

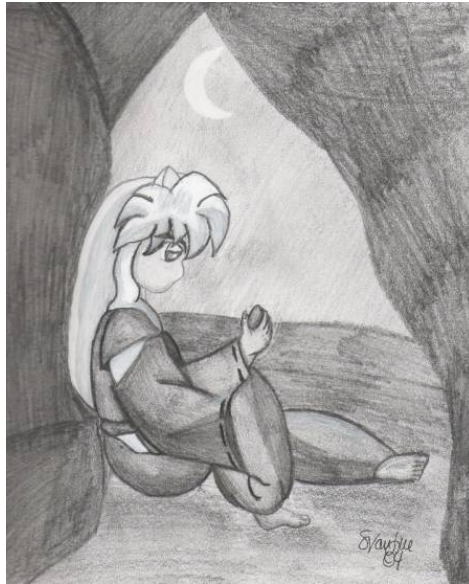
The Guardian



Sueric

The Guardian

1. Alone



The fire rat kimono tripped him up as he ran. He stumbled but caught himself and after casting a quick glance over his shoulder, the child ran on.

"InuYa-a-a-a-asha-a-a-a-a!"

The silver haired child glanced up as a bright smile broke out over his round face as his eyes lit on his mother. Izayoi waved, and InuYasha ran to her, throwing his arms around her and hugging her tight.

With a jerk and a startled gasp, InuYasha sat up, his eyes still bleary with sleep. Smells flooded his nose, and he frowned into the darkness of the cave. Wolves had once slept in this cave though they were long gone now. He made a face at the acrid smell that lingered.

"Myouga?" he whispered as he rubbed his eyes, careful to ball his hands into fists so he wouldn't scratch himself with his claws. "Myouga?" he whispered again.

Stillness greeted his ears. '*Where'd he go?*' InuYasha asked himself with a marked snort of disapproval. That figured. It really did. Coward of a flea, anyway . . .

InuYasha sighed and slumped back against the stone wall. It was cold. He dug into the kimono and pulled out a small compact. It was all he had left of her, his mother. Turning it over and over in his small hands, InuYasha drew a deep breath, biting back the thickness that welled in his throat and blinking back the hot wash of tears behind his eyelids. He was too old to cry now. Nearly seven years old was too old to cry.

She had been dead for over a year. In that year, he'd been cast out of the village where he had lived with her. They didn't want a hanyou living in their midst. Not even his mother's family had wanted him. Since then, he'd been staying in caves or, in the summer months, sleeping high in the trees.

It was lonely. He'd stopped wondering long ago, why it was that humans seemed to despise him, ridicule him. His mother had cried when he asked her what it meant, to be a half-breed. He hadn't really understood why, then. Now he did, sort of. He wasn't a human. But he wasn't youkai, either.

InuYasha squeezed the compact in his little fist once more then slipped it back into his kimono. It was hours until dawn. He let his eyes close and drifted back to sleep.

2. For Father's Honor



The trees whispered softly in the gentle early spring breeze. Next to the stream in the clearing, the small form with the brilliant silver hair bent down and lifted a handful of water to his face. Suddenly, as though he could sense something, the child's head shot up, and he glanced over his shoulder toward the trees and the shadows where the watcher hid.

He made no sound as he slowly retreated further into the shadows. He hated the kimono he had been forced to wear of late. He made a face as he glanced down at the dull black garment. Designed to conceal, he thought with a mental snort, a derisive sound. How he hated his responsibility . . .

"He is gone, milord."

Sesshoumaru glanced over at his faithful servant. Jaken trolled about in the shadows near the edge of the forest. He peeked out toward the stream again and shook his head slowly. "I can't see why we have to bother with this," Jaken grumbled, not for the first time.

Sesshoumaru stepped forward, shaking his long mane of silvery hair that fell in gentle waves to the small of his back. "I've explained all this to you before, Jaken," he remarked coldly, sparing just a glance at the little green youkai. "I gave my vow."

Jaken made a face but fell into step behind Sesshoumaru. "Still, milord. To have to do this, and for what? For how long?"
'For as long as it takes,' Sesshoumaru thought with a bitter smile. All this trouble, all this concern. All this, for InuYasha, his half-breed brother . . .

The wound on his chest was deep, festering. From the distance between the two, Sesshoumaru could smell the stench of infected flesh. Toga's breathing was hard, harsh. Rasping and uneven, Sesshoumaru stared in quiet disbelief at the almost pitiful form of his father.

"I'm dying, Sesshoumaru."

Sesshoumaru's expression didn't change. He continued to stare at his father. "Ryukotsusei? Why would you—?"

"You may not question me, Sesshoumaru. You have not the authority to do it."

"It was because of *her*. It was because of Izayoi, was it not?" Sesshoumaru countered sharply.

"Sesshoumaru!" Toga grimaced as a sharply indrawn breath caused him another pain. "Does it matter? I've come to see you. You are my son!"

Sesshoumaru nodded once. "I am," he agreed softly. The only glimpse into his otherwise stoic expression was the tell-tale rasp that barely caught in his voice. "What is it you ask of me?"

Toga's smile looked more like a grimace. "You are a man, Sesshoumaru. Make InuYasha a man, as well."

He opened his mouth to argue. Then he closed it again. His father was dying. His father asked him to protect InuYasha. What could he really say? "He will be a man, my lord."

Toga stared at Sesshoumaru for long minutes. Sesshoumaru didn't drop his gaze. He understood the question in Toga's eyes. Thought it nearly cost everything he had, Sesshoumaru nodded again, just one time.

"This is for you," Toga said. He held out the sword. Sesshoumaru stared at it with a thoughtful frown. "Learn to wield it. It is *the* most powerful sword in the world."

Sesshoumaru stared at the weapon. He'd never even seen his father unsheathe it. Powerful, was it? "But the Tetsusaiga," he remarked slowly, frowning at the sword in his hands.

"The Tetsusaiga is for InuYasha. You, Sesshoumaru . . . You make certain he finds it, when the time is right."

Sesshoumaru's eyes narrowed as he stared at his father's retreating form. "Where will you hide it?"

Toga stopped long enough to turn and face his eldest son once more. He smiled almost sadly and shook his head. "Just remember . . . Seen yet never seen. Protected, yet never known to its protector . . . Honor me, Sesshoumaru. Remember your promise, and honor me."

Sesshoumaru nodded again, one last time. Toga inclined his head slightly. Then he disappeared in a flash of white light and was gone. Sesshoumaru never saw him again.

The water softly gurgled before him, and Sesshoumaru slowly slipped out of his reverie only to find Jaken eyeing him curiously. "Milord?"

Sesshoumaru ignored his vassal and drew in a deep breath. InuYasha. InuYasha was headed west. With an inward sigh, Sesshoumaru started off, following the scent of his younger brother.

3. The Quiet



Summer flowers covered the field and filled the air with their sweet perfume. InuYasha wrinkled his nose and made a face. Though he wasn't tracking anything, it was still a nuisance. The overwhelming scent of flowers made it harder for him to tell if there was anything around that might cause him harm.

He frowned. A familiar scent, hidden, barely discernable under the fragrance of the blossoms. Still, it was there, and he glanced over his shoulder. Dog eyes, the villagers used to tease him. InuYasha shoved the memories aside. As hurtful as they were, they were also true. He had golden colored eyes, his mother had said, just like his father, and his silver hair was also inherited from Toga.

InuYasha's ears twitched, and he swung around. It had been nothing more than the rustling of a bush nearby. Still, he knew from experience that he couldn't be too cautious. There were nastier things than humans in the world. The humans taunted him, teased him, drove him away like he was the bearer of the Plague. But worse were the youkai. Whenever he chanced upon a youkai, they delighted in chasing him. Most of the times, he was able to dodge them. He was quick, nimble, probably also inherited from his great father that he couldn't rightly remember. But there had been a time or two when he had been unable to escape. The first time he had been trapped, he was knocked unconscious by a nasty bear youkai. He woke in the same place where he had fallen. But the youkai that had attacked him was dead.

Twice more things of that nature had happened. Always he had been rendered unconscious only to wake and find the youkai dead at his feet. He didn't understand how the youkai had been killed any more than he understood this strange scent he now smelled. It was the same unsettling, oddly familiar scent that he had smelled on the dead youkai. But why?

Slowly, cautiously, InuYasha lifted the fish he had caught to his mouth without taking his eyes off the odd darkness of the forest. Someone was there. He knew it. He could sense the presence. If only he could figure out who it was, why they smelled so familiar.

"Lord InuYasha! I've found you at last!"

"Ouch," InuYasha said absently, dropping his fish and slapping his hand to his cheek. Myouga groaned and crumpled, falling to InuYasha's kimono with a whine of pain. "Oh, it's you."

"Fine way to greet me, my lord!" Myouga grouched as he straightened out his tiny kimono indignantly. "I've been looking everywhere for you, and this is the reception I get! Ungrateful dog!"

"What do you want?" InuYasha asked with a snort.

Myouga hopped up onto his shoulder. "I wanted to check up on you. That's all."

InuYasha retrieved his fish and gnawed thoughtfully on it while Myouga stared at him. "Your grandfather has died."

InuYasha paused long enough to swallow a bite of food before snorting. "Like I care," he remarked casually.

"But your mother—"

"Give it a rest, Myouga. She died better 'n four years ago, and I don't wanna talk about her."

Myouga didn't give up. "My lord, surely you can't mean—"

InuYasha pinched Myouga between his fingers to shut him up. The wind shifted slightly, and InuYasha dropped Myouga with a frown. "Who *is* that?" he muttered, more to himself than to his vassal.

Myouga moaned and popped back into shape. "Who is who?"

InuYasha didn't answer. He shot to his feet and stomped toward the forest, intent on finding out who it was, why this person smelled so . . . so familiar. Myouga hopped off as fast as he could to catch up.

InuYasha was so intent on the scent that he didn't notice the other more menacing aroma that crept in around him. A low growl, almost like a nasty laugh, stopped him in his tracks. Slowly, InuYasha turned to face the hulking snake youkai that circled him.

"Is it you? The s-s-s-son of Inu-Taisho?"

InuYasha's gaze narrowed. The snake youkai's tongue flicked out, nearly touching his cheek. "Who are you?"

Again, the snake youkai chuckled. "Answer me, boy! Are you that dog bastard's son?"

"So what if I am?" he tossed out with calculated casual ease.

The snake youkai reared back, his black scales glimmering in the sunlight. "Prepare to die-e-e-e!"

InuYasha glanced back at the trees. Something shifted in the shadows. A sudden, blinding pain erupted on his neck. InuYasha gasped but crumpled to the ground before he had a chance to cry out.

4. The Sword of Life



"The damn little fool!"

Sesshoumaru shot out of the shadows and sliced through the snake youkai with his poison claws before the youkai could sense his presence. The youkai fell to the ground in a pitiful heap.

"My lord!"

Sesshoumaru didn't turn to look at Jaken. Jaken skidded to a halt and stared in dumbfounded silence at the unmoving body on the ground. Sesshoumaru nudged InuYasha with his foot. He tilted back and forth.

"Is he . . . Is he . . . dead?"

Absolute rage filled Sesshoumaru. His eyes snapped with fire, nostrils flared with indignation. He was too late. InuYasha . . . InuYasha was dead.

"The damn fool," he muttered again. He'd broken his promise to his father. Sesshoumaru turned on his heel and stopped abruptly. "The Tenseiga?"

He stared in mute wonder at his hip where the sheathed sword was pulsing. He frowned as he slowly lifted his hand to the hilt. In all the years since he had been given the sword, it had never reacted like this.

"My lord?" Jaken asked quietly, noticing that Sesshoumaru was drawing the sword.

Sesshoumaru didn't answer. As though possessing a will of its own, the sword jerked, pointing to the lifeless form on the ground. His eyes widened as he saw the fuzzy outlines of the youkai imps that have come to take InuYasha's soul to the next plane. "I am to cut them?" he mused. Jaken's expression clouded. He watched in stunned silence as Sesshoumaru drew his sword back and sliced through the air above InuYasha's body.

InuYasha moaned softly but didn't open his eyes. Sesshoumaru dropped the Tenseiga back into the scabbard and turned to go. "Come, Jaken."

Jaken stared for another minute then ran after Sesshoumaru.

5. Confrontation



InuYasha ran through the forest, arms stretched out behind him as the loose arms of his fire rat kimono blew in the breeze. It felt good to run. He edged around the small village, sticking to the outskirts of the forest that he loved. He hadn't stopped to analyze the reason why. But there was something comforting about it, the closest he ever felt to having a real home.

The sound of laughing children stopped him. Against his better judgment, InuYasha cautiously stepped toward the clearing in the forest, where the laughter was originating.

A young priestess directed the village's children as they gathered herbs. The kids were laughing and playing, and the priestess was pretending not to notice that her charges weren't doing as they were supposed to do.

InuYasha frowned and sniffed. The priestess smelled . . . nice. But why did she look so sad?

She was young. Very young. Even though she grinned, she looked poignant. Her smile was bright, open, friendly, but her eyes . . . An odd sense of sorrow hid in the depths of her gaze, and he had to wonder why. InuYasha frowned as his heart sped up a beat. What was this reaction?

A vice-like grip fell on his shoulder and jerked InuYasha back into the darkness of the forest. His nose was assailed instantly with the reek of that strangely familiar odor, and his eyes widened in surprise before narrowing in confusion as he stared, aghast, at a youkai who looked a lot like him.

Dressed in black with long silver white hair like his own, the older youkai glared menacingly at InuYasha with open animosity and an overall air of disgust. "Are you really that foolish, hanyou?" he growled.

InuYasha stiffened. "Who are you?" he countered.

"It matters not, who I am. She will kill you." He jerked his head toward the clearing and the priestess.

"Who are you, and why do you care?"

The man snorted and flicked an elegant, long-fingered hand. "Be not a fool. I care not if you are fool enough to die, InuYasha. Are you so dense you cannot even recognize your own brother?"

InuYasha froze for a heartbeat. "My *brother*?"

"*Half*-brother, hanyou. I, unlike you, am full youkai."

InuYasha frowned in confusion. "I don't have a brother," he said slowly, carefully. "Least of all a full youkai. If I did, I'd know it."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" the other youkai scoffed pointedly.

InuYasha was cut off as a small green youkai tore forward, oblivious to his presence as he planted himself before the intruder with marked gasps. "Milord! Why did you leave me behind, milord Sesshoumaru?"

"Sesshoumaru," InuYasha repeated, drawing the imp's scrutiny. Sesshoumaru's golden glare flicked to lock with his for an instant before he stepped forward, squashing the imp—his servant?—into the ground.

"I am Sesshoumaru, lord of the Western Lands . . . And your brother."

"I don't give a rat's ass who you are," InuYasha growled, allowing his fangs to show. Sesshoumaru's very demeanor was enough to set his teeth to grinding, and it took every last bit of his resolve not to lash out at the youkai who had just proclaimed himself lord. "This is *my* forest, and—"

"This is your forest because I allow you to keep it, hanyou."

A vicious growl, territorial and angry, erupted low in his throat as InuYasha fought to control his rising aggression. What was it about this brother of his that brought out such savagery? A fleeting image of the taunts of man that he'd had to endure for the first few years of his life flitted through InuYasha's head, and his growl deepened.

"Threatening me, InuYasha?" Sesshoumaru asked in mock-surprise, his artful black eyebrows disappearing under his thick silvery bangs.

"Never," InuYasha bit out. "It was a promise, you bastard."

Sesshoumaru's movements were lightning quick. He lifted InuYasha off his feet with a hand to his throat. His expression was blank but his eyes burned with intense fire. "Take care who you offend, whelp."

InuYasha ignored the implied threat and slashed wildly at the suspending hand. The hand dropped him, and InuYasha scrambled to his feet. He was about to spout off something else but stopped when the wind shifted and brought Sesshoumaru's entirely too-familiar scent to the fore. "You . . . You've followed me . . . for years. I've smelled you before. So why show me your face now?"

Sesshoumaru took his time deliberately flicking some nonexistent lint from his snowy white Mokokoko-sama. With a careless flip, he tossed the fur over his shoulder so that it hung down his back once more and shrugged. "I have not. Perchance I have passed you in my travels. I assure you, I was never following you. I have much better things to do than to waste my time following along after the likes of you."

InuYasha's fist tightened, digging painfully into his palm. He ignored the slick blood that pooled at the juncture where his claws punctured his own flesh. Sesshoumaru turned on his heel and stalked silently back into the forest.

6. Anija



Sesshoumaru stared down at his clothes with a small smile of satisfaction. *'Much better,'* he thought. He'd looked like a vagrant, like a vagabond, for far, far too long. At long last, he donned his real clothing and felt instantly soothed.

"It's good to see a smile on your face at last, milord," Jaken commented as he took the black kimono that Sesshoumaru had just shed and dropped it onto the fire. In a whoosh of flames, the garment disintegrated leaving no traces behind.

Sesshoumaru's smile faded as he tugged his armor on. Suddenly, his chin rose and he sniffed, scanning the horizon with narrowed eyes. "What does she want?" he mused, more to himself than to Jaken. "I know you're there. You may as well show yourself."

Anija, the ice panther youkai, stepped out of the shadow of the trees and stopped before Sesshoumaru, her cat-like eyes roving up and down his long frame. He refrained from his desire to step closer to her and instead blanked his features, tilting his head to the side just slightly. "You don't look very happy to see me," she pouted, her blood-red lips forming a playful moue.

"What do you want, Anija?"

"Is that the way you greet an old friend?"

One of Sesshoumaru's brows lifted; the only change in his otherwise stoic countenance. "Were we ever friends?"

Anija stepped closer and stroked a long-clawed hand over Sesshoumaru's cheek. Her touch was icy, cold. Sesshoumaru didn't flinch. "Weren't we?"

"How dare you touch Lord Sesshoumaru!" Jaken bristled, trying to shove the panther youkai back. She growled and raised a hand to warn back the servant.

Sesshoumaru's voice stopped Jaken on the spot. "Do not interfere, Jaken. It isn't your concern."

Anija grinned as the angry retainer stomped away. "Aww. He loves you."

"What do you want?" he asked again, making a point of ignoring Anija's commentary.

Anija licked her lips and pouted a little more. "You, of course."

Sesshoumaru didn't back away. But he didn't move toward her, either. "You and I both know you didn't come all this way to taunt me," he remarked. "Let me guess. Your people have returned for yet another round? I would think you'd tire of being forced into retreat. But if you must . . ."

He finally took a step toward Anija. Anija held out her hand. In a flash of light, Sesshoumaru watched as her ice saber solidified. She brought it to her face and licked the blade. "Come, Sesshoumaru. Let's see if you've even half of your father's power."

Sesshoumaru's only show of emotion came in the slight narrowing of the eyes. In one fluid movement, he grabbed the panther youkai and flew forward, pinning her to the thick trunk of a tree with his poison claws embedded into the bark. She chuckled. "You can't be dominated, can you, love?" she purred, taking for granted the fact that Sesshoumaru could easily kill her.

"What is your message?" he asked, his voice even, steady, as though he hadn't exerted an ounce of energy in restraining Anija. But his golden eyes blazed brighter, and Anija would have been a fool to think that playtime wasn't over.

"They're coming. They're angry, and they want your blood."

Sesshoumaru finally smiled. "They want my blood, do they? And you? What do you want? Why did they send you?"

Anija glanced down at Sesshoumaru's arm and watched as ice enveloped him. He pulled away and shook his hand once, sending ice flying as he flexed his knuckles. She stepped over to Sesshoumaru, her arms snaking around his neck, pulling his head forward until their lips were mere breaths apart. "You know what I've always wanted, Sesshoumaru . . . As for the honor of seeking you out?" She dropped her arms and turned her back on him, daring . . . foolish. "I volunteered."

Sesshoumaru watched without a word as Anija disappeared back into the forest. Jaken huffed indignantly and strode over to Sesshoumaru's side. "The nerve of that wench!" he blustered. "You should have killed her! You should have cut her down!"

Sesshoumaru's icy look stilled Jaken's wayward tongue. Then Sesshoumaru strode away in the opposite direction. Jaken ran to catch up. "Milord? Where are we going? Aren't you supposed to watch over InuYasha?"

"He is fine on his own," Sesshoumaru commented but didn't slow his stride. "The panthers are foolish."

Jaken fell silent as he struggled to match Sesshoumaru's speed. He was uneasy about leaving the hot-headed hanyou to his own devices. But at present, the panthers were the very real threats . . .

7. Miserable Fate



Sesshoumaru stood on the cliff looking down at the battlefield with a closed expression. Ryoukan, the forest guardian, stepped up beside him, his head hung in deference to the dog-lord. "I offer my services, my lord."

Sesshoumaru turned slightly, staring at Ryoukan with a marked frown. "And why would you do that?" he asked softly.

"Your father aided me. I must return the favor."

"Milo-o-o-o-o-ord!"

Sesshoumaru turned in time to see Jaken stumble and fall to his knees before him. He wheezed and huffed, dragging in lungfuls of air as he struggled to regain his breath before he could speak. Sesshoumaru waited patiently.

"I apologize for interrupting, milord!" Jaken began, squashing his face to the ground. "It's of the utmost import!"

"What is it, Jaken?" Sesshoumaru demanded, his tone very thin.

"I . . . I went in search of your brother, milord . . . That he could lend his aide to you . . . The panthers are your father's enemies, and—"

Sesshoumaru's pride stung. Surely the battle was difficult. But to ask that hanyou for help? "Where is he? Is he not here because he was afraid? Did he want to help his brother?"

Jaken blanched, fearing to tell his lord what he had discovered and yet fearing what would happen if he did not tell Sesshoumaru. "He . . . Uh . . . Well . . . InuYasha . . ."

"Now, Jaken," Sesshoumaru cut in, rapidly tiring of the lesser-youkai's prattlings. "Out with it."

"He is sealed, milord! That miko—the one you caught him staring at—She subdued InuYasha. The fool fell in love with her, a *human*, and . . . He's sealed to Goshinboku!"

Sesshoumaru's eyes widened for just a moment as he digested Jaken's words. Then he turned his formidable glare on Jaken once more before muttering, "The fool. How pitiful."

'*And no Tetsusaiga,*' he finished to himself. With that sword, he could have ended this battle that much quicker. But no . . . thanks to that fool of a brother of his, he had to fight this senseless battle without it.

'*The human woman . . . InuYasha fell in love with a human woman . . .*' Sesshoumaru closed his eyes just for a moment. How foolish his father had been, years before, when he had taken Izayoi as his mate. A mortal woman had begotten a hanyou, who, like their great and powerful father, had done the same thing, repeating history yet again.

'*This Sesshoumaru,*' he vowed to himself, reigning in the desire to find InuYasha and rip him to shreds. '*This Sesshoumaru will never succumb to a mortal! I will never be so foolish, so weak . . .*'

After all the years of watching over InuYasha, of making certain the idiot reached manhood . . . And this was the reward Sesshoumaru got in the end. He truly was the last of the great dog youkai . . .

The End

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

~Sue~