely under her chin.

*“Can we go see her now? Can we? Can we? Please?”*

*‘Go see her . . .’*

He shouldn’t. He should just stay away from her, shouldn’t he? After all, how could his presence do anything but remind her of the things that had happened to her? There were so many reasons why he ought to stay away from her, for her own peace of mind. After everything was said and done, the truth of it was that the things he done for whatever reason, did it matter? She deserved a lifetime of smiles and someone who knew how to laugh . . .

Still, he’d thought of it before as more of a fleeting thought than a viable option, but . . . But her family . . . they had money, didn’t they? Even if he didn’t know this for sure, it stood to reason, didn’t it? They’d lived in one of the most exclusive hotels in the United States for three months, hadn’t they? They’d spent months searching for her, and to do

that, they had to have the funds to back them up, so . . .

So perhaps they'd have more manpower available to keep tabs on the researchers. Keeping track of the three in Chicago and Thurman since he wasn't likely to leave that bastard to anyone else would take consume a lot of his time as it was. If he turned the information and tracking codes over to them, they could very likely have a much simpler time with it . . .

Besides that, he had to figure out what to do with *her*, too, didn't he? The very deliberate sound of giggling broke into his thoughts, and he wasn't surprised to find her staring at him with her fingers shoved into her mouth. She'd been doing that a lot today . . .

He sighed. "Why is it that you don't sleep at night like normal people?" he demanded.

She giggled more. "Tanny," she said around her slobbery fingers.

Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Kurt couldn't help the little smile that surfaced, either. "You're kind of a pest, aren't you?"

Her answer was another round of laughter.

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"Come on, now, sit down . . ."

Casting a surreptitious glance around and painfully aware that many of the people in the roadside diner were now staring at him, Kurt grabbed the child around the waist and set her down. "It's not nice to stare, you know," he pointed out.

She giggled at him.

He sighed, digging the last Hershey's Kiss out of his pocket and scooting it toward her on the table.

It took her all of two seconds to devour it.

"Tanny!" she hollered.

Kurt heaved a sigh. Four days into their cross-country trip, and the child was slowly starting to come out of her shell—well, sort of. She still tended to get nervous and shy when faced with crowds or wide open spaces, but as long as he had a pocketful of candy, he could pretty well coax her into doing things that otherwise frightened her.

Of course, that did have its drawbacks, too . . .

She tended to get a little hyper if he gave her too much candy, but she ended up whining if he didn't give her as much as she wanted, too. He'd ended up having to buy a car seat for her yesterday, as well. The police officer that had pulled him over as they'd trekked through northern Texas had seemed fairly insistent upon it. He'd even given them a ride to the store to buy it and a ride back to the car that he'd forbidden to let Kurt drive until it had a properly installed car seat and paid the five hundred dollar fine . . .

That had lasted all of ten minutes before she'd started wailing bloody murder because she didn't want to be confined, so Kurt had stopped long enough to buy more candy that he'd fed to her until they reached the state line—and she'd figured out how to unfasten the car seat . . .

"What can I get you, sugar?" the waitress asked as she stopped beside the table.

Kurt shot the child a quick glance. She was starting to squirm again, which meant she

wanted to look over the back of the seat. “Uh . . . a cheeseburger and fries,” he replied then leaned toward the girl. “You want to try a cheeseburger?”

“Tanny!” she hollered.

Kurt nodded since he’d figured he’d get that response. “Two, please,” he said.

“And to drink?”

He looked at her again just in time to catch the back of her collar to keep her from disappearing under the table. “A milk and a soda.”

The waitress winked and smiled. “Okay. I’ll be right back with your food, sweetie. Don’t give your daddy too hard a time, eh?”

“Oh, uh, she isn’t . . .” Trailing off with a sigh as the waitress hurried away, Kurt shook his head. He seemed to get that wherever he took her, too, the assumption that she was his daughter. It didn’t bother him nearly as much as it unsettled him.

Pulling her back up and smoothing down her dress, Kurt slowly shook his head. “Oh, you didn’t,” he muttered.

She smiled happily at him. “Tanny!”

Blowing out a deep breath, he stood up and reached for her. “Come on, stinky-butt. I thought we had a deal . . .”

Before he could grab her, though, she ducked under the table, dashing across the floor toward the cash register near the entrance. The register sat on top of a low glass counter with a display of candy on the shelves beneath. Thanking God or whatever entity was up there for the fact that she didn’t actually possess claws, he strode over to pick her up as

she scratched futilely at the glass.

“Tell you what,” he said as he hefted her off her feet and headed out the door and toward the car to change her stinky butt, “you cooperate for the rest of the meal, and I’ll buy you some candy before we leave. Deal?”

She giggled, happily kicking her feet. He grimaced when she managed to jam her heel very close to his *parts*. Shifting her to the side with an arm over her stomach, he sighed. Somehow, he didn’t think that she was going to go along with that deal, either . . .

No doubt about it, life was so much simpler before he’d figured out that not all demons were . . . demons . . .



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
Kids ... are worse ... than demons ...

## Chapter 61

### Just to See Her

-----

“Tanny.”

“No.”

“Tanny?”

“No.”

“Tanny!”

Kurt made a face and flopped back on the bed with a very tired sigh. “Stinky-butt, it’s nearly three in the morning—no ‘tanny’.”

She sat up as her bottom lip popped out. “No tanny?” she said.

Kurt blinked and uttered a low groan, forcing his gaze away from her. “That is *so* not fair,” he pointed out.

She smashed her little palms over her eyes and whimpered. “Daddy, no tanny?”

Kurt screwed up his face and grunted. That, in his opinion, was even *more* unfair. She’d picked up that horrid little habit a couple days ago at one of the diners when she’d heard one too many waitresses call him that . . .

He managed to stay still a whole three minutes before he tossed the blankets aside and got up—last night was only about one minute, if that . . .

Grabbing a handful of candy out of the small cabinet mounted on the wall of the rather ratty motel room, he tossed one into her lap and pocketed the rest as he shuffled over to the desk since she was nowhere near tired.

He'd tried sleeping and letting her wander around, but he'd figured out that the more comfortable she was with him, the more daring she grew, and the more daring she grew, the more mischief she got into, as well. Last night was the shaving cream explosion. The night before, she'd eaten an entire tube of toothpaste. She'd helped herself to a full bag of Hershey's Kisses a few nights ago, and to be completely honest, he was afraid to see what she'd get into tonight if he left her to her own devices . . . Too damn curious for her own good, and not that he didn't understand that. After all, she'd spent the majority of her life thus far locked away in a glass cube . . .

Pulling open the leather case that he'd purchased to put all the information that he intended to give them into, he frowned.

He'd considered hiring a courier to deliver the case, but he wasn't entirely certain that the rumors he'd uncovered were true. Having spent the evening in a small restaurant near the motel where he was staying, he'd found out that there was, in fact, a family close by that possessed what they called, 'exotic' looks. Evidently, it wasn't surprising to hear of silver haired people in the area. That was enough for him.

They'd said that the family lived outside of a nearby town named Bevelle in a huge mansion on the ocean . . . Apparently very friendly though a little on the reserved side, they said . . . Anyway, although he was fairly certain that this family—Zelig, their name was—was the right one, he wasn't about to leave anything to chance; not in this . . .

*'Zelig . . .'*

That was the name that the second guy he'd talked to had given, wasn't it? When Kurt had called to check on Samantha, the second guy he'd talked to, the one who had told him that she had made it home all right . . .

Still, he had to make sure, didn't he? Had to be positive that it really was her family before he dumped this sort of information on them . . .

*'You're a damn liar, Drevin, you know it? Why don't you admit the real reason you're dragging your feet? You want to see her. You know you do. Even if you say you don't, you know that's really just a lie . . .'*

Rubbing his forehead, he tried not to think about it. It didn't matter, anyway; not really. What he wanted, what he felt . . . Pushing the thought to the back of his mind, he grimaced. Even if he wanted to be with her, her family had to know about those data cards, didn't they? And if they knew about those . . .

A tiny hand reached under his arm, sneaking toward the breast pocket of his tee-shirt. He swatted at it with the papers in his hand. She giggled.

Digging out a piece of candy, he handed it to her and shook his head when she laughed.

She was the other problem, wasn't she? Just what the hell was he going to do with her? He couldn't just leave her, could he? But . . .

But . . . he couldn't take her with him, either. If Samantha's family had seen those videos . . . if they knew about him . . . If things went awry . . .

He sighed. The child had already seen more than enough ugliness in her short life. He couldn't let her see more, even if the idea of leaving her somewhere bugged the living, breathing hell out of him . . .

“Daddy, tanny?” she asked as she tugged on his arm.

Kurt blinked and gave her another candy. She popped it into her mouth and gurgled around it happily. He reached over to muss her hair then got up to grab a soda out of the dorm-sized refrigerator.

An insistent grunting stopped him before he’d taken the first sip, and he glanced down at the groping hands that swung at the can but couldn’t quite reach it.

Heaving a sigh, he let her take the can. She’d refused to drink the milk or to even try the real food that he’d bought for her along the way, but she’d nabbed his soda quickly enough, and he’d ended up bringing her across country on a diet of candy, soda, and the occasional Twinkie . . . “Father of the Year material, for sure,” he muttered with a shake of his head.

A particularly nasty fart broke the silence, and Kurt winced. It hadn’t taken him long to learn that noises like that one tended to be accompanied by things that no man should ever have to witness. Before he could say anything, though, another one—longer, louder, and way fouler by far—cut him off.

“Come on, stinky-butt,” he muttered, taking the can she’d emptied in short order and tossing it into the trashcan.

She giggled then belched loudly right in his ear when he picked her up and carried her to the bed. “Christ,” he muttered when he opened the diaper. “I am not going to miss *this*,” he decided as he grabbed some diaper wipes.

“Tanny?” she asked, oblivious to Kurt’s very real pain.

He didn't answer as he made quick work of removing the offending diaper and positioning her on the new one. Dumping a liberal amount of powder on her, he pulled the diaper up and fastened it into place. "I don't suppose you're sleepy yet?" he asked though he knew the answer to that question already.

She giggled and slipped off the bed, darting around the room as the sugar in the candy kicked in. Letting out a deep breath, he shook his head but figured that she'd be all right long enough for him to go to the bathroom, himself.

If nothing else, having the girl underfoot kept him on his toes, so to speak. It also made things like showering a little daunting, too, since she still wasn't keen on taking baths, but she didn't seem to have any qualms at all about peeking into the shower while he was in there. The first time she'd done that, he had thought for sure that the police were going to bust down his door and charge him with some sort of crime. So he'd tried locking the door the next time, but she'd cried the entire time.

It was just a no-win situation, he supposed . . .

Then he'd thought that if she had something to distract her, he could sneak into the bathroom without her realizing it. Cartoons hadn't worked—she just didn't understand them, he supposed—and the crayons that he'd bought for her ended up in her stomach when she mistook them for candy. As a last-ditch effort, he'd gotten her a stuffed animal—a teddy bear. That seemed to do the trick. She hadn't let the bear out of her sight for more than a few minutes since.

He'd just started to pee when he heard the ripping sound. Glancing over his shoulder in time to see her step out of the diaper he'd just put on her, he grimaced as she wandered over to him. "Uhh," he muttered, cheeks pinking despite the fact that she was just a little child, and he knew it. "G-go put your diaper back on!"

She watched him pee with avid interest, and Kurt stifled a groan of dismay. He tried to stop the flow, but that was easier said than done, and before he could manage it, she hiked up her dress, catching the hem under her chin, thrust out her little pelvis to imitate the way he was standing, he supposed, and she started to pee.

“*Abbbb!*” Kurt complained, hurriedly putting himself to rights. The he grabbed her, holding her at arms’ length, and set her on the toilet. “You’re a *girl!*” he grumbled. “Girls sit down when they pee!”

But she was already finished, it seemed, and letting out a deep, defeated breath, Kurt slowly shook his head. The bathroom was a mess, and she definitely needed a bath . . . At least she’d left the teddy bear out in the room, or she’d pitch a fit when he tried to throw it away, he was sure . . .

Still, he’d really hoped, hadn’t he? Confronting Samantha’s family was going to be hard enough. But as he cleaned up the floor and started the bath water, he sighed. The idea of actually getting into bed was slowly slipping further and further away . . .

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The ticking of the clock was obscenely loud in the quiet. Another night just like the one before, just like the one before that, just like the one before that . . . Night after night after night, it was all the same . . .

Rolling onto her side, Samantha let out a deep breath and rubbed her hot, gritty eyes. With every day that passed, she felt it; the nearing of the precipice . . . and the long drop below . . .

‘*Taijya . . . where are you . . .?*’

The nights . . .

Those were the hardest to deal with, weren't they? The memories were so poignant, so beautiful . . . and somehow horrifying, too, weren't they . . .?

During the day, she could smile and pretend that she was all right, couldn't she? She could laugh and smile and be all those things that everyone wanted of her, but . . .

Somehow after the sun went down, when those memories returned with the falling of the night . . . The smiles and the laughter . . . the way his eyes sparkled and shone . . . and he'd tried so hard, hadn't he? Bringing her things because he wanted to make her happy . . . that's what he'd done, hadn't he? Those things may not have been big or expensive or fancy, but . . . but they'd meant the world to her . . . He hadn't really smiled much, but the boyish look of anxiety he'd get on his face as he waited to see if she liked what he'd done for her or not . . . It was . . .

She missed him.

*'But he promised he'd come, Samantha . . . you have to believe . . .'*

Smiling sadly at the pragmatic sound of her youkai voice, Samantha stared at the window, at the darkness outside. *'He promised,'* she told herself. Just that little reminder . . .

He would come. He'd said so, and she'd be waiting when he did. He missed her, didn't he, and even if he didn't miss her quite as much as she missed him, that was all right, too. He loved her; she knew he did. The raw emotion behind that one kiss was enough, wasn't it? In that moment, he hadn't tried to hide what he was feeling, and maybe it was something that he'd never meant to show her. That didn't matter, did it?

She knew. She remembered, and though many of her memories of that day were a little fuzzy and distorted, that one moment was not. That one moment would forever remain in her heart, in her mind, in her soul in that place that Kurt had hollowed out and filled with himself inside her. That was where he belonged, wasn't it?

No, it was just impatience on her part. She knew he was going to make good on his word; she just didn't know when, and the waiting was hard. Every day, she heard the whispers when people thought that she wasn't paying attention.

*"Do you really think this guy's her mate? How can he be when she's fine; just fine . . .?"*

*"Well, she's still not quite as healthy as she used to be . . . She really could stand to gain a few more pounds . . . maybe ten or even twenty . . ."*

*"If she goes back to work, will she be able to focus on her job . . .?"*

*"What if he's not really her mate? What if it's just that . . . what do they call it? Stockholm Syndrome . . .? Poor thing . . ."*

She'd heard them all, hadn't she? She'd heard the whispers and the innuendo . . . She pretended that she didn't hear them because that was what they wanted from her, but they'd see for themselves, wouldn't they? When he came for her, they'd see . . .

Maybe it wasn't entirely simple. She knew well enough that nothing worthwhile ever really was. She knew that he was still suffering from the feelings that he'd carried with him since his family was so brutally destroyed.

Still, he had gotten her out of there, had set her free . . . and even if he had despised what he thought she was in the beginning, she also knew that he had never, ever been cruel to her. He'd never tried to hurt her, never belittled or mocked her . . . He had simply been lost, hadn't he? Lost and alone . . . and just a little afraid . . .

That was all right, too. Being afraid of things that he didn't understand . . . She felt that way, herself; felt the same sense of fear when she considered what might have happened had he not come back. Yet everything happened for a reason, didn't it? She was meant to meet him, to talk to him, to get to know him . . . That was her reason for being in that awful place, and even if it didn't seem completely right, who was she to say that it was wrong, either?

All of those things that she'd experienced had changed her, had given her a wholly new perspective on those things that she'd taken for granted over the years. The simple joys that she savored every day were so much more profound to her now. Walking in a gentle spring rain . . . relaxing in a hot bath . . . savoring a fragrant cup of tea with her family close . . . sitting on a stool in her grandfather's studio in complete silence as she watched him work . . .

Those were all things that she'd thought that she'd never experience again—things that were beautiful in their absolute simplicity; the kinds of things that other people forgot.

And yet how many of those things had Kurt experienced in his lifetime? How many of those insular moments did he hold dear in his heart? Did he even remember things like that?

A thoughtful frown surfaced on her features, and she bit her lip. He would have memories like that if she had something to say about it. She would devote the rest of her life to showing him the joy of those moments . . . and he would laugh, wouldn't he? Smile and laugh . . . and know that life really was a beautiful thing, after all.

Tossing the blankets aside, she got up, wandered over to the window. Pushing herself up on her tiptoes, she unlatched the window—her father would have a fit if he found out about it—and shoved it open. The cool breeze that flowed inside was a welcome balm on her overwrought mind, a cleansing feeling that made her smile just a little.

Somewhere out there, he was looking for her; that's what she believed. She didn't know how she knew it or why, but she did, and as long as she knew it somewhere deep down . .

That was enough.

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*'Okay . . . I think . . . that's it . . .'*

Heaving a sigh as he hunched forward, elbows on the table as he scrubbed at his head, Kurt glanced at the clock and made a face. *'Six-thirty in the morning,'* he thought with a grimace. *'Damn it . . .'*

He started to push the chair back, but frowned when the right rear leg met with resistance. Glancing down, he spotted the cause and slowly shook his head even as a wan little smile quirked his lips. *'Now, why doesn't that surprise me . . .?'*

The girl had passed out right behind him, curled up on the floor with her butt high in the air and her face sort of smashed forward into a very warped-looking smile.

Carefully stepping over her, he bent down to pick her up, but paused as he stared at her. Her hair really was black, wasn't it? He chuckled, lifting a lock of her hair and holding it up to stare at it. His own hair was black, sure, but hers seemed somehow deeper, darker, richer, and against the stark paleness of her skin. It was remarkable, wasn't it? The little girl that he'd found cowering in that cell . . .

She really was cute. There was just something about those huge eyes of hers, framed so prettily with the longest, thickest eyelashes he'd ever seen, and whenever she gave him that pleading look of hers he gave in every time, didn't he?

No doubt about it, he was a sucker . . .

Scooping her up, he sat back, leaning against the foot of the bed as he settled her against his shoulder. She grunted a little, made a couple sucking sounds, but didn't wake up. Once she went to sleep, Kurt had learned that there wasn't much that could disturb her.

He frowned. He'd meant to put her on the bed, but for some reason, he didn't want to. Considering how long she'd lived at that facility, he highly doubted that she'd had much, if any, real interaction with people, and he knew that she had a habit of crawling into his lap at odd times—or onto his head, depending. Still, he had to wonder if her behavior was due to the idea that she wanted to belong with someone. It was a natural thing, wasn't it?

Looking back now, he could see it in himself, too, couldn't he? Even though he knew that his brief stay at the hospital after his family's death was something that he'd benefitted from, he could still remember the relief he'd felt when he'd first seen his aunt and uncle lingering in the doorway to take him home with them. He could recall the sense of belonging that had helped to ease the sense of loss . . .

But the difference was that Kurt did have that family, to start with, unlike her—the child who was nothing more than a macabre science experiment to her biological father—and if Kurt had one real regret, it was that he had let that bastard live. There was something completely unnatural about what Thurman had taken it upon himself to do, and the one to suffer for it?

Pulling her a little closer, Kurt gently stroked her hair. In her sleep, she cuddled closer to him, as though she simply needed to be near him. That thought was painful, wasn't it?

It brought too many things to mind: things that he hadn't dared to admit, not even to himself.

And yet he could hear her voice in his head. It had started out as a whisper when he'd first left California, but as he'd made his way across the United States, it had grown louder, more insistent, and far, far clearer. She was calling him, wasn't she? In her quiet voice and with her gentle laughter, she was calling out to him. There was a certain urgency to it, but not the kind that made him feel as though she were in trouble. No, it was more like she . . . like she missed him, and that . . .

Heaving a sigh, he shook his head, his gaze falling to the child sleeping in his arms. If he were smart, he'd pay someone to deliver the surveillance information to her family. If he were smart, he'd walk away before he could do any more damage. If he were smart, he'd let her forget him; get away from her before he hurt her again . . . If all he knew was how to destroy, then wouldn't he end up doing that to her in the end, too? Speaking of monsters and demons and right and wrong, and all those things had somehow converged, turning inside out until all that remained were deep blue eyes and the gentle trill of her laughter . . .

Letting his head fall back, he closed his eyes. Those things . . . the one real problem with those ideas . . .

It'd mean that he'd never see her again, didn't it?

And Kurt just didn't think he was strong enough to do that, either . . .



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
Tomorrow ..

## Chapter 62

### Trial by Fire

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“You’re sure this is the place?” Kurt asked dubiously as the cab squeaked to a stop at the junction of what seemed to be just a regular side road that disappeared up a steep slope and was hidden by dense trees.

“Yessir,” the young guy said. “Twenty-six seventy, please.”

Kurt got out and dug into his pocket, only to pull out a handful of candy—striped white and red peppermints. Gritting his teeth, he handed money through the window. The kid mumbled something or other, and Kurt waved him on. He could hear the call of birds flying out over the ocean, could smell the tangy breeze . . . A knot of trepidation twisted his belly, and he gritted his teeth.

This was the right place. Sight unseen, he could still feel the overwhelming power of their combined auras. It was a little intimidating—or a lot . . .

Letting out a deep breath, he squared his shoulders and started to walk, adjusting his grip on the case in his hands. He’d come this far, hadn’t he? There was no going back now . . .

He’d dropped the child off at the Child Protective Services office with a bag of her diapers, clothes, and her stuffed bear. The woman had eyed him suspiciously—no small wonder when the child started whimpering and calling him ‘daddy’. The woman asked him to stay, to talk to them for a moment. When the girl had wiggled free, only to scoot under the nearest desk, he’d taken the opportunity to slip out, unnoticed, telling himself

that it was for the best, even as the underlying knowledge that he really was the most contemptible bastard that ever drew breath assailed him . . . After all, he wasn't entirely sure that they'd ever let him walk away from this place, and even if he were able to . . . Well, he had another promise to keep, too, and that was definitely not something that a child needed to witness . . .

That was hollow knowledge, though, when the sound of her sobs still echoed in his ears . . .

And . . .

Wincing as the beat of his heart sped up, took on an erratic cadence, as his palms sweat profusely. Was she here . . .? The little demon—Samantha . . . was she . . . here?

He'd tried to tell himself over and over again that he just wanted to drop off the surveillance equipment, wanted to tell them that he was sorry for the part that he'd played in it all. He . . . he didn't want to see her—couldn't see her, could he? He couldn't stand to see her; not now. To see her would be the biggest mistake of his life, wouldn't it . . .?

That's what he'd told himself as he got dressed, as he stopped to stash most of the things that he wasn't bringing with him in a storage facility he'd rented. He'd even told himself that as he'd stared at the Child and Social Services office growing smaller and smaller in the rear window of the cab he'd hailed just after dropping off the child . . .

He didn't want to see her; no. In fact, it'd be better if he didn't, right? Better because . . . because if he saw her—spoke to her—touched her . . .

She'd decimate his resolve, wouldn't she? With nothing more than a simple look, a little smile, even a tear . . . Sitting awake for hours at a time as he wondered if the things he'd done in the name of vengeance for her . . . Those things . . . and the understanding that

had come to him without ceremony, without the heralds or the angels singing, but he'd known that it was the truth . . .

It wasn't nearly enough, and he knew that, too.

Cresting the hill, all he saw were more trees; trees that lined the somehow welcome pavement that wound around them, as though the driveway, itself, had yielded to the path of the trees . . . Some of the people he'd spoken to had mentioned that this place had once belonged to a famous but reclusive artist named Cain Zelig. Now it belonged to his son, they'd said—not a junior but another Caine Zelig . . . It made sense, didn't it? The tranquility of the forest was impossible to ignore, wasn't it? Was this the place where she'd built snowmen and dropped on the ground to create snow angels? Was this a place that provided a haven for her; the place where she'd called home . . .?

And yet this place . . . it felt like her, didn't it? The calm, the beauty . . . the perfection of the simple balance between life and death; the cycle that was understood and observed without the unrelenting harshness that prevailed in the rest of the world. As though it had somehow escaped the rest of the flow of time, the forest stood silent, ever-watchful . . . And she . . .

Closing his eyes for the briefest moment as an ache so intense opened deep inside him, for one fleeting second, he thought that he could feel her—not her aura or those hallmarks that he'd come to recognize, but the overwhelming gentleness of her, the woman. Youkai, hanyou, human, whatever . . . did she really have to be one or the other, or . . . or couldn't she just be 'Samantha' to him . . .?

Following the path, his own thoughts so convoluted, so twisted upon themselves that he wasn't paying nearly as much attention as he ought to, he stopped suddenly, his eyes widening as a soft rustle told him a minute too late that he wasn't alone, and then . . .

“Tajya . . .”

The word was soft, more of a breath than a spoken thing, and the next moment, he was lying flat on his back with a blur of silver bearing him down. “Little demon . . .”

Sobs—he heard them—mingled with incoherent words as she kissed his cheeks a hundred times, her body quivering as her emotions overrode a baser common sense. Uttering nonsensical words that came and went faster than he could comprehend them, she held onto him, crying, laughing . . .

“S-Samantha . . .” he whispered, closing his eyes, trying to tell himself that it wasn’t right; that she really didn’t feel so absolutely perfect to him . . . knowing deep down that he was fighting a losing battle—one that had been decided so very long ago on a cold October night as the skies had clouded over for the storms to come . . .

“I knew you’d be here,” she sniffled, snuggling against him as though it were the most natural thing in the world. “I knew it . . .”

He swallowed hard, tried to ignore the rioting sensations that her very proximity inspired. It was impossible, and he knew that, too. Had her eyes sparkled that much before? Shimmering with a myriad of tears that she hadn’t shed . . . eyelashes spiky as her unsteady laughter shot through him . . . She was there, she was vibrant . . . She was beautiful . . . “L-little demon . . .”

“What took you so long?” she murmured.

“I . . .”

She grasped his cheeks, held his face still, her lips warm, fluttering, almost timid as she kissed him. He groaned as his mind whispered that he needed to push her away, but he

couldn't, just couldn't . . . He'd known it, known deep down in the very heart of him . . . she was his weakness . . .

And somehow the fight ended before it ever began, a whisper of her aura as it surrounded him, cosseted him, comforted him; as the weeks of ugliness, the atrocities that he'd committed to ensure that she and those like her would forever be safe, melted away.

Her kiss was light, airy, bold and beautiful—everything that he'd come to know about her, wrapped up in an insular sensation, in quiet sighs and the softest groans. The softness of her, the heartbreaking knowledge that if he died in that moment, it'd be all right, too . . . And how often had he felt the same sense of everything in her, everything he'd ever wanted, and all those things that he hadn't even realized existed . . .

Her fingers in his hair, the taste of the tears on her lips . . . the culmination of the weeks that they'd been apart, and yet . . . and yet the underlying knowledge that this gossamer moment was never meant to be his . . . Still, he couldn't pull away from her, couldn't let her go . . . As though a part of him were dying, only to be reborn in her . . . because of her . . . and in spite of himself . . .

There was a certain innocence in her affection; an untouched quality that had somehow managed to flower once more. The tenderness in her trembling fingers as she twined them in his when he reached for her; when he tried to give a token resistance . . . and still, her tears flowed like the waters against the sand . . .

“What the . . .? Don't tell me you fucking asked her to bear your damn children, too . . .”

“*InuYasha* . . .” a female voice hissed.

“Well, they ain't making those babies out here!” the first voice growled.

Uttering a terse groan but unsure whether it was because of the interruption or because of what had to be one of the most compromising positions he'd ever been caught in, he peered around Samantha, not surprised to see another one that looked like her, though this one was male and very obviously displeased with the scene he'd stumbled upon. Arms crossed over his chest, he was staring at Kurt in the strangest sort of way, as though he recognized him somehow, but . . . but Kurt had no idea how that could possibly be.

The small woman beside him, though, gave Kurt pause. Long black hair that floated on the breeze, she kept trying to peer around the man while he kept shrugging her off, blocking her from view. But she was human—Kurt could sense this—and she possessed an enormous amount of spiritual energy—the same kind he did, even if he didn't really understand how he knew that, either . . .

The sound of that statement—harshly uttered but tinged with an underlying sense of confusion—broke through Kurt's haze-clouded mind. Samantha sighed and hugged him, as though she were unwilling to let him go. "Bear my . . . what . . .?" Kurt repeated with a shake of his head.

The woman behind the angry-looking one rolled her eyes and made a face as she stepped away from him and slowly ventured forward. Her dark eyes were troubled, and she shook her head as she stared. "Oh . . . my . . . In-InuYasha . . ." she said, tugging on the man's arm.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," he muttered, ears flicking as though he were irritated.

Kurt shook his head as even more confusion set in. He'd never seen those two in his life, and he knew that, too. So why were they staring at him so oddly? And why . . . why did they seem . . . *familiar* to him . . .?

"He *has* to be . . ." the woman murmured, her hands lifting to cover her mouth as the blood seemed to drain from her skin.

“Aw, hell . . . weren’t it enough to have to deal with him once already?” the man grumped.

“Grandma . . . Grandpa . . . this is—”

“Sami . . .!”

She laughed weakly and sat up, wiping her eyes with a shaking hand as she smiled sweetly at Kurt and turned to face the one that Kurt recognized as her father. Stepping out of the trees, he looked a little confused, but that confusion seemed to dissipate as he got a better look at Kurt. The flare of utter rage in the man’s gaze spoke volumes. Samantha didn’t seem to notice as she shot her father a happy grin. “Papa, this is Kurt. He—”

“You little bastard,” the man—her father—snarled, lunging at Kurt, his claws extended.

Samantha gasped, her expression registering her absolute astonishment. “Papa!” she screamed, throwing herself across Kurt’s chest to protect him. “No! You’ll hurt him!”

“Damn straight, I will,” he growled, jerking back in time to avoid hitting his daughter and looking even more irritated by her blatant interference. “*Move!*”

“No, Papa!” she cried, plastering herself against Kurt’s chest, her anxiety rising fast. “He’s my mate!”

“Oh, we’ll see about that,” he growled, all his anger, all his hatred reflected in those bright golden eyes. Kurt saw it all in that moment. He knew—*knew*—what Kurt’s part in it was—and he was set to see Kurt dead. He lunged again. The other man—InuYasha?—shot forward, grabbing her father’s arms to pull him back.

“Knock it off, Kich!” InuYasha growled, pulling him away then giving him a harsh shake for good measure.

Her upset was a hurtful thing that he felt somewhere deep inside. “It’s all right, Samantha,” Kurt said quietly, sitting up slowly and gently pushing her aside. She shot him an imploring look, one that caught in his gullet and twisted. He forced a wan smile and nodded. “It’s okay.”

The resounding thump of footsteps came closer—from every side, or so it seemed. Within moments, they were surrounded, and Kurt grimaced, recognizing almost all of them from his observation of them in Chicago.

“What’s . . .?” trailing off, the huge one with the golden hair and eyes stepped forward, glancing over at InuYasha and the one that InuYasha had called ‘Kich’. When his gaze lit on Kurt, however, Kurt stifled a sigh. “Wait . . . you’re the guy from the restaurant . . .”

“Restaurant, hell!” her father snarled, fighting against the other man’s grip.

The larger one shook his head. “Yeah . . . Toga and I were grabbing something to eat . . . You were coming out . . . I spoke to you, didn’t I?”

“You what?” her father bellowed, jerking free of InuYasha’s hold and smashing a fist into the taller one’s jaw. He stumbled back a couple steps, rubbing his jaw as InuYasha latched onto him once more to pull him back.

“Knock it off, I said!” he growled. “Damn stupid pup . . .”

Her father jerked against the death lock InuYasha had on him, fighting to free himself, though he looked like he wanted to go after the tall one again. “Listen, Bas, you idiot! He took her there, damn it! He took her to those bastards!”

The taller man's gaze widened as he turned his head to stare at Kurt. Very slowly, his eyes narrowed, an iciness entering his gaze that almost gave Kurt pause. "You're on that tape . . ." he murmured, more to himself than to Kurt.

Kurt nodded slowly, his eyes locking with the one called Bas then shifting slowly to stare at each of them. "I . . . I took her there," he admitted quietly.

The assembly fell silent at that, all of them staring at Kurt as though they were finally starting to understand. "Let go, old man!" her father snapped. "I'm going to fucking kill him!"

"You *can't!*" Samantha yelled, insinuating herself between her father and Kurt once more. "I told you! He's my mate!"

And that just ticked her father off more. With a loud growl, he knocked InuYasha's hands away and lunged for Kurt again, shoving Samantha aside as he made to grab Kurt.

The others descended on them. For a moment, Kurt really thought that they were all coming after him. Closing his eyes, he didn't try to fight back, figuring that it was the least he deserved. He'd taken her, hadn't he? Taken their baby . . . and it took a moment for him to realize that they'd pulled her father away yet again. "Let—go—damn it . . ." he demanded, jerking on their holds. Four of them were holding him back, and they looked like they were having trouble doing it, too.

Samantha was crying in earnest now. The sound of her upset was enough to make him grimace, and, ignoring the little voice of common sense whispering in the back of his head, he reached out with a sigh, drew her close against his chest without taking his eyes off anyone else. "It's okay," he told her in a quiet tone meant only for her to hear. "Your . . . your father's right. What happened to you . . . it was my fault."

“No,” she insisted, shaking her head, flicking her ears as she stubbornly held her ground. “You *saved* me! Tell them!”

Letting out a deep breath, he couldn’t meet her gaze. “You . . . you shouldn’t have needed saving.”

“You’re the one from the surveillance tapes . . .”

Kurt blinked and grimaced inwardly. So wrapped up in Samantha’s emotions that he hadn’t sensed the rapid approach of another being even more powerful, more frightening than any of the others assembled with the exception of the one that had grabbed and held her father back, to start with. Their auras were different, though, those two. InuYasha had a much wilder feel to his aura—a much more aggressive saturation. This one . . . his power was more of an afterthought—something he’d possessed for so long that it had become little more than second nature . . . and this one was staring at Kurt with the strangest sort of expression—almost more of a curiosity than hostility . . .

“Dad . . .” the one that Kurt had run into outside the restaurant on Thanksgiving Day said. Uttering a terse grunt as he held tightly to the little demon’s father, even he looked like he had to struggle to maintain that hold . . .

‘*Dad?*’ Kurt thought, staring at both of them.

‘Dad’ didn’t look old enough to be ‘Dad’, but it must have been so, because the one that had just arrived nodded slowly. “Morio, why don’t you take Sami inside?”

One of the silver haired ones that was standing beside Kurt stepped forward. Samantha huddled closer to Kurt and tried to slap the man’s hands away. “C’mon, Sam,” he said, gently but firmly grasping her arms and hauling her to her feet. “You can talk to him later, I’m sure.”

“No! Morio, *let me go!*” she insisted, her ears flattening as she struggled to regain her freedom. “Papa, you *can’t!*” she screamed.

Her father growled low in his throat, his eyes narrowing dangerously as he yanked against the hold the others had on him.

Samantha dug her heels in, refusing to go any further. “*He’s my mate!*” she yelled, her throat scratchy, raw.

The cold look in her father’s eyes flickered but didn’t disappear. “Go in the house, Samantha,” he insisted without taking his gaze of Kurt.

“No, Papa! Promise me—”

“Fine,” he gritted out. “Now, go.”

She didn’t look happy, and despite the distance between them, Kurt could tell that she was crying again. Gritting his teeth, he watched her go.

The small woman beside the one called InuYasha cleared her throat. “InuYasha . . .”

“I know, wench, I know,” he growled. “Go check on her, will you?”

“But—”

“Don’t worry,” he said with a shake of his head and a flick of his ears—ears just like Samantha’s. “I’ll tell ‘em.”

She stared at him for a moment then nodded before turning on her heel and dashing away. Only after she was gone did Kurt slowly, warily turn his attention back to the men gathered around him. With a loud growl born in the depths of his frustration, her father

finally jerked free, shooting forward in a blur of motion. Mind-boggling pain erupted in Kurt's jaw as he flew back against the ground once more. He hadn't even seen the hit coming, had he?

He wasn't finished; not by a long shot. Striding over, grabbing him by the front of his shirt, her father yanked him to his feet before he could do it, himself. Yanking Kurt forward as he snapped out his arm, he sent Kurt flying back as pain exploded in his right eye.

"Get up, damn you!" her father snarled, shaking off the hands that reached out to stop him as he strode across the ground to tower over Kurt's prone body, every single line of him a study in barely contained rage.

In the back of his head, Kurt knew it was a stupid thing to do—probably the stupidest thing he ever could do . . . The other men were standing back, poised, ready, as though they all understood this, even if they didn't want to see it happen.

With a grunt as he forced himself to his feet once more, Kurt knew the next hit was coming, even if he didn't see the blur of motion any better this time around. This one connected with his gut, and he doubled over, wheezing and coughing. Then he pushed himself to his feet again.

"That's enough," the one said with the commanding presence of someone used to giving orders.

"The hell it's enough," her father growled. "Stay out of this, Zelig."

The hit this time sent Kurt flying back about ten feet before he rolled to a stop at the base of a thick white ash tree. The voice inside him was begging him to stay down this time, but he ignored that, too, forcing himself upright yet again. His eye was swelling fast, he could taste blood pooling on his tongue. His guts felt as though they'd been

ripped out then shoved back into his body once more, and he was pretty sure that he had at least a few broke ribs, as well.

“I’m going to fucking kill you!” he bellowed, barreling at Kurt once more.

Pummeling his fist in the center of Kurt’s chest, Kurt flew back again, smacking his back against the unyielding tree trunk behind him. Kurt couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. Stunned for a long moment before his brain reminded his lungs to work, he winced as the pain that registered in his brain returned with a vengeance. Every breath he tried to draw hurt like hell. Gathering what was left of his strength, he smashed his hands on the ground to push himself up again.

Her father lunged toward him. This time, the others grabbed him and held him back. “That’s enough, Kich,” the twin brother hissed.

“It’s not *nearly* enough,” her father growled, jerking on his arms to regain his freedom, to no avail. Chest heaving, anger still blazing in every line of his features, of his stance, he fought against the ones holding him.

The one with the long black hair and ears like Samantha shook his head. “Think of Sami. You promised her!”

InuYasha snorted indelicately. He hadn’t moved an inch since the one-sided fight had started. “He ain’t goin’ nowhere,” he finally pointed out, striding forward to plant himself between Kurt and Samantha’s father. “That damn monk never was smart enough to know when to quit.”

All heads turned to look at him, including Samantha’s father’s. “What?”

InuYasha flicked his ears, nodded tersely at Kurt. “He’s got his aura,” he said carelessly. “Just like that damned Miroku.”

Kurt didn't know what to make of InuYasha's words, and at the moment, it was the least of his worries, all things considered. Still, he sensed that the beating was over, at least for the moment, and managed to get to his feet as he shook his head. "You can kill me if you want to," he said quietly, spitting out a mouthful of blood on the decaying leaves, "but I'd like for you to hear me out, first . . . please."



**Final Thought from Kichiro:**

Dead. Fucking dead.

## Chapter 63

### Quieting

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Samantha paced the floor inside the room she'd been sent to as the unsettling sense of unrest grew larger and larger in her head. It wasn't fair, was it? She'd been waiting for so long already, hadn't she? Waiting patiently—as patiently as she could—for him to come for her, and now that he had . . .

But she'd been out on a walk by herself—at least, that's what she'd wanted, even though she'd known that she was being watched—trying to ignore the eyes of those who loved her too much to let her out of their sight, even for a moment. It was something that she had gotten used to, even if it was starting to irritate her.

Did they honestly think that someone could sneak onto her grandfather's estate and spirit her away without their knowledge? Of course they did, and while she could appreciate their worry, their concern, it was starting to grate on her nerves, too—enough so that she had taken to locking her doors at night; not because she was worried about someone sneaking in from the outside, no, but to keep them all from coming in fifty times before she finally managed to tell them all that she was fine; just fine.

And it wasn't just Samantha who was made to suffer from it, either. As though by some strange and unwritten rule, it seemed that all the women were ultimately suffering, too. Gone were the days when a simple trip to the grocery store could be accomplished by one or two of the women. No, a bevy of male escorts had to be summoned, as well—completely unsettling if, like Nezumi or Kagome, the women were human and therefore needed things that men didn't really need to know about. Oh, no, just last night Nezumi ended up in a shouting match with Ryomaru over that very thing . . . Nezumi had won . .

. sort of. He'd gone to the store with her but allowed her to go inside alone, as long as she stayed on her cell phone the entire time, from the moment she walked into the store until the second she walked back out. Come to think of it, though, Uncle Ryomaru was up quite early this morning, looking extremely tired and in what seemed to be a rather bad mood, so Samantha had figured without anyone verifying it that he'd ended up sleeping somewhere else last night . . .

And worse was the knowledge that they knew about . . . everything, didn't they? Those horrible things that she hadn't ever wanted them to find out, and they somehow knew . . . Knew every degradation, every humiliation she'd suffered . . . Knew it all . . . "How did everyone find out?" she asked, breaking the silence that had fallen in the room.

Bellaniece sighed, and for a moment, Samantha wondered if she was going to tell her anything at all. "There were . . . surveillance videos," she confessed at length. "That bag you brought home . . . they were in that."

"Surveillance videos," Samantha repeated almost tonelessly. "So . . . so everyone knows . . ."

"Not everyone," Bellaniece murmured. Samantha could sense the reticence in her replies.

She sighed. What was there that she could possibly say to that, anyway? That they knew—that they *all* knew . . . Why did it feel like the entire thing were happening all over again . . .? And this time, Kurt . . .

"Baby, come here and sit down," Bellaniece encouraged gently.

Shaking her head stubbornly, she scowled at the door since she knew damn well one of her male relatives was guarding on the outside, just as she could vaguely make out the form of someone's body propped against the glass doors that led to her balcony through

the thin, filmy curtains that hung over them. “Why are they doing this, Mama?” she demanded angrily. “He’s my mate!”

Stifling a sigh at the nervous expression on her mother’s face, she kept pacing. Somehow, she had a feeling that Bellaniece was going to side with the rest of them in this, and that was more than enough to irritate her all over again . . . “Sami, I know that you think he’s your mate, but you have to be sure, you know . . . taking a mate is very serious . . .”

“I *am* sure,” she replied, unable to mask the deep-rooted hurt in her tone as she tried not to look at her mother. “I’m not stupid.”

Bellaniece sighed and rubbed her forehead as she set the magazine she’d been leafing through aside. “I don’t think you’re stupid, Samantha,” she pointed out gently. “I’m sure that you absolutely believe that he’s your mate, but, sweetie . . .”

“You think it’s like Papa said,” she whispered, shaking her head as she tried to refute the bitterness that surged deep inside. Her father had mentioned to her that she might only be thinking that Kurt was her mate because he had rescued her—because he had somehow become her hero. It had made her angrier than she could credit, too, and now that her mother was agreeing . . . “You all think that I look at him and believe that he can walk on water because he rescued me, right? Because of that? You think that I don’t see his faults? Because I think he’s perfect, right? Because he’s my hero or savior or whatever?”

“I didn’t say that,” she said in a placating tone, a soothing tone. “I’m only saying that you must be sure. You understand that, right?”

Samantha stopped and turned to stare at her mother, slowly shaking her head. “It’s not like that, you know. It’s not like that, at all.”

A vague sense of anger flickered over Bellaniece's features; an anger that she masked, but not before Samantha saw it. "He put you there, didn't he? That's what your father said . . . He put you there in that god-awful place . . ."

"And he got me out, too," Samantha countered quietly.

"Do you think that matters?" Bellaniece demanded. "What those men did to you—"

"Doesn't matter!" Samantha cut in as her indignant outrage spiked. "What was done, was done to me! *To me!* Not to you or to Papa or to anyone else! And Kurt . . . Kurt *helped* me! When he was there, I wasn't alone!"

For some reason, Bellaniece looked even more upset by Samantha's words. Shaking her head, her hand fluttering over her chest, she blinked quickly moments before the scent of tears filled Samantha's nostrils. "That . . . that's not love, baby," she said quietly, unable to meet her gaze. "That's . . . that's desperation . . ."

Staring hard at her mother, Samantha fought to keep her anger from consuming her. Face stinging as furious color flooded her cheeks, she turned her back on Bellaniece and blinked back tears of her own. They didn't understand—didn't *want* to understand . . . and Samantha wasn't at all sure that she could explain it, either . . .

Bellaniece sighed, grasping Samantha's shoulders. Samantha stiffened and stepped away. "Sami," she said in a fragile tone, as though she were afraid that Samantha would crumble if she spoke any louder. "Sweetie, I'm not saying he isn't your mate—I'm not . . . I'm only saying that you need to be sure; that's all. Do you . . . do you understand?"

"Understand," Samantha repeated quietly. "Of course."

Bellaniece sighed at the understated bitterness in Samantha's tone. "Surely you can understand the worry . . . Because of him . . . Because of what he did . . ."

“Don’t you think that I know what he did, Mama?” Samantha pointed out quietly. “I also know that he’s not perfect, just like me, just like you, just like Papa . . . I know that, but maybe the difference is that I took the time to find out why he did it before I decided to condemn him.”

“That’s not it, at all,” Bellaniece insisted. “I think you should just take the time to consider what you’re saying. This man—”

“Kurt.”

Bellaniece sighed. “Kurt,” she amended. “How much do you really know about him?”

“How much did you know about Papa when you figured out that he was your mate?” Samantha challenged angrily. It seemed to her that they didn’t want to understand, that they didn’t have any interest in even trying . . .

“I knew he was a good man,” Bellaniece remarked quietly.

“And you don’t think Kurt is.” It was a statement, not a question.

Bellaniece slowly shook her head. “That’s not at all what I meant, sweetie. Look at it from your father and my point of view, can’t you? He took you there, right?”

Samantha pivoted on her heel to stare at her mother. “That place . . . Mama, let me ask you: did you ever do anything that you weren’t entirely proud of? Something that may have hurt someone else?”

Standing slowly, Bellaniece smoothed her skirt and wandered over to the window. “Nothing like this,” she replied.

“This . . . that . . . something else . . . does it matter? Hurting someone is still hurting someone, isn't it?”

“No . . . no, I don't think it is,” Bellaniece countered quietly. “This is entirely different.”

“And I say it's not,” Samantha retorted. It was unfair, wasn't it? Entirely unfair . . . her parents weren't even the slightest bit interested in knowing exactly what had happened. The same parents who had always told her to trust her instincts . . . The same ones who had always told her that they trusted her to make the right decisions for herself . . . And now . . . “I used to think that you and Papa were the greatest . . . the most open-minded people, ever, and I was so glad that you were my parents. Do you really not trust my judgment?”

“It's not that simple, Sami,” Bellaniece said.

Turning to face her mother, who was still staring out the window, Samantha slowly shook her head. “But you won't give him a chance to change your mind, either, will you?”

Bellaniece sighed, rubbing her arms as though she were cold. “I'm sorry, baby,” she murmured. “I . . . I don't think I can . . .”

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“What is your name?”

“Kurt. Kurt Drevin.”

“Drevin . . . All right. How did you find us?”

Letting out a deep breath as he tried not to grimace since he was quite positive that Samantha's father really had broken a few ribs, Kurt shook his head. "She mentioned Maine once," he reiterated calmly.

The one that was in charge shook his head. "Why did you do it? Why in the hell would you take her to that place?" he demanded.

"I didn't know her; anything about her. I thought . . ." Gritting his teeth, Kurt had to force himself to finish the statement; not because he feared the demons who were gathered close around him, but because . . . because she wasn't . . . and she never had been . . . "I thought she was a monster," he admitted quietly.

A savage growl erupted near the door. Kurt didn't need to look to see who it was. In the past hour since he'd been in this room submitting to their brand of interrogation, Samantha's father—Kichiro, he'd overheard—had to be restrained a number of times. "A monster? *A monster?* I'll show you a monster, *damn you . . .!*"

A rush of bodies moved to block her irate father. Kurt didn't blink, didn't move. To be honest, he doubted that he could dodge anything at the moment, anyway. "I didn't know," he muttered, unable to look any of them in the eye.

"Oh, well, then that makes it all just fine, doesn't it?" Kichiro snarled, lunging against the hold that the others had on him.

Kurt shook his head. "No, it doesn't."

"Knock it off, Kich," the other twin growled. "Balls, and they say I'm the hothead . . ."

"Let go, Ryo," Kichiro demanded.

His brother shook his head and yanked him back again. “No, damn it!”

Kichiro uttered another terse growl but didn't lunge again.

“Did they send you to find her?” Bas asked, leaning against the wall on the far side of the room with a menacing glower in place and his ungodly large arms crossed over his chest.

“No one sent me,” Kurt said. “Those guys . . . they can't hurt her again.”

“And we're just supposed to trust you on that?” Kichiro sneered as he yanked free of his brother's hold to stomp over to Kurt. The irate father managed to grab the front of Kurt's shirt before the others managed to restrain him.

“Get him out of here,” the one in charge demanded.

“Go to hell, Zelig!” Kichiro snarled.

“Just go calm down,” he shot back.

“Settle down, baka!” the one called Ryo gritted out. “You ain't doin' a damn bit of good here, and remember what you promised your pup!”

That reminder, whatever it meant, seemed to calm Kichiro a little. Still not satisfied that he was finished making a spectacle of himself, though, Ryomaru shoved his brother out of the room.

The one in charge heaved a sigh, rounding the wide desk to rifle through the drawers. He finally came away with an unopened pack of cigarettes, and Kurt didn't miss the way his hands shook as he yanked the seal off and ripped the pack open. “Why did you come here?” he asked after he'd lit a cigarette, as he shook a match to put it out.

Kurt didn't respond right away. Feeling as though his head was going to explode—or maybe he simply wished it would since it hurt so damn badly—he rubbed his forehead with a grimace. “I have information for you. I figured . . . I figured you could monitor it better than I can.”

One golden eyebrow quirked—those eyes, so like the little demon's—Samantha's . . . “Information?”

“Yes. In that.”

Shifting his gaze from Kurt to Bas, he nodded once at the case that someone had brought inside when they'd ushered Kurt in earlier.

Bas set it on the desk and opened it, frowning at the collection of files, the slimline computer, everything. “What's this?” he asked as he pulled a file and started to leaf through it.

“It's all the information on all the facilities that do that kind of research that I know of,” Kurt replied wearily. “All the names of all employees—security guards . . . secretaries if they have one . . . and the white-coats.”

“White-coats?” the older of the two repeated.

Blinking rapidly—Kurt was having a hell of a time making his eyes focus—at least, the one eye he could still see out of, anyway—he nodded. “That's what the little—Samantha calls them. She, uh . . . she said they weren't doctors or scientists; not really . . .”

“How'd you get this information?” Bas demanded.

Kurt shrugged. “I destroyed them,” he admitted quietly. “Tore up everything . . . and implanted trackers in all the white-coats.” The two men exchanged meaningful glances.

Kurt didn't see them since he was staring at the floor. "All their trackers are being monitored through ASOPSYs satellites and fiberoptic telekom systems. They won't come near her, ever again."

"So you did it."

Kurt slowly lifted his gaze to meet that of the one called InuYasha. He'd been sitting in the windowsill for the most part, saying nothing though his unsettling gaze had remained focused on Kurt for the majority of the interrogation. He looked like he was trying to figure something out, and while he didn't seem to have come to any real conclusions, the expression on his face was one of marked interest. "That place in Chicago. You the one who ransacked it?"

"They deserved what they got," was Kurt's only reply.

He snorted indelicately but said no more.

"You mean there were five of these places?" the black haired one demanded as he peered over Bas' shoulder at the files that he was looking over.

"That I could find, yes," Kurt said.

"And you wrecked them all," Bas muttered. "Gunnar . . ."

The black haired one nodded, taking the files and digging the cell phone out of his pocket as he strode out of the room.

Leaning against the window, the one in charge looked thoughtful, troubled. He didn't look exactly hostile, no, but he certainly didn't look friendly, either, which wasn't at all surprising, all things considered.

An abrupt knock on the door drew his attention, though, and the white haired one that had escorted Samantha inside poked his head into the room. “Sorry, Cain,” he apologized. “It’s, uh . . . Sam.” Casting Kurt a somewhat blank look, he glanced back at the one in charge and shook his head. “She wants to see him,” he said, jerking his head in Kurt’s direction without actually looking at him.

“Not now,” Cain said without taking his eyes off Kurt.

The one in the doorway heaved a sigh. “Easier said than done,” he muttered as he ducked out of the room again.

“Did you come here to see her?” Cain demanded.

Kurt slowly shook his head. “N-no . . .”

“You don’t sound very positive.”

Rubbing his forehead, Kurt didn’t really have an answer for that, did he? “That’s not . . . I didn’t come here to . . . I just wanted to give you that information,” he said, knowing in his head that his answer sounded entirely too clinical, too simple: too rehearsed.

Cain nodded slowly, a strange light in his gaze, and he almost seemed . . . disappointed . . . .? “I see.” Pushing himself away from the window, he shuffled across the floor in a slow sort of gait, a very deliberate ease of motion. “Well, you understand if I tell you that we cannot just let you leave here; not after what you’ve done, and while I know that you ultimately returned her to us, I cannot ignore the fact that you took her from us, to start with.” Pausing in his step, he turned to face Kurt with a very serious expression on his face as he shook his head. “I’ll level with you. I don’t think that there’s a single person in this place that wouldn’t love to get their hands on you and tear you to shreds other than my granddaughter—myself, included.”

Kurt nodded, understanding that feeling only too well. He shifted uncomfortably, just enough to dig into the pocket of his jeans for the small plastic static-free bag that he handed over to Bas. “That’s a tracker,” he said. “Just put it in a bottle with some saline and inject it wherever you want. I can’t take it out once it’s in there, so you’ll always know where I am. You can kill me if you want to. It’s fine, but . . . but there’s something that I need to do first. That’s all I ask.”

Bas eyed the device and handed it to his father, who stared at it for a long moment then stuck it into his shirt pocket.

“You’ll understand that I need to ask you to remain here for the time being,” Cain said at length.

Kurt nodded. “Of course.”

Cain heaved a sigh and nodded. “Bas, could you . . . show Mr. Drevin to a room?”

Bas stepped forward, pulling a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket and waved his hand, indicating that Kurt needed to stand up. He did, albeit a little slowly since he couldn’t seem to move any part of his body without said body groaning in abject protest. Bas fastened the cuffs behind Kurt’s back and grabbed his arm to escort him from the room.

Cain waited until they were gone before he sighed again and sank into his chair, pulling the tiny device out of his pocket and eyeing it thoughtfully.

“Keh!” InuYasha snorted. “You ain’t gonna do that, are you?” he growled in his normal tone.

Cain turned the packet over in his fingers before responding. “What do you think?”

Getting to his feet, the hanyou stomped around the desk, ears twitching with his agitation. "Sami says the bastard's her mate," he pointed out.

Cain nodded. "I know."

"And there's more than that."

Letting the packet fall from his fingers, Cain sat back and stared at InuYasha. "What'd that be?"

For once, InuYasha actually looked like he might be at a bit of a loss. Flexing his claws, he shrugged offhandedly though his expression was a little strained, at best. "Kagome says his aura . . ."

"What about it?"

InuYasha shook his head. "We used to know him a long time ago."

"What's that mean?"

InuYasha shot Cain a look that said quite plainly that he thought Cain was a little slow on the uptake. "That damn pervert, Miroku."

Cain frowned, trying to place why that name seemed vaguely familiar. "Miroku . . .?"

"Keh! The damn monk we traveled with while we were collecting the shards of the Shikon no Tama."

Cain pondered that then shook his head. "But that was . . . almost six hundred years ago . . ."

“I didn’t say he *was* Miroku,” InuYasha shot back with another loud snort. “You’re really dense, you know it?”

Ignoring the deliberate slur, Cain shrugged. “So you’re saying that this guy is the . . . the *reincarnation* of your old friend?”

“He’s got spiritual powers, don’t he? Stands to reason.”

“So what do you think I should do with him?”

InuYasha shrugged indifferently and stomped toward the door, pausing just inside to offer his last bit of advice. “I ain’t above beating on him a bit. After everything Sam went through, seems fair enough to me.”

Cain rolled his eyes, wondering why it didn’t really surprise him that InuYasha’s answer would involve violence. “We can’t kill him; not if he’s Sam’s mate.”

“I didn’t say kill him, Zelig. Damn, you’re hella stupid—always wondered why Gin married someone as dumb as you . . . ‘Sides, if he’s anything like the fucking pervert, you can’t kill him, even if you tried. Kinda like a parasite that way . . .”

He stomped out of the office then, leaving Cain alone to think. Drevin was dangerous, no doubt about it. The fact that he could discern youkai was enough, not to mention that he obviously was a little more multifaceted than that. After all, if he really was able to infiltrate all of those facilities and systematically destroy them, then that spoke volumes, too, didn’t it?

The problem was that he was presenting more and more of a threat by the minute. It was true enough that they couldn’t kill him, no . . . but somehow, InuYasha’s tongue in cheek suggestion . . .



## Chapter 64

### Sentencing

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Kurt stared dubiously at the wooden sword that the big one—Bas—had handed him as he tried to understand exactly what had happened.

He'd been pretty positive when he'd been locked in the almost barren but not even close to uncomfortable room last evening that he would be dead by this time today. Somehow, he should have known that it wasn't going to be nearly as easy as that. Having spent the night alone in a darkened room with his hands caught behind his back, bound by the restraints that they'd clapped around his wrists before escorting him out of the library, he could only groan when Bas had unfastened them this morning.

Then the strangest thing had happened. The silver haired one that had poked his head into the room yesterday to tell them that Samantha wanted to see Kurt had strode in with a tray of food that they'd left on the desk near the windows, and damned if it hadn't smelled good. Scrambled eggs with sausage patties that were still steaming hot, light, flaky biscuits, and a small carafe of black coffee along with sugar and creamer and a very delicate white porcelain mug with pink flowers hand-painted on it . . . sterling silver salt and pepper shakers and a fresh, crisp, white linen napkin . . .

It hadn't made sense at the time, had it? He'd thought that maybe it was his final meal or something to that effect, and damned if he hadn't eaten it, too . . .

They were going to kill him slowly, or so he figured. The one in charge—Cain—had told him shortly after the sun rose that he was going to . . . insist . . . that Kurt stay with them for a while, and that they'd be more than happy to see that he was, in his words,

‘properly trained’. Kurt wasn’t exactly sure what that meant, but it hadn’t sounded good at the time . . .

*‘Properly trained . . .’*

Staring at the wooden sword that looked like little better than a child’s plaything, he stifled the urge to sigh. The last thing that he wanted to do was to take part in whatever ‘training’ they had in mind for him. He was still ungodly sore from yesterday, and he grimaced. ‘Okay,’ he conceded with an inward wince. *‘So sore is a little bit of an understatement . . .’*

Kurt glanced around at the others, who stood off to the side; the same ones as yesterday, with the exception of the little demon’s father, who was conspicuously absent.

The unsettling peal of menacing laughter cut through Kurt’s otherwise bleak thoughts with all the finesse of a sledgehammer. “Sleep good, sunshine?”

Kurt frowned. It was the twin—her uncle—and in his hands was one very menacing-looking sword . . . Kurt said nothing as he scowled at the demon—and at his weapon, too.

As though he could feel Kurt’s reticence, his already nasty little smirk got a little nastier. “I am Izayoi Ryomaru, and this—”, he held up the sword, “—is Ryoteishuseishu,” he stated loudly, squaring his stance, drawing his shoulders back arrogantly, puffing out his chest a little. “I am the son of the hanyou of legend, InuYasha; the nephew of the powerful Sesshoumaru. I am the grandson of the scourge of Japan, the fierce and terrible Inu no Taisho.”

“The *what* of Japan?” InuYasha snorted.

“Quiet, old man! You’ll mess me up!” Ryomaru growled before turning back to face Kurt once more. “I am a warrior who cut my teeth on better than you, and I have trained most of those here to do the same. I will be your opponent. Youkai tremble at the mere mention of my name! Bow to my might and prowess! Prepare to face my wrath!”

One of the men standing nearby, watching the debacle unfold, rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Oi, old man! What the hell kind of bullshit was that?” he hollered.

“Shut up, Morio,” Ryomaru called back without taking his gaze off Kurt. “It’s called *intimidation*.”

Morio snorted indelicately. “Keh! It’s called *something*, all right . . .” he muttered.

The black haired one—Gunnar?—cocked an eyebrow and leaned toward the huge one, Bas. “Fifty bucks says he practiced that speech all night.”

Bas just nodded. “Probably.”

“Can I do this now?” Ryomaru snarled, glowering at the others.

Morio grinned unrepentantly. “Go right ahead, oh great warrior. Maybe you should take your shirt off. Your nipple stud is even more intimidating, you know.”

“Shut it, pup, or I’ll come after you next.”

Either this Morio was really stupid or he just wasn’t afraid of that threat because his grin widened almost ridiculously.

“Oi, Drevin,” Ryomaru called out.

Kurt blinked and stared at him.

Ryomaru chuckled unpleasantly. “You’d better get that sword up or I’ll hack you to bits.”

“I . . . I don’t know what I’m doing,” he confessed since he’d never touched anything like that in his life.

“Aww, it’s not that tough, *taijya*,” he sneered, deliberately using the word that Samantha had used for him during her incarceration. “Just make sure I don’t hit anything vital.”

And that didn’t sound like it boded well for Kurt, either; not really.

Bas sighed and shook his head as he watched the human fumble with the sword. “I don’t think there’s a damn bit of sport to this,” he muttered under his breath.

“It’s not about sport,” Cain replied quietly without taking his eyes off the goings on. “All this is about is letting everyone get their frustration out—the frustration of not being able to find her.”

Bas’ gaze narrowed. He could see that, he figured. After all, their hands had all been tied the moment Samantha had decided that he was her mate, and while Bas wasn’t entirely sure that he bought into the idea, he also wasn’t sure that he agreed with Kichiro’s stance that it was all because of the idea that he might have been somewhat more decent to her than the damned researchers had been, but . . .

But that wasn’t nearly enough to fool her youkai voice, either, was it? And he’d seen the conviction in her eyes, himself; had understood that whatever she felt, she truly believed that this man was her mate, so even if they could kill him, well . . . they couldn’t, not without taking a chance that no one was willing to risk.

Ryomaru started to stalk around Drevin, though, tossing his taunts as he did little more than lunge and jab at the human, smacking him with the flat side of his blade instead of going for blood.

“Where’s Kich?” Bas asked.

Gunnar sighed and rubbed his forehead, looking entirely put out that he was here instead of doing something that he considered to be of more use. “He took Aunt Belle and Sam to Isabelle’s house. Sam was having a fit because no one would let her in to see that bastard, and he thought it’d be better to remove her from the situation—at least for now.”

“Not to mention that there’s no way he could possibly face off with Drevin,” Morio put in thoughtfully. “Hell, he wants to *kill* him . . . not that I blame him for that . . .”

No, Bas supposed, he couldn’t either. If someone had done what he’d done to Bas’ child . . . Yeah, he figured he’d want blood, too.

Ryomaru took a swing at Drevin, cleaving his sword in a wide arc that whistled through the air as it made its descent. The human didn’t get out of the way nearly fast enough, and with a sharp hiss as the blade connected, he hit the ground hard flat on his back. Morio grimaced and sucked in his breath. “Kami . . . that *had* to hurt . . .”

Bas was inclined to agree. He remembered being on the receiving end of a hit like that all too well . . . That particular move hurt—a *lot* . . .

Advancing, Ryomaru swung his sword again. Drevin managed to bring his up to block though he didn’t get far. The forward momentum carried him forward, and with a loud grunt as he fought to stop it, the blade smashed against Drevin’s shoulder. The bokuto flew out of his hand, landing about twenty feet away in the grass. Drevin dropped to his knees, clutching his shoulder as he gritted his teeth, but he didn’t make a sound aside from the audible harshness of his breathing . . .

Bas shook his head. The man had to be hurting still from the beating he'd endured yesterday, didn't he? Yet he still forced himself to his feet and retrieved the bokuto he'd dropped, and though he swayed slightly, he stubbornly refused to back down. One of his eyes was completely swollen closed, his split lip was fat. He leaned to the side to spit out a mouthful of blood. All in all, he looked like hell warmed over. Still . . . He was either very brave or very stupid. Bas couldn't decide which . . .

Sparing a glance at his father, he grimaced. Cain didn't look pleased—Bas figured it had a lot to do with the idea that Drevin simply wasn't even attempting to fight back. Cain's sense of fair play was being sorely tested, wasn't it, even if he did believe that Drevin should have to pay for what he did to Samantha . . .

"Kind of like shooting fish in a barrel, isn't it?" he muttered.

Cain nodded, his gaze darkening.

Bas sucked in his cheek as he watched the unfolding carnage. Even Ryomaru was starting to look more than a little bothered, and no small wonder. There was the honor in such a battle, even if it really wasn't a serious contest, and honor was something that they all understood.

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"Umm . . . what in the world is Ryomaru talking about . . .?"

Nezumi shook her head and sipped the cup of coffee she'd just made, hiding a small smile behind the rim of the mug. "Oh, you know Ryo . . ." she hedged.

“ . . . The scourge of Japan . . .?” Gin echoed with an incredulous shake of her head.

Nezumi’s grin widened. “That part was my idea.”

“It was?”

She nodded. “Well, considering he had something or other written down about the ‘gnarly white beast’, I figured that it might sound better . . .”

“Gnarly white . . . oh, my . . .”

“Yeah, he was up all night, practicing that stupid speech. It was either help him or let him pace around all night.”

Gin stifled a little giggle with the back of her hand. “I’m sorry,” she apologized.

“Don’t be,” Nezumi said. “You don’t have to sleep with the baka.”

Meara heaved a little sigh and shook her head slowly. “And *that* is my father-in-law . . .”

“Don’t complain,” Nezumi muttered. “I married him . . .”

“It sounds kind of familiar,” Gin remarked at length, a puzzled frown on her face as she listened to the rest of her brother’s cheesy speech.

Nezumi rolled her eyes. “He watched *The Princess Bride* the other night.”

“*The Princess Bride*?”

“Yeah . . . you know the part with the guy who is trying to avenge his father? That . . .”

“You watched *The Princess Bride*?” Gin asked, looking clearly surprised. “But I thought you hated movies like that.”

“I do. He downloaded it,” she went on. “I sure as hell didn’t choose it.”

Meara smiled indulgently as she stared out the window. “I suppose there’s no question about where Morio gets his weirdness . . .”

Gin sucked in a sharp breath when Ryomaru smacked Kurt hard with the broadside of his sword. “Oh, that looked painful, didn’t it?”

“He’s not very good,” Meara mused.

“That’s kind of an understatement . . .”

“Oh, he’s bleeding . . .”

“Urgh.”

“Are you okay, Nezumi?” Gin asked, casting her friend a worried glance.

Nezumi waved her hand dismissively. She’d certainly gotten better about dealing with the sight of blood over the years, but she couldn’t say that she was much of a fan of it, anyway . . . “I’m fine.”

“That’s just so wrong,” Gin went on with a sigh.

“Morio said that they’re just trying to make him understand that they don’t appreciate what he did to Samantha,” Meara pointed out.

Gin shook her head quickly without taking her gaze off the combatants. “Not that,” she said, her voice a little distracted. “It’s just wrong that he’s barely putting up a fight. He hasn’t *earned* the right to bleed yet!”

That statement earned her a couple of strange looks. She didn’t see them as she went on, “I mean, come on! *Be a man!*” she yelled out the window. “Get up! *Stop being a baby and fight him back!*”

The men stopped long enough to glance at the women who were watching the one-sided fight. Cain shook his head slowly, as though he wasn’t at all surprised at his wife’s outburst. Bas muttered something to his father, and Cain shot him a look.

“Gin!” Kagome chided as she wandered into the kitchen. “What in the world are you yelling for?”

Gin shot her mother a rather nervous glance then wrinkled her nose. “He’s not even trying to fight back,” she complained.

Kagome wandered over to the others and glanced outside then winced. “Oh, that doesn’t look good, does it?”

“Nope,” Nezumi said.

“Still, after what he did to Samantha . . .” Meara hedged.

Kagome nodded. “As true as that might be, Samantha still insists that he’s her mate. She tried to come back last night, but Kichiro wouldn’t let her . . .”

Gin sighed. “Cain said that they won’t kill him,” she said slowly. “But I can’t help but think that it’s really not that fair. I mean, according to Samantha, he never actually hurt her, and he brought her food . . .”

“But he’s the reason she was there, in the first place,” Nezumi pointed out.

Gin bit her lip. Certainly, she could see their reasoning; of course she could. What had happened to Sam was, according to Cain, one of the vilest things that he’d ever seen, and while she wasn’t entirely certain that she wanted specifics, she also knew well enough that Samantha wasn’t the kind of girl who would say things lightly. No, she really did believe that he was her mate, didn’t she? And even then . . . if she could forgive the man for everything, then what could anyone really say to that?

She grimaced again when the man was sent flying once more. At least that time, he’d tried to fight back, but he’d swung the bokuto like it was a baseball bat. It was glaringly obvious that he really didn’t have a clue what he was doing, and that really wasn’t an honorable fight, at all.

A minute later, Ryomaru jammed the tip of Ryoteishuseishu into the ground and shook his head. “Keh!” he scoffed, his voice carrying to the women. “How the fuck did you manage to capture Sami, in the first place?” he demanded. When the man struggled to get to his feet but dropped face-down in the dirt, heaving to draw breath, the hanyou turned on his heel, yanking his sword free and stomping away.

“He looks a little irked, doesn’t he?” Meara remarked with a frown.

Gin sighed. “Of course he is,” she said. “That guy didn’t even give a token fight, after all.”

They watched in silence as Bas strode over to pull the poor man to his feet. A minute later, Morio stepped over to help, and with one on either side, they pretty well dragged the nearly unconscious human inside, up the stairs, and down the long hallway toward the unused wing of the mansion where they’d decided he was safest kept.

In all actuality, though, Gin figured that Cain really was making allowances. If he really thought that the human were a threat, he certainly wouldn't have him kept here under any circumstances. If all else failed, they still had the secured quarters under the youkai special crimes building where Myrna had lived for years following her arrest. Cain might not have said it out loud, but he wasn't about to ignore Samantha's claims, either.

Gin sighed and turned away from the window, hurrying over instead to retrieve the huge first aid kit she kept under the kitchen sink. The men might want their retribution, sure, but how much of a victory was it, really, when the human didn't have a clue about what he was doing? And even if he did, there was another problem, wasn't there? Unlike youkai or hanyou, he didn't have the ability to heal so quickly, either, which meant he was going to be at a permanent disadvantage, in the first place.

She shook her head. The men might well think that he should be left alone, but she wasn't about to agree. He needed some help, didn't he, and while Gin might not like what he'd done, she'd never demean herself by behaving as badly as those humans who had confined Samantha for so long, either. What would it prove, anyway?

*'Nothing,'* she told herself firmly as she shouldered the large canvas bag and strode purposefully out of the room. *'It wouldn't prove a thing except that we're no better than they were . . .'*

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"Where are you going?"

Samantha gasped and froze with one leg tossed over the windowsill. Slowly turning to glance over her shoulder at the scowling bear-youkai who leaned in the doorway,

watching her, she gave what she hoped was a casual shrug and stifled a sigh. She was so close, damn it . . .

“I . . . I just wanted to go on a walk,” she lied, hoping that Griffin wouldn’t see right through her.

He considered that then nodded. “So you weren’t thinking of heading back to Bevelle.”

The sigh she’d stifled slipped out, anyway, and she pulled her leg back inside and plopped onto the wide sill. “Well, it’s not a complete lie,” she hedged.

Griffin snorted. “So where were you walking to?”

She couldn’t even look him in the eye. “Uh . . . n-n-nowhere . . .”

“Is that right?”

Samantha was caught, and she knew it. Blast Griffin for showing up before she could manage her escape, anyway . . . “He’s not a bad person,” she muttered, “and it isn’t fair that no one is listening.”

Griffin pushed himself away from the doorway and lumbered into the room, his dark eyes shrouded in shadows as he lowered his chin to stare at her. “Your family won’t like it if you go running around by yourself in the middle of the night,” he pointed out with a shake of his head, sending his shaggy brown hair into his face with the motion.

“I just want to see him,” she admitted quietly. “That’s all . . . I just . . . he came all the way here for me, and . . . and he’s my mate.”

“You sure about that?” Griffin challenged though not unkindly.

Samantha sighed. “Yes, I’m sure,” she maintained with a shake of her head. “Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

He leveled a look at her that bespoke his belief that she really ought to know why they’d question it.

She shook her head and gave a little shrug, staring at her hands as she tried to figure out a way to explain her feelings. It wasn’t easy. “You know . . . the first time I saw him, when I woke up in the room where he’d taken me . . . I felt like he was familiar to me.” Uttering a sad little laugh, she shook her head, her ears drooping slightly. “I know, I didn’t know anything about him, and I probably should have been afraid of him, but . . . but I wasn’t. I just . . . wasn’t . . .”

“Familiar,” Griffin repeated with a frown. She knew that expression well enough. He wasn’t disagreeing with her; not at all. No, he was listening, wasn’t he? The first person who actually had . . . “Your father thinks that it’s that—that Stockholm syndrome or whatever he calls it. Says you identify with him because he wasn’t as bad to you as the others were.”

“I know what he thinks,” she grumbled, her gaze shifting out the window. “That’s not true, you know. There’re a lot of things about him that people don’t know, but . . . but it’s not my place to tell anyone, either. It’s his story, right?”

Griffin rubbed his forehead and shook his head. “You know, I can’t just let you leave,” he told her as he heaved a heavy sigh. “Your parents would be worried sick.”

Samantha let out a deep breath. She’d figured that he’d say something like that, and even though she knew that he wasn’t really trying to take sides, it certainly felt that way. She just didn’t have a better way to explain her feelings, did she? Saying how she felt . . . no one was really listening to her, and even though a part of her understood their collective concern, it still bothered her.

Since her return, they'd all been behaving as though they didn't really trust her to make her own decisions, treated her as though they honestly thought that she might break if she were pushed too hard.

The only thing that hadn't been completely right was the marked lack of him—of the *taijya*—of Kurt. Now that he had come for her . . .

It was infuriating, really. Now that he was here, she ought to be concentrating on other things: things like getting to know him even better than she already did, helping him to realize that those things that had happened to him so long ago shouldn't make him feel like giving up. She wanted him to know that; wanted him to understand that there was so much more to life that he had yet to realize . . .

And she wanted to show him these things—wanted to make him laugh, wanted to help him realize that the dawning of the sun every morning was a beautiful thing, after all . . . All those things that he'd forgotten if he'd known them in the beginning . . . those were the things that she wanted to give him . . .

It was a fine line to walk, wasn't it? She loved her family, absolutely, unconditionally, and she understood just how worried, how scared they'd been in the months when they couldn't find her. She'd been scared, too, even if Kurt had managed to keep that fear from destroying her. The last thing—the *very* last thing—she wanted to do was to hurt any of them, especially her parents . . .

But . . .

She missed Kurt, too, though, and while her family would always be her family, would always love her, even if they didn't like it and didn't understand it . . .

The truth of it was that Kurt was her future, and she knew it. On some level, he had to know it, too, even if he didn't quite understand the why of it or the how. He'd come for her, and that was enough to convince her that she really was right about him.

She felt as though she were balancing on the edge of a great chasm and was getting ready to jump. If she didn't jump far enough, she'd fall in, but . . .

But on the other side of that chasm was Kurt and the beautiful meadow where he was waiting beside that tree, beside that stream . . . and that was where she wanted to go, and as frightening as the great wide void between them looked, the potential reward that she could see even if she couldn't quite reach it yet . . . Wasn't that worth the jump?

Griffin sighed again, his face scrunching up in an entirely thoughtful sort of way. He cleared his throat and let out a deep breath, and she could tell by the way he kept shuffling his feet that he was trying to decide whether or not to say what was on his mind. "Don't suppose they could be too upset with you if you didn't go alone," he ventured at length.

Samantha blinked, her chin snapping up as she stared at him. "You'd . . . you'd take me over there?"

He didn't look entirely pleased, but he nodded once. "Considering you'll hop out that window the second I leave you alone in here? Yeah, I think I would."

She hopped up and started to dash over to hug him. He grunted, cheeks reddening as he quickly shook his head. "Oh, no, none of that," he grumbled. "That woman I married will kill me when she finds out."

Samantha blinked quickly, staving back the tears that threatened to spill over, her heart hammering wildly at the mere thought of seeing *him* once more. "Thank you," she said, clasping her hands behind her back and smiling up at Griffin, her hero.



## Chapter 65

# Misguided

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Kurt groaned and tried not to breathe too deeply since that hurt far more than the action was worth.

He hadn't realized, had he? He hadn't known that a human body could hurt quite that badly; oh no . . . He did now, of course. In fact, he wasn't entirely sure that there were any parts of him that didn't hurt.

Still, he'd been more than a little surprised when the lady of the mansion slipped into the room with a huge canvas bag that he'd figured out quickly enough was a first aid kit. She'd not said much as she'd doctored him; as her husband had stood directly behind her with a scowl on his face but a resigned sort of stance, as though he'd figured it'd come to that.

He grimaced. She really had tried to be as gentle and efficient as she could, but her doctoring had hurt a lot, and though he'd tried to hide his pain, he hadn't really been able to do it, and the poor woman had apologized a number of times during her treatments.

Which, of course, had only served to make him feel that much worse. They should have just killed him, shouldn't they? They should have struck him down where he stood for what he'd done to her—to Samantha. They certainly shouldn't be letting him stay in their home, and even if he were confined, it hardly mattered when the bed he had to sleep on was soft and warm, when they brought him three ample meals a day even if he couldn't quite bring himself to eat a lot, given that it hurt to breathe, let alone being able to chew and swallow food . . .

No, the room they'd put him in was the nicest one he'd ever seen, and he knew first hand that the balcony that overlooked the back yard provided an absolutely breathtaking view of the forest and ocean . . . He figured that since it was three stories off the ground, they doubted he'd actually try to escape. Funny thing, really . . . he didn't actually consider that to be an option, did he?

He was tired, damn it—exhausted, really. After dealing with the child for the last couple weeks—and he had to admit that he missed her, too—and then finding Samantha . . . He felt like his entire existence was spinning out of his control, leaving him broken and bleeding as he asked himself just how much more he really could take.

When he was stripping to take a shower earlier—another adventure in pain that he just didn't want to think about—he'd emptied his pockets, only to pull out those damned candies, and as he'd stared at them with a little bit of a smile, he'd had to blink back tears as the sounds of her wailing when he'd finally left her echoed in his head . . . It seemed like he was always letting go of people that he'd come to care about . . . Between Samantha and the girl . . . and he had to wonder just how much of himself he'd ever truly be able to keep for himself . . .

But where was she? Samantha . . .? He closed his eyes, wishing that he'd not been so stubborn, that he'd taken the pain reliever that Zelig's wife—Gin—had offered to him. He seriously doubted that they'd let him off of the hook tomorrow, and while he couldn't say that the punishment fit the crime, he could say that he was already suffering from it . . .

Of course, the worst of it, really, had come right after the lady of the house had bandaged him up, applying salves that she said would help his bruises heal faster, wrapping his ribs in about four Ace bandages to keep them from killing him completely. As she stood back with a somewhat satisfied, if not entirely grim sort of expression on her face—a face that reminded him entirely too much of another silver haired woman with those little pointy

ears—she'd nodded as though something had been decided in her head, and without preamble, she'd demanded that he get up.

Which, naturally, he did.

*"I'm going to train you," she said with a nod, as though it was a foregone conclusion.*

*Kurt blinked the only eye he could see out of and slowly shook his head. "Wh-what?" he stuttered, unsure he'd actually heard her right.*

*She nodded a little more emphatically. "It's only fair, you know. Otherwise, they'll just keep beating the snot out of you, and—"*

*"Uh, Gin, I don't think that's a good idea," Zelig cut in with a marked frown.*

*She waved a hand over her shoulder but didn't even look at her husband. "It's a fantastic idea," she insisted with a bright laugh. "In fact, I think it's the absolute best idea of them all! I'll train you. That way, you won't get beaten up so badly, right?"*

*Her husband heaved a sigh. "Your father's not going to go for that," he pointed out, obviously believing that this would dissuade her.*

*She laughed and finally peeked over her shoulder. "Papa will think it's a fantastic idea," she countered.*

*"Knowing him? Probably . . ." Cain muttered.*

*Kurt shook his head, collapsing onto the edge of the bed since his legs were still rather shaky. The jarring motion, though dulled by the springy mattress, made him groan when his ribs protested. "I don't think they want me to learn as much as they want to pummel me into the dirt," Kurt confessed.*

*“Of course not,” Gin insisted. “If you can’t fight back, at least a little bit, then it isn’t an honorable battle.”*

They were a strange lot, he’d decided then. That belief was only confirmed when he’d found himself out in the yard once more a few minutes later with that damned wooden sword in hand once more. He’d spent the next three hours dodging and trying to parry with the wooden joke as Gin had hurled this strange scythe-shaped weapon at him. Connected to a long chain that seemed to grow longer or shorter, depending on what she wanted it to do, it had a thick metal ball on the other end of that chain, and he had a particularly wicked-looking bruise where that damned chain had wrapped around his ankle to trip him up time and time again.

She’d called it a kursarigama. He’d called it evil . . .

At least she’d called a halt to the training when Zelig had pointed out that it was nearly time for dinner. The woman’s eyes had widened as she uttered a little gasp, and after asking her husband to help Kurt back to his room, she’d darted away to make dinner.

It was damn good, too—at least, the part of it that he’d been able to eat. Too exhausted to manage more than a few bites, he’d given up and was already stretched out on the bed almost asleep when the younger silver-haired man strode in to secure him for the night. That he was also polite enough to ask if Kurt needed to go to the bathroom first was something else that Kurt had taken note of, too.

In fact, it bothered him that they were all going out of their ways to be entirely decent to him, all things considered, and to be completely fair, he really didn’t feel that awful since Gin had applied whatever salves she’d used. Aside from his ribs and his still-swollen eye, he wasn’t too bad off, if one discounted general soreness from overexertion.

It hardly seemed right, really. After everything the white-coats had done to the little demon, if this was the extent of his punishment for it . . .

Of course, it should have been obvious to him, to start with, shouldn't it? He'd seen it in her all along. That same sense of fairness, that same compassion . . . it stood to reason that her family would feel it, too, didn't it? After all, they were the ones who had raised her, so their values had become hers, too.

Somehow, that only served to make him feel just a little worse, too, as a bitter, sad little grin quirked one corner of his lips. The true monsters, right? The absolute monsters . . . He was one of them.

A sudden and ferocious twang twisted his stomach; a feeling that had nothing at all to do with the injuries that riddled his body and had everything to do with the dark blue eyes that smiled in his head, the feel of her lips as real, as palpable as they had been when she'd thrown herself at him. He missed her viciously, desperately . . . and even as the surge of desolation reminded him that he was no good for her, the wild hope, the poignant wish . . . Coming here was a mistake; a huge mistake, wasn't it? Maybe her family deserved to have this time to regain a semblance of their honor, but . . .

But he didn't dare see her again, and he knew it. He couldn't take that chance when the only thing he really wanted to tell her was that he was sorry . . . and that . . .

And that he loved her.

Pushing that thought away, forcing it to the recesses of his mind, he grimaced as he tried to roll over onto his side. It was going to be a long, long night . . .

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Samantha slowly prowled around the ground below the third story balcony. She didn't sense anyone up there posted outside the door, but she couldn't rightfully see well enough to tell for certain, either. Even then, she figured that everyone inside likely knew that she was here, or at least, that she was on her way. To think that her parents hadn't realized that she was gone, to begin with, was little more than wishful thinking, and she didn't even try to convince herself that she was wrong . . .

"Do you sense anything?" she murmured to Griffin.

Scowling at his cell phone, he grunted. He'd shut it off when the first of the phone calls had come in. He probably had more missed calls now than he'd ever had since he'd gotten it, in the first place. He was limping just a little—a reminder that he was still recovering from the last reconstructive surgery he'd had, but when Samantha had asked him about it, he had waved her off with a shrug and a snort meant to assure her that he was just fine.

"Why don't you just go in the front door?" he asked suddenly, grabbing her arm before she could jump. He let go just as quickly.

She frowned at him. "And you think they'll let me just walk right up the stairs to see him?"

Griffin made a face and crossed his arms over his chest, clearly uncomfortable with the part he was playing in this. A guilty pang shot through her. She really hadn't meant to trap him in the middle of this, and that's exactly what she'd done since there was more than a passing chance that both her parents as well as Isabelle were likely to be angry at him for helping her, in the first place.

"You know," he began, looking even more uncomfortable by the second, "this—this sneaking around—this is why everyone is worried . . . The Sam I know would think this

through logically, and then she'd talk to people. The Sam I know doesn't sneak out windows or . . . or run away from her family."

Staring at her feet, she tried not to feel ashamed, to no avail. He was right, and she knew it, but . . .

"That's not it," she said quietly, rubbing her arms to dispel the chill of the mid-April night. I've tried talking, but no one's willing to listen, and . . ."

Griffin shrugged. "Your parents are too close to you. Maybe you should try talking to someone else . . . your grandfather, maybe . . ."

Lifting her eyes to peer up at him, she slowly shook her head. "Do you . . . do you think he'll listen?"

"I don't know. He might. I mean . . . it doesn't hurt to try, does it?"

"There you are!"

Samantha stifled a sigh as her mother's arms locked around her. Bellaniece's heart was hammering a mile a minute as her mother smashed Samantha against her chest.

"M-Mama," she said with an inward wince.

"What were you thinking, running off like that?" Bellaniece scolded as she leaned away just far enough to frown at her.

"Griffin? I can't believe you ran off with her," Isabelle huffed as she crossed her arms over her chest and shot her mate a definitive pout.

"Did you want her running off all by herself?" Griffin challenged gruffly.

“No, but you should have come and gotten the rest of us,” she pointed out.

“Mama, Isabelle,” Samantha said, interrupting the escalating argument as she gathered her resolve. “Don’t be angry at Griffin. He just wanted to make sure that I was safe; that’s all. I . . . I came over here to talk to Grandpa.”

Bellaniece stared at her for a long moment, unable to mask her upset. Then she forced an overly bright smile that made Samantha grimace inwardly. “O-okay . . . let’s go talk to him, then. In fact, I’m pretty sure that your father’s already in his office, so . . .”

“N-no, Mama,” Samantha said quietly, catching her arm before she could hurry toward the house. Sparing a moment to glance at Griffin, who caught the look and offered her a curt nod: his support. “I want to talk to him alone. Please,” she added to soften the blow.

“Uh . . . oh . . . o-of course,” Bellaniece said, blinking quickly as her indulgent smile widened even more.

Samantha managed a very weak one of her own before hurrying toward the living room door. It dissolved as she hurried through the house, thankful that it was late enough that almost everyone else had already gone to bed. Wincing as she reached for the handle of her grandfather’s office door, she stopped when she heard the raised voices within, and against her better judgment, she leaned in to listen closer.

“I want that son of a bitch dead, damn it!” Kichiro growled.

“I know you do,” Cain said with a sigh. “I might even agree, but it hardly matters, don’t you think? Samantha says he’s her mate.”

Kichiro snorted indelicately. From the way his voice traveled, she could tell that he was pacing the floor. “He isn’t, or didn’t you notice? He doesn’t smell a damn thing like her, does he? I’m not sure what kind of witchery he pulled to do what he did, but it’s nothing but a fluke!”

“Which also doesn’t matter when *she* smells like *him*. Even if she didn’t, she says he’s her mate, and—”

“Keh! She’s *fixated* on him! That’s all it is!”

The loud scrape of a chair and a thud as Cain slammed his hand down on the desk . . . “You don’t know that! And you wouldn’t take that kind of chance with her life, would you?”

“Back off, Zelig! Samantha is *my* daughter, not yours!”

Biting down on her lip, Samantha stepped away from the door, stumbling toward the stairs—anything to escape the raised voices—the conflict.

It was wrong: all wrong. Her father and her grandfather never had seen eye to eye, but . . . But it was worse—so much worse—now . . . and it was all her fault . . .

It seemed like all anyone had done since she’d gotten home was whisper and speculate and talk amongst themselves, but no one—no one—had asked her a thing. True enough, she’d had to think about it, but it really hadn’t taken her too long to figure out. The night he’d gotten her out of there . . . just how bad off had she been? Her memories of the days following that were a little vague, a little fuzzy, but she knew, didn’t she? He’d saved her—really saved her . . . and when he had, he’d made her his mate, too.

Stumbling through the mansion, up the stairs to the third floor, she wandered, her thoughts so twisted, so troubled, that she just couldn’t make sense of anything at all. All

she wanted was for everyone to understand that she wasn't fixated on Kurt, that there was nothing perverse or ugly about her feelings. She knew in her heart, as certainly as she knew that the sun would rise in a few hours . . . It was clear to her . . . but . . .

"What are you doin' up here, pup?"

Blinking and gasping as she stopped short, coming face to face with her other grandfather, Samantha couldn't help the way her ears flattened as her gaze dropped away; as she prepared herself for the inevitable lecture that she had no business on the third floor; that she had no business anywhere near the taijya. "I just . . . I just want to see him," she whispered, more to herself than to InuYasha.

"Figured that much," InuYasha muttered. Sitting with his back against the door, arms wrapped around Tetsusaiga, his ears flicked idly. "Your old man know you're up here?"

Shaking her head 'no' just once, she stifled the urge to sigh. "N-no," she admitted quietly.

"He don't smell like you," he pointed out, jerking his head to indicate the closed door and the man behind it.

"I know," she replied quietly. "He . . . he saved me."

"When those bastards cut you." It wasn't a question. "He hurt you? Don't you lie to me."

"Un, no. Not at all. I mean, when he first took me there, he sort of . . . I don't know, shocked me, I guess, but that was my fault, and I'm glad he did . . . I . . . I attacked . . ."

"I meant, did he *really* hurt you, pup," InuYasha interrupted in a tone of voice that stated that she ought to have known as much.

She shook her head quickly as a strange thought passed through her head. Her quick-tempered, hot-headed grandfather . . . he was the one who was willing to listen . . .? But somehow, it was enough.

“He has reason to hate us,” she admitted. “He never met a decent one of us—at least, he hadn’t, until he met me, and when he figured out that we weren’t all monsters like he thought . . .”

InuYasha nodded as he considered that. She’d heard stories from a long time ago, from InuYasha’s youth, and while he did tend to act first—act with his heart—and question it later, Samantha knew well enough that his decisions weren’t nearly as rash as they probably used to be. “Tell me, pup . . . He really your mate?”

Samantha smiled. She couldn’t help herself. The very idea . . . hearing someone else say it in something even a little bit close to belief . . . She nodded. “He is. I know he is . . .”

InuYasha grunted tersely as he got to his feet. “Hell . . . he’s kind of pathetic. Been asleep for hours. He ain’t goin’ nowhere, and I’m going to bed.”

He paused long enough to kiss the top of her head before striding down the hallway toward the stairs.

Samantha shook her head and blinked in surprise at the unguarded doorway in front of her. Before anyone else could come along to stop her, she reached for the handle and turned it . . .

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Kurt wasn't sure exactly what woke him. The gentle brush of fingers on his cheek; the warm and soothing balm of breath on his skin . . . or maybe it was the droplet of moisture that burned him . . .

Groaning softly, he hesitated to open his eyes, unwilling to relinquish the remnants of a breathtaking dream . . .

Opening his good eye, he couldn't quite credit what he saw; the silver hair, the flattened ears . . . the rich quality of her saddened aura . . . "L-little demon," he breathed before he could stop himself, before he could consider the ramifications of the vulnerability in his voice.

She choked out a roughened sound: nearly a sob but not exactly. "Taijya, I'm sorry," she mumbled. "What . . . what have they done to you . . .?"

The softly uttered question brought him sharply back to his senses as his entire body stiffened against his perceived weakness. "S-Samantha . . . get out of here," he demanded, willing himself to sound just a little cold, just a little cruel.

She shook her head stubbornly though he didn't miss the way her already flattened ears jutted out to the sides at the reprimand. "Do . . . do you want a glass of water or anything?" she asked, completely ignoring his terse command.

He watched in silence as she stood up and stepped over to the desk, pouring a glass of cold water from the white carafe that Gin had left for him when she'd come to take his dinner tray away. The dull clank of the ice inside reminded him that he actually was thirsty. Still . . .

She started back toward him, a teary yet completely genuine smile on her face. When she crossed through a shaft of moonlight that seeped through the window, he couldn't do a thing but blink, stare. In that instant, she seemed to glow, didn't she? Her hair, her skin,

her eyes . . . every delicate plane and hollow of her face . . . the beauty that a man would be lucky to gaze upon once in his lifetime, and yet there she stood, a brightness in her eyes that had nothing at all to do with pain or sorrow or fear . . . Anxiety, certainly, but untouched by those darker emotions . . .

But it was the ordinary quality of the tee-shirt and jeans that she wore that broke the illusion. Those things seemed a little too garish, too out of place, those things that shattered the trance that she'd cast over him so effortlessly. "Stop," he demanded.

She did.

He forced his gaze away, staring hard at the wall without really seeing a thing. "I want you to get out of here," he said again, a little more forcefully this time. "I . . . I mean it."

She didn't reply right away. Closing his eyes, trying to ignore the spike of pain in her aura, he reminded himself angrily that there were just some things in the world; things that simply couldn't be, no matter how desperately he might have wished it were otherwise. Her family despised him, and with damn good reason, and he . . . he'd never ask her to choose between them and himself . . . as if there were really any choice about it . . .

"You don't want me to; not really," she murmured with a shake of her head as she set the glass on the nightstand and refused to leave. Somehow in the expanse of time that they'd been apart, he'd forgotten exactly how obstinate she really could be.

Gritting his teeth as he gnashed over the idea that something—anything—should go his way, he sighed. "I mean it," he told her with a shake of his head. "I . . . I want you to leave me alone. Now."

"No."

Blinking at her soft tone—almost a whisper—he narrowed his gaze on her. “What do you mean, ‘no’?”

She clasped her hands, stared at the floor, her cheeks pinking discernibly, even in the shadowy, dusky light of the room. “I said no,” she repeated simply.

“W-why not?”

She drew a deep breath, wandered toward the window, wrapping her arms around herself. “You never left me alone there; not when it mattered. I won’t leave you alone now.”

“Why can’t you understand?” he grumbled, ignoring the aches that exploded all over his body as he pushed himself up on his elbow. “You were there because I captured you! I took you there . . . They could have killed you, and I wouldn’t have done a thing to stop them . . . Don’t you get it?”

“That’s a lie,” she countered without looking at him. Why did he have the feeling that she was smiling?

“Is it?” he challenged quietly. “Samantha . . .”

“You’re my mate,” she blurted suddenly, pivoting on her heel to face him. “You came here because you know it’s true, even if you don’t want to admit it.”

“Mate?” he echoed, dropping onto his back once more. “I only . . . I came here to give your family information on how to keep track of the researchers,” he argued, though his tone had lost much of his initial irritation. “None of them would want you in here . . . I . . . I don’t want you here, either.”

“But you’re hurt, and I—”

“No!” he snapped, glowering fiercely at her when she came toward him once more. He couldn’t let her touch him, could he? If she did . . . “Get out, damn it! *Get out!*”

Wincing at his anger, she shook her head. “Kurt, I—”

“*Go!*” he bellowed, straining to push himself upright. “*Now!*”

A strained expression flitted over her features but was gone as quickly as it had come as she whirled around and hurried toward the door. As it closed behind her, he winced. He was wrong for her; all wrong for her. So why didn’t that knowledge help him, even a little? The anger ebbed out of him slowly, leaving a dull emptiness behind. And yet . . .

And yet he knew, didn’t he? She hadn’t left because she was giving up; she had complied with his demands because she hadn’t wanted him to see her cry . . . and somehow . . .

Somehow he had to wonder . . . Had he finally met his match, after all?



#### Author's Note

**Kusarigama** Kofak's weapon. Gin uses a modified youkai one.



#### Final Thought from Kurt

If ... it has to be this way ...

## Chapter 66

### Stinky-Butt

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Samantha stomped down the steps with a fulminating glower on her face as she headed for the front door of the mansion with every intention of going for a nice, long walk entirely alone, and if the rest of her loving, doting, stifling family didn't like it . . . Well, they'd just have to get over it, wouldn't they?

She simply couldn't tolerate it any longer, damn it! After telling her parents that she was moving back into the mansion to be closer to Kurt whether they liked it or not—never mind that she really had said it a bit nicer than that—she'd tried to get in to see him after his training, only to be told that *he* refused to see *her* . . . and, of course, her family was more than happy to oblige him in this . . .

And it had been this way for the last three days, too. Every night, she went up to the third floor, and every night, whoever was on guard duty told her that Kurt expressly said that he did not want to see her.

She heaved a sigh as she stepped onto the porch and slowly shook her head. How, exactly, was she supposed to convince the rotten jerk that she was his mate if he refused to talk to her, she'd like to know . . .

Crossing her arms over her chest, she headed down the path that led around the mansion, ignoring the men gathered in the yard. She already knew that Kurt's opponent for the day was Gunnar, and she might have been more worried since Gunnar was definitely no slouch, but Gin was more than happy to tell her how Kurt's training was

progressing. According to her, he was learning very quickly, though Samantha figured that was due in large part to the hands-on practice he was enduring every day.

She made a face. Yesterday, Bas had tried to knock Kurt's block off. She'd stood at the window with her claws dug into the sill, biting her lip as she felt the blood leech from her skin as Bas batted Kurt around like a cat with a mouse, holding her breath as she tried not to scream. Too many times, Bas had almost smacked Kurt with *Triumvirate*, but Kurt somehow managed to dodge most of the blows. By the time it was over, she was sick to her stomach and ready to cry, and she seriously believed that Bas really was going to kill Kurt . . .

Making her way down the steps to the pebbly beach, Samantha stopped short when she spotted Sydney sitting at the edge of the water.

"Sydney . . . you all right?" she asked.

"Mm," Sydney said without turning around to look at her. "Dodging the all-seeing eyes of the oh-so-mighty menfolk?"

"Just going for a walk . . ." She trailed off with a frown. Come to think of it, she'd been so wrapped up in her own little drama of late that she hadn't bothered to talk to Sydney despite having noted a bit absently that the cat hadn't been her usual boisterous self lately . . . "Is something wrong?" Samantha asked a bit tentatively.

Sydney sighed and shook her head. "Oh, no . . ."

Samantha bit her lip for a moment. True enough, she had wanted to go for a walk alone, but . . . but Sydney had always been supportive, and the initial gratitude Samantha had felt when she'd first moved to the States to start working for the youkai special crimes division had grown into a friendship—an honor really, considering Sydney tended to keep at least a bit of distance with most everyone. "You . . . you want to come with me?"

Sydney looked like she did, but she hesitated. “You don’t want to be alone?”

Samantha waved a hand. “I’d like the company,” she said with a smile. If it hadn’t been for Sydney . . . “I’d love for you to come with me,” she admitted, holding out her hands to help the very pregnant cat-youkai to her feet. Sydney grunted as she accepted the help Sam offered. The two women walked along the coast for a while in silence.

“So . . . you’ve been quiet lately, Sydney,” Samantha finally pointed out as they continued along the path.

Sydney wrinkled her nose and heaved a sigh as she slowly shook her head. “It’s nothing,” she replied though she sounded only like she was trying to keep Samantha from worrying. “At least, it’s not important.”

“If it’s important enough to upset you, then it’s not nothing,” Samantha replied.

Sydney shot her a quick glance, and Samantha was surprised to see a hint of pinkness filter into Sydney’s cheeks. “I’m fat,” she muttered so quietly that Samantha had to strain to hear her.

“Wh-what?” Samantha blurted before she could stop herself. “You’re not fat! Surely Bas didn’t . . . didn’t say that, did he?”

Sydney sighed and shook her head. “No, not really. He didn’t have to . . . It was kind of implied . . .”

“What . . . what did he do?” she asked. She simply could not get a grasp on whatever Sydney was trying to say. Bas adored Sydney . . . he certainly would never have said or even thought any such thing . . . “Umm . . .”

“He won’t put out!” Sydnie finally blurted, her face exploding in embarrassed color. “He just won’t, and the only reason I can think of is because I repulse him now!”

Samantha stopped short and blinked. “He . . .? Oh . . . oh, oh, my . . .” she choked, covering her mouth with her hand.

“He keeps saying things like he doesn’t want to hurt me or the baby, but that’s just stupid! It didn’t hurt when he put him in there, now did it?”

Samantha snapped her mouth closed, her own cheeks pinking as she struggled to figure out exactly what she was supposed to do with that information, or at least what she ought to say to Sydnie . . .

If Sydnie noticed Samantha’s discomfort, though, she didn’t comment as she plunged on, “Women have babies all the time, right? I mean, all the books say that sex is just fine during pregnancy, and even then, if it weren’t all right, why would I want it? Don’t you think?”

Samantha wasn’t sure how to answer that, either. In fact, she was racking her brain for a viable way to steer the conversation toward a safer topic when the bushes they were passing rustled.

She blinked, realizing a moment too late that there was another youki there—an unfamiliar one, but . . .

But it wasn’t big, was it? Whatever—whoever—it was . . .

Sydnie shot Samantha a curious glance but didn’t try to stop her as she slowly stepped toward the bushes. Samantha stopped when the tremor came again, and when she leaned forward to peer into the foliage, she gasped. “Oh . . .”

The big, gray eyes stared back at her out of a smudged and dirty little face. The child huddled in the bushes couldn't be more than a couple years old, but she stared back at Samantha as though she recognized her. She whimpered suddenly, her bottom lip quivering as huge tears gathered in those fathomless eyes. "*D-daddy!*" she wailed, throwing herself into Samantha's arms, burying her face against her chest as she sobbed.

"What on earth . . .?" Sydnie breathed, kneeling beside Samantha as she leaned in to stroke the child's head. "You poor kitten . . . where are your mommy and daddy?"

"Da-a-a-addy," she wailed again.

Samantha shot Sydnie a helpless glance before turning her attention back to the child once more. Her black hair was all matted with twigs and leaves and grass tangled into her locks in places so thickly that Samantha doubted they could be removed short of cutting her hair off completely. Her little body bore a slew of scratches and scrapes that attested to the bushes and the brambles that she'd obviously crawled through. The soles of her tiny feet were a network of blisters, and Samantha grimaced, feeling the child's ribcage through the thin, torn fabric of the once yellow dress she wore. Diaper sagging so low that it was falling off of her, she tensed her little bottom as Samantha slipped her arm under it to steady her. Clutching Samantha tightly, she cried and whined when Samantha shifted her weight to get to her feet.

"There was a report in the paper about a little girl who ran away from the child social services office a few days ago," Sydnie remarked. "Do you think . . .?"

"I . . . I don't know," Samantha murmured as she tried to soothe the child and walk at the same time.

Heading back the way they'd come, Samantha continued to rub the girl's back, uttering soothing sounds as she shot Sydnie a worried glance. The cat-youkai wrung her hands as though she were beside herself, and she looked distinctly like she was about to burst into

tears . . . “Just a kitten,” Sydnie fretted as she reached out to touch the child’s cheek gently.

The girl squeaked out a scared sort of sob and hid her face against Samantha’s chest a little deeper. “Daddy,” she kept mumbling over and over again. “Daddy . . .”

They climbed the stone steps that led into the back yard. Sam glanced over in time to see Gunnar flash forward, smacking Kurt with the broad side of his sword across his kidneys. The taijya grunted as he hit the ground, lying still for a moment as he struggled to regain the breath that the hit had knocked out of him.

The child suddenly shoved against her, clawing, scratching to gain her freedom. With a sharp hiss as her ragged fingernails raked over the still-tender flesh of Samantha’s inner arm, she let go. The girl fell on her bottom, and Samantha tried to grab her. The toddler was too quick.

Dashing across the yard, she barreled straight ahead as Samantha ran after her.

“*Daddy!*” the girl shrieked, throwing herself across Kurt’s chest as Gunnar stalked back and forth nearby, waiting for Kurt to get to his feet once more. “Daddy, daddy, daddy!” she cried . . .

Sam stopped short, her eyes widening as she stared. To her utter shock, he sat up slowly then hugged the child, murmuring something into her ear that Samantha couldn’t discern.

“. . . Daddy . . .?” Bas repeated, unable to mask the incredulity in his voice.

“What are you doing here, stinky-butt?” Kurt asked as he heaved a sigh and cuddled the child gently.

“Hurt Daddy,” the girl blubbered, burying her face against Kurt’s chest in much the same fashion as she’d just done to Samantha. “No, bad!”

Bas, Gunnar, Morio, and Ryomaru all exchanged darkened glances, and Samantha blinked as all four drew their swords and leveled it at the taijya. “Daddy?” they all repeated in varying tones. Bas sounded irritated, probably because he couldn’t understand why the girl would call Kurt ‘Daddy’ when it was obvious that she wasn’t his, at all. Gunnar sounded put out since he hadn’t gotten to finish the fight. Morio seemed mildly amused—not really surprising—though he did look quite serious for once. Ryomaru was probably the most confused of them all, though, and his sword was the one that Kurt was staring down since he was directly in front of him.

Shoving Morio out of the way, she pushed past her cousins and uncle, kneeling beside Kurt with a shake of her head. “Why is she calling you ‘Daddy’, taijya?”

Kurt sighed again and shook his head. “W-uh . . . S-Samantha, I-I-I can explain,” he told her with a wince. “Where did you find her?”

“Shit . . . he’s toast,” Morio muttered. Bas nodded, though he still looked completely annoyed.

“It’s not like that,” Kurt hurried on to say. “I mean, she isn’t mine.”

“Daddy!” the girl sniffled and whimpered again.

Samantha nodded slowly since she could tell that the child wasn’t Kurt’s. Still, it made no sense to her, why she would think so, in the first place. “She was hiding in the forest,” Samantha admitted quietly, her gaze on the child. “Who is she?”

Kurt opened his mouth to answer but snapped it closed when the girl leaned away far enough to shove his tee-shirt up, as though she were looking for something. “He-e-e-ey,” he interrupted, pulling her hands away and tugging his shirt back down.

“Tanny?” the girl said, giving Kurt what was probably the most pitiful look, ever.

“What the hell’s going on?” Bas demanded, dropping his sword back into the scabbard and draping his hands on his hips as Sydnie slipped her arms around his waist.

“That’s a good question,” Cain said as he stepped off the porch and strolled over. “Who is this?”

“Uh, she . . . she wants candy,” Kurt admitted before turning his attention back to the child. “I don’t have any,” he told the girl. “I’m sorry . . .”

The girl sniffled and burrowed against Kurt’s chest once more. Morio dug into his pocket and pulled out a piece of bubble gum. “Here,” he said, hunkering down to offer the gum to her.

She shifted her eyes to the side but refused to reach out to take it.

“Do . . . do you mind?” Kurt asked, holding out his hand.

Morio dropped it into his palm and stood back up.

“Look,” Kurt said, unwrapping the hunk of gum.

The girl stared at it then leaned toward it to sniff. She must have decided it was all right, because she reached out with a grubby little hand and snatched it, only to stuff it into her mouth in one fluid motion. “Tanny . . .”

“Chew it,” Kurt told her. “Don’t—*aah!* You weren’t supposed to swallow it. It wasn’t ‘tanny’, it was gum.”

“Maybe you should bring her inside,” Cain remarked.

Kurt nodded and started to rise. Samantha got up and helped him to his feet. He followed Cain with Samantha close behind.

It was only after they’d disappeared to go inside that anyone spoke.

“What the fuck was that?” Ryomaru asked in the stunned silence.

Morio shook his head. “Dunno, old man, but you heard what she said, right?”

Ryomaru snorted as he put his sword away, too. “Keh! She don’t smell at all like him!”

“Whatever,” Gunnar complained, wiping his sword on the leg of his black hakama before resheathing it.

“Where are you going?” Bas called out when Gunnar started to stomp away.

“Where else?” he tossed over his shoulder without breaking his stride. “I’ll be at the office if anyone needs me.”

Bas shook his head but didn’t try to stop him.

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“She calls you ‘Daddy?’” Cain asked as Kurt sat down in a chair across from Cain’s desk with the child snuggled in his lap. She stank—really reeked—and she looked like she’d gotten dropped into a mud hole, and on the whole, she looked worse than she had when he’d found her, but if he were to be completely honest, he’d have to admit that he’d missed her—a lot.

Kurt grimaced. He was still trying to make sense of the whole idea that she’d somehow managed to follow him. She shouldn’t have. She’d have been better off, staying where he’d left her, but . . . but he sighed and ruffled her tangled and mussed hair. “She’s, uh, not mine,” he admitted.

“So I gathered,” Cain replied dryly. “Whose is she?”

Kurt opened his mouth to answer but stopped when someone rapped lightly on the door seconds before Samantha poked her head in. She had a tentative smile on her face, her gaze fixed on the child. She slipped quietly into the room and knelt beside the chair. “Look, sweetie—candy,” she said, holding out a small sucker.

The girl eyed the lollipop dubiously then slowly reached out to take it.

“You poor thing . . . Are you hungry?” Samantha crooned.

The girl crunched the candy then started to gnaw on the stick. Kurt took it away, ignoring her when she growled in protest. “She won’t eat real food,” he said as Samantha picked her up and despite the whining that ensued.

Samantha nodded and stood up, and though she whined a little more, she still let Samantha take her, just the same.

Kurt blinked and shook his head, unsure why it bothered him that the child had let anyone take her, even Samantha. When they were traveling, she'd have thrown a fit if anyone else had even looked like they were considering it, but . . .

"It's because she smells like you," Cain remarked as he eyed Kurt speculatively.

"Wh-what's that?"

Cain sat back and shrugged. "She smells like you . . . you marked her."

That earned him a rather marked scowl. "I what?"

Cain acted like he hadn't heard the question, standing up and wandering over to the windows to look outside. "That's normally done in one of two ways: either you had unprotected sex with her—"

"We never—" Kurt blurted, acutely aware of the heat that filtered into his cheeks.

"Didn't think so, or you'd smell like Sam, too, and you don't." Letting out a deep breath, he didn't turn around to look at Kurt as he went on, "Or you gave her your blood. I take it that's what happened."

"What? No . . . That's—" Cutting himself off abruptly, Kurt blinked and shook his head. Of course he hadn't done any such . . . Eyes flaring wide, he winced inwardly as the image of her in that damnable human form flickered to life; her skin so pale, so ashen, her lips tinged blue . . . "They almost killed her," he muttered, as though it explained everything. "They cut her arms to see how fast she'd heal, and . . . and I didn't know what else to do. I'm type O-negative, and . . . and I just wanted to save her . . ."

"So you gave her a transfusion," Cain concluded. "I see."

Kurt sighed, rubbing his forehead, not completely comprehending the gravity of the situation, but understanding that whatever had happened, it was important. “She was dying,” he admitted quietly. “She was human, and . . . and I didn’t know what else to do for her.”

Cain sighed and nodded, as though everything Kurt had said made sense. “So she’s not your mate.”

“My . . . what?”

Cain returned to the desk and plopped down, pinching the bridge of his nose and closing his eyes for a moment. “Okay, that aside, this little girl . . . Where did she come from?”

“She, uh, well . . . I . . . I found her.”

“Found her?” Cain echoed.

Kurt nodded. “She was . . . was born in the San Diego facility. Her mother was killed there just after she was born.” He shook his head, figuring that he’d better tell the man all of it, or at least, all of it that Kurt knew about. “When they went to take the infant from her, she attacked the white-coats, and they . . . they killed her.”

An unmistakable irritation flickered over Cain’s features. “And her father?”

Kurt snorted as fresh anger surged through him at the reminder. “He was one of the researchers. He’s the one that killed her mother.”

Cain scowled and leaned forward. “Is that so?”

“Bastard said that she was . . . was a science experiment,” Kurt growled, unable to keep his emotions in check. “I took the girl with me when I left, but . . . but I tried to leave

her with child social services . . .” He shook his head, still unable to grasp the idea that she really had followed him. “I . . . I didn’t know where else to take her, given the circumstances.”

Cain heaved a sigh and slowly nodded. “Don’t worry about it,” he assured Kurt. “I know of a couple who was looking to adopt a hanyou child.”

Kurt opened his mouth to protest, then snapped it closed again. She was better off with a couple—a family—wasn’t she? Besides that, nothing really had changed, had it? He was a prisoner here, and he had no idea whether they’d let him go in the end or not, and even if they did . . . He still had things to do . . . things that a child didn’t need to see. “Hanyou,” he repeated quietly. “Like Samantha . . .”

“Samantha’s dog-hanyou, but yes, same idea.”

“What is the girl?”

Cain looked rather surprised. “You don’t know?”

“How could I?”

Cain nodded, as though that made sense. “I think she’s an owl-hanyou . . . but I’m not sure about kind.”

Kurt shook his head as Cain started to reach for the phone. “Owl? Makes sense . . . never did let me sleep at night . . .”

Cain dialed the phone and sat back. “Ben?”

“Morning, Zelig. Do you need something?” the voice came through the speaker phone.

Cain let out a deep breath and shrugged. “Found a little girl—hanyou, about two, maybe two and a half—”

“She’s got to be almost four,” Kurt interrupted.

Cain shook his head and shrugged. “Hanyou and youkai children age differently, Mr. Drevin.”

Kurt scowled but didn’t reply to that.

“Okay, what do you need me to do?” Ben asked.

“Would you call and talk to the Conor family? They contacted me a while back, looking to adopt a child.”

“I can do that. Is this a rush placement?”

Cain shook his head as he regarded Kurt. “No . . . I think she might benefit from meeting the family and getting to know them first.”

“Absolutely,” Ben allowed. “I’ll give them a call then let you know what they said.”

“Thanks,” Cain replied, hitting the button to end the call.

Kurt sat back, scowling at the floor, reminding himself that placing the girl in a youkai home would be for the best, wouldn’t it? Who would be better to teach her what she needed to know, understand what she was . . .? They’d know how to deal with her better than he did, right? And . . . and they’d be able to give her the stability that a child should have. It was a good idea, wasn’t it? The best choice, really. It’d be better for her to be with them . . . better than staying with a man who never did understand what it meant to be a real father . . .

It was the best thing for her—for the little girl who got her way entirely too easily with him. She'd . . . she'd be better off with them, and that was really what mattered, right?

Of course . . . of course it was . . .

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Kichiro held up a clear red sucker just out of the reach of the urchin child who sniffled and pouted while Samantha carefully, gently rubbed her face with a washcloth. “I tell you what, sweetie. You let me look in your mouth, and I’ll give you the sucker, okay?”

The child’s bottom lip jutted out a little further. He almost laughed. “Wide, like this,” he told her, opening his mouth wide to demonstrate what he wanted her to do.

Samantha let go of her chin and gently grasped her wrists to wash off her hands with a sigh. How appalled had she been when she’d taken the girl into the kitchen and set her feet on the floor so that she could get some food out of the refrigerator? When she’d turned around with some meat and cheese to make her a sandwich, she’d found the child hunkered down beside the bowl that Gin always kept there for Bas’ dog, her little hands dug into the dry kibble that Badd hadn’t eaten . . . Samantha had hurriedly gotten her away from the bowls, but not without incident as the child cried. Why had she wanted to eat that, anyway?

She sighed. Samantha understood well enough, why the girl would try to do that. Kichiro had told her quickly when he’d strode into the kitchen a few minutes later that Cain had hurriedly explained the situation to him just before he’d asked Kichiro to take a look at her, to make sure that she was healthy enough, and to get a second opinion regarding the child’s age.

"I can't believe they'd do that," Samantha muttered under her breath as she pulled a small piece of ham off a slice and held it out to the child.

She looked confused and shook her head. "B-bad!" she insisted.

Samantha shot her father an upset glance. Had she tried to get her hands on real food before, only to be punished for it? Samantha sighed as she shifted her eyes back to the child once more. Yes, she supposed that she had . . . Why else would she look so frightened? "It's okay," Samantha reassured her with a smile. "Look . . . mmm!" she said as she ate a little piece and ripped off another. "You try."

The girl smashed her little hands over her face and sniffled. "*Daddy!*" she whimpered.

Samantha shot her father a helpless sort of glance. Kichiro's jaw tightened, his ears flicking in irritation.

She stifled a sigh. He really didn't want to listen to anyone about Kurt, did he? He'd rather cling to those things that he thought were true, and while Samantha couldn't really blame him for feeling the way he did, she also couldn't help but feel disappointed, too. She'd never seen her father act so irrationally before, and though she could appreciate his concern, she had to wonder if he ever really would.

*'Talk to him about that later, Samantha. Right now, we've got bigger fish to fry,'* her youkai pointed out.

Samantha blinked and nodded. That was true enough, wasn't it? The little girl kept squirming—no small wonder since the first thing Samantha had done was to get the saggy, nasty diaper off her, wrapping her in a clean, dry towel while her mother and grandmother ran to the store to pick up some diapers. The poor child's bottom was red and raw, chafed to the point of bleeding in a couple areas, doubtless from wearing that

diaper for the last few days. Still, even wrapped in just a towel, the air had to feel better on her skin while Kichiro coaxed her into complying with the quick examination, feeding her the little suckers every so often to keep her satisfied while he looked her over.

It didn't take too long for him to finish up, either. He'd managed to make the entire affair into a little game of sorts, and he'd just handed the girl his stethoscope to play with when Bellaniece and Gin hurried into the room with a couple bags of clothes and supplies and a bag of diapers.

The girl squawked at the sudden intrusion, throwing her arms around Samantha's waist and burying her face against her chest.

Gin clucked her tongue and grimaced, unable to stand the idea that the child was afraid of her. "I'll go draw a bath for her," she said before she hurried into the adjacent bathroom.

"Poor thing," Bellaniece crooned, smoothing the girl's hair gently.

Samantha pushed a small piece of ham into the child's mouth. She whined and fussed but chewed and swallowed.

"Well, she's in remarkably good health, all things considered," Kichiro declared as he held out another sucker. "Her diet could use some improvement, though . . ."

"Daddy said she thinks that Mr. Drevin is her father," Bellaniece remarked as Samantha tugged the little yellow dress over her head and dropped on the floor.

Kichiro snorted indelicately. "Like hell! He can stay the fuck away from her and Sam, both," he muttered.

Bellaniece shot Samantha a worried glance as the latter pretended not to have heard her father. “She’s so sweet,” Bellaniece commented instead. “Look at those huge eyes of hers . . . She’s going to break a few hearts someday . . .”

“Yeah, she is,” Kichiro agreed with a sigh, finally breaking into a little grin of his own.

Samantha scooped the girl up in one arm and the diapers in the other. “We’re going to go take a bath now, aren’t we?” she said in a bright tone as she smiled at the child.

Bellaniece sighed as she watched Samantha’s retreat. “She looks thinner,” she remarked speculatively, unable to hide the traces of worry evident in the depths of her gaze.

Kichiro scowled but didn’t reply as his own eyes darkened. He’d noticed that, too, hadn’t he? In the past few days since that bastard’s arrival, since he’d told her to go away and refused to see her . . . Kichiro had hoped that it was all in his mind since he tended to be overly critical whenever he looked at Samantha these days, trying to discern a hint that something wasn’t as it should be, and now . . .

But that couldn’t be it, damn it. No, Samantha just wasn’t taking proper care of herself, right? Too preoccupied to remember that she needed to eat, maybe. He’d talk to her about that later. Besides, what Zelig had said only served to reinforce what Kichiro had maintained all along. Those two weren’t mates. He’d given her his blood to save her, not because he knew what it would ultimately mean.

In a way, he should be a little grateful, shouldn’t he? Drevin’s resolve would eventually help Samantha to understand what Kichiro had told her all along. Too bad that he couldn’t be grateful, not in the least, and even when Bellaniece had pointed out that they could at least thank him for sending Samantha back to him, Kichiro couldn’t bring himself to do that, either, not when he was the reason she hadn’t come home, to start with . . . and he knew well enough that one day, they’d all thank him for being so insistent, right?

He heaved a sigh, watching as Bellaniece pulled a cute little dress out of a bag along with some diaper rash ointment and headed toward the bathroom, too.

Sometimes it really sucked to be right, didn't it?



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
... Stinky-but ...?

## Chapter 67

# Crime and Punishment

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Cain sat back, staring incredulously from one man to the next as he slowly shook his head and tried to make sense out of the information he'd just been given. "So . . . you're telling me that Drevin single-handedly destroyed every last one of the facilities?" he repeated.

Cartham sat back, knitting his fingers together atop his stomach, his right knee jostling up and down like a bobber on the surface of the water as the silver chain on his boot jingled softly. "Sounds 'bout right," he agreed with a careless shrug.

Moe Jamison grunted, scowling at the coffee mug in his hands. "Located all the men on my list," he added with a shake of his head, "cept one . . . Well, I did find him, too, but . . ."

Blinking at the vaguely disturbed expression on the hunter's face, Cain frowned. "What does that mean?"

Moe shrugged. "One of 'em—Thurman—he's dead. Hung himself in his apartment . . ."

"But . . .?" Cain prompted when Moe trailed off.

Moe made a face and set the cup on Cain's desk. "It wasn't so much that he killed himself that bothered me," the hunter began. "But there was this jar there by his feet . . . you know, one of them Mason jars . . .? His, uh, err, well, his *balls* were in it."

“His what?” Cain repeated blankly.

Moe shook his head. “Well, I didn’t, you know, look to verify it, but . . . but it was *someone’s* balls, anyway. They were in some kind of liquid, and I didn’t check that, either.”

“Balls?” Cain echoed. “As in, *testicles?*”

Moe nodded.

“Ungh,” Larry half-groaned. Cartham looked decidedly disturbed. Cain wasn’t surprised when all three men shifted in their seats just a little. “I guess I’d consider offing myself if someone removed my boys and pickled ‘em.”

Cartham grunted. “*Sbi-i-i-it* . . . Hell, I think Kelly’d off me if someone lopped off mine.”

Moe considered that then nodded. “I can see that . . .”

“Aiyuh,” Larry intoned. “I imagine Gin’d feel the same way . . .” He grinned suddenly. “Get ‘em while they’re hot: the tai-youkai’s big fellers . . .”

Cain rolled his eyes. “Okay,” he growled, shaking his head and rapping on the desk with his knuckles. “Moving on—”

Moe chuckled and reached over to slap Cartham’s arm. “I’ll be damned. Zelig’s blushing.”

“Can we focus, please?” Cain demanded.

“Aww, that’s kind of precious, isn’t it?” Larry remarked.

“What about the others?” Cain asked, ignoring their collective teasing.

“Nope,” Cartham said with a shake of his shaggy hair. “Far as I could tell, everyone else still had their balls.”

“My marks did, too,” Larry added. “Course, I didn’t check ‘em . . . Just didn’t *see* any Mason jars . . .”

Cain heaved a sigh and wondered how it could possibly be that full-grown adult men could act so stupidly when left to their own devices . . .

“So basically, your new houseguest has a really bad habit of hacking off people’s balls and sticking them in jars?” Cartham deadpanned.

Moe nodded. “In a nutshell.”

“All *right!*” Cain growled, tossing his ink pen onto the desk. “Let me know when we can finish this discussion like adults.”

The miscreants simply grinned at him, which just figured. They finally wound down, though, and Cartham shot him a rather conspicuous look. “Something else,” he drawled, propping his left ankle on his right knee.

“Something else about testicles?” Cain demanded.

“Naw,” Cartham replied with a chuckle. “Those sons of bitches, though . . . They were all terrified: lookin’ over their shoulders and shit . . . Seems like someone or something put the fear of God into ‘em.”

“My marks were like that, too,” Moe said.

“Aiyuh,” Larry agreed.

Considering that for a moment, Cain frowned. There was only one person who could or would have done anything like that, at least in the timeframe provided. After all, InuYasha had told Cain exactly what they’d found when he, Ryomaru, and Evan had finally breeched the facility in Chicago, and that could only mean that someone else had gotten there, first . . . but why? Why would he have gone to such lengths? Simply injecting the tracking devices and warning them ought to have been enough, but it wasn’t, was it? Not to *him* . . .

*‘You honestly have to ask that?’* his youkai voice demanded. *‘Why else would he, indeed?’*

*‘Because,’* Cain reasoned with an inward sigh, *‘he really is her mate, but he . . . Why doesn’t he acknowledge it . . .?’*

*‘Don’t be dense, Zelig. When one believes in one’s heart that one truly doesn’t deserve that level of happiness, why would you think that he would deny it?’*

Cain grimaced inwardly. He knew something about that sort of self-loathing, didn’t he . . .?

Yet it all made sense in the end. Cain wasn’t sure why Drevin would have captured Samantha to start with, but . . .

But somewhere along the line, he’d fallen in love with Samantha, after all . . .

*‘She . . . she’s been right all along, hasn’t she?’*

Thing was, Cain didn’t know whether that was a good or bad thing, did he?

“And what were they doing, exactly?” Cain asked, deciding that the questions he’d been pondering could wait until later.

Cartham’s chuckle was downright nasty. “Not a helluva lot of anything, tell the truth.”

“Mine, neither,” Larry confessed.

“Yup,” Moe agreed.

Cain nodded slowly. “So . . . it’d be safe to assign one person to keep track of them all . . . for now.”

The three exchanged looks then nodded. “I’ll take care of it,” Moe volunteered. “I’ve got free time.”

Cartham chuckled, though this time, it sounded a lot less mean. “Though you’d retired, old man,” he goaded.

Moe shrugged. “Hell, I’m not a rancher,” he confessed, “and it gets a little boring sometimes.”

Somehow, that wasn’t entirely surprising. To be entirely honest, he didn’t figure that Moe would last more than six months out there in the middle of Montana with nothing to do and nothing but ranch animals to keep him company—not to mention that the man enjoyed his high-tech toys that he loved to acquire with the justification that they were ‘for the job’ . . . Nope, not surprising at all that Moe would volunteer to devoting his time to keeping an eye on the researchers, and knowing Moe’s mate? Well, she’d likely thank Cain for putting him to work again, too. Gavin, Moe’s son, had mentioned a while back that his mother was complaining about Moe’s devices that he kept buying, even if he didn’t really need them anymore . . . Something about their modest little house looking like a Digi-Tech showroom . . .

The office door opened, and Cain looked up in time to see his diminutive little wife hovering in the doorway. Wringing her hands as she shot the assembled hunter one of her apologetic little smiles, she bit her lip when she met Cain's gaze. "Sorry to interrupt," she apologized with a little bow. "Zelig-sensei . . ."

"Something wrong, Gin?" he asked, inviting her in with a crook of two fingers.

She skittered over to him and leaned in close to his ear. "There's a little . . . problem . . ." she whispered.

"What kind of problem?" he whispered back, fully content to play her game with her since she seemed heartily intent upon it.

She wrinkled her nose and scrunched up her shoulders seconds before the sharp, shrill cry siphoned through the cracked-open doorway. "Um, that," she allowed.

"Was that the little girl?" he asked in a normal tone of voice.

Gin nodded. "Y-yeah . . ." she replied. "She's very upset, and—"

"So I gathered," Cain said dryly. "Do we know why she's upset?"

Gin heaved a sigh, her ears flattening momentarily as she slowly nodded. "She . . . she wants her . . . her daddy," she confessed.

Cain blinked. "Her daddy," he repeated.

Gin nodded again. "Yes. We've been trying to convince her that she can stay with Samantha for now, but she's so sleepy, and you know how cranky they can be when

they're tired . . . But she's had such a rough few days, hasn't she? So maybe . . . maybe just this once . . .?"

Letting out a deep breath, Cain slowly shook his head. "You think we should let her in to see him," he concluded.

Gin grimaced but nodded. "Would it really be that bad?"

Cain stared at her for a moment then slowly stood up, very mindful of the three sets of eyes that were watching the exchange with avid interest. "Gin . . . sweetie . . . Drevin's here to be punished for what he did, remember?"

"But is the child?" she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest and stubbornly shaking her head.

Cain sighed then winced as a very loud, very pronounced shriek jarred through him so hard that his teeth ground together. "Excuse me, gentlemen," he said as he stood up and headed for the door with Gin in tow.

On the one hand, he really wasn't very keen on the idea of letting the girl in there, but . . . but he also didn't have the heart to put her through that kind of upset when she'd already suffered enough. A child born and raised in one of those places . . .? Small wonder that she wanted Drevin, really. Regardless of how he'd actually treated her, he was probably the closest thing to a father that she had known thus far . . .

And therein was the real problem, wasn't it? The man . . . he seemed reluctant to want to keep her; seemed as though the idea hadn't crossed his mind, and to be honest, Cain hadn't thought about it, either, at least until after the fact. If he really was Samantha's mate, it might be all right . . . Still . . .

Still, he had already talked to the family that Ben had found. They were coming by tomorrow to meet the child, and that was another thing. As far as he knew, she didn't actually have a name . . .

The child was trying to wiggle out of Samantha's arms as she stood at the base of the stairs that led to the third floor. Samantha, herself, looked like she were ready to cry, too, but she smoothed the girl's hair and crooned in her ear. When she saw Gin and Cain, she shot them an imploring sort of look.

Cain sighed. He was going to catch ten kinds of hell from Kichiro, he was sure, for what he was about to do. The hanyou had made it abundantly clear that he wanted Samantha kept the hell away from Drevin, and while Cain had been cooperating with his wishes, he just wasn't so sure that he really ought to do that anymore, and even then . . . One look at the agitated little girl was more than enough to sway Cain's opinion, at least for one night. To make her suffer was one thing, but she was just a child—a baby, really . . . What other choice was there?

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*'So . . . when I breathe in . . . my . . . toe hurts . . .? How the hell does that work?'* Kurt wondered as he blinked in the darkness. All right, so that was a little bit of a misnomer. It wasn't like his toe was the only thing that hurt—God, no. It was just the *strangest* thing that hurt, he supposed . . .

Not surprising. He'd discovered that a lot of body parts could hurt, given the right impetus, and those relatives of Samantha's? Well, they were damn good at finding said-impetus . . .

He'd been given one day off after the uncle—Ryomaru—had at him. It wasn't actually what he'd call a day off, though. No, he'd spent the majority of that day in training, and he'd hardly call dodging the entirely too-sharp blade of Gin's Kursarigama 'resting' . . . But it had done some good—not a lot but some—or so he'd thought until he'd realized that his next opponent was that brute of a fellow named Bas.

The others had teased Bas, saying that he was too slow when he attacked, not that Kurt could tell. Bas still moved much faster than a human on a good day, and if one added to that the idea that every single one of Bas' strikes hurt so badly that Kurt saw stars, and, well, he really had thought that it couldn't get worse. No doubt about it, the man was terrifying, fighting with a grim determination that had literally scared the shit out of Kurt. All that, of course, after the claim that they wouldn't actually kill him . . . Go figure.

He'd fought Morio the next day, and while Morio hit with far more frequency than Bas did, his strikes weren't nearly as mind-numbingly painful, either, and after a while, he'd started cracking jokes—really *bad* jokes—and the more he joked, the more often he hit, too . . .

So today he'd ended up being paired off with the one they called Gunnar. Almost as tall as Bas which put him nearly a half a head taller than Morio, and not nearly as burly as Bas, either, Kurt might have believed that he was going to be all right . . . One look at the man's eyes, though, had convinced Kurt otherwise. There was more intensity in his gaze than Kurt could credit, and he'd figured out quickly enough that Gunnar was frightening, in his own right.

He'd actually reveled in telling Kurt exactly where he was going to hit him, how hard he was going to hit him, and what Kurt had done to earn the hit that was coming, and one might have thought that Kurt would be able to counter those hits since Gunnar had gone through the trouble of telling him all of that, but no. If the others could move with that much speed, Kurt wasn't sure, but Gunnar could and did. In the space of a moment, he'd

somehow managed to dash forward and strike, only to back away fast enough that Kurt really couldn't even see him move.

No doubt about it: Samantha's family was a frightening lot.

He sighed. He really had been stupid, hadn't he? Thinking that her family might not be able to protect her against the white-coats? What a joke . . .

Frowning when the sound of a child's crying broke through his abysmal thoughts, Kurt scowled at the door. '*Stinky-butt . . .*'

He closed his eyes, willing himself to relax. She was going to be fine, right? There were more than enough women in the house—women who knew how to deal with a child . . . They didn't need him to tell them what the girl needed, did they? So why did that idea piss him off even more . . .? He shifted slightly, wincing as another bout of pain shot through him.

It was laughable, wasn't it? He hadn't known what to expect when he'd arrived, but if he were pressed to ask, he'd have to admit that he was really expecting something more along the lines of what he'd done to the white-coats. He certainly hadn't expected this. Did they really believe that what they were doing was nearly enough? They'd seen for themselves what the bastards had done to her, hadn't they? How could that be all right? They should despise him; loathe him; want to kill him, and while he did ache, he couldn't say that he was actually suffering, per se.

Nope, about the only thing he could say with any real sense of clarity was that being so close to Samantha but not being able to touch her, to talk to her . . . It was more than enough to drive him insane . . .

He'd known from the start that it was no good. Her family would never, ever accept him, and with good reason. After all, the things she'd been subjected to . . . because of him . .

. No, everything was better this way. The plain and simple truth of it was that he cared about her far too much to hurt her even more than he already had . . .

Even if it killed him, damn it . . .

But the incessant crying was almost more than he could tolerate, too—the wail of a child who simply didn't understand . . . it didn't help at all to tell himself that the women could take care of everything. That child . . . she'd already cried enough in her short life, hadn't she? Cried and been afraid . . . and he could understand that, too . . .

The rattle of the door handle broke Kurt out of his reverie, and he blinked when the bright hallway light streamed into the room. Cain stood in the doorway—Kurt couldn't see his face—and just behind him, the sniffling child snuggled securely in Samantha's arms. With a ragged little cry, the girl squirmed to be let down, and Samantha complied as Cain stepped into the room and strode toward the bed.

Kurt winced and grunted as the child climbed onto the bed, whimpering, crying as she shoved her face against Kurt's chest. "Can you sit up?" Cain asked brusquely.

Kurt tried; he really did, but with the girl on his chest and the myriad of aches that erupted all over his body all over again, he sighed and shook his head. "N-no . . ."

Samantha stepped over and gently helped him. Kurt had to grit his teeth to keep himself from groaning. It was painful just to be that close to her, wasn't it? Painful in a completely foreign sort of way . . . He just wanted to lean into her, to breathe in the scent of her, to reassure himself that she was there; that she was near; that he . . . that he . . .

Cain unfastened the handcuffs that secured him at night and stepped back. "She's had a pretty rough day," he explained, nodding at the child who was sniffling and whimpering.

“Y-yeah,” Kurt muttered, frowning thoughtfully as the little girl yawned and slowly closed her eyes.

“Anyway, I have a family that’s coming to meet her tomorrow. Figured it’d be best to let them get acquainted before they try to take her home.”

Why did he hate the idea of someone else taking her home . . .?

Deliberately trying not to think about that one too long, Kurt nodded. “All right.”

“Another thing. Does she have a name?”

Kurt blinked, unsure why that question seemed so odd, given the situation. “Uh, no,” he confessed.

“What do you call her?”

It occurred to Kurt that what he called her really wasn’t exactly a name, either, but . . . but Cain asked, didn’t he? “Stinky-butt,” he admitted.

The man blinked and stared then blinked again. “You call her . . .? Uh . . .”

“W . . . She . . . Uh, yes,” he stammered. Funny how that never seemed quite so wrong to him before as it did, staring at Cain Zelig . . .

Cain eyed him for another minute as though he weren’t exactly certain what to make of that, then headed for the door.

“W-wait!” Kurt blurted before the man could pull the door closed.

“Samantha said she’d stay, too, in case the girl has to go to the bathroom or anything.”

That said, he closed the door, the sound of his footsteps heading back down the hallway was blunted but not completely blocked out.

Kurt didn't say anything for a long moment. He wasn't sure what he could say, and he was having very distinct difficulty in even looking at Samantha. He wasn't entirely certain that he understood what was going on at all, but when the child moved in closer to him, he heaved a sigh and slowly shook his head. "Samantha . . ." he said slowly.

"She's cute, isn't she?" Samantha blurted suddenly, as though she were afraid to hear whatever it was that Kurt was going to say. He could sense it in her aura, couldn't he? Her reluctance—her fear . . . that he would send her away . . . and while he knew in the logical part of his brain that he really ought to tell her to go, he . . . he couldn't . . . "She hated the bath—you probably knew that . . . I ended up getting in with her, and she seemed to be all right then . . ."

"She's just a little thing," Kurt replied softly, silently cursing himself for his weaknesses. "I can't believe she followed me here . . ."

"Most youkai and hanyou are born with the instinct to follow their noses, you know?" she said, visibly calming down since he seemed to be willing to carry on a decent conversation with her. "You left her with the child and social services people, didn't you?"

Kurt grimaced at the censure in her tone, though he also knew well enough that he'd done the only thing he'd known to do at the time. Showing up here with a child in tow . . . what would that really have accomplished except to put her in a situation where she'd have been subjected to even more of the ungodly drama? Glancing down at the child cuddled against his chest, he almost smiled. Neither of the females in the room with him needed that kind of thing. Unfortunately, that seemed to be about the only thing he was good at . . .

“Taijya . . .”

“Hmm?” he said, only half-paying attention as he mussed the girl’s hair and smoothed it down again.

“Nothing,” she said slowly.

Silence seemed to grow and thicken, lurking around the perimeter of the room like a broken shadow or a bad dream, thickening like the morning fog: dense and cloying. Samantha’s aura pulsed, ebbed and flowed with the beat of her heart, and for a moment—only a moment—Kurt let himself savor the welcome brush of it on his raw nerves.

It had been too easy to forget the way that her very proximity could affect him—the overwhelming feeling that always made him feel as though the world could fade away, disappear, and as long as she was there, then that’d be fine, too . . .

“You rescued her, didn’t you? Just like you rescued me,” she finally asked.

Kurt grimaced as he gingerly stretched out his leg. That damned Gunnar had whacked him in the back of the leg with a vindictive abandon. “Yeah,” he confessed, carefully shifting the child off of a rather painful bruise.

“She was born there?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Samantha’s gaze clouded over as she reached out to touch the girl’s cheek. “Poor thing.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that. In the end, he muttered something under his breath and tried not to stare.

She'd regained some of her weight, though he didn't know if she was back to her normal weight since his memory of that sort of thing in the first few days after he'd captured her wasn't that clear. He hadn't wanted to remember, had he? But damned if she didn't look good to him now . . .

*'Knock that off, stupid!' he told himself firmly. 'Remember, can't you?'*

"She tried to eat the dog food that Grandma left out for Bas' dog," she said.

Somehow, that wasn't nearly as surprising as it should have been. "Oh?"

"Yeah . . ."

Kurt frowned.

"I've missed you," she ventured hesitantly.

He paused but didn't reply. He didn't dare.

"So . . ." she tried again. "Did you do whatever you needed to do?"

"Little demon," he began, "you don't belong in here with me."

She let out a soft sigh and slowly shook her head. "If I don't belong with you, I don't belong with anyone."

That earned her a scowl.

"You're my mate," she said simply.

“Tch!” Kurt snorted, shaking his head and thanking dumb luck that the room was too dark for her to see him blush. “What does that mean?” he demanded a little more sharply than he intended.

She leaned against the footboard and wrapped her arms around her calves. “It means that you’re the only one for me,” she replied with a simple shrug.

“You . . . you don’t want to be with me,” he insisted with a shake of his head. “I *put* you there, remember?”

“You got me out, too, she reminded him.

“I would have let them do whatever they wanted to you if I hadn’t gone back,” he countered.

“But you *did* come back, and you wouldn’t have,” she replied with a smile.

He scowled at her. “The only reason I came here was to get the data cards.”

“That’s not true,” she said with a confident grin.

“How do you know that?” Kurt asked quietly, staring at her with a defiant tenacity.

Samantha giggled. “If that’s all you wanted, you could have broken in to get them and gotten away easily enough. You wouldn’t have come during the day, and you wouldn’t be letting them beat on you now.”

He snorted. “As if I’m *letting* them do that.”

She laughed quietly then sighed. “Would it . . . would it be so horrible?”

Heaving a sigh of his own, he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Don't ask me that," he muttered.

"You . . . you kissed me," she whispered, staring at her hands.

He flopped back, smacking his head hard, which set off about a million other aches spiraling through him, and he couldn't staunch the low groan that slipped from him, either. "I . . . I shouldn't have done that," he grumbled.

"Why?" she challenged.

Staring at her through half-closed eyes, he steeled himself against the formidable flattening of her ears. "Don't do that," he sighed.

"Sorry," she said, reaching for her ears to pull them upright again.

Kurt eyed her for a moment then slowly shook his head. "That's . . . That's just wrong," he told her.

"You . . . you came for me," she said.

Closing his eyes for a moment, he could only hope that she didn't sense the lie in his words. "I didn't."

"You're lying."

The little girl whimpered in her sleep as though she sensed the contention in the air.

Kurt rubbed her back to quiet her. "Your family won't accept me," he muttered. "Let's just . . . just leave it at that."



## Chapter 68

### Bitter Realities

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Kurt cocked an eyebrow and watched warily as the latest arrival—Evan Zelig—slowly circled around him. To be honest, Kurt wasn't entirely sure what to make of this Evan character. He'd overheard the others talking, and he'd realized that this guy was apparently some sort of musician, though Kurt couldn't rightfully say that he'd ever heard of his stage name, 'Zel Roka', before.

But his obvious inability to take the whole thing seriously was more than enough to piss Kurt off, too.

"I know you," the silver haired man said slowly. "You're the guy from that building," Evan drawled at length. "But you don't smell right . . ."

Kurt shrugged in a blatant show of mock bravado. "Those pills," he admitted.

"Pills?"

"Yeah. Samantha called them . . . scent-tabs? Something like that."

He looked like he understood that well enough even if he did seem somewhat surprised by it, too. "So you're kind of a sneaky little monkey, huh?"

"A . . . a what?"

Bas snorted loudly. "Come on, Evan. Either beat on him or get out of the way."

“I dunno,” Evan went in with a shake of his head. “Sami’s got his reek all over her. Means we can’t kill ‘im,” he said.

Kurt snorted and crossed his arms over his chest.

“No one’s trying to kill him,” Bas growled.

“Uncle Kich tried to kill him,” Morio pointed out thoughtfully.

Bas nodded slowly. “Kich tried to kill him,” he allowed.

Kurt gritted his teeth.

Evan considered that then made a face. “You mean Uncle Ryo didn’t try to kill him?”

“Nope,” Gunnar added in a condescending tone of voice with a vaguely irritated sneer on his face. “He just tried to maim him.”

Evan perked up suddenly. “Maimage is okay.”

“Keh!” Morio scoffed. “If neither Bas nor the almighty wearer of the fearsome nipple stud couldn’t maim him, then he’s not really maimable, in my opinion.”

Kurt rolled his eyes.

“Keh!” Evan scoffed back. “Bubby might hit hella hard, but he’s hella slow, too. I’ve taken shits, what came out faster n’ he can move.”

Bas snorted. “Shut your pie hole, and get to it, Evan,” he snarled.

Evan chortled. “Pie hole,” he repeated as he and Morio sniggered.

Kurt blanked his features since he hadn’t noticed anything ‘slow’ about Bas, in the first place.

Bas and Gunnar exchanged significant glances for a moment then drew their swords, leveling them at the center of Evan’s chest. “Get serious, Evan,” Bas warned.

Evan laughed, but held up his hands. “Aww, Bubby, why you gotta do me like that? ‘*You’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’ . . . whoa, that lovin’ feelin’ . . . You’ve lost that—*’ Okay, okay!” he agreed quickly when the elder brother broke into a menacing growl, thus ending Evan’s song abruptly.

And the entire situation only served to reinforce the opinion that the Zelig family was one of the most bizarre collections of individuals that Kurt had ever met. He sighed. The family just got stranger and stranger, too, as far as he was concerned.

Evan reached out suddenly and tapped Kurt’s cheek. He blinked and jerked away as the hyperactive guy bounced backward, holding his fists up loosely, like a shadow boxer. “C’mon, holy man. Show me your stuff!” he taunted, ducked left, ducking right, then leaning in to slap at Kurt’s face again.

The damned fool kept it up, too, and for reasons that Kurt didn’t understand, the entire thing only served to piss him off. Faster and faster, Evan kept hopping forward, slapping at Kurt, but not hurting him, just stinging his pride. Strangely, though, the actions seemed entirely degrading . . .

Growling low in his throat, he tried to smack Evan’s hand away, but the asshole was too fast.

Evan chuckled. “What’s the matter, Captain Kurt? Can’t catch me?”

“Knock it off, damn it,” Kurt snarled when Evan dodged toward him, only to alter the course of his hand, grasping Kurt’s right nipple and giving it a good, hard squeeze. Kurt knocked Evan away as his cheeks exploded in embarrassed color.

“What? Aren’t you quick enough to stop me? C’mon! Don’t be a wuss! Get your arms up to block me!” Evan goaded.

Kurt spun away to avoid the next onslaught, but Evan was just too damned fast. Dancing around like a crazy fool, he kept darting forward, slapping Kurt’s cheeks, jeering at him, teasing him. “Shit!” Evan went on. “Can’t you do better than that, old man?”

Swinging an arm to knock Evan’s hand away, Kurt gritted his teeth and tried to remind himself that he deserved whatever they dealt him. It didn’t help much.

The harder Kurt attempted to fight back, the more it seemed to amuse Evan. Darting around Kurt, only to dash up behind him to grasp and squeeze one of Kurt’s ass cheeks, the irritating uncle-slash-cousin grinned like a damned fool and hopped back, easily avoiding Kurt’s miserable attempt at a counterattack. “Well, this ain’t a damn bit of fun,” Evan complained as he slap-boxed Kurt once more.

Kurt growled in frustration and swung the bokuto. The demon looked surprised—and amused—when the loud ripping of his shirt echoed in the air. The sense of accomplishment that shot through Kurt at the sound brought a smile full of grim satisfaction to his face, and he almost chuckled.

“*Ye-e-eah*,” Evan bellowed as a huge grin surfaced on his features, his deep blue eyes glowing with the unspoken challenge. “Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!”

“Good God, you’re twisted,” Bas muttered with a slow shake of his head.

Evan grinned, the miscreant.

Kurt couldn't figure them out, could he? The entire lot of them were nothing but a bunch of blood thirsty heathens with the exception of the little demon, herself. Samantha . . . was she the only sane one in the family?

Entirely possible, he decided as he finally managed to knock Evan's hand away when it shot out to slap at him again. He really was enjoying himself, wasn't he?

Evan reached forward, bringing his fist down on Kurt's wrist, and he dropped the bokuto with a grimace. A moment later, the same fist slammed into Kurt's jaw, lifting him off the ground and sending him flying back through the air about five feet before he smacked down hard on his back. He hadn't seen the strike coming, damn it, and that irritated him far more than the throbbing pain in his jaw did. Evan swaggered over, hands on hips as he stared down at Kurt's prone body with a cocky grin on his face. "Not bad," he allowed, sticking out a hand to help Kurt to his feet.

Kurt stared at the open hand for a long moment as he struggled to catch his breath. "Not bad," Kurt repeated in more of a grumble than a clarification.

Evan chuckled and shrugged offhandedly as Kurt grudgingly accepted the assistance. "What do you expect?" he complained as he tugged Kurt to his feet and slapped him on the back once. "I liked this shirt, damn it."

"So sorry," Kurt muttered insincerely.

Evan grinned rather wolfishly. "You got her out of there, right? That's what she said."

Kurt let out a deep breath and shook his head. "I also put her in there," he gritted out quietly, unable to staunch the marked scowl that surfaced on his features.

“Yeah, well, she’s tough, and even then . . .” Evan trailed off suddenly, a strange sort of fleeting anger flickering over his features for the vaguest of moments. “Just don’t hurt her again, or I’ll kick your sad little ass, holy man,” he finished.

Though the words were said in a light enough tone, Kurt didn’t doubt for a second that he meant them. “She deserves better,” Kurt grumbled, more to himself than to Evan.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, don’t they all?” Evan retorted. “Don’t they all . . .?”

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“So this is where you disappeared to.”

Samantha hugged her knees a little tighter but didn’t turn to look at her grandfather as Cain shuffled closer and hunkered down beside her. “I didn’t go that far,” she replied a little defensively as she watched the small girl who was creeping closer to the edge of the water, holding onto the hem of the pretty white cotton skirt of her dress, her black hair blowing in the soft breeze filtering off the waves. Samantha had brought her out here, thinking that the child would enjoy the quiet, the peace, and while it had taken a few minutes for her to get comfortable enough to venture away from Samantha’s side, she finally had.

Two weeks since she’d entered their lives . . . Two weeks . . .

And in those two weeks, Kurt allowed her to stay with them at night. She knew damn well that he told himself that it was for the child’s sake, and maybe it was. If she could only get past the cautious distance he kept from her, even during those nights . . . She sighed.

“You didn’t,” Cain agreed easily enough. “Your mother was looking for you, though.”

“We went for a short walk then came down here,” she replied quietly. “I’m not hiding.”

“Didn’t think you were,” he said. “Seems like a nice day for a walk . . . How’s she doing?” he asked, inclining his head toward the child.

“Better,” Samantha allowed thoughtfully. “She’s just curious about everything; that’s all.”

“Curious and maybe just a little afraid,” Cain corrected with an enigmatic little smile.

Samantha licked her lips and nodded. “It’s a lot to take in, especially if she never got out of that place . . .”

“You’re good for her,” Cain decided. “She seems to like you well enough.”

“Because I smell like Kurt,” Samantha said but smiled slightly. “He’s a good person. I know that no one else wants to hear it, but it’s true. He has his reasons—we *all* have our reasons, don’t we?”

“I suppose we do,” he agreed slowly. “Samantha . . .”

“She went right to sleep last night, cuddled against him . . . Maybe he’s the closest thing that she’s had to a real daddy . . .”

Cain sighed but nodded, able to understand and concede that portion of it. “He probably is,” Cain admitted as he watched the girl shriek when a wave surged up toward the beach. She lifted her skirt a little higher and dashed away, and, satisfied that she’d put enough distance between herself and the water, she turned around and hopped up and down, taunting the ocean to come and get her. “He probably is . . .”

Samantha wrinkled her nose and scrunched up her shoulders. “Tell me something, Grandpa,” she began.

Cain chuckled suddenly then sighed. “You’re about to ask me why all men are stupid, aren’t you?”

She blinked but couldn’t stop herself as she turned her head to stare at him. Blue eyes wide and sparkling with his own humor as he stared out over the water, he looked like he’d expected that question for a while, and maybe he had. “How did you know?”

He chuckled again. “You know, Isabelle asked me the same question back when Griffin was being stubborn about admitting that he was her mate. Sound about right?”

Samantha sighed, too, and nodded slowly. “Yeah . . .”

Cain’s amusement died away as he shifted himself, sitting in the pebbly sand beside Samantha, extending his arms to rest on his spread knees, hunching forward, letting his hands dangle limply. “Sami . . . is he your mate? Is he really? I mean, are you positive?”

“Grandpa—”

“Humor me, okay?” he interrupted gently. “You tell me exactly how you feel, because you have to be sure. Just because he was nicer to you than the others in that place . . . that’s not love . . . You know that, right?”

She rubbed her face and slowly shook her head, ears flattening for a moment as she tried to find a way to explain her feelings, if she even could. “It’s not like Papa thinks; really it’s not,” she began quietly.

“Then tell me how it is,” Cain prodded gently.

She sighed. That was the million dollar question, wasn't it? Putting her feelings to words . . . Still, her grandfather was listening—*really* listening . . . and if she had a hope of convincing anyone, maybe Cain . . . maybe he could understand . . .

“He . . . he was *familiar* . . .” she murmured, unsure of her words. They seemed so insignificant in light of the feelings that she wanted to express. “I mean, even in the beginning, he . . . he wasn't cruel to me. He was . . . efficient, but never unkind, you know? But there was something about him . . . I . . . I was never afraid of him.”

“Familiar,” Cain repeated. “How so?”

Wrapping her arms a little tighter around her ankles, she scrunched up her shoulders. “Like . . . like I knew him,” she finally said then shook her head and waved a hand dismissively. “I know; I didn't, of course, but there was something about him . . . He . . . he was sad and angry and . . . and hurt.”

“And you knew all that you first met him?”

She nodded, digging her toes into the dirt. “It's not my place to say, but . . . but I know that he wasn't trying to hurt *me*. He didn't understand back then. He thought all of our kind were monsters.”

“Demons,” Cain replied with a curt nod, as though he understood something that he hadn't before.

She sighed and shot her grandfather a sad sort of look. “But as he got to know me, his opinion changed. I could . . . could see it in his eyes, and . . . and I just wanted to help him . . . My youkai voice . . . you've always said that we need to listen to it, right? And it told me . . . It told me . . .”

“Your youkai voice told you that he's the one,” Cain said quietly.

Samantha nodded as an infinite sense of sadness entered her gaze, pooled in her eyes. “I thought it’d be okay, you know? If I could just help him . . . All his anger and hatred . . . If I could do that . . .”

A sense of understanding passed over Cain’s features as he nodded slowly. Blue eyes dark, inscrutable, he stared out over the ocean, the rising waves, the gentle crests of the ever-moving water. “I felt like that once,” he admitted at length. “The first time I saw your grandmother. She was . . . she was comforting to me.”

She smiled just a little and nodded. “Sometimes . . . sometimes I wonder if we’d met somewhere else, but . . . but I don’t know . . . He spent time with me because he had to at first, but . . . but there was this wall around him. If I hadn’t been there in that place . . . I don’t know if he would have let me near him . . .”

Cain nodded, as though that made sense to him, too. “And you’re sure that he’s your mate.”

“I’m positive,” she replied.

Cain heaved a sigh and dug into his pocket for a cigarette, taking his time as he lit it and blew out a steady stream of smoke. “You ever told him? What it means to be mates?”

Samantha wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “Would you tell Grandma, if she hadn’t known already? It . . . it needs to be his choice.”

A strange sense of recognition slowly surfaced on his features, but he remained silent as Samantha pushed herself to her feet, pausing just long enough to kiss Cain’s cheek.

He watched in silence as she wandered over to the girl, coaxing her away from the water with a Jolly Rancher that she'd had in her pocket. The girl saw the candy and followed happily enough, leaving Cain to his thoughts as he continued to stare out over the ocean.

*"It needs to be his choice . . ."*

God, why did those words strike fear into his heart? Ordinarily, he could understand that sentiment, sure, but . . . How fair was it to ask him to make that kind of choice when the reality of the situation was that Drevin knew nothing at all about the seriousness of it? He was human, and humans didn't really grasp or understand the consequences of stubborn pride, and while Cain might leave it up to them to figure it out, he had to wonder if he dared to do that this time.

He knew only too well what stubborn, stupid pride could do, knew damn well that he'd bargained and nearly lost everything. Thing was, this time, the stakes were so much higher, with Samantha's life on the line. If what she'd said were true, and he really didn't doubt her on it any longer . . .

But what kind of choice could Drevin make, really? A man who knew deep down that the woman that he cared about was just out of his grasp . . . and that was something that Cain understood a little too well, himself . . .

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Kurt sank down in the thickly cushioned chair across from Cain Zelig and fought back the urge to fidget. He wasn't sure why he felt so restless, but he couldn't seem to help himself, either. Something about the formality of Cain's 'request' that Kurt joined him in the study . . . well, it seemed odd to him, entirely too rigid, given the man that Kurt had

come to know, at least on some level, through observation and in meeting the family that he had helped to raise.

Even so, as the seconds ticked slowly away, as Cain continued to sit there, staring at Kurt in that rather foreboding sort of way, Kurt had to wonder exactly why he had been summoned, in the first place . . .

“Your training seems to be progressing well,” Cain finally said, breaking the thick silence.

Kurt gritted his teeth. He knew damn well that Cain hadn’t brought him in here just to discuss said training. He couldn’t quite grasp why Cain would want to speak to him and in such a formal way as this, but he also figured that he wouldn’t get anywhere if he demanded to hear the real reason. “I suppose,” he replied a little tightly.

Cain nodded slowly, as though something Kurt had said made perfect sense. But he seemed almost . . . preoccupied . . .? Was that the right way to describe it? “I . . . uh . . . I wanted to ask you something . . . something that’s been bothering me lately . . .”

“Okay,” Kurt agreed slowly, warily, thankful, at least on some level, that he wasn’t as sore as he normally was following the others’ attempts to ‘train’ him. Despite the lingering irritation at Evan’s idea of training, Kurt had to allow, even if it were completely grudgingly, that he was more clear-headed than usual for this discussion.

Cain sat back and nodded. “You captured Samantha because you saw what she was and meant to sell her to that place, right?”

All of the air whooshed out of Kurt’s lungs, and he nodded. “Yes,” he forced himself to say.

“But you got her out of there, too.”

“Y . . . yes.”

“Why?”

Kurt grimaced. He'd known that it was simply a matter of time before he was forced to answer that particular question—and he still wasn't entirely sure of the answer. No, that wasn't right. He knew damn well what the answer was, but . . . but he still wasn't quite ready to admit it, either.

“She . . . she was . . . different,” he heard himself saying.

Cain nodded again, and he didn't seem surprised by that answer in the least. “Can you tell me what was different about her?”

Kurt sighed, leaning forward, dragging his fingers through his hair. “She . . . she wasn't a monster,” he replied. “She was . . .”

“And you've met others who were. Monsters, I mean,” Cain supplied when Kurt trailed off. It wasn't a question, either.

“Something like that,” Kurt admitted.

“She says you're her mate.”

Frowning, Kurt shook his head. “What the hell does that even mean?” he demanded quietly, vehemently. “Mates? That . . . that—that—”

“That means everything to us—to our kind,” Cain interrupted. He looked a little sad, really, and the patience in his tone was enough to temper Kurt's rising irritation. He wasn't angry that the man was asking questions, no. He was irritated that he just couldn't

answer those questions; not without giving away more of himself than he ought to. “It means,” Cain went on calmly, “that she lives . . . for you.”

Kurt snorted and shook his head stubbornly, refusing to believe the underlying statement—the gravity behind Cain’s words. “I’m the last person she should live for,” he scoffed.

Cain stared at him for a long moment then heaved a sigh. “You don’t love her?”

Caught off guard by Cain’s softly uttered question, he slowly rubbed his eyes. “What I . . . I feel . . . doesn’t matter.”

“Because you put her there.”

That simplistic statement earned a darkened scowl from Kurt. “Because I . . . because I *sold* her to them!” he hissed angrily. “Because I didn’t give a damn enough to find out anything about her before I gave her to them . . . Because I . . .”

Cain chuckled quietly—a sad sort of sound that was touched by the slightest hint of a vague recognition—and shook his head though there wasn’t nearly enough amusement in his voice below the thicker layer of regret that tinged his voice when he spoke. “Because you don’t deserve her,” Cain finished quietly—*knowingly*. “Mr. Drevin . . . do you love her?”

Kurt ground his teeth together, refusing to answer that question, even in his own head. “Of . . . of course n-not . . .”

Cain stared at him for another long moment then slowly got to his feet, shuffling over to the window with a decidedly thoughtful air. He didn’t speak right away and seemed to be lost in thoughts of his own as he gazed out the window at the lengthening shadows of the late afternoon.

“Can I tell you a story?” Cain finally asked as he slowly turned around to face Kurt once more, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room.

Kurt nodded slowly. “All right . . .”

Zelig’s eyes dropped to the floor, and he stared at it for a long moment, as though he were gathering his thoughts. “I knew this . . . uh, idiot. Met this beautiful girl . . . *gorgeous* girl—*woman*.” He chuckled suddenly, his eyes taking on a lazy sort of glow as he considered the story he was telling. “But, see, he . . . he’d lost his first wife some years before that, and he blamed himself for her death. He thought . . . he thought that he owed her his life . . .” Trailing off with a shake of his head, Cain sat back down and leaned back in his chair, his gaze fixed on the small calendar though he didn’t seem like he was actually looking at it, at all. “This woman . . . she reminded him, you know? Reminded him that there were all these beautiful things in the world . . . things he hadn’t seen in a long, long time . . .”

*‘Snow . . . and laughter . . . and . . . and that feeling—that breathy, dizzy feeling whenever she smiled at me . . .’* Kurt thought as another pain—a deeper, more secretive ache—erupted somewhere deep inside him.

“But there’s something you don’t know about us,” Cain remarked quietly, so softly that Kurt had to strain to hear him. “We . . . we get one mate: one chance. This guy . . . He’d honestly thought that his first wife was the mate of his youkai blood. That’s what he’d wanted to believe, you see? But she wasn’t . . . and when he finally found the one . . . he, um . . .” Cain cleared his throat, unable to continue without doing so. “Fool that he was, he thought that she would be better off without him. He’d given his word to his first wife . . . promised her things that he never should have, and the girl . . . she knew in her heart, but . . . but she didn’t care. She didn’t know what it meant to be selfish, and she . . . she never told him. She didn’t want him to be with her because he felt obligated to do so.”

Shaking his head, Kurt frowned at Cain, unable to grasp exactly what it meant; unable to comprehend what Cain was trying to say. Cain must have understood the confusion on Kurt's features. He smiled a little sadly and drew a deep breath. "What do you see when you look at us?"

Caught off guard by Cain's question, Kurt shook his head again. "See?"

Cain nodded, biting his lower lip, exposing the razor sharp fang. "You noticed, right? You had to have. We're stronger, faster . . . We heal in the blink of an eye in comparison to humans. We don't get sick; we don't fall victim to the things that could kill most men . . . Our senses are stronger, and most of us possess powers that humans could never comprehend . . . We endure where humans cannot . . . You did notice all that, didn't you?"

Kurt leaned forward, pressing his fingertips together as he rested his forearms on his knees. "Yeah, I did," he admitted quietly. "So?"

"So," Cain echoed with a shake of his head. "Haven't you ever wondered what our weakness is? Our one, true weakness?"

"You mean you have one," Kurt remarked, only half-joking.

Cain nodded again. "Don't we all?" he replied in a rather ironic sort of way. "Our mates are our weakness," he confessed at length, "but they're also our strength. Once we find the one . . . They become our lives in every sense of the word. Our very existences are tied together—bound by will and by blood . . . and if one mate should die, the other will, too."

"That's ridiculous," Kurt growled, casting Cain an angry look, a fierce scowl.

Cain didn't blink as he stared at Kurt. "You marked her as your mate by giving her your blood. That's only part of it, though. Youkai exchange blood—it's part of the ritual. Samantha's blood has the power to bind the two of you together—to allow you to live out your life in her time instead of yours. Our blood is a living thing, and as long as we live, that blood sustains us, and should we choose a human mate, it does the same for them, too."

He shook his head, unable to believe the things that Cain told him. He started to say as much, too, when another voice, a softer voice, a gentler voice, whispered in his head; words that he had nearly forgotten . . . "*If we die, so does our blood. It's that simple.*" That's what she'd said . . .

Still . . . to believe something like that . . .

But another memory occurred to him. Watching those videos from the first few days of her incarceration, he'd seen her fight against them, even in her weakened state after being shot. She hadn't wanted the blood transfusion that they'd tried to give her then. Was that . . . was that why . . .? He'd never stopped to think about that before, had he? And then he'd . . . he'd given her his blood to save her life. Still . . . What the hell had he really done . . .?

"That's . . . crazy . . ." he muttered, unable—unwilling—to accept Cain's claims.

"Samantha said that you had reason for hating our kind," Cain went on, ignoring Kurt's weak statement. "Could I ask you what it was?"

Snapped out of his own reverie, Kurt jerked upright as his frown deepened. "I don't want to make excuses," he replied tightly.

"Is that what you think you'd be doing?"

“Isn’t it?”

Cain let out a deep breath, as though he had figured as much already. He stared at him for another long minute before he stood and strode over to the doorway. “Baby girl,” he called as he leaned his head out of the room. Without another word, he returned to the desk as the rapid patter of soft footsteps approached in the foyer.

“Yes, Zelig-sensei?” she replied with a bright smile just after she wiggled her fingers in Kurt’s direction.

The gravity in Cain’s expression melted away as he smiled at his wife. “Do you have time to make me a cup of coffee?” he asked.

Gin rolled her eyes as her smile widened. “As if you have to ask me that!” she chided. “Would you like some, too, Kurt?”

Kurt shook his head. Gin nodded and hurried away once more as Cain sat back and watched her retreat. “I still don’t think—”

Cain chuckled. “Pretty, isn’t she?” he interrupted.

“Uh . . . yeah,” Kurt replied, acutely aware that the woman—Zelig’s wife—*mate*—bore an uncanny resemblance to Samantha—or maybe it was the other way around since Samantha was younger. Even so . . .

A minute later, Gin breezed back into the room with a tray of coffee and biscotti. She poured a cup for Cain and one for Kurt even though he’d said that he didn’t want one. Then she smiled brightly at Cain and headed out of the office again.

“She’s a hell of a woman,” Cain ventured in the silence that fell with her departure.

Kurt nodded and set the untouched cup of coffee on the edge of the desk. “Look, I don’t know—”

“Can I show you something, Kurt?” Cain broke in with a thoughtful nod.

The entire conversation seemed as though it were getting weirder and weirder, and while Kurt wasn’t entirely sure what to make of it, he held his own council on that matter and nodded. “All right.”

Cain sat still for a moment then slowly got to his feet, shuffling over to a thick wooden filing cabinet. Fiddling with the keypad that secured the lock, he entered a series of numbers, and the lock released with a soft beep. He dug what looked like an old fashioned leather folder out of the cabinet and pushed the drawer closed, pausing for a moment to run his fingertips idly over the softened material before shuffling back toward the desk again. Letting out a deep breath as he untied the long sable ribbons that held it closed, he let those fall to either side and slowly opened the folder, taking a moment to scowl at whatever the file contained, as though it hurt him, but it was with a rather bittersweet smile that he finally closed the file and extended it to Kurt. “Everyone makes mistakes,” he said softly, almost apologetically. “It’s what we learn from them that makes us who we are.”

Kurt stared at him for a long moment before turning his attention to the portfolio.

He wasn’t entirely sure what he expected to see, hidden within the confines of the old yet elegant file. In a day and age where most everything worth keeping was saved on data storage in one way or another, to hold something like that was almost enough to induce a certain reverence. He could smell the leather—uncannily strong, given that the binder had to be fairly old—the dusty and unmistakable scent of paper . . . and with a sudden sense that he wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to see what was inside, he opened it.

He frowned at the first sketch inside, a graphite rendering that was slightly smudged, a little faded, and completely beautiful in a horrifyingly melancholy sort of way. It took a moment for him to understand it; the sketch of a tiny woman lying in the center of a bed that seemed to swallow her—too large, too cold . . . too impersonal . . .

There was something wrong with her; even Kurt could see that. The shadows under her closed eyelids were too dark, too vast; the hollows of her cheeks too deep and sunken. Even the hair that pooled around her was too defined, too stark, and as he stared in complete and utter horror at the image presented, he couldn't help but notice the tiny triangular ear that looked as though it were wilting, diminishing . . .

'*Little demon . . .*' he thought suddenly then shook his head. No, it wasn't her, was it? So many similarities, sure, but . . . but it wasn't her, and he knew it. The woman . . . she was . . .

Refusing to finish that thought, even in the confines of his own mind, Kurt carefully moved that picture aside, his gaze darkening as he gritted his teeth against the next picture, this one sketched on a cream colored page in the bold lines made of charcoal. The same woman, the same bed, but this time, she was uncovered to her waist. Even through the thin fabric of the delicate nightgown, he could see the subtle delineation of her ribs, her bones. The articulated outline of a collarbone that protruded much too prominently; the sunken hollows that were much too deep . . . and in this one, there was no mistaking the oxygen tube that was taped to her face, the lines of the IVs and cords of the various monitors . . . The macabre sense of a poetic and sad sort of aesthetic quality that reached out from the simple charcoal sketch, right into Kurt's chest, gripping his heart as tightly as a fist . . .

He wanted to stop looking at the images, but he couldn't. He'd known that Cain used to be a famous artist. Even he had heard of Cain Zelig before, but . . . but to work such wonders when staring at someone that close to him . . .? How . . . or better, *why?*

Cain cleared his throat, as though preparing Kurt before he dared to speak. “That’s Gin,” he said quietly, eyes darkened with emotion that he simply didn’t try to hide—a somber sadness, a sense of utter despair . . . “That’s what happened because I thought . . . I thought that I didn’t deserve her . . .”

Kurt looked up, his gaze meeting Cain’s as all the bits of the story fell into place, into perfect, logical order in his head. “That story was about you,” he said.

Cain nodded slowly, the barest hint of a sad, sad smile quirking the corners of his lips. “That was me,” he admitted. Heaving a quiet sigh, he pushed himself to his feet again, digging in his pocket for a cigarette. “I thought—*believed*—for a very long time that I . . . that I killed my first wife. I thought that I deserved to die for my part in the whole thing. I even promised her as she lay dying—or maybe she was already dead . . .” With a grimace, he shook his head, as though the things that he was saying had the power to hurt him. “I told her that I would follow her because I’m youkai . . . because that’s what we do, but . . .”

His hand was shaking as he took a deep drag off his cigarette, shaking as he turned away to stare out the window. “But I thought that Gin . . . I thought that as long as I didn’t tell her how I felt . . . as long as I didn’t claim her as my mate . . . I thought that she’d be all right, you see? I thought . . .” He sighed. “I was wrong. I’m not a doctor, and I don’t profess to know exactly how or why things happen the way they do, and it puzzled me, you understand? Because Samantha has never really shown the signs of her body breaking down the way Gin’s did—the way *mine* did . . . at least, it didn’t when she first came home . . . You’ve noticed, right? She’s lost weight recently . . .” He trailed off for a moment, as though he needed a moment to gather his thoughts, and maybe he did. “Let me tell you what I’ve learned about things you deserve . . . My first wife died in childbirth. There was a hurricane, and the roads were washed out . . . Hell, even if I had been able to get her to the hospital, it was full, too . . . full of those fools who ignored the weather reports and thought they could tough it out . . . The electricity was out, and

Isabelle . . . she couldn't deliver the baby. She was dying, and she knew it, and . . . and she told me to save the child . . .”

Pausing again, Cain cleared his throat, a sadness so deep, so pervasive, radiating from him in palpable waves. “I cut her open with my claws, and I . . . I held my child for the first time with her mother's blood dripping from . . . from my hands . . . Samantha's mother, Bellaniece . . . and I knew at that moment that I deserved to die.”

“Deserved to die,” Kurt repeated quietly, thoughtfully.

“In your lifetime,” Cain went on quietly in a more resolute tone than he had been using before, “you'll find that there are always those things you deserve, the things you don't, and then there're the things that grace will provide. Gin . . . Gin *is* my grace, and I'll be the first to tell you that I don't deserve her. So instead, I made it my goal in life to make her smile every day. As long as she's happy, then that's all that matters to me. That's what matters, Mr. Drevin. That's *all* that matters.” Snuffing out the cigarette butt in a nearby ashtray, Cain stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned to face Kurt once more.

Those dark blue eyes he knew a little too well—Samantha had gotten them from him, hadn't she?—those eyes were unnaturally bright, bringing to mind another time and another place—a cold, cold room, a metal cage, and tears that formed but didn't fall as her quiet voice spoke of her father, of his birthday, and of the idea that she wanted them to have that party, even if she couldn't be there . . .

“Samantha knew—she *believed*—that you were coming for her. I think that was enough to sustain her, but . . . but if you walk away from her . . . if you're *really* her mate . . .”

‘*Then she'll end up just like this,*’ Kurt finished in his head, his gaze dropping to the distorted images of a frail woman—a woman who looked just a little too much like the little demon he'd come to know—too much like her— like Samantha . . .



## Chapter 69

### Completion

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Kurt sighed and gritted his teeth, unable to make sense of anything as he stared at the copy of the sketches that Cain had given to him. He'd asked for the copies, unsure whether or not Cain would permit it, and even at the start, the youkai had seemed reluctant to do it. In the end, though, he had copied them, likely figuring that Kurt might still need the extra encouragement. He didn't, but . . .

But he also wanted to etch those images into his head; to always keep in mind that his choice—as if there really had been a choice, in the end—was the only one he could make.

It didn't matter whether he believed Cain's words or not, either. He wasn't willing to take that great a risk; not with her.

Damned if it seemed right, though. No, it seemed too easy, didn't it? He was being handed every single thing that he'd ever wanted, wasn't he? And he'd earned none of it.

She deserved a man who protected her from the things that she'd been subjected to; one that fought to keep her safe instead of tossing her away, handing her over to those bastards to do what they would to her. That's what he'd done, contemptible asshole that he was, and while he'd tried to understand why she'd be so ready to forgive him without as much as a second thought, he never had understood before, but now . . . Samantha . . .

So why was it so simple? Well, not simple, exactly, but it was, wasn't it? The difficult part had been admitting what he'd known for a long, long time out loud. Samantha might well deserve better—he'd be the first to admit that, but . . .

But there was irrefutable truth in what Cain said, too. Maybe it wasn't about him, and maybe it had ceased to be about him the moment he'd clapped eyes on her . . .

He sighed and sat back. In the distance, he could hear muffled sounds, though nothing that he could truly discern. He could see the somber hues of falling night outside the windows and frowned as he gathered the copies together to tuck them away in the drawer of the nightstand. They'd be in soon to secure him for the duration and to remove the dinner tray . . . Tonight had been a fabulous roast beef and roasted vegetables—a far cry from the dog kibble and tainted water they'd always, always given her . . .

The door opened, and Kagome and InuYasha stepped inside. That was something else he didn't understand. Kagome had told him that he was most certainly the reincarnation of someone they'd known—someone they'd called 'Miroku'—a Buddhist monk they'd apparently traveled with almost six hundred years ago all over Japan. He'd possessed a cursed hole in his right hand that had the ability to suck in everything in the vicinity. The curse had been inflicted upon Miroku's grandfather and then passed down, father to son, with the understanding that eventually that hole would suck in the monk, too, unless they managed to defeat and kill the demon that had cursed his grandfather, to start with.

But they had, according to Kagome. They'd found him, and they'd destroyed him, and in the doing, they'd saved their friend's life.

Still, Kurt wasn't sure what to make of that. To believe that he had been reincarnated . . . well, that was a pretty long shot, really . . .

InuYasha had snorted loudly, though—just before asking him if he still grabbed asses and asked hapless women to bear his children . . .

"You didn't eat much, Kurt," Kagome commented, a gentle chiding evident in her tone.

“Keh! Leave him be,” InuYasha grouched.

“It’s not healthy to skip meals, dog-boy,” she pointed out calmly, reasonably—a sure sign that she was getting irritated with the man she called her mate.

“It ain’t healthy to badger anyone, either,” he shot back.

“It was fine. I just wasn’t very hungry,” Kurt said in an effort to stave off the squabbling.

“Whatever,” InuYasha muttered. “You know the drill, right?”

“That’s entirely unnecessary,” Kagome remarked as she watched InuYasha make quick work of securing Kurt’s hands behind his back. “It’s not like he’s going to try to run away, and you know it,” she said.

InuYasha shot her a look then shrugged. “Not my call, wench,” he replied.

“It’s fine,” Kurt insisted quietly.

Kagome sighed and shot Kurt a quelling sort of look. “You’re comfortable enough?”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Kurt realized exactly how messed up it really was, that Kagome was so concerned about his well-being. Who had worried about the little demon during those days, especially the earliest ones? He certainly hadn’t, had he?

Or maybe . . . maybe those feelings of concern when he’d thought that it was simply because of his investment . . . was it? Was it, really? Or had he known somewhere deep down that she meant more to him, even then . . .?

The door opened once more, and Kurt blinked, his stomach turning over in a decidedly pleasant sort of way when Samantha poked her head into the room with Stinky-butt in

her arms. The girl had obviously been crying, her little nose all reddened, her eyes rimmed in pink as she sniffled and drew a shaky breath, and Kurt couldn't help the grimace that surfaced on his features when she whimpered and wiggled to gain her freedom.

"Grandpa said that it was all right to leave his hands free for the night," Samantha said.

InuYasha snorted and shook his head but unfastened Kurt's hands. "Tell him to make up my damn mind," he grumbled.

Samantha smiled though it seemed to Kurt that it was a little strained, and she kissed her other grandparents on the cheeks before setting Stinky-butt on her feet and laughing softly when the girl made a mad dash for Kurt.

He caught her and swung her off the floor, settling her against his shoulder as she began her ritualistic plundering of his pockets in search of the candy that she thought he might have. "I don't have any," he told her with a wince as she climbed up his shoulder and onto his head. He sighed.

Samantha clapped her hands over her mouth as a giggle slipped from her. "She wanted to come up here. She kept trying to sneak, so Grandpa told me that I might as well bring her," she explained in an almost apologetic sort of way.

Kurt nodded but didn't speak. It occurred to him that she had to have known exactly what the whole 'mates' thing meant. Of course she did. He wasn't stupid enough to believe otherwise, either. Still, she hadn't told him, had she? Hadn't bothered to explain a damn thing—things that would have made a world of difference in his mind . . . What had she meant to do? Leave him in the dark forever? To what end . . .?

"Evan said that you have pretty good reflexes," she went on in a falsely bright tone of voice. "He said you ripped his favorite tour shirt."

“Samantha . . .”

“I met the Conors today,” she hurried on, as though she didn’t want to hear whatever Kurt was going to say. Rubbing her upper arms almost nervously, her ears twitched her anxiety showing in the slight tightness around her eyes as she quickly paced the floor. “They seem really nice, and they thought that she was just adorable—of course she is, isn’t she? And they brought jelly beans for her, so she liked them . . .”

Kurt frowned for entirely different reasons that time. True, he hadn’t gotten a chance to even clap eyes on the couple who hoped to adopt the child, but he didn’t like them, never mind that he knew that his general disdain was completely unfounded and entirely ridiculous . . .

Tugging the girl off his head, he smiled just a little as she pouted at him, sticking out her bottom lip and staring at him in an accusing sort of way, as if to ask him why he didn’t have candy for her. “Sorry, Stinky-butt,” Kurt muttered.

The girl whimpered in protest.

Samantha sighed but smiled. “You’re good with her.”

Kurt shot her a quick glance but didn’t respond. He wasn’t sure if he trusted himself to do it; not when he knew damn well that she’d purposefully kept the truth from him. Whatever her reasons, did it matter when he hadn’t understood the vastness of it all? It ticked him off that she could be so blasé about the entire thing when she knew—*knew*—what it all meant. He hadn’t. He wasn’t supposed to, but she . . . she should have known that he cared about her far too much to let anything happen to her. He’d spent so much time trying to do things to protect her, and then . . .

“Do you want to meet them? I mean, I’m sure that Grandpa would be okay with that,” she ventured.

“Samantha, we need to talk,” Kurt said abruptly.

Samantha bit her lip and shot him a nervous sort of glance. “Talk?” she repeated hesitantly. Then she sighed. “Okay.”

He scowled at her reluctance, depositing the child on his bed before stalking over to the nearest window. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he demanded quietly. “Why didn’t you tell me . . . everything?”

“Everything . . .?”

“Don’t play dumb, Sam,” he growled without turning around to face her. “You didn’t tell me . . . that you . . .”

“Taijya . . .” she began in a completely placating tone of voice. “I . . . I don’t know what you’re—”

“I know,” he cut in almost coldly. “Mates . . . dying . . . all of it. What I want to know is why you didn’t tell me.”

She stopped moving, her entire body stiffening. “Why does it matter?” she countered quietly.

He scowled out the window in abject disbelief, unable to reconcile himself with what she’d just asked in light of the situation. He didn’t trust himself to look at her, not yet. He was still too angry, and that anger just kept spiraling higher with her incomplete answers. “What do you mean? Of course, it matters!” he growled. “You’d think it wouldn’t matter to me? Are you nuts?”

She took a step back, as though his outrage had the power to hurt her. “Who . . . who told you?” she asked instead.

“Does it matter?” he tossed back carelessly, glancing over his shoulder at her despite his resolve not to do any such thing.

Rubbing her forehead, she couldn’t hide the way her ears flattened just as little. “You weren’t supposed to hear all that,” she admitted almost sadly. “I . . . I’m sorry . . .”

“Is it true?” he demanded, gritting his teeth, forcing himself to ignore the tell-tale sign of her upset.

“Which part?”

Narrowing his gaze, he shook his head and turned his attention back out the window once more. “All of it.”

She let out a deep breath and sank onto the edge of the bed, her shoulder slouching in defeat. “Probably,” she said.

He whirled around to glower at her. “That’s all you have to say? ‘Probably’? Zelig said that—that you’d die if I really am your—your mate, and you weren’t with me! *Is that true?*”

The child whined and crawled into Samantha’s lap, nudging her face against Samantha’s neck, as though she needed the reassurance.

“You weren’t supposed to know that,” she whispered with a sad little shake of her head.

“Why not?”

“I don’t want you to stay with me out of pity,” she said quietly, simply, as though it made all the sense in the world. “I don’t want that . . .”

“Pity?” he echoed as his irritation surged hotter. “You’re the last person I’d ever pity! Damn it, Samantha! Don’t you understand? You’re better off without me! You always have been!”

She finally lifted her gaze from the child, a belligerence in her features that he couldn’t credit. “Why?” she demanded softly.

“Why do you think?” he shot back. Drawing a deep breath in a vain effort to assuage his rioting emotions, he rubbed his face and shook his head. “I just want what’s best for you,” he said.

She laughed suddenly—a thin, brittle sound. “I’m so tired,” she said softly, her voice full of understated vehemence, “of everyone deciding what’s best for me without bothering to ask me what I want—of everyone telling me that I don’t know what I want; that I’m confused and all that . . . I’m not stupid, Kurt. I know who you are, and I know what you’ve done, and . . . and I don’t care.”

“You know what I’ve done,” he repeated cryptically, unable to stop himself from shaking his head in complete and utter disbelief.

“Yes.” She nodded, her gaze burning into his with a strength of conviction that he simply could not understand.

“You don’t,” he replied slowly, thoughtfully. “I went back. I put those bastards into cages, and I made damn sure that they understood exactly what they did to you—the total humiliation, the degradation that you never, ever deserved . . . I made sure that they understood beyond a shadow of a doubt that what they’d done to you was unacceptable.”

Even in the fading, washed-out light, he could see her face pale as his words sank in. “W-why?” she whispered.

“Because,” he said simply, flatly. “Because I *wanted* to.”

“Taijya . . .”

“No,” he insisted with a stubborn shake of his head. “I won’t have you worrying, every time you walk down the street . . . looking over your shoulder to make sure that they’re not coming after you. If I didn’t do what I did, you’d never have that because they wouldn’t have stopped, and maybe they wouldn’t have found you, but they’d have just captured another little demon . . . or bred their own . . .” he said, nodding at the child nestled in her lap, his meaning crystal clear. “Can’t you understand that?”

She let out a deep breath and bit her lip. “I wasn’t afraid,” she murmured softly.

“Samantha . . .”

She shook her head to cut him off. “I was never afraid as long as you were there,” she admitted. “Those white-coats . . . I pity them.”

He snorted and pushed away from the window to pace across the floor. “Of course you do,” he gritted out. He’d known that she’d feel that way, but it didn’t help assuage his anger. They didn’t deserve her pity, her tears, her worry. Those bastards . . . they deserved none of it. A sudden sense of absolute irony gripped him, and he slowly shook his head. “You . . . you want to hear the best part?” he asked suddenly, almost ruefully. The understated knowledge . . . the things that he had understood all along during those weeks as he’d caught and tormented the white-coats . . . He’d tried to ignore it, hadn’t he? “I’m no better than they are. Maybe . . . maybe I’m worse.”

“Because you put me there,” she said softly.

He heaved a sigh, nodded, only to shake his head as a complete and utter feeling of hopelessness surged through him. “Yes . . . yes. That’s why.”

“And if you knew me when you caught me like you know me now, then maybe I could understand that . . . but that isn’t you. You were never like them.”

“You don’t know that,” he countered in a hiss of desperation, a whisper of pleading.

She shrugged and handed the child a sucker that she’d had in the breast pocket of the plain white blouse she wore. “I do,” she stated.

“How?”

She bit her lip, shook her head, and her lips turned upward in the barest hint of a shy smile as she slowly met his gaze. “Because you *wanted* to know me. They never did.”

“That’s not enough,” he countered with a stubborn snort. “That’s not *nearly* enough. Those bastards . . . they deserve to die for what they did to you—and maybe I do, too.”

“That’s not true,” she argued. “You didn’t know, and after what you’d seen—”

He rounded on her, glowered at her. “Don’t make excuses for me, Samantha. Don’t try to make it okay.”

“But you can’t live with anger and hatred,” she said quietly. “You . . . you just can’t.”

Letting out a deep breath as his anger faded with her words, he shook his head, his brow furrowing in a grimace of irritation, an influx of confusion. “I . . . I don’t know anything

else,” he admitted quietly, almost brokenly. “Those . . . those things are all I’ve ever known . . .”

She stared at him for a long moment, her eyes glowing as she gently set the child aside. The bed squeaked just a little as she got to her feet, as she shuffled toward him, and her touch was soothing as she turned his face toward her. “Then let me show you,” she coaxed with a faltering smile. “I want to show you what it’s like to laugh again.”

“To . . . to laugh,” he repeated, as though the idea hadn’t occurred to him. “Why . . .?”

“Because,” she replied like it was the simplest thing in the world, and maybe to her, it was. “Because if you laugh, then I will, too.”

“Little demon . . .”

“Please.”

He sighed, wondering how it could be that a woman as precious, as beautiful, as Samantha could deign to notice someone as broken and flawed as he was. How did she make it sound so simple? And why . . . why did he want so desperately to believe that it might be? “Samantha . . .”

Her smile widened just a little bit. “You came here to find me, didn’t you?”

“N . . .” he began automatically. He’d lied to himself so many times that it had become second-nature, hadn’t it? He trailed off when a fleeting memory assailed him—memories of those images—those sketches—the shadow of a life that had almost ended way too soon—flashed through his head. “I guess . . . I did . . .” he allowed.

Her lips trembled; her fingers shook as she stroked his cheeks, as a solitary tear spilled over to slip down her face in the waning daylight. “And I knew you would.”

Closing his eyes for a moment—just for a moment—he gathered his scattered senses, the last vestiges of his rational thought, and slowly opened his eyes again. “I don’t deserve you,” he said slowly. “I never have, and I never will. You . . . you know that, right?”

A bitter wash of disappointment flickered behind her gaze, and he caught her wrists when she started to turn away, refusing to let her go; refusing to let her misunderstand. “I want you to understand that,” he insisted. “I want you to wake up every morning and know that I don’t deserve to be anywhere near you . . .”

“And what will you think every morning when I’m thinking that awful thing?” she countered, her nostrils quivering as her outrage spiked.

It was then that Kurt finally smiled—a wan thing that was more of a grimace than a show of pleasure, but she seemed to understand it, too. “I’ll be thinking . . . that maybe there is such a thing as grace.”

The old belligerence rose in her; he could see it in her expression. She opened her mouth to argue. He was faster, placing his index finger against her lips to silence her. “Just . . . just tell me one thing. Tell me why. Why in the hell would you ever have chosen me?”

“Why does anyone choose someone else?” she asked instead, her countenance registering her own slight confusion, as though she had no real answer to his question. “Maybe . . . maybe that first time I saw you, I realized that you were as lost and lonely as I was . . . misunderstood . . . doubted because of who or what you were . . . Maybe that’s why . . . Does it matter so much?”

He let out a sigh and slowly shook his head, more because of the innate knowledge that he’d never, ever understand her than because he was trying to refute what she said. Still, he had just one last question, and everything—everything—depended upon her answer. “Samantha . . .”

“What?”

He bit his lip for a moment, his gaze narrowing as he tried to read her features. “Am I . . . your mate? Really? You’re sure?”

“Do you want to be?” she countered.

“That’s not what I asked,” he grumbled.

She shrugged, as though his answer didn’t really matter, one way or another, though he could sense the rising turmoil that belied her cool façade. “It’s what I need to know,” she replied.

He was having none of it, though, and he snorted indelicately as he dealt her one firm shake. “No games, Samantha. I need to know. Is what your grandfather said true? If I walked away from you, would you—?”

“And I won’t answer that,” she cut in with a shake of her head. “Do you think I want you to stay because you feel sorry for me? For what might happen? If you stay, I want you to do it because it’s what you want, baka!”

He blinked and stepped back, startled for a moment by the vehemence in her voice, in her very essence. “Baka?” he repeated. “What does that mean?”

She snorted, a mulish sort of expression dawning on her face. “Nothing untrue, I assure you,” she replied tightly.

For some reason, that just didn’t reassure him; not at all, but he let it go since that was hardly worth arguing over at the moment. “Don’t you know?” he muttered, more to himself than to her as he let go of her and turned back toward the window once more. “I

thought . . . I thought that you were better off without me. After all I've done . . ." He trailed off and shook his head, dragging his hands over his face. "It was never because I didn't want you."

She gasped quietly as time seemed to stop, and for a dizzying moment, it really could have. Kurt grunted in surprise as a warm body barreled against his back, nearly throwing him off balance. With some difficulty, he turned around—Samantha was holding to him so tightly that he really had to work at it—he sighed. "You're a strange little demon," he mused as she clung to him, her face buried against his chest as silent tears dampened his shirt. "Samantha . . ."

She sniffled loudly and leaned away, beaming a brilliant smile up at him despite the tears that streaked her face. "Do you . . . do you love me? Or do you think that you might someday?" she asked.

Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head. "You . . . you think I don't?"

She hugged him tight and uttered a terse laugh. "I just want to hear you say it sometime . . . whenever you feel like it, that is."

His smile this time was genuine, and while it wasn't very big, it was heartfelt. "I love you, Samantha," he heard himself saying, and it registered somewhere in the back of his mind that it hadn't been nearly as difficult to say out loud as he'd thought it would be.

"Really?" she asked a little breathlessly, her blue eyes sparkling.

"Yes," he replied.

She yelped out a happy little half-screech that made him grimace, and he was about to remark upon the idea that the noise really ought to hurt her ears far more than it hurt his, but he never got that far. Suddenly pulled down as her lips met his, he couldn't stifle the

groan that slipped from him at the contact. Entirely too inviting, entirely too close, entirely too perfect . . . that's what she was. Her body seemed to melt against his as he slowly, hesitantly slipped his arms around her—the sweetest kiss, the gentlest promise neither spoken nor heard but felt somewhere deep down, and he realized for the first time in such a long while that he felt as though he were finally home.

“Tanny,” a little voice said, cutting through the moment.

Kurt heaved a sigh and opened his eyes though he didn't try to break the kiss, either. The child was standing beside them with a rather pouting expression on her face, staring up at them with her little arms crossed over her chest in an entirely disapproving sort of way.

“S-Samantha,” he muttered between her kisses.

“Hmm?”

He leaned back and slowly shifted his eyes to the side meaningfully.

She glanced down and smiled. “You want more ‘tanny?’” she asked.

The child nodded, her face brightening upon mention of the desired treat. “Tanny!”

Kurt heaved a sigh as Samantha laughed and dug into her pocket for another tiny sucker. “Here you go,” she said, offering it to the girl.

She took it with a peal of laughter and dashed back over to the bed to enjoy it.

Kurt watched her for a moment as Samantha snuggled against his chest again, tucking her head beneath his chin as she, too, watched the girl unwrap the candy.

“Samantha,” he said at length as he made a face at the obscenely loud crunch of the sucker in the child’s jaws of doom.

“Yes?”

He leaned back to look down at her, but tightened his hold on her, just the same. “You going to tell me what ‘baka’ means?”

A decidedly guilty sort of expression surfaced on her face for a moment before she managed to blank her features, casting him an entirely too-bright smile. “Oh, that . . . It . . . It means . . . um . . . *darling!* Yes, that’s what it means . . .”

He narrowed his eyes on her and slowly shook his head. “Yeah, why don’t I believe that?”

Her eyes widened at the obvious accusation in his voice and demeanor. “I don’t know what you’re talking about taijya . . .” she hedged.

“Oh, Christ, it means something bad, doesn’t it?” he grumbled.

She twittered out a rather nervous little laugh. “Of course not!” she insisted.

“Tanny!” the girl hollered again, this time jumping up and down on the bed.

Kurt heaved a sigh and shook his head as Samantha leaned up to quickly kiss his cheek then stepped away to scoop up the child. “Let’s go find you some more ‘tanny,’” she said as she headed toward the door with the squirming toddler. “We’ll be right back,” she promised.

“Uh huh,” he called after her, crossing his arms over his chest. “And you’re going to tell me what it really means.”

“I can’t hear you!” she said, wiggling her fingers jauntily as she let herself out of the room.

Kurt watched her go then sighed again, figuring that he might as well give up on finding out what she’d called him, exactly, but he couldn’t help the little smile that quirked on his lips, either. The feeling that everything was going to be all right was a strange one to him, and while it wasn’t completely unwelcome, it was more than a bit unsettling.

Still . . .

Turning back to the window once more, he frowned at the two figures standing on the beach, the ones he recognized as Samantha’s parents. It wasn’t really as simple as that, was it?

Even if the family understood the whole ‘mates’ thing, and Kurt didn’t doubt for a second that they did—that was why they hadn’t just killed him outright, wasn’t it?—he wasn’t even going to try to delude himself into thinking that those two were going to be all right with the situation. They were her parents, right? How could they be?

It was clear to him, of course, that he didn’t dare do anything to jeopardize Samantha’s well-being, and even now, he had to admit that he’d felt compelled to come after her despite his reluctance to do it. Maybe he’d realized that his fate was inexorably tied to hers—had been from the moment he’d met her . . .

But her parents . . .

She had something that he didn’t: a family, and that family loved and cherished her, too, and as much as he loved her—he knew without a doubt that he did—he still wasn’t entirely certain, was he? After all, her family was never, ever going to accept him, and while he didn’t really mind that part of it—hell, he’d hate him, too, if he were them—the last thing he wanted to do was to drag Samantha into the middle of it, either . . .



## Chapter 70

# The Story of a Girl

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Samantha smiled but didn't open her eyes right away as she savored the encompassing feeling that everything just felt perfect. Snuggled against Kurt's side with the child nestled between them—more like on top of them . . . it felt like the most natural thing in the world, didn't it?

She couldn't credit it; not really. Somewhere deep down, she couldn't help but feel like maybe it was all a dream—a beautiful and fantastic dream . . . a dream that she wanted to hold onto forever . . .

But the girl wiggled around, burying her face against Samantha's chest with a contented sigh, as though there was no place else she'd rather be, either, and Samantha's smile widened. Such a gorgeous little girl with her mysterious gaze . . . Something about those eyes spoke to Samantha in whispers and giggles, didn't they? There was something wholly familiar about the child that Samantha understood, even if she couldn't really put a name on the why of it.

The girl sat up suddenly, her face registering the vacant sort of expression that was entirely unavoidable when one first woke up. Samantha laughed softly, reaching out to smooth the toddler's hair. "Morning, sweetie," she said in a low tone, so as not to disturb Kurt.

The girl blinked, her gaze slowly focusing on Samantha's face as a bright little smile solidified with the clarity. "Tanny?" she asked hopefully, clapping her little hands in anticipation.

Samantha laughed again. “Oh, it’s too early for that,” she chided without rancor.

The child’s face scrunched up in a formidable pout. “Tanny,” she repeated.

“Mmm,” Kurt groaned but didn’t open his eyes. “Check the little demon’s pocket, Stinky-butt . . . Something was poking me all night,” he mumbled. “I’m going back to sleep.”

“That’s hardly a decent name,” Samantha pointed out but giggled when the girl started groping pockets for the candy that Kurt had mentioned. It didn’t take her long to find the last Dum-Dum pop that Samantha had, and it took even less time for her to unwrap it and stuff it into her mouth.

“Maybe not, but it is entirely appropriate,” he argued.

She wrinkled her nose. “So what would you have called me if I didn’t have a name?” she countered.

Kurt snorted, the barest hint of a smile quirking the corners of his lips. “Benji,” he replied.

Samantha gasped and sat up, turning her incredulous gaze on him. “B-Benji?” she echoed. “You’re so *mean!*”

He chuckled, stubbornly refusing to open his eyes. “Sounds about right,” he tossed back carelessly.

She heaved a sigh designed to let him know exactly what she thought of that, but couldn’t help her own little smile as a flood of warmth surged through her. His laughter . . . she loved it . . .

“Tanny!” the toddler chimed in. She laughed, too, though she had that kind of look on her face that a child tended to get whenever they were laughing just because the adults were.

“Go back to sleep, Stinky-butt,” Kurt grumbled though the little smile on his face didn’t fade.

“Tanny, tanny, tanny!” she insisted, bouncing on her knees, rocking the entire bed.

Samantha giggled and laid back down again, content to savor the warmth of Kurt’s body so close to hers. On a whim, she leaned over and kissed his cheek. His eyes shot open as a light flush surfaced on his skin, and she couldn’t resist the urge to kiss him again before he could protest out of sheer habit.

He seemed to hesitate, just for a moment, but returned the kiss with a gentle pressure. She felt as though time stood still, and with a soft sigh, she snuggled just a little closer.

Sensing that both adults were completely ignoring her, the child whined in protest and climbed onto Kurt’s stomach before resuming her bouncing, much to his dismay. “Ungh,” he muttered, breaking away from Samantha’s kiss with a grimace. “She’s trying to break me.”

Samantha laughed a little shakily but rolled off the bed and held out her arms. “Come on, you,” she said, encouraging the girl. “Let’s go get dressed, and we’ll find some breakfast, okay?”

She seemed to be a little torn between the idea of bedeviling Kurt a little longer and going with Samantha. Samantha heaved a melodramatic sigh and slowly shook her head. “All right,” she allowed, making a show of letting her shoulders slump in defeat. “Guess

I'll have to eat breakfast alone . . . and I guess I'll have to go to the store afterward to get candy for myself, too . . .”

That seemed to do the trick. The child's head snapped up as she pondered this concept. In the end, she hopped off the bed to dart after Samantha, who had paused in the doorway to wink at Kurt and wiggle her fingers before she slipped out of the room.

The girl babbled all the way down the hallway as the two headed for the stairs. Samantha needed a shower, and she knew from her own experience that the only way to get the child to wash up was to coax her into the shower with her. She couldn't say that she minded it, but she did have to wonder exactly how Kurt had handled that particular ritual when he'd brought her across the country. The sudden and very clear image of the taijya's face if the girl had insisted upon showering with him was enough to make her laugh.

“Tanny, tanny, tanny, tanny, tanny!” she sang as she skipped along beside Samantha.

“You're just the sweetest thing,” Samantha remarked with a bright smile. The little girl turned up her face to smile back. “Okay, so we'll get you cleaned up, fed, and then you and I will . . . will sneak off to town before anyone can stop us . . . How's that?”

The child seemed to approve of the idea well enough, and Samantha heaved a sigh as her own smile faded just a little. Sneaking off to town . . . that might be a bigger task than it sounded like. After all, she hadn't actually done any such thing since she'd been home since everyone and their uncle seemed to be dead set against her retaining any portion of her independence . . .

“That's what we'll do, huh?” she whispered conspiratorially. “We'll sneak off to town . . .”

The little girl smiled and hopped up and down. “Yeah,” she whispered happily.

Samantha scooped her up and cuddled her against her chest as she headed down the stairs with a little giggle since she was quite sure that the child had absolutely no idea what Samantha was talking about.

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*'So far, so good . . .'*

Gripping the steering wheel a little tighter, Samantha told herself to relax despite her rapidly fraying nerves. It was going well, even if she was a little nervous—more nervous than she'd expected to be. She'd done well during the short taxi ride from the end of the driveway where she'd requested to be picked up, all the way into town where she'd given directions to her apartment, thankful that she'd taken a taxi to the airport that fateful day last fall. Her car was sitting where she always parked it, and though it had been a little rough when she'd first tried to start it, it hadn't taken long for it to smooth out again as she made a mental note to make an appointment for a tune up sometime soon.

In fact, the girl had done remarkably well in the taxi, too, which had helped to assuage Samantha's nervousness. Mesmerized by watching the rainbows of light reflected by the crystal prisms hanging from the rearview mirror, she'd sat quietly for the entire trip. She hadn't even asked for candy until Samantha was fastening her into the back seat of her car . . .

Tamping down the surge of guilt that shot through her as she glanced into the rearview mirror to make sure that the girl was still buckled into the built-in child booster seat, Samantha told herself for the hundredth time since they'd stepped off of Zelig land that everything was fine—just fine—as she carefully negotiated the streets she knew so well in the car she'd bought shortly after moving to Maine.

It had been strangely easy to slip out of the mansion, hadn't it? Unsettling, really . . . Why had she expected it to be so much more difficult? It wasn't as though she was actually being kept there against her will, and she knew that. Still, the panic that her parents both tried to hide from her the few times she'd mentioned going into town alone for any reason whatsoever had been more than enough to curb her will, as far as that was concerned.

And yet . . .

And yet, she couldn't help the trill of trepidation that tied her stomach in knots, either—the ungrounded feeling that she was doing something very, very wrong. In a twisted sort of sense, it was almost as though she'd traded her forced confinement to one of a voluntary nature at the Zelig compound, and that thought, as unwelcome as it was . . . It was true, wasn't it? She'd told herself that she didn't want to hurt her family, and while that was true enough, that certainly wasn't the entire long and short of it; not by a long shot. No, she'd allowed herself to be kept under surveillance, as it were, and while the reasons for it were so very different, the end result was the same, wasn't it? A mental crutch that she thought she needed, and now . . .

Now was the time to prove to herself that she didn't; that she could walk outside any time she wanted, that she didn't need to fear anyone or anything . . .

It was the sense of freedom, wasn't it? It was foreign and unfamiliar to her despite the underlying knowledge that no one had really tried to inhibit her, at least, not in that sense—not anymore. It also made her wonder if those months she'd spend in confinement had gotten her too used to the restrictions, so much so that she'd unconsciously sought the same sort of thing from her family, albeit in a completely different way—and that . . . that infuriated her. It had been simple at the mansion—simple to think that the hovering, the constant though understated sense of worry was unnecessary even as she endured it. She'd honestly believed that they were all being ridiculous, but . . .

But they were right, at least to a point. Maybe she wasn't as all right as she wanted to believe . . .

Wrinkling her nose as she turned into the department store parking lot, Samantha couldn't help but notice that the normally crowded lot was blessedly empty. It was just after eight in the morning, and she supposed that she had just come out earlier than most everyone else. Pulling into a space and killing the engine, Samantha blinked as she stared at her hand, trembling like the last autumn leaf, clinging to the branch with all its might as a stronger gust of wind whipped up to tear it away from its hold . . .

*'Stop that, dollbaby,'* her youkai voice chided. *'Think of this as therapy . . .'*

*'Therapy . . .'* Samantha repeated with a frown. *'Yes; all right . . .'*

That's what it was, wasn't it? This trip . . . it really was more therapy than anything else. Candy and maybe a couple toys, she'd thought when she'd first thought of the idea. Now, though, she realized that she hadn't wanted to go to the store nearly as much as she'd needed to take that first step away from her family's careful, if not somewhat overbearing, affection and protection. She needed to do this for herself, didn't she? To prove to herself that she really would be all right, and even if she couldn't stand it for long, she could do it, couldn't she? Of course she could . . .

"Tanny?" the child piped up, grunting as she fussed with the seatbelt that held her in place.

Blinking away the doubts that lingered in the back of her mind, Samantha took a deep breath and opened the door. "Just a second, sweetness," she said in a bright, happy voice.

She bumped the door closed with her hip and drew another deep, steadying breath, pressing her hand against her belly as though to control her own sense of nervousness, then opened the back door to get the child.

It bothered her that she didn't have a proper name, but they'd all agreed that it might be best to allow the Conors—the couple who were interested in adopting her—to have that honor. They'd been out to the mansion a couple of times to meet the girl, and someone had advised them to bring candy, so that had helped, too. Still, it bothered Samantha more than she could credit. Everyone needed a name, didn't they? It was the first step to creating and defining one's identity, right? The girl needed that, especially now . . .

But the child just smiled brightly at Samantha and held up her arms to be picked up. Samantha laughed despite her troubled thoughts and scooped her up, planting a loud kiss on the toddler's downy soft cheek. "Would you like a baby doll?" Samantha asked as she carried the girl toward the building.

"Tanny!" she insisted, clapping her hands.

"Of course," Samantha agreed.

The sudden blare of a car horn in the distance made her jump, and the child jerked and threw herself against Samantha's shoulder. Samantha's heart lurched violently as a rush of adrenaline made her knees go weak, and she grimaced when the girl whimpered.

"It's—it's okay," Samantha heard herself saying in a much calmer tone than she felt. "It was just a car, baby. Just a car . . ."

She whined a little more, refusing to loosen her grip. Samantha rather understood that feeling, too. '*Quit that,*' she told herself sternly. '*She's relying on me . . . I have to be strong for her . . .*'

The pep talk helped some, and Samantha let out a deep breath, pausing for just a moment before she stepped through the automatically sliding doors.

“Good morning! Oh, what a sweetheart!” the elderly greeter called out to them as they entered the store. “Do you mind if I give her a lollipop?”

Samantha swallowed hard and forced a wan smile then nodded. “Uh, okay,” she allowed, jostling the girl against her shoulder. “You want a candy, baby?”

The mention of candy got the child’s attention, and she turned her face just enough to stare at the older woman who was holding out a red and white swirled Life Saver lollipop. “Tanny?” she asked, eyeing the woman a little dubiously.

Samantha managed a weak laugh. “It’s all right,” she assured her.

The candy seemed to be the magical fix, and the girl was more than happy to let Samantha settle her into the front of a cart while she tugged on the plastic wrapper. “Thank you,” Samantha called back as she shot the woman a somewhat timid smile and pushed the cart along.

The trill of her cell phone nearly made her jump out of her skin. Moving the cart to the side out of the way, she dug the device out of her purse and bit her lip, not at all surprised to see her father’s name on the small display. “Hello?”

“Sami? Where are you?” he asked in a much calmer tone than she had been expecting, and while it did sound rather contrived, it did not sound angry.

“I’m at the store,” she replied in what she hoped was a very casual sort of way. “The little one wanted candy, and I wanted to get a toy or two for her, too.”

He didn't respond right away, as though he needed to figure out exactly how to say whatever he was thinking.

"We won't be gone long," she assured him quickly in an effort to forestall whatever lecture he was about to impart her.

"I know, dollbaby," he finally said. "Next time, though, tell someone before you go, okay?"

"Papa—"

"Just humor us, please?"

She sighed. "I needed to do this," she admitted.

Kichiro sighed, too. "I know. I'll tell your mama where you are, all right?"

Grimacing at the not-so-subtle reminder, she let out a deep breath. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize, Sami. Just be careful."

"I will," she allowed. "I'll be home soon."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you, too."

She closed her phone and dropped it back into her purse. Certainly she could understand their concern, and she loved them for it. She also didn't doubt that he could appreciate her need to do this. He was entirely too perceptive that way.

“Sami! Hi!”

Samantha jumped and whirled around as her heart lurched wildly yet again. Madison Cartham, Evan’s best friend, rushed over. “M-Maddy . . . I didn’t know you were in town,” she intoned, trying to cover up her fluster before it could be discerned.

Madison smiled and gave her a quick hug and a kiss on the cheek. “You’re thin,” she said with a hint of concern in her tone. “Don’t you dare try to tell me that Gin’s not feeding you, because I won’t believe it—Oh! Who is this?” she demanded as her already brilliant smile widened even more, as her gaze fell on the child. “Hello, precious. What’s your name?”

The girl drew away and grabbed the front of Samantha’s shirt, burying her face in the old, childish belief that if she couldn’t see someone, then he or she couldn’t see her, either.

“Aww, she’s shy, huh?” Madison said.

“Uh . . . Kurt brought her with him,” Samantha explained. “She’s . . . she’s not used to everything just yet, but she’s getting there . . .”

“Oh, but she’s just the sweetest thing, ever,” Madison insisted.

Samantha finally smiled—a real smile that was much closer to normal than the strained ones she’d been forcing. “She is.”

“And this Kurt? Evan said that you told him that he’s your mate.”

Samantha nodded. She couldn’t tell from Madison’s tone whether or not Evan had told her anything else, but as close as the two were, it was safe to assume that she knew

everything that he did. “He is,” Samantha admitted cautiously as she dug a roll of Life Savers out of her purse. She unwrapped them just a little and offered one to the child.

“And is he good-looking?” Madison quipped.

Samantha smiled a little bashfully as she pushed the cart down the main aisle with Madison beside her, heading for the toy department. “Of course . . .”

Madison laughed. “Good.”

“So why are you in Maine?” Samantha asked, mostly to change the subject because, while she didn’t expect that Madison would say anything disparaging against Kurt—she simply wasn’t that kind of person—Samantha just didn’t want to take that chance, either.

Madison rolled her eyes and waved a hand dismissively. “Daddy got an old musket at an estate sale a while back, and he’s been dying to show it to me, so . . .”

That made Samantha laugh as the girl pried her hand open to get at more candy. She didn’t miss the wary glances that the girl kept stealing at Madison, and she ruffled her hair in a reassuring sort of way. The child must have figured that Madison was all right, though, since Samantha was talking to her, so she didn’t hide her face again.

“So you came home to see an old rifle?”

“Not just *any* rifle, Sami! A genuine Civil War, Springfield rifle musket; not a replica. Daddy says it needs some restoration work, but it’s in excellent condition, overall, and he knows a guy down in Georgia who can fix it up . . .”

Sami shook her head. Madison Cartham might look like a thoroughly cosmopolitan woman, but thanks to her gun-happy father, she knew more about firearms than most men. “So you aren’t here to see Evan?” she teased.

Madison laughed. “No, but I suppose that I could drag myself away from the musket long enough to say hello . . .”

Samantha relaxed slowly. It helped, didn't it? Helped to be with someone who wasn't hovering and wasn't related to her, and while she knew that Madison probably had things that she wanted to ask, the woman was far too tactful to do that. Either way, it didn't matter, did it? Talking to Madison was enough to keep her preoccupied—enough to help her accomplish the task she'd set for herself . . .

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Samantha leaned back on her hands in the grass under the green canopy of the unfurled leaves of the towering ash tree. The girl had worn herself out, chasing bubbles that Samantha had blown from the cheap yellow plastic bubble wand in the ninety-seven cent plastic bottle of solution. She'd tried to eat them, much to Samantha's amusement, and when she'd finally figured out that bubbles weren't candy, she'd used her new teddy bear to swat at the bubbles, instead.

When she'd had enough of that, though, she'd sort of crashed, huddling against Samantha with her head in her lap, content to nap right there in the midday breeze.

It had taken a couple hours to completely relax after the hold of anxiety she'd felt all morning, and as much as it irritated her that she'd feel that way in the town where she'd spent the last few years of her life; a town that she'd come to know over the years of her childhood, she had told herself that she'd be fine, too. In retrospect, though, she realized that she'd wanted to take the child along as a bit of a catalyst, of sorts. In the beginning, she'd told herself that the girl needed to become accustomed to going out in public and doing the things that normal children did, but in hindsight . . . It was because of her,

wasn't it? Samantha had been able to be braver for her. She'd been able to force herself to deal with her own feelings because the little one had relied upon her for comfort, and maybe in the end, they'd actually helped each other.

"How did it go?"

Samantha blinked and looked up as Bellaniece sank down beside her, her eyes still bright with unspoken worry, and Samantha smiled as she idly stroked the snoozing child's hair. "It went well," she allowed with a wan smile. "I ran into Maddy, so she stayed with us in the store."

"Good, good . . ."

Samantha bit her lip as she stared at her mother. There was something else on her mind, she could tell, and she seemed to be trying to come up with a good way to say it. Samantha didn't try to avoid it, though, waiting patiently as Bellaniece gathered her thoughts. "Sweetie . . ."

She continued to wait after her mother trailed off. Tugging blades of grass, Bellaniece looked so thoughtful, almost sad, that Samantha heaved a sigh.

"Your father and I . . . we're a little worried about you spending so much time with . . . with them," she finally finished. "You slept in his room last night, didn't you? With him and her . . .?"

"Does it matter?" Samantha countered quietly, shaking her head as she frowned at her parents' concerns. "I should spend time with him, shouldn't I? He's my mate . . ."

"Samantha . . ."

“Mama, you and Papa didn’t raise me to be stupid, and you never tried to make my decisions for me, either. I know what my heart tells me. Kurt’s the one.”

Her answer didn’t look as though it pleased Bellaniece. “But you must be sure,” she said quietly. “It’s not something you can do lightly, you know? Don’t choose him out of some sort of—of feelings that you owe him for releasing you from that place . . . Don’t think that you owe him that much. We’re talking about the rest of your life, Samantha . . .”

She smiled suddenly and shook her head as she toyed with the girl’s baby-fine hair. “Mama . . . I *am* sure. I know that you two are scared to death that I’m not, but I am . . . Kurt’s the only thing I am sure of . . . I wish . . . I wish you could see what I do, Mama. I . . . I want to make him smile and laugh and remember all those things . . . the kinds of things that you give Papa: that’s what I want for him to have, too.”

Bellaniece looked even more torn, as though she were caught somewhere in the middle, somewhere between Kichiro and Samantha in the silent strain that Samantha had sensed, too. Bellaniece sighed and slowly shook her head, her blue eyes darkened by whatever emotion she was struggling to deal with. “I trust you, sweetie,” she said quietly. “It’s not that I don’t . . . but when I think about that . . . that place—about what they did to you . . . and when I think that the reason you were there was because he—”

“He didn’t know me, Mama, and . . . and he has his reasons for hating our kind,” Samantha interrupted gently. “I . . . I can’t tell you because it’s not my story, but . . . but if I can accept it, why can’t you?”

She let out a deep breath, managed a wry smile. “That’s not all of it, Sami . . . This girl . . .”

Samantha laughed softly. “You know, she really does believe that Kurt is her daddy . . .”

Bellaniece frowned. "But he's not."

"I know."

Bellaniece shook her head. "Do you?" she asked quietly. "I mean, I have to wonder . . ."

"You think I'm getting too attached to her," Samantha finished quietly when her mother trailed off. Staring down at the sleeping girl as she ran the back of her fingers over her cheek, she smiled, albeit a little sadly. "I know. You're probably right, but . . . But I see things in her . . . things that I might have become if I'd been forced to stay there longer . . . and I can't help but love her."

"But she's got a family who wants her," Bellaniece pointed out, trying her hardest to choke back her emotions, "and . . . and it's probably the best thing for her—a stable family who will raise her in a normal home—one where there are no c-cages and no limits . . ."

"I want that for her, too," Samantha admitted. "It's just . . . I wonder . . . If she wakes up in the middle of the night because of a bad dream . . . if she cries and clings to them because she's frightened and doesn't understand . . . Even if they're good people, are they really going to understand her? Are they going to know what she sees in the darkness? And how in the world will they fight against monsters that only she knows?"

Bellaniece didn't answer that, but she did look quite pained. Samantha understood that expression well enough. It was the look of a mother who didn't understand but who desperately wanted to, and for some reason, that expression only served to make Samantha a little sadder, only made her feel a little further away . . .

"Even if I can't keep her, I can't help but love her," Samantha said quietly, blinking rapidly as a sheen of tears filled her eyes. "There's nothing wrong with that, is there?"

Bellaniece sighed and scooted a little closer, close enough to toy with the sleeping child's hair. "No, there's nothing wrong with that," she said in a strange tone of voice.

Something about that tone drew her attention, and she looked up, frowning at the strange sense of recognition that was awash in her gaze, a bittersweet sort of sadness tinged with an air of inevitability. "That's how I've felt," she admitted, her voice husky, raw, and she smiled just a little. "Every time one of you girls left home . . . that's what I've felt, too . . ."

"Mama . . ."

Bellaniece laughed softly, waved away Samantha's concern. Just as quickly as the smile came, though, it dissolved, and she sighed. "I don't know if I can like him," she confessed. "Even if he is your mate, I don't know if I can *forgive* him for what he took it upon himself to do . . ."

Samantha tried to hide the upset inspired by her mother's candid admittance. "I'm not asking you to forgive him, Mama. What I'm asking you is to trust *me*."

Bellaniece's expression blanked, as though she hadn't considered that before.

"I love him, Mama. There are things about him that are wonderful—beautiful . . . things that I don't think he even realizes he has inside. From the moment I met him, I felt this . . . connection . . . like a part of me knew him, and despite everything, I wasn't afraid; not with him." She shook her head, smiled down at the child. "He loves me . . . and that's enough for me."

"Enough for you," Bellaniece repeated thoughtfully. "Oh, Sam . . ."

She smiled and reached out, wiping away a single tear that trailed down Bellaniece's cheek. "I love you, and I love Papa . . . but I love Kurt, too. That's okay, isn't it?"

She didn't look entirely convinced, but at least she looked as though she were finally listening to Samantha. That was enough, wasn't it? And while it hurt to think that her parents might never really accept Kurt in the same way that they accepted Griffin and even John, even though he had yet to officially become Alexandra's mate, Samantha had to allow that she could understand that, too, and that . . . that would be all right. Kurt would show them all, wouldn't he? He'd prove himself eventually, and maybe they'd at least understand what it was that she saw in him . . .



**Final Thought from Samantha:**

That wasn't so bad ...

# Chapter 71

## Aments

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Kurt winced as he landed flat on his back with a very loud grunt for the twentieth time in the last couple hours since the daily game of ‘Maim the Taijya’ had begun.

Ryomaru—his opposition for the duration—snorted loudly and stepped back, his face contorting in complete irritation since Kurt was doing much worse than usual. “Kami, what the hell’s wrong with you?” he grumbled. “I mean, you normally suck, but today, you suck dog balls.”

Kurt sat up, scowling at the unwelcome commentary, and jammed the tip of the bokuto into the ground to push himself to his feet. “I’m fine,” he gritted out.

So that was a big, fat lie.

Grinding his teeth together, he tried to keep from glancing over to the rose-trellis enclosed arbor where Samantha, Stinky-butt, and the strange couple had retired to for their ‘visit’.

They wanted to adopt her; that’s what Samantha had said.

Damned if that sat well with Kurt, though . . .

*‘Knock it off,’* he told himself as he refreshed his grip on the wooden sword. *‘You want what’s best for her, right?’* He snorted, glancing at the arbor despite his resolve not to do any such thing, and grimaced inwardly. *‘Yeah, but what if they’re not what’s best for her?’*

Best for her . . .

That's all he wanted for both of them, wasn't it? For Samantha and for the child . . . The problem was figuring out what that elusive thing could possibly be . . .

Ryomaru swung again. Kurt barely managed to step out of the way in time to avoid the descending blade as it whistled in the air.

Kurt whipped around, sweeping with the bokuto to knock Ryomaru's sword aside.

"Nice," Ryomaru approved with a nod and a grim half-smile. "Not bad."

Kurt gritted his teeth again as he parried another of Ryomaru's harsh strikes. He rounded again, bringing his sword up in a wide arc. Kurt reacted on instinct, lifting his in time to avoid the tip of the weapon as the blades met and clashed. He knew better than to get into a match of brute strength. Still, he tried to hold his ground, just the same. "Sh . . . shit," he grunted as he felt his feet slide back in the loose dirt.

The sudden trill of a child's laughter rang over the top of the arbor. Kurt's head snapped to the side at the sound. He should have known better.

Ryomaru shoved him hard, sending him sprawling to the ground for the twenty-first time, and with a disgusted snort, he slammed the tip of Ryoteishuseishu into the earth. "*Fuck*," he complained, draping his hands on his hips as he glowered at Kurt. "Get your head outta your ass before you end up sliced to ribbons," he growled. That said, he grasped the hilt of his sword, jerked it free, and stomped away, slamming the weapon into the scabbard strapped to his waist with a resounding thud.

Heaving a sigh, Kurt sat up, leaned back on his hands, staring at the arbor with unmasked irritation.

“You want to meet them?”

He blinked and tilted his head back to stare up at Bas Zelig. “Uh, no,” he muttered. “I’m sure they’re . . . fine.”

“Dad’s been trying to find a baby for them for a while,” he said. He looked like he wanted to say something else but didn’t as he stared at the arbor thoughtfully. “They’re pretty nice people.”

“Glad to hear it,” Kurt forced himself to say. “That’s great.”

“You sure you don’t want to meet them?” Bas asked again.

Kurt pushed himself to his feet and slowly shook his head. “No, thanks.”

“Sure,” Bas relented though Kurt could feel his gaze. “Come on. I’ll take you back to your room.”

It was strange, Kurt thought as they headed toward the doors. In the beginning, they’d made sure that he was bound when he wasn’t practicing or safely locked away in his room, but lately, they hadn’t been quite as stringent about that. Maybe they figured that he wasn’t going anywhere. Still, it was a little reckless, as far as he was concerned.

He scowled as they made their way through the mansion. He really needed to stop thinking about all of it. After all, there was nothing he could do, and common logic told him that she’d be better off with that couple, right? It wasn’t like he’d ever meant to keep her, no . . . So why did the very idea tick him off so damned badly?

‘*Because,*’ he thought with a rueful frown, he’d spent the entire night with Samantha cuddled against his chest and the child nestled snugly on both of them, and while he

hadn't slept—he'd been too busy enjoying the foreign and altogether pleasant feel of absolute completion that he couldn't ignore—he had come to understand the simple beauty of an insular moment, as though he were the strong one, able to watch over them, to ensure that they slept . . . The two of them had slumbered in a state of absolute trust, hadn't they? Slept deep in the belief that he would watch over them, and . . . and damned if he hadn't liked that, too. Maybe . . . Maybe he'd liked it a little *too* much . . .

Making a face, he rolled his head back slowly, grimacing at the newest round of aches and pains that his morning of exercise had brought on. What he needed was a nice, hot shower and a nap, he decided—and he needed to stop thinking about females in general .

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“Wow. You look like you're about a million miles away.”

Bellaniece blinked, dragging her gaze off the window and forcing a smile as Nezumi slipped into the breakfast nook across from her. “You're back already?” she asked, glancing at her watch and realizing with a grimace that it was a little later than she'd thought it was.

Nezumi made a face as she fiddled with a cup of coffee. “I just dropped them off,” she said. “Not like I could go past the security checkpoint with them, anyway,” she said. She'd taken Morio and Meara to the airport to catch their flight back to Japan and John and Alexandra to get on their flight back to Sydney, Australia.

“Ryomaru mentioned getting a not-so-subtle hint from Sesshoumaru about getting back to work, too,” Bellaniece remarked.

Nezumi nodded but rolled her eyes. “Yeah, but knowing Ryo, he’ll want to stay longer just to irritate him just a little more.”

Bellaniece laughed softly then sighed.

Nezumi sat back, crossing her arms over her chest as she continued to stare at Bellaniece. “Okay . . . tell me why you look like that?” she prodded.

Rubbing her forehead, she let her gaze return to the window once more—and the arbor that was obstructed from view. “Sami,” she replied in a tone that implied that Nezumi really should have figured as much.

“Her mate, you mean?”

Bellaniece smiled a little sadly, a little wearily as she fussed idly with the edge of a bright yellow linen napkin. “Kichiro swears that he’s not. Daddy says that he believes her . . .”

Nezumi nodded slowly as she lifted the mug to her lips, pondering Bellaniece’s statement as she slowly sipped the coffee. “And what do you think?” she finally asked in a cautious sort of tone.

Letting out a deep breath, Bellaniece slowly shook her head. “Honestly? I don’t know.”

Nezumi didn’t reply to that. It wasn’t really surprising. She wasn’t one to offer opinions or advice unless it was specifically asked of her, and Bellaniece had come to understand over time that it wasn’t because Nezumi didn’t care. She simply figured that if anyone wanted to know what she thought, they’d ask.

Bellaniece sighed again. “I feel like I’m going crazy,” she admitted. “Part of me wants to hate him—everything about him. When I think about what those men did to her . . . when I think about his part in all of it . . . Oh, I hate him. I really hate him . . . but . . .”

Nezumi got up, grabbing both her cup as well as Bellaniece's and shuffled over to the counter to refill them. "Because he sold her to them," she murmured as she rinsed the cups and dropped a fresh tea bag into Bellaniece's before adding hot water and refilling hers with coffee.

"Yes," Bellaniece said. "But you know . . . every time I think that I hate him, I realize that Sami . . . Sami thinks that he's special—sees something special in him, and I . . . I can't help but wonder, you see . . ."

Nezumi considered that as she returned to the table with the cups in her hands. She set Bellaniece's in front of her and sat down again before she bothered to speak. "Maybe . . ." she began, only to trail off without finishing her thought.

"What?" Bellaniece pressed. "What would you do if you were me?"

Nezumi shook her head as she reached for the sugar dispenser. "I think I'd . . . I'd try to see what Sami sees," she replied simply, her gaze carefully averted.

Bellaniece considered that then nodded slowly. "She's so sure," she said almost apologetically.

Nezumi smiled as she stirred the coffee. "He's taken a hell of a beating since he got here, and . . . and he really hasn't tried to fight back. Ryomaru said that he thinks that Drevin believes that he deserves it. I mean, he does, right? But then . . . then I wonder, what's the point, you know? Anger feeds anger, and hate feeds hate, and . . . and sometime, somewhere, it has to end, you know? Maybe . . . maybe that's what Samantha feels."

The woman blushed just a little—she'd said more than she probably wanted to say, but all of it made sense, too, didn't it? Bellaniece considered Nezumi's words as she held onto

the tag and bobbed the tea bag up and down. "You're right," she finally said with a shake of her head. "You are . . ."

"Afternoon, ladies," Isabelle greeted as she hurried into the kitchen with a large bag that she set on the counter before hurrying over to kiss her mother and aunt. "Lovely day, isn't it?"

"You're in a good mood," Nezumi commented over the rim of her coffee cup.

"Oh, it's because I got some this morning," Isabelle quipped.

"*Jezebel*," Griffin hissed, face beet-red as he paused in the doorway. The poor bear looked entirely discomfited, which only served to make his mate giggle that much more. Shaking his head, he turned and got out of there as quickly as he could.

"You really should take it easier on him," Bellaniece chided despite the little smile on her face as Isabelle sat down beside her. "Poor guy . . ."

"Well, I'm glad *someone's* getting it," a very irritated Sydnie commented as she stomped into the kitchen, her arms crossed over her chest.

"Kitty," Bas complained, grabbing a glass out of the cupboard and yanking open the refrigerator for milk.

"Some puppies think that kitties don't need love, too," she pouted.

Bas sighed, but his face was definitely flushed as he stubbornly insisted upon filling the glass from the earthenware jug that Gin kept filled with fresh from the farm milk.

“Sebastian! Sydnie! I thought you two were staying home today,” Gin greeted as she hurried into the kitchen and tugged her son’s arm to bring him down for a kiss on the cheek.

“Why bother?” Sydnie scoffed. Nezumi scooted over to allow the feline a place to sit. “You two are both doctors, right?” she demanded, eyeing Isabelle and Bellaniece in turn.

The mother and daughter exchanged significant looks. “Now, Bastian,” Isabelle started to say.

“Can we *not* talk about this?” Bas demanded hotly as he strode over to set the glass of milk in front of his mate.

“What’s the matter, Sebastian?” Gin asked, concern bringing a thoughtful frown to her pretty face.

“Nothing, Mom, I swear,” Bas grumbled.

“Did you have sex while you were pregnant?” Sydnie asked, turning her gaze on her mother-in-law.

True to form, Gin blushed and cleared her throat—it was easy to see where Bas had gotten his rather shy tendencies when it came to discussing things of that nature. “Well,” she hedged slowly, grabbing a bright green sponge out of the sink and scrubbing furiously at the already clean countertop.

“Yes. Yes, we did,” Cain commented as he strolled into the kitchen to slip his arms around his wife. “Lots and lots and lots—”

“Cain!” Gin complained, her cheeks pinking just a little more though she didn’t try to get away from him, either.

Cain grinned rather wolfishly and shrugged. “Go home, Bas. Sleep with your wife, and stop being so overprotective.”

That comment earned him a round of snorts since they all knew well enough that Cain, more than anyone, tended to be more overprotective of Gin than anyone else had been with their mates—with the exception of maybe Toga.

“Was it something I said?” Cain deadpanned, letting go of Gin to kiss her on the cheek and grab a plate for a thick slice of his cake *du jour*.

Isabelle hopped up and kissed Bas on the cheek. “It’s healthy, it’s fine, and as long as it feels good to her, you don’t have to worry,” she assured him with a wink.

Bas’ cheeks darkened a little more. “Th-thanks, Bitty,” he muttered.

Bellaniece slipped out of the booth and headed for the doorway. The others were busy enough teasing Bas that they didn’t notice, and that was all right. Still considering the things that she’d talked about with Nezumi, she couldn’t help but feel restless, anxious—a feeling that simply would not go away, and she figured that it probably wouldn’t, not until she tried . . .

She sighed as she slowly headed for the staircase. It really wasn’t a question of how she felt about him—about Kurt Drevin—was it? No, it was a question of how she felt about her *daughter*. Samantha believed—absolutely believed—that Kurt was her mate, and while it was true that Bellaniece worried that she only felt that way because of her time in captivity, she also had to wonder . . .

Cain was convinced, too. He’d said as much this morning. He’d smiled and told her that it would be all right, that he maybe Kurt wasn’t exactly what he appeared to be, and Bellaniece desperately wanted to believe that for Samantha’s sake . . .

Too bad Kichiro was so convinced otherwise. Bellaniece couldn't say that she was completely ready to accept the situation, but she couldn't say that she was up to being stubborn just for the sake of it, either. In the end, she supposed that she still wanted what any mother wanted for her child: happiness, and if that meant that this man was her mate, then Bellaniece would find a way to deal with that, too . . .

She paused outside the door of the room where he was being confined, biting her lip as she gathered what was left of her waning bravado. In truth, she hadn't tried to speak with him before, and she really didn't know what to expect. Gin had said that he really wasn't as bad as all that, but she'd also said that he adamantly refused to say a thing that might paint him in a different kind of light, as though he wanted them all to think that he really was some sort of monster . . .

Smoothing her skirt and taking a moment to run her fingers through her hair, she squared her shoulders and knocked on the door.

No sound came from inside, not a whisper, not a breath of movement. She waited for a moment then knocked again, this time a little louder.

She heard the sound of his footsteps in a vague sort of way. A second later, he called out. "Come in."

She opened the door and stopped short. He'd obviously just gotten out of the shower, and while he was wearing jeans, he wasn't wearing a shirt, and when he glanced up to see her standing there, he made a face and snatched up the tee-shirt off the bed and hurriedly yanked it over his head. "S-sorry," he muttered as he tugged the hem down and shook his head.

Bellaniece nodded as she quietly closed the door, heading over to the small table near the balcony doors. Gin had brought up a tray of iced tea, light, fluffy biscuits, and a smoked

glass covered dish—his lunch? But she strode past that to open the doors, letting sunlight flood into the room as a gentle breeze wafted in, too.

“Sorry to disturb you,” she said, unable to think of anything less formal. “Please feel free to go on and eat.”

He nodded but made no move toward the food. “You’re, um . . . Samantha’s mother,” he muttered.

Pasting on a somewhat tepid smile, Bellaniece nodded. “I am,” she agreed. “I wanted to talk to you about . . . about Samantha.”

He wasn’t surprised in the least. Licking his lips, he jerked his head once in a nod and gestured toward the table. “Would you . . . would you like to sit down?” he asked rather reluctantly, decidedly nervously.

Bellaniece did. He cleared his throat and sat down, too, pushing the tray away just enough to indicate that he wasn’t hungry at the moment. Bellaniece stared at him for a long minute. Hair hanging rather carelessly into his eyes, he’d caught the rest of it back in a black cloth-covered rubber band, and while Bellaniece could see the slight discoloration just under his right eye and the bit of swelling near the corner of his mouth, he really didn’t look any worse for wear otherwise. She was, however, taken aback just a little by the man’s eyes. She supposed that she simply hadn’t ever had occasion to look him over closely, and she’d always just assumed that his eyes were a dark brown or even black, but no; they were violet, weren’t they? Darkened now most assuredly because of his acute discomfort, they seemed to hold emotion that he neither spoke nor encouraged, yet it was there, discernable just below the surface . . . Was that what had first compelled Samantha . . .? *Probably . . .*

Kurt cleared his throat, as though he were gathering the courage to say something. With a deep breath, he shook his head, unable to look Bellaniece in the eye. “I . . . I’m sorry,”

he said. "I captured her, and . . . and I sold her to them . . . and everything that happened there was . . . was because of me."

"I know," Bellaniece said quietly. "I know."

"Sorry doesn't mean a damn thing, does it?" he asked suddenly, a sad sort of smile that was completely devoid of any real humor gracing his lips.

"Why?" Bellaniece countered softly. "Maybe . . . maybe if you just told me why . . . Why Samantha? Why her? Did she . . . did she do something to you? Offend you? *Why?*"

Kurt seemed surprised by her questions—surprised and a little unnerved . . . or maybe it was the tone of her voice, because he had to know that she would ask him to explain. He shook his head, and for a moment, she had to wonder if he was going to answer her at all. He let out a deep breath, a flicker of regret making its way into his gaze before he managed to quell it, as though he didn't deserve to feel something like that, either. "I won't—I *can't*—make excuses for it," he finally said.

"I'm not asking for you to make excuses," she replied stiffly, "but . . . but my daughter . . . She loves you, and I . . . I need to know why she does: what she sees in you . . ."

He blinked as though that thought had never occurred to him. "What she . . . sees in me," he repeated almost ruefully. "If you figure that out, maybe you can explain it to me, too."

"Let me be crystal clear," she murmured, unable to staunch the surge of indignation inspired by his almost flip response. "I hate what you did, and I'm not sure that I'll ever be able to forgive you for it, but Samantha . . . she's my baby—she'll *always* be my baby. I love her more than anything else in this world—her and her sisters . . . But if you make her happy, then . . . then I can accept that." She shook her head, bit her lip as she tried to find a way to make him understand, why she needed him to tell her—why she needed

to see. “You have to help me,” she stated in a tone that left no room for discussion. “You have to help me see what she sees. You took her away from everyone who loves her, and . . . and even if you did give her back, you . . . you owe me this—me, her mother—so that the pain I feel whenever I look at you might one day go away. *Please.*”

He sighed and shot to his feet, stomping over to the open doorway. It occurred to her that it wasn't that he didn't want to say anything; he simply didn't want to make anyone think that he was trying to garner sympathy or explain away his behavior, his choices, and she had to respect that on some level, even if it were a grudging sort of respect; one not willingly given.

“You're right,” he whispered at length. “I did, and . . . and you're right.” He drew a deep breath, seemed to pause as though to gather his thoughts. Bellaniece said nothing as she waited for him to speak once more. “I . . . I've always been able to see youk—youkai . . .” he finally said. “I thought everyone could. I never knew that most people didn't, and . . . My father did, but Mom couldn't . . . I don't know if my sister could, but I don't think so . . .”

Leaning in the balcony doorway, his gaze deep, somber, he shook his head, lifted his scowling face toward the sky so high above. “They . . . they came after me—after my family . . . Killed them—all of them. Cut them down like they were nothing at all. I didn't know . . . didn't know that there were decent ones . . . like . . . like her . . .” He trailed off and swallowed hard, clearing his throat a few times, and Bellaniece had to wonder if he weren't tearing up. “I don't kn-know how you did it,” he rasped out, his chin dropping once again as he scowled at the floor beneath his feet, “I'll never know how you managed to raise a creature like Samantha . . . instilled her with more . . . more *decency*—more grace . . . than anyone I've ever met before . . . but you have, and . . . and I . . .”

Bellaniece didn't need him to finish that thought. She knew what he was trying to say, and as she considered that for a moment, thought about what he'd said. To have lost his

family to beings that he didn't understand? A faceless fear of something so vast, so terrible . . . Somehow . . . somehow she could comprehend that . . .

"How old were you?" she asked softly.

Kurt sighed and rubbed his eyes. "Seven," he replied. "Eight when they killed my aunt and uncle . . ."

She grimaced. So young—*too* young . . . No one should ever have to deal with something like that, should they? And that he had been little more than a baby, himself . . . Even if she couldn't forgive or forget what he'd done to Samantha, maybe . . . maybe it would help her to at least understand that much of it . . . "And you thought that my daughter . . ."

He shook his head quickly, vehemently. "No, but . . . but . . . I also didn't . . . didn't *want* to know, either."

Because he'd wanted to believe that they were all monsters, didn't he? Because he hadn't wanted to consider that maybe the ones who had hurt him and taken away his precious ones were the exception and not the norm . . . "Project Demon'," she murmured.

He nodded slowly. "What I did . . . It's inexcusable, and I'm not asking you to forgive me," he muttered. "Hell, I don't *want* you to . . ."

She frowned at his back as she slowly started to process and make sense of the things that he said. So afraid that people would think that his explanations were little more than attempts to shirk his hand in all of it that he refused to acknowledge anything beyond those things that damned him . . . and why did she understand that on some level, too? "Why didn't you bring her home then? Why didn't you make sure she got here safely? Afraid of facing what you'd done?" she challenged though her tone lacked any real hostility.

“Partly,” he admitted. “Maybe mostly.”

“And the rest of it?”

He sighed. “There were other facilities,” he said. “Different places doing the same things . . . They . . . they needed to be stopped, and the one in Chicago—those damnable bastards . . .” He let out a deep breath, a defeated sort of sound. “I couldn’t let them get their hands on her again, and they would have tried . . . I couldn’t let them hurt her . . . or her family . . .”

Bellaniece digested that in silence. She’d overheard enough of the men’s conversations to know that something very obviously had happened to the laboratory in Chicago, but that was really the extent of her knowledge. Had he been the one who had wrecked the place? He . . . he had done it for Samantha . . . “And did it work to assuage your conscience?” she asked instead.

Kurt uttered a soft chuckle—a dry sound. “It wasn’t meant to assuage anything,” he replied. “Those . . . men—” —he said ‘men’ in an entirely derisive sort of way. “They deserved what they got, maybe worse . . .”

“Is that really what you believe?”

He shook his head and rubbed his eyes. “They wouldn’t have understood if I hadn’t done what I did,” he said. “Maybe they’d have agreed to stop to save their miserable hides, but they would have turned right around and kept it up as soon as I left.”

“You thought that they’d hurt her again,” Bellaniece murmured.

“Something like that.”

She stood up and slowly crossed the floor, stepping out onto the balcony and into the brilliant daylight, wandered over to grip the railing. “She says you’re her mate,” Bellaniece remarked almost absently.

Kurt sighed. “I . . . I know.”

“Are you?”

“I . . . I love her,” he replied quietly—reverently.

Bellaniece nodded as she slowly turned to face him, could see in his expression, how very much it had cost him to say that out loud.

She could also see the truth behind it—the raw fear that he might be causing more harm than good, in the end, and while she couldn’t say that she liked him—couldn’t even say that she didn’t hate him—she had to admit that it had taken a lot for him to have told her the things that he had.

“You . . . you swear to me,” she began in a choked voice as she clasped her hands before herself and forced herself to look him in the eye. “You promise me that you will never, ever make my daughter cry again—that you will cherish her like her father and I always have.”

Kurt nodded slowly as he stepped over to the railing, his eyes taking on a soft glow as he gazed down at the young woman in the yard below as she chased a small child with raven black hair around in circles. “I swear,” he murmured without looking away and without a trace of reluctance.

Bellaniece sighed. No, she wasn’t entirely satisfied, but she was a little closer. If it were for Samantha’s happiness, though, maybe . . .



## Chapter 72

### The Comrs

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“She doesn’t look like she likes them.”

Samantha peered over the top of the magazine and pressed her lips together to keep from giggling out loud. “You don’t think so?”

He snorted without turning to face her. “No.”

“She’s fine,” Samantha reassured him for what had to be the fiftieth time since she’d brought up his lunch tray about an hour ago.

Kurt snorted again. “See? He’s making her cry.”

Tossing the magazine aside, she untangled her legs and got up off the bed where she’d settled down to read when it became apparent to her that Kurt couldn’t be sidetracked into cuddling with her. “That’s not crying,” she remarked as she wrapped her arms around his waist and leaned against his side. “She’s pouting for candy; that’s all.”

“And what does your grandfather really know about them?” he countered.

“Grandpa says that they’re fine, upstanding people. He’s a neurologist, and she’s a kindergarten teacher.”

“So they sound good on paper. Big deal,” Kurt scoffed. “But what do they know about her?”

Samantha bit her lip since she'd wondered the same thing—wondered enough that she'd sought out her grandfather a few days ago to ask him exactly that . . . “Grandpa's told them just about everything—at least the important things.”

“Depends on what you consider ‘important’,” he grumbled. “Did he tell them that her biological father killed her mother? Did he tell them that the bastard thought of his daughter as nothing more than a fucking science experiment?”

She grimaced at the harshness of his words—he'd explained everything to her a few nights ago—how he'd found her, why he'd brought her with him . . . the entire story of what the father had done to the mother . . . From Samantha's understanding, the woman was a hanyou, and the doctor had just managed to catch her on the right—or wrong, as the case was—night . . . and the child was the result . . .

The entire thing had sickened and infuriated her. Kurt had told her that Cain had said that the hunters had found the man dead. He'd killed himself, but . . . but there was something darker, a little foreboding about Kurt's behavior at the time, and she'd asked him if he'd killed the man—he'd been entirely too angry about it all, too irate . . . Kurt had said that he didn't, but . . . she wasn't entirely sure she wanted deeper answers than she'd gotten, either. True, she didn't want the man's blood on Kurt's hands—he'd already been through enough in his lifetime. Still, she couldn't say that she was unhappy about his apparent suicide, either, though, in her estimation and in this case, only, he'd deserved to live with what he'd done to the child . . . “You don't want them to adopt her?” Samantha asked tentatively.

He shot her what she supposed he meant to be a quelling glance though it seemed a bit sulkier than anything else. “Of course I do,” he muttered then sighed. “And even if they do know her history, can they deal with it? With her?”

He looked so worried, didn't he? Did he even realize it? Did he understand? She did . .

. in the short time that Samantha had been caring for her, the girl had brought back a level of peace to Samantha that she hadn't realized she'd been missing. She'd latched onto Samantha right away, and while she figured that it was because she smelled like Kurt, she couldn't complain about it, either. She opened her mouth, ready to suggest that the two of them keep the child, but she snapped it closed again. True enough, he was acting strange about the entire thing, but as much as she hated the idea of giving the girl to the Conors, she just wasn't sure how he'd feel about it. Sure, he was obviously distressed over the placement, and she knew well enough that his feelings had nothing at all to do with the Conors, themselves . . . but adopting a child was a huge thing, and as much as she thought that she knew how he felt, she wasn't sure if he understood what it all meant . . .

She sighed and tried not to watch as the couple played with the child in the yard below. It hurt, didn't it? Watching them with her . . . it felt wrong; so very wrong . . . "They . . . they really like her," she heard herself saying.

Kurt snorted yet again and shook his head. "Of course they do. She's a cute kid—maybe the cutest one, ever."

Biting her lip, Samantha wondered if he knew what he sounded like, but decided against telling him. After all, it had taken a lot for him to admit that he wanted to be with her, hadn't it? Still . . .

They were almost ready to try taking her home with them for an overnight visit, and that certainly didn't sit well with Samantha, not at all. But the child seemed to like the Conors all right, and maybe it was for the best . . . wasn't it?

"Has anyone bothered to check out their house? What if it's not kid-safe?" Kurt went on with a shake of his head.

Samantha let out a deep breath and nodded. That thought had occurred to her, too, not

that she wanted to dwell on it. Cain had told her, though, that all of that stuff had been checked thoroughly. Ben had visited them to talk things over, and Cain and Gin had gone to visit them, too. The couple lived in a quiet neighborhood on the outskirts of Bevelle in a renovated old farmhouse with a couple horses, a pony for the child, and close to one of the better preschools in the area—in fact, it was the one that Bas and Evan and Jillian had attended. They'd already bought a nice, sturdy swing set for the back yard, too—a pink one with streamers that stuck up from the small flags atop the construction. They'd also built a small playhouse for her, too, and from what she'd been told, her bedroom was decked out in white tulle and ribbons, complete with a princess canopy bed and enough toys to keep her occupied for a year or more . . . clothes and everything that a little girl could ever possibly need . . .

They wanted her. They really wanted her.

So why didn't that idea make her happier . . .?

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Kichiro snapped his cell phone closed and dropped it onto the nightstand with a long sigh and a shake of his head as Bellaniece stepped into the room with an armload of laundry that she'd just brought upstairs. "Did you call the clinic?"

He nodded and stepped over to help her put the things away. "Yeah, everything's fine," he allowed. "Nothing to worry about."

She shot him a smile as she hung a few items in the closet, fussing with them to make sure that they weren't wrinkling. "Good."

He took his time tucking clothes into the dresser drawer. He'd gotten an idea in the last

few days, and while he had a feeling that Bellaniece would like it, he wasn't entirely certain if she would think that it was a good idea. "You know," he began slowly, carefully measuring his words. "I was thinking . . ."

"You're so sexy when you're thinking," she quipped.

He chuckled. "Yeah, well . . . I kind of thought that since we really should get back to Japan soon . . . maybe we should see if Samantha might like to come along. For a visit," he added when Bellaniece slowly turned to face him.

He could tell from her expression that she wasn't entirely against the idea, and that was good. Still, he could also tell that she didn't necessarily think that Samantha would like it or agree to it, either . . . "I don't know, Kichiro," she began slowly. "I'd love that, but . . . but I don't think she'd do it."

Kichiro shrugged and continued to put their things away. "It'd be better for her; give her some time away from . . . everything," he muttered. "If we talked to her—"

"I don't think it's a good idea, either," Bellaniece cut in quietly. "I mean, I'd love to have her, but . . . but she needs to figure things out for herself."

Kichiro shifted his gaze, narrowing his eyes as he regarded his mate. She was keeping her own eyes carefully averted, as though she was afraid to see whatever was on his mind. Shaking his head slowly, he reached out, grasped her arm. "I thought we agreed, Belle-chan. That guy is not her mate."

She grimaced and shot him an apologetic sort of look. "No, Kichiro . . . You said that, and I know that you believe it, but . . . but I'm not as sure as you are. If Kurt is her mate, then—"

"He's not!" Kichiro interrupted, unable to control his rising anger, his outrage that even

Bellaniece doubted him. “If he were her mate, he never would have sold her to that damned place! If he were her mate, he’d treat her like it!”

Bellaniece turned to face him, staring at him for several moments with the kind of expression on her face that she only got when something really bothered her. “Kichiro, will you just stop for a minute and think about what you’re saying?” she said quietly, evenly, calmly. “What if you’re wrong?”

He shot her a cold stare. “I’m not,” he stated flatly.

She smothered a sigh, her eyes glowing in a way that he knew meant that her irritation was rising fast. “What. If. You. Are?”

Brushing past her, he strode toward the door. “I’m not,” he growled without stopping.

What the hell was wrong with everyone? Why couldn’t they get it through their thick heads? Had they all lost their damn minds? He snorted.

Samantha . . . She didn’t belong with that bastard. Didn’t anyone comprehend what he’d done to her? Didn’t they care? Why was he the only one who could see through it all? Okay, maybe she did want to believe that they were mates, but he knew better, didn’t he? She didn’t love him. He was just the most decent one to her out of all of them, maybe, but that wasn’t love, and the last thing that he would accept was that she wouldn’t wake up in ten or twenty years and realize that the man really wasn’t her mate; wasn’t anything at all but a miserable bastard who had gotten away with the things he’d done to her.

Not if he had any say in it, though. There was no way he’d allow anything to come of it. Sometimes it sucked to be the parent, to have to be the voice of reason when a child couldn’t see things that should have been plain. He loved her—adored her, and it was his sacred responsibility to protect her, even if she didn’t think she needed that protection . . .

Heaving a sigh as he stopped by the window, he stared down at the yard below. Samantha was there, kneeling in the grass beside Drevin with what looked to be a first-aid kit, nursing his injuries from his daily practice. It was a damned joke, wasn't it? Those bastards had stuck her in a fucking cage, used her as little more than a living science experiment, and all he got out of it was a few cracked ribs, a few split lips, and maybe a black eye or two. The room where they'd confined him wasn't even close to being a cage, and the meals they gave him were a far cry from dog kibble. There was no justice, was there?

And what was it Bellaniece had told him? That he'd had his reasons for hating youkai . . . Kichiro didn't give a shit about reasons, and he didn't care what sort of nice face they wanted to put on it all. What he'd done to Samantha was inexcusable, wasn't it?

He simply couldn't tolerate it, could he? The rage that burned so brightly within him . . . For every indignity his daughter had suffered, and she was content to forget it? To pretend that everything was fine? But it wasn't, and it wouldn't be. That man was a living, breathing reminder of the entire thing—the one who had done the unthinkable to her . . .

“Hmm, you don't look so happy.”

Kichiro grunted but didn't turn to look at his mother as she approached.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he grumbled, ears flicking with his irritation.

“Oh, and you think that I don't know when you're lying to me?” Kagome asked in a gentle, teasing sort of tone.

He sighed and rubbed his forehead as he continued to watch out the window. “Why

can't anyone else see that he's not the right one for her?" he grumbled.

"Are you so sure?" she asked gently.

He sighed and spared a moment to glower at his mother. "You, too, Mama?"

She smiled and slowly shook her head. "I'm not sure, no," she allowed. "But I also know that there's a time when a parent has to step back and let his child figure things out on her own, too."

"Not this time," he insisted. "Mama, this isn't like she's trying to figure out what car she wants to buy or anything. This is big—huge . . . and the ramifications of a mistake like this will impact her for the rest of her life."

"And you think she'll regret her choice."

"I know she will."

"Oh, I don't know, Kichiro," she went on with a sigh. "Samantha's a bright girl, and I think . . . I think you should trust her. All her life, people have told her to listen to her youkai voice. Sometimes I think that she might be better attuned with hers than just about anyone. If her youkai were telling her that he isn't her mate, I think she'd know it."

"You'd think," he shot back then sighed. "Sorry."

She was quiet for a moment, and then she laughed softly. "Do you remember when you were little, and you wanted to learn how to ride your bicycle, but you wanted to do it alone?"

He glanced at her then shook his head. "That's not even close to being the same."

“Isn’t it? Samantha’s bicycle is just different from yours.”

He snorted. “Keh. I also remember the old man following me around when he thought that I couldn’t see him.”

“And you can do that, too,” Kagome insisted. “Follow Samantha at a distance, close enough to catch her if she falls . . . but let her do this her way. It is her life, after all, and a parent might not like a choice a child makes, but in the end, you must understand that it is her choice; not yours. What might not be right for you might very well be right for her.”

He frowned as he stared out the window, pondering his mother’s advice. “Is that what you told Gin?”

Kagome sighed and smiled a little sadly, the memory of her daughter bringing a slight shadow to her face: the very thought of how close they’d come to losing her all those years ago. “Yes,” she admitted as her smile faltered slightly. “It is.”

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Cain double checked the car seat buckles as the child idly kicked her feet. She was content to work her way through the bag of gummi bears that Gin had given her before they’d put her into the vehicle.

“Don’t forget her bear,” Samantha fretted as she stood on tiptoe to peer around Cain to ascertain for herself that the girl had everything she needed. Looking sweet as could be in a crisp white cotton sundress with little white ribbons tied around the two little piggy tails on either side of her head, she looked entirely adorable. Samantha had taken extra

pains in dressing the girl for the day. It was a special one, after all, wasn't it? "Oh, let me check her diaper bag . . ."

"Everything's fine, Sam," Cain reassured her. "Besides, I'm sure that the Conors have all that stuff at their house, too."

Samantha bit her lip and didn't look at all pacified. "Y-yeah . . ."

"Can you wave 'bye-bye'?" Cain asked the child. She summarily ignored him.

"She'll be okay . . . right?" Samantha pondered as she watched him close the door and lope around to the driver's side.

Gin smiled brightly and gave her a quick squeeze. "Of course, sweetie."

Samantha wasn't completely convinced.

"Cain said that they've decided to name her 'Iris,'" Gin commented as Cain started the SUV.

"Iris?" she echoed with a shake of her head. "I . . . see . . ."

"You don't like it?"

Samantha took a moment before answering. Iris Conor? She bit her lip. No, that just really didn't sound quite right, did it? "It's . . . nice."

Cain honked the horn as he pulled out of the space between Gin's car and Samantha's, negotiating the long driveway slowly and carefully.

Samantha forced a smile and turned around to head back inside. Kurt was likely irritated

to no end since his room was on the other side of the mansion.

He'd been moody, distracted all day, and she didn't have to be brilliant to know that this home visit was the reason why. Did he know—really know—how badly he was taking everything? Did he know what Samantha was starting to suspect? He cared about the child so much more than he let on—loved her, didn't he? Did he want to keep her? Somehow, Samantha knew that there was so much more to it than that, and she knew, too, that there was a very good chance that Kurt, himself, didn't even realize that he might want to, for that matter.

That was the trouble, wasn't it? With every day that passed; every day spent seeing the timid child slowly creep out of her shell, Samantha couldn't help but love her just a little more . . .

Waking up in the morning, just to see her smiles, her cautious fascination as she chased butterflies; as she ran and played . . . Just yesterday, she'd somehow managed to climb atop InuYasha's head, content to go wherever he went, much to Samantha's amusement. Her laughter as she darted over to Samantha's side, her need to reassure herself that Samantha was still there . . . and Samantha, sitting in the grass, was left to wonder as the girl dashed away again to chase after a squirrel that she didn't really have any real hopes of catching, if the complete feeling of contentment she felt was the same emotion that she'd seen so often, reflected in her mother's gaze. Was that the feeling of a mother? And if it were . . .

Climbing the staircase, she sighed. Letting go of the child . . . It was for the best, wasn't it? She . . . she needed a family in the very worst way, didn't she? A mother and a father who would dote on her every day for the rest of her life . . .

There had been a few times during the last few days when Samantha had come close to asking Kurt if he would mind adopting the girl, but she hadn't. Something always stopped her. There were moments when she'd look at him, only to see hints of the very

familiar sadness that he still carried around, that he clung so tightly to, and she'd wondered whether or not those nightmares still plagued him. Those dreams that would make him cry out in the stillness of the night . . . She'd heard it so often, and yet . . .

To ask him to take on a little girl when she'd already asked him for so very much of himself . . . Did she really have a right to do that? Somehow, she didn't think that she did . . .

He was sitting on the balcony when she stepped into his room. The sheer white curtains that hung over the doors blew in the gentle breeze, but the sadness in his aura reached out to her, hurt her . . .

"She gone?" he asked, sensing her approach but not bothering to verify it, either.

"She'll be back tomorrow," Samantha ventured.

"Tomorrow," he repeated. "She . . . she didn't cry, did she?"

Samantha cleared her throat and sat beside him on the sturdy railing that ran around the perimeter of the balcony. "No . . . un, Grandma gave her gummi bears . . ."

"Gummi bears."

She smiled just a little. "Yeah."

"Candy . . ."

She sighed. "Grandma . . . she also said that they've chosen a name for her."

"Oh?"

Her smile faltered at the flatness of his tone. "Iris."

She didn't miss the incredulous look he shot her as he snorted indelicately and shook his head. "Iris? The hell . . .?"

Somehow, his response didn't surprise her. She had a feeling that he wouldn't have liked any name the Conors had come up with . . . and for even more disturbing reasons, she agreed . . .

Kurt let out a deep breath and forced a tight little smile. "It's . . . it's fine," he said though he didn't look very pleased. "Iris . . . that's a . . . a great name."

"She'll be fine," she said, trying to sound completely positive.

"Y-yeah," he replied. At least he tried to smile . . .

Samantha smiled and stood up. She needed to distract him before he ended up really agitated . . . "Tell me something?"

"Hmm?"

"When all of this is over, where do you want to go?"

He blinked, surprised by her question, and he didn't seem to know what to say. "Go?"

She nodded. "We could go anywhere, do anything . . . I mean, I'd like to go back to work, but . . ."

"Back to work," he echoed, his expression darkening just a little. "You mean, as a hunter . . ."

Stepping over to stick her finger into the soil of a nearby plant, Samantha turned to fetch a glass of water for it. “Yeah, of course.”

She didn’t see the scowl that surfaced on his features, the thoughtful frown that the idea of her going back to work inspired in him.

“How does your family feel about that?” he asked, leaning in the doorway as he watched her fill a glass from the pitcher of water on the desk. “They okay with you going back to work?”

Hesitating in her task of pouring the liquid, she shot him what she hoped was a reassuring smile over her shoulder. “They’re not very keen on it, if that’s what you mean,” she replied honestly.

He nodded, and she had a feeling that he was measuring his words before speaking. “It’s dangerous, isn’t it?”

“Not if you’re careful,” she said. “Not really, anyway.”

“And that’s what you were doing when I captured you.”

She sighed. She’d figured it was something like that. “There’s always a measure of risk,” she admitted as she took the glass and brushed past him to water the plant. “But the rewards outweigh the risk. What I do . . . I just want to protect whomever I can, in any way that I can.”

He grasped her shoulders and turned her around, his expression saying it all, even as he said nothing. *‘But who will protect you?’* she read in his eyes, the turbulent churning of unspoken dread.

She smiled and leaned up to kiss his cheek. “You worry too much.”

Her response didn't please him, and he slowly shook his head. "Yeah, and you don't worry nearly enough."

"Well," she deadpanned, slipping her arms around his neck. "Look at it this way: I don't need to worry because I know you'll do it for me. How's that?"

He snorted loudly and rolled his eyes. "Little demon . . ."

Samantha sighed and let her cheek rest against his shoulder for a beautiful moment. "She'll be okay, won't she?" she finally whispered.

Kurt let out a deep breath of his own, his arms rather reluctantly encircling her, drawing her close. "It's . . . it's better for her, isn't it?"

"Is . . . is it?"

Her question seemed to stump him; he didn't have an answer. For a moment, Samantha wondered what he was thinking, but when he intercepted her stare, he slowly shook his head. "There are things I still have to do, Sam," he admitted quietly, almost apologetically. "I promised . . . my family . . . I promised them . . ."

"Let me help you," she offered in a low tone though not without conviction. "I . . . I could help you find them, and—"

He slowly shook his head despite the tender little smile that touched his lips, as he reached out to stroke her cheek with the back of his knuckles. "It's not your fight, little demon."

"Taijya—"



## Chapter 73

### Healing

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Samantha sat back and tried not to stare at her parents, who hadn't spoken more than a couple perfunctory things to each other during the course of breakfast. Bellaniece looked completely tranquil, as always, and her father looked a little bored but nothing really out of the ordinary, and for a moment, she wondered if she might be blowing things out of proportion. But she could feel an underlying strain that she didn't quite understand, and that was more than enough to have her glancing from one to the other and back again.

Kagome shot InuYasha a questioning glance. The hanyou flicked his ears and narrowed his gaze on the two but didn't comment as Bellaniece got up to refill her glass of orange juice, and Samantha didn't miss the fact that her mother didn't bother to ask Kichiro if he wanted one, too. No, she stepped over to the highboy and poured the beverage, returning to the table without bothering to see whether or not Kichiro wanted the same.

Kichiro didn't comment, though. If the two of them were trying to pretend as though nothing was wrong, they were failing quite miserably. Both Cain and Gin were sitting back in their chairs, openly gawking at the couple. Ryomaru and Nezumi kept exchanging strange sorts of looks, and when Bas walked in a minute later with a black slimfile in his hands to ask his father a question, he stopped abruptly just inside the door, his eyes flaring wide as he stared around the table. It took him all of two seconds to figure out the source of the heaviness in the room, and with a concerted effort, he managed to shake his head and ignore the tension as he grabbed a coffee cup off the highboy and filled it.

"Thought I told you to stay home with your mate today," Cain remarked, breaking the

uncomfortable silence.

Bas shot his father a glance as he grabbed the cup and strode over to the table. “Morning to you, too, Dad, and Sydnie wanted me to come over to talk to you about one of the cases.”

“And where is she?”

Bas snorted, downing half of his coffee in a single gulp. “Right now? Watching *Good Morning, Maine* with Precious.”

“The cow?” Kagome questioned with a raised eyebrow.

Bas sighed but didn’t reply as he grabbed a couple cranberry biscotti.

“That’s so sweet of you to have bought her a cow,” Bellaniece said with a radiant smile.

“Yeah, well, sometimes I wish I didn’t,” he remarked with a shake of his head. “That damn thing stinks, and she lets it into the house. She doesn’t see the difference between Badd and Precious . . . I’ll tell you what the big difference is: Badd doesn’t stink nearly as badly as Precious does—and Badd’s housebroken, too.”

InuYasha snorted but didn’t comment on that, though Samantha could tell from the look on his face that he simply didn’t understand why anyone would allow a cow into the house, in the first place.

“And you complain about the cat when she sheds her fur,” Nezumi mumbled.

Ryomaru grinned. “Why, Nez? You want a cow, too?”

“Let’s just hope that Precious outgrows the doorways sooner rather than later,” Bas

muttered.

“What about Sydnie’s fish tank?” Gin asked since Bas had told Sydnie that the cow was too clumsy to be around the aquarium after Precious had knocked over and broke the first one.

Bas sighed. “Got too expensive,” he muttered.

Samantha pressed her lips together to keep from smiling since she knew well enough that the aquarium wasn’t nearly as expensive as the fish that Sydnie insisted upon playing with—and killing. For as bright a woman as Sydnie really was, she just didn’t grasp that a fish that flopped around in the palm of her hand wasn’t playing; it was dying, and Samantha had a feeling that it wasn’t the expense of replacing the fish that bothered Bas, it was the unsettling idea that Sydnie . . . well, she just kept killing the poor things . . .

Samantha stood up and grabbed her plate. Ordinarily, her parents’ odd and strained behavior would have upset her, and while she had to admit that it did bother her, she had a hunch that they were at odds over her and Kurt, and if that really was the case . . . maybe she was better off not knowing . . .

Besides, Samantha was still more than a little tired, given that she hadn’t slept well last night. Kurt had tossed and turned most of the time, and she’d been too preoccupied, worrying about the child to get any rest, herself.

Maybe she could clear her head if she went for a run. Rinsing off her dishes, she put them in the dishwasher and kicked the door closed. That sounded like an excellent plan, she figured. After all, she wouldn’t be able to spend any time with Kurt since those bordering-on-barbaric men of the family insisted upon thrashing Kurt on a daily basis . . .

It didn’t take long for her to run up to her room and change clothes, opting for a pair of pink stretch shorts and a white tank top. Since it was a bit on the brisk side, though, she

did stop long enough to nab a gray sweat jacket before grabbing her running shoes and hurrying out of the room again.

But the sun was shining brightly when she stepped outside, and she closed her eyes, drew a deep cleansing breath . . . and froze.

The bushes beside the porch trembled, but it was the scent that drew Samantha forward. Dropping her shoes, she ran down the steps as her heart lurched into her throat.

“Sweetie?” she called quietly, grimacing at the anxiety rife in the child’s youki. Hunkering down on the balls of her feet, Samantha stared into the murky shadows. “Aww, honey . . .”

A small whimper met Samantha’s ears moments before the girl sprang out of the foliage and into her arms. Dressed in a dirty and torn nightgown—white with pink teddy bears printed all over the knit fabric—she shook and sobbed and clung to Samantha.

“Oh, sweetie,” she crooned, wrapping her arms around her and slowly getting to her feet. “Did you run away?”

The girl continued to sob.

A moment later, the front door swung open, and Cain strode outside with his cell phone plastered against his ear. He stopped short and slowly shook his head, his eyes registering his obvious relief. “Never mind,” he said into the device. “It’s all right. She’s here.”

Snapping the phone closed against his chest, Cain sighed. “The Conors just called. Said she was gone when they got up a bit ago.”

Samantha patted the child’s back and shot her grandfather a worried glance. “How did

she get out?”

He let out a deep breath. “Near as they could tell, she must have crawled through the cat door and hopped over the fence. Don’t worry, Sam. We’ll try another overnight visit next weekend.”

“But she doesn’t want to go,” Sam pointed out.

Cain frowned. “Sam . . . she needs a family of her own.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “I . . . I know . . .”

He stared at her for a long moment then slowly nodded. “Take her inside,” he finally said. “She’s probably hungry . . . and tired.”

“D-daddy,” the child whined.

Cain sighed again then shook his head, as though whatever he’d thought just couldn’t be helped. “And why don’t you take her up to see him?” he suggested with a half-hearted smile. “I guess . . . I guess he can skip the training for one day . . .”

Samantha nodded, cast Cain a grateful smile, then headed toward the porch with the still whimpering child nestled against her chest. She sniffled, stuffing her fingers into her mouth as Cain pulled the teddy bear from the bushes. “Here,” he said, holding it out to her.

The child took one look at Cain and howled, her arms tightening around Samantha’s neck almost painfully tightly. She grimaced and took the stuffed animal from him. “Sorry, Grandpa,” she said with an apologetic smile.

He sighed and waved his hand dismissively as Samantha hurried into the mansion.

She headed straight for the stairs, gently trying to soothe the child's upset. She probably associated Cain with the perceived trauma, and while Samantha knew that her grandfather would never, ever hurt a child, she could understand the girl's skewed opinion of it.

Kurt threw open the door before Samantha reached it, his expression a mix of anger and concern as he reached for the girl without a word.

"She ran away and came back here," Samantha explained as she pushed the door closed.

Kurt nodded as he rubbed the child's back and paced the floor. "You're okay," he told her in a gentle tone.

"Daddy!" she wailed, burying her face against his chest. "Daddy . . ."

He heaved a sigh and shot Samantha a fulminating glower. Samantha bit her lip and shifted from one foot to the other. "She's all right," she told him. "She was just scared; that's all."

"Here," he said, digging a butterscotch candy out of his pocket.

The child sniffled and reached for it.

Kurt sighed and frowned at Samantha. "She . . . she won't go willingly; not to them."

Samantha shook her head. "No, I doubt it."

That didn't appease him. "What does your grandfather think that he's going to do? Forcing her to go with them when she doesn't want to?" He snorted, moving toward the bed to set her down before he reached for the little pink diaper bag off the floor where he

kept it. “What’s the point? She’ll just run away again . . . She doesn’t like them. She doesn’t want to be an ‘Iris’, and she doesn’t want to be a Conor, either.”

Samantha sighed. That was true enough. She agreed completely. That little girl . . .

But she watched quietly as Kurt made quick work of changing the child’s diaper.

He sighed and sat back, frowning as he pulled the girl off the bed and into his lap, cuddling her against his chest. “What am I going to do with you?” he mused quietly, the stirrings of a tender smile gracing his features.

Samantha sank down beside the two of them. “Grandpa . . . he said that they could try having her overnight next weekend . . .”

He shot her a quick glance, all traces of the smile that had been starting to form dissipating completely as he slowly shook his head. “Why? So she can run away again? Come home all dirty and crying and upset? What’s the point?”

“M . . . maybe . . .”

He sighed. “Whatever.”

Staring at the child, she couldn’t help the sad little scowl that surfaced. She opened her mouth; wanted to say that she’d keep her, but she couldn’t do it. Couldn’t ask more of him than he’d already given her; the concessions he’d already made to accommodate her . . .

It struck her then, exactly how exhausted he looked. She knew he hadn’t gotten much sleep. Too busy, fretting over the child, he hadn’t been able to sleep at all, had he?

“Grandpa says you don’t have to train today,” she murmured quietly.

Kurt didn't respond right away. The girl reached out to Samantha, grasping her sleeve and tugging to bring her closer. Only after Samantha had moved in beside Kurt, leaning against the bed next to him with the child safely cradled between them, did she finally let her eyes drift closed.

Kurt watched her in silence for several moments. "The first time I saw her," he said softly, "I thought . . . I thought that if I could save her . . ." He trailed off, his voice rough, catching, and he tried to smile, but couldn't quite manage it. "I thought that maybe you . . . you'd forgive me . . . someday . . ."

"Taijya . . ." she whispered.

He shook his head. "For you . . . for her . . . to be happy . . ."

"And you?"

He shot her a little smile—an almost bashful sort of smile—but this one was genuine, illuminating his gaze with a sparkle, a brightness that made her stop and stare. "You make me . . . you *are* my happiness, little demon . . . you know that, right?"

She snuggled against his shoulder, her nostrils tingling as tears prickled her eyelids. "You never needed my forgiveness. There was never anything to forgive."

He snorted but slipped his arm around her waist, drawing her a little closer against his side, content, it seemed, just to be near her.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while as waves of drowsiness surged over her. Stifling a yawn with the back of her hand, she shifted to ask Kurt if they should lie down on the bed, only to stop and smile. He was already asleep, too, and in the end, she didn't have the heart to wake either of them, and as she closed her eyes, she figured that it'd be

just fine if she woke up with a kink in her back from sleeping in such an odd place. Some things were just worth it, after all . . .

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Kagome paced around the base of the tree with a somewhat bemused smile on her face as she waited patiently for InuYasha to notice her.

She couldn't see him up there, hidden as he was by the tangle of limbs and leaves. She knew he was there, of course. He'd taken to that tree a lot of late.

"Should you really be up there, spying on them?" she asked, giving up on the subtle approach.

"Keh! I ain't *spying*, wench," he countered hotly. "Ain't no '*spying*' about it."

She rolled her eyes but smiled. "So you say."

"He's Miroku's reincarnation, ain't he? Just making sure that he keeps that cursed hand of his off my grandpup."

"You really think that's a problem?" she asked with a shake of her head.

InuYasha dropped out of the tree at Kagome's feet and stood up with a marked scowl. "They're sleeping, anyway." Crossing his arms over his chest, he started to walk away.

Kagome hurried after him, falling into step beside him. "Gin said that the child came back?"

InuYasha shot her a quick glance. “She did.”

Kagome sighed. “They’re good with her—both of them.”

“Well, why not? The damned pervert wanted to have children with every woman he ever met, didn’t he?”

Kagome rolled her eyes but giggled. “Kurt doesn’t seem like that,” she pointed out.

“Hell, I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s just putting up a good front.”

“Why would he do that, dog-boy?”

“Keh! ‘Cause he’d be cut to shreds by whoever’s closest if he didn’t.”

“. . . I swear, sometimes I think I said ‘osuwari’ to you one time too many . . .”

InuYasha grunted, absently reaching up to finger the now-dormant prayer beads that had been his curse—sort of—for a long, long time. “You did,” he gloated, “but that ain’t got nothing to do with this.”

Kagome heaved a sigh but smiled. Just as quickly as the smile surfaced, though, it dissolved.

“Forget it, Kagome,” InuYasha remarked with a shake of his head when he intercepted the thoughtful frown on her face.

“But I didn’t say anything,” she pointed out a little too reasonably.

“Yeah, but I *know* you. Kich’ll figure it out. Stay out of it.”

She sighed again. There were times when InuYasha was a bit too perceptive. This was one of those times. “But he and Bellaniece never fight.”

“Never say never, wench.”

“InuYasha . . .”

He grabbed her hand and dragged her along the path away from the mansion. “No, no, no,” he grouched.

“I wasn’t going to meddle,” she argued, tugging against his hold.

“Yeah, and I don’t breathe,” he shot back as he rolled his eyes and hurried her along. “Let the pups alone,” he insisted. “They ain’t babies anymore.”

Kagome shot him a pouting glower that would have been much more effective had he deigned to notice it, letting him pull her along with him. He had a point, and she knew it. Still, it was hard to stop mothering her children, no matter what age they were.

She sped up, falling into step beside him, and turned to face him, but stopped short when she saw the expression on his face. He was thinking about it, too—about his normally level-headed son and the turmoil simmering just below his otherwise calm-façade. As much as InuYasha blustered and grumbled, he really did worry just as much as she did, even if he were loathe to admit as much . . .

But he did have a point this time. If Kagome offered the wrong advice this time, he’d just be that much more agitated about the entire situation, but if she were to agree with his stance, then there was a good chance that he’d never, ever come around, and to be honest, she had a feeling that she already knew the gist of the argument, anyway. Kichiro wasn’t about to admit that maybe Samantha really was right about Kurt being her mate. He was so convinced that it was nothing more than a complex infatuation that he wasn’t

even willing to consider the idea that it wasn't, and Bellaniece, she knew, had been struggling of late, wondering if Kichiro weren't simply believing whatever he wanted.

The thing was, with every day that passed, as she watched Kurt and Samantha, Kagome, herself, was starting to believe, too. There was an intangible quality about the two of them, an unspoken need that drew them together even if they tried to hide it from everyone else. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Samantha didn't really try to hide her feelings at all, though she did try not to say anything in front of her father that might lead to an altercation. Kagome suspected that Samantha simply didn't want to fight with him over it, not that she could blame her. Whenever he thought he was right, Kichiro would argue himself silly to prove his point.

But that wasn't going to help this time around. That sort of tenacity, whether he realized it or not, was only going to hurt the one person that he really didn't intend to hurt, at all: Samantha. With as close as the girl was to her father, his unhappiness over her choice was wearing away at her, slowly but surely.

Kagome only wished that Kichiro would realize and come to accept things sooner rather than later. Putting Samantha into the middle of it was just not fair; not after everything else that she'd been through in the last few months . . .

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"We put her to bed . . . She . . . she cried herself to sleep, and we stayed with her, but she . . . Well, she didn't seem to want to be held or anything . . . In fact, she cried harder if we tried to . . ." Cora Conor trailed off, staring intently at her hands with a decidedly dejected air that she struggled to keep in check. Gin filled a delicate porcelain mug with tea and slipped it into the woman's trembling hands. "We thought she was just having a hard time adjusting: her first night there, you know . . .? But . . ."

Dean Conor gently squeezed his mate's shoulder and smiled apologetically. "When Cora went in to check on her this morning, she was gone."

Cain sat back and nodded as Gin offered Dean a cup of tea. "She's fine," he assured them both with a wan smile. "She came back here. In fact, my granddaughter found her outside."

The Conors exchanged looks. Dean sighed and shook his head. "She kept . . . kept asking for her daddy," he said at length. "I . . . I thought you said that she never knew her father . . ."

Cain licked his lips and slowly conceded that. "She doesn't, but . . . but the guy who brought her to us . . . Well, they spent quite a bit of time together while they were traveling here, so she got a little attached to him, as I'm sure you can understand."

The couple exchanged more looks. "He doesn't want to keep her?" Cora asked quietly. She hadn't wanted to, had she? She was concerned about what was best for the girl, and in Cain's mind, that spoke volumes.

He let out a deep breath. "I don't think so. I mean, he hasn't expressed any interest in doing that, no."

Cora nodded and drew a deep breath. "I just can't help but think . . . If she thinks that he is her father . . ."

"There's, um, more to it than that," Cain said. "Anyway . . . if you want to try to have her overnight again, let me know. Think about it for a couple days, and give me a call. If you'd like, you could take her for a night next weekend."

The Conors stood up and shook his hand, and Cain watched them go with a slight frown

on his face. Gin showed them to the door then slipped back into the office. He could tell from the expression on her face that there was something on her mind, and he figured that he knew what it was likely to be, too.

“Maybe it is a bad idea, Zelig-sensei,” she said as she gathered the tea cups and slipped them onto the tray. “If you want my opinion, she belongs with Samantha . . . *and* Kurt.”

Cain let out a long sigh and rubbed his forehead in a weary sort of way. “I think so, too,” he agreed, “but neither one of them has given any kind of indication that they’d be interested in doing that, and under the circumstances, I don’t think that it’d be right to ask them to.”

She bit her lip and stared at him for a minute, her ears flattening slightly as she pondered what he’d said. “They remind me of us,” she remarked at length.

“Us?” he repeated with a shake of his head. “How do you figure?”

She shrugged and stepped around the desk, slipping onto his lap as she wrapped her arms around his neck. “Don’t you remember? You were trying to find a family to take Jillian, and all the while, I kept thinking that I wanted to keep her but worried that you’d think that I was taking on too much since Evan was still a baby, too.”

Cain smiled at the memory. The entire time Gin had thought that, he had been thinking that he didn’t have a right to ask her to take on that much responsibility. After all, it was true enough. Evan was only a few months older than Jillian, and Jilli had been an infant at the time. But she was such a beautiful, happy baby that she hadn’t been any real trouble. At the time, though, Cain had gone through the steps of finding a family who were looking for a child, and he’d even gone so far as to meet with the couple when Gin, in a wash of miserable tears, had hesitantly suggested that they keep the girl.

“So maybe all they need is for someone to suggest it,” Gin suddenly exclaimed in a gush

of inspiration.

“Gin,” he said, catching her around the waist to hold her still before she could dash off to do exactly that. “Listen . . . Right now, I’m not sure that anyone else would really think that it’s a good idea. Your brother’s having a hard time, coming to terms with the idea that Samantha chose Kurt as her mate, and putting the child into the midst of that . . . That isn’t really fair, is it?”

Gin sighed, her eyes slipping to the side as she shot him a rather petulant sort of pout. “But they love her, and she loves them,” she pointed out.

Cain nodded. “I know,” he agreed. “I don’t like it, either, but right now, the important thing is that that little girl needs a family. She should have had one all along.”

She heaved another sigh designed to let her know that she thought the entire thing was just too complicated. Leaning against his shoulder, she tangled her fingers into the long ponytail that hung over his shoulder. “Zelig-sensei?”

He rubbed her hip idly, going over the whole thing for what had to be the millionth time since the little girl had appeared on his property. “Hmm?”

“If they asked, would you let them keep her?”

Cain frowned. “You mean, if they came to me and said they wanted to keep her?”

She nodded.

“I don’t know,” he ventured at length. “If it was something they both wanted, then it’d be fine with me . . . but you need to promise me you won’t suggest it to them, baby girl.”

“But—”

“No,” he insisted gently. “If they think of it on their own, that’s one thing, but . . . but they’re not even mated yet, and given the circumstances, they may want to wait, at least for a while, anyway. I mean, they’ve never even gone on a real date, you know.”

Gin smiled suddenly and giggled. “Neither did we,” she pointed out.

“Well, we kind of did.”

She wrinkled her nose. “No, we didn’t. The one time we did, you made me cry.”

“Gin!” he gasped indignantly. “I didn’t mean to do that, and . . . and we did, too, go on other dates.”

She giggled and kissed his cheek. “That’s okay, Zelig-sensei. I love you, anyway, even if we didn’t actually date.”

Cain snorted then sighed, slowly shaking his head. “You’re the one who just *had* to use me for my body,” he pointed out almost sullenly.

Gin gasped again and blushed about ten shades of red. “I didn’t!”

“You did,” he argued.

“I did not!”

“You did, too. Just before I left Japan, you said—”

Gin clapped her hands over his mouth and shook her head adamantly. “I didn’t, didn’t, didn’t!”

He pulled her hands away and grinned. “Now you’re lying,” he told her, “and you know that lying is a horrible thing.”

“I’m not lying,” she countered with a frown that was completely lost when she giggled a second later.

“And liars should be punished.”

Gin froze for a moment, her eyes widening as she slowly shook her head. “Oh, you can’t do that,” she insisted. “There’re people here!”

Cain’s grin turned wolfish. “Then you’d actually better run this time, Gin,” he said. “One.”

“Cain!”

“Two.”

“But—”

“Thr—”

With a little yelp, Gin shot to her feet and dashed out of the office, much to Cain’s amusement. He didn’t stand up right away to follow, figuring that just this once, he might do well to wait before chasing after her. He didn’t care who saw them, he supposed. After all, it was his house, wasn’t it? But if he didn’t wait, Gin would probably be too embarrassed to come out of their room for at least a month, and if she didn’t come out of their room, she wouldn’t make his cakes at night, either . . .

All the same, he wasn’t surprised to hear a door slam in the distance a moment later, and with an entirely evil sort of chuckle, he stood up slowly and sauntered out of the study,



## Chapter 74

### Epiphanies

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Gritting his teeth, Kurt tried to block the descending blade, but it moved entirely too quickly, though he did manage to compensate by knocking it off-course enough to keep it from slamming against his ribs as he spun to the side to avoid the strike.

“Better,” Ryomaru hollered from where he was lounging against the low stone wall that ran around the perimeter of the raised patio. Bas leaned over to mutter something to his uncle. Ryomaru nodded, his lazy grin widening.

“What’s the matter, Gunsie? Losing your touch?” Bas goaded.

Gunnar ignored Bas’ commentary as he stared blankly at Kurt, nodding slowly, as though he were approving of something. Kurt could only guess.

A moment later, Kurt had to roll out of the way of another well-placed thrust of Gunnar’s sword. With a grimace at the impact when he couldn’t avoid the flat side of the blade, Kurt got to his feet, certain that the man was really trying to kill him.

Heaving a sigh, Kurt adjusted his hold on the bokuto and righted his stance for the next go-round, scowling at the ring that Gunnar wore on his right hand ring finger. The first time he’d seen it, he’d thought that it was a wedding band, but as near as he could tell, the arrogant hanyou wasn’t married—and Kurt really had to wonder if that one in particular would ever find a woman willing to put up with his complete and utter autocratic, dictatorial sort of way. But there was something entirely too familiar about that ring, too, and while Kurt hadn’t really gotten a chance to give it a good look over

since it was normally moving and normally working to swing the sword that Gunnar was altogether too good at using, that wasn't really surprising. Still, why did he know—just *know*—that there was some sort of scrollwork on that ring? And why did Kurt feel as though Gunnar were wearing it on the wrong finger, anyway?

In fact, he was so preoccupied with that train of thought that he was slow to react when Gunnar swung again. The man got an entirely too-condescending grin on his face when his hit caught Kurt across the side of his thigh and sent him sprawling onto his back a few feet away.

Heaving a frustrated sigh as he mentally berated himself for his lapse in concentration, Kurt started to push himself off the ground when the ear-piercing wail echoed around him.

It was a cry that he hadn't heard before; one full of fear and pain, and without a second thought, he took off at a dead sprint, following the sound.

“Oi! You're not done!” Gunnar hollered behind him.

“It's all right. He ain't goin' far,” Ryomaru said. “I'd go, too, if my pup were hurt.”

Kurt snorted but kept moving around the side of the mansion, frustrated at his own physical limitations. The rest of them—they'd have gotten there by now . . .

Still . . .

Skidding to a stop as he reached the woman and child, he dropped to his knees. It was easy to see what had happened. Samantha had bought the girl a tricycle on a trip to the store yesterday, and she'd managed to coax the child onto it. From what he could see, she'd fallen off of it and scraped her knee, but he wasn't entirely sure who was making the

bigger ruckus: Samantha, who was sobbing because the girl was hurt or Stinky-butt, who was waving her arms and sobbing because her knee was injured.

Letting out a deep breath as a surge of relief shot through him, he pulled both of them into his lap and reached around Samantha to inspect the injury. "It's not that bad," he said quietly, unsure whether he was speaking to Samantha or the child. "A couple hours, and you'll be as good as new, right?"

The child sniffled and buried her face against his chest.

"Sam . . ."

The woman blubbered something that made absolutely no sense, her face covered by her hands, which certainly didn't help her diction at all.

"She's all right," he said, giving Samantha a little squeeze to reassure her. "Kids fall off tricycles all the time, you know. Bet you did, too."

That seemed to do the trick. Samantha sniffed and wiped her eyes, her face all blotchy and red . . . Really unattractive, Kurt figured, and yet . . . and yet he couldn't say that he didn't think she was the prettiest thing he'd ever seen, either. "Oh, I hurt her," Samantha whimpered, fresh tears springing to her eyes when she saw the blood still surfacing in the wound.

The child wiggled over closer to Samantha, as though she wanted comfort from the both of them. Samantha choked back a sob and slowly, gingerly wrapped her arms around her. "I'm sorry, sweetie," she murmured, "I'm sorry . . ."

Kurt heaved another sigh and shook his head. It was just a scraped knee, right? The girl would be fine, even if Samantha took a little longer to get back in order . . .

What he didn't see was the gathering of men on the far side of the mansion where they'd stopped after trailing after Kurt in his sudden defection. Gunnar looked irritated enough—it seemed that he never really got to have much of a go at Kurt. Bas looked a little surprised, but he couldn't say that it was a bad thing, either. Ryomaru just nodded and grinned, as though he'd realized something a while ago and was gloating that he'd been right, after all. InuYasha stepped up behind the men, sparing a moment to take in the display unfolding on the front lawn of the Zelig estate, but he said nothing, either.

Inside the study, Cain stood with his arms crossed over his chest, a thoughtful frown on his face. Gin had already run off to get the first-aid kit, though he had half a mind to stop her. The child wasn't in any serious danger, and maybe those three needed that moment far worse than they needed to bandage the scraped knee . . . Did Kurt realize exactly what he was doing? That his actions were exactly what a man did for his family—to comfort each other in such a way . . .

Bellaniece smiled as she watched out the window, a hint of reassurance that her daughter really was right adding a brightness to her gaze. Those things that Samantha had said . . . they showed, didn't they? Showed in the careful way that he held them both, in the way that he leaned down to murmur things to Samantha—things that made her smile, that made her understand that it was all right if a child fell down as long as someone was there to help them back up and to brush them off . . . It was all right . . .

Beside her, Kichiro scowled at what he saw. It was an odd thing, wasn't it? He didn't doubt that Drevin might actually care about Samantha. Hell, it'd be impossible not to, wouldn't it? After all, Samantha was a special girl, and he knew it. The thing was, Kichiro wasn't about to soften his stance on it, and in the end, wouldn't they all see that Kichiro was right?

Narrowing his gaze, his expression hardened. He wasn't about to back down, not in this. It was his responsibility to protect his daughter. Damned if he would fail her a second time . . .

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Kurt glanced around the office, wondering what he'd done this time to be summoned here so formally. Maybe Zelig had taken exception to the fact that Kurt had run away from his daily training to check on Samantha and the kid. A slight belligerence entered Kurt's gaze at that thought, and he snorted inwardly. The day he apologized for doing that was the day he died, damn it . . .

To his surprise, though, Cain smiled when he strode into the office with Ben in tow. Kurt had only actually talked to that one once, though he'd seen him around a few more times since then. He seemed to be one of Zelig's friends or something. Samantha had called him a general, whatever that meant. Still, Kurt had the feeling that the man's presence meant something, if only he could figure out what.

But he said nothing as he waited patiently for Cain to get on with it.

"Would you like something to drink?" Cain asked rather cordially. "Water? Coffee? Tea?"

Kurt shook his head as Ben strode over to the wet bar on the other side of the room.

"I wanted to talk to you," Cain said, settling down in the chair behind his desk.

"Okay."

Cain smiled in a way that Kurt figured was supposed to reassure him. It didn't. "It's about the child."

Kurt frowned. "What about her?"

Cain's smile dimmed but didn't disappear completely, and he took his time as he considered what he was about to say. "Kurt . . . Have you ever thought about keeping her? Raising her? Being her daddy?"

Kurt wasn't sure what he'd expected Cain to say. It certainly wasn't that; not by a long shot. Shaking his head, he struggled to make sense of Zelig's meaning. "What?"

"Zelig tells me you're Samantha's mate. Is that right?" Ben asked as he strode back over with a bottle of water in his hand.

"I—w—y—yeah," he agreed. "But—"

"That child already thinks of you as her father, and you . . . well, you act like she's your daughter. Kurt . . . would you and Samantha like to keep her? Adopt her?" Cain asked.

Why did it feel like the ground had opened up beneath him? Kurt shook his head slowly, still unable to figure out exactly what was going on. Was it some sort of elaborate hoax? Were they waiting for him to say or do something stupid? Just what the hell were they thinking, anyway? A guy like him? With a . . . a family . . .?

Cain sighed. "I think you know as well as I do that she'll just run away again if we try to do the whole overnight thing, and while I could still look for a compatible family, I have to wonder if that's really necessary. You love her, right? Love her like she was your own . . ."

Kurt frowned. "I'm not . . . not really father material," he muttered.

"Yeah, but you didn't think you were mate material, either, did you?" Cain countered mildly.

Kurt snorted. “You’re not going to tell me something bizarre, like the girl will die if I don’t agree to be her fa-father, are you?”

Cain laughed and shook his head. “Nope, it doesn’t really work that way,” he allowed.

That hardly served to pacify Kurt. “Listen . . . I don’t think . . .”

“Before you say no,” Ben interrupted. “Think about it. I’d hate to see her end up somewhere with people who might love her but that she doesn’t trust. With her background, maybe . . . maybe it’s the best thing for her. To be completely blunt, if I may?”

Kurt nodded.

Ben drew a deep breath and shot Cain a quick glance before he went on. “Samantha might well understand her far better than anyone else could . . . and I daresay that you . . . you probably do, too.”

“It’s . . . it’s not that easy,” Kurt admitted with a shake of his head. Glaring at the carpet under his feet, he cleared his throat, rubbed his forehead. “Samantha knows that there’s something . . . something I have to do . . . before I can be with her . . . before I can even think about anything else . . .”

“What’s that?” Cain asked. His question was entirely candid, as though he were merely interested in hearing it.

“Just . . . something . . .”

The sudden flash of a half-formed thought flickered to life in his head: the vision of a little house with a smiling girl with her face plastered to the window as though she were waiting for him. Behind her stood Samantha, waving happily . . .

Kurt sighed, blinking the lingering scenario out of his head. “It’s not . . . not that easy,” he mumbled.

“It never is,” Cain agreed. “Suppose you tell me what you have to do first?”

Kurt didn’t answer. In his mind, the two faces faded from the window, only to be replaced by the silhouettes of monsters and then of his family . . . Their voices echoed in his head, their screams as they begged for mercy that wasn’t to be. To appease their memories, to vindicate their lives . . .

“I have to find the monsters that killed my family,” he said. “I . . . I have to . . .”

“Killed your family . . .?”

Kurt shook his head. In truth, he hadn’t meant to mention that; not to Cain, but given the topic . . .

“Youkai?” Cain asked slowly, his expression clouding over as he considered that. “Youkai killed your family . . .?”

“. . . Yeah.”

“When?”

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Kurt heard the sharpness, the terseness behind Cain’s voice. Trapped half inside the memories that were entirely too vivid, Kurt didn’t question it. “Thirty years ago? Thirty-two? I . . . I was seven . . . when they came . . .”

“Thirty years ago,” Cain murmured. “I see . . .”

Shaking his head, Kurt closed his eyes for a moment, willing away the memories that did nothing to help him. That was the reason he’d never considered having a family of his own, wasn’t it? Those memories . . . They hurt, and he . . . He didn’t know if getting revenge would do anything at all to assuage his conscience, but it couldn’t hurt, could it? It couldn’t possibly make things worse. Those dreams—those nightmares . . . if he could just do this for his family, wouldn’t it make a difference?

“Drevin,” Cain said, as though he were pondering something. “Drevin, Drevin . . .”

“Zelig . . .” Ben interrupted in a cautiously quiet sort of tone.

Cain nodded slowly and cleared his throat. “Kurt . . . Why don’t you let me look into this? Things like that . . . I should have known about it.”

Kurt blinked, his eyes slowly coming to focus on Cain’s features, realizing that the man looked completely disturbed by the things Kurt had said. Cain forced a wan smile and shook his head as Ben strode over to rifle through a nearby filing cabinet. “But about the child . . . Do you want her? Do you want to adopt her?”

Kurt didn’t know what to say to that. Well, that wasn’t completely true. The thought of seeing her every day, of watching her grow into a child then a youth then a woman . . . For some reason, that idea was . . . was nice . . .

“I . . . I haven’t talked to Sam about it,” he confessed.

Cain nodded. “Tell you what. Why don’t you go find her, talk to her? Sleep on it if you want to. There’s no rush.”

Sensing that he was being dismissed, Kurt got to his feet and headed for the door.

To keep her? The child . . .? He'd never considered that, had he . . .? But what would Samantha say? What would she think? Would she think that he'd lost his mind? Or . . .

The memory of the woman, kneeling in the grass with the little girl, both of them crying because the child had fallen off the tricycle . . .

Kurt stopped mid-step on the first flight of stairs as another memory solidified in his head. He didn't know how old he was at the time, but he remembered . . . He'd fallen off the swing in his back yard, hadn't he? His mother, with tears in her eyes as she spoke to him with an unsteady voice, telling him that he was okay . . . wiping his knee with an antiseptic towelette, her fingers shaking, her lips trembling . . . and his father pulling them both into his lap . . . *"You'll be fine in an hour or so, son, right . . .?"*

A small smile surfaced on his features; the barest hint of emotion at a sense that maybe things really did come full-circle. But Samantha . . . what would she say . . .? If he said that he wanted to keep the girl . . .

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Samantha laughed as the child leaned over, trying to peer between the toilet seat and the bowl as Samantha peed. She didn't seem to fully grasp what was going on, but Samantha knew that it was just a matter of time before she did. She was entirely too bright not to, wasn't she?

Still, it was just too amusing to watch the child, really. Samantha wiped then stood up, and she laughed when the girl shrieked happily. "Ooh!" she squealed, clapping her hands as she stared at the water in the bowl. She'd seen that it was blue before, and Samantha

supposed that the change in shade of the water inside was fascinating to the girl's young mind. She shot Samantha a questioning look as Samantha pulled up her underpants and shorts.

"It was blue; now it's green, huh?" Samantha asked as she reached for the handle to flush.

The child laughed as the water in the bowl cleared and was replaced once more by the fresh blue while Samantha washed her hands. With a little hop, she tugged at her diaper. Samantha smiled and tugged on the tapes, letting the disposable garment fall to the floor before lifting her onto the toilet and holding her in place. "Now you pee, then the water will turn green again," she said.

"G-gween!"

Samantha giggled. "Yes, green."

She smiled expectantly at Samantha, but a moment later, she wiggled to get down. As soon as her feet were on the floor, she whirled around to inspect the toilet only to frown when the water was still the same shade of blue.

Samantha smiled. "You didn't go pee, sweetie," she said. "It won't change color unless you do."

She shot Samantha a puzzled sort of look, and Samantha shook her head. "Come on. Let's put your diaper back on, and we'll get you some Pull-Ups tomorrow. Those are big girl pants, and then you can use the potty like I do, okay?"

The child nodded in agreement, and while Samantha didn't figure that she really understood at all, that was fine, too. She was coming along a lot faster than anyone had really thought, given her background, and even then, Samantha had to wonder if her

mother could speak. After all, she'd chosen not to speak to the white-coats, herself, hadn't she? Maybe the girl's mother had taken that route, too . . .

But there really wasn't a doubt in Samantha's mind that the girl was just as smart as any other two year old child. She was just a little behind because she was never taught anything. That made her angrier than anything else, really. Science experiment, indeed . . . Just what the hell had those white-coats done to her over her lifetime in that facility? Hadn't it ever occurred to them that the girl had the capacity to learn things?

Heaving a sigh as she refastened the diaper and helped her wash her hands, Samantha figured that she was better off, not thinking about all of that. It wouldn't do any good now, would it? Bemoaning circumstances and being angry about it wouldn't change anything, and it certainly wouldn't do a thing for the girl, either.

Kurt was standing at the window, looking out over the sprawling yard and the ocean beyond when Samantha stepped into the room. He didn't turn when she entered the room, but she knew that he felt her presence. The girl squirmed to get down and darted over to him. "Daddy, tanny!" she hollered, holding up her arms.

Kurt leaned down and scooped her up, handing her a small bag of Skittles.

"We were showing her how to go potty," Samantha said as she hurried over to kiss Kurt's cheek.

"Oh? And how'd that go?"

She smiled. "It was just the first step. These things take a while."

He nodded and shot her a perfunctory sort of smile before shifting his gaze outside once more. There was something on his mind, she could tell. She only wondered whether or not he'd confide in her . . .



## Chapter 75

# The Finality of the Beginning

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Ben sat back in his chair and heaved a sigh as he tossed his ink pen onto the old fashioned red blotter and rubbed his throbbing temple as the roots of a fierce headache took hold. Through the window off to the left, he could see the sky brightening as dawn broke. He'd been searching all night, hadn't he? So why the hell couldn't he find it . . .?

The trill of the telephone cut through the tense silence, and with a grimace, Ben yanked the receiver out of the cradle and smashed it against his ear. "Hello?"

"Now don't you sound cranky, Ben? Don't tell me you've been up all night again."

Smiling wanly as Myrna Loy's silken voice came through the line, Ben willed himself to calm down. "Sorry, Myrna. Any luck?"

"In the open cases? Nope. Not a thing," she replied, the unmistakable hint of irritation prevalent in her words. No doubt about it, the woman did so hate to fail at anything, and it showed.

Ben scowled, picking up his pen and drumming the cap against the blotter. "That's impossible."

"Unless he's lying about it," she supplied in a dubious tone.

"He's not lying," Ben replied automatically.

“And you don’t think this guy’d say just about anything to save his worthless neck?”

“He didn’t need to save anything, so no, I don’t think it was a lie. Anyway, I’m sure he was telling the truth.”

Myrna snorted indelicately. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, Ben. You’re too damn good, you know. You think that just because you wear your integrity on your sleeve that other people do, too, and that simply isn’t the case.”

“Thank you for the jaded lesson on ethics, Ms. Loy,” he replied despite the reluctant hint of a smile that surfaced. “I think I’m a pretty good judge of when someone’s lying to me and when they’re not.”

“For what that bastard did to Samantha? Hanging’s too good for the likes of him.”

“Put your claws away, please,” Ben said. “Did you double check the files?”

Myrna sighed. “Ben, honey, I quadruple checked the files, just for you, and I’m telling you, there’s nothing here—nothing even remotely close.”

“All right; all right. Thank you.”

“Of course,” she said. He could hear her stifle a yawn. “I’m going to go crawl into bed now . . . Don’t suppose you’d come on over to keep a lady warm?”

“Good night—*morning*, Myrna. Sleep well,” Ben replied.

She heaved a melodramatic sigh. “Can’t blame me for trying, now can you?”

He chuckled and hung up the phone, but his humor died quickly enough as he tried to make sense of it all. If those youkai had attacked and murdered Kurt’s family, why

weren't they showing up in the unsolved cases? It didn't make any sense, did it? Ben had spent the entire afternoon and evening yesterday and then all night reading through notes and handwritten files—things that pertained to the happenings from thirty to thirty-two years ago—his own notes from the unsolved cases that had sprung up through the years.

*'Unless it's a closed file . . .'* his youkai piped up.

To be honest, he'd thought of that, too, more than once, but Drevin had seemed so convinced, hadn't he? He'd seemed so sure that the youkai who had murdered his family were still around . . .

Letting out a deep breath, Ben leaned down to push the power button on his computer before standing up and stretching, venturing over to start a fresh pot of coffee.

A soft knock on the doorframe drew his attention, and he smiled when he caught sight of the pretty hanyou woman lingering there with an armload of bright spring flowers. "Morning," she said with a hesitant smile. "I . . . I saw your car outside . . ."

"Flowers?" he asked in a teasing tone.

She blushed and shrugged as her little ears flicked almost nervously. "Well, I thought they'd brighten up your office a little," she explained.

"I thought that the man was supposed to be the one bearing flowers," he pointed out.

She laughed and set the large cut glass vase on the table near the door. "Sure, if they're dating," she shot back. A moment later, she seemed to realize exactly what she'd said, and she blushed darker as she forced a high, terse laugh. "I mean—"

“It’s okay,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Maybe I’ll bring you flowers next time—That is, I . . .” He chuckled and shook his head as a suffusion of redness infiltrated his cheeks, too. “You want some coffee? I just made a pot.”

Charity giggled, covering her mouth with her hand. “That’d be great, thanks.”

He poured a mug for her, then one for himself and headed back to the desk.

Charity added a packet of sweetener and a splash of cream to her cup. “You’re here early,” she ventured as she stirred the coffee.

He sighed as he lifted the cup to his lips. “Or late, as the case were. To be honest, I’ve been here all night,” he admitted, grimacing at the strength of the coffee. “Oh, uh, my coffee tends to be a little on the . . . muddy side . . .” he warned her.

It was too late. She fumbled her drink with a wince, leaning forward as a dribble slipped down her chin. Wiping it away with the back of her hand, she laughed and set the cup down. “Oh . . . wow . . . I think I’ll be feeling that one for a few hours or so . . .”

He chuckled and offered her a clean, crisp handkerchief. “Sorry about that,” he murmured.

She took it and dabbed her chin. “It’s fine,” she assured him. “I just wasn’t expecting it to be so . . . so strong . . .”

Ben gestured at a chair and logged into the security system. It only took a moment for his identity to be confirmed, and he keyed ‘*Kurt Drevin*’ into the file search.

“You’ve been here all night?” she asked as she sat down.

Ben sighed. "Yes. I've been trying to find some information on an incident that happened about thirty-two years ago."

"That's a while," she remarked.

Ben nodded as he scowled at the computer monitor and the viable lack of search results. "Damn . . ."

"No luck?"

"No . . ." He ran the scan again, this time using just 'Drevin'.

"Is there anything I can do?" she asked.

Ben's eyes widened as a file came up. "Uh, no, thank you."

Charity smiled and stood. "You seem busy, so I'll leave you alone."

"Wait," he called after her, casting her a smile. "Would you . . . would you care to have lunch with me later?"

She blinked in surprise and nodded slowly. "Y-yeah," she stammered, her cheeks pinking. "That'd be nice."

"Okay, I'll call you, and I . . . I could bring you some flowers."

She bit her lip, smiling shyly. "That sounds great."

He watched her go, bemusement illuminating his gaze.

Then he sighed, turning his attention back to the computer once more.

The file was dated '2039', and Ben clicked on it. Scanning the documents with a frown, he leaned to the side and idly rubbed his temple.

According to the file, three youkai had attacked the family for unknown reasons, murdering Doug Drevin, his wife, and their young daughter. The documents mentioned a son, but his name wasn't given, and according to official records, he escaped the killings.

But that was all, really. There was a curious lack of information, on the whole.

The names of the three youkai thought to be responsible, however, were linked, and Ben clicked on that.

It opened another case file—this one the hunt order. Issued a few months later, it cited another instance, this one at a state park in lower North Dakota where a couple was slain. According to the police reports of the incident, they had fallen victim to a random bear attack, and the details were gruesome, but the police report also stated that they'd found a child on the scene—unconscious and lying in the center of what appeared to be a circular burn roughly ten feet in diameter on the ground. The youkai investigators who were sent in didn't see or have occasion to talk to the child—a boy police reported as being named Douglas K. Drevin, Jr. He was the nephew of the victims and had gone to live with them after a brief stay at a psychiatric hospital after he'd witnessed the violent deaths of his entire family a few months prior . . .

*“Junior,”* Ben repeated quietly, thoughtfully. “So that's why . . .”

He grimaced. It all made sense, didn't it? The file on the couple—Marcus and Mary Latham—went a bit more in-depth with the case in general. The couple had no children of their own, and, according to the documents, Mary Thompson Latham and her twin sister, Lainie, had no other family. Lainie had married Douglas Drevin shortly out of

college, and their son, Douglas Jr. was the oldest of their children. When the Drevin family was killed, the Lathams had taken the boy in since the only kin listed on the father's side was his father, Granger Drevin, and no one had known exactly how to contact him, anyway.

Strangely, though, the old man, himself, surfaced just hours prior to the forest incident, yelling at the police that his grandson was in danger, and after a screaming match between the officers on duty and the bordering on senile old man, they'd agreed to go check on the family. By the time they'd reached Roider State Park a couple hours later, it was too late. Both Marcus and Mary were dead, and the boy was unconscious nearby.

In the chaos that followed, however, the old man had somehow managed to abscond with the child, and while the police had wanted to talk to him, they'd eventually closed the case. After all, no child would have been strong enough to have been responsible for the atrocities they'd witnessed, would they? And in the end, wasn't it better for the kid to get as far away from all of that as he possibly could?

And the youkai hadn't actually made that much of a connection, not at the time. Easy to overlook if the son was named for his father. Douglas Drevin and Douglas Drevin, Jr.? Ben remembered the case clearly enough. Somehow, they'd *all* managed to overlook the boy, hadn't they? By the time they'd figured out that a child was involved, they'd figured, as had the police, that it was better to let him forget what had happened. He'd gone to live with his grandfather, right? They'd thought that it was for the best . . . A boy who could see youkai—monsters that the lesser-youkai could appear to be . . . a boy who had never understood why his family was targeted: a boy who had grown into a man who never had understood any of that.

Grabbing the phone receiver, Ben punched in the number he knew by heart.

It only took Cain a couple of rings to pick up, and in the background, he could hear the soft talking that spun around the Zelig breakfast table every morning. “Zelig,” he answered.

“Cain, you near your computer?”

“No, but I can be. Hold on.”

Ben heard the distinct scrape of a chair being pushed back. Cain murmured something, probably to Gin, and the dull sound of his footsteps filled the line. “Did you find anything?”

“I think so. I need some verification, first.”

“What kind of verification?”

Ben sighed. “I’ll send you the files I found.”

“Okay.”

“Tell me something. What’s Kurt’s full name?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know,” Cain replied. “Why?”

“If these are the right files, then everything makes a hell of a lot of sense, but the boy mentioned in one of them isn’t listed as ‘Kurt.’”

“What’s he listed as?”

Ben rubbed his eyes as a wave of weariness hit him. “Douglas K. Drevin, Jr.”

Cain sighed, too. “Okay, I got the files. Give me a second to read them . . .”

Ben waited patiently. Cain said nothing for several minutes, probably coming to the same conclusion as Ben had. Suddenly, though, he stood up—Ben could hear the unmistakable sounds—and strode out of his office. “Sami? Do you know what Kurt’s full name is?”

Samantha didn’t respond right away. “No . . .” she finally said. “I didn’t even know his first name until the day he sent me home. Why?”

“Could you ask him?” Cain asked, ignoring her question.

Samantha laughed. “Sure, Grandpa. Let me go find him . . .”

“Ben?”

“Yes?”

Cain let out a deep breath. “If that’s him . . .”

Ben nodded slowly. “I know.”

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Samantha slipped into the room just in time to see Kurt emerging from the bathroom with a pair of jeans on and nothing else. Hair still damp from his shower, eyes glowing softly in the hazy morning light, he looked good—damn good, and Samantha had to blink and remind herself that she wasn’t there to enjoy the scenery. “Morning, taijya,” she quipped lightly.

He shot her a quick glance before turning his attention to the breakfast tray that Gin had delivered a bit ago. “Morning . . . you know, I think they feed me every morning in hopes that I’ll puke it all back up during their daily torture sessions,” he pointed out dryly.

She giggled and hurried over to hug him, letting her fingertips trace over the soft skin of his back, inhaling the clean scent of him. “Can I ask you something?”

He snorted but slowly slipped his arms around her. “What’s that?”

She smiled. “What’s your full name?”

That question earned her a rather dubious look. “Why?”

“Humor me,” she countered.

He rolled his eyes, reaching around her for a biscuit. “I was named after my father. Why?”

“Was his name ‘Sexy’, too?”

He snorted but blushed at that, breaking off a large hunk of biscuit and shoving it into her mouth. “Crazy little demon,” he muttered with a shake of his head. “No, my name’s Douglas Kurt Drevin, Jr. Now why?”

“That sounds so respectable,” she quipped, swallowing the biscuit with a giggle.

Bas leaned into the room. “Come on, Drevin. You get to fight me today.”

Samantha smothered a laugh. It was plain that Bas thought that fighting him was a great thing, but it was equally plain, judging from the look on Kurt's face that he simply didn't agree in the least.

"If I die, scatter my ashes over the polar ice caps, won't you?" he muttered, letting go of Samantha and heading for the door.

She did laugh at that. "Kick his ass, taijya," she called after him.

Kurt's snort lingered in the air long after he'd headed down the hallway, and with another soft giggle, Samantha followed along behind to tell her grandfather the answer to his question.

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Kurt was really starting to dread these little misadventures that always seemed to lead to Cain Zelig's office, never mind that this one had put off what would have doubtless been another sound trouncing dealt him by that damned battle tank, Bas . . .

When he let himself into the office, it was to find Cain reading over something with a thoughtful scowl on his features.

"You wanted to talk to me?" he asked without preamble.

Cain started and sat up a little straighter. "Yeah . . . Sit down, please."

Kurt did but couldn't quite shake the feeling of unease as he waited. Something about the odd soberness in Zelig's aura—Samantha called it 'youki' . . .

“Your . . . your family . . . You were from North Dakota, right?” Cain asked at length.

Kurt nodded as a trill of suspicion raced up his spine. “Yeah.”

Cain sighed. “Douglas K. Drevin, Lainie Thompson Drevin, and your baby sister, Caroline . . .”

Kurt grimaced, unsure why it bothered him so much, to hear their names spoken out loud. “Yeah . . .”

Cain nodded. “And your aunt and uncle.”

“ . . . Yeah.”

Dropping the papers onto the desktop, Cain sat back and rubbed his eyes. “I thought so.”

“Why?” Kurt demanded flatly.

Cain got to his feet, stuffed his hands into his pockets as he turned toward the window. “We never knew why they attacked your family. Just chalked it up to the erratic actions of the lesser-youkai . . . causing trouble, targeting a family for whatever reason . . . I get it now, of course. They could sense your gift, couldn’t they? Knew you could see through their concealments . . . and thought you were a threat.”

“So I was told,” Kurt agreed evenly despite the anger that soared inside him; an anger that he couldn’t quell.

Cain nodded. “And you’ve spent your entire life, trying to track them down, right?”

Kurt ground his teeth together. “Something like that,” he allowed.

Lighting a cigarette, Cain slowly turned to face him, his eyes sad, brightened by a certain melancholy that Kurt couldn't quite credit. "And if you'd found them? What then?"

Clenching his jaw so tightly that it hurt, Kurt's expression hardened. "I'll kill them," he replied.

Cain nodded slowly. "That's what I thought."

Kurt shot to his feet, stalking the length of the study and back. "Listen, Zelig, I have to do this. For what they did . . . I have to . . ."

Cain sighed as though he'd expected as much. "I know," he said quietly. "That's why . . ."

"You don't get it," Kurt growled, unwilling to let Cain try to talk him out of it. "You have no idea! Those . . . those *demons* . . . they gutted my mother—cut up my father . . . They ripped my sister to pieces because . . . because I could see them! All of it—*all of it*—and it . . . It was my fault, and . . . and you have no idea what that's like . . ."

"Kurt," Cain said softly, sadly, "you won't find them."

He spun around to glower at Cain, shaking his head in sheer disbelief. "I don't need your approval," he bit out. "I don't."

"No, Kurt, you don't understand," Cain interrupted in an even calmer tone of voice. "They're dead. They were hunted down for what they'd done, and they're dead."

Kurt froze, his brain slowing to a crawl, unable to comprehend what Cain claimed. "Wh-what?"

Cain drew a long drag off his cigarette and slowly let the smoke escape in a long ribbon. “I issued a hunt for them, and one of my men saw it through. Those youkai that killed your family . . . They’ve been dead for years.”

Kurt shook his head, sank into the nearest chair, hunching forward with his hands dug into his hair. A thousand memories shot through his head; a hundred screams and a million cries for help . . . a nonsensical order, a macabre dream—all of it gone but never forgotten. He couldn’t give it a rhyme or reason; couldn’t make himself understand. The things that had driven him his whole life through . . . and what was it worth?

Cain crossed the floor, sat down across from him on the fawn brown suede sofa. “Kurt . . . youkai are not allowed to do what those youkai did to your family. It’s my job to make sure that those who do are taken care of so that they can never hurt anyone again . . . to protect what we are and our way of life . . . You never should have had to go through any of that, and . . . and I’m sorry that you had to, but if it makes any difference at all to you . . .” He paused and sighed, as though he were trying to decide whether or not he should tell Kurt the rest. “You killed one of them,” he said. “The investigator I sent down there reported a strange burn mark on the ground. We thought that it was just the residual marking of an attack, but . . . but when my hunter tracked the three of them down—”

Kurt’s head shot up, his eyes wary, confused. “There were two,” he said. “Only two.”

Cain shook his head. “There were three. The last one was their leader, it seemed. He’s the one . . . He was nearly dead when Cartham caught up to them after they murdered your aunt and uncle. Cartham said that he would have died within the day or so, anyway. At the time, we figured it was just infighting or something. What did it matter? They were taken care of, but now I think . . . I think you did it.”

Kurt snorted. “I didn’t do a damn thing,” he argued. “I was too little, too weak . . . I didn’t . . . I couldn’t . . .”

Cain sighed and managed a little smile—just a little one. “I think you somehow managed to put up a barrier, Kurt. That’s what saved you. You saved yourself. That’s what I think.”

“I . . . I don’t remember . . .” he admitted.

Cain shrugged. “You could talk to Cartham sometime if you wanted. He comes in from time to time. He’d remember; I’m sure. Cartham doesn’t forget a hell of a lot.”

Kurt nodded slowly and got to his feet. The overwhelming desire to be alone was a fierce one, and he didn’t think as he headed out of the room, toward the front door.

Bas stopped in the doorway and shot his father a confused sort of glance before starting after Kurt. Cain’s voice stopped him. “Let him go for now,” he said.

Bas shot Cain a troubled look.

Cain stood up and nodded. “It’s all right. He’s not going far. He just needs some time to think.”

“What happened?” Bas pressed.

Cain’s answer was a while in coming, and when it did, it was tinged with sadness, a kind of regret. “I think he just realized that there’s nothing left for him to fear.”

Bas still didn’t look like he understood what Cain meant, and that was all right. He would after he became tai-youkai one day. Cain sighed and shook his head at his own thoughts. Sometimes his job really sucked, didn’t it?

This was one of those times.

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He wasn't sure where he was going. There wasn't any conscious thought in his mind. Thoughts kept swirling, half-formed, bleeding into one another without reason, with only a modicum of comprehension.

Those monsters . . .? But . . .

Closing his eyes, he kept walking, stumbling, sight unseeing. His entire life . . . had there ever really been a point? The last crumbling remnants of everything he'd ever believed . . . everything he'd ever done . . . and there never had been a reason . . .

Trudging along the pebbly beach, he slipped around the base of the cliff that served to shelter the cove and blinked as he stepped inside the tiny nook. Three walls of rock surrounded the area—quiet, private, perfectly isolated . . .

Sinking down in the tender, sparse grass that grew up through the sandy terrain, he closed his eyes for a moment, unable to ignore the void, the emptiness that threatened to encompass him. What was it worth? Those years of anger, of bitterness, of righteous indignation . . . Those emotions that had fueled his very existence for so very long . . . What was anything worth anymore?

He grimaced, leaning his elbows on his knees, burying his face in his hands. He'd single-handedly masterminded more hatred in his life than he could credit, and all because of those moments when he had felt as though he couldn't do a damn thing. All he'd done was hurt everyone and everything around him, and . . .

“Daddy!”

Chin snapping up at the sound of that one little voice, Kurt's eyes came to focus on the tiny girl as she wiggled free of Samantha's grasp to dart over to his side. "Tanny, Daddy? Tanny?" she asked hopefully.

Samantha smiled gently, leaning against the rock wall with her arms crossed over her chest, her hair tossed ever so lightly by the invisible fingers of the salty breeze. "I followed you," she confessed quietly.

He handed the child a fistful of candy as a sad, bitter smile touched his lips. "They're dead," he said just as quietly. "All of them."

"Who?"

He shrugged, as though it were of no real consequence, forcing himself to lend voice to the thoughts that were twisting and turning and tumbling around inside him. "The . . . the monsters," he replied with a sigh. "Your grandfather had them hunted."

She didn't seem at all surprised by the admission, but she did push herself away from the rocks and wander toward him. "I told you," she said quietly, simply. "Youkai aren't allowed to hurt humans, and those who do . . . We deal with them, too."

He shot her a look then shook his head before returning his gaze to the sea. "But I never knew that," he said. "And when I think about the things I've done because I thought I was right . . . because I thought that your kind were . . . were monsters . . ."

"And how were you supposed to know? Who was supposed to have told you? Kurt . . ." Gentle fingertips turned his chin, forced him to look at her: at the infinite sadness veiled in the depths of her gaze. "Don't live in the past," she whispered, her brow furrowing, as though she were trying to make him understand. "All you see when you look back are regrets . . . and I don't ever want to be one of yours, okay?"

“What am I going to do?” he muttered, scanning her face for an answer—any answer. “I have . . . nothing—no reason, no purpose . . .”

“You have me . . .”

“Do I?”

She nodded, her smile timid, almost uncertain. “I don’t want you to be sad or bitter or alone . . . Maybe we can find something else, you know? Another reason for you . . .” Her expression brightened suddenly, a ray of sunshine in his world of darkness. “How about this? I’ll live the rest of my life for you—to make you laugh and smile and to give you good memories, and you . . . you can do that for me, too.”

Kurt let out a deep breath and uttered a small little laugh. “You make it sound so easy.”

“It could be,” she told him. “You just have to want it.”

“Is that right?”

She nodded as the child crawled back toward him once more with her hand outstretched and a brilliant smile on her face. “Daddy, hugs!” she announced, throwing her little arms around Kurt’s neck.

He blinked and stared for a long moment. “You taught her another word,” he said.

Samantha nodded, her smile widening. “It’s a nice word, don’t you think?”

And suddenly, he realized something, an understanding of exactly what the little demon had tried to tell him for so very long. He’d spent his life walking backward, staring at the past and hating himself for the things that he couldn’t change. Was that the difference? Was that the thing that he’d never fully been able to put his finger on? That thing

ingrained so deeply within her that she knew it instinctively? She didn't look back, did she? Didn't look over her shoulder for demons that were trying to catch up with her, because she let them go as soon as they faded. That was the real reason that she was still able to smile, still able to trust and to love . . .

Even if he wasn't sure that he could be that way, too, there was some measure of truth in the things she said, wasn't there? To look forward instead of looking back, and maybe all that really meant was that he needed to put words to those things that he wanted more than anything else . . .

"Sam . . ."

"Hmm?" she intoned, reaching over to pluck a bit of dandelion fluff out of the child's hair.

"I want to ask you something, but I want your honest reply. Don't say anything just because you think that it's something that I want to hear, okay?"

She frowned at the seriousness in his tone but nodded. "All right."

He drew a deep breath, his gaze shifting to the little girl who was stooped over, gingerly moving a hunk of driftwood aside to see what was underneath. "Would you . . .? Do you think you . . .? How would you feel about . . . about a-adopting her?"

Samantha's breath was audible, and she sat completely still, breathless, for a moment. It was as though she were afraid that he was going to tell her that he was joking or something silly like that, but she slowly, hesitantly met his gaze. "You . . . you want to?"

"I never really thought about having a family of my own," he admitted with a shake of his head. "Just seems like . . . like she should be in it, too—if I have one, that is."

He blinked and gasped then grunted as he fell back against the sand. Samantha was little more than a blur of motion, bearing him down, covering his face with kisses. “S-Samantha . . .”

She laughed, straddling his chest as she continued to barrage him with affection. Kurt chuckled then shook his head. “I guess that means you want to . . .”

It took a moment for him to realize that there were two sets of lips accosting him. Opening his eyes, he couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped him. The child, it seemed, had decided that attacking him looked like fun, and for once, Kurt didn’t try to sit up or push them back. “You’re sure?” he asked Samantha.

She laughed and rolled her eyes. “I’m sure,” she replied happily.

“Tanny?” the child asked suddenly.

Kurt shook his head. “So much for that,” he muttered as he sat up to dig a piece of candy out of his pocket. “Here, Stinky-butt.”

“You know, she really ought to have a name, then,” Samantha pointed out reasonably.

“What’s wrong with Stinky-butt?”

Samantha heaved a longsuffering sigh. “I just don’t think that’ll look good on a birth certificate; do you?”

Kurt leaned back on his hands as Samantha cuddled against his chest. “I’m not good with names,” he said. “You pick one.”

“Well, there’s always Iris,” she teased.



## Chapter 76

### Special Delivery

-----

Evan sauntered into the mansion with a cocky grin on his face and a stack of mail in his hand. The smile faded as he stood in the foyer, though. The place was oddly quiet.

It only took a moment for him to deposit the mail on his father's desk, and while he wasn't too concerned with the emptiness, he was surprised by it.

No Mama in the kitchen, and no one in the yard. Weird, really.

Pushing the button on the side of his earpiece, he waited for the series of beeps. "Call Mama," he said, yanking open the refrigerator and grabbing the container of orange juice off the top shelf.

"Evan, sweetie!" Gin's voice greeted. "I thought you were out of town."

"I was, but now I'm not," he said, taking a huge swig out of the container and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Where's everyone?"

"Hmm, well, your father got a call from Ben about a break in one of the old cases, your grandfather and uncles flew out to California to talk to the one researcher about Tanny's actual date of birth, and the girls and I decided to take a trip to Portland for some things for Tanny's nursery. Oh, but Sebastian is in New York City—he had to check on something since Gunnar had to go back to Japan for a few days, so Sydnie's there. She was feeling a little tired today, so she wanted to stay home. Won't you be a sweetie and check in on her?"

“What about the holy man?” he asked with a frown.

“Kurt? He’s resting, too, I think. He’s a little sore from fighting with your brother yesterday . . . Evan Roka Zelig, you aren’t drinking out of the orange juice container, are you?”

Evan grinned and stared at the open container in his hand. “Of course not, Mama. You always tell me that it’s bad to do that, right?”

Gin laughed. “You’re such a good boy! Okay, we’ll be home later.”

“Love you, Mama,” he said before she hung up.

“Love you, too, Evan,” Gin replied.

Pushing the button on the side of the earpiece to end the connection, Evan capped the jug and stowed it in the refrigerator once more. ‘*Check on Sydnie? Ni-i-i-ice,*’ he grinned.

She was lying down in Bas’ old bedroom—not at all surprising since she’d been forced to stay at the mansion while he was out of town. The door wasn’t completely closed, and his knock opened it a little wider. “Hey, pussikins. Feeling a little under the weather?”

Sydnie cracked an eye open and managed a little smile. “I’m fine,” she told him.

“You sure?” he pressed. “I mean, I’d be more than happy to rub your kitty, if you want me to,” he said with a wide grin.

She laughed and threw a small pillow at him, hitting him square in the chest. “I’m fine, Evan, thanks,” she said once more.

“All right. Gimme a ring-a-ding on my ding-a-ling if you need anything.”

She nodded and giggled, and Evan winked at her as he slipped out of the room.

He sighed. Damn, he was bored, wasn't he? International rock sin-sation on the rise, Zel Roka, *babysitting* . . .

Ah, well . . . Considering who he was babysitting, he figured that it was okay. That particular pussy cat was the hottest one he'd ever seen, pregnant or not . . . Too bad she'd met his damn brother first. It was Evan's considered opinion that things would've been vastly different if she'd met him, to start with. Then again, call it bad timing since he was only fifteen the first time they'd met . . .

He headed for the stairs, taking them two at a time. Might as well check in on the unwilling guest while he was there, right?

Evan made a face. To be honest, he wasn't entirely sure what to make of Kurt Drevin. Sure, he'd agreed that locking Samantha into that God-forsaken place was a dag-nasty thing to have done, but he also believed Sam when she told him that it was a mistake. Everyone else was so convinced that Drevin should have been strung up and shot at dawn that it was a little sad, really. Maybe if he weren't sorry for it, but . . .

But it was natural to make mistakes, wasn't it? Hell, Evan knew that better than anyone. 'Sides, Samantha had told him parts of it, enough for Evan to start to understand exactly how and why it had happened, in the first place, and while he couldn't say that he was okay with it, he also didn't think he had a right to carry a grudge when Samantha didn't.

And he supposed that was a large part of the reason he was out here now. When he'd spoken to her a couple weeks ago on the phone between recording sessions in Vancouver, she'd sounded so bummed out. Sure, she could understand everyone's feelings, but it still hurt her, especially the idea that her father refused to even listen to her side of things—or

more to the point, Kurt's side of things. She wanted to be happy—that was all she wanted, and with the impending adoption of the little girl they'd named Tanny as well as the happiness she should have felt at having found her one true mate, it seemed like she was getting the short end of the stick, didn't it, and that was enough to bother Evan more than he cared to think about. So Evan had thought that maybe it'd please her if someone made an effort, and to that end, he'd hopped on the first flight out after having laid down the tracks for his upcoming album in record time . . .

Sparing a moment, he tapped on the closed door and waited.

"Come in," Drevin called out.

Evan opened the door and poked his head into the room. Drevin was sitting at the small table, fussing with some kind of electrical device.

"Got the day off?" he asked.

Kurt glanced up with a marked scowl. "I guess so . . . unless you're here to beat on me."

Evan chuckled. "Naw. I left my sword at home, anyway. So whatcha doin'?"

Letting out a deep breath as he stared at the device he had disassembled, he slowly shook his head. "Samantha said that this was broken, but she was upset because all of her music is on it," he replied absently, reaching for a tiny electronics screwdriver. "Figured I'd see if I could fix it for her."

"What? Her Medialis?" Evan queried.

Kurt nodded.

“Oh, hell, I’ll buy her another one if she wants. Hell, they gave me that one for free just to have it in one of my videos . . .”

“Yeah, but all her music is on this one,” Kurt remarked. He didn’t say anything as he positioned a loose wire and carefully soldered it into place. “There . . .”

“You fixed it?”

Kurt shrugged, positioning the back cover of the unit and carefully picking up one of the miniscule screws. “I think so.”

“Nice,” Evan approved. “So tell me, Kurt—can I call you Kurt?”

“Sure,” Kurt intoned in a distracted sort of way.

“What do you do for a living, young man?”

Kurt paused long enough to cast Evan a rather droll look. “I’m sort of between jobs, at the moment.”

Evan rolled his eyes, grabbing a chair and turning it around to straddle it. “Well, did you go to college? Did you get adequate book-learning?”

“Yes,” he replied as he finished replacing the cover. “I even went to grad school.”

“Impressive, impressive . . . I’m sure that the big bones in the office will be accordingly impressed by a bit of bond paper with your name on it. So what does that bit of paper entitle you to do?”

Kurt almost smiled as he pressed the power button. “I’m a doctor,” he said.

“Really? As in, a real doctor? Like making the rounds and all that happy crap?”

Kurt nodded, sticking one of the earbuds into his left ear. Wincing as the very loud music blared in said-ear, he yanked it loose and tossed the earbud on the table. “It’s fixed,” he declared with a shake of his head.

“That is an awesome song,” Evan quipped. It was one of his older songs—one of his favorites.

Kurt snorted. “It sounds like a bag of pissed off cats.”

“You think?” Evan asked with a grin. “And here I thought that was one of my better songs.”

“That was you?” Kurt demanded, shaking his head.

Evan’s grin widened. “Abso-fucking-lutely!”

Kurt stared at him for a moment as though he didn’t quite believe Evan, who nodded vigorously and reached for the Medialis, unplugging the earbuds and turning up the volume. “I take that back, then,” he finally decided. “It doesn’t sound like a bag of pissed off cats—it sounds like a bag of pissed off cats having an *orgy* . . .”

“Really? You think? *Wicked!* That’s pretty much what I was going for, but the upper ass cracks in charge were afraid that it would offend the public, so they added a few guitar riffs over it to tone it down . . .”

Kurt opened his mouth then closed it, finally shaking his head slowly. “Christ. You’re bent.”

“Yeah, well, better to be bent than to be Bubby.”

Kurt chuckled. "I suppose."

"You're all right," Evan decided with an approving nod.

Kurt rubbed his forehead. "You mean you don't want to see me dead, too?"

Evan shrugged, as though it were of no real consequence. "What's the point? You love her, right?"

The frank question seemed to catch him off guard, but he nodded, his cheeks pinking up just a little. "Y . . . yeah . . . I do."

Evan grinned. "Then it's all good, 'cause, you know, right? You're gonna have to wait for her."

Kurt shook his head. "Wait for her?"

"Well, sure! You don't think they'll let someone her age run off and get hitched, do you?"

The expression on Kurt's face was priceless, in Evan's estimation. "What do you mean?" he asked slowly.

"*Du-u-ude* . . . how old do you think she is?"

Evan almost laughed at the nearly panicked look on the man's face. "Wh . . . ? H-how old is she?"

Evan sat back, crossing his arms over his chest and ignoring the voice in the back of his mind that chided him for being so mean. "Aw, lessee . . . She might be . . . Oh, nope, not

yet . . .” He snapped his fingers, as though the answer had just come to him. “Guess she’s about seventeen.”

Kurt swallowed hard. “S-seventeen?”

Evan nodded. “Yeah . . . almost.”

“. . . *Almost* seventeen?”

Evan grinned like a damn lunatic—a sure sign that he was bullshitting the poor guy. Too bad Drevin didn’t know him well enough to realize that . . . “Well, she’ll be seventeen in June, I b’lieve . . .”

The man looked decidedly green.

“But, you know, it’s different for youkai . . . Take Ryomaru, for example. He knew Nezumi was his mate when they were just pups, so it’s not a big deal, right?”

The first hint of suspicion surfaced on Kurt’s features. “They can’t have—”

Evan shrugged again. “Sure, they could. I mean, they were inseparable; always together. Sure, they waited to get hitched, but that’s just a formality, anyway, for us. They were mates *lo-o-o-o-ong* before that.”

Kurt grimaced. “I . . . I see . . .”

With a particularly nasty chuckle, Evan shook his head. He was about to let Drevin off the hook when his phone rang. He pressed the button to connect the call. “Lo?”

“Evan?”

His grin widened at the absolutely breathless quality in Sydney's sexy voice. "Hey, pussikins! Miss me?"

Sydney let out a slow, measured breath. "Evan, I need help . . ."

His smile faded as he slowly got to his feet. Something in her voice . . . "What's the matter?"

She uttered a half-whine. "Um . . . I think I'm having the baby . . ."

He stopped dead still, eyes flaring wide. "You-you-you mean *now*?"

She breathed deeply again. "Yes."

"Uh, okay. I'll call Bitty," he said as he headed for the door.

"No-no time," she gasped. "Evan—"

"Just hold on, Sydney. Cross your legs and hold it in or something," Evan blurted, smashing his hand against his forehead as he racked his suddenly-blank brain. She uttered a sound halfway between a growl and a hiss, and he grimaced. "All right; all right. I'm on my way down . . ."

An ear-piercing shriek shot straight to his core, and with a grimace, he jerked the phone out of his ear.

"What's wrong?" Kurt demanded, his face showing signs of alarm.

Evan glanced at him then stopped short. "You're a doctor, right?"

Kurt shook his head. "Yeah, but—"

Evan didn't wait to hear more, grabbing Kurt's arm and dragging him out of the room. "Sydnie's in labor," he said as he broke for the stairs. "You gotta help her."

"I'm not an obstetrician," he insisted, tugging against Evan's grip.

"But you did rotations, right?"

"Not in that," Kurt growled.

"Yeah, well, you're a helluva lot closer to this kind of thing than I am."

"N-no!"

"Get *moving*, Dr. Drevin!"

Kurt scowled at Evan but followed him down the stairs.

Sydnie was curled on her side in the huge bed. She looked so tiny, so lost, and Evan had to bite back the surge of irrational anger that swelled up inside him; the rage that Bas was off doing God only knew what. He gritted his teeth. True enough, Sydnie wasn't due for another six weeks, and Bas wouldn't have done any damn where if he'd known . . . He was big, and he was a moron, but he wasn't *that* big a moron, after all . . .

"Hey, pussikins. Lookin' good," he teased.

She shot him a grateful, if not somewhat weak, smile. "Of course, puppy," she murmured. Her smile faded when Kurt stepped into the room. "Why's *he* here?" she demanded warily.

"Relax," Evan said in his most reassuring tone. "He's a doctor; didn't you know?"

“R-really?” she asked with a grimace.

Kurt cleared his throat. “Evan, can you get the first-aid kit for me, please?”

“Okay,” he agreed. “Water? Towels?”

Kurt shot him a blank sort of look. “You’ve watched too many movies, haven’t you?”

“You don’t need those?”

Kurt nodded. “Yeah, okay, but I need that kit first.”

Evan started to go. Sydnie caught his hand. “You do it,” she whined, casting a distrustful look at Kurt.

He made a face. “Sydnie, darlin’, I gotta tell you, I’m damn fucking good at doing what puts the critters in there, but I don’t think I’d be any good at all at getting them out again.”

She sighed then winced.

“I’m going to look now, Sydnie. Is that all right?” Kurt asked in a calm, soothing tone.

She whined as another contraction hit her hard, but she nodded.

Kurt gently repositioned her, pulling off her underpants and check her dilation. Eyes flaring wide as he grimaced since there wasn’t any way in hell an ambulance would make it in time, Kurt bit his lip. “Uh, Evan . . .”

“Huh?”

He shot Evan a meaningful look. “I *really* need that first-aid kit, please.”

That was all Evan needed to hear. Calling an apology over his shoulder, he dashed out of the room again, slipping his phone over his ear and holding down the button as he dashed down the steps and broke for the kitchen. “Call Bubby,” he barked without missing a step. “Hey, Bubby,” he said when Bas answered as he grabbed the kit and ran out of the kitchen again.

“Evan? How’s Vancouver?”

“Yeah, I’m at home, in Maine,” he quipped. “Anyway, I thought you should know, you’re about to become a daddy . . . Let me put my phone on Sydney. You might as well hear it, at least . . .”

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Samantha slipped into the quiet room with a tender little smile on her face. Kurt was sleeping with Tanny cuddled against his side. Somehow, during the confusion and excitement of the day, the taijya had managed to fade into the background once the women had returned home about twenty minutes after Bailey Zelig, the future North American tai-youkai, was born. Bellaniece had rushed in and had taken over, checking the child, satisfying everyone, including Kurt, that the baby was hale and hearty, and that the mama was just fine, too. She’d smiled at Kurt, hadn’t she? Bellaniece had smiled at him and had told him that he’d done a fantastic job . . .

Evan had happily informed them that Kurt was a doctor, didn’t they know? And Sydney, who never warmed up to anyone very quickly, had smiled and thanked him and told him that she’d tell her puppy that he wasn’t allowed to beat on Kurt anymore.

Samantha's smile widened as she pulled up the blanket that was smashed into a lump at the end of the bed over the two sleeping forms.

Kurt had managed to slip away from the thanks and smiles. Cain shook his hand, his gaze bright with emotion and had thanked Kurt for taking care of Sydnie and the baby. Gin had cried and had proceeded to make Kurt a special cake to thank him, much to Cain's chagrin. Kagome had smiled a knowing little smile, and InuYasha had made some weird comment about making enough of 'em in his past life that he ought to know how to birth them. Even Isabelle and Gunnar had given their thanks, too, much to Samantha's amusement—Isabelle's in the form of a kiss on the cheek; Gunnar had opted to shake Kurt's hand instead. Griffin had muttered something about 'getting used to that kind of mush'. In Evan's excitement, he'd actually hugged Kurt, which had been well worth seeing, and Samantha had a feeling that the poor taijya hadn't been sure what to do with that kind of attention, so he'd retreated back to the sanctuary of his room.

But the best reaction had been Bas'. He'd somehow managed to make it back from New York City in record time—Samantha had a feeling that he'd run the entire way. He'd opened and closed his mouth a few times, unable to find the right words to start with. He'd managed a weak but heartfelt smile and the sheen of tears in his eyes, and, with his son in his arms, he'd acknowledged the next tai-youkai, giving him the name Bailey Kurt Zelig.

And then Bellaniece had shooed everyone else out of the room to let the new family have a bit of peace and quiet. For once, Evan and Bas hadn't argued, though Evan had shot his brother a ridiculously large grin, stating loudly that he'd officially seen more of Sydnie than he ever thought he would, and something about her swollen breasts since he'd also gotten to see Bailey get his first meal. Bas had shook his head but smiled, unable to summon the will to go after Evan.

Kurt uttered a loud breath, his eyes slowly opening, and when he saw Samantha standing there, he smiled just a little. “I . . . I fixed your Medialis,” he said, nodding at the table.

Samantha laughed and leaned down to kiss him, his lips warm, welcome. “You really are my hero today, huh?”

He grimaced but carefully sat up so as not to disturb Tanny. “I don’t know about that,” he confessed. “How’s the baby?”

“Bailey’s just fine,” Samantha said as she poured a glass of ice water for him. “Cute as a button—like a baby version of his papa with his mama’s eyes.”

Kurt scowled, as though he were trying to see it in his head. He must not have been able to do it because he got the strangest expression on his face. “Damn. He’s going to be as big as a house, too, isn’t he?”

Samantha laughed and handed him the glass. “I’m glad you were here with her today.”

He heaved a sigh and shot her a serious sort of look. “Yeah, but I’m not a baby doctor,” he replied. “If there had been complications . . .”

“But there weren’t, so don’t worry about that. Mama said that he’s just fine, and they’re going to take him in to Isabelle’s office in the morning for a thorough checkup. They both said that you did a fine job.”

He finally smiled just a little. “Then it’s all right,” he allowed then made a face. “Of course, I think I could have done without Evan hugging me . . .”

She laughed as she wandered over to open the doors, letting in the salty night breeze. Stepping outside into the darkness, she drew a deep breath. “You know, I don’t think that we can live in my apartment,” she ventured at length when she sensed his approach.

“You have an apartment?” he asked.

She nodded. “You didn’t think I lived here, did you?”

“But you’re not old enough to have your own apartment,” he countered.

She turned to face him, her eyebrows raising in surprise. “Of course I am,” she said.

He shook his head and narrowed his gaze. “Oh, I’m on to you, little demon. It’s all right; I can wait.”

“Wait?”

He nodded. “Yes, till you’re . . . till you’re *legal*.”

“. . . Legal?”

Kurt scowled in what seemed to be self-disgust, and he planted his hands on his hips. “You really should have told me how old you are,” he said in a tone that lacked censure but was a little on the disgruntled side.

She bit her lip. “How . . . how old am I?” she asked slowly.

That earned her a slightly darker scowl. “Seventeen. Almost.”

“I’m . . .? Who told you—? Wait, don’t tell me . . . Evan?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “And you believed him?”

“Why not? I mean, strictly speaking, you really don’t look that old, so I should’ve guessed . . .”

“Taijya?”

“Hmm?”

She tried to keep her expression blank. She couldn’t help the way her lips twitched just the tiniest bit. “He was lying.”

“Why would he do that?” he demanded.

She blinked at him as the smile broke free. “Why, indeed?”

It took a moment for him to consider that, and he must’ve figured out that maybe she was telling the truth. Heaving a sigh, he shook his head. “Your family likes to mess with me,” he grumbled.

“I’m almost twenty-one.”

“Damn . . . you’re not even old enough to drink,” he muttered.

She laughed. “You’re adorable when you’re blustering,” she pointed out.

He heaved a longsuffering sigh and pinned her with a doleful sort of expression. “So . . . you have an apartment, eh?”

She nodded. “Yep.”

“Then why are you here now?” he snorted, slipping his arms around her, resting his chin on her shoulder.

Heaving a sigh of utter contentment, she closed her eyes and leaned back against him. “Because you’re here . . .”

“Wow, that’s a pretty pathetic reason, isn’t it?” he half joked.

“I thought it was a pretty good reason, myself,” she quipped.

He sighed and shook his head. “I still don’t get why you think I’m your mate,” he admitted then smiled a little bashfully. “Not that I’m going to complain . . .”

She laughed then winced as a droplet of rain fell on her. “Well, that figures . . .”

“Hold on,” he said, letting go of her. “I’ll be right back . . .”

She watched as he ran back inside, shuffling through the desk drawers as though he were looking for something. Grabbing a small notepad, he scribbled something on the page, then grabbed a roll of tape and tore off a small strip. “I don’t know if this will work,” he admitted as he slipped past her and out the doors again. He affixed the paper to the glass pane and touched it for a moment, murmuring something under his breath before slowly looking up over his head.

Samantha gasped as the rain grew steadily harder, but none of it fell on them. Reflected by the barrier he’d constructed over the porch, they stood in the dry area as a soft giggle slipped from her. “That’s a neat trick,” she teased.

Kurt grinned and shrugged as he pulled her against his chest once more. “Yeah, I’m great for parties,” he deadpanned.

She laughed and leaned back to kiss his chin, wrapping her hands over his arms as the gentle patter of the rain filled the companionable silence . . .



**Final Thought from Evan:**  
There's one born every minute ...

## Chapter 77

# Demand and Conquest

-----

“Grandpa, I’d like to talk to you.”

Cain glanced up from his latest sculpture he’d been working on and reached for a rag to wipe his hands. “Okay . . .” he agreed slowly. “Am I an idiot again?”

Samantha strode into the studio with an authoritative air. “No,” she allowed calmly. “At least, not yet.”

Cain winced and held out a piece of candy for the little girl hovering around her soon-to-be mother’s legs. She caught his gaze and ducked behind Samantha but not before she spared a moment to stick her tongue out at him.

He sighed. Tanny wasn’t about to forgive him for having been the one to drop her off at the Conors’ home, it seemed . . .

“Grandfather, I think that Dr. Drevin has done more than enough to redeem himself, and it’s high time for you to let him go.”

Cain blinked in unmasked surprise brought on more by the formality of Samantha’s speech than her actual words. “Dr. Drevin?” he repeated, amused by her brusque, business-like demeanor. “Really.”

She nodded, lifting her chin in a show of quiet defiance. “Yes.” She stepped forward and extended a closed slimfile. “I’ve taken the liberty of compiling a list of reasons that I

believe should be taken into consideration. I think you'll agree that he has done his level best to make up for what he did."

Cain stared at her for a moment before opening the file. "Closed down all known youkai research facilities in North America . . . facilitated the return of one Samantha Izayoi, granddaughter of the current North American tai-youkai, heretofore referred to as one 'Cain Zelig' . . . rescued a child in dread peril at the significant risk to his own person, informally named Tanny . . . ensured the life of the future North American tai-youkai, the infant named Bailey Zelig . . . submitted himself willingly to daily physical torture and debilitation, psychological abuse, and residual post-traumatic stress . . ." he read. "I . . . I see . . ."

Samantha's expression remained impassive though Cain didn't miss the gleam in her eyes, either. "You failed to read the last reason aloud, Grandpa."

Cain bit his cheek. "Yeah, I'm not too sure that 'he has a cute butt' actually qualifies as a good reason to release him."

"Really? And I thought that was the best reason of them all."

Closing the file, he leaned against the work table and crossed his arms over his chest. "And you think two months of training can even come close to comparing to what was done to you in that place?"

She heaved a sigh, her ears drooping as she stared at the child peering out from behind her legs. "So we're no better than they are? Is that what you mean? Grandpa . . . if you want to hurt someone, hurt those who might deserve it, but Kurt . . . He doesn't, and you know it. You've always been fair and thoughtful. You tell me that you don't agree with me."

Letting out a deep breath, Cain slowly shook his head. "It's not just about me, Sami. Your father, your mother . . . aunts and uncles . . . This was never the perfect solution, but at least this way, they got to vent just a little of their frustration. Surely you can understand that."

"And I say that enough's enough," she countered quietly but with no less conviction. "Everyone wants to punish him for one choice he made, but . . . but I'm suffering, too. Kurt's a good man, and you know it. I know you do. Can't we just leave it go? Prove once and for all that we aren't like them?"

He stared at her for another long moment as a very slow smile spread over his features. "You're a good woman, Samantha. Did you know that?"

She heaved a sigh and shook her head. "I'm not good, Grandpa. I'm just me, and I am the way that my family raised me to be."

"So you think we've punished him enough," Cain murmured.

Samantha nodded. "Yes, I do."

"Any ideas? I mean, I'd think he should at least endure one more test."

She sighed. "Okay, then fine. Let me fight him. If he wins, he can go free."

"And you think he'd fight you?"

She got that stubborn look on her face again. "Yes, I do," she maintained.

"And if he doesn't win?"

Samantha bit her lip. “If he doesn’t . . . then I won’t complain, and you can keep him for the rest of the three months.”

Cain considered then then nodded. To be honest, he didn’t actually think that Drevin would fight her; not at all, but even then, he supposed that’d be okay, too. The only real problem was figuring out what to do with him once they let him go because someone with his powers . . . well, it was definitely something that Cain would have to consider . . .

Cain shuffled over to the row of windows, staring outside at the training taking place behind the house. With InuYasha, Ryomaru, and Kichiro in California, and Bas having been told that he wasn’t going to beat on Kurt for a while, the one doing the training for the day, oddly, was Cartham. Madison and Evan were standing nearby, probably taking potshots at the poor embattled human, and Cain smiled.

He flinched a second later when the resounding echo of gunfire shook the floor-to-ceiling windows. Cartham, apparently tired of swinging at Kurt, had pulled a handgun and was firing rounds at Kurt’s feet.

“Grandpa!” Samantha complained, the color leeching from her skin as she dashed over to peer around him. “Stop him! *Has he lost his damn mind?*”

Cain chuckled. “Well, Cartham’s a deadeye. I don’t think he actually intends to hurt him . . .”

Samantha wasn’t impressed, and she stomped her foot angrily. “Do you remember when he accidentally shot Evan in the foot?”

“Yeah, that was different,” Cain drawled but headed toward the doors that led outside.

“How was that different?” she demanded, right on his heels.

Cain chuckled again. “I don’t think that was an accident.” He yanked the door open and strode outside. “Cartham!” he yelled. “*Deke!*”

Cartham lowered the gun and swung around to face Cain as Samantha vaulted the railing and darted over to the shaken human. He was obviously stunned—it wasn’t every day that someone was off-kilter enough to fire a gun at you, Cain supposed, but he didn’t seem any worse for wear . . . “I thought I told you: no permanent damage!”

The deviant hunter grinned at his boss. “Aw, hell, Zelig . . . I’m using blanks, damn it . . .”

Cain chuckled again as Tanny reached into his pocket to nab a candy before she dashed away. “Oh, well, then go right ahead.”

“Shit! Shit! I’m gonna piss myself!” Evan howled, completely bent over an equally amused Madison.

Samantha, however, wasn’t nearly as impressed. Stomping over to the hunter who towered a good foot-and-a-half over her, she grabbed the gun and started firing it at Cartham’s feet instead.

Cain opened his mouth to yell at them then snapped it closed again, pausing long enough to watch as Samantha, out of artillery, sprinted for the beach and neatly tossed the weapon into the frothing water, much to Cartham’s chagrin. Then he turned on his heel and headed back inside, satisfied, at least for the moment, that no one was really in any mortal danger . . .

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*'That twisted little monkey . . . just wait till I get my hands on him . . .'*

Kurt made a face and tugged futilely on his hands, suspended over his head via the short length of chain that separated the handcuffs fastened around his wrists and was looped through a longer chain that the little miscreant had padlocked together well out of Kurt's reach . . .

He really should have known better than to trust Evan Zelig when he said that he had something planned that Kurt would love.

He sighed, giving up for the moment since he really couldn't see any way out of his current predicament. That damned Evan had come in, saying that his father wanted him in chains for the night, and while that hadn't happened in a while, Kurt wasn't inclined to argue, given the situation. Evan must've counted on that. Five seconds later, or so it had seemed, he'd had Kurt fastened to a longer chain slung over the top railing of the old wrought iron bed—the kind that could be hung with curtains with a canopy over it. Then Evan had assured him that it wasn't so bad before winking and ducking out of the room as his laughter trailed behind him, drifting through the closed door.

Samantha slipped into the room, balancing a dinner tray on her hip as she closed the door and slowly turned to face him. "Grandma made roast beef with carrots and potatoes, and—O-o-oh, *my* . . ."

Kurt tried his best to pin her with a formidable scowl—not entirely possible, all things considered. "Your cousin," he said slowly, carefully, "—is going to die when I get my hands on him."

"Evan?" she asked with a grimace.

He nodded slowly.

She opened her mouth to say something then closed it, opting instead to bite her lip, as though she wasn't sure that he was going to like whatever it was she had to say. "Yeah . . . he took off about twenty minutes ago . . . but he said he'd be back in the . . . the morning . . ."

He closed his eyes and shook his head, counting to twenty before he trusted himself to speak. "Tell me that he didn't take the keys with him."

"Well, I don't know . . ." she hedged as she set the tray aside and wrung her hands. "I-I'll go ask . . ."

"No, Sam, wait! Little—damn it," he growled, hanging his head when she darted out of the room once more, and he wasn't at all surprised when she burst back into the room a few minutes later with her grandfather, Bas, and Gunnar in tow. All three men stood stone still for a moment, staring at the way Kurt was caught up, and all three of them slowly shook their heads, though, to their credit, not one of them actually laughed, no matter how pressed not to they really were.

"Um, Sam . . . I don't have a key to that," Cain remarked as he stepped forward, staring upward at the padlock.

"Hell . . . I don't, either . . . and . . ." Bas drawled as he grasped the cuffs and gave them the once-over. "Those are Cartham's."

"So I suppose you're stuck there till Evan shows up again," Gunnar concluded with a distinct nod as he turned and headed for the door once more.

"In layman's terms," Bas added for good measure, "you're fucked."

Kurt shook his head and gritted his teeth, wondering exactly how he'd ended up like this.

Cain promised to try to hunt Evan down though Kurt could tell from the tone of his voice that he really didn't expect to be successful at it. But at least Bas and Cain finally left the room, and Kurt shot Samantha a longsuffering glance. "Does he always do stuff like this?"

Samantha giggled and picked up the dinner plate off the tray. "Not always," she said in a tone that was far from reassuring.

"What are you doing?" Kurt demanded when she sat beside him on the bed.

"I'm going to feed you," she replied calmly.

Kurt scowled but let her do it. "You know, I don't think I like that Cartham guy," he remarked just before she stuffed a hunk of potato in his mouth.

"Oh, Cartham likes you," she assured him then wrinkled her nose. "Even if that was pretty dirty of him . . ."

He leaned away to avoid the next bite. "He tried to shoot me!" he reminded her.

"With blanks," she countered. "Anyway, I got him back for you. He was grumbling at Grandpa because that was one of his favorite guns . . ."

Kurt snorted then suddenly sat up a little straighter. "Where's Tanny?"

Rolling her eyes, Samantha stuck a bite of roast into his mouth. "She's fascinated by Bailey," she said. "She was watching Sydnie change his diaper and didn't want to come up with me."

Kurt snorted. "You think she should be watching stuff like that?"

Samantha laughed. “You think it’ll give her ideas?”

“Well, she doesn’t have boy parts, you know,” he pointed out.

“I think you’re being paranoid, Daddy,” she teased, leaning in to kiss his cheek.

“It might; you never know,” he huffed. “Sam . . .”

“Open your mouth.”

“Hold on . . . Tell me something.”

She lowered the fork. “What?”

Kurt shook his head. “Are all youkai babies born with those fuzzy things?”

She blinked and considered his question. “Oh, you mean Bailey’s Mekomoko-sama? Only dog-youkai, and hanyou aren’t born with them, no.”

He considered that for a moment. “So your babies . . . wouldn’t have one of those?” he asked slowly.

She smiled. “No.”

He fell silent as she continued to feed him. He wasn’t entirely pleased with the notion of having to be fed, but it wasn’t nearly as humiliating as the things that had been done to her. She smiled and seemed content to do this for him, though, and that was more than enough to temper any lingering discomfort. So Kurt concentrated instead on watching her—enjoying the way her face seemed to glow with her contentment, the way her eyes sparkled and shone in the ambient light cast by the bedside lamp . . . She looked so very

different, didn't she? Clean and well-kempt, the way she was supposed to look. Kurt nearly smiled, shaking his head when she offered him another sip of soda.

"Taijya . . ."

He made a face. "I really wish you wouldn't call me that," he muttered.

She smiled sweetly. "You'll always be my taijya," she insisted.

He shot her a chagrined frown. "Still . . ."

"Would you promise me something?"

"What?"

Deliberately averting her gaze, she shrugged. "Promise me you'll do your very best tomorrow during training, no matter what . . ."

"Why? They bringing in someone bigger and stronger to kick my ass? Is there someone bigger or stronger than that damned battle tank of an uncle—cousin—whatever of yours?"

She laughed. "Maybe. Just promise me."

He snorted. "I really don't think that'll be a problem," he pointed out.

"Please?"

He sighed. "Fine, all right. I promise."

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Cain rubbed his forehead and frowned at the far wall without really seeing it as he drummed his claws on the desk and waited.

“So the dilemma is what to do with a man of his . . . talents,” Sesshoumaru concluded, his voice clear and commanding on the speakerphone.

“That’s the gist of it, yes,” Cain replied. “I mean, sure he’s Sami’s mate, but even so, we cannot keep him confined forever, and even if we could . . .”

“But he *is* her mate, correct?”

“Yes, he is . . .”

“I daresay he has no interest in returning to his previous profession?”

“No,” Cain replied. “He was only doing that, I think, so that he could look for the ones who had killed his family, and since they’re dead . . .”

“Then there’s no need to continue it, even if he had a desire to.”

“Dad, I had a thought,” Bas spoke up in the silence that followed Sesshoumaru’s last remark.

“What’s that?”

Bas let out a deep breath and glanced around. Gunnar nodded—obviously the two of them had already spoken about it. “He located five facilities in North America, alone. Who’s to say that there aren’t more; maybe not here, but in other countries? If he were

willing . . . He could infiltrate them. He's already proven that he can effectively shut them down, and while his methods might not be exactly what we're after, I think maybe he could do this."

Sesshoumaru uttered a terse sound, as though he were considering what Bas had said.

"There's also the matter of the others like him. It stands to reason that he isn't the only human supplying youkai to those facilities," Gunnar added.

"And you think that Drevin can handle it?" Sesshoumaru asked.

The assembled men exchanged significant glances. "Yes, we do," Cain replied.

"I have heard rumors regarding a place in India that has been researching 'variant creatures'—chimera, they call them: half man, half beast. If Drevin wishes to work for us, I suggest we start there."

"Okay," Cain agreed. "I'll talk to him tomorrow."

"Then I trust you'll keep me informed. Sebastian . . ."

"Yes, sir?"

Sesshoumaru chuckled—a rare sound from the stoic youkai. "Congratulations to you and your mate."

Bas broke into a grin. "Thank you."

"Just do yourself a favor and keep him as far away from your brother as you possibly can."

The connection was lost, and Cain pressed the button to end the call, glancing up as InuYasha, Ryomaru, and Kichiro filed into the office, all of them looking very tired.

“How’d it go?” Cain asked in lieu of a proper greeting.

Ryomaru muttered something completely unintelligible as he flopped onto the sofa. InuYasha ignored Cain and stopped in front of Bas, instead. “How’re your mate and pup?”

Bas grinned again. “Couldn’t be better.”

InuYasha nodded once in silent approval before he headed toward the window.

Kichiro rubbed his eyes. “Tanny’s actual date of birth is February 14, 2069, according to that Cabot bastard. No birth certificate was ever filed.”

“Little weasel’s afraid of his own shadow,” Ryomaru added. “Seems like Drevin scared the living, breathing shit outta him.”

That comment earned a scowl from Kichiro.

“Keh! Damn near wet his pants when Kich told him he was gonna be her grandfather,” InuYasha remarked as he crouched on the windowsill.

Cain wasn’t at all surprised, considering. It would take a little more work since she didn’t have a birth certificate, but it could be done . . . Shifting his gaze around the room, he nearly sighed, knowing well enough that Kichiro was about to get even more ticked off than he already was . . .

“Samantha has asked to fight Kurt for his freedom,” Cain said, carefully measuring his words. “I’m going to allow it.”

“What?” Kichiro growled, rounding on Cain as he narrowed his eyes. “No.”

Cain shook his head. “It’s not your choice,” he said.

“Like hell it’s not!” Kichiro snarled.

“It isn’t,” Cain stated flatly. “He’s earned the right.”

“Have you forgotten what he did to her?”

“Of course not,” Cain retorted. “But we cannot keep him here against his will any longer. If he can defeat Sam, then he is free to come or go as he pleases. End of discussion.”

Slamming his hands down on the desk, Kichiro leaned in to challenge Cain’s decision. “And I say it’s still not enough!”

Cain didn’t blink, and he didn’t back down. “He’s Sam’s mate.”

“The *fuck* he is!”

“Kich,” Ryomaru interjected, sitting up. “Kami, they’re adopting Stinky-butt, ain’t they? What other proof do you need?”

Cain heaved a sigh and shook his head since Ryomaru, like Kurt, never called Tanny, ‘Tanny’, and instead used the deplorable nickname. ‘*God . . . Drevin’s as bent as Ryo . . .*’

“Yeah, and he shouldn’t be allowed to do that, either!” Kichiro spat.

“Look, why don’t you go get some rest? You didn’t get a damn bit of sleep the whole time we were gone,” Ryomaru added.

“Fuck you, Ryo,” Kichiro growled, starting toward his brother, cracking his knuckles.

“Let it go, pup,” InuYasha said.

Kichiro shot his father an irate glower. “Old man—”

“Think about Sam,” InuYasha warned.

Kichiro glowered at him for another long second. With a very loud curse, he whipped around and stomped out of the office.

Cain heaved a sigh and gripped his forehead. Sure, he could appreciate Kichiro’s anger. When it was about your child, there was no such thing as unbiased. Still, he had to wonder as a weariness set in—a bone deep sort of weariness that only came with perpetually having to deal with things like this: how much uglier could the entire situation get . . .?

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“So when Mama came in, I was completely covered in whipped cream and strawberry glaze. At least, that’s what they tell me.”

Kurt chuckled as Samantha cuddled against his chest. “So you’re basically telling me that you were a really rotten child.”

“I was not!” she argued with a giggle. “I was four! I was . . . *precocious* . . .”

“Save it for the jury, little demon.”

She giggled again. “The cake was good,” she replied defensively.

“That’s your reason?”

“Yes.” She sighed happily. “Mmm . . . you’re so warm . . .”

He sighed, too, though for completely different reasons.

After some maneuvering, Samantha had managed to work the chain over the high corner until it dropped down the length of the fifteen foot bedpost, so at least he was able to lie down. Now the problem was that he was entirely—acutely—almost painfully aware of the fact that they were actually alone since Tanny had fallen asleep on Bas and Sydnie’s bed. When Samantha had gone down to get her, the new mother had insisted that Samantha leave her; that she was just fine, right where she was . . .

“Kurt?”

He winced. “Yes?”

“This is nice, isn’t it?”

He shifted uncomfortably. “Y-yeah.”

Bracing herself on her elbows, she gazed at him with an uncanny sparkle in her deep blue eyes. She stared at him with a seriousness in her expression that scared him yet thrilled him at the same time. He could feel her heart beating, could sense everything about her; everything within her, and he frowned. “Why . . .?” he whispered.

Samantha shook her head. “Why, what?”

Blinking away the half-formed thought, he cleared his throat. *'Laughing brown eyes . . . a certain recognition . . . and a name . . . Sango . . . ?'*

"Are you all right?"

He nodded as the thought receded. "Yeah . . . fine," he assured her.

"Good," she said, leaning down to kiss him.

The thought skittered away from him at the gentle brush of her lips against his, the fiercest emotion shooting through him. More than a simple feeling, something indefinable, untainted, something that he hadn't felt before, not like this . . . As though every single thing he'd ever known was somehow inexorably wrapped up in her, he could hear the gentle whispers of her soul, speaking to him in places that hadn't existed until she'd come into his life . . . Easy to say that it was desire or need or even lust, but . . . but hidden beneath it . . . Something far more pulchritudinous, far more overwhelming . . .

She sighed—a breath, an insular exhalation. The warmth of her lips, the cadence of her heartbeat . . . the silent understanding that he . . . he had nothing to run from; not any longer . . . Her body pressed against his, the shocking heat of her skin . . . He tried to move his arms, to wrap them around her, only to be thwarted by the damned metal chain.

"Son of a—" he growled, wrenching his head to the side as a sense of utter frustration roiled inside him. "Samantha . . ."

She wasn't listening. Her mouth blazed a trail along his jaw, down his throat, her tongue flicking out to tease him, her hands rubbing, caressing, moving lower and lower . . .

"S-Samantha," he rasped out, closing his eyes, wincing as he bucked his hips to move her aside.

She blinked, her breathing ragged, her lips swollen from their kissing. “What’s the matter?” she asked with a shake of her head.

He drew a deep breath to calm his nerves. It didn’t really work, but he hadn’t figured that it would, either. “No,” he gritted out. His entire being seemed to be reacting far out of his control, a riot of unfulfilled sensations, screaming for her touch, for her body. “Not like this,” he muttered, shaking his arms to emphasize his point.

She blinked and glanced at his hands, then shook her head. “You’re uncomfortable?”

He snorted. “No! Damn it, I just don’t want . . .” He breathed deep again. “When we . . . I want to be able to touch you, too, okay?”

She didn’t look like she was pleased with his blatant show of chivalry—or stupidity, all things considered. “But I want you,” she stated rather matter-of-factly as she reached out, ran her hand up under his shirt.

He shivered. Violently. Then he frowned at her. “S-Sam . . .”

She heaved a sigh and seemed to understand that he really wasn’t going to back down; not in this. A moment later, though, she smiled brightly and curled up beside him once more with her head on his shoulder and her hand on his chest—outside the shirt, at least. “I don’t know whether I should love you more or hate you right now,” she admitted.

Kurt uttered a terse bark of laughter that quickly shifted into a moan since his body still hadn’t quite gotten the message. “You’re going to be the death of me,” he predicted in a completely hopeless sort of way.

She giggled, though the sound was choked, at best. “No,” she said softly, wiggling around so that she could kiss his cheek before she snuggled against him once more. “I want to be the life of you, taijya.”

He smiled just a little as he blinked in the darkness. “The life of me . . .” he murmured.  
He . . . he wanted that, too, didn’t he?



**Final Thought from Cartham:**  
That was m' favorite gun!

## Chapter 78

### Face-Off

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Kurt rubbed his face and tried to stifle a yawn without being too obvious about it. Damn, he was tired. He'd been too busy trying to ignore the lure of Samantha's body to fall asleep for the majority of the night, and when he finally had, that devilspawn, Evan had busted in to unfasten him.

*"Well, damn, Drevin! You're telling me that I went to all that trouble, and you two didn't do a fucking thing?" Evan complained.*

*He'd shot Evan a darkened scowl for that . . .*

Then Tanny had stumbled in, rubbing her eyes as she crawled onto the bed, but instead of going back to sleep, which was what Kurt had hoped, she'd proceeded to start jumping up and down on the bed.

*'No rest for the wicked . . .'*

He grimaced inwardly, realizing that there was definitely something wrong. While he was used to being watched during these exercises, it seemed like everyone had come outside for this one, with the exception of Sydnie, who was probably still lying down, and Samantha, who was probably keeping Tanny preoccupied since the girl tended to throw herself into the fray if she saw that Kurt was being pummeled.

Cain stepped forward, a serious expression on his face. "Kurt, we've decided to allow a special person to spar with you today. Let me state: you cannot back down, and you must

fight.”

Kurt’s frown deepened as he reached for the bokuto that was stuck, point down, in the ground nearby. It made no sense, did it? He already knew all that. He didn’t understand why Zelig was being so formal, but it didn’t really bode well for him, did it?

Samantha stepped out of the mansion without Tanny, and he narrowed his eyes. Wearing skin tight black leggings, black boots, black shirt, and . . . and the little beret just like the one he remembered . . .? The only thing missing from the ensemble was her black leather coat, but that was in the storage facility he’d rented; he hadn’t had a chance to get it to give it back . . .

But she strode over to them without stopping, striding forward until she was standing about fifteen feet away from him. Cain handed her a bokuto without a word as Kurt’s eyes flared then narrowed dangerously. “N . . . no way,” he stated flatly, tossing down the weapon.

“Morning, taijya,” Sam said with a brusque nod. “You ready to do this?”

He shot a quick glance around, trying to figure out if they were actually being serious or not. They looked serious, especially her father, who looked like he wanted to step forward and have another go at Kurt, himself, but . . . “No,” he stated once more, louder this time. “I won’t fight you.”

“Cause he knows she’ll kick his ass,” Ryomaru muttered. Nezumi smacked him in the middle of his chest with the back of her hand to shut him up.

“You have to,” Samantha reminded him gently with a smile, damn it. “You promised.”

“The *hell* I will!” Kurt growled.

“You do have to,” Cain said quietly.

He shook his head, gritted his teeth. “Then pick someone else,” he told them, “*anyone* but her.”

She heaved a sigh and stared at him for a long moment. “Okay, then I’m coming after you.”

Her movements were little more than a blur to his eyes, and Kurt had to dive out of her way when she swung at him. Eyes flaring wide as she landed in a half-crouch, pivoting on her left foot as her right one swept out in a wide circle, he barely managed to lean out of the way of her follow-up attack.

‘*Damn, she’s fast—faster than the lot of them,*’ he thought as he grabbed the bokuto he’d discarded and held it between his outstretched hands to block her next blow. The sheer determination on her face was unsettling, and he grunted as he heaved against her. She stumbled away a few paces—just enough to let Kurt roll to his feet, to right his stance.

She smiled at him—she even winked, damn it. “Come on, taijya. You can do better than that,” she teased.

He scowled at her, wondering if he’d fallen into some strange and macabre parallel universe or something. No, he didn’t think so, and she really did look the same, but . . . but why the hell was she trying to fight him?

She flew at him again, her bokuto whistling through the air as she brought it around in a wide arc aimed directly at his chest. He grabbed at her wrist to disarm her but missed, and in another blur of motion, she grasped his fist, wrenching her hand in one quick, deft jerk, and quite neatly flipped him over.

Grimacing as he landed flat on his back, he didn’t even try to move out of the way as she

stalked over to stand beside him, staring down at him with a completely disgruntled expression on her face, as though she couldn't figure out exactly why he wasn't bothering to fight her back. "Fight me," she gritted out between clenched teeth.

"No," Kurt insisted again without bothering to move.

"You have to!" she insisted stubbornly.

"I won't," he retorted.

"That's enough, Samantha."

She opened her mouth to argue with Cain, but he shook his head slowly. "You can't expect him to do it," Cain said. "Step away, hunter."

Samantha didn't look like she was willing to comply, but at last she did. Turning on her heel—he could feel her upset thick in her aura—she stalked away to stand beside Cain.

"All right, Drevin," Cain went on. "Since you won't fight Samantha, then you'll fight everyone else, instead. Ten minutes apiece, and all you have to do is endure it. If you can stand on your own after that, then you're free to go." He glanced at Samantha and cocked an eyebrow. "Does that sound fair to you, Samantha?"

She didn't look like she liked the terms that Cain set down, but she stared at Kurt for several moments then nodded. "Yes," she said.

"Do you understand the terms, Drevin?"

Slowly, cautiously, Kurt pushed himself up, staring around the assembly. Take on every one of the men for ten minutes each? He had to be nuts to agree to that, especially since Samantha's father still looked like he wanted to beat the living bejesus out of him, and if

it were up to Kurt, he'd refuse. The white-coats hadn't given Samantha a choice of how long she stayed there, did they? Why should he be offered that?

But Samantha . . . She must have understood what he was thinking—the thoughts that were flying through his head. Her eyes had taken on a certain pleading. She wanted him to be free, didn't she? Wanted him to be able to come and go as he pleased . . . whether they kept him here for two months or twenty years, they never would be even a quarter as inhumane in their treatment of him as the white-coats had been to her, and there really was no point, was there? Samantha . . . she knew that, and maybe . . . maybe it was all right for him to wish to take that first step forward; the first step on the path that ultimately led to her . . .

"I . . . I understand," he said.

"I'll go first," Evan remarked, strolling forward almost lazily with a half-cocked grin on his face. "I'm not going to slap-box you this time, *'taijya'*," he sneered good-naturedly. "So you'd better bring it."

Kurt gripped the bokuto and readied his stance. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Gin's smile. Her lessons were paying off, at least a little, and while he was no where near good enough to even come close to claiming to be a swordsman, at least he wasn't entirely laughable anymore, either.

Evan chuckled and slowly drew his sword, the bright silver glinting in the subdued sunshine. He dashed forward, cleaving the weapon without pulling any punches. The blade reverberated as though it were an extension of his arm, an extension of himself.

'*Damned youkai weapons,*' he grunted to himself as he met the blade head-on. He'd figured out through the course of his training that those weapons enabled their users to harness powers that shouldn't have been possible otherwise. Having those attacks directed at him, however, was more than a little daunting.

Evan grinned and shoved Kurt back, using his weight against the flat of the blade to send Kurt stumbling. He caught himself and righted his stance, wincing when Evan shot forward, spinning his sword on his nimble fingertips. He caught the hilt in one fluid motion and flicked the blade. Kurt wasn't quite fast enough to spin away, and the rip of fabric was punctuated by the white-hot burn that exploded on his left forearm. Evan hadn't cut him deep, but he had cut him, and it took all of his concentration to keep from dropping the bokuto to grip the injury.

Evan didn't stop to gloat. He darted forward, only to stop, digging the tip of his sword into the earth and using it to anchor himself as he spun around, kicking out his legs, knocking Kurt flat on his ass in the gravel. Evan sprang back, jerking the blade free and bringing it straight up, sending a shower of dirt and stones down around Kurt.

He rolled to his feet before Evan could attack again, irritation rising at his perceived inability to mount much of an offense. Gritting his teeth so hard that he could feel them scraping, he swung around, the wooden sword smacking hard against the Ternion's blade. He might not win against any of them in a battle of brute force, but that wouldn't stop him from fighting . . .

Evan chuckled, blue eyes igniting in an amused glimmer. "Nice," he approved just before he heaved Kurt away once more.

He remained upright, sliding back about ten feet, chest heaving as he wiped his forehead with his right arm.

"Time," Cain called out.

Evan nodded, tossing his sword end over end into the air, only to catch it on the way down, sheathing it as he turned away.

Gunnar stepped forward next, his expression completely impassive. He sprinted toward Kurt, drawing his sword as he closed in fast. Kurt managed to parry the attack but winced when his knuckles scraped against Gunnar's sword. The arrogant hanyou narrowed his gaze and kicked out a leg, bringing Kurt down. He leveled his sword at Kurt's throat, his eyes taking on an almost gloating glow. With a growl, Kurt knocked the blade to the side and scooted out of the way.

Gunnar uttered a somewhat derisive chuckle. "Better," he allowed. "So why don't you take off that glove and *really* fight me?"

Kurt shook his head, regripped the bokuto. "Don't need to," he growled, lunging forward, bringing the sword up, aiming for Gunnar's wrist.

The hanyou ducked out of the way, though not before Kurt discerned the momentary flash of surprise that surfaced. He spun to the left, swinging the sword with all his might. Gunnar knocked the blade to the side with a twist of his weapon.

Caught off-guard by the force Gunnar had used to block him, Kurt grimaced when Gunnar smacked him with a harsh blow aimed at his ribs. He sucked in a sharp breath and smashed his left arm against his side. For one agonizing second, he thought he was going to pass out . . .

He was so dazed that he had to blink to clear away the darkness that ringed his vision.

"Kurt! *Watch out!*" Samantha's scream split the haze enveloping his mind. Kurt hissed as pain erupted when he dove out of the way to avoid the glowing ball of energy that Gunnar flung at him.

He pushed himself to his feet once more, slightly disoriented by the receding ache. A second later, Kurt grunted as Gunnar shot forward, smacking him across the back hard with the flat side of the blade.

“Come on—*taijya*, is it? Get up,” he taunted.

Kurt did, slowly, unable to hide the grimace of pain on his face.

Gunnar shook his head, gaze narrowing as his lip turned up in a derisive sort of sneer. “Pathetic,” he said.

A surge of anger shot through Kurt—anger at the unsettling feeling that he’d never, ever be good enough. With a loud shout, he dashed forward, knocking Gunnar’s sword to the side as he swung at him. Gunnar caught his fist, yanking him forward as he shoved with his free hand, sending Kurt sprawling back into the gravel yet again.

“Time,” Cain called as Kurt got to his feet.

Gunnar dropped his sword into the scabbard and fairly swaggered over to the side, passing by Bas, who strode forward, crossing those damn hamhocks he called arms over his chest. “I want you to fight me for real,” Bas remarked, nodding at Kurt’s hand. “That glove helps you contain your spiritual power, right?”

Kurt eyed him for a long moment. “Yes.”

“I want to see what you can do,” Bas insisted. “Please.”

He hesitated, glancing past Bas at Samantha. She seemed to understand his reluctance and nodded once. He wasn’t entirely certain why they wanted him to fight that way, but given the fact that Bas was pretty well indestructible, he slowly tugged off the glove and tossed it aside.

“Keh! Here,” a voice called out from the gathered mass. Kurt frowned and caught the long teak staff that InuYasha tossed to him. The rings that dangled from the ornately

carved metal loop on the end jingled softly, and he scowled when he noticed how sharp the deceptively beautiful loop was. “Hella stupid, if you ask me. Damn monk was never any good with a fucking sword, anyway.”

Kurt frowned at the deceptive weapon. *‘What the hell am I supposed to do with this?’* he scoffed. *‘Smack ‘em over the head with it?’*

A strange sense of familiarity seeped through him; a feeling that he somehow knew the weapon. No, it wasn’t that he knew it—it was more like he’d *seen* it somewhere before . . . He sighed inwardly. Even if he had seen it before, it didn’t mean that he had even the smallest clue how to use it.

But he didn’t have a chance to consider that too deeply, either; not when Bas wasn’t giving him time to ponder it . . .

The dull thud of his footsteps drew closer and closer. Kurt didn’t have time to think; he simply reacted. Swinging the staff, he whipped around in a tight circle, the jingle of the rings echoing in his head. Bas tried to alter his course but couldn’t as he brought Triumvirate up to block the staff.

The man hissed and hopped back as the sharpened loop sliced into his arm. Sparing a moment to glance down at the injury, he nodded. “Not bad, Drevin,” he remarked before he hefted the sword again.

Kurt didn’t have time to gloat. With a mighty growl, Bas jammed Triumvirate into the ground and dashed forward, lowering his shoulder as he closed in.

The impact felt like being hit by a ton of bricks. Kurt grunted, wincing as he hit the ground a few feet away. It was sheer force of will that forced him back to his feet; instinct alone that made him duck in time to avoid the heel of Bas’ hand as it snapped past his head.

Kurt blocked the next strike with his forearm and swung at Bas, who leaned to the side and kicked out his leg, catching the back of Kurt's knees to bring him down. Kurt retaliated in kind, catching Bas' ankles between his feet and jerking hard.

Bas hit the ground beside him then rolled to his feet as Kurt pushed himself up, wiping his brow as he scowled at Bas. Taking a step back, Bas slowly lifted his hand.

A hiss, a crackle, as a bright ball of energy formed in his outstretched palm . . .

Kurt reacted on instinct, dashing to the side to retrieve the weapon he'd dropped. Hefting the weapon over his head, he bore down on it with all his might, slipping to his knees as he held onto the staff with everything he was worth.

A flash of light, a gust of wind blew Kurt's bangs out of his face as a hazy purple light engulfed him. The blast hit Bas head-on, sending him flying back a good twenty feet. He landed hard and didn't move.

"Time," Cain called out tersely. Gin broke away from his side to dart over to her son. Gunnar beat her over there, hunkering down beside Bas to assess the damage.

Kurt blinked and stood up slowly, unsure exactly how he'd done that. Bas groaned and sat up. Kurt frowned. He looked rather woozy, but he managed to get to his feet of his own accord, though he did lean rather heavily on Gunnar and Gin as they helped him away from the field of battle.

Kichiro snorted and shot Kurt a scathing glower as he brushed past them all. "Come on, Bas. Let me take a look at you," he said, waving Gunnar away as he helped the young man toward the mansion.

"Guess that means I'm next," Ryomaru muttered from behind Kurt. "This should be

fun.”

He turned around, facing the hunter. It was on the tip of his tongue to say that he was finished. Samantha, though, was staring at him with a determined sort of expression on her face.

Ryomaru slowly, deliberately circled Kurt, taking his time in sizing him up. A lazy grin spread across his features reminding Kurt of a deranged serial killer or something. “A taijya, are you?” he rumbled. “Let’s see what you’ve got, then. I won’t be as easy to take down with a fucking barrier as Bas was.”

With a low growl, Ryomaru shot forward, splitting his swords apart. Reaching behind himself with both hands, he whipped the blades around to unleash a sizzle of energy from each one. The two forces met and collided, creating a vortex; twin whirlwinds that spun away from him, closing in on Kurt in a rush.

He dove to the side in an effort to avoid the tornadoes, but hissed when one of the cyclones caught his shoulder. The pain that reverberated through him was harsh, shocking, and he grimaced a moment later when the very earth shook. The funnels that Ryomaru had loosened impacted hard against a sturdy oak tree about fifty feet behind Kurt . . .

Ryomaru wasn’t finished though, not by a long shot. Kurt barely managed to block the descending blades, the clash of metal and teak much louder than it ought to have been, rattling through Kurt’s head. He barely managed to block the descending blades. The staff groaned, creaked, but didn’t give.

The man chuckled and pushed against the staff, springing back, away from Kurt. He only spared a moment before he shot forward once more, dragging the swords across the ground, raising sprays of sparks on either side of him as the metal raked against the dull gravel that encompassed the practice area. Kurt sprang to the side as Ryomaru lifted the

blade but couldn't avoid the double assault. Grunting as he felt the tip of a blade cut through the fabric of his jeans and the soft flesh of his upper thigh, he just barely managed to land on his feet. The cut wasn't too deep—maybe half a quarter of an inch deep at the worst of it, but it hurt fiercely, and Kurt grimaced as he blocked a string of lighter, faster blows from the nuisance swords. Hands slipping as sweat saturated his palms, he gritted his teeth and tried to hold on . . .

“Time,” Cain called, and not a moment too soon. Letting his arms drop—the felt as though they were cast of lead—Kurt fought to keep his fatigue from showing.

Ryomaru grinned and stepped back, fastening the swords together once more. Kurt flinched as a flash of light erupted from the fissure where the blades met.

“So who's next?” Ryomaru asked carelessly as he sauntered away.

Cain glanced at Kichiro, who had returned with Bas during the last fight, though Bas didn't look like he was feeling particularly well, at the moment.

“Kichiro?” Cain asked, staring pointedly at Samantha's father.

Standing with his arms crossed over his chest, he narrowed his gaze on Kurt for a moment before glancing at his daughter. Kurt didn't know whether or not Samantha knew that Kichiro was watching her, though, since her gaze was fixed on Kurt—a steadiness that seemed to be whispering in his head. *'You can do it; I know you can . . .'*

He saw it, didn't he? The expression on her father's face . . . As though he understood something, though Kurt had no idea what it was, Kichiro narrowed his eyes and gritted his teeth. With a loud snort, he turned on his heel to stalk away. “There's no honor in fighting the likes of him,” he tossed back over his shoulder without breaking his stride.

Cain frowned but didn't comment for a moment before glancing over at InuYasha. “You

want to finish this up, InuYasha? Unless you've gone soft . . ."

"Keh! Shut the fuck up, Zelig," InuYasha growled. "I don't see you runnin' your happy ass out there to fight. What are you? Chicken shit?"

Cain ignored the blatant jibe at his ego and looked around. "Griffin?"

The bear-youkai quirked an eyebrow, pinning Cain with the classic 'you've-got-to-be-kidding-me' look. "No, thanks," he muttered.

"I don't know . . . maybe the old man's right, *Cain*," Evan drawled. "I mean, the rest of us fought him, didn't we? Are you chicken shit?"

Cain snorted. "I am not chicken shit, *son*."

"Your father's scared of *him*?" Gunnar growled in a very loud aside to Bas, who was sitting on a chair that Gin had dragged over.

"Kind of seems that way, doesn't it?" Bas mused in a slightly weaker tone than usual.

"I'm not afraid of—I'm *not*," Cain stated flatly though his eyes were a little darker than they normally were.

"For shame, Zelig-sensei," Gin said with a slow shake of her head. "I could always fight him, if you don't want to . . ."

His head snapped to the side, his gaze widening as he gawped at his little wife. She appeared not to notice as she gave a little shrug and stepped forward. Cain rolled his eyes and caught her arm. "Keep time, will you?" he growled as he yanked off his watch and shoved it into her hand.

She smiled sweetly and stepped back beside Samantha. Cain strode over to retrieve the bokuto that Kurt had tossed aside when InuYasha had given him the staff.

Kurt eyed Cain warily, unsure what to expect. He'd never seen Cain fight, but Samantha had told him before that youkai bowed to the mightiest, relying on the strength of the tai-youkai, and in their way of life, they truly respected and recognized the strongest as the different regions' tai-youkai. That meant that Zelig was regarded as one of the strongest youkai in the world . . .

Mighty heavy claim, wasn't it, considering Kurt had fought Bas and the others on a daily basis . . .

Kurt went on the offensive, dashing forward with the staff hefted aloft, only to bring it down hard. Cain parried with the bokuto as Kurt hit the ground and scrambled to his feet.

Cain slipped around Kurt in a fluid burst of motion, flicking out the blade to catch Kurt under the arm. He bobbed the staff but didn't drop it, swinging around as he brandished the staff in a wide arc. Cain jumped back, neatly avoiding it, eyeing Kurt warily, his movements controlled, steady. Knocking the staff to the side, he whipped around, using his momentum to smash his elbow into Kurt's stomach.

Kurt doubled over, fought to keep himself from puking as his guts twisted over upon themselves in a mass of pain.

Cain stepped back, waiting for Kurt to straighten up. "Damn," Kurt groaned with a wince as he stumbled a few steps away.

"Come on, Dr. Drevin. You're not finished yet, are you?" Cain asked quietly.

Scowling at him, Kurt forced himself to stand up straight. "Course not," he ground out.

Cain nodded in silent approval.

Damned if he didn't move faster than Samantha. It was almost as though he could dissolve his body or teleport to another place. Shooting from one side to the other, Cain moved with dizzying speed. He swung the bokuto at Kurt, who managed to block with the staff, but not before the blunt blade cracked against his left shoulder.

Kurt shoved Cain's sword aside then lowered his right shoulder to bump him back.

Cain stumbled. Kurt swung the staff before he could recover. The sharpened loop sliced cleanly through the fabric of his shirt and connected with his skin. Cain hissed out a sharp breath and tossed the bokuto to his other hand as blood seeped into the stark white cotton sleeve of his shirt.

Kurt blinked as the blade of the unremarkable weapon took on a teal glow, as though Cain were somehow able to channel his energy into it. A second later, he swung it hard, unleashing a volley of teal blurs shooting directly at him.

Kurt vaulted off the ground in an effort to avoid them. The shards of energy ripped through his clothes, singeing his legs. The pain was negligible, but the tingling shock that reverberated up his legs wasn't, and when he landed a moment later, he had to lean upon the staff to keep himself from falling flat on his ass.

"Time," Gin hollered.

Cain flipped the sword in the air and jammed it, point down, in the dirt before strolling back over to his wife and reaching for the watch again. "InuYasha?" he asked with a pointed look.

The hanyou snorted but stomped forward, standing with his arms crossed over his chest,

his ears flicking as though he were listening for something. He glowered at Kurt for a long moment—actually, Kurt had a feeling that he wasn't glowering as much as he was considering something really deeply. His clothing, however, seemed oddly familiar to Kurt—a strange but archaic looking outfit constructed in a recognizably Japanese style and crafted out of what looked like red suede or something like that . . .

Kurt wiped the sweat off his brow on his right shoulder and blinked in surprise as InuYasha unsheathed an impossibly old, horribly rusty sword. After being on the receiving end of so many youkai swords of late, why was it that the one being with the most inscrutable aura had a weapon that was so damn pathetic? Straightening his back, he started to smile despite himself—an incredulous sort of sound as he slowly shook his head. That had to be a joke, right? And a really, really bad one, too . . .

InuYasha flicked his wrists, and Kurt's humor died away. In a flash of light, that pathetic looking sword transformed into the biggest, meanest, scariest damn thing that he'd ever clapped eyes on. Easily six feet long, the blade, itself, was curved, shiny and razor sharp, and around the hilt was a strange sort of silver-white fur.

"Oh, *hell*, no," he gritted out, taking a step back away from InuYasha. "You've got to be kidding me!"

InuYasha grinned then pushed off the ground, heaving the massive sword over his head and bringing it down as he aimed for Kurt's head. He tried to leap back out of the way, but that damned sword was huge. Lifting the staff between his hands in a futile hope that he could block it, he squeezed his eyes closed as a surge of adrenaline rushed through him.

The blade connected with a heavy smack that shook him all the way down his arms. A flare of light erupted around him—from somewhere deep inside him: a flash of power that was stronger than any that he'd ever felt before, and he opened his eyes in time to see a hazy glow emitting from the staff—or was it from him? InuYasha sprang backward as

the sword flew the other way, end over end. It sank deep into the earth about fifteen feet away, the blade giving off wisps of smoke that rose and dissipated in the air. It was just a rusty old sword once more, and suddenly, InuYasha chuckled. “So you really *are* his reincarnation,” he rumbled.

“Whose?” Kurt asked. Sure, he’d heard the rumors. InuYasha and Kagome had both told him that he was the reincarnation of some monk they’d known six hundred years ago or so. It bothered him, didn’t it? Standing there on that morning with the wind picking up, lightly carrying the scent of impending rain . . . He was Kurt Drevin, wasn’t he? The name ‘Miroku’ meant nothing at all to him . . .

A flash of a dream that had laid dormant in his memory . . . That strange cave . . . the singing . . . the woman . . . and he’d been holding this weapon in his hands, hadn’t he? Dressed in strange black robes with a dark purple sash . . . Miroku . . .?

“That was his,” InuYasha called out, waving a hand at the staff in Kurt’s hands. “Shakuju,” he said. “Shippou kept it all these years.”

“Shippou . . .?”

InuYasha nodded, crossing his arms deep within the folds of his strange shirt, his hair blowing in the wind coming off the ocean. Eyes bright gold—he saw everything, didn’t he?—InuYasha looked like he was thinking about something: something long past . . . “He traveled with us, too. Worthless little kit at the time . . . ain’t worth much more now, come to think of it . . .”

Kagome heaved a sigh. “Baka . . .” she muttered under her breath.

“You done with this, Zelig?” InuYasha called over his shoulder.

The first droplets of rain started to fall. Cain chuckled, too. “Yeah, I think we are,” he

said, giving a slow nod of approval. “Kurt . . . you’re free to go.”



**Author's Notes**  
**Tenion Evars sword**  
**Trimitrae Bas sword**  
**Shalaja Mirok's staff.**



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
**Free...?**

## Chapter 79

# Derigation

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Kurt heaved a sigh and rubbed his forehead as he frowned at the display screen of the slimfile. *'Jesus . . . what the hell do they think I am? A miracle worker . . .?'*

"Miss me?" Samantha asked, slipping her arms around his neck and leaning in to kiss his cheek.

He rubbed her clasped hands and closed the file. "Didn't I just see you a few minutes ago?"

She shifted her eyes up at the ceiling as though she were concentrating on something. "An hour, at least."

"Oh, well, in that case . . ." he murmured.

She smiled and kissed his cheek again. "How's it going?"

Sighing again, he slowly shook his head. "Not too well," he replied. "They didn't give me a hell of a lot of anything to go on here."

Her smile faded slightly. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Kurt turned in the chair but grimaced when his still store body protested the movement. "Yeah," he said quietly, staring into her eyes, willing her to understand. "I'm sure."

She looked like she wanted to argue, but she only nodded rather reluctantly. “Why don’t you let me check your bandages?”

“I’m fine,” he told her. She didn’t listen as she carefully pulled the bandage on his arm loose. “It’s seeping a little,” she fretted. “Are you sure you don’t need stitches?”

“It’s not that deep,” he insisted. She frowned and shook her head as she reached for the herbal salve Gin had brought up just after the fight.

Kurt tried not to flinch when Samantha gingerly dabbed at the wound with a wad of gauze she’d dampened with antiseptic wash.

It was strange, wasn’t it? The idea of being ‘free’ . . . It didn’t actually feel that much different, did it? Unlike the stark change that Samantha had to have felt when he’d let her go . . . It bothered him a lot, but . . .

Just after the battle ended, the men had asked him into Cain’s office—again—only this time, they offered him a job, instead. They wanted him to work for Bas and Gunnar in the youkai special crimes division, specializing in locating and closing down other research facilities around the world. They’d also said that they’d like for him to consider dissuading any of the hunters that he knew of from continuing their practices, and while Kurt was inclined to think that the vast majority of those hunters who really could differentiate a youkai from a human were few and far between, he had to acknowledge the truth in their concerns.

*“Sorry for being so rough with you out there,” Cain remarked, sipping a mug of coffee. “We needed to see what you’re capable of—what you’re really capable of.”*

*Kurt grunted, not at all placated by Cain’s backhanded apology. “Sure.”*

*“We want you to work for us,” Cain went on. “Hunting down these facilities . . . making sure that they’re wiped out . . .”*

*“Though trackers, alone, should take care of the problem,” Gunnar added. “You shouldn’t have to . . . convince them.”*

*Kurt rolled his eyes at the blatant censure in Gunnar’s tone, the disapproval at Kurt’s prior methods used to convince the researchers that they wanted to find a new area of expertise. “How much do you know about human nature, Inutaisho?” he countered quietly, refusing to tuck his proverbial tail between his legs and run away. “I’ll tell you: we’re stupid and arrogant . . . We believe that we’re smarter, better than anything else on earth. If I’d gone in and asked them to stop, do you honestly believe they’d have complied? Of course not. Tracker or no tracker, they’d have found another way to do those things . . . and that was not acceptable.”*

*Gunnar narrowed his gaze coldly. “Be that as it may, we do not wish to perpetuate the belief that we are . . . what was your word? Oh, right—monsters,” he reiterated.*

*“Kurt . . .” Cain interrupted as the two stared each other down. “What you did at those facilities . . . It may have been necessary in those instances, but we want to do things differently—for your peace of mind, too.”*

*“I already ensured my peace of mind,” Kurt replied evenly.*

*Cain nodded, a certain understanding entering his gaze. “Of course . . . Kurt . . .”*

*“Yes?”*

*“There is one other thing . . .”*

*Kurt sat back and waited for the other shoe to drop.*

*The men exchanged glances, and Cain sighed. “We . . . we wanted to know where you stand on the idea of Samantha going back to work.”*

*He frowned. “As a hunter, you mean?”*

*Cain nodded. “Yeah.”*

*The frown widened. Why did that question feel like a trap, waiting for him to step on it to spring it? “Do I want her to hunt, you mean?” he clarified.*

*Cain nodded again, his expression inscrutable.*

*Kurt sighed, rubbing his eyes in a tired sort of way. “To be honest? I . . . I don’t want her out there, no,” he muttered.*

*“Good,” Gunnar stated. “Then we’re in agreement.”*

*“Let’s be clear,” Cain added quietly. “We’re not babying her—we’ve never wanted her to hunt. It’s a harsh job—taking lives, no matter the reason . . . It’s not pretty . . . But now . . . The fear might be ungrounded, but it’s still there, and . . .”*

*Bas cleared his throat as he sank further down in the thickly appointed chair where he’d been sitting ever since Kurt stepped into the office. He still didn’t look like he was feeling too great, and for the briefest of moments, Kurt couldn’t help the small twinge of guilt that surged through him. “We just don’t know if she’s mentally ready to go back out there. I mean, most of the time, she seems okay, but . . . but there have been a few times when she’s . . . I don’t know? Flipped out, I guess you could say . . .”*

*“‘Flipping out’, as Bas so eloquently put it, can mean death out there,” Gunnar added. “If Samantha were to flip out’ again . . .”*

*"I get it," Kurt muttered.*

And the hell of it was, he *did* understand. It wasn't that they didn't trust her abilities; they were frightened, just like he was. If something happened to her . . . "Sam . . ." Kurt began slowly, unsure exactly how to approach this subject.

"This might sting a bit," she said.

He gritted his teeth and waited for her to finish spreading salve on his wound. A bit was kind of an understatement. The damned salve stung like a bitch . . . Still, he managed to endure it without letting her know that it bothered him, and he let out a deep breath when she finally taped another bandage into place.

"It does look better," she mused. "I wish you healed as fast as I do . . . Let me see your back."

He sighed but leaned forward so that she could check him. "Sam . . . you . . . you aren't thinking about going back to work right away, are you?"

She hesitated for a moment as she unwrapped the ace bandage that covered his chest. "They don't want me to, but no," she admitted quietly. "At least not right away. It's not because of my family, though . . . You don't want me to go back, either, do you?"

He made a face, unsure how to explain his thoughts on the matter to her without upsetting her or making her feel as though he thought that she was inept. He didn't think that, at all, damn it. It just figured that her family would be as underhanded as to get him to do their dirty work, didn't it? Letting out a little sigh, he reached out to take her hand and tugged her around so she was standing before him. "It isn't that I don't want you to work," he said. "It's just . . . hunting is dangerous, isn't it? If something happened to you . . . If I lost you . . ." Swallowing hard, trying not to flinch, he shook his head, couldn't meet her gaze.

She stared at him for several long seconds, then finally smiled. “I may want to go back to work eventually,” she confessed. “But right now . . . I was thinking . . . Tanny’s been through so much—more than I have, really, and . . . and she needs me. There’re so many things that she doesn’t know—doesn’t understand . . . and it’s my job to teach her those things, right?”

“Our job,” he corrected quietly, frowning. “Is that what you really want?”

She considered it for a moment then nodded, her smile widening as she pondered his question. “I think so,” she said. “She’s such a smart child. I don’t think it’ll take long to get her caught up to children her age, but . . . but the social skills . . . She needs those, but I think she’s doing just fine. Did you know that she learned another word today?”

Kurt smiled, feeling the first stirrings of relief ebbing over him. “What one?”

She giggled, her cheeks flushing prettily. “Mama.”

He blinked then chuckled. “Good one to learn.”

Samantha nodded then shrugged. “Maybe when she’s older—better adjusted . . . Maybe I’ll want to go back to work then,” she mused. “We could work together, you and I . . . The new dynamic duo . . .”

Kurt snorted indelicately. “Like I’d be able to concentrate with you around.”

“Are you implying that I can’t hold my own?” she teased though he could discern a trace amount of stiffness underlying her words.

“Nope, not in the least, but if you were there, I’d spend all my time looking at you, and that’d probably be bad.”

She laughed at his prediction then leaned in to kiss him. The warmth of her mouth was entirely too inviting, wasn't it? Too welcome . . . and way too intoxicating. He grimace when he tried to pull her closer, as his body reminded him rather vehemently that he should be thinking about recovering instead of trying to figure out a way to get Samantha into bed.

They both turned at the sound of the door scraping open in time to watch Tanny slip into the room, holding her skirt up like a hammock that was filled with an assortment of candy. Samantha bit her lip and shot Kurt a quick glance before turning her attention back to the child once more. "Where'd you get all that?" he demanded mildly.

She smiled sweetly up at him. "Mine," she said.

Kurt blinked. "Now that can't be good . . ."

"That's a lot of candy, sweetie," Samantha pointed out.

"Mine," Tanny repeated. "Mine, tanny!"

Kurt shot Samantha a completely droll sort of look. "Wow . . . You know, I don't think I'm going to like that word at all . . ."

Samantha giggled. "No?"

Kurt snorted and slowly shook his head.

\*\*\*\*\*

*The singing . . . always the singing . . .*

*He smiled, recognizing the sound of that voice. He knew it, didn't he? Strange, wasn't it? He hadn't realized it before . . . Leaning against the sturdy tree trunk as the amber shades of evening fell, he felt a sense of contentment the likes of which he hadn't known in such a long, long time.*

*"It's beautiful, isn't it, houshi-sama?"*

*His smiled took on a tender sort of brilliance as his gaze fell away from the setting sun to the woman kneeling beside him in the grass. "Absolutely," he replied.*

*She sighed a happy sigh and stroked the tiny fire-cat-youkai curled up in her lap. "Everything's been so quiet since InuYasha left, hasn't it?"*

*He nodded, dragging his eyes off her face, staring instead at the first bright stars so high above. Nearly a fortnight since they'd last seen their friend. He'd followed the woman he loved through the Bone Eater's Well, and while they all knew that he was where he wanted to be, it didn't mean that they missed him or Kagome, for that matter, any less. "I miss him, too," he replied quietly.*

*"Promise me something?" she murmured.*

*He glanced at her, her skin glowing with a honeyed hue in the waning light of day. "If I can," he agreed. "Maybe even if I can't."*

*She shot him an endearingly bashful little smile before her gaze fell to the cat in her lap. "Well, I just thought . . . InuYasha and Kagome found each other, right? Kagome, the reincarnation of the woman he loved . . . and I thought . . ." Trailing off, she shook her head, as though she believed that whatever she had on her mind was silly.*

*“You thought what, Sango?”*

*“Promise me we’ll find each other again . . . our souls . . . our hearts . . . If we are reincarnated one day, too, I think . . . I think I’d like to spend that lifetime with you, too . . .”*

*His smile spread over his features as he leaned the Shakuju against the tree and sank down beside her. “I’ll find you,” he promised, reaching out, taking her hand, twining his fingers around hers.*

*“How . . . how will I know?” she whispered, and even in the semi-dark, he could tell that she was blushing.*

*He sighed and let his head fall back, gazing at the stars again. “You’ll save me,” he replied simply. “You’ll save me, just like you did in this lifetime.”*

*“How did I save you?” she asked quietly.*

*He chuckled. “You gave me a reason to fight,” he told her, “a reason to believe . . . and in the next life, and the next one . . . and forever . . . I’ll find you, Sango. I’ll always find you . . .”*

Kurt’s eyes opened slowly, focusing on the sun-brightened room. He was in bed, alone, and that was almost enough to disorient him. Sitting up slowly, he grimaced. His ribs hurt like hell. A moment later, he remembered. He was a free man, wasn’t he? Free . . .

No one had brought him a breakfast tray. He supposed that was the first sign that things were different. He wasn’t going to be confined to this room any more, was he? What a strange feeling, that . . .

Glancing at the clock, Kurt shook his head and looked again. It was nearly ten in the morning? It felt completely strange, didn’t it?

Pushing himself to his feet, ignoring the various aches and pains that protested the movements, he frowned as he thought about that strange dream. He'd been someone else in that dream, hadn't he? The man in the black robes and purple sash . . . the one named Miroku . . .

For a split second, he considered taking a shower, but figured that he'd need a little help—at least to unwrap his ribs for the duration, and while he wasn't entirely certain that he'd actually get anything to eat since it was much later than he normally did, he remembered with a grimace that his ribs had been hurting far too much the night before to eat very much of his supper, and with that thought in mind, he headed for the door, half expecting it to be locked but knowing in the back of his mind that it wouldn't be.

Still, it was a strange thing, he mused, as he shuffled down the hallway toward the stairs. Samantha had mentioned that she had an apartment, and for a split second, he considered asking her if they could stay there, but in the end, he discarded the idea. No, her family wanted her here—here where they could reassure themselves that she was all right, and he supposed that he could deal with that, too, for as long as it took. After all, it was a pretty small concession, wasn't it? Besides, he had other things on his mind . . . things he couldn't even begin to understand . . .

That dream . . . It hadn't *felt* like a dream, had it? It had seemed more like a . . . a memory. It couldn't be his memory, though, and he knew it. He'd never been to Japan before, and . . . and how the hell did he know that was where those two people—Miroku and Sango—had been?

*“So you really are his reincarnation . . .”*

Kurt shook his head. He didn't believe in that sort of thing, did he? He didn't . . . and yet . . .

And yet, the woman's face—Sango—flashed through his mind again, as real and as vivid as it would have been had he met her just yesterday, and as quickly as her face started to fade, another replaced it: a human face that hadn't belonged on the body of the hanyou woman he'd come to know . . . and the faces . . .

He stopped mid-stride, his eyes widening then narrowing by turns. Samantha's face—her *human* face . . . it was the same as the woman in his dream, wasn't it?

*'That . . . that can't be . . .'*

Moving forward again, Kurt shook his head. Okay, so he was a skeptic, as far as that went. He didn't rightly believe in such things as reincarnation and all of that, but . . .

But, he had to allow, at least to himself, that if he were inclined to . . .

*"Promise me we'll find each other again . . ."*

So that wouldn't have been such a bad thing, would it . . .?

Stepping off the bottom of the stairs, he pushed the thought aside and headed for the kitchen. The mansion was strangely empty, but as he neared the doorway, he slowed his step at the sound of very familiar voices—and one word.

"Mine!"

"No, mine."

*"Mine!"*

"No, *mine.*"

“Mine! Tanny!”

A very loud snort. “‘Tanny,’ yours. *Cake*, mine!”

“No, mine!”

Kurt stopped in the kitchen doorway and blinked, pressing his lips together in a thin line as he tried to make sense of the tableaux before him.

Tanny was standing on the pristine white marble counter with her hands on her hips in a frilly white linen dress adorned with yards of lace and streamers of ribbon—and a stubborn frown on her face as she glared at the North American tai-youkai, who was glaring right back at her, hands on the counter, and leaning down so that he was eye-level with the child. Beside Tanny stood the elevated cake plate where Gin always kept the cakes she made for Cain—even Kurt knew about those via Samantha. Just inside the doorway stood Gin, her arms crossed over her chest and the strangest look of near-exasperation on her pretty face as she watched the battle of wills unfolding, too.

“Ah-ah-ah! Don’t you touch that!” Cain growled when Tanny started to reach for the cake.

“Mine!” Tanny insisted, stomping her foot with every syllable to emphasize her point. “Mine, mine, mine, mine!”

“No, no, no, no!” Cain argued. “Great-grandma’s cakes are mine!”

“Zelig-sensei, you are *not* arguing with her, are you?” Gin finally demanded in a quiet, pinched tone.

Cain didn’t even glance at her. “She’s got to learn,” he insisted. “Everyone else knows they’re mine—everyone but her.”

Gin's mouth dropped open at the sulky tone in the man's voice. Kurt bit his cheek.

Tanny stomped her foot once more, then leaned down quickly, digging her hand deep into the fluffy, white frosted cake and smashing it into her mouth.

"H-hey!" Cain grouched, shaking his head in abject disbelief. "Gin! Did you see what she did?"

Gin cleared her throat. "Oh, I did," she agreed. Kurt had a feeling that she was trying not to laugh.

Cain reached for the cake plate. Tanny was faster. Grasping the edge with both hands, she pulled it along the cupboard out of his reach. "Mine!" she insisted in a completely triumphant tone.

Cain opened his mouth to say something. Gin was faster. "Cain Zelig, you leave her alone, you bully! She's just a little girl, and you need to learn to share, anyway!"

"But you make those for me!" Cain insisted in a completely whiny tone.

"And I'll make you another one—if you leave her alone *and* tell her you're sorry for being mean."

"M-mean?" Cain sputtered indignantly. "She stole my cake! She's a cake thief!"

"Come on, Tanny," Kurt said, carefully stepping around Gin to scoop up the child, fistfuls of cake and all. He gave Cain a wide berth as he headed for the doorway again. "Let's get out of here before he has you arrested or something."

Kurt glanced at his soon-to-be daughter then shook his head. She was peering over his shoulder, sticking her tongue out at Cain.

“Uh . . . Zelig-sensei, you’re not sticking your tongue out at a child, are you?” Gin demanded behind him.

Without stopping to think about it, Kurt looked back in time to see Cain doing exactly that.

“*Completely* bent . . . and I thought Evan was bad,” Kurt muttered under his breath.

Tanny heaved a sigh and happily licked the icing off her fingers . . .



**Find Thought from Tany:  
Mine!**

## Chapter 80

# Miracles

-----

“So you’re originally from North Dakota?” Samantha asked as she wandered along the shore holding Kurt’s hand. The sun hovered just above the trees, and the crests of the ocean reflected the colors, constant motion with a hue that carried from wave to wave.

He nodded. “That’s right.”

She pushed her hair out of her face. “What’s it like?”

Kurt shrugged. “Don’t remember a hell of a lot about it,” he replied honestly.

“Nothing?”

He shot her a quick glance and shrugged again. “Winters were really cold,” he said.

She laughed. It was easy to laugh with him, wasn’t it?

He smiled a small, rather boyish grin. “Well, it was . . . Then I moved in with Old Granger, and—”

“Old Granger?”

Kurt grimaced suddenly, as though he hadn’t meant to mention him.

“Who’s that?” she pressed.

“Oh, uh . . . n-no-no one . . .” he hedged.

She stopped and lifted an eyebrow playfully. “Is there something you haven’t told me? Another skeleton, rattling around in your closet, perhaps?”

“I wish,” he grumbled.

Her lips twitched. “Okay, if you really won’t tell me . . .”

“Oh, hell! You’re trying to guilt me now?” he asked.

She smiled. “Nope. Why? *Are* you feeling guilty?”

He snorted. “No way.” He tugged on her hand to get her to walk again and exhaled softly. “He’s my grandfather.”

“Your grandfather? Is he still alive?”

Kurt nodded. “Oh, yeah.”

“Do I get to meet him?”

He made a face. “Not if I can help it.”

She stopped abruptly and shot him a worried frown, unable to keep her ears from flattening for a moment. “*Taijya?*”

“What are you doing that for?” he asked sharply, scowling as he tried to pry the appendages up.

She managed a tight little smile, but her eyes were sad. “It’s because I’m hanyou, right? Because I’m a demon . . .”

Kurt blinked and shook his head, unable to grasp what was going through her mind. “What?”

She shrugged, trying to seem nonchalant about the whole thing. “I-it’s okay,” she assured him in a falsely bright tone. “I . . . I understand . . .”

“You . . . you think I’m embarrassed of you?” he demanded quietly, incredulously. “That’s . . .? No . . .”

“He probably hates us as much as you do—did,” she amended, once more making excuses where none were necessary.

“Sam . . .”

She uttered a small laugh and slowly shook her head. “If someone did that to my family, I think I might hate them, too.”

“Sam,” he stated louder, grasping her arm to make her look at him. “It’s not you,” he said then winced. “Well, okay, granted, he’s not too fond of your kind, but no . . . Old Granger’s a dirty old man—and I mean that in the most literal way, possible.”

She shifted her eyes to the side, peering up at him, and while she didn’t look entirely convinced, she did look like she was listening.

Kurt sighed. “He hit on my teacher, for God’s sake,” he muttered, shaking his head in complete disgust.

Samantha bit her lip and tried not to smile. “Was she hot?”

“Hell, no. She was a heavyset woman with a bulbous nose and a really scary black mole on the end of her nose—you know: the kind that sticks out in graphic relief with those nasty whisker-hairs sticking out of it? Thinning gray hair and . . .” He trailed off, affecting a full-body shiver. “I got away with the first couple years. Said that he was sick or had the flu or something, but that year, I remember, Ms. Butterbee—yes, her name was Ms. Butterbee—sort of stared at me over the top of her glasses, and I could tell that she really didn’t buy that Old Granger was sick again, so . . .” He made a face, as though he really didn’t want to discuss it. “So I told him about it, and he got all excited.” Laughing suddenly, Kurt shook his head again. “Old bastard . . . should have known that he was only thinking in terms of my female teacher. It was humiliating. We walked into the school, and he started tossing this gray dust he kept in this old crock to ward off demons. He tossed it right into the vice principal’s face, and when we got to my classroom, he marched right up to Ms. Butterbee and grabbed her . . .” He grimaced, his cheeks pinking just a little. “Her left breast . . .”

“He didn’t . . .”

He sighed and scratched the back of his head. “Oh, he did, all right . . .”

“Oh . . . my . . .”

“The last thing that I want or need is for you to be groped by a nasty old codger like him.”

She laughed and grabbed his hand again, tugging him down the impossibly narrow path to the little alcove where they’d first decided that they could become a family—that they wanted to keep Tanny. Sitting down to watch the ocean, she smiled and breathed a contented sigh. “Thank you for returning my things,” she said quietly.

“I would have done that sooner, but . . .” he said as he sat beside her and dug out his cell phone. “I gave Bas my number, right?”

“You did,” she agreed.

“Of course I did,” he said, scowling at the device. “Maybe I should call, though . . . in case they lost it or something . . .”

“Tanny’s fine,” Sam reassured him. In fact, that was the main reason they were out here. The poor guy had done nothing but prowl around the mansion after Tanny had happily waved goodbye from the car seat securely fastened in Bas’ Chevy Blazer, and Samantha had decided that the taijya needed a distraction, of sorts.

Besides, he’d spent almost all of his first day of freedom trying to eek out information on the youkai research facility he’d been asked to look into, but when Tanny had seen a cow on television, Sydnie had told her that they had one at home, and the child had jumped at the chance to see it for herself. Sydnie had taken a liking to Tanny and had offered to let her spend the night with them. Samantha wasn’t entirely sure that it would work out all right, but Bas promised that he’d bring her back if she didn’t want to stay.

Kurt intercepted her smile and grimaced. “Give me a break,” he complained. “I’m new at this whole ‘daddy’ thing.”

She giggled and crawled around, settling herself between his raised, spread knees. “You’re so damn cute when you’re fretting over Tanny,” she murmured as she slipped her arms around his neck.

His breath caught as his eyelids drooped; as his lips parted just slightly. “Samantha,” he whispered.

She could feel her heart fluttering crazily, could sense the electricity in the moment. He reached up, touched her cheek, an expression on his face that was amazing to behold. A curious sense of wonder—an underlying poignancy . . . a sense of reverence that made her catch her breath . . . The brush of his fingertips set off a yearning so bittersweet, and she knew that she would never forget—this moment, the utter contentment, the knowledge that he could be her entire world . . .

He smiled gently with a rare vulnerability shining through; one that he tried so hard to hide. Everything—everything in the space of a single heartbeat, and he . . .

His smile faded, replaced by a fragment of truth, the vaguest whisper of an unspoken vow . . . The touch of lips, of silent promises . . .

He sighed, his arms slipping around her, holding her gently, like he thought she'd break if he held on too tightly. Hands shaking with a lethargic sense of forever, he shook his head as she leaned in closer.

“Sami . . . I . . .” he murmured between kisses. She uttered a sound; a guttural plea, unable to lend voice to the surging emotions, and in the end, maybe that was all right, too.

Nibbling his lower lip, she could feel the violence in his tremors. He felt so vibrant, so very alive, and for the first time in such a long while, she felt it, didn't she? That sense of entire perfection—a calm, a quiet, a sense of harmony, even as his heartbeat thundered in his ears . . .

“Every . . . one . . . will . . . know . . .” he muttered as his head fell back, between the strain of his uneven breathing.

Nuzzling against his neck, drunk on the scent of him . . . licking, sucking, kissing—savoring every last nuance . . . The whisper of his heart and soul . . .

“I want you,” she whispered. “I . . .”

He grimaced and pushed her back just a little, forcing his eyes open, his hands shaking, his breath rattling over her in a temerarious rush. “But . . . they’ll know . . .”

She uttered a terse giggle. “They won’t,” she argued. “I already smell like you.”

He didn’t look like he believed or understood her. She laughed and leaned forward to kiss him again. “O-oh . . .” he breathed as she shoved her hands up under his shirt, seeking the feel of his flesh. His breath was an audible gasp, his body tensing as her fingertips brushed over his skin. He didn’t have the sculptured physique that the men of her family did, but there was something infinitely more inviting in him, the lure of him that she simply couldn’t ignore. She pushed his shirt up, breaking the contact of their kiss long enough to tug the shirt over his head and cast it aside then blinked, mesmerized by the sprinkling of hair that covered his chest: fine, black hairs with a few graying ones peppered throughout . . . It covered the upper part of his chest, only to taper into one fine line, extending downward where it finally disappeared under the waist of his jeans . . .

She leaned against him, the heat of his body permeating the thin cotton dress she wore. He moaned, pulling her closer, capturing her lips in a searing kiss that shot through her with a ferocity that she simply couldn’t ignore. Too many emotions, too many thoughts that spun around into an insular strand. The reason—*any* reason . . . in a time and place where sanity and the furious hope collided . . .

She pushed him back, straddling his chest as she pressed herself closer, savoring the feel of his body.

“S-Samantha,” he breathed, closing his eyes as she ran her hands over him. Heaving, straining . . . She could feel the hardness of him, straining against the coarse denim.

The flick of her tongue against his teeth elicited a shiver, a groan . . . The consuming inebriation of the moment . . . He couldn't restrain the ragged moan that slipped out of him; captured in her . . .

Splayed fingers running down the center of his chest, her fingertips brushing over his skin with deft tenacity, sliding lower, stroking him through his jeans . . .

Straining against her, he jerked, thrashed, moaned. With a roughened growl, he grabbed her wrists, rolled her over, slamming her hands down against the ground, rising over her, quelling her protests with a single look. Eyes rife with unyielding intensity, he glowered at her for a moment, as though he were trying to make sense of something that she didn't comprehend.

With a little groan, he fell on her, nudging her head to the side, suckling her throat as a fierce growl colored the air. Bending her knees, she couldn't help it as she tightened her thighs, cradling him against her as a deep burn ignited and spread. Her mind felt like it was coming apart, and she clung to him, willing him to save her . . .

Kurt's hands were everywhere, touching her, gripping her, stroking her as she whimpered, her breathing reduced to smothered gasps. The brush of his fingers through the soft fabric set off a frenzy of trembling as everything that led up to that insular moment formed, congealed, and dissolved in the space of a single heartbeat.

His hands slipped over her hips, up her thighs, only to reverse directions as he pushed the skirt up out of the way. Fingers squeezing, exploring, he rocked his hips against her as the burn spiraled higher, hotter, fiercer . . .

Fingertips dancing, touching, demanding . . . He nipped the tender skin of her throat as she forgot to breathe. Digging her fingers into his arms, she begged, she pleaded . . . she drew him closer, closer . . .

Slipping his arms under her back, he pulled her up without breaking the connection of his mouth on her. She heard the faint 'snick' of her zipper but couldn't think past the feel of his lips, his tongue . . . He pushed the dress off her shoulders, let it slide down her body. She yanked her arms free and smashed herself against him, resting her cheek on his shoulder as he ran his hands up and down her spine.

He lowered her back once more, tugging the dress down her body. Catching the waistband of her simple white cotton panties, he sucked in a sharp breath as he pulled the garments off of her and dropped them to the side.

Forcing her eyes open, she swallowed hard as she stared at him. Standing between her splayed knees, he was tugging almost clumsily at the fastenings of his pants. His body was covered with a fine sheen of sweat, and he shoved his jeans down, catching the left leg with his right foot and yanking himself free before repeating the process with the other leg and kicking the discarded jeans aside.

With a smothered groan, he met her gaze, the fire banked in the depths of his eyes enough to make her forget to breathe. Dropping to his knees, he ran his hands up her legs and back down again, rubbing, caressing . . . Lifting her knee, he kissed it, grazed his teeth over it as a shiver raced up her spine. There was something wholly reverent in his touch, something entirely gentle despite the heady strength that flowed just below the surface. She arched her back, stretched up to meet his fingertips as they brushed along the contours, the hollows of her flesh with a whimper, a moan . . .

He rose over her, his skin caressing hers, teasing hers. The hair on his chest tickled her in an almost sinful way. Lips falling on hers with a breathtaking hunger, the sweetest desperation . . . She kneaded his shoulders, her kiss conveying the consuming urgency that she willed him to understand. The head of his penis pulsed against her, and she wiggled around in a vain effort to move him.

He kissed his way down her body, across her chest, nuzzling her breasts. She gasped, digging her fingers into his hair, dislodging the band that held the length of it in place. It spilled over his shoulders, brushing against her conflagrant skin, and she rose against him as his mouth—hot, voracious—closed over her nipple. It felt like a cloudburst, like a million explosions of heat and light. The demands of his body, of his indomitable will, driving her closer and closer to a precarious apex.

She whimpered when he kissed his way to the peak of her other breast, as his fingertips flicked over her swollen nipples. Closing his hand over it . . . tugging, rubbing, squeezing . . .

She bucked her hips against him as words failed her, as a culmination of want and necessity converted. He stroked her sides to quiet her, murmuring things between nibbles, kisses—things she didn't comprehend. The ache that surged inside her shivered into a volatile desire. She felt like crying—like screaming—and the more she struggled to make him understand, the slower, more deliberately he teased her, dragging his lips over her body—barely touching, his breath a heady balm.

She could feel herself trembling, could feel the sensitized nerves in her body waiting, waiting . . .

Kissing his way down her belly, delving his tongue into the shallow hollow of her navel . . . His thumbs flicked against the contours of her hips, and all the while, she felt as though she were dying . . .

Keening quietly, she struggled to breathe. He felt good—*too* good—too wonderful: his touch, his presence, and despite the innate knowledge that she was there, that she was with him, she couldn't withstand the slow torture, the sweet onslaught.

“P—please,” she half-breathed, half-whined. “Kurt . . . taijya . . .”

“I . . . I love you, little demon,” he told her quietly.

“Taijya . . .”

He ducked his head, his hard breaths rattling through her. Letting her eyes drift closed, she willed herself to relax. It didn't work.

Running his thumb along the very center of her, he uttered a soft groan as he slipped his hands under her hips, as he lifted her—opened her—ran the very tip of his tongue up, down . . . Flicking out against her as she gasped, pushing herself up off the ground . . . It felt as though something had been set free inside her—something wild and beautiful; something wanton and free . . .

But Kurt was relentless, unwilling to let her go. She could feel the absolute heat radiating off him in waves, could sense the turmoil gripping him. As desperately as he wanted her, he was holding himself back . . .

She couldn't help the soft whimpers that surged out of her with every passing moment. Biting down on her knuckle, she felt every inch of her body disintegrating . . .

“Samantha,” Kurt's voice came to her from what seemed to be very far away, “Open your eyes, Samantha . . .”

“N-n-n . . .” she breathed, shaking her head, or so she thought.

His lips touched the corner of her mouth, and she let her hand fall away, turning her face to intercept the kiss, to give it back.

“Little demon . . .”

She forced her eyes open at the sound of his quiet plea. He was staring down at her with a seriousness in his gaze—the same violet as the midnight sky . . .

Leaning on his hands, he swallowed hard, gritted his teeth as he pressed against her. With a sigh, a gasp, she lifted her hips to meet him. He gasped and groaned, tensing as her body yielded to him. “Oh, God,” Kurt groaned, every muscle in his body tight. “Damn . . .” Letting his forehead rest against hers, he drew a few long, drawn-out breaths.

“What’s the matter, taijya?” she whispered, shifting her body beneath his. He was holding his body above hers, wasn’t he, holding back . . . “You’re stronger than that, aren’t you?”

He managed a wan smile just before he grimaced and shuddered, grinding his hips against hers in one fluid motion, unleashing a strangled, rasping cry that mingled with hers . . . “N-no, I don’t . . . I don’t think I am . . .” he murmured.

She wanted to laugh, to cry, to tell everyone how happy she was. Maybe it was enough, though . . . enough just to be there with him . . .

He kissed her long and slow, his body remaining perfectly still, his muscles twitching madly as he restrained himself for a minute, allowing her to become accustomed to him. Then he started his move, his tongue creating a rhythm as he began to undulate his hips. She kissed him back once, twice, a thousand times in the space of a heartbeat, in the moment that was truly the beginning—their beginning.

The sensations he created; his body so deep inside hers, was beautiful, magical. With every stroke, the feeling of absolute completion grew and blossomed like the resurgent tide.

And yet, there was an underlying emotion, as well: a burgeoning sense that there was more—so much more. The fullness gave way to the innocent wonder; the innate

understanding that one moment would lead into the next, and the next one would flow into a lifetime . . .

The insular glow of something shimmering and bright . . . It called to her in whispers and sighs; in bated breaths and ragged moans. Kurt groaned as he leaned back, grasping her knees to drag her toward him. He let his head fall back as beads of sweat formed and trickled over his skin. Sam whimpered, her body rising to meet him as an ache deep down grew and multiplied.

Uttering a harsh, rasping cry, he jerked her against him once, twice, her name tumbling from his lips as he surged inside her. Those last few thrusts were all she needed. One moment, she was balancing on the very cusp as the ache roiled into something painful. The next, she could feel her entire world exploding as she cried out, only to have his lips silence her—a frenzied kiss that somehow soothed her, too . . .

She didn't know how long it took before cognizant thought intruded. When it did, though, she found herself cuddled against Kurt's chest. He had his eyes closed, and he was struggling to breathe, but he had a little smile on his face, too . . .

A complete sense of contentment swelled inside her as she snuggled closer to him. He was her mate for real—officially so—and that thought made her smile even as the sting of tears poked at her eyelids. "I love you," she said quietly.

He gave her a gentle squeeze and kissed the top of her head. "You'd think that I'd feel guilty about this," he said.

She braced her hands on his chest and grinned down at him. "Do you?"

"Not really."

"That's good," she agreed. "You realize, right? You're mine now—really mine."



# Chapter 81

## Daddy

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“So are you having any luck finding information?” Cain asked, leaning his elbow on the desk as he sipped a cup of coffee.

Kurt frowned and shook his head. “Not much. Not really,” he allowed. “I could get a better handle on it if I went there, but . . . but at the moment, I don’t think that’s a viable option.”

Cain considered that with a marked frown. “And Samantha?”

“I told her about all this. If I do eventually have to go, she’s all right with it.” He shrugged. “She said that she wants these places closed down as badly as I do, but . . .”

“But?” Cain prompted when Kurt trailed off.

Rubbing his eyes, Kurt shook his head. “When I was working in Chicago, I’d heard rumors that there was another facility in Prague, too. Nothing concrete, though, but I’d heard it from a couple sources. Even then, as much as I want these places shut down, I’d breathe better if I knew that the hunters I know of were out of commission before I got on a plane heading anywhere else.”

Cain nodded. “Prague?”

Kurt sighed. “Samantha’s already looking into it. She wants to stay home with Tanny, but she wants to help with the intelligence gathering side of it, too. I think . . . I think that it’s something she needs to do for herself.”

“That’s fine with me. I just don’t want her out there in the field. One close call was enough, I think . . .”

Kurt didn’t reply to that though he was inclined to agree. “Still, I know of about six guys who hunt youkai for these places—at least, they did until I shut them down. Maybe it’d be better to clean house here before worrying about the ones overseas, to start with.”

“And what would you do to these hunters?”

Kurt shrugged and reached for the cup of coffee that Gin had set on the edge of the desk for him. “What else? Put trackers in them. Keep tabs on them. Ask them nicely if they have information on any other facilities . . . suggest they find new lines of work . . .”

Cain grimaced. “You’re not going to hack anything off of any of them, are you?” he asked pointedly.

Kurt almost smiled—almost. “Wasn’t planning on it, no,” he agreed.

Only then did Cain relax. Sort of. “These others you know of . . . can they see us, too?”

Kurt shook his head and snorted. “Nope. They just got lucky a time or two.”

The soft rustle of the door opening drew their attention, and Kurt blinked as Tanny slipped into the room. She smiled brilliantly at him, her huge, dark eyes shining happily. She carried a pretty pink platter in her hands, and on that platter were about a dozen fluffy, pink frosted cupcakes with various sprinkles. “Cupcakes!” she announced with a proud sort of smile.

Kurt bit his lip. For some reason, he wasn't entirely sure that Tanny's cupcakes were going to go over very well . . .

Surprisingly, though, Cain only smiled at the girl. "Those look good, Tanny. Did Mommy make those for you?"

Tanny shot Cain an entirely suspect glance. "Gwanny Gin," she replied.

Kurt stifled a sigh as Cain slowly stood up, the smile on his face dissipating fast. "Run, Stinky-butt," he muttered under his breath when the tai-youkai started around the desk to intercept her. Tanny squawked and scooted out of the room before he could catch her.

"Oh! Careful, sweetie," Gin said, patting Tanny on the head when the girl nearly collided with her in her haste to escape. She ducked behind Gin's legs and peered out from behind her.

"Gin!" Cain complained. "She's got my cupcakes."

Gin shot Cain a quizzical glance. "No, she doesn't. She has *her* cupcakes."

Cain snorted, draping his hands on his hips as he narrowed his eyes on the girl. Tanny stuck out her tongue in retaliation. "Listen, woman, the only person you make cakes for is me, remember?"

Gin's mouth fell open. Kurt blinked. Why did he have the very distinct impression that this was going to get really, really ugly . . .? "Cain?"

"What?"

Gin cleared her throat. "Did you just call me . . . *woman*?"

He snorted. “Yes, I believe I did—woman.”

Gin’s ears flicked in a way that Kurt recognized from having seen Samantha’s do exactly the same about ten seconds before she let him have it for whatever he’d said wrong at the time—and he grimaced as he got up and tried to slip out of the room without drawing notice—no small feat, considering the two were blocking the doorway. “She’s a little girl—and your first great-granddaughter, you know,” Gin pointed out stiffly.

Cain shrugged. “The only reason she wants those is because she knows they’re mine!” he retorted.

“Now, Cain, I made a big cake for you, and I made the little ones for her. They’re just cupcakes, so—”

“Yeah, that’s right! *Cake*, Gin! *Cake!* Cup or pan, with or without a prefix, doesn’t matter when the word ‘cake’ is in the name!”

Gin heaved a frustrated sigh and slowly shook her head as Kurt grasped Tanny’s shoulders and quickly hurried her away from the altercation. “Zelig-sensei, you’re acting like a five-year-old.”

Cain snorted. “Whatever, baby girl, and don’t even try to tell me that you wouldn’t be upset if I gave away your Reese’s peanut butter cups.”

Checking his watch as he strode out of the office with Tanny following along behind him, he made a face. Cain had called him into his office to remind him that he and Samantha had an appointment with a judge in Bevelle regarding the adoption. He’d pulled a few strings to get the adoption hurried along, but this was just a preliminary placement meeting to grant Samantha and him temporary custody of Tanny until the actual adoption went through.

The only real problem, as far as Kurt could tell, was the idea that they weren't married, though Cain had also commented that this judge in particular was youkai and therefore understood the situation easily enough.

Still, the old cynicism that was embedded deep within him was too hard to ignore. Was it really going to be that simple? He sighed, glancing down at Tanny as she trotted along beside him.

Samantha was still in the back yard where he'd left her earlier. She was visiting with her aunt-slash-cousin, Jillian—he still didn't comprehend exactly how the family worked, but it wasn't entirely surprising that the bent-ness stemmed from Cain Zelig, himself. Tanny squealed when she spotted Samantha and ran to her, carefully balancing the cupcakes as she went.

Jillian was fussing with a very expensive-looking camera. "You know, Tanny is entirely photogenic," she commented as she peered through the lens then lowered it to adjust it a little more. "Just a doll-baby!"

Samantha smiled and straightened a bow in Tanny's hair. "You want to have your picture taken, sweetie?" she asked in the child's ear.

Tanny blinked around a mouthful of cupcake—and she had frosting all over her face and smeared on the tip of her nose, too. "Tanny?" she asked instead.

Jillian laughed. "I've got some candy, yes . . . and you can have it if you let me take your picture."

"Sam, we've got an hour before we have to be at the courthouse," Kurt reminded her.

Samantha nodded. “Okay. Tanny, why don’t you let Jilli take your picture? Granny Gin’s in the house, too.”

Tanny nodded as Samantha stood up and set the girl into the high-backed, white wicker chair that she’d just vacated. “You think she’ll be all right?” he asked as Samantha took his hand and started back toward the house.

She laughed and shook her head. “She’ll be just fine. Jilli’s good with babies.”

“As long as she keeps her away from your grandfather. He’s all pissed off about the cupcakes.”

Samantha bit her lip but couldn’t staunch the giggle that surged out of her. “They’ll be fine.”

Kurt snorted. “Your family’s bent,” he told her as they headed around the side of the mansion. “All of them—you, especially.”

“Oh?” she teased, her voice dropping an octave as her gaze took on a hazy glow that he knew a little too well.

“Oh, no,” he grumbled, cheeks pinking as he stubbornly shook his head. “We have to get to town, and even if we didn’t, I still remember what happened the *last* time you talked me into doing that . . .”

She let her head fall back as a trill of laughter escaped her. True enough, about the moment they’d stepped off the stairs that led to the mansion from the beach below—damn, but he’d been in a really good mood at the time—he’d blinked when three men pulled swords on him. They’d been ‘practicing’, or so they’d said—Kurt was inclined to believe that they were really lying in wait to lynch him—and they’d made no bones about knowing exactly what had happened during Kurt and Samantha’s stolen moments.

Worse yet was that Samantha had clapped her hands over her mouth and giggled, muttering something about, “*Oh, yeah, I forgot that you didn’t already smell like me . . .*”

Then she’d actually abandoned him, leaving him at the mercy of Gunnar, Ryomaru, and Evan, who had spent the next couple hours informing Kurt of every bad habit that Samantha possessed or that they could make up, and even Griffin, the hard-to-read bear-youkai had helped them out . . .

He slowly shook his head but smiled when he caught hers. She made it entirely too easy to do that, didn’t she? She really, really did . . .

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Kichiro stood in the window, staring at the yard stretched out below with a marked scowl on his features as he slowly, methodically sipped his coffee.

‘*Damn it . . .*’

How the hell had all of this happened? He’d thought that if he left Samantha alone—if he didn’t pressure her . . . He’d honestly believed . . .

Well, he had thought that she’d realize that he was right, that Drevin wasn’t even close to being good enough of a man for her. At least, that was what he’d *wanted* to think.

‘*Damn it.*’

He sighed. Last week during the fight designed to let the others test Drevin to see exactly what he was capable of, Kichiro had seen it for himself: the truth of Samantha’s feelings, written in her eyes when she’d looked at Drevin, and . . .

And Drevin's feelings had been a little too obvious, even from the very start. To be completely truthful, Samantha's expression . . . that was what had stopped him. He'd wanted to step up; wanted to beat Drevin black and blue. Looking at his daughter's face, though . . .

So he'd pushed the rage down yet again, squeezing it to the back of his mind as the entirety of his frustration rose to choke him, but he'd tamped it down for her—for Samantha, making yet another concession that simply didn't feel right to him in the least.

Kichiro sighed and drained the last of the coffee with a grimace. The problem wasn't that. Oh, he'd really wanted to believe everything he'd said about Stockholm Syndrome and all that, and maybe in the beginning, he'd honestly thought that it was a possibility. After all, Samantha *had* gained weight after returning home, hadn't she? She had believed that he'd come for her, and that was why she hadn't broken down at all . . . She'd known . . .

But once he'd gotten there—when he'd sent her away . . .

No, the real truth of it was far simpler yet far more complex than that. He knew, didn't he? Knew that Samantha was far too intelligent to let herself be swayed by some misplaced sense of gratitude. *'Damn it . . . anyone but him . . .'*

Rubbing his forehead, he frowned at the little girl—Tanny—his first granddaughter—sitting at the tiny tea table that Jillian had set up in the yard to take her picture. Ribbons and lace and ruffles and giggles that blended in his head with another laugh that had existed years ago in another country, in another home, and while that little girl had grown into a woman, Kichiro had to wonder . . .

Samantha and that man were mates, fine, but Kichiro wasn't entirely certain that he'd ever be able to look Drevin in the eye without seeing those images that were burned into

his brain, those debilitating atrocities that Samantha had endured, and all because of Drevin's prejudice, and like it or not—fair or not—Drevin's family had been destroyed, yes, but they hadn't been tortured, now had they? They hadn't been strapped to tables and humiliated in every single way imaginable. Did making excuses and spouting bullshit about the capriciousness of fate mean that one shouldn't be held accountable for their misdeeds in the present?

Bellaniece had told him the story—told him what had happened to Drevin's family, and as much as Kichiro tried to sympathize, he just couldn't. Memories of those endless days spend worrying, wondering, hoping, even when everything had seemed impossible . . . Kami, he couldn't shake them, couldn't get them out of his head, and while everyone else might be able to forgive him or at least try, Kichiro couldn't; simply couldn't . . .

Drevin would understand one day, wouldn't he? When that child grew up and left home, when she made choices that he might not like but had to face, he'd understand . . . Or maybe he wouldn't. Kichiro's stomach felt as though it were tied in knots. No, to be honest, he prayed that neither of them ever truly understood that kind of pain, that kind of heartache, that kind of helplessness.

That was the thing, wasn't it? Kichiro . . . he'd have given anything to have traded places with Samantha, to have saved her the humiliation and anguish inflicted upon her. He'd have given his life to save her from having to go through any of that because that's what a father did . . . *His daughter, his precious little girl . . .*

*'Balls, Kich . . . you know damn well that all Sam really wants is to be happy—something you've always said you wanted for her, too.'*

Heaving a sigh at his youkai voice's cryptic words, Kichiro shook his head. *'It's not that I don't want her to be happy,'* he argued stubbornly. *'That guy . . . he nearly destroyed her. Okay, sure, what happened to his family—that's sad, and yeah, I feel bad for that. No pup should have to go through that, should he? Even so . . . what he did to Sam . . .'*

*'Look, Kich. I'm not saying you need to forgive him right away, and I think that Sam could understand that, too, but . . . but as long as he's good to her . . .'*

He snorted and tried to block out the voice in his head. Why? Why was it that everyone—*everyone*—insisted on trying to make him feel bad for his anger? Why couldn't they understand that he had every right to be angry? If they wanted to make nice to Drevin, that was fine, wasn't it? Kichiro . . . he couldn't. He wasn't able to. He really couldn't make himself do that; not yet—maybe not ever.

Thing was, he was trying; he really was. Maintaining a stony silence around him, a carefully contained civility . . . it was all he could do, especially when all he really wanted was for Drevin to know the pain that he'd endured for those three months. There weren't enough tears in him to even begin to give an inch. Yet he didn't go out of his way to be nasty to Drevin or even to speak ill of him, at least in front of Samantha or the child. No, his thoughts were reserved for moments like this one . . .

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned away from the window. He was bordering on mental exhaustion, and he knew it. Everything around him felt as though it were falling to shit. Bellaniece was quite vocal in her insistence that Kichiro try to come to terms with Drevin. Kichiro would be damned if he would. To be entirely honest, he wasn't sure that he *could*. All he'd ever wanted was to keep his daughter safe, and he'd be damned—*damned*—if he'd apologize for it, for his concern.

A stubborn glint entered his gaze as a hard expression tightened his features. As for the rest of them? Well, as far as he was concerned, they could all just back the fuck off, couldn't they, because the day he'd apologize for worrying about his children would be the day he died . . .

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Samantha giggled as Kurt narrowed his eyes at the rows of assorted teddy bears lining the shelves in the small toy store. He'd already picked up a few of them and put them back again, citing silly things about each one that made it too imperfect to give to Tanny on such a special occasion.

She was officially their ward, at least for the next six months, until the adoption was officially finalized. The judge was more than happy to do a personal favor for the tai-youkai, and he'd gotten the waiting time reduced from one year to six months, just for Cain, though Samantha secretly wondered if the favor weren't ultimately for Gin since the man had asked about her a number of times . . .

"What about that one?" she asked, nodding at the bear he was inspecting at the moment.

Kurt sighed and shook his head, stuffing the bear back onto the shelf before reaching toward the back of the rack for a tan colored, nappy-haired, white-dress-clad bear. "That one's nose was crooked."

Samantha covered her mouth with the back of her hand and leaned against his shoulder. "And that one?"

"There's a smudge on her dress," he muttered, putting that one back, too.

"That one's cute," she commented as she stared at the next bear he picked up.

"It's ass is crooked," he declared.

She rolled her eyes, gathering her hair in her hand to flip it back over her shoulder. "It is not," she contended.

Kurt shot her a completely blank sort of look. "It was, and I'll tell you, if a bear has a crooked ass, it lops over when you set it on the bed."

Her lips twitched, but she didn't laugh. "You've given that a lot of thought, haven't you?"

He ignored her commentary as he continued to eye the assortment of stuffed bears.

"So the judge said that we could start writing her name as Tanny Drevin, right?" he asked at length.

Samantha nodded, reaching for a bear in a doctor's coat. "Yes."

Kurt slapped her hand away. "My idea. I get to pick the bear," he informed her.

She laughed and kissed his cheek. "Tell me something," she drawled, crossing her arms over her chest so that she would refrain from reaching for a toy.

"Hmm?" he murmured since he was eyeing another bear.

"Are you going to ask me to marry you?"

He froze for a full minute then slowly stuck the bear back on the shelf before he turned to gaze at her. "I . . . I want to," he admitted.

She frowned at the strange sense of foreboding in his tone. "But . . .?" she filled in.

He let out a deep breath, narrowing his eyes as though he were trying to figure something out. "I don't want to rush anything," he replied, and while she could sense the truth in his words, she could also sense the lie.

"You *don't* want to," she said slowly, haltingly.

He shook his head. “It’s not that; I swear it isn’t,” he told her then grimaced. “It’s just . . . your family . . . they won’t like it. I mean, I know that they understand that we . . . that you . . .” Blushing slightly, he waved a hand as though to dismiss whatever he’d been about to say. “Well, I know that they understand, but if we told them we wanted to get married right now, don’t you think that’d be kind of like rubbing salt into the proverbial wounds?”

She bit her lip. On the one hand, she could appreciate what he was saying. It really did bother him that her family wasn’t completely supportive of their decision to be together, and she loved him for that; she really did, but . . . But he was the one for her—the only one, and while her family might not wholeheartedly approve, they loved her unconditionally, too. “My family just wants me to be happy,” she told him with a wan smile, “and since you’re the one who makes me happy, then I suppose that they’ll just have to deal with that.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, but he did manage a hint of a smile. Still, his eyes were troubled, and though he tried to hide it, he couldn’t; not from her. “I will do it one day,” he told her, almost as an afterthought. She knew better. “I’ll marry you, and . . . and . . .”

She forced a brighter smile than she was feeling, but it seemed to do the trick. He shot her a shy, almost boyish grin as he turned toward the shelf once more.

“Uh . . . oh . . .”

Samantha blinked and laughed at the bear that he’d pulled off the shelf. Wearing a simple white tee-shirt with pale blue lettering that proclaimed it to be ‘Candy Bear’ it was holding a large plastic lollipop in its paw.

“You don’t think she’ll try to eat that, do you?” he asked a little reluctantly.

She laughed again and shook her head. “I think it’s perfect,” she told him.

Kurt eyed the bear for a long moment then nodded, but his gaze was already caught on the other side of the aisle—the board games—one in particular: Candy Land . . . Her smile faded but didn’t disappear. Her family was coming around, slowly but surely, and that was enough, she figured. She wasn’t naïve enough to think that they’d forget what his part in the entire affair had been, but they were coming to terms with him on his own merit. Even Bellaniece had smiled at him last night at dinner, and maybe it wasn’t a huge smile, but it was genuine and welcoming. That had meant more to Samantha than she could put into words: a small concession, but a concession, nonetheless . . .

*‘And your father?’*

Heaving an inward sigh under her breath, Samantha bit her lip. *‘Papa will come around, too,’* she told herself. He’d see for himself that Kurt was a good man—every bit as good as Griffin and John . . .

*‘That might just be wishful thinking, dollbaby,’* her youkai voice warned.

Samantha shook her head, unable to believe that. Her father was one of the fairest people she knew, and sure, he was upset, and with good reason, but she couldn’t believe that he’d begrudge her this. He’d always taught her never to judge a person by a single action, right? He’d come around . . . He had to . . .



**Author's Note**

**Candy Land is a product of the Milton-Brady Company (Hastro).**



**Final Thought from Kurt  
... Marriage ...?**

## Chapter 82

### Proposals

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“How do I look?”

Tanny glanced up from the Candy Bear—she was gnawing on the plastic lollipop despite Kurt and Samantha's insistence that the thing wasn't really candy—and blinked at Kurt, her dark eyes shadowed and mysterious. “Daddy gets tanny?”

Letting out a deep breath, he fussed with his tie for a second then shook his arms to straighten the sleeves. “You've got to help me out here, stinky-butt. I'm trying to make sure your mama *stays* your mama . . .”

She giggled and clapped her hands happily. “Tanny!”

Kurt made a face as he stared at his reflection in the mirror. Hell, he couldn't remember the last time he'd worn anything even remotely like this before. It was . . . strange . . . and he certainly didn't look like himself . . . “So you think that she'll say ‘yes’ if I give her ‘tanny?’”

She stood up and leapt onto Kurt's back. He choked since her hands were locked a little too tightly around his neck as he pried his fingers under her arms to loosen her hold. “Tanny, tanny, tanny!” she hollered.

“Keh! She'll say ‘no’ if she sees you in that,” Evan Zelig drawled from the doorway.

Kurt shifted his eyes in the mirror to glare at the jerk rock-star. “Thanks, Evan,” he replied stiffly.

Evan chuckled and pushed himself away from the door frame and sauntered over beside Kurt. “Shit . . . Don’t you know how to tie a fucking tie?” he groused as he reached over to correct it—no small feat, considering Tanny’s little arms were still locked around Kurt’s neck.

“Give me a break,” Kurt muttered, cheeks pinking slightly. “I’ve never had to wear one of these.”

“That’s ‘cause you’re an uncultured baka,” he retorted.

Kurt frowned. That word . . . he’d heard it before. Narrowing his gaze, he eyed Evan for a moment. “What does that mean?”

“What? Baka?”

Kurt nodded.

“Means ‘idiot’. Why?”

Kurt blinked and shook his head. “Oh, is that so?”

Evan grinned, stepping back and draping his hands on his hips as he surveyed his handiwork. “Yup. Did someone else call you that?”

He snorted indelicately before he could stop himself. “Tch! Sure . . . Samantha did, but she said that it meant, ‘darling’ or something like that . . .”

“And you bought that?” Evan demanded, his eyes brightening with amusement.

“Not really,” Kurt allowed as he deliberately turned back to the mirror once more. “Idiot, huh?”

“Yes,” Evan agreed then clapped his hands. “Oi, Tanny-girl. Why don’t you come here and hang out with me like all the cool chicks do?”

Dangling from Kurt’s neck, the girl turned her head to stare thoughtfully at Evan. “Tanny?” she asked suspiciously.

Evan’s grin widened. “Sure, I got lots of ‘tanny’.”

Kurt grimaced when Tanny braced her feet against his back and launched herself off of him and into Evan’s waiting arms. He caught her around the stomach and swung her high into the air, much to her amusement if her delighted shriek meant anything. “So let’s see it,” Evan demanded as he continued to manhandle the little girl.

Against his better judgment, Kurt scowled but dug the small black velvet jeweler’s box out of his pocket and tossed it to Evan. The youkai managed to flick it open with one hand, and he stared at it for a minute before closing it against his chest and casting Kurt a cheesy grin. “It’ll do,” he allowed as he tossed it back.

Kurt caught it and opened the box to stare at the ring. A simple three-quarter carat round solitaire diamond set in a slightly textured platinum band nestled in a bed of wine-colored silk winked at him, and he let out a deep breath as he snapped the box closed and stowed it back in his pocket.

“So you’re really gonna do it?” Evan asked at length while Tanny dug into his pockets after the candy he’d told her about.

“What? Propose?” Kurt asked as he fussed with the tie again.

“Yeah, all that,” Evan commented.

Kurt nodded. “Yeah . . . I mean, that’s what you do, right?”

Holding up his hands in a blatant show of surrender, Evan took a step back. “Hell . . . You’re asking the wrong guy about that,” he drawled. “That whole thing is kind of . . .” Trailing off with a huge grin, Evan shrugged. “I like my women, and they *love* me. Never thought about getting hitched, come to think of it . . .”

Letting out a deep breath, Kurt crossed his arms and turned to face Evan. “It’s all messed up, you know?”

Evan considered that then slowly nodded. “Because of Kich, you mean?”

Kurt let out a deep breath, raking his hands through his hair. Tanny wiggled around and dropped to the floor before skittering out of the room. “I don’t expect him to forgive me or to forget my part in it . . . but I don’t want Samantha put in the middle of it, either. I . . . I don’t . . .”

Evan rolled his eyes but smiled, and it wasn’t a cocky grin for once. “You’re a fucking saint, Captain Kurt.”

Kurt shook his head and scowled. “No, I’m not . . . It’s just . . .” Drawing a deep breath, he struggled to find a way to explain his feelings, and while it occurred to him that he really didn’t have to, he wanted to, didn’t he? “Samantha’s got something that I don’t . . . She’s got a family who loves her. I . . . I can’t take that from her. I can’t make her choose.”

“But you’re asking her to marry you, right?”

Grabbing black suit jacket off the wooden hanger hooked over the brass closet handle, he shook it out and carefully tugged it on. "I just want her to know where I stand," he admitted quietly. "No one says we have to do it right away. Maybe if we take some time . . ."

"Maybe Kich'll get used to the idea," Evan supplied when Kurt trailed off.

"Something like that."

Evan nodded though he didn't look very enthusiastic, either. "Look, man . . . Sam loves you. Sure, she loves her daddy, but you're her mate. No contest, right? Just be good to her, and he'll eventually come around."

Kurt rubbed his forehead but remained silent.

"Anyway, tell me. You got anything planned as to how you're going to ask her?"

Forcing a smile since the doubts still lingered in the back of his mind, Kurt shrugged. "I've got it all planned out," he assured Evan. "I'm pretty sure that it's going to be cheesy and cliché, though . . ."

Evan grinned and clapped him on the shoulder as the two men headed for the door. "All proposals are cheesy and cliché," he replied with a shake of his head, "but you're missing the big picture."

"Oh? And what's that?"

That grin widened. "That's the absolutely phenomenal sex you get to have afterward, and the cheesier and more cliché the proposal is, the better."

"Thought you said you'd never proposed before," Kurt remarked.

Evan chuckled nastily. “I haven’t, but I know enough people who have.”

“You’re a little twisted, aren’t you?” Kurt muttered as they headed for the stairs.

“Hell, yes,” he agreed happily enough, “and someday, some very lucky woman’s gonna thank me for it, too.”

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Samantha glanced around the opulent little restaurant as she tried to quell the sense of worry that gnawed at her. It wasn’t as bad as it had been the first few times she’d ventured away from home, though whether it was because her nerves were steadier or because Kurt was there, she wasn’t sure. She had a feeling, though, that it was the latter.

Glancing at him, seated across the table from her, she bit her lip and tried not to smile. Straightening his tie in an almost nervous sort of way, he caught her amused expression and forced a little smile. He seemed almost edgy, but that certainly couldn’t be it. Why would he be, after all?

Tanny babbled to her teddy bear. It had made her smile at the time, hadn’t it? The maitre d’ had seemed surprised when they’d walked in with her, and Samantha figured that they weren’t very accustomed to having children in the exclusive restaurant.

To be honest, they hadn’t planned on bringing her along, but she had been so excited when she’d burst into the room where Samantha was getting ready that Samantha hadn’t had the heart to tell her ‘no’, either. Kurt had been a bit stunned when he and Evan met them in the foyer—stunned, but not unhappy—and they’d decided that of course she should go, even if the two were supposed to be going on a real date . . .

So why was Kurt so preoccupied?

“Evening, folks. What can I get you to drink?” the waiter asked abruptly as he leaned half-over Samantha’s shoulder to fill her water glass. Samantha jumped, covering her heard with her hand as she tried to steady her rioting nerves.

Kurt cleared his throat. “What would you like, Sami?”

She forced a weak little smile. “Um, iced tea with lemon would be fine,” she said, hoping that she could cover up her fluster easily enough.

“Sounds good,” Kurt murmured.

Tanny cast the waiter a wary glance. “I want tanny!” she said.

Kurt chuckled. “Uh, a soda for her, please.”

The waiter smiled as he slipped the small pager onto the table. “If you need anything at all, just push the button on that, m’kay?” he rattled off and hurried away.

“You, uh . . . you look fantastic,” Kurt said, his cheeks pinking just a little.

Samantha smiled. “You think so?” she asked as she glanced down at her little black dress. Simple black satin, the sheen of the fabric was more than enough embellishment.

“Of course, but . . . but I always think you look pretty,” he replied as Samantha’s cheeks pinked up.

“Daddy,” Tanny spoke up. “Daddy!”

“Yeah?”

She beamed at him. “I pwetty?” she asked, hopping off her chair and holding out the sides of her wide-skirted white linen dress.

He chuckled. “Yes, very,” he assured her.

She climbed back into her chair and sat up on her knees—the restaurant didn’t seem to have any booster seats. “Tanny?”

Kurt rolled his eyes but grinned indulgently as he checked his pockets. “Oh, no; no ‘tanny,’” he teased. The child looked sorely disappointed—until she heard the tell-tale rattle in his jacket’s left pocket. “Well, look at that,” he deadpanned with a shake of his head as he pulled out a good sized bag of gummi bears. She squealed in delight and reached for it, impatiently opening and closing her hand while she waited for Kurt to pull the seam apart.

Samantha laughed. “You know, I do believe you spoil her.”

He snorted but blushed just a little. “Like you’re one to talk,” he retorted. “You’re the one who just had to let her come along with us tonight.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled. “As if you didn’t want to.”

“I would have left her at home if it had been up to me,” he scoffed.

“Oh, you would not!”

Kurt smiled. “No, I don’t suppose I would have.”

The waiter reappeared with their drinks. Tanny gave him another wary sort of stare and cradled her bag of candy against her chest when he leaned in to set her glass of soda down. Kurt eyed the cup a little dubiously but remained silent.

“Do you know what you’d like or would you prefer to have a bit longer to look over the menu?” he asked with an entirely too-broad smile.

Samantha cleared her throat and glanced rather self-consciously at her menu once more. “Do you have chicken nuggets and French fries?” she asked with a slight frown since she didn’t really see anything like that on the list.

The waiter looked a little surprised. “Um, well, we have chicken plants, lightly breaded with our own signature spice blend spices and . . . potato wedges—kind of like fries but thicker.”

Samantha glanced at Tanny and slowly nodded. “Okay,” she said at length. “That sounds good for her . . . and I’d like the filet mignon—rare.”

He nodded. “And would you care for the baked potato?”

“Yes, please.”

“Caesar or garden salad?”

“Oh, no salad, thanks.”

She didn’t miss the look Kurt shot her, and she smiled.

“I’ll, uh, have the same,” Kurt said, closing the menu and handing it to the waiter. “Make mine medium-well done, though, and . . . and I’d like the garden salad, please.”

The waiter smiled and took Samantha's menu. "Not a problem," he said. "I'll be back shortly."

"You know, you're setting a bad example for Stinky-butt when you don't eat your vegetables," Kurt pointed out.

Samantha giggled. "It's no worse than calling her 'Stinky-butt', don't you think?"

He chuckled. "Well . . ."

Tanny dug the last of the gummi bears out of her bag and scowled as she popped it into her mouth. A moment later, she hopped off her chair and ran over to check Kurt's pockets.

"You don't really strike me as a 'suit-type'," Samantha commented at length.

Kurt grimaced slightly and shrugged. "Yeah, I'm not," he confessed. "I don't know that I can remember ever having to wear one before."

She frowned and shook her head. "You didn't wear one to your family's funerals?" she asked gently.

Kurt shrugged again. "Never went to them," he mused. "I was in the hospital after that . . . and then Old Granger took me home with him, so . . ."

That bothered her, didn't it? It was true that she hadn't known many people who had died, but still, it seemed like such a sad thing. Kurt didn't look upset, exactly, but he did seem a little subdued, not that Samantha could fault him for that, she supposed. Still, on the occasion that her grandmother, Kagome had talked about having to attend her family's funerals . . . She'd said that they had given her a sense of closure, a peacefulness . . . Kurt never got that, did he?

“Oowie tanny!” the child exclaimed, drawing Samantha out of her reverie. She had her hands smashed over her mouth as a befuddled sort of expression surfaced on her little face.

“What . . .?” Samantha began with a shake of her head. “Come here, sweetie . . .”

Tanny dashed over to Samantha, throwing her little arms around her neck as Samantha scooped her up and settled her on her lap. She winced—Tanny had something hard clasped in her hand though Samantha didn’t take a moment to look to see what—and cupped her hand, holding it under the child’s chin. “Here . . . let me see . . .”

Tanny whined but spit out the offending ‘candy’. Samantha blinked and stared, her mouth falling open slightly as her eyes flared wide. “It’s a . . .” Slowly lifting her gaze to meet Kurt’s worried glance, she shook her head. “Taijya . . .”

He got up and hurried around the table, only to stop short when he saw what his daughter had tried to munch. “Uh . . .” He laughed suddenly and shook his head. “Well, so much for my plan,” he muttered, cheeks pinking just a little.

Samantha’s brain slowed to a crawl. “Is-is this . . .?”

Kurt sighed and reached out to take the ring from Samantha’s shaking palm. “I thought . . . We don’t have to do it right away or anything, but . . . but I want to marry you . . . someday, Samantha . . . if you’ll have me.”

She stared at him for a moment, trying to make sure that she was really hearing him correctly. Blinking as she stared at the beautiful ring, only to glance up at his face, then back to the ring once more, she slowly shook her head. “Kurt . . .”

Kurt swallowed hard and tried to smile as he hunkered down beside the chair. Not exactly on one knee, but it was close enough, in Samantha's estimation. "Marry me, little demon?" he asked in an almost breathless sort of way.

He tried to hide the hint of anxiety written in the depths of his gaze, but even if she couldn't see it, she could feel it, and that was enough to make her smile. "Yes," she whispered.

His expression blanked, as though he couldn't quite credit that she'd actually said she would. A moment later, though, he managed a shaky smile, taking her hand—his were trembling, too—and pushing the ring onto her finger. "Samantha . . . you're sure?"

She nodded, leaning forward to kiss him as Tanny played with the ring box. "I love you," she whispered.

He let out a deep breath, but his smile this time was much, much closer than the others had been. "This . . . was just not what I had planned," he confessed, shaking his head.

"You planned it?" Samantha asked with a bright smile though her lips trembled precariously as she blinked and stared at the ring on her finger.

"Of course I did," he said. "Hell, I plan everything, right? So . . . they were going to bring out a single rose with dinner, and I . . . I was going to give it to you and make this stupid speech about how much you mean . . . to me . . . how I'd change everything if I could, but . . . but not the part where I met you . . . Then I was going to give you the ring box . . . and hope you didn't chuck it at my head."

Samantha giggled at that. "Really?"

"Yeah."

She bobbed her shoulders, her cheeks pinking. "I rather like this way better."

He shot her a chagrined sort of look for a minute then chuckled. "Nice of you to say so," he muttered as he got to his feet.

Tanny caught his hand before he could head around the table once more. "Daddy! Tanny!"

He sighed and shook his head but laughed. "They're bringing your dinner, Stinky-butt. You've got to eat before you get more 'tanny'."

She wiggled off Samantha's lap and chased Kurt back to his seat. "Tanny? Pwease, tanny?" she whined.

He pursed his lips when he saw the big, fat tears standing in her fathomless eyes. "That is so unfair," he muttered as he dug a grape Air Head out of his pocket and handed it over.

Tanny laughed and grabbed the treat before clamoring back into her chair once more.

Samantha giggled, unable to contain the surge of happiness that swelled inside her, and that happiness blossomed into a trill of laughter as the waiter set Kurt's dinner before him, complete with a single, long stemmed peach rose. The man heaved a sigh but smiled at her, and she had a feeling that he was considering how his best plans just never quite went the way he wanted them to.

Tanny frowned at the plate of food in front of her. Glancing at Samantha, who shifted her gaze from the child to the plate and back again, the girl heaved a frustrated little sigh and slowly picked up a chicken strip to sniff at it. She must have figured out that it smelled just fine, though, because a moment later, she nibbled on it.

Kurt stood up, walking over to give Samantha the single rose and kiss her forehead before he sat back down again. She sat back, food forgotten, as she stared at the rose and carefully lifted it to her nose.

Tanny actually did eat one of the chicken strips before she decided that she was finished. Babbling softly to herself while she played with the ring box, she held it out to Kurt. “Daddy!” she insisted, holding it out. “Tanny in the box!”

He blinked and stared for a moment, as though he didn’t understand what she wanted. It must have dawned on him, though, because he set his fork and knife aside and took the box. “You want a ring, too? Is that what you mean?”

She nodded almost solemnly.

Kurt chuckled and winked at Samantha as he dug into his pocket once more. She covered her lips when she saw the garish, huge child’s candy ring—the kind made out of compressed powder. It wouldn’t fit into the box, but Kurt set it inside and held it open, turning it toward the little girl. “Here, Stinky-butt. You want to be my girl, too?”

Tanny nodded and grasped the box with both hands, content to stare at the candy ring for the moment. “Tanny!” she hollered happily.

Samantha laughed, then sighed when the child grabbed the ring and promptly stuck the fatter end into her mouth. “Is that why we stopped at the store before we came here?” she asked quietly.

Kurt shrugged as he picked up his knife and fork once more. “You think we’d make it through dinner without her candy?”

Samantha lifted her fork, but she just wasn’t nearly as interested in eating as she was in getting a certain man back home and into the nearest bed—fast.

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Kichiro turned the page of the newspaper and scanned the headlines on the page. Why did it always seem to be the same news, no matter what day it was? Always someone fighting someone else, and while the reasons for fighting were always different, it most always boiled down to humanity's insatiable need to have *more* of one thing or another.

He sighed and tried to ignore the nagging feeling that he just couldn't help; the one he'd carried around for so long that he figured he ought to be used to it. He wasn't, but he ought to be . . .

Absently, he reached up and patted Bellaniece's hand as she strolled past and let her fingers trail over his shoulder in passing. It was something that they'd always done: an unspoken reminder that they were together, and always before, it had filled Kichiro with a certain satisfaction that he loved, and even now, it still did, even if there was a friction between them: an unspoken unease that had grown over time since Drevin's unceremonious appearance . . .

Folding the paper and leaning forward to drop it onto the coffee table, he sighed. Bellaniece, Gin, Nezumi, and Kagome were sitting around the card table playing a game while Ryomaru and InuYasha were outside doing some night training. Zelig, it seemed, was cloistered away in his studio working on a painting, Gin had said. Kichiro glanced at his watch and shook his head. Going on ten o'clock, and Samantha was still out with that bastard and the child . . .

*'Who the hell keeps a pup out this late at night?' he fumed. 'She ought to be in bed now, that girl—my granddaughter, damn it . . .'*

He scowled as he got to his feet and stomped over to the window. It bugged the hell out of him, didn't it? That girl . . . she couldn't be coaxed anywhere near him. Gin had gotten into the habit of leaving bowls of candies in everyone's rooms—candies to initiate interaction with her—with Tanny. The idea was that everyone would grab a handful of candy in the morning, and whenever she was around, they were to offer it to Tanny to encourage her into making new friends. Kichiro wasn't entirely sure that the candy bribe was a good one, but it seemed to be working readily enough. Tanny had even warmed up to Ryomaru, much to his chagrin. After all, he was her grandfather, right? Yet she would linger in doorways, staring at him, but she wouldn't come close, even if Kichiro did offer her one of the treats.

In fact, she'd warmed up to everyone but him—well, and Zelig, but that wasn't really anything that Kichiro could blame her for. After all, he wasn't too fond of that guy, either, come to think of it. Bellaniece had told Kichiro that she believed Tanny sensed Kichiro's underlying anger toward Drevin, and that might be true. Still, it bothered him, didn't it? His very first grandchild, and she hated him . . .

The unmistakable sound of the front doors opening drew Kichiro's attention, followed in short order by the surge of absolute relief that always came with Samantha's return. Irrational and stupid, maybe. Still, he couldn't help but feel it whenever she went out, even if she went with other people. That she'd gone alone with Drevin . . . Well, it just made the feeling that much worse.

"Gwamma!" Tanny hollered as she half-skipped, half-ran into the living room and straight to Bellaniece.

Bellaniece laughed and caught the child, pulling her into her arms as she got to her feet. "Did you have a nice dinner?" she asked, planting a loud kiss on the child's cheek.

Tanny squealed and giggled.

Samantha stepped into the room with Drevin right behind her. “Guess we don’t have to ask if you had a good time,” Gin piped up as she pushed herself out of her chair and hurried over. “Let me see!”

Samantha smiled almost shyly but held out her hand. Kichiro’s eyes flared wide as he gaped at the ring on his daughter’s finger.

“Evan told me that Kurt was going to give that to you,” Gin went on. “How exciting!”

Bellaniece didn’t look surprised, either. In fact, the only one who was, apparently, was Kichiro. The women crowded around her, hugging her and offering their congratulations. Kichiro gritted his teeth, wondering exactly how they could all seem so happy about what was transpiring. Mates, maybe, but still . . .

It took him a few minutes to tamp down his nerves enough to manage a somewhat strained smile, but that smile was on his face by the time Samantha’s eyes shifted to meet him. She looked relieved but not entirely convinced.

“When are you going to get married then?” Kagome asked after hugging Samantha.

Samantha shrugged and glanced back at Kurt. “I’d like to do it as soon as possible . . . It’d be best to be married before the adoption is final, I think . . .”

Drevin shifted a little when the women all looked at him for verification. “Uh, well . . . whatever she wants,” he replied.

Kichiro frowned and turned toward the sliding doors. He just couldn’t stand to hear more, could he? Couldn’t tolerate it . . . Samantha . . .

He slipped out of the room without drawing notice, breathing in long and slow as he fought to contain the rampant rise of anger, of frustration. In his heart, he knew that he

was expected to go back inside, to hug his daughter and tell her that he was happy for her. He couldn't; just couldn't. The entire situation made him sick to his stomach . . .

Drevin . . .

He scowled. He'd have to admit that so far, Drevin's treatment of the child—of Tanny—was impeccable. He might have doubts about his ability to father the girl, but he was doing well enough, and on some level, Kichiro could appreciate that, albeit grudgingly. No, the trouble wasn't that. The trouble was the absolute and undeniable rage that grew a little darker, a little thicker every single time he looked at that man; when he thought about those tapes, when he knew what Drevin's hand in it really was . . .

To marry Samantha . . . Maybe he'd realized on some level that it would come to that. Maybe . . . and maybe he was a fool for ignoring it for so long . . .

Drevin deserved nothing that he'd been so readily given. Even Bellaniece, who ought to be the one to understand Kichiro's feelings . . . She'd told him that she loved her daughter, that she'd support Samantha, no matter what. She'd said it all in such an accusing sort of way, though . . . as though she honestly believed that Kichiro loved Samantha any less?

Everything he'd done in his life, he'd done for his family—his first family of his mother, his father, his brothers and sister . . . and later, for the new family he'd created for Bellaniece. The gut-wrenching anguish he'd endured for such a long time after that call from Bas on that cold November night . . . and the thing was, Drevin's reasons—his excuses—just didn't do a damn thing to make it better. No, it only served to anger him more and more every time he thought about it . . .

His mother had told him just the other day that he needed to let go of his rage, needed to let it go before he let it destroy him. Those words sounded good, didn't they? They



## Chapter 83

# Home Front

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“We can go back to the mansion, if you’d rather,” Samantha pointed out patiently for what had to be the twentieth time since they’d sat down to dinner in the quiet little restaurant.

Kurt glanced up, looking a little guilty as he slipped the cell phone into his pocket once more. “No, I’m sure she’s fine . . .”

Griffin snorted and sat back, staring at Kurt through the shag of his unruly brown bangs. “You don’t have to worry,” he muttered as he reached for the mug of herbal tea. “Not like you left her with Isabelle or anything.”

Isabelle rolled her eyes and heaved a long-suffering sigh. “I’m so misunderstood,” she complained lightly.

Griffin snorted again. “Like hell, woman,” he shot back.

Isabelle laughed and leaned over to kiss Griffin’s cheek, which only served to deepen the bear-youkai’s scowl as well as bring a very pronounced blush to his face.

Kurt shot Samantha a quick glance, only to find her smiling at the byplay between her sister and brother-in-law.

“You’re trying to make him blush,” Samantha remarked almost idly.

Isabelle shook her head but winked. “If I do, it’s just because I think it’s sexy as hell.”

“*Jezebel*,” Griffin muttered under his breath, the ruddiness in his cheeks deepening just a little more.

Not for the first time, Kurt had to wonder exactly how those two had ended up as mates. They were so very different, at least upon first glance, that it was difficult to see them as a couple. The bear-youkai, Griffin was a huge man, quite literally a bear—huge in every conceivable dimension, as far as Kurt could tell. Not for the first time, too, it had struck him, exactly how the youkai tended to act in a very real sense like their animal associations implied. Gruff, brusque, even lumbering, and yet . . . and yet there was a certain friendliness that belied the harsher exterior, too . . . In fact, in the last few weeks since he’d been so unceremoniously released from the forced training regime and confinement, Kurt and Griffin had talked a few times—well, more like they’d sort of hung around each other without really saying much, but that was all right. Griffin, Kurt had learned, was the one Samantha had told him about before; the youkai whose entire family was killed by humans a long, long time ago, and maybe, in that sense, the two of them had more in common than Kurt had with most of them here, and maybe that was why Griffin didn’t seem to judge him as harshly as the others could and did, including Kurt, himself . . .

But Isabelle . . . Well, if Kurt hadn’t known that the woman was Griffin’s mate, he never would have guessed it upon first impressions. Bright, bubbly, inexorably happy, the woman exuded confidence where the bear-youkai tended to falter. It was an interesting mix, really, the two of them, and maybe they actually complimented each other far more than Kurt had actually thought, to start with . . .

Still, Kurt hadn’t been sure, exactly what to expect when Isabelle and Sydnie had suggested a ‘triple date’ of sorts. He’d reluctantly agreed—Samantha had seemed keen on the idea—only to find out earlier that Jillian, Bas and Evan’s younger sister, and her mate, Gavin would be joining them, too. By the time that all was said and done, it had

become a regular family outing. Zelig had actually rented out the entire restaurant for the occasion, and even Samantha's parents were there, citing that Samantha's twenty-first birthday was occasion enough to make it a family affair . . .

He sighed and shifted in his seat, wondering exactly what he was getting himself into. Samantha was so adamant that she wanted to be married before the adoption was final that she'd rushed it, only allowing herself two months for planning, and they'd set the date for Saturday, July 4—Independence Day—just over a month away . . .

It wasn't that he was having misgivings about marrying Samantha, no, but . . . but he worried, didn't he? He couldn't help but feel as though he were intruding with her family, couldn't stand the palpable tension that seemed to stagnate the air every time that Kichiro and he were in the same room. It wasn't that the man went out of his way to be nasty or anything, of course, but the understated tension was a painful thing—something that Samantha never commented on, though Kurt knew damn well she could feel it, too. She was too intuitive not to, wasn't she, and as much as Kurt despised it—despised the feeling that he was inadvertently making her choose between her family and him—he also wasn't entirely sure what he ought to do about it, either . . .

At the moment, however, Kurt had bigger fish to fry. They'd left Tanny with the hunter, Cartham and his wife—for reasons that Kurt would never, ever understand, the girl had actually taken a liking to the uncouth pole-cat-youkai. It had reassured him a little that Bas and Sydnie had left Bailey with them, too. Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that Cartham was just waiting to do something incredibly nuts, like draw a gun on the child . . . or teach her to fire one . . .

Too bad Samantha had just laughed and told him that Cartham was harmless. Harmless? The man had pulled a gun and fired it at him, and he hadn't known at the time that it was loaded with blanks . . . Harmless, indeed . . .

"I can't believe my baby sister's getting married!" Isabelle gushed. "Somehow, though, I figured you'd marry someone a little more . . ."

Kurt stiffened under the woman's lazy scrutiny. Something about those golden eyes . . .

"Isabelle," Griffin began in a warning tone.

She ignored him. ". . . A little more . . . well . . . *goofier* . . . Yes, that's the right word, I think . . ."

Samantha giggled. "Goofier? Why's that?"

Isabelle smiled and shot Kurt a conspiratorial wink. "Well, you used to idolize Evan, didn't you? And I'm pretty sure that he's about as goofy as they come."

"I'd hardly say that was the same," Samantha pointed out with another giggle and a shake of her head.

"It *so* is," Isabelle argued.

Samantha's cell phone rang, and she dug it out of her purse. "Oh, it's Lexi," she announced as she opened the device. "Hello?"

She listened for a moment then turned to smile at Kurt. He could see the traces of anxiety behind the blue of her gaze that she was trying to hide from him and frowned. "I'll be right back," she said as she got up and willed her smile to brighten. "Excuse me."

Samantha felt her smile falter as she turned away from the table, casually making her way toward the bathroom before she deigned to finish this particular conversation. That was fine, though, wasn't it? Alexandra wasn't really listening to her, anyway . . .

“—And Papa says that we really don’t know a thing about him or his past . . . Sure, maybe he has reason, and I agree, I’d want vengeance if someone did something so unspeakable to my family, but you must understand that excuses cannot exonerate him from his wrongdoings, and—”

She counted to twenty-five before she dared to answer. “Lexi,” she interrupted her sister’s diatribe.

Alexandra sighed. “It’s just because we love you, Sami, and we’re concerned; that’s all.”

“Lexi,” Samantha said again, inflicting a stubbornness into her tone: a firmness that bespoke her rising irritation, “I know that’s how Papa feels, and I can appreciate his concern, but you’re my sister, not my parent, and I’d prefer if you acted like it.”

“Sweetie, that’s not what I’m trying to do,” Alexandra went on slowly, carefully, as though she believed that Samantha was going to break if she used a more no-nonsense tone. “I just worry about you . . .”

“I know,” Samantha replied, pacing back and forth in front of the plate glass mirror that ran the length of the opulent bathroom. “Everyone’s concerned about me, but you don’t need to be. I’m not stupid, and . . . and I resent the fact that everyone seems to think that I am.”

“No one thinks you’re stupid, Sami,” Alexandra said quietly. “We just love you, you know? And we’re worried, sure. You really can’t fault anyone for that.”

“I don’t fault anyone for being worried,” Samantha stated. “Honestly, though . . . Kurt makes me happy—really happy . . . and I just wish that you all could be happy for me, too.”

Alexandra didn't answer right away. Whether she was trying to decide how best to say whatever it was that she had on her mind or if she were simply unsure what she dared to say, at all, Samantha wasn't sure. In either case, Samantha couldn't help but feel a little angrier . . . "Look, Alexandra . . . my wedding is in a month, but if you cannot bring yourself to be happy for me, then . . ." Samantha swallowed hard, biting back the tears that suddenly clouded her vision. "If you can't be happy for me, then maybe you shouldn't come."

"You . . . you don't mean that, Sam . . ." Alexandra said in a quiet voice, the hurt in her tone very evident. "You *can't* mean that . . ."

Samantha let out a deep breath and slowly shook her head. "I want you to be there, you know . . . I really do, but . . . but you have to accept that Kurt *is* my mate . . . and even if you don't like him, can't you pretend? Just for one day?" She swallowed hard, swatted a tear off her cheek angrily. "Please . . ."

"Of course I'm . . . I'm happy for you, sweetie," Alexandra continued in an entirely placating tone of voice. "I am—at least, I *want* to be . . ."

Turning around, leaning against the countertop, Samantha bit her lip. "He's a good person, no matter what Papa thinks—and no matter what you think, too. You'd know that if you'd just give him a chance. He makes me happy. He makes me feel *safe*."

"Safe . . ."

"Yes, safe. How else do you think I kept myself sane during those months, and maybe it was his fault that I was there, but . . . but getting to know him? I . . . I don't know if I would change things, even if I could."

"Oh, Sami . . ."

Samantha straightened her back proudly and headed for the door. “Don’t feel sorry for me, Lexi. Just because our start wasn’t exactly perfect doesn’t mean that our future can’t be.”

Alexandra heaved a sigh. “No,” she allowed though she still sounded rather dubious, “I don’t suppose it does . . .”

Sensing that the worst of the confrontation was over, Samantha smiled just a little as she pushed out of the bathroom. “Anyway, I’ve got to go. It looks like they’re searching for me, and there are a lot of presents . . .”

“Okay, sweetie. Happy birthday . . . and I can’t wait to see my new niece again, too.”

Samantha laughed and hung up the phone, taking her time as she wandered down the short hallway toward the main seating area where everyone was gathered once more.

It meant a lot to her, didn’t it? Everyone she loved, gathered together in that place . . .

Kurt was talking to Bas at the moment, probably about business, and that was all right. Bas had told her that he respected Kurt’s abilities and that he honestly thought that Kurt could hold his own and then some—high praise from Bas, after all. Even Gunnar had muttered something about Kurt being competent enough. He’d proven himself to them, and maybe he’d even proven a few things to himself, too, and that was, in Samantha’s opinion, more than enough, wasn’t it?

*‘He showed them that he is fully capable of standing on his own two feet—and that he’s able to protect you, as well,’* her youkai voice murmured.

*‘Of course he is,’* she agreed with a small smile. *‘He might not have their brute strength, but he has his own power.’*

*'And he's really good in bed . . .'*

Samantha's eyes widened, and she blinked at the bawdy commentary from her youkai voice. *'Well, there is that, too . . .'*

Her youkai fell quiet with a soft laugh, and Samantha couldn't help but smile, too . . .

It meant a lot to her, didn't it? The support of her family, for the most part, was genuine. She didn't know why it had surprised her that Isabelle had come around rather quickly. It shouldn't have; not really . . .

Griffin had talked to Isabelle, she knew—had told her that there really wasn't any difference between himself and Kurt, aside from a few hundred years that had served to temper Griffin's own anger, his frustration, his hostility . . . Isabelle understood that, and because of that, she was trying—*really* trying—to get to know Kurt without judging him for the things that he simply couldn't change. Samantha only wished that everyone felt that way . . .

But in the weeks that had passed since Kurt had earned his freedom, she had to admit that the others were slowly coming around, at least for the most part. Samantha sighed. She also had to admit that Alexandra and Kichiro's attitudes were the main dark spots that hung over her otherwise complete happiness. It wore on her, didn't it? They loved her, and she adored them, and the very last thing that she wanted was to hurt them, but . . . but . . .

But she wished that they'd try—just try—to get to know Kurt; that they'd make the effort for her, if for no other reason, and while she didn't blame them for feeling the way that they did, she had to wonder if it weren't the proverbial beating of the dead horse, so to speak.

“Happy birthday, sweetie,” Bellaniece said as she hurried over to give Samantha a hug. Her smile was warm, bright, and she looked happier than she had in a while. “You know, the waiter was telling me that his cousin does wedding cakes—not so many as a business; more of a side job or hobby, but she’d probably talk to us if we told her that her cousin recommended her, if you’d like. He said that she made the mayor’s cake last fall. There was a picture in the paper. It was really, really lovely. She specializes in candied flowers.”

“Really?” Samantha asked. “I wonder if she would give us a better price for the candied rose petals, too . . .”

Bellaniece’s smile widened despite the slight grimace on her face. “Do you really think that’s a good idea? I mean, I think that Tanny should absolutely be your flower girl, but the candied rose petals? What if she eats them all before the service?”

Samantha laughed. She’d wondered that, too. Still, the candied petals were so pretty, like iridescent prisms that caught the light and added a gentle yet sophisticated sheen . . . “I think it’ll be fine,” she assured her mother. “But maybe we should order a few extras . . .”

“Well, it won’t hurt to talk to this woman about the cake, right? I’ll give her a call on Monday.”

“Happy birthday, Sami,” Kichiro said, slipping an arm around her and kissing her forehead.

She gave him a quick squeeze. “Thank you, Papa.”

He smiled and dug an envelope out of his pocket. “These are from your mother and me. You don’t have to use them right away, but I do expect that you’ll use them.”

Samantha stared at the round trip tickets—three of them—from New York City to Tokyo. They were all open-ended, and it did relieve her that he'd gotten three. "Thank you," she said again, smiling at her father. "We will."

Kichiro's smile faltered slightly. "You do still remember the way home, right?" he teased though she could hear the underlying gravity in his tone.

"Of course I do," she told him. "Like I'd ever forget something like that."

Kichiro nodded and kissed her forehead again. "Be sure that you don't," he told her.

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Kurt stepped outside, taking a moment to draw a deep breath of the fragrant evening air. The open air patio behind the restaurant was empty at the moment, but bedecked with a thousand tiny yellow-white lights tucked into the thigh high sandstone wall that surrounded the area, it was bright enough. A few paper lanterns were suspended over tables here and there, too, and the tang of the ocean air, and in the distance, the low-hung moon shivered on the ever-moving waves.

He frowned. The truth was, he'd been a little out of sorts all day. It couldn't be helped, could it? He hadn't realized right away, why he'd felt so odd, but it had occurred to him, as he got dressed for dinner . . . and for reasons he didn't quite understand, the knowledge that came to him neither surprised nor bothered him nearly as much as it should have . . .

"It's pretty out here, isn't it?"

Samantha hadn't turned around. Standing near the wall, she was staring out over the ocean, a sense of peace radiating from her in the gentlest of waves. He smiled slightly, dug his hands into his pockets—damned if he'd actually get used to wearing suits, after all—and wandered over toward her. “Happy birthday, little demon,” he murmured, slipping his arms around her waist, drawing her back against him as he buried his nose in her hair.

She smiled—he could feel it in the way her body moved—the slight sigh in her shoulders, the shifting of the peace in her aura . . . “Birthday parties are nice,” she murmured, “but I'd have liked it just as much if we'd spent it alone . . . just the two of us.”

Kurt let out a deep breath, a smile toying with the corners of his lips, but it was a sad sort of smile; one tempered by memories, by time. “You know,” he said softly, slowly, “I used to hate today.”

“Why?”

He leaned in to kiss her cheek. “My . . . my family died today . . . well, thirty-two years ago today . . .”

She stiffened in his arms—he could feel the pang of sorrow hitting her hard, and he tightened his grip on her, as though to reassure her . . . or maybe he was reassuring himself . . . What did it matter, either way? His family . . . he missed them, and he supposed that he always would. Samantha was his future, and that was enough, wasn't it? “I'm sorry,” she said, grasping his arms and holding onto him fiercely.

“Don't be,” he told her. “I mean, it seems . . . I don't know . . . right, maybe? You were born on that day, so it gives me something happy, right?”

“Is that what you think?” she mused after a moment.

“Sure.”

She relaxed against him, content to savor the gentle ocean breeze. “It’s my happiest birthday, ever,” she stated.

Kurt chuckled. “Well, it’s not over yet . . .”

“It isn’t?” she asked, turning just enough to peer at him over her shoulder.

“Nope. I didn’t give you my present yet.”

“You mean you’re not my present?” she teased.

He rolled his eyes. “Hardly.”

She laughed as he pulled the small box out of his pocket and offered it to her.

She frowned. “Did you buy me jewelry?”

“I’m too practical to buy jewelry all the time,” he told her.

She turned around, leaned against the low wall as she turned the package over in her hands. “Hmm . . . It’s too small to be a new car,” she remarked with a grin.

Kurt stuffed his hands into his pockets and waited. He thought she’d like it—was ninety-nine percent sure she would, anyway. Still, the waiting was almost enough to drive him crazy, wasn’t it? Pursing his lips, he tried not to look too anxious.

They’d seen it a few weeks ago. They’d gone out to eat and then to a movie—damned if Kurt could remember what one, though—and they’d opted to walk around a little instead of heading straight home after he’d called and was told that Tanny was fine, sleeping off

s'mores and cocoa after the family had built a bonfire out of the brushwood that had washed up on the beach. As they'd walked through one of the quieter, older neighborhoods that Kurt had ever seen, they'd found it. Standing on the end of a small street lined with modest homes that had been built so long ago out of stones and mortar created from mixing sand and water was the house.

It was more of a cottage, really—a quaint, picturesque little place covered with ivy and smelling of seasonal blooms. Constructed, like all the other houses, of very large stones, bluish gray, washed with age, everything about the place spoke to him—to them. An old, wrought iron lamppost burning with a blue gas flame stood just outside the white wicket fence, overhung with ivy and pink roses, the arched gate that stood no higher than Kurt's waist stood ajar, welcoming those who passed by with a quiet warmth that only the older places could manage. It was as though time stood still in that place, even as the faint scent of burning wood from the chimney beckoned him.

Two small windows around the arched doorway were illuminated with a warm glow from inside, spilling out over the grass of the carefully manicured lawn in patches of light on the ground.

*"That has to be the sweetest house I've ever seen," Samantha said quietly, her hand clutching his tightly.*

Kurt nodded but could only stare, smiling to himself as remembered the name of the street: Gingerbread Lane, it was. He'd thought it was silly at first, hadn't he? Staring at the small house and the peace that it exuded, he realized that maybe it wasn't nearly as silly as he'd thought . . .

So he'd gone over there the next day, wondering if he weren't out of his mind, but he'd talked to the man of the place—an older gentleman who had told him that he'd just retired a few months ago. His wife and he had thought that they'd never sell the house, but they'd talked about buying a camper and traveling all over the States, seeing

everything and stopping here and there along the way, wherever and whenever they felt like it. His wife had said that they'd wait for some kind of sign, and a few days later, their lawyer had called Kurt to let him know that they thought that maybe Kurt's desire to buy the house for his fiancée and daughter just might have been the sign they'd been looking for.

The couple had stopped out to see Kurt just yesterday to drop off the keys a little early. They'd bought a Winnebago and were heading out to see the world. If they were ever in the neighborhood, though, Kurt had told them that they were welcome to stop in and see the old place. They'd smiled and waved and wished Kurt luck, telling him that they hoped that the house provided as much happiness to him and his family as it had to them over the years.

Samantha tore the paper away from the box and pulled it open. She didn't understand, though, slowly shaking her head as she pulled the Polaroid picture out. "What's this?" she asked quietly.

Kurt chuckled. "Well, the house has a keypad lock, so I couldn't give you the key to the front door like I'd planned," he told her. "Hell, seems like nothing ever goes how I plan . . ."

She giggled and leaned up to kiss him. "Are you going to build me a house like this one?" she asked since he'd mentioned something like that as they'd walked away from the place.

"Nope," he told her with an offhanded shrug. "Don't have to."

"I don't understand," she said slowly.

Kurt's smile widened, and he let out a deep breath. "They figured they'd rather sell the place and use the money to travel—at least, they'd do it if they had someone who wanted to love that house as much as they did."

She gasped quietly, her eyes growing round as she stared at him. "Are you . . .? It's ours?"

He nodded and grimaced as she launched herself into his arms with a loud yelp. "I guess you're happy," he deadpanned, wrapping his arms around her.

"Yes!" she hollered, kissing him quickly, kissing him hard. "It's perfect—*perfect!* And you really bought it? For us?"

"Yes, little demon," he remarked.

She kissed him a few more times for good measure. "Just wait till I get you home, Kurt Drevin," she promised. "I'll make sure I thank you good."

"You don't have t—" Kurt began then cut himself off with a mental shrug as Samantha's kisses deepened, as she latched onto his bottom lip and suckled gently, sending a shiver down his spine as her fingers dislodged the hair he'd caught back at the nape of his neck, as she pressed her body even closer. Then again, there was something to be said for being grateful, wasn't there? Who was he to complain . . .?



**Final Thought from Samantha**  
**My little house on Gingerbread Lane!**

## Chapter 84

### Reprieve

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“I don’t like it.”

Samantha glanced up from the sheet she was carefully tucking in on the new bed that had just been delivered in time to see Kurt, leaning in the doorway with a marked frown on his face as he glowered at the piece of furniture. “Why?” she asked with a shake of her head as she stepped away and turned to give it a critical once-over.

“What do you mean, why?” Kurt grumbled, waving a hand at the bed. “It looks like a cage, damn it!”

She blinked, unable to understand why he’d think such a thing, in the first place. “But Tanny picked it out,” she said at length.

“Sam . . .”

“It’s a day bed, taijya,” she pointed out.

He snorted. “I know what it is! It’s got bars all the way around it!”

She let out a deep breath and bit her lip. “There’s nothing wrong with it,” she said quietly. “She liked it. The bars look like peppermint sticks, don’t you think?”

He shot her a fulminating glower. “They look like cage bars,” he countered. “Even then, if she thinks it looks like candy, she’ll just try to eat them, you know . . .”

Samantha smiled. “Not really, you know. She liked it. Besides, did you see the pillows that Grandma found?”

He heaved a sigh as though he realized that he wasn’t about to change her mind. “No, I didn’t.”

Samantha giggled as she pulled the pillows out of the bag. There were a few cylindrical bolster pillows in taffy-pink covered with a sheer layer of white organza like the old fashioned salt-water taffy candies, and there were a few disk-shaped white pillows striped with red that looked exactly like peppermint disks. Kurt smiled despite himself. “Those . . . are probably the worst idea of all,” he remarked as visions of the little girl with pillow stuffing sticking out of her mouth assailed him.

Samantha rolled her eyes as her grin widened. Reaching for the pink and white striped comforter, she shook it out and let it fall over the mattress. “Grandpa did a wonderful job on the walls, didn’t he?”

Kurt blinked, shaking off the strange ideas of the girl and the trouble she was going to get into as he turned his attention to the absolute artistry that Cain Zelig had employed in the floor to ceiling murals. He’d created the little girl’s candy-themed bedroom with painstaking precision—everything from a chocolate lake surrounded by lollipop trees and gumdrop rocks to spun sugar fairies flying through a glen of Easter basket ‘grass’. Birds perched upon their nests, full of jelly beans as little gingerbread men and women walked, hand in hand, along a candy-covered-chocolate bit path. The clouds carefully adorning the ceiling looked like cotton candy of every conceivable shade while a lemon-drop sun smiled down over them all. It was plain to see that the entire thing was nothing short of a labor of love—he’d even painted the dresser to look like an unwrapped chocolate bar. Samantha had found some Hershey kiss-shaped drawer pulls, too . . .

Quite amazing, really, all things considered. Last week, Kurt woke up in time to realize that Stinky-butt was not with them, and while that wasn't an entirely new concept, it hadn't taken him long to figure out that she wasn't in the kitchen, either. After about half an hour of searching and swearing since the Zelig mansion was more like a damn museum than a home, he'd finally found her in Zelig's studio, and while that hadn't been horrible, she'd taken the opportunity to smear oil paint all over the current work in progress to make it 'pretty'. Kurt hadn't known what to do. He'd grabbed an old rag towel off the paint smeared and splattered table, only to discover that the oil paint underneath was still quite wet, and he'd ended up wiping off a good sized patch.

In the end, he'd grabbed Tanny and headed for the door, figuring that he'd leave her with Samantha and explain things to Zelig without her anywhere within spanking distance, but he hadn't even made it that far. Nope, Zelig, himself had strode into the room, only to stop short to stare at the paint-covered child—and at Kurt.

Surprisingly, though, Zelig wasn't overly upset about it. For a briefest of seconds, he did look a little irritated, but he must have figured out who the real culprit was despite Kurt's insistence that he'd done the dirty deed. Zelig had stared at the ruined work before pulling Tanny out of Kurt's arms and letting her finger paint the rest of the canvas, too. Then he'd helped her paint different candies all over it—something that had won the child's grudging friendship. Cain later said that making Tanny smile and laugh was worth it, even if she had ruined the painting that he'd been working on to give Samantha and Kurt as a wedding present.

She shot him a quick smile as she arranged the myriad of throw pillows all over the white and red striped day bed. It still bothered him, though. Enclosed on three sides by those bars . . . and even if they did look a little like stick candy, the disturbing feeling that he was somehow putting her into a cage was enough to irritate the living, breathing hell out of him, too . . .

"See? With the pillows, it's not nearly so bad," she pointed out with a smile.

Kurt wasn't entirely inclined to agree though the contented expression on Samantha's face curbed his irritation just a little. Wandering over to the window that looked out into the fenced in back yard, he sighed. Tanny was busy, running into and out of the playhouse that he'd just finished cleaning. The Pryors—the family they'd purchased the house from—had built it years ago—a miniature of the cottage, itself, and that playhouse would last a few lifetimes . . .

She looked so happy, didn't she? The baby he'd found in that God-forsaken place . . . She looked just like any other toddler, and even through the half-closed window, he could hear her laughter as she delighted in the tiny house that was all for her. Catching the reflection in the sparkling pane of glass, he frowned.

He could still see the damn bars on that bed, and they bothered him. He'd promised himself that he'd never willingly put another living creature into a cage. That the bed Tanny had chosen so closely resembled one, despite Samantha's insistence that it really didn't . . .

It still just didn't sit well with him; not at all.

But . . . but Samantha seemed to optimistic . . . and he had to admit that the spindles really did look like peppermint sticks . . . Maybe . . .

Tanny dashed out of the playhouse and broke toward the back door. Samantha had taught her how to open the handle, and a moment later, the girl was squealing with delight as she ran toward her newly made bed. "Tanny!" she hollered happily. "My tanny bed!"

Despite his misgivings, Kurt broke into a smile. The child looked like she'd died and gone to heaven, and in the end, Kurt let the discussion drop. It'd be worse, wouldn't it? Making a big deal out of it all . . . Maybe what he should do instead of focusing on the

negative . . . He should probably take a leaf from Samantha's book and focus on the future . . .

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“What are you doing out here, pup?”

Kichiro let out a deep breath as he whipped a smooth, flat rock over the rippling water of the crystal clear pond. He'd gone on a walk to clear his head, needing to escape the constant talk of weddings and plans and the lot of it.

“Just wanted some air,” he lied, unable to keep the trace tightness out of his voice.

InuYasha snorted, calling Kichiro on the lie though he didn't press for details. He strode over to stand beside Kichiro, his hair blowing in the gentle wind coming off the water.

They stood for a while in comfortable silence; Kichiro trying not to think about anything at all while InuYasha looked like he might be thinking just a little too hard. In the end, he shook his head and sank down on the bank of the pond with his knees spread, his hands planted between his feet. Kichiro smiled despite himself and mimicked the pose. “Belle-chan thinks I'm being pigheaded,” he ventured.

InuYasha kept his gaze on the water and snorted. “Most women think men are,” he replied.

Kichiro sighed. “Yeah, but . . . I just can't do it,” he admitted quietly—almost sadly. “I can accept that Sam . . . that she's chosen him to be her mate. I mean, I don't have a damn choice, right? But . . .” Trailing off, he felt his ears flatten, felt himself wince, and

though he hated how callus the words really were, he couldn't help feeling it, too . . . "But to watch that . . . I . . ."

InuYasha didn't reply right away. Considering Kichiro's claim, though, he only nodded.

"Kami, it just pisses me off. What the fuck? Am I supposed to shake his damn hand and just pretend that what he did was all right? Hell . . ."

"That what you think people are trying to tell you to do?" InuYasha countered.

Kichiro shook his head. "Isn't it?"

"I don't think so," InuYasha ventured. "If you don't like him, that's your choice, but you gotta love your pup."

He sighed, glowering over the water. "I do love her," he replied. "I just don't like the bastard she chose."

InuYasha snorted. "Fathers rarely do."

Shaking his head, he dug his claws into the softened earth. He couldn't deal with any more of it, could he? Samantha had asked him to oversee the marking process. He'd done that yesterday, and while he hadn't liked it at all, he had done it, keeping his opinion to himself as he'd watched Drevin's blood drain out of his body, then he'd hooked the transfusion kit to Samantha to complete the process. He'd monitored all the man's vitals, making sure that nothing was going to go wrong, and nothing had, of course. He'd managed a small smile for his daughter, reassuring her when she looked distraught over the paleness that had seeped into the human's skin . . . and he'd done that for her.

And yet . . .

“I like Griffin,” he admitted quietly, shaking his head as he tried to bite back the froth of rage that rose deep inside him. “I . . . I figured I’d like all my daughters’ mates . . .”

That was the crux of it, wasn’t it? He’d wanted to like them; wanted to like them all. He’d never wanted for his daughters to think that he disliked the ones they’d chosen, but this time—this time—kami, he couldn’t help it. The nightmares of those videos he’d forced himself to watch . . . every bit of the indignity that was trust upon his youngest—his baby . . . and if Drevin had just spared a moment—a moment—before he’d handed her over, he had to have realized that she was nothing at all like the youkai that killed his family . . .

Understand? Sure. Having those you loved yanked away from you in the blink of an eye was an awful thing that Kichiro understood all too well, but of everything he’d done since then, Drevin hadn’t once . . .

“Yeah, well, I’ll never know why your sister chose a damned baka like Zelig,” InuYasha grumbled, interrupting Kichiro’s musings.

Kichiro’s frown deepened. “They . . . they want me to give her away,” he admitted quietly—angrily—*sadly*. “Belle . . . she wants me to walk my little girl down the aisle and *give* her to that . . .” He grimaced. “To *him*.”

InuYasha let out a deep breath. “I heard that.”

Kichiro snorted. “When all I want to do is kill him? Not such a good idea, is it?” Letting his head fall back, he stared blankly at the slightly overcast sky. “He’ll never know,” he said in a whisper, deadly quiet, unable to trust his own voice not to falter, “what it’s like . . . From the time I . . . I knew she was there, inside her mama . . . from the moment she came into my life . . . He’ll never understand how precious she is . . . To everyone else, she’s just Samantha. To me? She’s *my* baby girl . . .”

InuYasha nodded slowly, the expression on his face stating plainly enough that he understood exactly what Kichiro was trying to say. “So what are you going to do?”

Kichiro shook his head, his gaze suspiciously bright, and he sighed. “I can do a lot of things, old man,” he said at length, turning his face slightly, enough to stare his father in the eye. “I can accept that she . . . that she wants to be with him—at least, I will eventually, but I . . . I can’t *give* her to him. I . . . I just can’t . . .”

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Samantha frowned as she turned the pale pink envelope over, pushing the front door closed with her shoulder.

*‘Return to sender. Addressee unknown.’*

She let out a deep breath, dropping the sparse stack of mail, mostly advertisements, on the table beside the door and bit her lip.

“Sam? Is that you?”

She blinked and started through the cozy living room toward the kitchen, following the sound of Kurt’s voice. He was painting the walls with a fresh coat of rose-tinted white. Splatters of paint in his hair and on his arms . . . even some on his nose . . . She giggled. “Miss me?” she teased.

Kurt glanced over his shoulder at her and smiled. “Well, maybe a little,” he deadpanned. “What do you have there?”

She glanced down at the envelope she still held in her hand and shook her head. “The wedding invitation I sent to your grandfather was returned: addressee unknown.”

He set the paint roller down and rubbed his nose with the back of his hand. “Let me see,” he said.

She handed him the envelope and leaned back against the counter, crossing her arms over her chest. “I used the address you gave me,” she pointed out.

Kurt let out a deep breath and shrugged. “Not surprising. Don’t remember the last time he actually got any mail out there,” he muttered, tossing the invitation onto the new state-of-the-art stove he’d installed yesterday. “What a shame. Guess he won’t be here.”

She made a face at the complete nonchalance in his tone. “You’re telling me that you don’t care if he’s here or not?”

He snorted and reached for the roller again. “If you’ll recall, little demon, I was against sending him an invitation, in the first place.”

She wrinkled her nose and swiped the envelope off the stove with a frown. “He’s the only family you have, taijya. I want him to come.”

“Oh, you really don’t,” he argued mildly. “Seriously . . .”

“Kurt—”

“Sam . . .”

“Douglas *Junior*—”

“Samantha . . . no.”

She wrinkled her nose. Maybe on some level, she could understand and even appreciate his concern. After all, Kurt had said that Old Granger could see youkai, too, right? So he was afraid that his grandfather would cause a scene or something, especially when he realized that Kurt was marrying into a slew of them. Still, that didn't mean that he shouldn't know. After all, he *was* the last family that Kurt had . . . “Maybe I should meet him first, then. I mean, if we explained things to him . . .”

Sucking in a sharp breath, Kurt dropped the roller onto the copious amounts of plastic that he'd taped to the floor as he lifted his hand in front of his face. “Damn.”

Pushing herself away from the counter, Samantha hurried over to see. “What'd you do?”

He shrugged then wiped the trace amount of blood onto his paint-splattered jeans. “Eh, nothing. Just pinched myself in that roller. It's fine.”

“Let me see.”

He rolled his eyes but held up his hand for her. Samantha looked it over and smiled. The cut wasn't deep, no, but she didn't doubt that it ought to have bled a bit more than it had. She figured that it was because the transfusion they'd done was working. He might not heal as quickly as she did, but he'd heal much faster than a human ought to . . .

“You know, Kurt . . .” she drawled innocently—*too* innocently—as she gently ran the tip of her claw down the center of his palm.

He shivered. She could feel it. “What?” he asked almost dubiously.

“We've still got a few days before the wedding . . .”

She felt him sigh. “Why do I get the impression that I’m not going to like whatever it is that’s on your mind?”

She grinned. “It’d only take a day or so to fly out there to see your grandfather and invite him to the wedding personally . . .”

He made a face and pulled his hand away to drape it on his hip. “Yeah, I figured that I wasn’t going to like it.”

“But he’s your *grandfather*.”

“No, he’s just a loony old man.”

She bit her lip. Okay, so it was underhanded—even dirty. Still . . . “It’d make me really happy if your grandfather was at our wedding.”

The scowl on his face shifted into a decided grimace. “Now, that’s completely unfair,” he grumbled.

She didn’t disagree, but she did lean on his shoulder to kiss his cheek. “Maybe Tanny should meet him now, too. I mean, he *is* her great-grandfather—at least, he *will* be . . .”

“Oh, God,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Little demon . . .”

“Do you want to call the airport, or should I?”

“Can we talk about this?” he demanded as she hurried out of the room to find her cell phone. “You know, there’s a good chance that people will stop talking to us if we invite Old Granger . . .”

She laughed at his complaints as she grabbed the phone book and started to leaf through the yellow pages.

“Then again,” he went on, talking more to himself than to her, “would it *really* be a bad thing if everyone stopped talking to us . . .?”

She giggled since she could hear the dryness in his tone and knew damn well that he was joking. She reached for the phone, but Kurt was faster, smacking his hand down on top of it to keep her at bay. “I’m begging you, Sam,” he began.

She batted her eyelashes and very slowly gave him a very critical once over. “I like it when you beg, taijya . . .”

He grunted though his cheeks reddened. “Sam . . .”

Staring at him for several moments, she wandered closer and slipped her arms around his neck, pressing her body against his, pulling him down for a long, lethargic kiss. With a low moan, he wrapped his arms around her, dragging her just a little closer.

A moment later, she yanked away from him, giggling happily as she held out the phone. “Do you want to book the flights?”

Kurt sighed and scowled at her before finally reaching for the phone. “Let it be known that I was fully against this idea of yours,” he grouched.

Samantha laughed and pointed to the phone number in the book as Kurt dug his wallet out since he’d need his payment information at hand.

Satisfied that Kurt was going to take care of the travel arrangements, Samantha smiled. Now if she could only explain the necessity of the trip to her family without causing them undue concern, she’d be one step ahead of the game . . .

*'What if he's right, Sam? What if his grandfather is crazy or something?'*

Brushing that thought away as she hurried off to pack an overnight bag—she'd moved most of her things over the course of the last few days, partly to be ready once the wedding was over, and partly because the lease for her apartment was about to expire.

*'Oh, relax! He's Kurt's grandfather! How bad could he be, really?'*

Her youkai heaved a longsuffering sigh but didn't comment.

Samantha grinned as she dug a small black suitcase out of the back of the closet . . .



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
... Oh, I think I'd rather be dead ...

## Chapter 85

### Old Granger

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Glancing into the rearview mirror, Kurt stifled a sigh as he adjusted his grip on the steering wheel.

Oh, why did he just know that this was a bad idea? From start to finish, no matter how he looked at it, he just couldn't see a good outcome in this. Exactly how Samantha had talked him into it, he still didn't know. Even then, he hadn't been able to get a wink of sleep last night after they'd finally checked into a hotel in town. He'd spent the entire night, inventing scenarios in his head, one right after another, and not one of them ended well for him . . . Oh, no. This felt less like a homecoming visit and more like a time bomb, just waiting to blow up in his face.

"Are you sure you know the way?" Samantha asked dubiously.

Kurt sighed and turned down the lonely stretch of road—barely discernible these days, and barely wide enough to allow the rented Jeep to pass. "Oh, I'm sure . . ."

"But it's so overgrown . . ."

Kurt shrugged. "Well, this is all private property, and if he doesn't care to keep his land cleared up, then there isn't much anyone can do. Besides . . . I'm the only one who ever comes out this way, anyway . . ."

"He lives out here all alone?"

“He’s not much of a people-person.”

She rolled her eyes but giggled as she opened her cell phone then snapped it closed again. “It’s official: we’re out in the middle of nowhere. I can’t get any kind of signal at all . . .”

“You did warn your family about that, right? So they don’t worry?” he asked.

She nodded. “Yes, I did. I told them that you’d said that there wasn’t very good reception out this way. I just wanted to check in on Tanny. She seemed okay when we left . . .”

“Hell, everyone was giving her candy. Of course she was okay.”

At least there was that, he supposed. The family in question had done their best to hide the alarm that he knew they’d felt when he’d taken Samantha over to the mansion to let them know about their plans. The only thing that had saved them, as far as he figured, was that Kichiro wasn’t in the house at the time. Her mother had looked completely panic-stricken for a few moments before she managed to cover it up with a wan smile. Still, he couldn’t help but feel as though he were doing something entirely horrible to them, taking their precious one away, even if it was only going to be for a couple days.

“I can’t believe that by this time next week, I’ll be Mrs. Dr. Kurt Drevin . . . That’s how it works, right? Mama explained it to me once, but it *sounds* so awkward.”

Kurt chuckled despite himself at the disgruntled tone in her voice. “Hell, I have no idea,” he admitted. Her words had given him pause, though hearing it out loud . . . It was nice, wasn’t it?

Samantha fell quiet for a moment, staring out the window at the dense foliage they were creeping through. “Doesn’t get many visitors, does he?”

Kurt grunted, leaning forward to get a better view of a low hanging branch before he attempted to drive under it. “Not really,” he agreed almost absently. “Not surprising, considering how obnoxious he can be . . .”

“So tell me more about him,” Samantha prodded gently.

“Like what?”

She giggled. “Well, anything!”

“He . . . uh, he likes whiskey,” Kurt said, unable to come up with something better.

“I gathered as much when you bought six bottles of it before we left town,” she quipped.

Kurt grimaced and sighed inwardly. “He used to have this bastard of a raccoon for a pet. Little monster would bite me whenever it could and shit in my bed if I didn’t catch him before he did it . . .”

“A raccoon?”

Kurt snorted. “Oh, yeah . . .”

She was trying not to laugh; he had to give her that much. She wasn’t quite succeeding, but she was trying . . . “In your bed . . .?”

“Yes, little demon, in my bed.”

“What was his name?”

He couldn't hide the grimace from her that time, but the last thing he wanted to do was to admit to her what his twisted grandfather had named the damned beast. "D . . . Doug."

Her mouth fell open. He could see it out of the corner of his eyes. "After your father?"

Kurt forced himself to nod. "Sounds 'bout right, yeah . . ."

She pressed her lips together to contain her amusement that was sorely evident in her quivering nostrils. "W-why . . .?"

"Said that the raccoon had that shifty look about him, same as Dad did when he was younger and getting into mischief."

She choked on that, not that he blamed her. He let out a deep breath as the feeling of impending doom grew thicker and heavier in the pit of his stomach.

Pulling over with a sigh, Kurt killed the engine and shot Samantha an apologetic sort of glance. "Looks like the end of the road," he commented somewhat dryly. "We're not far, anyway. Why don't you stay here until I come get you? Let me talk to him first so he doesn't do anything . . . stupid."

She smiled at him and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "I think you're worried about nothing," she told him, "but if it makes you feel better, I'll wait right here."

He let out a deep breath and nodded, wishing that he could share her eternal optimism, but failing miserably.

At least the day was gorgeous, the weather clear and crisp and slightly breezy as he trudged away from the Jeep. He had far too many memories of Old Granger and his particular kind of weirdness to say that he was comfortable with the entire affair. No, he

knew better, didn't he? Knew the old bastard much too well to think that this whole venture was nothing but folly. He didn't really blame the old man for the almost apathetic way in which Kurt had been raised. He never really had, come to think of it.

Still, he'd realized that Old Granger really had tried with him. He simply didn't really know or maybe he just didn't remember what it was like to have a child, at all. His own father hadn't really talked about him much that Kurt could remember. Maybe he was simply too young. Maybe it just hadn't occurred to Doug Drevin that Kurt might like to hear something about his elusive grandfather. In any case, there really was no use bemoaning it, was there?

Back in those days, as the numbness had slowly worn off, Kurt had wondered a few times, what it would have been like, to have been drawn onto his grandfather's lap, to have been comforted just a little. As time went by, though, he'd come to understand that Old Granger's way was to let Kurt blunder and muck through it all, to learn from his own mistakes as well as from his own triumphs. Whether it was falling out of a tree or figuring out a way to build a small bridge to reach the other side of the deep ravine not far from the cabin, he'd always thought that he was alone.

Yet how many times had he felt as though someone were watching him, even if he couldn't see him at all? How often had that feeling of isolation been blunted by the subtle knowledge that someone, sight unseen, was nearby? It had been him, hadn't it? Old Granger, in his own way, watching over Kurt . . .

And the one time . . . Kurt didn't remember how old he was, exactly, but he thought that maybe it wasn't long after he'd come to live with the crazy old man . . . He'd gotten sick one year—really sick. He couldn't remember much about it; only bits and pieces here and there, but when, at last, his fever had broken, he could remember seeing Old Granger, sitting in the rough wood chair that he always kept near the stove. The memory was hazy with an almost dream-like quality, and while it could have easily been nothing more than that, Kurt knew in his heart that it wasn't. The old man . . . he was

crying, wasn't he? Quietly, without a sound to be heard above the ambient crackle of the flames on the hearth . . . Crying and whispering . . . "*He's the last . . . the last of m' boy . . . Don't take 'im . . . Don't take 'im . . .*"

Then Kurt had fallen asleep again, and by the time he woke up the next morning, the gruff old man was back, wasn't he? Grumbling at Kurt for being lazy, for lying in bed for nearly a week . . .

He blinked in surprise as he stepped out of the trees into the clearing where the old cabin stood.

The front door was standing open—not surprising since there were only a few windows in the place, and Old Granger enjoyed airing out the place—that was what he called it, anyway—if the weather allowed.

A sudden crack erupted around him, and Kurt grunted as his feet were yanked out from under him. A rough hemp net closed over him as he was jerked upward off the ground. Hissing in pain as his forehead smacked against the bottom of a very stout tree branch, Kurt gritted his teeth as the makeshift sack bounced a few more times before slowing to a steady swinging motion.

"Eh? Y' showed up just in time to test out my demon catcher!" Old Granger hollered as he thumped out of the house, leaning heavily upon the gnarled branch he used as a cane.

Craning his head to the side—extremely difficult since his left knee was digging painfully into his ear—Kurt shot the crazy old coot as irritated a look as he could muster. "Great," he gasped out. "You going to get me down from here?"

The insane old man was too busy, hooting triumphantly over his invention to answer. Shuffling his feet as he did a half-jig around the cane, he was positively triumphant, and

Kurt winced when the handmade ropes suspending the net groaned and creaked ominously.

“Hey, Old Granger,” he called out, trying in vain to get his grandfather’s attention. “Get me down, goddamnit!”

“Hold on; hold on!” Old Granger hollered back. “Gimme a second, boy! No damned demon’s gonna get past me, no sir!”

Grimacing again since he felt pretty much like a sardine packed into a can after processing, Kurt shifted his gaze upward, wondering exactly how a lunatic like Old Granger was allowed out to be such a menace to normal folk . . .

It was a simple trap, and Kurt probably should have been ready for it. Just like the silly ones that Wile E. Coyote would think up to trap the Road Runner, really, and Kurt had fallen for it, which just figured. A simple lever trap that he’d sprung just by stepping on the right thing, he supposed, the damn thing had been hidden beneath a layer of carelessly tossed decaying leaves . . .

And he really should have realized that Old Granger wouldn’t just lower the damned net back down again, either, but no, he didn’t think about it. Landing hard with a dull thud with only the leaves to cushion the impact, Kurt grimaced and grunted and didn’t move, slowly assessing the damage. There wasn’t much, aside from the sharp pain in his ass, and maybe he deserved that for having let his guard down around Old Granger, in the first place.

“I think I liked the powder you tossed in my face better,” he grumbled as he slowly, carefully, pushed himself up, swatting the net away with a grunt.

“I thought I learnt you not to sass me,” Old Granger growled, bopping Kurt upside the head with the end of his walking stick.

Kurt stood up, bracing his back with his hands and leaning to stretch it out. “Why aren’t you dead?” he muttered, slapping the stick away when Old Granger swung it again.

True to form, the old loon laughed—a high-pitched cackle full of stale breath and very little sound. “Got too much work to do,” he insisted with a shake of his head. “Damn glad you came out here, boy,” he said suddenly with an almost friendly sort of smile.

“You . . . you are?” Kurt demanded, unable to help the instant surprise that registered on his features.

Old Granger nodded, letting his gaze sweep the clearing as he pushed the brim of the dusty hat he always wore back on his head to scratch at the sparse hairs on the top of his head. “I’m outta whiskey,” he said. “Hand it over.”

Blinking at Old Granger’s wiggling fingers, Kurt stifled the urge to sigh. He should have known, right? As if his grandfather would have actually missed *him* . . .

“It’s in the car,” he remarked, shaking his head and berating himself for thinking that Old Granger would ever admit that he cared. “I need to talk to you.”

“I’m not one for talking,” Old Granger pointed out in a tone that all but called Kurt stupid for not having realized that already.

“Yeah, well, you’re going to listen, then,” Kurt said.

Old Granger slowly turned back toward the cabin once more, muttering under his breath about ‘citified’ youngsters that forgot how to be respectful toward their elders.

Kurt stifled the urge to snort since he highly doubted he'd ever actually been 'respectful', anyway. Besides, he had more important things to think about, like explaining to Old Granger that he was about to marry one of those demons he tried so hard to avoid . . .

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"Kurt?"

"Hmm?"

"Are you limping?"

He didn't falter in his gait as he peered over his shoulder at her. "No," he replied tersely.

Samantha frowned as she followed him along the path he'd forged through the dense foliage.

*'He is limping just a little,'* her youkai voice pointed out.

Samantha nodded wanly. *'He is,'* she agreed.

*'And he's even tenser now than he was when he left to talk to his grandfather . . . Samantha?'*

*'Yes?'*

*'Maybe he was right . . . Maybe forcing this meeting was a really bad idea . . .'*

"So . . . did you get the bump on your head the same time you got that limp?" she asked in what she hoped was a neutral tone.

“Nope,” he replied almost tersely. “The limp is from being smacked in the shin for ‘sassing’ him.”

Samantha bit down on her lip—hard. “Was he at least glad to see you?”

Kurt sighed and stopped abruptly. “Not really,” he admitted with a shake of his head. “He did promise that he’d refrain from tossing purifying dust or restraining papers on you . . . and no anti-demon trap nets, either . . .”

“Trap nets?” she echoed. Something about the strange expression on his face . . .

He grimaced and gingerly touched the swollen lump. “Yeah . . . tested it on me, of course.”

Samantha stepped closer and reached out to assess the damage. “I think you’ll live.”

The look he shot her was almost apologetic, and he tried to smile. “I just . . . If he offends you, I’m sorry in advance,” he mumbled, shaking his head with a decidedly resigned sort of expression on his face.

She stared at him for several moments before finally letting her gaze fall away. “Kurt . . . if you really don’t want me to meet him, I . . . I don’t have to,” she said. “If you really think that he’s as bad as all that . . .”

“I just . . .” Letting out a deep breath as he raked his fingers through his hair, he grimaced. “He . . . he has a habit of coming off as a little . . .”

“Eccentric?” she supplied with a little smile of encouragement.

He snorted indelicately. “Obnoxious, is more like it.”

She laughed. “But he’s your grandfather, and he raised you, right? He can’t really be that bad.”

“You’d be surprised,” Kurt muttered with a shake of his head. Still, he reached for her hand to tug her along the path.

She blinked as they stepped out of the shade of the trees into a bright, sunny clearing. She wasn’t entirely sure what she’d expected, but she couldn’t help herself as she smiled when she caught sight of the small, rough log cabin. The cracks between the logs were packed with a grayish caulking—Kurt later told her that it was a mix of quick-setting cement and white sand that Old Granger always made him touch up every summer—with deeply recessed windows that weren’t any larger than a foot square set into the wood. They were so deep, in fact, that Samantha suspected that the walls were likely two logs wide, and it struck her that the cabin must have been a rather dismal place to have spent so much time in his youth . . .

But the patches of grass that grew here and there were cropped short, probably by the two goats picketed nearby, and a large stack of roughly chopped wood stacked against the nearside of the cabin. Glancing at Kurt, she smiled again, remembering their discussion about working out that they’d had so long ago. He’d chopped a lot of wood in his lifetime, too, hadn’t he? That thought only made her smile a little more . . .

He must have figured out what she was thinking, or at least figured out what she was looking at, because he snorted loudly and shook his head. “I’m not chopping wood for that crazy old man,” he mumbled under his breath.

“Can he do it, himself?”

Kurt shrugged. “Wouldn’t know. Once I was old enough to move out, I hired someone to haul him wood in the fall.”

It struck her then, how much he did care about the man he called Old Granger. Even if he said he didn't, his actions spoke louder, didn't they? She shook her head at her own silly thoughts. Of course he cared about his grandfather. Kurt . . . he was too good a man not to, wasn't he?

Her thoughts were cut short, however, her attention shifting when a stooped over man leaning heavily on a rough cane stumped out of the cabin. She could feel her eyes widen as she got her first real glimpse of the man. Hidden in the billowing folds of a loose robe fashioned out of a rough-looking, drab olive green cloth, he stared at her with curious abandon from the darkened recesses of his hat brim.

Kurt was the first to speak, breaking the impromptu silence that had fallen. "Old Granger, this is Samantha. Sam, this is Old Gra—"

The old man's laughter cut Kurt off—a brittle sound as thin and rusty as Kurt's had been the first time she'd heard it. He shuffled closer, his feet and cane creating an erratic cadence as his continuing laughter resounded. "Caught you a fairy, did you?" he said without bothering to glance at Kurt.

"Caught me a—what?" Kurt blurted.

Samantha giggled. It was the first time she'd ever been called a fairy, and it was rather novel, really . . . "A fairy?" she repeated brightly.

Old Granger nodded slowly, his laughter dying away though his eyes remained aglow. "Seen a lot of fairies these days," he remarked. "You're the first girly fairy I've seen in ages . . ."

Kurt shot his grandfather a droll stare. "She's not a fairy; she's a—"

"I ain't blind, boy!" Old Granger cut in, lifting the end of his cane high enough to whack Kurt in his good shin.

"Ow, damn it!" Kurt hissed. "Hit me again with that, and I'll shove it right up your—"

"You've met other fairies lately?" Samantha cut in pleasantly before Kurt could finish his dire threat.

"Fairies? Sure. Just last winter, one what looked like you but male helped me find m' choppers."

"Oh, hell," Kurt grumbled.

Samantha was intrigued. "He looked like me? How?"

Old Granger shot Kurt a calculating glance then scratched his chin through his scraggly gray beard. "Oh, you know. Silver hair . . . 'em ears . . . Least-a-ways, he *said* he was a he. Thought damn sure he was a she—a real *purty* she . . ."

Samantha pressed her lips together as she struggled not to laugh out loud. Only five men in her family fit that description, and since it was a fair bet that Mikio hadn't gone out to look for her, that only left four, and she highly doubted that any of them would have found even the basest amount of humor in being mistaken for a woman . . .

"You, boy . . . how'd you manage to convince a fairy to marry you?" Old Granger demanded, jabbing the end of the cane at the ground near Kurt's toes.

"Just lucky, I guess."

Old Granger shook his head and slowly turned to hobble away. "Girly . . . come here," he called over his shoulder.

She shot Kurt a questioning glance. He lifted his eyebrows and shook his head, telling her that he had no idea what Old Granger wanted, but when he moved to follow, too, Old Granger thumped the cane on the ground. “Not you, boy. Just her.”

Samantha wasn't entirely sure what to make of that, but she didn't argue, and neither did Kurt though she couldn't say that he looked like he was at all pleased.

Still, she couldn't help but be a little intrigued by whatever it was Old Granger wanted to show her. Stepping into the low hanging shadow cast by the side of the cabin, she felt the immediate coolness hit her, enough to bring a rise of goosebumps to the surface of her skin, and she quickly rubbed her arms to force them back.

“Met me a girly fairy once,” Old Granger commented at length as he stumped along with the help of his cane. “Purtiest thing, you know?”

Samantha frowned but didn't speak out loud. *‘A girly fairy . . . ? A youkai?’*

“At was back in the ol' days—back when I had me some real choppers.”

Biting her lip, Samantha tried not to smile. Kurt had told her that he tended to call his teeth ‘choppers’ and that he also had a really bad habit of taking them out at odd times, too.

“Had this . . . this long red hair—red like the sunset, you know? Real red, not that mucked-down brown-red, neither . . .” He hobbled his way around a fallen tree trunk that looked as though he'd been hacking away at it, bit by bit. Samantha followed in silence, waiting for the old man to continue his tale. “. . . and these eyes—weren't green or blue, but sorta between . . . Could look straight through you, and sometimes . . .” He wheezed out another airy chuckle and slowly shook his head. “But she'd smile, you see? She'd smile . . .”

Samantha frowned as they stopped beside a small wooden cross fashioned out of two sturdy tree branches that had been lashed together with what looked to be fishing line. Peaceful, wasn't it? Situated below the boughs of a flourishing tree . . .

“Died no more ‘n a few years after she come here with me. I built this place for her, and we was happy, too. It was afore I met the boy’s gran’mamma, you know—his gran’mamma weren’t no fairy. Anyways, I went huntin’ and trappin’ and fishin’, and she did things around here. Never needed matches in those days, neither. She could start a fire, something fierce, just by starin’ at the sticks . . . One winter, though . . . got cold—real cold. Fifty below zero or I’ll eat m’ hat . . . For a month, straight, without a break, and she never could tolerate the cold. One second, she was there, and the next, she . . . she disintegrated in front of m’ very eyes. But I buried her here—what I could gather of her. Used to sit under this here tree and sing . . .”

He trailed off, slowly reaching up to remove the tattered hat, showing his respect, Samantha supposed. “A fire bearer, she said she was,” he mumbled with a shake of his head. “You . . .” he said, slowly turning to stare at Samantha, narrowing his eyes—they were violet, too, though a little faded with age—as he eyed her. “You’re one of them, ain’cha? A fairy . . .”

Samantha bit her lip for a moment, unsure why it was that she was loathe to tell the old man the truth. There was something far more fanciful about the idea of fairies, and she knew damn well that she wasn’t one, but . . . but the quiet hope in his eyes . . . Had he spent his entire life trying to find another being like the one he’d lost? A fire bearer—a fire-based youkai, and of course she couldn’t tolerate the cold. Being an elemental youkai had its disadvantages at times, and extreme cold . . . That was probably what had killed her . . .

‘A fairy . . .’ And she smiled. “I guess you could say that,” she agreed with a nod.

Old Granger nodded, too, a slow grin spreading over his features. "I thought so," he gloated happily with a triumphant little laugh. "I thought so!"



**Final Thought from Kurt**  
**...A fairy ...?**

## Chapter 86

### Flash Point

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“Kichiro, did you have time to try on that tuxedo?” Bellaniece asked as she breezed into the bedroom where he was reading through some paperwork that the assistant director had sent over from the clinic.

Kichiro didn't look up from his work. “I'm busy, Belle-chan.”

Carefully hanging the pink garment bag—her dress, he supposed—in the closet, she slowly pivoted to face him. “If anything needs to be altered, it has to be done today, you know,” she reminded him. “You've been putting it off for the last two weeks . . .”

Kichiro nudged his glasses with his knuckle. “I'm not going,” he said simply, as though he were telling her that the sun was shining outside.

Bellaniece stopped dead in her tracks, staring at him in a completely incredulous way. “What?” she asked quietly.

“I am not going,” he stated once more.

She didn't speak right away, probably trying to decide whether he was being serious or not. “Are you saying that you're not going to your own daughter's wedding?” she asked in a calm, albeit clipped tone.

Kichiro turned the page and settled back in the chair. “That's right,” he replied evenly.

“But it’s her *wedding*.”

“I realize that,” he countered.

Bellaniece slowly shook her head. “You can’t mean that.”

He snorted, shifting to the side and leaning his forehead on his fist. “It’s not open for debate,” he said.

She strode over, planting her balled-up fists on her hips. “You are not doing this,” she insisted. “Your daughter is getting married tomorrow, and you cannot break her heart by refusing to show up!”

“It’s her wedding, right? You said so, yourself. You honestly think she’d be happier if I were there? If I ended up attacking the groom? Last time I checked, that was bad form, Belle-chan.”

She narrowed her eyes at his acerbic reply. He could feel her gaze on him though he didn’t look to verify it. “Can’t you put aside your feelings for one day? Just one?”

Kichiro sighed. “No, I don’t think I can.”

She drew a deep breath, as though she were deliberating the best way to get him to break. “Fine, then. I’m asking you—”

Gritting his teeth so hard that his jaw ached, Kichiro kept his gaze trained upon the paper before him. “Don’t you fucking dare ask me to do something I cannot do,” he bit out quietly.

“How fair—?”

He shot to his feet, towering over Bellaniece and glowering at her in so fiercely that grown men would have backed down, but she did not. “Don’t you talk ‘fair’ to me! There is no such thing as ‘fair’! My daughter—*my daughter!* And you ask me to hand her over to *him?* And you think that’s fair, do you, Belle? *No!*”

Eyes flashing, nostrils flaring, she glowered up at him as her temper soared. “She’s *my* daughter, too, and whether you like it or not, she’s getting married tomorrow. I will not push her away! I *won’t!*”

“I’ve done all that I can do,” he argued. “I’ve done it, haven’t I? Everything—*everything*—she’s asked of me—I’ve done it! She chose him, and I’ve accepted that! She asked me to oversee the transfusion, and I did that, too! Samantha . . . *him* . . . Tanny . . . all of it—*all of it!* Every last damn bit of it, and I . . .” Trailing off, shaking his head furiously, he started to turn away, letting the paperwork drop from his fingers like rain. Bellaniece reached out, caught his arm to stay him. He jerked away from her but didn’t move. “This, though . . . to give her away? To give her to *him?* Ask me to move a mountain, Belle-chan! Ask me to die for you—for *her* . . . but you cannot—*cannot*—ask me for this.”

Blinking back stubborn tears that she just couldn’t help, Bellaniece shook her head and stood her ground. “You’ll force her to choose, Kichiro, and you know it’s true. Your anger, your hatred . . . You’ll make me lose my little girl all over again!”

“Belle—”

She held up a hand and stomped toward the door, brushing the tears away with a furious hand. “If you drive her away, Kichiro . . . If you do that . . .” She drew a deep breath, took a moment to compose herself as she reached for the door handle. “If you cost me my daughter, Kichiro Izayoi, I swear upon all that is holy, I’ll teach you the true meaning of ‘a woman scorned’ . . .”

He heard her slip out of the room, heard the soft 'snick' of the door closing behind her.

A sudden, intense burst of rage shot through him, so vile, so cloying that he grimaced, snatching up the nearest object—a glass of water he had brought up when he'd gotten the papers faxed over—and he spun around, hurling the glass as hard as he could. It smashed against the doorframe, shattering into a million splinters that rained down all over the floor. He watched the splattered water trickle down the wall, and slowly, the anger that had choked him ebbed away.

But the emptiness that it left behind was even harder to swallow, as though all the emotion that had carried him through months at a time were draining away, and all that was left was a hollow shell of nothing, of what was left . . . From the time Samantha had disappeared until this very moment, the emotions had suddenly become dull, blunted.

Too much fear, too much anger, too much anxiety and sorrow and pain; too much guilt, and yes, even happiness—a lifetime of emotions packed into the space of a few short months . . .

He felt his knees give way as he sank back down in the chair once more, burying his face in his hands as his eyes—hot, dry, burning—refused to shed tears.

He heard the door open with a whisper, felt the familiar brush of youki and knew it before she ever spoke. “Mama said . . . Mama said you won't come to the wedding,” Samantha said quietly.

Kichiro sighed and shook his head but didn't uncover his face. “I'm sorry, Sami,” he murmured, his voice distorted by his hands. “I . . . I can't.”

She crossed the floor, avoiding the shards of glass littering the floor, and sat beside him, her gentle hands pulling on his wrists so that she could see his face. It killed him to see the sadness in her gaze, the trembling smile that she was forcing just for him. “Papa . . . I

wish you'd change your mind."

"Dollbaby . . ."

She shook her head quickly, as though to cut him off, and that damned smile brightened as a sheen of tears filled her eyes. "Could you promise me something?"

He didn't answer. As much as he wanted to, he wasn't entirely sure that he could make a promise without hearing it first.

Her smile trembled but didn't diminish. "I . . . I can understand why you can't come . . ." She brushed away a single tear that slipped down her cheek. "One day, you'll see, though. Kurt really is a good man, and . . . and when you finally see it? Would you try to be happy for me then?"

Kichiro sighed and pulled Samantha into a hug. Whether or not she realized that he hadn't made that promise, he didn't know, but he could feel her pain—the pain she was trying to hide, and as much as he wished he could force a smile and pretend that he was okay with it . . . It was one lie too many, wasn't it? One lie that he simply couldn't give voice to . . .

Samantha hugged him and sniffled, but she still managed a weak smile as she got to her feet. "If you change your mind, Papa . . . I'll be the one wearing white."

He held onto her hand as she slipped away, as her fingertips dragged over his palm, until they brushed against hers, only to fall away as she headed for the door again.

Getting to his feet, he shuffled over to the doors that led to the balcony and stepped outside. In the yard below, hired help were decorating, and he could feel the rush of excitement, even where he stood so high above it all.

He'd thought it would be so simple back then, hadn't he? When his children were born, and he'd held them in his arms, he'd thought that there was nothing he wouldn't do for them; not ever. He'd thought that nothing else would matter, if they asked something of him, that he would move heaven and earth to make sure that they had it.

He hadn't realized back then, had he? He hadn't realized that there were some things that he simply didn't have it within him to give . . .

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"You're not thinking of leaving us, are you, Dr. Drevin?"

Kurt grimaced and tried not to be too obvious as he checked his watch. "Uh, no," he lied with a careless shrug as he swigged his beer.

Evan chuckled and clapped a heavy hand on Kurt's shoulder. "Good . . . good . . . you haven't sung yet!"

That earned a blank sort of look since it'd be a cold day in hell before Kurt did anything of the sort.

"Who the hell picked karaoke?" Gunnar demanded as he frowned at the stock beer that the bartender had shoved across the counter at him when he'd asked to see their import list.

Evan's grin widened. "Well, as best man, my first and foremost thought was, of course, the strippers, but Bubby nixed that one."

'Bubby' rolled his eyes. "Considering Sesshoumaru's here? I think strippers would be in

bad taste.”

Evan snorted, draining his beer and slamming the empty bottle onto the counter for another. “Hate to tell you this, Bubby, but it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? Sesshoumaru’s the biggest dog of ‘em all, right? So it stands to reason that he’s treed his fair share of pussy over the years, all things considered.”

Bas choked on a swig of beer.

Gunnar whacked Evan upside the head. “Shut it, you twisted little bastard.”

Kurt shook his head, unconsciously glancing across the bar at the man in question. He’d arrived while Samantha and he were tracking down Old Granger, and Kurt had to admit that Sesshoumaru’s aura was even more intimidating on the whole than even InuYasha’s, which was saying a hell of a lot, really . . .

“So where’s that nutbag of a grandfather of yours?” Morio asked, squeezing between Gunnar and Kurt as he held up his empty bottle and waved it at the bartender.

Kurt sighed. “He discovered the honor bar in his hotel room. He was passed out for the night when I checked on him.”

Gunnar snorted, ears twitching as the only real sign of emotion on his countenance. “Speaking of ‘twisted’ . . .” he muttered under his breath.

“Eh, I thought he was a pretty cool old guy,” Evan commented. “Sides, it’d suck if he were just like everyone else, wouldn’t it?”

“Says you, Evan,” Bas grumbled. “He groped my kitty . . . and she *giggled*.”

Kurt stifled another sigh since that was very true. The first time they’d brought Old

Granger over to meet everyone, Bas and Sydnie had been on their way out, and before he could even be properly introduced, Old Granger had a handful of the cat-youkai's bottom . . . which might have been funny since Bas looked like he was set to maim the old man—at least, it might have been if Kurt hadn't been scared witless that he actually would.

And it had pretty much gone downhill from there, too, come to think of it . . .

"I say kick him the hell out. That old man is crazy—not just *slightly* crazy, but *really* crazy. No wonder you're as fucked up as you are," Gunnar pointed out.

"Shut up, Gunnar," Bas retorted from Kurt's other side.

Gunnar rolled his eyes and shot Bas a pointed glower. "Mark my words, Bas-tard. That old man is going to do something obnoxious at the wedding and ruin it for Samantha."

"Since when do you care about weddings?" Morio chimed in.

"I don't," Gunnar replied, "but Sami might. Stands to reason, doesn't it? She actually thinks she *wants* to marry *that* guy."

'*That* guy' rolled his eyes and took another swig of the half-stale beer as Evan sauntered away toward the little platform the bar called a stage. "There's nothing wrong with getting married," Kurt pointed out.

Gunnar snorted. "There's nothing right with it, either. Our kind doesn't need that sort of convention. It's only done to appease you humans, after all."

"Is that right?" Kurt asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Shut up, Gunnar. Not everyone is as cynical as you are," Morio said mildly.

“No, it’s not,” Bas countered. “Ignore him. He was born jaded. Anyway, don’t worry about it. After tomorrow, it’ll all be a done deal.”

Kurt frowned and nodded, content to allow the conversation to move off into another direction, entirely. Even still . . . Why couldn’t he shake the sense of unease that just wouldn’t go away? There was something, wasn’t there? Samantha had told him a thousand times if she’d told him once that everything was all set for the wedding, but . . . For some reason, though, he couldn’t help but wonder if it were really going to be as simple as everyone else made it sound . . .

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Kichiro stepped out of the shower and grabbed a dark blue towel, slinging it around his hips and loosely tucking in one end of it to hold it in place as he reached for the door handle.

He wasn’t sure where Bellaniece was, but it was safe to say that she wouldn’t be joining him in bed, which just figured, and if he wanted to be completely honest with himself, he’d have to allow that he didn’t rightfully give a damn, at least not at the moment.

Pulling the door open, he stopped short at the sight of his granddaughter skulking around the bed. She looked like she might be searching for candy, but he wasn’t sure. In any case, though, it brought a half-smile to his lips as he leaned against the jam to watch her.

She hadn’t actually made any overtures toward him in the length of time that she’d been living there. She’d made friends with everyone—Zelig notwithstanding—everyone but Kichiro. Maybe she sensed his anger or his frustration, and maybe it intimidated her,

and he sighed. He hadn't meant to alienate her; not at all, and suddenly, a vicious pang shot through him. He wanted to get to know her, didn't he? He was going to be her grandfather, after all . . .

"You looking for candy?" he asked softly, so as not to frighten her.

She uttered a strangled little yelp and skittered toward the door. Kichiro reached back to nab the candy he'd emptied out of his pockets earlier before his shower off the counter beside the sink. "Tanny . . ."

"You like candy, huh?" he said, careful to keep his tone light, unthreatening.

She stopped and slowly, hesitantly, looked back at him. Her eyes widened like saucers when she saw the candy in his hand. "Tanny," she burred, one hand on the handle, the other jammed in her mouth.

Slowly, Kichiro stepped into the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. "Wow . . . taffy and cinnamon disks . . . and a purple sucker . . ."

He could feel the base conflict within her. She didn't trust him, but he had *candy*, didn't he? He almost laughed—almost. "T-tanny . . .?"

"Why don't you come here and get it?" he urged gently, holding out a single piece of pink salt-water taffy toward her.

She bit her lip but let go of the handle, her arms bent at the elbow as she slowly toddled toward him. "I wike tanny," she ventured, cocking her head to the side as though she were imparting a great secret to him.

Kichiro chuckled and let her take the piece of candy from him. "So does your mama," he murmured quietly.

The unwrapped and chewed the candy thoughtfully, and she must have decided that Kichiro might not be completely bad since he had candy. Crawling onto the foot of the bed—she grasped his ankle to pull herself up—she sat down in the middle of the coverlet and pointed to the candy in his hand. “Tanny for me?” she asked hopefully.

Kichiro nodded. “Sure. You want more?”

She nodded, too, her little pigtails bobbing with the exuberance of her nod. “Dat one!”

“This one?” he asked, holding up a cinnamon disk wrapped in red cellophane.

She nodded again and clapped her hands.

Kichiro chuckled and let her take it. It wasn’t the first time that he’d realized exactly how far she’d come in such a short time, really. The girl was smart—very smart—and she was flourishing under Samantha’s tender care.

Tanny crunched the candy and crawled over to Kichiro, planting her hands on the rough towel covering his bent leg. “Sucker!” she demanded, a cautious light dancing in her dark eyes despite the hopeful expression on her face.

Kichiro gave her the sucker and shook his head. Encouraging her to make friends through bribery wasn’t exactly the greatest thing, he supposed, but given her past, he figured that whatever worked was just fine with him. “That’s a pretty nightgown,” he remarked, touching the soft fabric covering her shoulders: white cotton decorated with pastel candies, of course.

She giggled. “Mommy gived it to me.”

He laughed. “Did she? She make your hair pretty, too?” he asked, tugging playfully on

one of her piggy tails.

She shook her head. “Daddy,” she replied happily as she nabbed another piece of taffy. “Mommy pulls hair.”

Kichiro’s smile faded just a little. “Mommy pulls hair, eh? Yeah, that sounds about right . . .”

“Daddy make me pwetty,” she said around a mouthful of taffy.

“Does he?”

She nodded one big nod and scrunched up her face as she tilted her head to the side to stare at him. “You’re my gwampa?” she asked slowly in her sing-song voice.

“Mommy say that?”

She nodded then shook her head, looking a little perplexed by the simple question. “Mommy *an*’ Daddy,” she replied.

Kichiro let out a deep breath and set the candy on the bed beside her before reaching for the sweatpants he’d set out before his shower. “Your daddy . . .” he murmured, more to himself than to her as he tugged the pants on, mindful not to let the towel fall until he had them pulled up in place.

She had a very thoughtful look on her face when he glanced at her as he swiped up the towel and tossed it in the general direction of the bathroom. “Gwampa is mommy’s daddy ‘cause daddy don’t gots no daddy . . .”

Kichiro nodded and forced a half-smile that he was far from feeling. “Is that right?”

She considered his question then nodded again. “Family is . . . important,” she replied gravely.

“Daddy say that, too?”

Tanny paused as she worked at a particularly stubborn taffy-wrapper. “Yeah.”

Kichiro sank back down and took the candy, absently unwrapping it before handing it back. “He . . . he sounds like a . . .” trailing off for a moment, he swallowed hard and let out a deep breath, “. . . like a good . . . daddy . . .”

Tanny giggled and popped the taffy into her mouth. “I sweep here!” she suddenly exclaimed, waving a pointing finger at the bed beneath her.

Kichiro smiled just a little. “You want to sleep in here?” he asked.

She nodded and crawled over to the pillows, flopping onto her belly with a loud giggle.

Kichiro didn’t say anything as he scooped up the wrappers and tossed them into the small trashcan beside the nightstand. By the time he’d pulled back the covers and pulled them up over her, she was asleep.

He sighed. He knew, of course, that Drevin was good with the child. He hadn’t really questioned that, at all. Still, seeing the proof of it . . . it unsettled him. What did it matter, though, really? If Drevin could make such a poor judgment call, in the first place, like the one that had landed Kichiro’s daughter in the midst of that kami-forsaken place, who was to say that he wouldn’t make another one—one that might cost them all more than just three months of overwrought emotions . . .? No, that was just too big a risk to take, wasn’t it, and the one to pay for that ultimately would be Samantha . . . and that little girl . . . Maybe it wouldn’t be anything as bad as selling them to one of those so-called research facilities, but still . . .

A curt knock on the door drew Kichiro's attention, and he hurried over to answer it before they could wake up the child.

"Hey," Griffin greeted tersely, looking decidedly uncomfortable. "You busy?"

Kichiro shook his head and took a step back to admit his visitor. Griffin let himself in and paused for a moment when he saw the child curled up in the bed. "So that's where she ran off to. Sami was looking for her."

Kichiro shrugged. "She wanted to sleep here tonight. Figured that was all right."

Griffin nodded. "I'll tell her . . ."

He strode over to gather the paperwork he'd discarded after the altercation he'd had with Bellaniece earlier. Griffin didn't comment, and he didn't move, except to close the door behind himself.

"I take it you wanted to speak to me about something?" Kichiro asked at length.

Griffin grunted, shuffling his feet in a decidedly nervous sort of way. Not surprising, not really. The man hated to 'interfere', and Kichiro had a feeling that he wasn't going to like whatever he had to say, anyway, especially since he knew damn well what it was likely to be about . . .

"Is-Isa-Isabelle told me that you . . . that you won't come to the wedding," Griffin admitted quietly.

Kichiro didn't falter as he stacked the papers neatly and stowed them in his attaché case. "No, I won't," he agreed evenly.

“Guess I can’t blame you for that,” Griffin admitted with a shake of his head. “If she were my cub, I suppose I’d feel like you do.”

“Tell that to Belle,” Kichiro muttered.

Griffin cleared his throat. “Can I be honest with you . . . sir?”

That earned a rather dubious sort of look from Kichiro since Griffin had knocked off the ‘sir’ crap a long, long time ago. “Okay . . .”

The bear-youkai sighed and rubbed his forehead, turning his face just enough so that the scars that marred the one side weren’t visible. “I just wondered . . . why? Why do you hate Drevin, but not me? I mean, I’ve thought about it, you see? What he did . . . the things I’ve done . . . there’s no difference—not really.”

Kichiro snorted indelicately and rounded to frown at his son-in-law—a man who was far older than Kichiro . . . a man who had been through far too much in his lifetime. “There’s a *huge* difference,” Kichiro challenged with a shake of his head. “You learned from your mistakes, Griffin, and you’ve never, ever hurt Isabelle—not like that.”

“Because Isabelle’s your daughter, and that makes the difference,” Griffin concluded with a nod. “I see.”

“*Yes!*” Kichiro snapped then rubbed his face at the small sound of shock from the still sleeping child. He shot her a quick glance then sighed. “Yes,” he repeated in a more subdued tone. “That makes a world of difference, Griffin.”

Griffin considered that then shook his head slowly. “Not really. I mean, those people I . . . I hurt . . . They were someone’s daughters . . . sons . . . children . . .” Slowly, he met Kichiro’s gaze, his eyes darkened by the memories of the things he’d seen and done over his lifetime. “Yours or someone else’s . . . Kurt Drevin is me, the way I was . . . The only

difference is the passage of centuries when I thought I was worthless, useless . . . like my very existence meant nothing at all.”

“It’s not the same,” Kichiro muttered angrily.

“You’re right; it’s not,” Griffin agreed simply. “Sami gave Drevin a chance to find that out early . . . the same things Isabelle taught me. Difference is, he has a chance to change it before he ends up as bad as I was . . . and I have to tell you, the way I lived? It wasn’t really living, at all.”

Kichiro shook his head slowly, the familiarity of rage burning brightly within him.

Griffin sighed and turned to leave. “Whatever you decide, it’s your choice . . . but I don’t think you have to like Drevin to want to be happy for your daughter.”

Kichiro didn’t respond as Griffin left the room as quietly as he’d come.

That was the thing, wasn’t it? That was really the crux of it . . . He wasn’t sure he could be happy for Samantha, not when Drevin . . .

He gritted his teeth and rubbed his forehead, wishing for the life of him that he could find some sort of reason, some sort of sanity . . . Maybe if they’d given him more time to get used to the entire idea, maybe . . . and yet, the anger that grew a little brighter every single day . . .

Kichiro sighed.

From the time that he was old enough to understand, his parents had taught him—*instilled* in him—the fundamental belief that he must fight to protect those things that he held dear. InuYasha had told him time and again that he had to protect his mother, and later, Gin. There was always something that he needed to protect, and he’d understood

without needing to be told, that his mate, his own family . . . they needed his protection, too. Babies learning their first words, how to crawl and scoot, how to pull themselves up on his pants leg . . . babies with their wide smiles and their shining eyes . . . and as those babies grew up, he'd done what he could to encourage them, gave them a little more of himself with every passing day . . .

And they'd flourished, hadn't they? Secure in the unbidden knowledge that their father would always catch them when they fell . . .

But Samantha . . .

She'd always had her own belief of what was important, what was worth protecting, and in a very real sense, Kichiro had always known that Samantha was a fighter, more so than her sisters. She always wanted to prove something to someone, even if it were only to herself. Still . . .

Still, it frightened the hell out of him, didn't it? The one thing that she couldn't—*wouldn't*—protect herself from . . . she was marrying him . . .



**Final Thought from Griffin:**  
There's no real difference ... is there ...?

## Chapter 87

### Beautiful

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“You look beautiful . . .”

Samantha blinked and smiled as her mother slipped into the room with a cup of chamomile tea and a trembling smile on her lips. “Thank you,” she said, giving her mother a careful hug before taking the tea. “I . . . I can’t believe it . . .”

“Careful, Mama, or you’ll wrinkle her,” Isabelle chided as she fussed with the simple yet elegant skirt of the wedding dress that Samantha had chosen.

Samantha giggled. “I don’t mind if I’m a little wrinkled.”

Tanny dashed over to stand in front of the floor-length mirror, watching herself as she spun around, her skirt belling out around her.

“Well, don’t you look precious, sweetie?” Alexandra said, stopping Tanny mid-spin with a tight hug and a kiss on her cheek. Tanny shrieked in happy laughter and tried to pull away.

“My puppy says that the groom is close to hyperventilating,” Sydnie commented as she slipped into the room, patting her hair in a self-conscious sort of way. “I suppose that means that everything is progressing as it should.”

Samantha laughed and shook her head. “Is Evan taking it easy on him?”

Sydney rolled her eyes. "I doubt it."

"Think of the bright side, Samantha," Kagome commented as she hurried into the room from the adjoining bathroom, "Cain did forbid weapons at the wedding, so at least no one will be trying to maim your husband-to-be."

A loud thumping on the door made Samantha jump. A moment later, InuYasha slammed it open with a menacing scowl on his face. "Wench! Fix this!" he hollered, gesturing at the open tie hanging around his neck.

Kagome slowly shook her head and handed Bellaniece a corsage. "Kami save me from demented hanyou," she muttered under her breath as she strode past them to herd her husband out of the room once more.

"Fucking monkey suits! Why the hell do I have to wear this?" InuYasha grumbled as Kagome shoved him outside.

"Because you look handsome in it, dog-boy!" she shot back, pulling the door closed again.

"Keh!"

Alexandra covered her smile with the back of her hand and tried not to laugh too loudly. Isabelle wasn't nearly as covert.

"Let me get a picture," Bellaniece insisted as she watched Samantha kneel down to fuss with Tanny's skirt.

She snapped the image and smiled. "My baby's all grown up," she murmured a little sadly.

"Mama . . ."

Bellaniece waved her hand and laughed despite the tears standing in her eyes. “You just promise me that you’ll be happy,” she insisted.

Samantha nodded. “I am, Mama . . .” Her smile faltered as she slowly got to her feet again. “I want you to make up with Papa,” she said quietly.

Bellaniece’s smile widened. “Don’t you worry about your papa and me,” she replied. “We’re fine.”

Samantha shook her head. “You slept in a guest room last night, Mama,” she pointed out gently. “I know you did, and I—”

“Don’t worry about them,” Alexandra cut in with a falsely bright laugh. “I think they fight just so that they can make up, right Mama?”

Bellaniece forced a little laugh. Samantha knew better. Her parents never fought—*never*—and she hated that they were now because of her . . . “Kurt wanted to wait,” she admitted. “But I didn’t. He wanted to give Papa more time to get used to things, but . . . I just want to be with him. I just want to be happy . . .”

“Sweetie . . . you know, right? That’s all your father wants, too. He’s just . . . just worried; that’s all, and he does love you. He loves all of you girls.”

Samantha nodded, though she could feel the thinness of her smile. In fact, it was the only real shadow hanging over her wedding, and it struck her once more that it just didn’t feel right. Still . . .

Still, she knew her father better than that, didn’t she? Even if they had put off the wedding, there wouldn’t be any difference, and as much as it hurt that he had chosen not to be there in this, how could she blame him when she saw in his eyes, his worries, his

concerns? Those things would go away in time. Kurt would slowly prove himself to be the man she knew he was. Her father would see, and even if he never really came to like Kurt, maybe, in some small way, he'd come to respect him . . .

And in a perfect world, everything would be wonderful. Samantha knew better than that, didn't she? It wasn't a perfect world; not even close, and she knew that she couldn't force her father to do anything that he wasn't willing to do.

The question had arisen early on in the planning. Gin had suggested that Samantha have a Shinto ceremony, partially so that Kichiro wouldn't have to 'give her away', as it were, but Samantha . . . She remembered how beautiful Isabelle's wedding had been. That was what she'd wanted, and even if Kichiro refused to attend, she'd deal with that, too. Cain and InuYasha, her grandfathers, had agreed to escort her down the aisle in Kichiro's absence, and that had to be enough, didn't it?

*'Don't dwell on that, Samantha. You promised that you wouldn't,'* her youkai reminded her.

*'I know . . .'*

*'It's your big day, you know, and even if your father's not here, you know that it isn't because he doesn't love you.'*

*'I know.'*

*'Now smile, Samantha. Instead of thinking about the things you can't change, concentrate instead on the idea that you're getting married, okay? You love him, and he loves you, and this is the final step, you know.'*

*'The final step . . .'* she smiled just a little. *'Samantha Drevin . . .'*

*'That's right . . .'*

“Earth to Samantha . . . Oh, look, she’s dreaming about her wedding night,” Isabelle teased loudly.

“Come on, Sami. Let’s get you ready. The band is already getting tuned up . . .” Alexandra commented with a smile.

Samantha smiled and nodded, carefully settling down on the padded bench as her sisters shook out the wedding veil to place on her head . . .

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Kurt frowned at his reflection, wondering for the fiftieth time in the last hour alone, exactly how they’d convinced him that wearing a tuxedo was a good idea . . .

He’d never felt quite so out of place, not really, especially after seeing most of the men in their tuxedos that seemed to have all be tailored to fit. Gunnar and his father, Toga in Armani, Bas in Astorian, even Cain in what looked like a genuine vintage Versace—Kurt didn’t know that, but Gavin, also wearing Astorian, had remarked upon it with a blush, citing that he’d spent far too much time around his wife, Jillian, not to know something about fashion . .

The only one who looked even remotely goofier than Kurt, in his opinion, was Evan, and he was goofy by choice, wearing the most ungodly white ruffled shirt with bright pink embroidery on the ruffles under his black tuxedo . . . Cain had taken one look at his youngest son and slowly shook his head, but he’d let it go, probably thinking that the argument just wasn’t worth the effort . . .

He drew a deep breath and glanced at the clock again. Half an hour till, as Evan called

it, 'show time' . . .

*'Ugh, I think I'm going to puke . . .'*

Damn those jackasses. He should have known better than to go out drinking with a bunch of damn youkai. Of course they weren't suffering any ill-effects from the overindulgence. Kurt, himself, had opened his eyes, only to wish that he could scoop his brains out with a spoon since his head felt as though it were about to explode . . .

A soft knock sounded on the door, and Kurt grimaced. "It's open," he called, straightening the bow tie that Evan had fixed for him. Of course, he'd handed Kurt a clip-on tie, to start with, the little bastard . . .

Gin poked her head into the room and smiled. "You look so nice," she commented as she slipped into the room. "I came to see if you needed any help . . ."

"Uh, no, I'm fine," he said, managing a rather weak smile. "Just, um, nerves, I guess . . ."

She hurried over and tugged at the tie to straighten it for him. "There."

He sighed. "How's Samantha?"

Gin's friendly smile faltered slightly, and she forced a little shrug. "She's fine; just fine . . ."

Kurt frowned. "You don't sound like she's 'fine' . . ."

Gin winced. "It's nothing," she insisted, her brightest smile back in place.

"No . . . what?"

She sighed and bit her lip, stepping back and wringing her hands. “Kurt, I wondered . . .”

He shook his head. “What?”

She didn’t look like she wanted to say whatever she was thinking, but she nodded. “I thought maybe . . . Have you tried to . . . to talk to Kichiro? About Samantha, I mean . . .”

Kurt shook his head again, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “No, I haven’t,” he confessed. “I thought . . . I thought that maybe it was better to let him approach me . . .”

“But that’s the thing,” she hurried on to say. “Kichiro . . . he won’t . . . and because he won’t . . .”

The knot tying up Kurt’s innards tightened just a little. “He won’t what?” he prompted when she trailed off.

Gin wrung her hands a little faster and offered a nervous sort of shrug. “He . . . he won’t come to the wedding . . . I mean, we can all understand why he doesn’t want to give Samantha away, you know? But to miss her wedding *completely* . . . and Samantha doesn’t say so, but I know it’s hurting her . . .”

Kurt stopped short, his head snapping up as unaccountable outrage surged through him. No one had told him that Kichiro was refusing to attend the wedding, had they? No one had mentioned that at all . . . “What?”

Gin heaved a sigh, her shoulders dropping just a little as she shook her head and grimaced. “I mean, there’s still time, you know? And maybe . . . maybe if you talked to him . . .?”

Kurt stared at the woman for a long moment, a million thoughts about Samantha, about her smile, about the way that she never asked him for anything shot through his head. "Where is he?" he asked as he headed for the door.

Gin let out a deep breath. "I think he's in his room," she admitted. "Kurt . . ."

"I know," he tossed over his shoulder as he yanked open the door. "Maybe I should have talked to him sooner . . ."

And it was the longest walk of his life, wasn't it? Down the hallway and the stairs that led to the second level of the mansion . . . Along the corridor to the room on the end, and as he squared his shoulders and raised his hand to knock, he drew a deep breath, only to blink when the door opened of its own accord before he could tap on it.

Kichiro sat in a chair near the balcony, staring out at the yard below where the wedding would take place, and while he had to sense Kurt's presence, he said nothing at all.

Kurt cleared his throat and stepped into the room. "Gin tells me that you . . . that you won't attend the wedding," Kurt began in what he hoped was a neutral tone of voice.

Kichiro didn't respond.

"I wish you'd change your mind. Samantha . . . It'd mean the world to her . . ."

"You will presume to tell me about my daughter?" Kichiro countered quietly. He stood up but didn't turn around, shoving his hands into his pockets as he continued to stare out the window.

"That's not what I was trying to do," Kurt replied. "It's just . . . I . . . I never want her to regret anything; not ever . . ."

“And you think that she won’t regret marrying you?” Kichiro demanded. “That’s what you’re saying.”

Kurt winced. “I’m going to do my best to make sure she never regrets it, no,” he allowed. “I . . . I love your daughter.”

Kichiro finally looked at him, slowly turning to face him. His countenance was a mask of unbridled rage, but there was something else there, too, wasn’t there? Something a little harder to discern, lying just below the anger . . . He was frightened, wasn’t he? Frightened for the daughter that he adored, and that was something that Kurt could completely understand. . . “If I didn’t think you loved her,” he said slowly, evenly, *carefully*, “you’d be dead already.”

Kurt sighed. “I wish to God I’d never caught her . . . That doesn’t make it better, but . . .” He shook his head, trying to find the words to say, to make Kichiro understand exactly how much he wished he could change the past.

Kichiro snorted and looked away, as though the very sight of Kurt was enough to fuel his rage, and it probably was. “Why did you change your mind, taijya?” Kichiro sneered angrily. “Why did you finally let her go after three months—*three months . . .?*”

Kurt licked his lips, forced himself to look Kichiro in the eye. “I decided after the first couple months to get her out of there, but I . . . I told myself that . . . that I needed to plan, to make sure that they couldn’t come after her. Now I know, though . . . I . . . I couldn’t stand the idea that I’d never see her again . . .”

“So you kept her there for another month? You kept her there in that hellhole?”

Kurt nodded once. “. . . Yeah.”

“You bastard. You little punk-assed bastard . . .” Kichiro growled, balling up his fists so

tightly that the tendons in his arms stood out.

“I didn’t want to think that she . . . that she was any different,” he murmured, shaking his head, unsure why he kept talking when he was only making it that much worse. “But she told me . . . she told me . . . about your birthday, and I knew . . . She had a father and a mother—family who missed her . . .”

Kichiro snorted then sighed, turning back toward the window once more. “Family,” he muttered under his breath.

Kurt pressed his lips together and turned to leave. He’d wanted to make it better, hadn’t he? But somehow, he’d . . . he’d made it that much worse . . . “I don’t know how you did it,” he said, pausing with his hand on the door handle. “She’s a beautiful woman—I mean on the inside . . . She taught me about the kind of person I . . . I want to be,” he admitted quietly. “I don’t know what it’s worth, but . . . but I’m sorry—sorrer than you’ll ever know, and . . . and I’m asking you to . . . to please reconsider . . . for Samantha . . .”

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“Hello?”

“Hi, Sami. Sorry I couldn’t make it.”

She smiled and gripped the cell phone as her sisters fussed with the veil. “That’s okay, Mikio. Uncle said you had some stuff that you couldn’t put off.”

“That’s what they said,” Mikio remarked with a sigh. “Make sure you get pictures, okay?”

“Of course,” she assured him with a smile. “Morio’s filming it, too, so I’ll send you a

copy.”

“Good,” he agreed. “So have you taught him to see the stars yet?”

She laughed, remembering the conversation she’d had with Mikio about Kurt before he’d arrived there. “I’m working on it.”

“Okay. I’d better let you go. Bet you’re the prettiest bride, ever,” he said.

Samantha laughed and brushed away an annoying tear that slipped down her cheek as she closed the phone with a happy sigh. Sure, she wished that Mikio could make it, but she knew well enough that the flight was entirely hard on him, especially when he’d just gone home not long ago. She also knew that there was nothing so pressing that he couldn’t have made it, but Sesshoumaru knew, too, how difficult the traveling was on his body, so he had found other reasons for Mikio to bow out gracefully, and that was all right, she supposed.

“You look perfect,” Alexandra stated, taking a step back to critique her work. “What do you think, Mama?”

Bellaniece laughed and snapped a quick picture. “I think that you’d better not be getting married, at least for a while, Lexi,” she said.

Alexandra wrinkled her nose and waved a hand dismissively. “I’m too busy to get married right now,” she hedged then shrugged. “Maybe in a few years . . .”

Isabelle laughed and gave Samantha a quick hug. “I’m going to go sit down. It’s just about time. You look fantastic, sweetie.”

Bellaniece gave her a hug, too, and smiled. “Just remember that, married or not, you’re still my little girl.”

Samantha nodded and kissed her cheek. "I know, Mama."

Alexandra let out a deep breath and shot her a shaky smile. "As long as you're happy, Sami," she said.

"I am . . . and I will be," she replied. "Lexi . . ."

Alexandra stopped. She had been following Bellaniece from the room. "Yes?"

"About the phone call the other day . . ."

Alexandra waved a hand in dismissal. "No, you were right. I don't know if I'll ever really like him, but he is your choice. Besides, you'll keep him in line, I have no doubt."

"Thank you," she said quietly.

Alexandra laughed and gave her hands a quick squeeze. "Oh, right. Here," she said, digging a fine white kerchief out of her purse. Edged in delicate white lace, it was an old piece that used to belong to Kagome's mother years ago. "Something old and something borrowed," she said with a smile. "I'll send Grandpa up to get you . . . Come on, Tanny!" she called, holding out her hand.

Tanny giggled and darted over to Alexandra's side, and Samantha laughed as the two left the room.

It was almost time, wasn't it? In less than an hour, she'd be Kurt's wife . . .

That thought was enough to make her smile again, though the expression was tempered just the slightest bit. Biting her lip as she scolded herself for thinking about the negatives again, she moved toward the window, her skirts whispering as she walked.

Everyone was taking their seats. There weren't a lot of guests—Samantha hadn't wanted a big wedding—but most of the people who were important to her were there, and that had to be enough. She watched as Isabelle, escorted by Griffin, slipped into chairs near the front, and she smiled to herself when she realized that they were sitting on Kurt's side. The band that they'd hired was tuning their instruments—a string quartet that Samantha had favored . . .

Closing her eyes, she breathed deep, drawing in a cleansing lungful of the crisp wind blowing off the ocean. The forecast had called for rain, but there wasn't a cloud in the sky. Maybe Kurt had put up some kind of barrier, she thought with a whimsical smile. That was silly, of course. He hadn't done any such thing. Still, it was a nice idea, wasn't it?

A soft tap on the door drew her attention, and Samantha was just turning around when Cain opened it. "Look at you," he remarked quietly with a shake of his head though his smile widened just a little. "It's about that time."

She giggled and reached for the bouquet of pink silk roses and violets. "How do I look?"

That smile faltered slightly as Cain's gaze brightened. "As pretty as your mama on her wedding day," he replied.

She hurried over and pushed herself up on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. "Thank you, Grandpa."

Cain smiled at her and escorted her from the room and down the hallway toward the stairs.

"You know, I could do this, myself, without InuYasha's help," he teased as she gathered her skirts carefully to keep from stepping on them as she descended the steps.

“As if I could choose between the two of you,” she chided.

“Pfft . . .”

“Shut up, Zelig. Be glad you’re a part of this family, at all,” InuYasha grumbled, having overheard the end of that conversation as he’d stepped up to meet them at the bottom of the stairs. Samantha took a moment to kiss his cheek, too, before slipping her other arm under InuYasha’s outstretched elbow.

“Don’t trip, old man,” Cain muttered under his breath as they made their way toward the double doors in the living room that led to the back yard where the wedding was to be held. Far ahead, she watched as Kurt strode slowly down the white linen runner that had been rolled out for the wedding, and she smiled. He didn’t look particularly nervous, so that was a good sign . . .

Evan grinned like a fool and offered Sydnie his elbow. “I knew I’d get to walk you down the aisle someday,” he quipped.

Sydnie giggled and kissed Evan’s cheek, then spared a moment to wipe away the remnants of lipstick she’d left behind.

“Aw, damn! I finally scored a kiss, and no Bubby around to see it!” he complained.

“More tanny!” the child piped up in a plaintive sort of voice as she held out the little white basket that had been full of candied rose petals.

Samantha’s mouth fell open as a laugh surged up inside her. Gin giggled and grasped the girl’s hand. “Come on, sweetie, but remember, you can’t eat them! You have to drop them on that white runner while you’re walking, okay?”

“Good thing you ordered extra,” Cain remarked, frowning slightly as Bellaniece, escorted by Morio, walked down the runner to take her seat. He didn’t say anything out loud, but he didn’t have to. It bothered him a lot that Kichiro refused to attend the wedding, didn’t it?

Gin handed the basket back, whispering in Tanny’s ear before she let go. Then Kagome took Gin’s hand and dragged her out of the house, too, following Bellaniece and Morio down the aisle to take their seats, too.

“Go on, kitten,” Sydnie whispered to Tanny, giving the girl a slight little shove. Tanny smiled broadly—her lips tinged with a deepened shade of pink from the rose petals, and to everyone’s relief, she actually tossed a few rose petals on the carpet between bites, anyway.

Sydnie turned to wink at Samantha before following along behind Tanny, and Samantha glanced up at her grandfathers, a trembling smile gracing her lips.

“You ready to go?” InuYasha asked, shooting Samantha a quick glance.

“Yeah,” she said, drawing a deep breath. “Y-yeah . . .”

“Step back, old man . . . Zelig.”

Samantha froze, unable to believe the sound of that particular voice. She turned slowly—very slowly—lifting her gaze to meet her father’s.

Dressed immaculately in the tuxedo that Bellaniece had ordered for him, he stood in the doorway with a little smile on his face as he stared at Samantha. “Papa . . .”

He blushed just a little, his gaze falling to the floor, but he shrugged and cleared his throat as he started to walk toward her. “Sorry I’m late, dollbaby,” he said as Cain



## Chapter 88

### Vendetta

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“You know, you can’t back out now,” Kurt muttered to Samantha as he escorted her back down the aisle. Well, sort of. They were pausing quite often since Tanny had decided that she needed to pick up the few petals she’d dropped as a light snack, of sorts.

Samantha giggled and kissed his cheek. “As if I would,” she countered softly.

Kurt cleared his throat and tried not to stare at Samantha’s bared shoulders, the gentle arch of her neck. “Tanny . . . you missed one,” he said, tapping the runner with the toe of his shoe.

She darted back and grabbed the petal, shoving it into her mouth with a happy little giggle.

Kurt chuckled. “She’s violating the five second rule.”

Samantha laughed, too. “I think we can make an exception this time, don’t you?”

He shot her a droll look, acutely aware that everyone there was staring at them, though he’d rather believe that they were looking at her. She was prettier, after all . . . “Come on, Sam. The faster we get all of this over with, the faster we can get out of here . . .”

She laughed and followed Tanny, who had completely cleaned up the petals.

Mrs. Kurt Drevin . . .

She liked the sound of that, didn't she?

"Step away from the bride, Drevin," Evan joked as he strode over. He and Sydnie had been waiting on the porch for a while as the couple had slowly headed to join them.

Kurt rolled his eyes but let Evan hug Samantha—well, sort of. Evan swung Samantha in a wide circle and planted a loud, obnoxious kiss on her cheek as she giggled loudly.

"Welcome to the family," Bellaniece said as she gave Kurt's arm a gentle squeeze.

He turned and shot her a bashful little smile that vanished when he met her father's gaze. "Thanks," he told her then nodded at Kichiro, "and thank you."

"It wasn't for you," Kichiro replied tightly.

"I didn't really think it was," Kurt admitted. "Thank you, anyway."

Kichiro narrowed his eyes, pinning Kurt with a fierce glower. "Don't thank me. Just take care of my daughter."

"You think he won't?" Bellaniece asked with a sigh, though she smiled. "Come on, Kichiro. We're holding up the line."

Kurt relaxed just a little when the couple moved on. It had been explained to him that the reception line was simply a way to allow the hired help to rearrange things since the reception was going to be held where the wedding had just taken place. His mind was in a haze, though, unable to quite grasp onto the idea that Samantha really had married him. It was the strangest feeling, really, though he didn't figure he'd mind the idea of getting used to it . . .

Toga and Sierra . . . Cain and Gin . . . InuYasha and Kagome . . . Bas and Sydnie . . . Gunnar and, well, his date—Kurt never caught her name . . . Gavin and Jillian . . . Morio and Meara . . . Chelsea and her date . . . Charity, who had apparently come alone . . . Ben, who was being followed around by a youkai woman Kurt had briefly met, Myrna . . . They all wished them well, they all congratulated them. Kurt couldn't rightfully recall exactly what was said. Too busy stealing glances of his new wife, bemused with the knowledge that she actually hadn't run away at the last moment, he nodded and smiled and figured that he'd made enough comments to keep people thinking that he was paying attention. Besides, weddings were for women, weren't they?

Still, he had to blink in surprise as Sesshoumaru and his wife, Kagura stopped before them. "I trust you will take care of my great-niece well, Dr. Drevin?" Sesshoumaru asked in a way that made it much more of a statement than an actual question.

Kurt nodded. "I will," he promised.

Sesshoumaru stared at him for a long moment then nodded as his gaze flicked over Kurt's shoulder. "And I trust that you ordered more than one wedding cake?"

"Oh . . . *my* . . ." Kagura demurred, covering her lips with her hand as she followed the direction of her mate's gaze.

Samantha glanced at Kurt as they both turned to look. It didn't take long for Kurt to see what Sesshoumaru was talking about, either.

Tanny stood on the table beside the cake, shoving handfuls of frosting into her mouth with the happiest smile on her little face. Kurt sucked in a sharp breath. "Wow," he muttered, narrowing his eyes.

Samantha giggled. "Um, excuse us," she murmured to her aunt and uncle as she gathered her skirts and hurried to intercept the child.

Kurt grimaced but followed along behind her. “That’s . . . a lot of sugar,” he pointed out.

Samantha’s giggling escalated.

Tanny’s smile widened when she caught sight of her parents coming toward her, and she held up her hands, complete with fistfuls of cake. “Tanny!” she announced happily.

“Did you find more tanny?” Samantha asked.

The girl giggled and held out her hand to her mother. “Bite, Mommy? Bite?”

Samantha smiled. “Guess we’d better get it now, before she eats it all,” she remarked, winking at Kurt.

He slowly shook his head but chuckled, grimacing as Tanny offered him a handful of cake, too.

She laughed when Kurt and Samantha took bites from the cake in her hands. Kurt blinked at the mad ‘snick’ of cameras going off, but smiled. He supposed those would be some of the better wedding shots, really. Samantha leaned behind Tanny, pulling Kurt down for a kiss, and, well, he wasn’t about to argue with her; not over that.

She had cake all over her face—Tanny hadn’t been holding still while she fed them—but Kurt figured that he didn’t really look much better, either . . . That was all right, wasn’t it? He chuckled softly as he pulled a clean white handkerchief from his pocket and carefully wiped Samantha’s face. “Good as new,” he said, making a face at the soiled fabric. Dropping it onto the table beside the ruined cake, he lifted Tanny down and shook his head. “Maybe I won’t feel so bad about leaving her with your parents tonight,” he ventured, watching as she darted away into the crowd.

“You’ll miss her,” Samantha guessed as he slipped an arm around her waist.

“I’ll miss her,” he agreed easily enough.

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“I’m proud of you.”

Kichiro blinked and glanced at Bellaniece. Draining the champagne in his hand, he shrugged, letting his gaze shift back to the dancing newlyweds. “I don’t know if I’ll ever like him,” he ventured quietly, sadly.

Bellaniece sighed and took his empty glass, setting it aside on a small table nearby. “You don’t have to,” she told him. “I think it was enough for Sami that you came to the wedding, after all.”

“Enough,” he echoed with a shake of his head. “What if he hurts her again?”

“What if he doesn’t?” Bellaniece countered softly.

“How did you forgive him?” Kichiro asked, narrowing his eyes in a questioning sort of way.

Bellaniece shrugged and smiled just a little. “I didn’t have a choice,” she confessed. “I didn’t do it for him, you know. I did it for her.”

“Right, right . . .”

“Kichiro . . .”

Drevin murmured something in Samantha's ear that made her laugh. Kichiro frowned. "Hmm?"

Bellaniece heaved a sigh and grabbed his hand. "Come on, lover. Dance with me."

That got his attention quickly enough, and he almost smiled. How long had it been since she'd called him that, after all? He hadn't realized until then, how very much he'd missed it . . .

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"Looks like things are getting back to normal," Meara commented quietly.

Morio cocked an eyebrow and shot her a completely unrepentant grin. "What's that mean, Meara, my darling?"

She laughed and let him pull her a little closer as they swayed with the soft music. "It means that it looks like Kichiro and Belle have made up."

He swirled her around so that he could look in the direction that she'd been staring and grinned when he spotted his aunt and uncle dancing nearby. Kichiro leaned in to whisper something in Bellaniece's ear that made her smile almost wickedly. Morio chuckled. "Good . . . have to admit; it was weird, wasn't it?"

Meara smiled and nodded. "It was. I mean, those two never, ever argued before—at least, never that I can recall . . . Do you think that he's okay with Samantha's choice of mates?"

Morio's smile faltered slightly. "Probably not. Doubt he ever will be, really, but at least he's trying. No one can say he isn't."

Meara sighed. "Kurt loves her, though. I mean, you can tell . . ."

"Yeah, yeah . . . They're almost as perfect together as we are," Morio agreed with a cheesy grin.

Meara rolled her eyes but smiled. "Of course," she giggled.

"Meara?"

"Hmm?"

He caught her and bent her back in an impossibly low dip that only made her giggle harder. "If you were a booger, I'd pick you first."

She smacked his shoulder as he pulled her back up but didn't try to get away from him. "That's the most disgustingly sweet thing I think you've ever said to me," she teased.

"Ah, but it's the truth, my darling. Nothing but the truth . . ."

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"So do you suppose that things can get back to normal now?" Toga asked as he sipped from his glass of champagne, idly watching as Sierra stood nearby, chatting with Bellaniece.

"That would depend upon your definition of 'normal'," Sesshoumaru remarked.

Toga grinned and shrugged noncommittally. “Touché, Father. I heard Ryo talking, though. Seems that he and Nezumi are finally coming home next week.”

“About time,” Sesshoumaru said, his gaze sweeping lazily over the gathering. “I was beginning to think that he’d decided to retire.”

“Retire? Hardly. Nezumi would kill him if he hung around her all damn day,” Toga predicted.

“Hmm, perhaps . . . though I was wondering if he wouldn’t be interested in helping Dr. Drevin with his assignments.”

“I’m pretty sure that Kurt would probably kill him, then,” Toga remarked baldly. “Those two would drive one another up a wall and back down again. I don’t think anyone would miss Ryo, but Sierra’s rather fond of Nezumi . . .”

“Must you talk business at a wedding?” Kagura asked, pointedly raising an eyebrow as she shifted her eyes from her husband to her son and back again.

“I thought you were dancing with your grandson,” Sesshoumaru said.

Kagura laughed, tapping her closed fan against her palm. “I was,” she replied and shook her head. “Then he decided to cut in on the groom.”

“Doubtless to ruffle Dr. Drevin’s feathers, I presume,” Sesshoumaru remarked.

Kagura shrugged. “Doubtless,” she agreed.

“Well, I’m not quite as adept as my son, but I would love to dance with you, Mother,” Toga said, setting his glass aside and making Kagura a low bow.

Kagura smiled and nodded, sparing a moment to wink at her mate before allowing her son to escort her away.

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“Oh, that can’t be good . . .”

Kurt blinked and followed the direction of Bas’ troubled gaze. A moment later, he spotted the reason for the man’s comment and stifled the urge to sigh. “Damn it . . .”

Without another word, Kurt abruptly set off to intercept Old Granger, who was currently skulking around behind the guests—the female guests. He sighed. He’d already had to apologize for his grandfather’s wandering hand more times than he’d care to think about, and if the old man kept it up, he swore on all that was holy he’d have to lock him in a closet or something . . .

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Kurt demanded quietly as he stopped just behind Old Granger. The old man jerked his hand away and craned his neck to look over his shoulder at his less-than-amused grandson as Chelsea Inutaisho—the intended target—pursed her lips and tried not to smile.

“Ah, just the boy I been wantin’ to see!” Old Granger blurted with a very goofy little grin. “Here. Hold m’ choppers!”

Kurt blinked and opened his mouth to protest but shook his head when the old codger dropped his dentures into Kurt’s half-full champagne glass. “Old Gr—”

“Hee hee! Makes for better kissin’ with the ladyfolks!”

“Oh, no, you fruitcake. There’ll be no ‘kissin’ with the ladyfolks’ . . .” Kurt warned.

“Oh, it’s all right,” Chelsea said with a laugh. “He’s just a sweet little old man!”

“That’s right,” Old Granger nearly crowed. “Sweet, see?”

“Sorry,” Kurt muttered, casting Chelsea an apologetic grimace. “I just got him out for the day, but I swear to God he’s going right back, first thing in the morning.”

His head snapped up, and he grinned at Kurt again. “Speakin’ of sweet—”

“No!” he hissed. It was too late. Old Granger, the miscreant, stumped away before Kurt could catch him as a smallish tug drew his attention.

Tanny smiled brilliantly up at her father as she held up her empty hands. “Tanny aw gone!” she said with a perplexed shake of her head.

“Oh, uh . . .” Digging with his free hand, frisking his own pockets, Kurt grimaced. He’d forgotten to grab any candy this morning while he was getting ready for the wedding . . .

“Whazzat?”

Kurt blinked and glanced at Tanny. It took a moment for him to figure out exactly what she was staring at, and when he did, he could only sigh: the makeshift dentures settled in his champagne glass. “Ehh, those are . . . Old Granger’s teeth . . .”

Tanny was fascinated. “Teef?”

“Yes, teeth.”

The girl pondered that for a second before opening her mouth wide and tugging on her own teeth. She pulled so hard that her little arms shook, and when she finally gave up, she looked at Kurt with such unabashed befuddlement on her features that he was sorely pressed not to laugh. “Your teeth don’t come out, Stinky-butt,” he told her.

Her face shifted into a pronounced pout, and she turned on her heel to flounce away.

Kurt’s amusement died a moment later, however, when he glanced around to locate his errant grandfather once more.

*‘Damn, he’s got a death wish,’* he thought with a grimace as he took off to intercept Old Granger yet again. This time, though, he doubted that the intended target was going to think that he was just a ‘sweet old man’, all things considered.

He was too late. Old Granger, with a completely maniacal grin on his face, reached out, slowly, slowly, slowly . . .

Kagura Inutaisho flicked the blunt side of her folded-up fan over her shoulder, smacking the old man in the middle of the forehead without bothering to turn around or faltering in the conversation she was having with her husband, the one Kurt had been told held the title of Inu no Taisho—in essence, the undisputed leader of all the youkai in the world.

“Give it up, Old Granger,” Kurt growled, grasping his grandfather’s shoulder and spinning him around, away from his great-aunt-in-law. “Uh, s-sorry,” he muttered, wondering if there were some sort of law he was inadvertently violating by bringing the old fart out of the back hills he called home.

Kagura only smiled and nodded at him as he hurried Old Granger away.

“She’s spunky! I think she likes me,” Old Granger announced quite happily.

Kurt rolled his eyes and shook his head. “No, she didn’t, and her husband probably would have maimed you if you’d done what you had a mind to do,” he pointed out.

“I tell you, boy, I didn’t know what there were so many purty fairies! Oh, now, that one’s just my type . . .”

Kurt started to call out to stop the old man, but he gave up with a sigh and another shake of his head. If he wasn’t mistaken, Old Granger was making his way directly toward Gunnar . . . ‘*Anyway,*’ he thought as he pressed his lips together in a tight line to keep himself from chuckling, ‘*that old bastard’ll learn soon enough . . . especially if he gropes that particular ass . . .*’

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“. . . It’s the most uncanny thing I think I’ve ever seen,” Shippou remarked with an incredulous shrug as he watched the bride and groom dancing nearby.

InuYasha grunted and flicked his ears. “Which? Drevin or his damned grandfather?”

Kagome sighed and shook her head since she’d already seen the old man grope no less than four women in the last hour. It really had to be some sort of record . . .

Shippou grinned. “Well, both, but I was talking about him,” he replied, nodding at Kurt. “He looks just like Miroku, doesn’t he?”

“Keh! I’m starting to wonder, though,” InuYasha complained, his gaze darkening as he glowered at Old Granger, who was currently trying to sneak up behind Bellaniece to cop a feel. “Damned baka . . .”

Rin hurried over, handing Kagome a glass of champagne as she slowly let out a deep breath. “That old man . . . I think he felt me up,” she remarked.

Shippou chuckled. “Wow . . . Kichiro’s had his rabies shots, hasn’t he?”

Kagome grimaced, rising to her feet when the younger of the twins advanced on the old fellow. InuYasha stuck his arm out to stop her. “Kich ain’t gonna hurt him,” InuYasha grumbled. “Much.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed his arm away. “Yes, well, I’m going to make sure he doesn’t,” Kagome tossed over her shoulder.

“So he’s really Miroku’s reincarnation?” Shippou asked as Kagome hurried off.

InuYasha rolled his eyes and snorted. “Course he is. Stands to reason, don’t it? That guy’s got more spiritual power than he knows what to do with.”

Shippou nodded slowly. “Is that a good thing?”

InuYasha shrugged. “Well, if you think ‘bout it, it makes sense. Kagome’s powerful because she shared Kikyō’s soul, right? Like her spiritual energy got stronger when she was reincarnated . . . so if that’s how it works, then it would mean that he’s got the same power, too, just like that damned monk . . .”

Shippou slowly turned to stare at InuYasha, his expression registering a moment of absolute surprise. “Kami, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear that what you just said made sense, InuYasha . . .”

The hanyou turned, narrowing his gaze as he scowled at the kitsune. Shippou saw it seconds before it happened, but he wasn’t able to avoid the hard thump InuYasha dealt

him upside the head, either. “*Oww!* Damn, and here I thought I’d outgrown that,” he complained.

Rin sighed and shook her head. “I’d say you deserved that one,” she intoned.

“Keh! He’s always deserved every one he got,” InuYasha muttered under his breath.

Shippou chuckled but still rubbed his head. “Probably,” he agreed lightly.

“*Definitely,*” InuYasha retorted.

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“Have I told you that I think you look beautiful today?”

Samantha smiled and kissed Kurt’s cheek. “You have,” she assured him as her smile widened. “But you can say it a few more times, if you’d like . . .”

Kurt heaved a sigh and slowly shook his head, though his gaze remained bright, clear. “Do you think Tanny’s handprint is going to come out?” he asked a little sheepishly.

Samantha waved the hand that had been resting on his shoulder as they danced. “What does it matter? I’m never going to wear this dress again.”

Kurt shrugged, leaning to the side far enough to look at the very pronounced brown smear in the shape of a small hand on the side of Samantha’s otherwise pristine white gown. “I thought women loved to keep stuff like that,” he muttered, nodding to indicate her wedding dress.

Samantha giggled and shrugged. "I'd much rather have the memories."

"I still can't believe you married me," he said, his cheeks pinking slightly at the softly uttered admission.

She laughed then slowly turned a little thoughtful. "Taijya . . ."

"Hmm?"

"Did you talk Papa into coming?" she asked.

Kurt let out a deep breath, his gaze wandering over to the man in question, who was currently dancing with another of his daughters, Isabelle. "No," he said. "I asked him to reconsider, though."

"For me," she murmured, her gaze bright with a sheen of moisture.

"Anything for you," he replied.

"I knew you were a good man," she said.

Kurt let out another long breath. "Not as good as you make me out to be."

"Good enough," she assured him.

He stared at her for several long moments, his gaze lingering on hers as he wondered yet again exactly how it could be, how he could possibly have been lucky enough to have found her. After such a long time and so much hatred, so much anger . . . a lifetime of bitterness that she'd somehow managed to wash away with little more than a tender smile and a heartfelt laugh . . . and her tears that she'd shed for him . . .

“What are you thinking?” she asked softly.

Kurt sighed and uttered a terse chuckle. “I’ll never understand how or why you did it,” he admitted. “I never thought . . .”

She sighed, too, but it wasn’t a regretful sound, either. “You never thought you’d have anything left after you let go of your vendetta?”

He raised an eyebrow and shook his head. “That sounds way too melodramatic.”

“Isn’t that what it was?” she parried.

“N . . . no . . . yes . . . I don’t know.” He shifted his gaze out over the gathering, his eyes lingering on the faces that he’d come to know . . . Gunnar, dancing with Madison—the surly hanyou had somehow managed to catch the garter belt without even trying, much to his chagrin, and Madison had caught the bouquet, then had promptly tried to give it away . . . Bas and Sydnie, dancing nearby with Bailey nestled against his mother’s chest . . . Ryomaru and Nezumi, sitting quietly on a bench swing across the way. He was talking in her ear as she smiled and blushed just a little . . . Morio and Meara, standing off to the side; the hanyou behind his mate with his arms wrapped around her as she idly buried her nose in the pale peach rose that he must have given her . . . Evan dancing with Gin while she laughed and held onto him . . . Zelig, dancing with Tanny—the girl was standing on the tai-youkai’s feet while he danced her around . . . InuYasha, grumbling and complaining, but allowing his mate to drag him onto the dance floor that had been set up for the wedding reception . . . Griffin, looking entirely uncomfortable as he shuffled his feet in a reasonable facsimile of dancing with Alexandra . . . Cartham dancing with his wife, Kelly—they had to be the strangest looking couple that Kurt had ever seen. Cartham, with his wild beard and crazy streaked black and silver hair, and Kelly, a tiny, demure woman who looked like she belonged in a hoop skirt somewhere down south . . . Ben, who was dancing with Gunnar’s sister, Charity . . . Gavin and Jillian, sitting at a small table lost in a conversation all their own . . .

And Kichiro and Bellaniece—his new father and mother-in-law . . .

Those two were dancing not far away, smiling at one another in a way that made Kurt wonder if they even realized that anyone else was there . . . That was the kind of love that Samantha had grown up around; the kind of love that had made her flourish . . . and there, in that place and in that moment, Kurt vowed to himself that he would try every day—that he would make sure that Samantha knew that kind of love every day for the rest of her life . . .

*'Kurt . . .'*

Frowning at the word that he'd heard in his head as plainly as he would have had it been spoken aloud, Kurt blinked.

*'Live, Kurt . . . live . . .'*

A slow smile broke over Kurt's features as those words echoed in his mind. Those words hadn't made sense to him back then, had they? His father's wish . . . his father's dying hope . . .

*'Live, Kurt . . . live . . .'*

Staring into Samantha's eyes, he suddenly laughed, and though she laughed, too, he could tell that she hadn't a clue why. "You know something, little demon?"

"What's that?"

"The last thing my father said to me . . . he said he wanted me to live. I thought that he meant that I needed to go on, you know? To . . . to find my way . . . to survive."

She bit her lip, looking entirely thoughtful, though her smile didn't diminish. "That's not what he meant?"

Kurt shook his head. "I don't think so. I don't think that merely surviving is nearly enough. I think that's what he was trying to tell me."

Her smile took on a tender softness as she reached up to touch his cheek. "And now?"

"And now," he repeated, then let out a deep breath. "Now . . . I think it's all right. To live . . . with you."

"Forever," she breathed.

Kurt chuckled and leaned in to kiss her. "Forever."



Final Thought from Kurt:  
Vendetta ...?

# Epilogue Disney World

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**June 21 2079**  
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“Do I have to wear that, Dad?”

Kurt Drevin shot his ten year-old daughter a raised-eyebrow-ed look. “Yes, you do.”

Tanny wrinkled her nose and shot her mother an imploring gaze. “Mo-o-om . . .”

Samantha Izayoi Drevin tried not to smile as she shifted Tanny’s year-and-a-half old sister, Ainsley from one hip to the other. “Sorry, sweetie, but you heard your father.”

Kurt fastened the monitoring device around Tanny’s slender wrist and synchronized it with his. “Okay, you’re the pink blip on my watch, and I’m the blue one yours. If we should happen to get split up, you find me, pronto. Got it?”

“Why doesn’t Ainsley have to wear one?” Tanny pouted, crossing her arms over her *‘I’m a Disney Kid!’* t-shirt.

“Because,” Kurt said, taking the toddler from his very-pregnant wife, “I’ll be holding her the entire time. She’s not going to go anywhere without me.”

Tanny rolled her eyes but didn’t comment as they moved away from the gates of the huge amusement park. A moment later, though, she gasped and dashed on ahead without warning, breaking directly for a huge candy store nearby.

Kurt rolled his eyes as he and Samantha followed along at a more leisurely pace. “You’d think she’d be a fat little piggy by now,” he commented, a faraway sort of look glazing over his eyes.

“Mm . . . she’s got good genes.”

Kurt chuckled, shifting Ainsley to one arm after sparing a moment to kiss her flyaway silvery hair so that he could slip his free arm around Samantha’s back. “You sure you’re feeling up to this?”

She shook her head but giggled since it was only the twentieth time he’d asked her that since they’d gotten through the gates.

“I’m fine, and remember? Isabelle said that it was okay, as long as I stay off roller coasters,” she reminded him gently.

Kurt didn’t look entirely convinced, but he relented. “You’ll tell me if you want to take a break, right?”

She smiled as Kurt stopped short, his eyes flaring wide at the sight that greeted him. Standing outside the candy store stood his daughter—and a boy who looked to be at least a couple years older than her. He handed Tanny a piece of neon pink bubble gum, and the girl blushed, digging the toe of her sandal against the pavement and twisting her foot in her normal show of nervousness.

“Hmm, yeah, I don’t like that,” Kurt said in a bordering-on-hostile tone of voice.

“Now, Kurt . . .” Samantha began.

He turned to frown at her and made quick work of slipping Ainsley into the bright pink stroller Samantha had been pushing.

She heaved a sigh and shook her head, seeing no choice but to follow her mate over to intercept their oldest daughter.

“Tanny, who’s this?” Kurt demanded in a barely civil tone as he narrowed his eyes at the boy in question.

Tanny grimaced and slowly looked up at him. “Da-ad!” she hissed under her breath.

“I’m Pete,” the boy said, more than a little reluctant, or so it would seem.

Kurt snorted. “Well, Pete . . . don’t you know that it’s bad to give candy to little girls you don’t know? They put people in jail for that all the time. Practicing for your future profession, are you?”

Tanny looked like she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her, and to be honest, Samantha couldn’t really blame her, either.

“S-sorry,” Pete muttered and hurriedly backpedaled.

Tanny waited until the boy was out of view before rounding on her father, her hands balled into tight fists at her sides. “Dad! Why did you do that? That was *humiliating!*”

Kurt shot her what should have been a quelling glance. It didn’t work. “He just gave me a piece of gum because he bought the last pack of that flavor!”

“And I’ve told you not to take candy from people you don’t know,” Kurt reminded her.

She wrinkled her nose. “It wasn’t candy. It was *gum.*”

“Does it have sugar in it?” he countered.

She shrugged.

“Then it’s *candy!*”

Tanny swung her head around, silently imploring Samantha for help. She knew better. These arguments—always about boys or candy or both—never, ever ended well, as far as she was concerned, and if Kurt wanted to pick the fight, then he was on his own . . .

“Look, Ainsley! Let’s go see Mickey Mouse!”

Kurt watched her go with a very loud snort before turning his attention back to his adolescent daughter. “You’re only ten,” he muttered with a sigh. “Humor me, will you?”

Tanny rolled her eyes but relented. “Well, I guess you did bring me to Disney World . . .”

Kurt broke into a little smile. “Does that score me a couple cool points?”

“Maybe,” Tanny allowed. “One or two . . .”

Kurt chuckled. “You want some cotton candy? It’s on me . . .”

“Can I get two?” Tanny asked grudgingly.

Kurt nodded. “All right: two.”

She finally smiled then, and while she didn’t reach for his hand like she used to when she was littler, she did walk beside him to the window in the side of the store. Kurt bought three bags, though, since he knew well enough that Tanny wouldn’t really want to share

her candy with her baby sister, and that was all right, too. He hadn't really wanted to share his cotton candy with Caroline, either, had he . . . ?

It struck him then . . . That spring so long ago . . . he'd been promised a trip to Disney World back then, but they'd never made it. Somehow, it seemed right that he bring his girls here, instead.

Tanny dashed over to Samantha, holding out the bag of purple candy that he'd bought for Ainsley—he could only hope that Samantha wouldn't let the girl have all of it, but even then, he supposed that it would be all right. Samantha dug a large hunk out of the bag and handed it to the baby, who was wailing inconsolably from her frightening introduction to a seven foot tall talking mouse. The candy calmed her instantly, and Samantha smiled at him.

“You're my hero,” Samantha giggled as she slipped her arms around his waist.

“Well, I do try,” he deadpanned, grasping the handles of the stroller and pushing the child along. Tanny walked on his other side, babbling about the different rides she swore she'd talk her father into riding with her . . .

And the skies so high above were blue, painted here and there with a touch of fluffy white clouds. In the distance, he could see miles and miles of Disney World, and it wasn't frightening or distorted . . . he no longer felt as though he were simply existing, going through the motions of living. Samantha . . . she'd given him a reason, hadn't she? Reasons and smiles and laughter . . .

“Come on, taijya,” Samantha prodded, snapping Kurt out of his reverie.

He chuckled and smiled down at her, his little demon. “Where are we going?”

She didn't miss the sparkle in his eyes and giggled as she leaned up to kiss his cheek, everything about her as welcoming and comforting as it had been from the very beginning. "Everywhere, Kurt," she whispered. "Everywhere."

*August 18, 2008.*

*11:42 a.m.*



**Final Thought from Kurt:**  
**Everywhere, huh? That's okay ...**