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**Merripit House: The Dark Daiyokai**

by SherlockHolmesSkittle

**Summary**

After defeating and sealing his deadliest foe in the Underworld, Sesshomaru spends the next 400 years or so in a deep sleep. When he awakes, not only has the world drastically changed to a human-dominated and yokai-absent place, but some foreign human woman has desecrated his brother's grave and stolen his father's sword.

Jenny Harkness, owner and manager of the investigation agency Merripit House, deals with powerful people on a regular basis. Brilliant, ruthless and arrogant, she has brought many to their knees with naught but a few words. Dealing with a Demon Lord suffering from 'Captain America-itis' is a first for her, though. The solution: hire him.

Soon, Jenny is forcing Sesshomaru to learn English, teaching him how to use modern technology, and honoring the UN's demands to please do something about a sudden, worldwide emergence of deadly legendary creatures. Despite burying his past, Sesshomaru is forced to deal with a pair of horrors that refuse to stay sealed and silent any longer. This time around, though, Merripit House is here to help him take them down.
Grave Robber

The blade cut the flesh of the earth. With an exhausted heave, a woman with her long blonde hair pulled back in a sweat-slickened ponytail, lifted a shovel with its pound of dirt over her shoulder, adding to the pile behind her. She rested the shovel on the floor of her hole, wiped the glistening moisture off her forehead which left a streak of dirt from her filthy gloves, and caught her breath for a moment. Then she stabbed the soil once more and jumped on top of the shovel, cutting a bit deeper into the ground, but frustratingly not as deep as she would have liked. While not exactly petite at 5'4", the woman didn't have near enough fat on her bones to make a significant dent in her project.

Months of running and digging and unearthing aged manuscripts and balancing conflicts and calling home to lie and say everything is fine can do that to a person's body.

"Had to be Japan," she grumbled as she cut another scoop of soil. "Had to be a graveyard." She threw another pound of earth next to the displaced gravestone. "Had to be in summer." She smacked her neck, killing yet another mosquito. "Had to be freaking Fukushima." Despite the city recovering from the nuclear meltdown in 2011, the idea of digging around in a place that had once been filled with radioactive material left a bad taste in her mouth.

With a thud, the shovel hit something considerably harder than packed down dirt. Furiously working, the woman scraped off the layer of dirt covering a long cement slab. When the shovel became too unwieldy, she fell to her knees to brush the slab clean with her hands. English words in a Japanese graveyard engraved in the cement soon revealed themselves to her fingers.

To: Jenny Harkness, year 2012 AD (or thereabouts)

The woman laughed at the greeting through time, more from relief than joy. "Hello Jackie," she said. "It's good to hear from you. I'm about six years late, though. I hope you don't mind."

Jenny threw the shovel out of her grave-sized hole and grabbed a pickaxe. If she were an archeologist, perhaps she would have found a way to preserve the specimen of anachronistic cement and evidence of written English in early Feudal Japan. But, no, she was not an archeologist. Without a breath of hesitation, she swung the instrument over her head and into the slab beneath her feet.

In quick rhythm, she swung the pickaxe into the ground.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Slowly, the aged cement chipped away. The pickaxe dug through the material that had held together for centuries, breaking it into little flakes until it broke through the outer layer. With a small hole in the cement, she was able to break the cement even further until she'd opened a cavity large enough to fit both her hands.

Abandoning the pickaxe, Jenny fell to her knees and pointed her headlamp into the hole while brushing away the dirt and debris. Despite the stream of light breaking through the darkness, the space inside remained obscured in shadows. She slipped her hands through the hole, hoping the cement tomb's contents hadn't rotted over the last few hundred years or so.

When her fingers took hold of something solid and dry, a smile crept onto her face. "Finally."
From the cavity, she pulled out a flat rectangular box made of cedar wood. It still had a fresh heady smell to it as it escaped from its underground cell. When shaken, something soft rattled around inside it. Jenny grabbed a backpack sitting outside the grave-sized hole she'd made, and stuffed it in.

Reaching in again, she found something long like a flattened cylinder, wrapped on one end with cords. Below a disk-like protrusion, the cylinder felt cold and made of a rich, hardened and lacquered wood. With a bit of maneuvering, Jenny slid out a katana. She couldn't see much detail in the harsh light from her headlamp, but from the weight and the detail on the tsuba, she could tell it had great value in an ancient day, and more than likely, in contemporary markets as well.

Taking the hilt in one hand and the sheath in the other, Jenny exposed the top part of the blade to open air for the first time in centuries. Despite its poor storage, the blade still shone brightly without a speck of rust or damage. No doubt it would be as sharp as the day it was forged, she supposed. A thrill ran through her body at the sight of the blade, a thrill she couldn't quite explain. Something about this sword held more than meaning, but her mind couldn't quite find the word to describe this rush and almost spiritual tingle in the back of her head.

This she added to her backpack's load before her brain could wax more eloquent.

One last search through the cement tomb produced nothing else but scraped fingers on the sharp remains of the box, so climbing out of the pit, Jenny took her backpack with its valuables safely stuffed inside and began to run.

Thud thud thud.

Cracking open his eyes, Sesshomaru idly wondered why his heart had decided to come alive and beat like he'd found himself in the middle of an ambush. Something must have given his body and unconscious mind cause for a sudden anxiety. Then he wondered how long he had slept. Dragging open his heavy eyelids, he came to the conclusion that however long it had been, he had been asleep long enough.

Bones creaked as he moved his limbs. As he sat up, he brushed a heavy layer of dirt and dust off his clothes. With some level of disgust, he realized he had cobwebs all through his hair and the fur pelt over his shoulder. Thankfully in the dark, he couldn't see the poor state of his attire. All he had to focus on was crawling out of the cave and forcing his arms and legs to bend and pull and bear weight. A deep, dull pain radiated from his chest throughout his body, something he might have described as an ache.

Ache. What a disgustingly human thing to feel.

The cave ran deeper and lower than he remembered, forcing him to stoop embarrassingly low. But perhaps in his need to rest, he hadn't made note of its actual length. It had been a long week of battle after all.

He recalled leaning on Bakusaiga, perhaps a little more than he intended. Blood seeped through his kimono, staining most of it red. But that could hardly compare to the carnage surrounding him. In a field in Fukushima, bodies lay heaped upon the earth. Bodies of yokai, humans, and the unwitting animal steeds that had born thousands of warriors into battle. Torn flesh, shattered bones and twisted, mangled bodies had been thrown as far as his sharp eyes could see. The setting sun added a splash of crimson to an already gore filled earth.

A woman in a black kimono splashed with silver flowers and tied with a white obi, who wore crow's feathers in her black tresses, shrieked at him the moment his final enemy fell. Almost like it had been
yesterday, he could still hear her screaming for her son that Sesshomaru had sealed away in the Underworld. "Do not think you have nothing left that I can take!"

Izanami, he called her. He didn't know if she was the Izanami, mother of the Underworld, but she acted like it nonetheless. Mother of Daiichi, the Destroyer of Life, self-proclaimed enemy of Lord Sesshomaru and nearly the downfall of civilization if it hadn't been for his intervention.

After digging graves for the few he would call friends — Ah-un, the first and noblest to fall; Jaken, loyal to a fault; Kohaku, dependable, brave and clever; and InuYasha — he did not see how he had anyone else to lose to Izanami's wrath. Burying their bodies hurt his soul more than he wanted to admit. When he found no trace of InuYasha's body, or even of Tessaiga, in the rubble of Daiichi's fiercest blast of demonic power, Sesshomaru mourned more than he thought possible for that insufferable hanyou that shared his father's blood.

The battle and grave digging and slashing Izanami asunder with the decomposing blast of Bakusaiga, took nearly every last ounce of energy out of the daiyokai. For the first time in his life, he understood what exhaustion must feel like to a human. So when he had come across this cave, sleep sounded delicious.

Sesshomaru squinted at the light that seeped through the mountainside as he emerged from his cavern. From its bluish hue, he could tell it was the moon that illuminated the mouth of the cave. Its faint light practically blinded him for a few long minutes. From the state of the foliage and the hot night air, it appeared that he had slept until late summer. He wondered if he really could have slept for an entire half a year.

Taking in every scent and sound of the forest, Sesshomaru took time to adjust himself to his surroundings. Birds, vermin, and other prey wandered through the forest, although in a significantly lower degree than he remembered. The explanation came from the sounds of human voices, machines and other strange, unexplainable noises that reached far deeper through the edges of the forest than they used to. This place used to be a haven from humankind. It seems their reach spread even this far now, and in such a short amount of time.

What he did not smell was yokai. Not a touch of youki energy anywhere in the air. The only hint of it was his own. But considering the damage his last battle had wreaked, perhaps he was the cause, he thought. No yokai dare enter these parts of the land ever again after what happened with Daiichi.

As he followed a deer's path through the trees, Sesshomaru could feel something else touching his senses. An energy he'd felt few times before. He carried that energy with him at his side in the form of Tenseiga. And when his half-brother fought, he could feel it in Tessaiga's attacks.

Did the Inu no Taisho have a third sword forged?

The thought made him curious, leading to a fierce hunger in his mind that had to be satisfied. Gathering up what strength he had, he took off into the night sky, flying just over the treetops to avoid being seen. What had once been something that came as naturally as walking, flying took a bit more concentration than he liked.

Perhaps this is what 'groggy' felt like.

Aiming for the source of the energy, Sesshomaru effortlessly breezed past the landscape, noting in the back of his mind that he seemed to be heading back to the battlefield where he had made his last stand against Daiichi.

As he left the forest, he kept to the higher skies, blending in with the clouds. But they were not too
thick to see the phenomenal changes made to the landscape below. The humans had not only created
new paths made of black stone and trimmed the vegetation down to its barest roots, but the latest
inhabitants had brought strange contraptions to assert their dominance over the earth. Rounded metal
and glass boxes raced across the pathways and roads in orderly lines, all of them illuminated by lights
that had to be artificial. The buildings, annoyingly numerous as always, had exploded in size,
frequency and density.

But what humans did or didn't do mattered little to the daiyokai moving faster than any of the
inventions of men below him. All he needed was to find the source of the burst of energy.

Before long, he came across a small grassy meadow with blades that hadn't been cut short to expose
the carved stones laid in the ground for many a season. He recognized the place at once, even before
he saw the one hundred, perhaps 150 stone pillars and slabs with detailed carvings marking the final
resting places of a few generations of a small human village. Deep in the back of the overgrown
graveyard, with a metal fence running around most of the lot and trees filling in the missing gap,
Sesshomaru knelt at four forgotten, handmade stones.

To his dismay, Sesshomaru found that all had been left unmolested save one. The stone marking
where his brother would have rested had been dug up and shoved aside. An abandoned shovel laid
at the edge of a hole big enough to fit the body of a human. At the base, a broken up, hollow box
laid empty and abandoned.

Anger rising in his throat, Sesshomaru searched for every last sign of what heathen could have
desecrated his family's grave. An abundance of human sweat, a drop or two of blood, traces of
leather, ink and cotton. These scents mingled together created an image of a human woman — yes,
this thief was female — that seared itself into his mind.

A sharp leap into the air, and the hunt was on.

The backpack clunked as Jenny tossed it onto the chunk of batting, fiber and springs masquerading
as a hotel bed. As much as she wanted to dig into its contents immediately after her drive from
Fukushima to Tokyo, she needed clean hands first. Peeling off her sweat-stricken tank top and khaki
capris, she dropped every stitch of her clothing on the floor of the cramped bathroom and began
scrubbing her skin clean of the dirt she had collected that night. Gray filth ran down in a torrid stream
toward the drain of the bathtub.

While concentrating on getting clean enough to think properly, Jenny could hear a change in the
wind, like something angry had electrified the sky. By the time she'd finished her rapid shower and
gotten dressed in a clean pair of jeans and t-shirt (the knock-off TARDIS on a baby blue background
she'd found in a market in Tokyo seemed to speak to her), a lightning storm had descended over the
hotel. Even when the bolts struck down hard and fast, growing closer to her building, her focus
remained on the contents of the bag taking a better rest than she had in the last several years.

After brushing out the matted tangles from her hair, Jenny hopped up on the bed and folded her legs
under her. "Let's see what you've got for me today," she said as she slid the cedar box out of the bag.

Now that she had a proper source of light, the details of the box came out clearly. Namely that the
box had no details to speak of. It had the normal sandy, tan and rose colorings of normal cedar wood,
but not a hint of water damage, scuffs, or even dirt that could have seeped into the grain. Running
her hand along the top, it felt like someone had sanded it the day before. Hints of sawdust came off
on her fingers.

The sides nearly had no seams to them. Along one edge, a long rectangle fit in between four walls,
but no nails or glue held it together. Yet when she jammed the edge of a pocketknife into the seam, the wood refused to budge. She pressed harder and harder until the knife flew out of her grasp, nearly slicing the fingers on her left hand as the blade left her control.

The blade left no scratch.

"What the heck?" Jenny remarked at the perfectly unremarkable box. "How am I supposed to open you?"

Her eyes fell upon the sword poking out through the backpack. The whole idea of wielding a sword to slice open a box looked as ridiculous in her head as it probably would in real life. But at least the weapon could bear examining. Pulling it out of the backpack, Jenny absorbed every detail of katana, from the red wrappings around a black hilt and tsuba, to the smooth cordovan lacquer on the sheath. With a bit of amusement, she noted that the sword's primary colors, red and black, were the same that her little sister used to wear.

"Why on earth would you leave me a sword, Jackie?"

She'd studied Japanese before beginning this strange mission in Southern Japan, but the kanji engraved at the top of the scabbard escaped the reach of her lessons. So she climbed off the bed with the sword in hand to grab a Japanese-to-English dictionary from her suitcase sitting at the foot of the bed.

"Ketsugō-kiba," she said after some searching through the dictionary. "Binding Fang. That must be your name. No offense, but it's an odd one."

Suddenly, in the midst of another crack of thunder, the flimsy door of Jenny's hotel room burst open in a flurry of wood splinters. Jenny instinctively reacted to the cacophony by grabbing the handgun off her nightstand and pointing it at the danger.

A tall, massive figure half hidden by shadows stood in her doorway. A green glow came from a katana held in his right hand. He took one step into the room, moving silently despite the weight of the black lotus petal armor around his torso, steel spiked pauldron over his left shoulder and white and red traditional Japanese clothes. Jenny blinked hard a few times to ensure she wasn't imagining this out-of-place intruder. Amber eyes bored into hers, daring her to use the weapon in her hand.

Most tourists in a foreign-speaking land learn phrases like, "Where is the bathroom?" and "Which way is the train station?" Jenny immediately whipped out the first Japanese phrase she'd made sure to learn: "Nokosu ka, watashi wa uchimasu zo." Leave or I'll shoot.

Pointing a finger that looked as sharp as a tiger's claw, the man began to speak in a calm, but sharp, voice. "Haka dorobo."

Grave robber.

His lips pulled back into a snarl of disgust, revealing sharp fangs. He could probably hear her blood racing with adrenaline, betraying her fear even as she clenched her jaw, forced her arm to keep her aim steady and refused to blink as they shared a glare in order to give the impression of dominance. "Despite what you think you see, I am no thief," she replied in his language. (Rosetta Stone proved good for something.)

The intruder raised his sword, pointing it in her direction, making his intentions quite clear. "You desecrated the grave of a brave warrior to steal a sword. Why?"

Remembering the trouble even getting this katana she held in her left hand, Jenny clutched it closer
to her body while refocusing her aim at the intruder's armored chest. More worrisome to her was the fact that he stood closer to the cedar box on the bed than she did. "That's something I can't explain to you."

"Nonetheless, you will give me that sword. It belonged to my father, and as his heir, it belongs to me."

"Yeah, no." Jenny fired three shots as fast as her finger could squeeze the trigger. The first bullet hit him in the chest, forcing him to bend backward, but then he moved. All she could see was a blur, the figure going to her left, then a flash of green glowing steel almost right at her face. A second later, her trigger finger pulled empty space as the pieces of her gun fell apart in her hand.

"I do not enjoy killing foes as weak as humans," he said, raising his sword again. "They are too easy to dispose of."

In true cowardly fashion, Jenny resorted to the other weapon in her hand to defend herself. As the intruder's katana sliced through the air, she took the sword in both hands and held it up to stop his blow. She braced herself to feel a bone shattering impact of sword on scabbard.

But it never came.

A translucent red sphere suddenly encapsulated her, bouncing his attack back at him and throwing him backwards a few steps. She could feel a hum of energy from the sword through her fingers, letting her know exactly what had created the shield.

Jenny could read the confusion in the man's face. Although he had distinctly non-human features — the magenta marks on his cheeks, a crescent moon on his forehead, pointed ears and unnaturally long silver-white hair being among them — anger and frustration had universal use amongst Earth's inhabitants. He glared at her with eyes that could have struck her down that instant if he hadn't been more focused on the sword that gave her protection.

"Do not think you have some sort of advantage, woman," the inhuman man snarled. His sword seemed to spark and grow in power the angrier he became. "I can break through any barrier."

This time when the blow came, Jenny refrained from flinching when his katana came down on her. Again, a red sphere forced the sword and its wielder backwards hard enough to send him flying into the destroyed doorway. "This seems like an advantage to me," Jenny replied.

If she thought that the intruder couldn't look any more intimidating, her egging him on only drew out more of a beast-like fierceness. She hoped her eyes were playing tricks on her, but as he drew himself back up to his feet, his eyes began to turn red, his bared teeth became sharpened, and the fur pelt over his shoulder seemed to raise like the bristles of fur on a dog's back when he's backed into a corner. "Surrender now before I rip your throat out!"

"Over my dead body." Taking the sword by the hilt and holding it the same way she would a softball bat, Jenny swung the sheathed katana at the intruder with all the force she could summon.

A flash of red energy shot him straight through the remains of the doorway, over the outside railing and into the parking lot a story below.
By the time Sesshomaru managed to pull himself together and leap back into the thief's living quarters, she had vanished, taking the sword and all her belongings with her, right down to the cedar box that smelled of graveyard soil. The woman couldn't have known that surrounding herself with thousands upon thousands of other humans would make finding her nigh unto impossible. And yet as he tried to narrow down the yellow-haired woman's scent, he had no choice but to conclude that she'd unwittingly outsmarted him. And bruised his dignity far more than her tiny hand cannon had bruised his chest. Hours later, his chest still hurt from the slug of metal he'd picked out of the folds of his kimono.

Perhaps these metal horseless covered carts had sealed her up and transported her away. Or, more likely, the Inu no Taisho's sword was protecting her from him. This wouldn't be the first time his father had created a sword to protect a human woman.

With dawn breaking over the mountaintops, the extent of the humans' influence on the land showed in stark contrast against the green of the Earth. From his perch in the top of an aged pine tree, Sesshomaru observed the gray and black spread of buildings with odd angular shapes rising far higher than the surrounding trees, metal snakes darting around the countryside, a distasteful layer of soot that smelled like garbage hanging over the city, artificial giant birds roaring through the sky and vast expanses of nothingness. Humans enjoyed creating and building — this was evident by the miles and miles of buildings — but also liked to remove and erase. The sounds of wildlife had dampened considerably since the last time he was awake. And the longer he searched idly for signs of yokai — sound, scent, aura — the more isolated he felt.

Sesshomaru felt no desire whatsoever to get accustomed to this new world he'd awoken in. But the longer he observed their overwhelming reach, the more he feared that he would have no choice.

The idea of the land possessing no potential subjects to rule disturbed the daiyokai greatly. But then he remembered the decimation of his army and kingdom under his leadership. Blood and bone as far as the eye could see. Suddenly being alone felt … right. Deserved.

How long had he slept? The thought needed a better answer than long enough. Humans couldn't have become so powerful in a short period of time. Taking to the sky, Sesshomaru lazily glided southward amongst the clouds. From that high in the air, the landscape's shape still looked like he remembered. Humans could send the metal snakes around and over and through the mountains, but they couldn't grind them down flat or reroute the rivers that cut through their cities. So he followed familiar paths in an attempt to find remnants of yesterday.

To his astonishment and gratitude, there was a certain forest that the humans had seen fit to leave mostly untouched. Sesshomaru could smell a lingering trace of humans that had passed through as he landed on the forest floor. According to his sharp senses, though, he had his privacy.

Within minutes, after passing through trees that had grown massive in girth and height, Sesshomaru found the magnolia tree that had lived and seen the passing of many more years and ages than he could comprehend. He placed a hand on the trunk where a pair of human lovers had carved evidence of their commitment into the bark. Under his fingers, a warmth bled through the aged wood. A warmth of life and ancient power that, judging by the lack of care on and around the tree, had been forgotten by even the most diligent of pilgrims. With a bit of reverence, Sesshomaru brushed away some of the garbage that had collected over the years.

"Bokusenō." He watched for the folds in the bark to come to life at his bidding, but the old tree's
eyes didn't open. Not a twitch or a hint of expression came forth.

Years ago, when Bokusenō wanted to vex the Demon Lord, he would pretend to be fast asleep when Sesshomaru came calling. But he couldn't ever hold perfectly still and keep back his laughter longer than the daiyokai would wait.

"Bokusenō my friend. Can you not hear me?"

The tree's features remained as still as stone.

Sesshomaru frowned. The tree could not be dead as a hum of life still came from within the ancient magnolia. But why would this aged spirit not awake? In all the years that Sesshomaru knew him, the great Bokusenō would never have allowed any impertinent visitors to deface his skin. The only reason that carving could have happened is if he couldn't have said anything at all.

Could this slumber be an enchanted one? Fingering the remaining cobwebs in his long tresses, Sesshomaru wondered if his own sleep had been just as deep.

The next place that came to mind was the village InuYasha had settled in after the miko Kagome had domesticated the runt. Rin and her husband, Kohaku, had started their own family there too. Perhaps their children had left descendents who could fill him in. Edo wasn't too far off, anyway.

From a tiny village struggling to survive attacks from yokai every other week, Edo had exploded in growth and density. While the shape of the land had remained similar to what he remembered, the humans had congregated in truly staggering numbers and erected edifices as far as the eye could see. It was like an entirely new forest of glass, metal and cement structures had completely taken over the natural one, and then some. To top off the oddity, according to the many street signs he caught sight of, the city had undergone a name change to Tokyo.

If it hadn't been for a shinto shrine and accompanying features surrounding one particular sacred tree, Sesshomaru never would have known where to start looking for the remains of Rin's village. He touched down before the tree that had kept his half-brother captive for 50 years. It still bore a scar from that time, but in the interim between then and now, the tree had been roped off with a sacred barrier.

The courtyard between the red torii at the top of the staircase and the residential (by the smell of it) two-story building had a certain serenity to it. Worshipers exited the shrine with a calm as they returned to the profane world below. Sacred energy sparked under the daiyokai's feet, but it acted as little more than an annoyance to him. Across the way, a shelter covered the bone-eaters well, protected with its own sutras and charms. Sesshomaru could sense something strange from that way.

"Excuse me." Sesshomaru turned to the young man that had interrupted his study of the area. Little more than 30 years of age, he had an air of humility and generosity about him. He'd attempted to tame his dark hair, but mostly failed to do so, and his wide brown eyes looked exactly like the miko's. A great-grandchild perhaps?

"Yes?" he replied.

"I couldn't help but notice that you look like a friend of mine. He went by the name of InuYasha."

An eyebrow raised, betraying his surprise in hearing the name. "What of it?"

"Forgive me," the man said, bowing. "I thought that you might know him. You seemed like him."
Sesshomaru turned his focus back to the tree. "I am nothing like my half-brother."

He could almost hear the man's mouth drop open. "Then … you must be Lord Sesshomaru!"

"You know of this Sesshomaru? How?"

"My sister, Kagome, when she traveled to the Feudal Era, she would tell us all about her adventures. It sounded like she'd walked straight into a fairy tale when she'd talk about fighting Naraku or that wind sorceress or the Band of Seven — well, you were there for that, weren't you."

Sesshomaru nodded once. "What do you mean by traveling to the Feudal Era?"

Seeing how many of the shrine's visitors were beginning to stare at the odd arrival, the man gestured toward the building behind him. "Why don't you come inside and I can tell you what I know. Mother would love to meet you and hear from one of Kagome's friends."

Instead of arguing that he would not describe the miko as a friend, Sesshomaru agreed and followed him inside his place of residence. The man introduced himself as Sōta Higurashi, the younger brother of Kagome and husband of — in his words — the most beautiful woman on the face of the planet, Hitomi. The daiyokai noted evidence of two young children in toys strewn about the main room on the ground floor. Sōta invited Sesshomaru to have a seat at the dining table.

"I never thought we'd get to meet any of InuYasha's family," a kindly old woman said as she poured tea for him and Sōta. If her gray hair was held back in a bun instead of a mass of orderly curls, she would be the mirror image of Kagome when her skin had grown wrinkled and her joints had gotten stiff and painful to move. "You certainly favor each other. Same hair, eyes, jawline. Oh, but your ears — "

"Mother," Sōta scolded gently as he prevented her from invading Sesshomaru's personal space. Her fingers had gotten remarkably close to his pointed ears. "You're probably wondering how Kagome has family centuries after she should have been born."

Not quite the question he would have asked, but any information was valuable. "I did not know your sister, but it was known that InuYasha's miko was … strange."

"From the future," he clarified. "Kagome could travel through time via that well out back."


"That's the one. She'd just jump in and pop out 500 years earlier and vice versa."

If not for his perfect control over his emotions, the daiyokai probably would have choked and sputtered on his tea. Instead, his eyebrows furrowed intensely. "Half a millenia? Are you certain?"

"Mother," Sōta shrugged. "InuYasha and Kagome were the only ones who could use the well to travel through time, so we don't know for sure exactly how far back she went, but everything fit with it being the Feudal Era. Hitomi calls it a stable time loop. But ever since Kagome went back to marry InuYasha, we haven't seen or heard from them since."

"I must know, Lord Sesshomaru," Mrs. Higurashi said, a pleading in her eyes. "Did they have children? What were they like?"

"Six," he replied. "Four sons, two daughters. I … had other matters to deal with at the time, so I did not get to know them as I should have. But I knew they were good, honorable children."
For a moment, Sesshomaru saw a green pasture filled with children running wild through the grass. Rin helping Kagome's daughters braid flower wreaths that they would force their younger brother to wear. InuYasha teaching his oldest two sons how to wield a katana, then ordering them to help gather firewood to help their mother prepare dinner. One boy scrawling pictures in the dirt as he loved to draw and paint on every surface he came across, much to his mother's consternation when he'd found her makeup and best kimono. Years later, the boys would find trades and leave to find masters to apprentice under. Kagome would complain about her house feeling emptier. InuYasha would find ways to travel the countryside hunting yokai and 'accidentally' running into his boys. Their oldest daughter, unwilling to ascribe to traditional gender roles, struck out on her own and wrangled Totosai into taking her on as his student. Sesshomaru only found out when he'd returned to the master swords smith to repair cracks forming on Tenseiga.

He had so many images and memories he could never figure out how to put into verbal pictures.

With a sigh, Mrs. Higurashi smiled and thanked Sesshomaru with a pat on his hand for the tiny bit of information he could impart to her hungry heart. "Two of the boys and one of the girls shared their father's ears," he added. "Their oldest son had silver hair. They were … feisty."

"Serves that girl right," Mrs. Higurashi said with a laugh. "Now she can see what I put up with."

"Did they live well?" Sōta asked.

Sesshomaru nodded. "Quite well."

"It's weird to think that Kagome's long dead. We know she was happy, but we've missed her."

"Did you ever find a special someone?" Mrs. Higurashi asked. "Kagome mentioned a girl. Rin, was it?"

"Rin only traveled with me for a short time. After I left her in the human village, she wed Kohaku and started a family."

"Oh, Sango's brother! That's wonderful."

Hopeless romantic, Sesshomaru thought with disgust. But he agreed with the sentiment and convinced himself — again — that he didn't care what Rin had done with her life. "Indeed."

Rin and Kohaku had their own children as well; two sons and three daughters. Every last one of them were talented demon slayers. Sesshomaru liked to think that the only reason that could be was thanks to the time both their parents accompanied him on his journeys. At the same time, he felt mildly annoyed that they made a living off of destroying his kind. Rin had grown into a sharp and savvy woman who could run not just a happy household, but a newly reorganized demon slaying village. Kohaku may have been the kind-hearted, soft spoken governor in his later years, but the growing community knew exactly where his wisdom and expertise stemmed from.

"So you've been a bachelor all these centuries?" The woman had pity in her voice. Pity he neither wanted nor needed.

These people really had no idea what legends and stories his life held. Legends were told of great heroes because they could never keep quiet when a crowd was near. Sesshomaru felt no need to brag. And fortunately, Kagome's family knew nothing of his utter failure and shame. They did not need to know, nor of his embarrassingly long slumber. "I have no need for such trivial things."

Kagome's stories of his stony and silent nature helped Sesshomaru extract himself from further
conversation. While Sōta and Mrs. Higurashi extended only the most courteous respect due to a Demon Lord of his nature, they were still humans that liked to pass time by talking and he tired of their company easily. That evening, he meditated under the Goshinboku, unwilling to part from this tie to the past so quickly.

A daiyokai couldn't live in a shrine, however. That would defeat the purpose. But coming up with a reason to leave proved more difficult than he thought it would. Sesshomaru literally had no reason to exist.

Sōta emerged from the house with a small boy hanging over his arm who was giggling maniacally. "Ryuū refused to go to bed until he got to say goodnight to our visitor," he explained. "Okay, say goodnight to Sesshomaru-sama."

The boy reached so far out, crying, "Fluffy!" that he nearly fell out of his father's arms. Sesshomaru put out his hands instinctively and took Ryuu into his arms. Naturally, the boy curled up in his lap, playing with and petting his fur pelt. He'd finally been able to wash out the remains of the dirt and spiderwebs from his clothing thanks to the Higurashis' hospitality. Despite the boy's hyperactivity, he calmed down significantly in Sesshomaru's hold.

*How many years has it been since …*

"Do yokai still exist in this time?" Sesshomaru asked, getting his mind off the child.

"We get stories of ghosts every now and again," Sōta replied, "but no. Apart from that incident with the Noh mask that tried to eat me, and that time Kagome brought home those dried demons, we don't see yokai nowadays. I don't think anyone believes in them anymore."

"What of spirits and kami?"

"Losing worshippers and pilgrims, but every religion around the world is losing followers."

"Have you seen them?"

"Not personally. It seems like Kagome saw stuff like that all the time in the Feudal Era. But then she was a better miko than I am a priest. What happened to the yokai?"

Ryuū's face fell, his head leaning into the fur pelt. Sesshomaru began to rock the child. "I don't know. I suspect that many of them died."

"I hope not. I hope they're just in hiding. This place wouldn't be very interesting if we didn't have yokai like you."

"There have never been yokai like me," he replied sharply.

"Sorry. Of course not." The man had admirable humility and the ability to suffer egos with dignity. "I'm curious and have to ask, what have you been doing for the last few centuries?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

"I see. It's just that if you're alive, it seems like InuYasha might be too. Do you know what happened to him?"

He wanted to growl at Sōta's increasingly prying questions, but the sound would have disturbed the child. "He died nobly in the field of battle, defending his home and family from —"
Sesshomaru stopped as a scent so faint he nearly missed it, drifted by on the air. He knew it almost immediately. On the shoreline, the grave robber was bleeding. Not only did he finally have a lead on finding his father’s sword, this gave him the perfect reason to leave the shrine.

Handing the now sleeping boy back to Sōta, the daiyokai got back to his feet. "Thank you for your hospitality, Higurashi. There is something I must attend to."
Jenny absentmindedly picked dirt out from under her fingernails. In the back of her mind, she knew she would be the only one who noticed the evidence of digging through soil, but she would prefer not having to worry anyone would know what she had been up to the last few nights.

Many things Jenny could see and explain through simple use of observation and deduction. For instance, sitting in the concourse waiting for her flight out of Tokyo, she had already spotted two individuals smuggling a good quantity of cocaine in their luggage, a 'pregnant' woman with an aching stomach who'd swallowed packets of various drugs, a man running away from trouble at home — the ring on his finger said abusive relationship — and a politician's aide picking up an escort for his boss.

What she couldn't explain was the man that had come through her hotel room door at 2 in the morning. The more she thought about the man dressed like someone out of the Feudal Era who'd traveled in China to pick up some armor, the more she couldn't figure out how he'd followed her. Two rental cars under bogus IDs, avoiding all traffic cameras and high population areas, working under cover of darkness, not a soul knew she'd even come to Fukushima. No one should have known. But this warrior (what other name could she give him?) that had more of a beast's nature than that of a beautiful, elegant nobleman …

Jenny stopped her line of thought there.

And now her father's gun laid in pieces on the floor of some cheap motel and she'd had to ship her findings back home — well, most of them. All she needed to do now was run and get the hell out of the country. No distractions, no diversions, no excuses.

Which was why when she saw a Japanese man dressed like a businessman with tattoos and scars under his sleeves walk off an airplane from Hawaii with a dazed girl no more than five years old in tow and no signs of luggage to speak of, she started to glare. The girl might have passed for his daughter, except Jenny caught the few English words she used to ask the man, who seemed to have a death grip on her hand, if she could use the bathroom. Yanking on her arm, he told her to shut up. The man put a phone to his ear and looked around the concourse, looking for someone they were supposed to meet.

"I have to pee," the girl said in Japanese this time. Japanese-American girl raised in Hawaii? No, her shoes said California. And the man was definitely a native of Japan.

"Later," the man replied.

With a deep sigh, Jenny stood up and put on a bright smile. Then she approached the pair with her suitcase trailing behind her. "Kon'nichiwa," she said with a hint of a Southern drawl. "I couldn't help but overhear, but if she needs to use the bathroom, I can take her. I'm real good with kids."

The man scowled at her slightly, but hid his anger by glazing his eyes over with confusion. "I … no speak English good."

"Oh! Um, here." She handed him the handle of her suitcase so she could pull out her phone and type a sentence into Google translate. "Watashi wa toire ni kanojo o toru koto ga dekimasu." I can take her to the bathroom.

His grip on the girl tightened, but Jenny chose to see the pause in his thinking as an agreement.
"Come with me, sweetheart," she said, offering the girl her hand. "Watch my things."

An instant later, the girl in a My Little Pony dress and white tights was running after her to the bathroom. Her coordination seemed a little off as Jenny had to pick her up when she tripped over her feet. Now that she had the girl close, she noticed needle marks in her arm and more than a few days old bruises.

"Thank you," the girl said as Jenny let her into a stall.

While she relieved herself after her long journey, Jenny turned on the hand dryers and started up a bit of a conversation. "What's your name?"

"Rin."

"Where are you coming from, honey?"

"Los Angeles."

"That's an awful long way away. Where are you visiting?" Rin remained silent. "Do you know?"

"Daddy says I shouldn't talk to strangers."

"Is that your Daddy that you're traveling with?"

Again, the girl hesitated to answer. "No."

"Do you want to go home?"

She flushed the toilet and opened the stall door before she answered. "Can I?"

Jenny smiled. "Of course you can. Now wash up real quick." While Rin did so, she dialed a friend of hers, who answered after the first ring.

"Boss!" the man on the other end said, masking his lack of surprise with a show of enthusiasm. "What a surprise."

"Hi Liu. How is Osaka?"

"Um, I have no idea what you're talking about."

In the background, a hispanic woman's voice bled through. "She knows we tried to follow her, you idiot," she said. "There's no point in hiding it."

"I need to talk to both you and Rosario, anyway," Jenny said. "You on speakerphone?"

"Yeah, hang on." A bit of shuffling, and the sound became a bit more echo-y. "Okay. What can Merripit House do for you?"

"I'm about to turn my phone's GPS locator back on so you can follow me. I'm in the Tokyo airport."

"I knew it!" Rosario said. "What are you doing there?"

Jenny looked back at Rin who was finishing drying her hands in the air dryer. As soon as the noise stopped, she punched the button and turned it back on. "At the moment, about to commit a little bit of kidnapping. And maybe piss off a human trafficking ring."
"Is that why you were in Tokyo?"

"No, or else I would actually have a plan." Leaning against the wall that acted as the restroom's entrance, Jenny snuck a photo of the man waiting impatiently for Jenny and Rin to return to him. "Sending you a picture of the man now. Think you can do anything with this?"

Some shuffling on the other end of the line meant Rosario had taken the phone away from Liu. "This should be enough to run a facial recognition trace," she said. "I'll get some footage from the airport too."

"Good. The Shinkansen will get you here in a little under four hours, which means you've got that much time to make a plan to dismantle the ring and get me out before they shoot me."

"Are we getting paid for this?" Liu asked.

"Depends on if I make it out alive. I don't have an earpiece with me, so you two are on your own for this one. See you in a bit." After hanging up on her employees, Jenny turned the GPS locator on, zipped her phone into her black leather jacket pocket and double-checked that she still had a few of her necessary gadgets in there. In truth, the jacket and matching pants were made out of something a bit more durable than leather. She zipped the jacket all the way up to her throat, made sure both her pockets were closed and tied her hair back into a messy bun before turning to Rin. "Ready?"

"You look like Black Widow," she replied.

"I ... thank you? We should go." Jenny took Rin's hand and began to walk from the bathroom as soon as Rin's guardian's back was turned.

They immediately joined a larger group of travelers from America — Midwest by their waist size — and walked among them, acting like part of the group. Rin wanted to turn and look back, but Jenny squeezed her hand and had her keep looking forward, like nothing was wrong. How could it be when they had pimply teenagers talking about kawaii things and adults with pocketbooks too big for their own good going on about how beautiful the hike up Mt. Fuji would be? They managed to go about 50 feet before they heard the man yell, "Hey!"

The group kept moving straight ahead, but Jenny took a sharp right down a hallway of overpriced airport shops and restaurants. Bored foreigners looking to relieve themselves of pocket money would act as fantastic obstacles both visually and otherwise. Rin's breathing began to quicken when she realized that the man had not stopped shouting, and he had started running.

"He's coming!" Rin cried as they took another turn toward the escalators.

"Keep looking forward, love." The first escalator they could get their feet on, Jenny practically ran down, dragging Rin with her and weaving them between other travelers and their luggage.

Still dizzy from whatever drug cocktail she'd been given, Rin tripped down the last few of the steps, forcing Jenny to stop and put her on her back. As soon as her feet hit the tile, she started running. At this point in the game, what she needed was distance. Simultaneously fortuitous and worrying, Rin barely weighed a thing, which made racing through the airport much easier on Jenny's knees.

Down one hallway, the airport train that had brought Jenny to this concourse, arrived right on time.
The doors slid open and passengers spilled out while other travelers hurried on. Jenny joined the
throng of travelers pushing themselves onto the platform. Just as soon as she jumped aboard, their
pursuer caught sight of them entering the train. She could see him struggling to dart through the
sluggish groups of people, and by the time he got to the train, the doors had mercifully slid shut.

Jenny couldn't help but wave as the train took off.

Rin slid off her back and sat against a window sill with her head in her hands. Jenny put a hand on
her shoulder. "Still dizzy?" She only nodded. One of the passengers had a water bottle in an exterior
pocket of a backpack. A fascinating text message exchange kept his attention away from his
surroundings, so Jenny slipped the bottle out and gave it to Rin, who eagerly drank half of it in one
go."We'll get you some help. Don't worry."

The layout of the airport came together in her mind. The train had two more stops at concourses
before the ground transportation and baggage claim stop. If her pursuer had a ride, they would be
waiting at the last one. What they needed was airport security, the TSA, an air marshal, anyone who
had an air of authority, a superior officer and permission to carry a gun.

At each of the next stops, Jenny subtly scanned every single person on their car for someone who
she could trust with Rin. Unfortunately, Japan seemed to be far less paranoid than the United States
when it came to air travel. Who knew that rational thinking could be so frustrating?

With the same scrutiny that she used to look for useful people, Jenny also kept an eye out for any
other potential cohorts of her original mark. Hugging Rin close to her, Jenny tried to make the two of
them look as nondescript as possible to avoid raising suspicion. Even if the passengers were trying to
help this girl, alerting authorities could also give the trafficking ring a good target. She spotted a few
more drug traffickers, but no one that too particular interest in the white woman paired with the
Japanese-American girl.

"This is our stop." Jenny kept her arm around Rin's shoulders as she led her off the train. Rin's arms
stayed right around her waist, keeping her escort as close as possible. This had the unintended side
effect of slowing both their steps, which helped them blend in with the other travelers. However,
Jenny could feel her anxiety rising the longer it took to get to the exit that seemed practically right in
front of their faces.

Then it happens. Six feet from the automatic doors leading to the shuttle and taxi stops, an American
man with a square jaw and a blue military-esque uniform jacket comes up to them and stops them in
their tracks with a badge and an ID card. "Air Marshal, ma'am. I need to see your tickets and
passports."

"No thank you," she replied, brushing past him.

Before she can take more than a few steps, he grabbed her arm. "Ma'am, this isn't optional. You need
to come with me if you won't comply -"

Jenny yanked her arm away. "I totally would if you were actually an air marshal. And if you're
thinking of going for that ceramic gun in your right pocket, I wouldn't because I have no qualms
about yelling 'Bomb!' in as many languages as I can think of."

Stunned, the fake air marshal simply allowed the two to walk out the terminal. Out of the corner of
her eye, Jenny saw him talk into his coat sleeve and follow them from a good ten paces away.

"Are we almost home?" Rin asked as Jenny shuffled her along to the curbs.
Blood pounded in her ears. Just a little bit farther. Just one available taxi was all they needed, but the stream of travelers around them filled up whatever transportation options opened up. She could barely hear herself think of what to do over the noise of talkative tourists and squealing bus brakes. "Just about."

A nondescript white van with tinted windows pulled up to the curb. At the same time, the first man with the tattoos exited the terminal. Jenny cursed the Japanese efficiency that got him there. He was joined by the fake air marshal. Down the road, another man casually dressed, dragging a carry-on sized suitcase with him, made eye contact with the tattooed man and air marshal before spotting Jenny and Rin.

Jenny didn't need her father's FBI training to recognize when she was being boxed in.

Kneeling on the ground, Jenny looked her kidnapee in the eye. "Rin, I promise, I'm going to take you home. Do you believe me?"

The girl nodded. But she was smart enough to see the dread in the woman's eyes.

As she stood back up, the doors of the van opened and the air marshal rejoined them, shoving the muzzle of his gun into her ribcage. "Get in the van. You have nowhere to run."

"Whatever organization you've got going here," Jenny said in a low voice, "I will take it down."

Two men dressed in electricians' uniforms grabbed the pair as the air marshal pushed them inside. Jenny barely tumbled onto the floor when a black hood slipped over her head and a pair of handcuffs clamped down on her wrists. Rin started to cry, but the sound was muffled by three other men climbing inside the van and telling her to shut up. Barely five seconds had passed before the van left the curb and sped off through Tokyo.

Jenny spat a mouthful of blood at the floor. Taking a calming breath, she returned to her upright position and faced her interrogator. "Ouch."

Almost jumping with giddy joy at her pain, the Japanese man in his 30's with a smoking problem and masochistic streak grabbed her face. "Are you ready to talk, Fed?" he asked. Two other men in business suits and latex gloves flanked him, providing an imposing backup for the wild-haired man with jeans and a baggy t-shirt. Clearly the enthusiastic sociopath of the bunch as revealed by the contents of his suitcase.

"I told you, I'm not a cop," Jenny replied. Her wrists burned from the handcuffs keeping her attached to the metal folding chair. They'd already given her a couple bruised ribs and a black eye. The scent of saltwater and dead fish hung in the musty air, giving her a clear idea of where this particular warehouse was situated. Not that she needed to smell the ocean to know she was in a shipping yard. Despite the hood over her head, Jenny had followed every twist and turn the traffickers' vehicle took. She knew exactly where they stopped when one of their contacts escorted Rin to a separate location despite the number of U-turns they made before and after the drop. Eight, if she was going to be precise. To quote a poor rendition of Sherlock Holmes, the only mystery here was why they bothered to blindfold her at all.

Apart from the three ruffians before her, Jenny counted six others in the building; two sat just behind her, beyond her peripheral vision, and another was watching the door. As for the other three, they were armed, but not in positions to mobilize quickly.

An older, cigar-smoking Japanese man in a more expensive, and cleaner, suit spoke from somewhere
behind her on the left. "Who else but a cop would attempt to steal my merchandise?"

"Little girls are not merchandise. They are not for drugging with meth. And they are certainly not sex toys for dirty old men like you."

The men chuckled at her moral declaration. "I've got some news for you, Nancy Drew," the sociopath said with a wide grin. "The world doesn't work like that. Do-gooders like you are the ones that get eaten by the wolves."

Even with nowhere to run or any chance of escape, Jenny's glare refused to budge from her face. "Tell me, when is the last time your brothel managers reported in?"

Behind her, words got exchanged and a phone call went through. A few moments of the wild sociopath humming the Jeopardy theme tune went by as all the employees checked in. "They're fine, boss," said the tattooed man Jenny met at the airport. "She's bluffing."

"Give it a minute," Jenny said, sitting back in her seat and crossing her legs. "In the meantime, I suppose I should tell you who I am. My name is Jenny Harkness — Jenny, not Jennifer. I run an agency called Merripit House. Normally we take cases from world leaders or leading businessmen, or, well, anyone who has an interesting case and a bit of money, really. In short, we fix problems. Maybe a child has vanished, maybe the police can't figure out who the murderer is, maybe an honest politician can't escape a blackmailer, maybe a politician needs to be blackmailed. My colleagues and I can fix that. Human trafficking is a little straightforward and messy for me, so usually I'll just tip off the police. Remember that sting in Kosovo a few months ago? 300 massage parlors and nail salons shut down in countries all around the Baltic region? I just wanted to get my nails done, and there's a girl from Vietnam who couldn't tell me where she put her passport. Three days later, all gone. Now, your operation here is considerably smaller. But when you show up in the airport with a girl on meth against her will who doesn't know where she is, and you stand right in front of me, well ...") She chuckled. "It's like you shone a great big spotlight on your entire operation and said, 'Shut this down, please.'"

The man from the airport got a call on his phone and he went off to answer it. "Fire department? What? Who called them?"

The other two men in suits standing in front of her also got messages on their cell phones. "East side is requesting backup. Something about the health department," one of them reported.

"The Japan Animal Welfare Society is sniffing around the dog fighting ring," the other said. "Should we go take care of it?"

"You may notice that the police haven't been tipped off yet," Jenny said. "If you'd like that to be the case, I suggest that you give me what I want: Rin."

The older man, clearly the one in charge, calmly stood and strolled over to her, bent down and exhaled a breath of cigar smoke in her face. "Do you think that you're in a position to negotiate with us?"

Coughing a bit and blinking away the acrid fumes, Jenny returned the boss's gaze. "Considering the fact that if my people don't hear from me in the next twenty minutes, they'll ship in Operation Underground Railroad themselves ... yes." Leaning forward in her seat, she whispered to her interrogator, "You might be the big bad wolf, but I am the hunter."

The older man gave his men some orders to start moving their operations. They jumped to it and started making the necessary phone calls. "Once you hear back from your assignments, shoot her
and drop her in the harbor."

The wild haired man seemed disappointed that he couldn't keep playing with his new toy. From his suitcase of sharp instruments, he pulled out a 9mm handgun with the serial number filed off, and leveled it at her heart. "It was nice playing with you, little thief."

"You know, you're the second person to call me that recently," she replied.

"And who would be the first?"

The man guarding the door shouted a warning at someone approaching the warehouse, followed up by shooting at a threat coming down at him from above. Then, like a wrecking ball coming at it, the wall facing the shipping yard suddenly exploded inward, knocking down every last one of the human traffickers in sight holding Jenny in the warehouse. Framed in dust and harsh fluorescent lights, a tall figure with a sword that glowed green in his right hand strode forward. Even without seeing the markings on his face or the glare that bore down specifically on her, she knew exactly who had just destroyed this half of the pier.

"Him."
The dust and debris settled on six downed human traffickers and one prisoner handcuffed to a chair. Grabbing their guns, the men hurried to their feet and surrounded their boss. Jenny could almost taste the tension as they held their breaths and waited for movement from the singular intruder.

"I would run if I were you," Jenny said.

Like a piano wire snapping under stress, her captors jumped into action. They advanced on the intruder, firing a barrage of bullets. Not to be outdone, the strange man leaped, no, flew straight up, avoiding the shots. Light from the shipping yard framed his graceful figure perfectly as he floated in the air.

Down below, the men suspended their disbelief and changed their aim accordingly. As their gun muzzles pointed his way, the intruder slashed out with his left hand. A string of light from two fingers tipped with pointed claws, whipped across the warehouse, danced about the men and snapped at their guns. Metal and ceramic clattered to the cement floor a second later, creating the only sound. The intruder waved his left arm again. Dancing elegantly around the floor, the light whip struck each of the would-be gunmen in turn. Shouts of aggressiveness quickly turned into shrieks of pain as they hit against walls and were sent through one of the stacks of boxes.

Jenny could almost hear the imagined cartoon skidding sounds as the men flew backwards on the concrete, then hastily made their retreat into the safety of stacked crates and deep hallways — anywhere that took them away from the otherworldly intruder. Taking the opportunity to slip a pin out from her sleeve, Jenny began to fiddle with the handcuff locks.

With all the distractions out of the way, now would have been the time for her new stalker to come crashing down to the ground in a show of power, but instead he came down gently, his feet making little sound as he approached her. The show of threat he chose came from the sword point he held at her throat with a steady-as-stone hand.

"Where is my father's sword?"

Examining this man — or creature — Jenny locked her gaze on him with unwavering nerve. "I do not have time to deal with you right now." The handcuffs finally popped open, which she then promptly tossed to him. She pulled a device out of her pocket, a portable cell phone signal scrambler, and turned it on before standing up and hurrying away.

Frozen in place with a pair of steel bracelets in his left hand, Sesshomaru did little more than stare at the woman as she blatantly ignored his presence and stopped to pick up one of the abandoned weapons he'd knocked out of these pathetic men's hands. Rage boiled up through his heart, racing through his veins. "Do not turn your back on me, woman. Tell me where you've put my father's sword."

"I hid it." The gun seemed to be in good shape, according to her quick inspection, although low on bullets. She stuffed it into the back of her waistband before searching for another one.

"Where?" he snapped.

Kicking over a sheet of plaster, she found another firearm that seemed to suit her needs. She made sure the safety was off before continuing on her task. "Where what?"

He suppressed the urge to rip out her throat then and there, and chased after her. "Where did you hide
my father's sword?"

"I'm not going to tell you." She hopped over some rubble on her way out of the warehouse through the destroyed wall. "Can we talk about this later?"

Racing ahead of her as fast as a blur, Sesshomaru stood in her way. She nearly ran into his chest; the spikes on his chestplate would have done a number on her forehead. "I have ways of making my enemies talk. None of them are pleasant."

A fire lit in her demeanor and she crossed her arms, daring to argue with him. "Who are you? Why should I give you the Ketsugó-kiba?"

Interest sparked in his eyes when he heard the name, a gleam of new information in his mind. He does not know anything about this sword, she concluded. "I am Lord Sesshomaru, heir of the Inu no Taisho," he said with a distinct air of authority. "By right, weapons forged from his fangs are mine to inherit."

Mortals in his presence normally trembled in his shadow. But she remained annoyed and frustrated like she would with an impatient child. Could she not see the sheer threat that he posed with his claws alone? "Lord of what, exactly?" she asked.

His answer came automatically and condescendingly. "The Western Lands."

"Which Western Lands? Could you be more specific?"

"I am an inu daiyokai of noble blood. Which lands I rule matter little to vermin like you."

"Evasion and name calling. Classy." Having stumped the Demon Lord again, she stepped off to the side and jogged past him on her quest. Entering the driveway where three black vehicles were parked, she held her gun at the ready should any of the human traffickers decide to attack. Fortunately, no one seemed to be around.

He had to remind himself that if he killed the impudent woman, he might not ever learn where she'd hidden this Ketsugó-kiba. "I demand an answer from you, woman. Where —"

"Jenny," she said, cutting him off. "I'm Jenny Harkness. If you're going to attempt to threaten me, you might as well use my name."

"This is no attempt, I assure you."

Had she not been focused on her present task, laughter would have broken out her split and bleeding lips. Instead, she rolled her eyes and approached the driver's side door of the first car. "Let me tell you what I already know about you, 'Lord' Sesshomaru." She smashed open the window with the butt of the gun so she could unlock and open the door. Once inside, she pulled a lever that popped open the hood of the SUV. "First, you're not human. As to what you are, I'll admit I don't have any idea, but no doubt a little research into Japanese legendary creatures will tell me what I need to know. You're far stronger, older, faster and more deadly than any human in the history of the world could ever hope to be. So know that my lack of fear does not stem from ignorance." Jenny ripped something out from the engine block before letting the hood slam down and moving on to the next vehicle.

"No, it stems from foolishness."

She let that one go. This BMW had bulletproof windows, meaning she needed a more direct approach. Without wasting a moment, she aimed her gun at what would most likely be an essential
part to function and shot the radiator four times. When smoke rose from the engine, she continued. "Second, you've been out of commission for so long I'm surprised you have the audacity to claim you rule anything. It's been centuries, hasn't it. There's no one left alive that could possibly still be under your rule."

For the first time, Sesshomaru's expression twitched and his body tensed, displaying the emotions he was struggling to disguise. "I warn you to watch your tongue."

A wicked smile flashed across her face, betraying how much she reveled in disparaging the daiyokai. "Third, you've been stripped of everything you did once have in a humiliating defeat. You blame yourself, but you're hoping to hide the fact that even you believe that the title of Lord belongs to you no more. You think that honoring your dead father's legacy will remove some of the shame of your failure, but you know it won't."

Sesshomaru bared his teeth with a snarl erupting from his throat. But instead of taking his anger out on the one causing his frustration, he pushed past her to get to the third vehicle. Raising Bakusaiga high over his head, he brought it crashing down with a blast of its decomposing wave. The metal and glass contraption practically burst apart, scattering pieces across the asphalt. One of the wheels went rolling straight for the harbor.

After recomposing himself, he turned to Jenny, sheathing his sword for a bit of emphasis. "Continue speaking and your death will not be a swift one," he said coldly.

She struggled to maintain a similarly impassive expression on her face. Sesshomaru could hear that her heart had picked up considerable speed and adrenaline flowed freely through her veins. "Why did you do that?"

"Bakusaiga can disintegrate anything, given the right touch."

"I didn't say 'how,' I said 'why.' I needed one operating vehicle." The urge to punch him in the gut and tell him what she'd deduced about his relationship with his mother rose, but Jenny restrained herself, not without considerable effort, and started walking quickly back to the warehouse. "If you're trying to intimidate me with this," she gestured wildly toward the destroyed vehicle, "admittedly impressive posturing display, you're in for a whole heap of disappointment, Sesshomaru."

His fur bristled at her deliberate use of his name with no honorific attached. "Do you assume that you're safe because I didn't bother to slaughter any of those men?"

"Look, I have a very short time frame to contain these sickos that deserve to rot in Hell for what they've done to the little girls they've been trafficking. So if you could please—"

His brow furrowed in confusion as his mind suddenly shifted track. "Trafficking?"

Jenny stopped in her tracks. While human trafficking must have existed back in whatever day this demon had come from, the term may not have existed. But the fact that he'd suddenly taken an interest in this over his obsession with getting her to spill where she'd hidden the Ketsugō-kiba, caught her off-guard. "These men take young girls and women, often from poor families, keep them compliant with drugs like opium and sell them to rich men who beat them, abuse them and rape them repeatedly."

Red coloring began to bleed into his eyes as his mind comprehended the crimes she described. Sesshomaru finally examined the woman's injuries with a critical eye. Despite her attitude, she'd taken quite a beating and the effects showed in how she moved her torso stiffly and limped slightly. Now that he paid more attention, he could smell the traces of a young girl hanging around the thief's
neck. "You were here to put an end to that." Not a question, but he spoke his thoughts aloud so Jenny could confirm his suspicions.

The shadows of the towers of boxes and pallets in the warehouse practically swallowed her as they returned to the war zone to hunt down the man in charge. "Yes," she said quietly. "I found one of the girls at the airport and tried to rescue her." In order to test her new theory that maybe Sesshomaru had a kinder heart than she'd calculated, she decided to get a bit more personal. "Her name is Rin. She's about six years old and I told her I would take her home."

His jaw clenched when he heard the girl's name. Intellectually, he knew this couldn't be the same Rin he'd rescued from the wolves, but … emotionally, this felt exactly the same. "Where is she?" he demanded.

"Not here. Before you got here, I was going to trick them into telling me where she is. Now I have to keep them from telling anyone else that something went horribly wrong here or else they'll spook whoever has Rin. That's why I was trying to disable their cars instead of destroy them."

Without another word, Sesshomaru drew Bakusaiga. There hadn't been any wind in the night air before, but it seemed like a storm descended upon him in the warehouse, whipping his long sleeves and fur pelt around him.

"This cannot possibly end well," she muttered as she hurried to catch up.

Inside the warehouse's maze, the traffickers dared to make their last stand from the corners and shadows. Not that Sesshomaru needed light to find them. Their fear provided enough of a scent for him to pinpoint each of their locations and get an accurate count. Nine men in the building, one already dead from his initial entrance. That left eight to prey upon, and three of them had already retreated into the farthest reaches of the building.

The man in a business suit with tattoos across his arms and neck who Jenny had taken Rin from, was the first to emerge from behind a stack of pallets. He carried a semi-automatic gun in his hands. He moved quietly, attempting to shoot the Demon Lord in the back, but his footsteps and quickened breathing gave away his position long before the moonlight glinted off his gun.

Without warning, a light whip shot out directly at him. He tried to throw his hands up and defend himself, but the supernatural thread came down hard along his chest. A perfect semi-circle spray of blood came out from the man's breast. The scream that came out of him made Jenny flinch instinctively. Sesshomaru brought the whip back around for a killing blow, but Jenny grabbed his arm and pulled it down, making it slash the man's legs instead.

"Do not kill them," she ordered.

He didn't respond, but simply threw her off his arm and glared at the men beginning to surround him. The wild haired man had found a few knives and threw one in their direction. It narrowly missed Sesshomaru's head, slicing off a bit of hair as it flew by. He waved his hand and the whip wrapped around the giddy sociopath's throat. Skin sizzled where the whip held him, eliciting a scream before the daiyokai pulled two fingers back, beheading him. "I am not an underling you can order around. These men deserve death."

"Clearly, but I might need them," she argued back.

"Their leader is the only source you need," he replied, sending his whip through a stack of product. The whole line came crashing down on two of the gunmen, forcing them to expose themselves to his attacks.
Gunshots rang through the warehouse, which sent Jenny scurrying to find cover behind a thick stack of crates. "Disarm them only. If you see them talking to a square glass stone in their hand, destroy the device." She checked how many bullets she had left in her gun before going off to find the leader of the ring.

The cover these men had began to annoy him. Sesshomaru swung Bakusaiga at the ground, sending out a wave of destruction. The earth seemed to leap into action, breaking apart and rolling upward. Crates and pallets tumbled down and broke apart long after the green flash of energy surged through the place.

While the men stumbled around in an attempt to find cover and footing, the light whip flailed around the warehouse with deadly precision. He attacked each of the men in turn, spraying blood and screams all over the warehouse. So precise was this man that he could stand perfectly still and relaxed while attacking whomever he pleased. Even though the Harkness woman didn't know her place, she was correct in that they needed a backup in case her source didn't come through.

Fortunately, should that be the case, he had a backup plan too.

In the back of the warehouse, a flurry of gunshots went off. Some had different tones and speeds from the others. Sesshomaru concluded that two or three people were in a gunfight. With no rush to his step, he followed the sound to its source.

He found Jenny pressed against the wall of a hallway corner and looking over her shoulder at a doorway down the corridor. "Tell me you didn't kill anyone else," she said between her teeth.

"One. Possibly." He looked around the corner only to have a bullet zing through his fur pelt. "The rest are in quite a bit of pain and unable to walk."

"I can't wait to explain this one to the UN," she muttered in English. "If you're planning on existing in this world, you have to understand that you can't just kill people because they piss you off. You have to have respect for death."

"Trust me." During one of the pauses between volleys of bullets, Sesshomaru stepped into the hall and sent a disintegrating blast at the door where the last of the human trafficker's were holed up. "I am quite aware."

"Do you just not like doors? Or do you not know how to use them?" Jenny crept along the hallway just ahead of Sesshomaru with her gun at the ready.

Two bodyguards laid on the floor, buried under rubble. Their boss huddled behind a manager's desk, trying to be as quiet as possible. One of the bodyguards raised his gun, but Sesshomaru flicked it out of his grip with his whip, then subdued him further by stepping hard on his chest. Jenny kicked the gun away from the second one, but since his leg was broken and his shoulder dislocated, that was merely a precaution. Both of them groaned in pain, earning them no pity from either one of their attackers.

With phenomenal strength, Sesshomaru picked up the desk and threw it across the room into the opposite wall. "Is this the man you're looking for?"

Jenny nodded, then began to loosen her muscles a bit by rolling her shoulders back and cracking her neck. Interrogations require quite a bit of commitment and energy.

"Please, I'll give you anything you want!" he cried as he fumbled around in his pockets. "Name it, I can give it to you."
"You already know what I want," she replied as she put her gun away and pulled out a small knife from her belt.

During this bit of distraction, a shot echoed through the tiny office loud enough to severely damage the eardrums of anyone standing nearby. Jenny stumbled backwards into the wall, clutching her stomach, then fell to her knees. The ring leader on the ground almost giggled in relief. His suit coat pocket now had a blackened hole in the pocket where his gun had been hidden.

Sesshomaru didn't quite know what to do about this turn of events. The scent of gunpowder singed his nostrils, but not that of burning flesh or blood. Even if this Harkness woman was dying, he had no obligation to avenge her or even help her. And yet before he realized how his body was reacting, he rushed the man. With poison tipped claws, he grabbed the sniveling man's right hand and savagely twisted it behind his back until he dropped his weapon. The skin under his hand began to blister and sizzle, and the man screamed in absolute agony.

"Easy there." A hand on his arm halted his torturous attack on the man. Struggling to stand at his right, Jenny tugged on Sesshomaru's sleeve with an unreadable expression on her face. Like she didn't exactly want to stop him, but felt she had to. Her breath came in short, pained gasps, but she looked no worse for wear after receiving a bullet to her gut. "Still need him to talk."

With a feral growl, Sesshomaru tossed the man aside, then stood back and allowed Jenny to get to work. "Then make him talk."

Putting a knee on top each of his forearms, Jenny knelt on the ringleader's chest. The pressure on his burnt wrist — was that a chemical burn? — caused him to shout something unintelligible in pain. "What are you?" he gasped. "You can't be human. Either of you."

Jenny gave him a furious scowl. "Just call us concerned citizens. Now, you have a friend of mind being held in a separate location. You're going to tell me where you've put Rin."
"Are you absolutely certain that he told you the truth?"

Jenny turned the bathroom sink on as high as the faucets would allow before sticking her hands under the freezing cold water. "Yes." Blood rushed off her hands and ran like a stream down the sink into the drain. She didn't much like this part of the job. But answers came at a price, and she was willing to pay a hefty one to get Rin back.

Sesshomaru shouldn't have been feeling so wound up. His claws twitched in anticipation of another fight with these pathetic human traffickers. "Where is she?"

A bang! echoed through the tiny washroom as Jenny slammed her fists into the porcelain sink. Her entire being quivered in rage for a minute. Then she took a deep breath and answered calmly. "He didn't know where."

"You said he told you the truth."

"He only had a name. I can work with that, but I might get there too late." She pulled her phone out of her pocket while walking through the warehouse back to where she'd left her cell phone signal scrambler. She carefully avoided tripping over the headless body of the wild sociopath, sidestepped a man in a uniform with white foam around his breathless mouth, and pushed aside the body of the tattooed man who'd died from shock to get her scrambler out from under him.

"Your whip is made of poison, isn't it," she'd asked him when she first found their bodies. Her face had gone white at the sight of their contorted faces and limbs. And for the first time, she showed a glimpse of true fear in the presence of Sesshomaru.

To be perfectly honest, he wasn't entirely unsurprised. He hadn't ever tried not to kill humans before. But what did surprise him was that Tenseiga remained silent. It seemed that he could not call forth souls that he had sent to the Underworld himself.

After turning off the scrambler, Jenny called her employees. "Rosario, how close are you?"

"Another few minutes. We had a problem with the transportation, so I'm hoping you'll forgive us for our choice in vehicle."

"Stolen?"

Through the phone line, Jenny could tell she shrugged while hanging onto the steering wheel. "Procured."

"I have a name for Liu to look up."

"I can do it."

"No, you're driving. Speaking of which, why are you the one talking?" Jenny waited for Liu to take the phone. Which took a minute as it sounded like he dropped the phone when it was passed to him.

"Present!" he said.

"The name is Honda Koizumi. I need an address and a trace on his cell phone and known contacts."

"Way ahead of you, boss. His name came up while we were tracing the phone calls from your
location. I'll have an address for you before we get there. Seems like Honda is the second in command. Did he piss you off personally or something?"

"Stop reading motivations into my actions," Jenny chided. "And good work." She hung up and headed for the driveway.

However Sesshomaru refused let her leave him behind. "Where is the girl?"

"I'll find out in a few minutes." She took one of the guns out of her waistband that she'd used earlier and chucked it into the harbor. "I have good people working for me."

"I will accompany you," he announced with little emotion in his voice like a command he would have given his army.

But Jenny refused to fall into the role of a subordinate and shook her head. "All you can do is kill. I don't need that."

"I will not hurt Rin," he said, the offense evident in his voice.

Putting her head in her hand, she rubbed her temple while trying to figure out how best to explain her position. "Do you know why I didn't want you to kill these men?"

"Like all humans, you believe all life is important, no matter how despicable that life form is," Sesshomaru replied with a sneer.

"Not quite. I'm not heartbroken about these men in here," she said, nodding toward the warehouse. "There are a lot of people that deserve to be shot in the eye. The problem is that the type of enemy I deal with is insidious. If there's one criminal, they have twenty friends doing similar things, and all those friends have twenty more. If I kill that first criminal, I won't be able to find those friends. If he rats on all those friends, I can hunt them down and kill them. Or I could use each of them to rat out even more people. Every criminal I deal with is useful in some way. All of these men in here knew other people involved in human trafficking. Now the police won't be able to get them to talk, and there are thousands of other boys and girls, men and women stuck in slavery that we can't find and help yet. All because you decided revenge was the course to take."

Sesshomaru stared straight ahead at the harbor. He was sure this shoreline was the same one where he last saw his father and told him he had no one to protect. "If that is the enemy you choose to fight, then you will never win this war."

"That's why I'm not the only one fighting."

From the far reaches of the shipping yard, an orange VW bus appeared, heading straight for them. Its tires squealed noisily on approach, betraying just how hastily its driver wanted to get there. The van skidded alongside them, with the shotgun side facing them. A Tongan man in his late 20s with strikingly handsome features, shoulder length dark hair pulled back in a man bun, and a well-muscled physique rolled down the window of the passenger-side door and gave a friendly wave to Sesshomaru. "Boss! You look terrible!" he said to Jenny with a grin.

Jenny opened up the side door and released the scent of a strange incense, tobacco and something resembling sake according to Sesshomaru's nose. Beaded tassels hung from the top of the doorway, complementing the leather tassels hanging from everything else in the vehicle. The walls were covered in colorful paintings of flowers and strange designs along with lettering declaring peace upon all mankind. "And y'all stole a hippie van," she said as she hopped inside. "Didn't think they existed in Japan. I'm impressed."
"Like I said, there were problems with transportation," a hispanic woman with flat black hair and iridescent blue eyes said from the driver's seat. "Can we go? The police chatter on the scanner isn't sounding good."

Grabbing the van doors, Jenny gave Sesshomaru a sharp look. "*We'll talk later,*" she said before slamming the doors shut.

The orange VW bus drove off as noisily and haphazardly as it had entered the scene and Sesshomaru was left wondering how he had been so easily dismissed by a mortal human woman without an ounce of spiritual power to speak of. Taking to the sky once more, the daiyokai gave chase through the night as silently as a shadow.

"All things considered, you sent us on a nice vacation," Liu said while fiddling with an electronic device hooked up to a security code pad. A few more seconds and some educated guesses, and Liu soon had the back door of a high-cost apartment complex popped open. "Osaka was beautiful."

"You mean all the women you ogled were beautiful," Rosario argued. Her dark jeans and sleeveless black turtleneck top helped her blend in with the darkness. After listening for footsteps, she slipped inside first with a gun held at the ready.

"I thought you might enjoy it," Jenny said softly. Liu offered kindly to let her step inside first before he pulled the door shut behind them.

Down the hall, they spotted movement and hid accordingly. A man in a military style haircut and a mid-price suit shouted something at them, but Rosario darted out from the shadows and jabbed him right in the trachea, followed up by pistol-whipping him in the back of the neck. The trio stepped over his body and started up the stairs.

"The security isn't much to speak of," Rosario remarked.

Another man leaned over the railing above them and started firing at them. Liu and Jenny plastered themselves to the far wall, but not before Jenny had been hit in the shoulder. While the man paused to report to the others through the radio in his coat sleeve, Rosario stepped out and shot him twice through the heart. A moment later, his limp body fell on top of the railing and hung there.

"Boss, you okay?" Liu said, helping Jenny get back to her feet.

She rubbed her shoulder, easing out the forming bruise some. "Fine. Keep moving."

"Here's my question," Rosario said as she continued on ahead. "If I'm the one taking the lead when bullets are flying, why do I not get to wear the bulletproof suit?"

"Because it doesn't fit you and I'm usually the one people are pissed at."

"What she's saying is that your boobs are too big," Liu explained. "I don't see how that's a problem, though."

Rosario threw a spent shell casing at his head and called him a pig in Spanish.

They encountered only two more men in the stairwell, and Rosario dispatched them with precision. Then she stood guard while Liu got to work picking the lock of the door to the tenth floor. Jenny put her ear to the crack of the door to listen for footsteps on the other side. They walked quietly, but she could pick out distinctions between their shoes. "We've got at least three in the hallway," she said.
After handing Jenny one of her spare firearms, Rosario put a fresh magazine in her handgun. "Should we call the police, get them moving?"

She nodded. "Liu."

"On it, boss." The lock popped open and he got ready to pull the handle. "Ready?"

Rosario gave the signal and Liu swung the door back. Jenny moved first, falling to one knee and firing at the man waiting on their left before he had a chance to react. Blood spurted out of his leg and he fell forward with a scream. Shooting over her boss's head, Rosario targeted two more men hiding behind a cross hallway on their right. One stumbled backwards when she hit him in the chest, and the other retreated behind the corner to reload.

Getting to her feet, Jenny walked past Rosario. In the reflection of one of the glossy painted doors, she noticed two more men waiting around the corner on the right. When the uninjured man came out again, she shot him in the arm, forcing him to drop his gun.

"Nice shot for an amateur," Rosario said.

"Not so bad yourself," Jenny replied. "There's at least two more guarding the door."

"On it." She rounded the corner and with a few shots, had the last of the guards on the ground. "Clear."

While Rosario kicked the men's guns away, Jenny stepped on the wrist of the man with the injured arm to keep him from reaching for another weapon and went through his pockets. A moment later, she produced a key. "I'm not really one for bashing down doors."

"Pretty sure the door weighs more than you do." Rosario reloaded her weapon and stood at the ready. "I'm good."

Before Jenny could insert the key, they heard the piercing screech of a small girl. Then two distinct gunshots went off muffled by a few walls. The screams stopped right after the last shot. Her hands trembled as she shoved the key into the lock as the rate of fire indicated an execution instead of the rapid fire of a surprise attack.

"Jenny, wait," Rosario said, attempting to hold her back. But Jenny turned the doorknob and stormed inside.

The men inside were ready for someone to storm in through the door. They weren't quite ready for Rosario shooting through the wall at whoever would be standing there to ambush her. All Jenny saw was someone, possibly a fake sky marshal, falling to the ground in front of her as bullets ran through his shins, and a man with a smoking gun running out of the bathroom.

Instead of chasing after the perpetrator, Jenny went to the doorway of the bathroom and stopped. Five girls, from ages 6 to 19, 20 at most, laid in a circle on the white bathroom tile with blood blooming out of their chests and pooling all around them. The smallest girl's dress had gone from bubblegum pink to scarlet. The different directions of blood spatter across her ashen face told of the executions her body had witnessed, probably because she was the first to go.

Dropping to her knees, Jenny turned Rin onto her back to check her pulse. Her ears rang, muffling out the flurry of gunshots, shouting, a scuffle of feet as Rosario bodily took down the executioner, fists on flesh cracking bone. All that mattered little compared to the silence under her fingers and Rin's unseeing stare.
A window crashed open in the room behind her, but Jenny ignored it to pick Rin up from the pool of blood and hold her against her chest. She vaguely recognized the sound of more than one body being thrown against the wall — why was that a sound she was so familiar with? Moaning escaped from the injured men's throats as handcuffs clicked around their wrists. Then a familiar voice broke through her thoughts. "I found these men attempting to flee," said a man with ice in his tone. "They smell of blood. Where is the Harkness woman?"

"Jenny, I'm going to need you to translate," Rosario called, her breathing hard as she headed to the bathroom. "Did you know that your friend can fl — oh putso."

Her mouth snapped closed at the sight of the blood. Sesshomaru followed right behind her. Even without seeing, Jenny could feel how he tensed up at the sight of the massacre. "How did this happen?"

"Rosario, get Liu," she choked out.

Rosario attempted to put a comforting hand on her boss's shoulder, only to have it shaken off. "I'm so sorry. This isn't your fault. We acted as fast as we could."

"Now."

Nodding, she left the penthouse, leaving the daiyokai alone with Jenny.

Sesshomaru listened carefully to the sounds echoing in the enclosed washroom. One heartbeat, one set of lungs breathing, one person trying to process her emotions. The volume of the blood said enough. Every last girl was dead. The girl in Jenny's arms had soft eyes and would have had a crooked smile. She even wore her hair in a single ponytail on the right.

"Honda and his men got spooked," Jenny said in a husky voice. "They needed to clean up and run, so they killed the witnesses."

He wanted to argue how she couldn't blame him for the atrocities these deplorable humans had committed. But he couldn't figure out how. Then he wanted to say that it wasn't her fault either. But he couldn't say for sure why that would be true either. The both of them got involved, and people died. That's what happened in a battle. The innocent always suffer in the wake of a war.

Sesshomaru observed the woman before him. Jenny holding a dead child in her arms the way a mother might hold a sleeping daughter. Her face had a gray pallor to it and an exhaustion that came deep from within her bones. Brushing hair out of the child's face, she held back tears in her eyes. But there was anger rolling off her as well. Undirected, unbridled, unconditional fury at him, at the executioners, at herself. Soon she would fail at hiding how much this hurt. Humans couldn't sense pain in others the way yokai could; Sesshomaru knew by scent alone that it was threatening to overwhelm her entirely.

Like listening to an awakened heartbeat, Sesshomaru felt energy pulse at his side. Tenseiga cried out to be used, ordering its wielder to listen to its plea.

Then he could see them, the servants of the Underworld. Little overgrown gray toads danced all around and about the girls, tugging at their tired and terrified souls. He counted ten of them, two for each of the victims. Jenny remained unaware of the beings surrounding her and mocking her swallowed pain.

For a moment, he realized that he finally had something that he could use to bargain for Ketsugō-kiba. No doubt the Harkness woman would hand over the sword in exchange for Rin's life. But he
banished the thought. He'd known Tenseiga long enough that he never could have gotten away with such a despicable offer.

So, as sobs began to break through the thief’s hardened exterior, Sesshomaru drew Tenseiga. The soul-collecting imps sensed the power of his unsheathed sword and immediately began to cower in fear. None of their companions had seen the power of Tenseiga for many a century, but instinct told them this was their end.

The sword practically hummed with joy when Sesshomaru slashed through half of the Underworld servants. A second stroke brought down the others. They disintegrated and blew away with an otherworldly wind. Lost in her own thoughts, Jenny barely reacted to the sword movements dancing around her.

Then Rin took her first breath of renewed life. It startled Jenny, who shifted the girl to a better sitting position. The four other girls stirred as well. It began with blinking eyes, then coughing as they dispelled blood from their rapidly healing lungs. Some even began to sit up and rub their eyes like they had been asleep.

Rin woke with a groan of pain, but her eyes soon fluttered open. She looked confused for a moment, but then her face brightened when she recognized the woman holding her. "You came back!"

Jenny didn't know how such a miracle could make her heart hurt so much. She hugged Rin as tightly as she could to her chest. Tears rolled down her face and her nose began to run into the girl's dress. "I told you I would."

Sheathing his sword, Sesshomaru took one more look at the blubbering thief and turned away to leave.

"Wait!" Jenny stood up, holding Rin tightly in her arms. "You did this, didn't you. You brought her, them, back to life."

He nodded once.

She swallowed a few tears. "I would have given anything for this."

"I know."

Her mouth gaped open like a fish while she scrambled to figure out what question to ask him. How? Why? Why didn't you use this as an opportunity to find the location of Ketsugō-kiba? How much of this girl is healed? What exactly did you have to kill? How long will this last? But Jenny settled upon, "Thank you, Sesshomaru-sama."

He said nothing as he left, flying out the window into the night sky.

"Come work for me."

After this century's version of samurai had invaded the massive housing structure and removed what they wanted to, the thief and her two cohorts left discreetly in a less-gaudy carriage. The brown-skinned one wove a tale that implicated the human traffickers in all their sins, but removed their involvement entirely, and the black-haired woman helped Jenny remove the blood from her hands and suit. Their vehicle only went so far as the park a few blocks away from the building. There Jenny got out of the metal and glass contraption and walked nearly thirty meters away from her employees where she stopped at a tree, looked up at Sesshomaru who was lying in its high branches, and spoke to him.
He scoffed at her invitation. "That is so far beneath me that it warrants no answer."

"This world has many rulers. I can control all of them if I want to. So this would actually be a step up for you."

"I have no need to control humans."

"What about helping them? You gave up the one thing you could have held over my head to take Ketsugō-kiba from me, and instead you brought Rin back to life. You didn't even know her, but saving her was important to you."

"I have no need to help humans either."

Jenny took a deep breath through her nose, then slowly exhaled through her mouth. "What purpose do you have, then?"

"Like you said, all I can do is kill. I seek nothing more than to battle the most powerful beings alive."
Yes, it felt as rehearsed in his mind as it was in its delivery. But this woman had nothing to offer him if she wouldn't surrender his father's sword to him.

"There are many more ways to fight than with a sword. If you want to better learn how to use your words and wits..." She took a small white paper from her jacket pocket and left it at the base of the tree. "Come find me."
Two months later …

Jenny rocked with the other passengers as the train hurtled through downtown New York City. She never would have chosen to live in such a congested place if it hadn't been for her job. A job she loved and chose for herself, but let's not get into that.

Jenny's head cocked to one side. "I could have sworn I heard a narrator editorializing."

Um, no. Not at all.

During Jenny's travels to her office, her phone vibrated with a call. Glancing at the name, she grimaced, then plugged in her headphones and answered. "If this is about the case in Moscow, I really don't want to talk about it."

The voice on the other end did, though. And so they talked about it. Jenny patiently allowed the figure chew her out verbally — or attempt to — while she chewed on a handful of granola. Every now and again, she added a, "Really couldn't be helped, love," or, "Can't blame me for that," or, "Could have happened to anyone, honey," or, "No, I was paying attention and Liu behaved himself this time," or, "That was Rosario holding back."

Sun broke through the train window momentarily, striking her in the face. Her nose tickled in anticipation. "Oh for heaven's … ah-choo!"

The next thing she knew, a toad landed on the subway floor and hopped away with a cheerful croak. Only to be trod upon by one of the passengers. "That's disgusting!" a teenage girl cried as the toad only got stepped on by more and more people when the doors opened up at the next stop.

Since no one can sneeze with their eyes open, Jenny could never figure out where the damn things kept appearing from.

"Gesundheit," said her caller in a thick Russian accent. "You're not coming down with something, are you?"

_Do not say anything about having a frog in your throat_, she reminded herself. "Allergies. Now, I believe you were upset about some houses falling over?"

"The embassy is not a house, Ms. Harkness!"

She rolled her eyes and continued to let the being with the scrambled voice berate her. It mattered little to her how upset this particular member of the Russian aristocracy was with her; when all was said and done, she'd bill them exactly the same as she always did and they would pay her every last penny.

Especially when Merripit House had done what the Russian special forces could not: take care of none other than Baba Yaga.

Finally, after getting off the phone with that pleasant Russian, Jenny reached her desired stop. As she climbed the steps out of the subway, her phone rang once again. "What now?" she said in greeting.

An unscrambled British man's voice came through. "I have a job for your team."
"Not taking it."

"Pardon?"

"You're not interested in it. Why should I be?"

"Look, it's just a quick consult. My team has tried all the angles, and we keep coming back to the same impossible result."

"Vampires?"

He paused in confusion. "No. Nothing that improbable."

"Then that means you're probably right. Call me when it's as interesting as vampires." She hung up once again.

Merripit House resided in an apartment building on the outskirts of the overcrowded part of the Big Apple. The somewhat homey atmosphere of the apartment put clients at ease or on edge when they expected something else — probably something out of a Film Noir. The door had a stylized hound on a hill overlooking the Merripit House name as its logo. Always a fan of Sherlock Holmes, Jenny enjoyed the nod to the man who originally inspired her to excel in school and make a living at exposing other people's secrets, even if most people didn't get the reference.

Jenny opened the door to the spacious, white and powder blue apartment. The place had windows from ceiling to floor that invited all sorts of daylight into the room through filmy white curtains. Since no one actually lived there, the home setup stayed clean apart from when a case required long nights of research or a client needed a place to hide out from assassins for a while. A pair of blue couches faced a set of giant wide screen televisions, the kitchen had a dining table and basic dishware, the bathroom carried necessary amenities, and one corner of the main area housed a stack of computer and surveillance equipment that the NSA would have been suspicious and/or jealous of. Around the corner was Jenny's office — a simple setup with a desk, a couple chairs for clients, a massive bookcase with her books and papers, paintings that hid a couple safes, and a laptop with a password Liu hadn't figured out yet. The second bedroom on the other side of the apartment had a guest bedroom setup with the communal gun safe.

As the head of Merripit House, Jenny felt like she completed the polished, professional look of her business. So even though she hated taking the time in the morning, she wore her hair in sleek curls, donned a navy pencil skirt and loose-fitting gauzy cream blouse, and put on a pair of matching navy pumps before leaving home that morning.

"Are you screening your calls or something?" Liu, dressed in a brown business suit that looked like it cost more than the GDP of a small country for no other reason than he knew how good it made him look, practically shook his finger at her as soon as she got inside and shut the door behind her.

"Office hours aren't for a couple more minutes," she replied.

"Well when ambassadors can't get through to you, they find me, and you know how I feel about that."

Jenny raised an eyebrow. "You're welcome?"

He clapped his hands together as if praying to a saint. "Sylvia Maret is still playing hard-to-get, but I think she's about to finally say yes to a night at the Vienna Opera."

She had to think hard to remember that one. "Ambassador from Morocco, right? She barely speaks
"Love knows no boundaries, and definitely not language barriers. And I can learn French."

"Who's learning French?" Rosario sat up from one of the couches where she had crashed for the night. With frizzy hair down, a baggy gray t-shirt and sweatpants, she stood in stark contrast to her co-worker's put-together look. Not that she cared much; the last few days had been tough on her with running around playing bodyguard/un-matchmaker. "What happened to learning Russian for Katrina two days ago?"

"I'm not incapable of being multilingual," he argued back. "'Ilo au faka-tonga, hili kâtoa."

She rolled her eyes as she went to grab a water bottle from the fridge so she could swallow some ibuprofen. "You keep hitting on me, but we've been working together for two years and you still don't know Spanish."

Jenny's phone rang again and she quickly sent it to voicemail. One more minute. "So what did your ambassadors want?"

Liu pulled a notebook out of his breast pocket before taking a seat in an armchair by the fireplace. "Two shipping liners have gone missing on their way to Greece. Could be interesting. I thought I heard him say something about Atlantis, but maybe he meant Athens."

"I'm not doing another charity case for Greece."

He tore that page out. "Sylvia has a serial killer on the loose that she says, in her words, 'iz like a Golem.'"

"Since when did we become the Mystery Machine?" Jenny complained, rubbing an oncoming headache in her temples. Jet lag and lack of sleep really made her miserable and grumpy for days after an overseas trip.

"Probably about the same time you named this place Merripit House," Rosario said with a shrug.

"Okay, when is somebody going to explain that reference to me?" Liu cried, throwing up his hands in frustration. His two coworkers ignored his plea. "Right, never. I have to figure it out on my own."

"What else do you have to report?" Jenny asked with a long-suffering sigh.

His face scrunched up in thought. "Oh yeah, your package from Japan arrived today," he said, pointing a thumb toward her closed office door.

It only took her a moment to blink, take a deep breath and straighten her skirt. Feeling properly straightened out, she proceeded to storm into her office. Rosario took a chair alongside Liu, which had the perfect view to the oncoming show.

Dressed in his full traditional armor with a full shoulder pauldron that reached almost to his elbow, a white kimono with red cherry blossom designs through the neckline and sleeves, a billowing white hakama that gathered at his black armored boots, and a fur pelt that dragged along the ground, Sesshomaru stood at the ready in the middle of the office with his left hand resting on his swords at his side, held there by a gold obi. With narrowed eyes, he looked down his nose at the woman.

"Harkness. This place is pitifully protected."

She scanned her office, noting the papers that had shifted, the two inches the bookcase has moved, the paintings that hung crooked, the pried open lock on the window, the closet doors that were...
slightly ajar. Given the opportunity to look, she knew she'd find his fingerprints all over her desk drawers and a few long silver hairs scattered on the carpet.

"What brings you to my office?" she asked, clasping her hands together. "My previously clean, unsearched office. Please tell me you're here for a job."

His nose wrinkled in disgust. "I would never be subject to a human. Nor to a human woman, no less, even if she can read."

Reminding herself that her presentism and obsessive need to correct would be about as effective as his mild sexism in winning this argument, Jenny gritted her teeth and forced a smile onto her face. "Then why are you here, Sesshomaru?" Again, leaving off the appropriate honorific because she felt like giving tit for tat.

He took a step closer to her, letting his height and his presence do the intimidation for him. "I searched all of Nihon for the Ketsugō-kiba and came up empty handed." In the last two months, he'd tracked down every last hint of the Harkness woman's presence. Try as he might, the sword's scent and presence had vanished like it had never existed. The only trace or hint left was in its original resting place, giving validity to the argument that he did, in fact, not dream of such a weapon.

Jenny tilted her chin up higher so she wouldn't break eye contact with the daiyokai. "Have you come to torture the information out of me?"

He raised his right hand to inspect his razor-sharp claws, currently absent of poison, nearly brushing her face on the process. "Would you like me to try?"

She shook her head. "Probably not. No, definitely not."

"Then once more, I suggest that you surrender it to me."

"And once more, no. I've stared down Death before, my dear. Shot her in the head, even. If you think you scare me, you're wrong. If you think you can torture anything out of me, you're wrong. If you think that you'll be able to find anything I've hidden when I'm dead, you're wrong. So you're just going to keep going in circles, chasing your tail, if you continue hounding me about the Ketsugō-kiba."

Sesshomaru glared down at the woman with the sharp blue eyes. He so very much wanted to test what she said to be sure that she really could withstand what she said she could. But faint lines of scars hidden by her long, thin sleeves gave him a notion that perhaps she already knew from personal experience. One thing did strike him as odd, however. "What do you mean by shooting Death in the head?"

A fake smile immediately spread across her face. "It's just a turn of phrase I picked up," she said with a dismissive shake of her head. "Although considering the trouble we've been getting in lately, I wouldn't be surprised if it actually happened."

He raised an eyebrow. "Trouble?"

Having taken control of the conversation, Jenny strode over to her desk and took a seat. "Ever since you woke up, strange things have been happening all over the world. And when strange things happen, they call Merripit House — us. Go ahead and have a seat."

Sesshomaru glanced at the two chairs before the desk, both with armrests that would make it impossible for him and his armor to fit. So he simply folded his arms and remained standing.
"Lately, they’re asking us to investigate things like reports of an Imugi killing cattle, Sasquatch terrorizing some villagers, a witch named Baba Yaga interfering in some young people's love affairs, a Golem made of gunpowder, vampires, creatures like that. Naturally, I accept the cases because they sound interesting and there's no way any of these legendary creatures are actually the cause of the problem." With a sigh, her face became a combination of a self-effacing smile and a grimace. "They're all real. Except for the vampires, fortunately."

"I was not aware that yokai existed outside of my land."

"I hesitate to call them yokai because while yokai are legendary creatures, they're really only found in Japan. With the exception of you, currently."

"You think that I woke these creatures."

"I can't say what did. Only that ever since I met you, many from myth and legend are coming to. It could mean that whatever woke you up also woke them up. In any case, governments keep hiring us to make sure they stop killing people."

A short snort was the only sign of laughter or amusement he gave. "You."

"It's not just me. Liu is pretty crafty with the traps, and Rosario is my sharpshooter." She waved at the doorway where the both of them were peeking through. They, too, waved back at the daiyokai before slipping away. "We haven't done too bad on our own, all things considered."

"Except you have a curse attached to you."

Her nose twitched, threatening another sneeze. She daintily touched her upper lip to send the sensation away. "We're not exactly experts. Just convenient people to call."

"Because of your ignorance, you will put yourself in unnecessary danger." The thought seemed to annoy him, although he couldn't hammer down a reason why.

"Which is why I could use someone like you. The job offer still stands. I need a bodyguard and someone who actually knows what they're doing when it comes to these creatures. In return, I can teach you English, history, science, mathematics, political science, macrame — "

He cut her off simply by turning his head away. "I have no interest in these things."

"Everyone always turns down the macrame." With a deep breath, Jenny considered the trump card she was hoping never to play. But the man had a pride in him that she simply couldn't overcome through simple reason. Finally, she readied the distasteful words in her mouth. It took a couple starts, but she finally said, "Would you be interested in … Ketsugō-kiba?"

That he did not expect. Sesshomaru turned his burning, questioning gaze on the woman, but she did not flinch back. While she did not like the idea whatsoever, she had no lie in her eyes. Although, considering her chosen profession, perhaps she knew how to lie to a daiyokai. "This Sesshomaru does not make bargains lightly. What do you want in return?"

"Six months," she replied. "Work for me for six months. Protect the team, offer us your expertise, learn new things. That's all I want."

Half a year? The length of time seemed absurdly small for such an offer. He inclined his head in consideration. "Six months, and then you'll give me Ketsugō-kiba?"

"Yes. You have my word. Is it a deal?" She raised her arm, extending her right hand towards him.
His eyebrow lifted, asking her to explain. "It's a handshake. It's a sign that we have come to an agreement."

The offer sounded almost reasonable. Ketsugō-kiba had offered her protection like she was its true wielder, after all. And here she was, grimacing at the thought of surrendering the one thing she had to hold over him, but offering nonetheless. But she was a thief who desecrated a grave, he reminded himself. A grave robber with no honor. What guarantee did he have that forming a contract with a liar would bear any fruit whatsoever.

A cold look came into his eyes. "No. I will find Ketsugō-kiba on my own." He darted for the window and flew off into the sky before she could take a second breath.

Jenny could only stare at the space the impressive Sesshomaru had occupied a moment before. The window swung limply on its damaged hinges, its squeaking the only sound in the room for a time.

Rosario was the first to enter the room once he was gone. "Well that was … interesting. He must not have taken the job."

"Allow me to congratulate you on a brilliant bit of deduction."

She let her boss's condescending remark brush past her. "Are you ever going to explain to us how you met him?"

"Or what that guy even is?" Liu added, popping in behind her.

"Sesshomaru is a daiyokai, which is like a yokai, but far more powerful according to my understanding," she explained, keeping her eyes on the window. "I stole and hid a sword that he thinks belongs to him."

"Right," he said nodding. "What's a yokai?"

"A type of legendary creature from Japan. Which considering how they've suddenly started popping up all over the world since we got back from Japan, you should put them on your list of creatures to research, Liu, so we don't have a repeat of Moscow."

He had the audacity to look surprised when Jenny and Rosario gave him glares in stereo. "You can't blame me for being freaked out by the chicken legs."

"We could use someone who can fly and fight with dragons. As of late," Rosario said.

"He made it clear that employment from a human woman is beneath him. You know how royalty is," Jenny said with a shrug. "He'll be back tomorrow."

"That looked like me when I'm leaving a one-night stand, um…" Liu trailed off after getting a stink-eye from Rosario. "That didn't look like he was planning on ever coming back."

"He'll be back." She settled into her office chair and opened up her laptop. Already emails had come pouring in, and not just from spammers. "Liu, turn Sesshomaru into a human being that's been living in Japan for the last, mmm, 30 years. Doctor up a photo to look like someone with not-pointy ears for a passport; I don't know if he'll think cameras steal his soul or not, but he's probably photo shy. And please make sure the name you pick for him isn't a stupid one."

"All of my names are perfect and inspired," he argued. But he was already on his phone getting in touch with some people.
"Rosario, find him an apartment close by. No idea if he even eats or sleeps, but get a bed and make sure the fridge is stocked with some fruits and vegetables he might recognize. If you've got time, find him some clothes from a thrift store."

She shook her head. "He's going to need tailored clothes. He's too tall for what we've got around here."

"Then we can take care of that later. Maybe find some old textbooks, too. And a desk and chair. And —" She was cut off as her cell phone started buzzing again with an Amber Alert sound. "And I'll talk to MI-6. I guess this case actually is interesting."
It seems that when I posted the seventh chapter, Artful Dodger, the end got cut off. If you've read it before, you may want to read to the end again.

Covert British agents operating in New York City (with full permission from the U.S. government who disavowed all knowledge of their existence) did not enjoy it when their luggage went missing. Then their towels. Then their protein powder. Then their bugs.

And then every last scrap of collected intelligence data that could be stored on a digital device.

More frustrating was when their items would reappear, but in unexpected places that would cause them to stumble, fall down a flight of stairs, nearly get in a car accident, or all three at once. The day the towels nearly blew the three agents' cover did not bear repeating.

Try as they might, they could not figure out who was getting into their safe house and how. The 'how' really set their teeth grinding. Despite oodles of cameras watching the place, they never caught sight of a single suspect. No footprints, no fingerprints, and the hair samples turned out to be from some sort of animal. Whoever wanted to torment these poor men knew just how to cover their tracks, and no one could stop them.

So MI-6 called Jenny. And Merripit House got involved.

Of course, from the way the three were positioned, no would ever have known. Rosario in the rooftops with a sniper's rifle. Liu dressed in black clothes and his best running shoes crouched the alleyway. Jenny hidden behind a building corner keeping an eye on the apartment windows. Should a character decide to approach the safehouse located in an apartment three stories above Liu's head, Merripit House would know.

"Boss, you've got movement at one o'clock," Rosario said, scanning the area through her scope. "Liu, can you confirm?"

Creeping slowly from the shadows, he got to his feet and looked in that direction. "I don't see anything."

A garbage can rattled as a cat leaped from a window to the metal lid, sending echos throughout the loosely populated street. Without blinking or flinching, Jenny kept her gaze on their target. "False alarm. Keep your eyes peeled."

As much as Liu would have loved to use this moment to snark around with his favorite ladies, he kept his mouth shut and his mind focused on the job. Which is difficult to do when not much of anything happens for minutes upon minutes on end.

Scoping out the area again, Rosario passed a glance at him. "Liu, check your six," she said over the radio. "It's probably just a rat, but—"

"It's a rat. Have I mentioned how disgusting this is yet?"
"Quiet you two." Jenny reminded them. "It's here."

With movement so quick they almost missed it, shadows began to move up toward the apartment. A creature shaped like some sort of small beast darted along the wall, stopping every now and then behind garbage and cars to look for anyone watching. When it was sure no one would see it, the little creature's body began to morph into something taller, with longer limbs and dark skin. It scurried up the building faster than anyone not paying attention could notice and stopped at the agents' window.

Jenny tensed up, getting ready for the perfect moment for her team to move in and corner the creature. For good measure, she took a few photos with her phone of a half-humanoid, half-furry beast slipping through the shadows and into the apartment.

"That's definitely our thief," Liu declared. "What's with all the magical creatures lately? It's just not fair."

"I've still got eyes on him, boss," Rosario said, taking the safety off her rifle. "Should I put it to sleep?"

"As soon as it comes out the window, take the shot." She allowed herself the luxury of smiling in a 'counting her chickens before they hatched' sort of way. After all, Jenny was the one who'd told MI-6 nothing human had been terrorizing them. A few more minutes of patience, and they would have this thing in the bag.

Tensing up for the moment the creature would flee with his ill-gotten treasures, Jenny nearly screamed when a massive, angry, presence landed in the alley with a blast of wind, white and red silk and fur.

It seems the one thing Jenny miscalculated was how long it would take for Sesshomaru to return. And where.

The ground vibrated with the fury the daiyokai directed at the detective. But as soon as he opened his mouth to yell at her, she clapped a hand across it and pushed him backwards into the alley, knocking over a fantastically loud garbage can as she did so.

Three stories up, a creature with glassy black eyes shifted its gaze into the street. Then darted to the window and pressed its face against the glass. Liu and Rosario shifted position, ready to intercept one of the two targets. "Boss, you okay?" Rosario asked, urgency filling her voice.

"Focus on the target," she ordered, then turned to Sesshomaru with an equally blazing fury in her eyes. "What!"

Grabbing her wrist, he ripped her hand off his face. "This being you face is not what you think it is."

"We're in America!" she hissed between her teeth. "I'm pretty sure I know exactly who this is."

"This is not some lowly yokai." His grip got tighter with urgency, causing her to grimace in pain. "This creature smells like a god."

"Boss, move!"

At the sound of Liu's voice and the crack of Rosario's rifle, Jenny spun her head around to see a pair of wild yellow eyes and a mouth full of sharp teeth headed right for her throat. Before she even had time to gasp, a set of toxic claws slashed out at the sinewy muscles of a brown, wolf-like beast, catching it in the chest. For a frozen moment, Sesshomaru growled like a primal animal and glared at the wild beast before throwing him clear across the alley.
And then Jenny blinked and noticed Sesshomaru had moved to intercept the blow meant for her.

The beast yelped when he hit the wall, but he recovered his footing almost instantly. Releasing his hold on Jenny, Sesshomaru's eyes went red as the beast prepared to attack again. Faster than sound, he raced to greet the beast, drawing out his poison whip with a sharp crack! But before the whip could bite him, the beast's body shifted and expanded. His head and neck stretched long, and his feet nimbly danced him away from the string of poison. With one long, oversized paw, he smacked Sesshomaru aside into the side of a dumpster as casually as a cat would bat a mouse.

The next instant, the beast's head slithered up to Jenny's face with a wicked grin. As his body caught up, his eyes went from murderous to curious. Suddenly, his nose started sniffing her shirt. "Pretty girl," he said with a voice as giddy as a rushing stream. "Where did you get your corn silk hair?"

His nose, almost with a mind of its own, dared to peek down her shirt. With a shriek, Jenny smacked it away. "Bad dog!"

"Dog?" Drawing his limbs and neck back to their correct proportions, albeit still a bit large for a normal wolf, the beast stood before her indignantly. "Corn Silk Girl, I am Coyote!"

Sesshomaru dared to begin a second approach, moving silently with a snarl in his teeth. But Coyote sensed his approach and simply kicked backwards, hitting the daiyokai in the chest and sending him flying back into the dumpster.

Jenny locked her eyes on Coyote's and took a careful step backwards. In her ear, Rosario changed locations to get a line of sight on the creature and Liu readied a taser. "The trickster god?" she said, baiting him with flattery. "The one who gave fire to man? The one who made death permanent?"

He threw his head back and laughed, the sound rushing forth like a babbling brook. The stars seemed to glow a bit brighter in response. "Ay, that is me! So you've heard the stories."

Another step backwards, and Coyote followed. "Some of them. I didn't grow up listening to — wait, you speak English."

"If you know me …" Coyote's mouth grew, his teeth glinted like obsidian blades, hungry for blood. "Then why are you hunting me?"

Electricity crackled as two prongs on wires were fired into Coyote's rump. He gave a yowl of pain and pranced around to try to dislodge them. Rosario took aim to put another tranquilizer dart in his neck, but right as she fired, Coyote was barrelled over by Sesshomaru coming at him in a flying tackle. "Damn it! He's out of my line of sight!"

Running down the alley with a finger to her ear, Jenny got out of the way of the god and the daiyokai who tumbled to the ground in a brawl filled with claws, teeth and fur. "Liu, status!"

While racing to catch up with his boss, Liu scrambled through his pockets. "Coyote got the taser, but it should still be pumping volts."

Coyote managed to shake off Sesshomaru like a dog and started to chase after Jenny and Liu, but the daiyokai bounced back from the wall and aimed his whip at the beast's snout. With a snarl, the creature leaped into the air to pounce on him. The daiyokai, however, nimbly sidestepped him and slashed his leg with his poison claws. The smell of burning and blistering god-flesh filled the tiny alley, followed by a pitiful whine.

Jenny stopped in her tracks at the sound of a sword being drawn from its scabbard. "Head to the rendezvous point," she ordered Liu as he caught up to her, ignoring his and Rosario's protests on her
Way back down the street.

With blood dripping from his nose and a severe limp to his step, Coyote made for a pitiful sight. But while he gathered his energy for another attack, a furious light grew in his eyes. Sesshomaru stood before him, his face impassive, with Bakusaiga in his hand. Just as he raised his sword, Jenny ran and stood between the two of them, her hands raised to keep one from attacking the other. "Stop!"

His nose wrinkled in disgust and frustration. "Get out of my way."

"Coyote is just a trickster. We're trying to not kill him — Ack!" A cold, wet nose went up her skirt from behind, making her jump away. "Seriously?"

Within a blink, Sesshomaru threw his fist into Coyote's jaw. Bones and brick cracked as he crashed into the apartment building. But the noise that screeched loudest in Jenny's ears was the shouts of residents waking up to the small earthquake and the ghostly taps of phone calls and pictures made on cell phones.

Never before had a plan fallen so completely apart at her feet. Jenny simply watched in horror as Sesshomaru stalked after his prey, backing Coyote down another alleyway. The creature seemed to meld into the shadows, taking on a pitch black hue. In a blur of motion, Sesshomaru attacked Coyote, burying Bakusaiga deep in Coyote's chest.

But then he stopped. The shadow figure's edges bled out, covering his hand up to his wrist. He pulled, but his limb wouldn't move. Even using two hands, the shadows wouldn't let him go. In fact, they dragged him in like quicksand.

Laughter echoed against the walls. Leaping agilely over garbage bags and cardboard boxes, Coyote emerged from the alley with a renewed spring to his step. "Corn Silk Girl, where have you gone?" he barked.

"This way, honey." Jenny said with a wave. Then turned and started to run. Despite the four-inch heels she'd been unable to change out of before beginning the stakeout, she took off down the alley with surprising grace and speed.

Giddy, Coyote bounded after her.

Now Sesshomaru had no intention of letting the mischievous Coyote get the better of him. The false Coyote, apparently made of tar or pitch, continued to absorb him, drawing both his arms in up to his elbows. It seemed the harder he pulled, the faster and harder it pulled back. He vaguely recalled the kitsune of his homeland using similar tricks. Not from personal experience, of course. Fortunately InuYasha wasn't here to make this humiliation all the worse.

Still grasping Bakusaiga, Sesshomaru sent out a decomposing blast. The tar Coyote stretched like an inflating pufferfish until it burst apart with a dramatic bang! Sticky black goo splattered across the alley, coating every surface in a five meter radius. Except, of course, Sesshomaru who remained pristine in every way.

"Whoa…"

He turned to a little boy with dark skin and loose, disheveled clothes holding a rectangular device facing him. The boy had a few other friends with him unable to close their mouths or stop staring. To their credit, they kept their distance.

The children needed no second thought from him, so he took to the air, following the scent trail leading to Jenny and Coyote.
For her part, Jenny did tremendously well sprinting over broken beer bottles and bicycle pieces in four-inch heels. She definitely hadn't planned on being the bait. But, whatever. The only reason she stayed ahead of Coyote was because he seemed to be playing with her. He leaped from wall to wall, over dumpsters and fire hydrants, laughing all the way.

Over the radio, Rosario reported in. "Boss, I've got eyes."

"Then start shooting!" Jenny said between pants.

Tranquilizer darts flew overhead and stung Coyote in the neck. He screeched to a halt to scratch them out of his skin. "Your little bees don't hurt me, Corn Silk Girl!" he taunted. But as he started running, keeping up seemed harder than before. Not that he still couldn't.

"I'm good to go, too." From around the corner, Liu poked out his head and gave Jenny a thumbs up. She allowed herself a small smile as she passed across a street and stopped.

Rosario kept hitting Coyote with ketamine laced darts while Liu watched him carefully for the right time to activate the detonator in his hand. Coyote galloped towards the detective who was bent over, trying to catch her breath and ease out a stitch in her side. Right on his tail came Sesshomaru — his eyes a furious red and Bakusaiga ready to swing if his poison claws didn't take out the creature first.

"Now!" Jenny screamed.

Coyote's teeth came within inches of her face when the ground whipped up and wrapped around him. Tangled in a mess of ropes, the beast lifted straight up into the air, just in time for Sesshomaru to fly straight into Jenny.

The Lexus had deep gouges from claws along the passenger side doorframe. And a missing passenger front door. In the driver's seat, Liu stewed, trying not to express his feelings about the state of his vehicle, especially as the one to blame sat less than three feet from him on his right. Sesshomaru glared at the road straight ahead, certainly not in a mood to hear any complaints about his inability to operate a car door. Behind Liu, Jenny pinched her nose with a handkerchief. Her shirt had blood all down the ruffles. Rosario, next to her, kept her fingers on the pulse of the coyote head in her lap. His nose started to sniff curiously, which then trailed up toward her shirt.

"He's doing it again," Rosario said, flicking Coyote in the ear. "Pretty sure he's awake."

Slipping out of her arms, but not the canvas tarp he was wrapped in, Coyote wagged his tail and grinned. "The Magpie Girl smells like rotten vegetables. I love it!"

She grumbled as she recalled having to wrestle with him in the garbage. "Just tell us where you hid everything."

"And then what?"

"Then we let you go," Rosario replied.

"But what if I don't want to leave?"

Jenny held up a stun gun and let electricity snap between the prongs. With a yelp, Coyote hopped into Rosario's lap. An impressive feat for a canvas bundle with a head and tail. "Thanks to some people, I am completely out of patience tonight. All I want is stuff you stole from those MI-6 agents."

"Are you talking about this dog that looks like a man?" Coyote asked, his head stretching around to
look Sesshomaru in the eye. All he got in return was an icy stare. "He smells like the land of the rising sun."

"You know about Japan?"

His head swung over to Jenny, putting his eyes right in front of hers. "Haven't you heard about the time the moon was stolen? I volunteered to take its place and I saw everything!"

Apparently that was too close to Jenny for Sesshomaru's comfort as he grabbed Coyote by the scruff of his neck and pulled him away from the detective. "What are you planning to do with this creature, Harkness?"

Wishing she could actually shoot daggers at him with her eyes, she turned her glare to him. "To be honest, I'm thinking about hiring him."

Sesshomaru stiffened, then completely turned around in his seat. (Not a pleasant experience for the driver who had to dodge his spiked pauldron.) "You will not. He tried to kill you."

"So did you," Jenny said with narrowed eyes.

"He's too dangerous to have around. Are you trying to kill yourself?"

She shrugged. "I have a dangerous job. Coyote seemed capable of outsmarting the smartest and strongest of demons. Present company included."

"Not for long," he scoffed.

"Long enough, though. I think I would like having a smart creature like him around."

Anger seemed to make his nostrils flare. "There are many of those to pick from. Tricksters are never reliable."

"Yes, but he knows English. Somehow."

Sesshomaru only growled.

"He's a god. That would be nice to have on our side."

"A trickster god," he corrected. "Tricksters always betray. You cannot strike an honest deal with them."

"Kind of like with a noble Demon Lord?"

Liu and Rosario silently watched the exchange, backing into their respective seats as the tempers flared. They both might have kept their faces calm and collected, but Coyote was wagging his tail at the tension in the air. "Ooh, sounds like a lover's spat!" he said happily.

Sesshomaru turned to Liu and ordered, "Stop this carriage."

He didn't need to know Japanese to know to throw on the brakes.

Tearing himself out of the car, the daiyokai stormed out and to the other side. Coyote's expressive eyebrows seemed to shoot off his head. "You be quiet," Jenny said with a pointed look just before her door was opened and she was dragged out. Somewhere in between the car and the shoulder of the highway, she lost her handkerchief and blood seeped down her face. "What?"
Sesshomaru towered over her with his hands in fists. "Must I define it for you, you dense woman? How am I supposed to learn the location of Ketsugō-kiba if you are dead? I have never met someone so intent on getting to the Underworld as fast as possible."

She sputtered for a second, trying to figure out what to say. "I do not!" He raised one eyebrow. "You're right, that was weak. It's not deliberate."

"You have made it clear that if I don't stay by your side and protect you, you will die. That would be unacceptable."

In a staring contest more like a game of chicken, Jenny blinked first. "So ... you want to protect me. How will that make me give up Ketsugō-kiba?"

"If I maintain a close proximity, you will eventually reveal the location to me. Even if you never go near it. Humans say much in what they don't say as much as what they do." He stood before her proudly, noting how she shut her mouth on a rebuttal. "To put it in your crude terms, I will accept your offer of employment."

Jenny could feel her brain processing his words, but the overall picture still didn't click yet. "Then I suppose I should compensate you in some way."

"Education will be sufficient. I have no desire for human comforts, after all. And after six months, you will surrender the sword to me."

"Right." She wanted to gape at him, to ask him what changed from twelve hours ago, to shout at him, 'This is exactly the same deal I offered you this morning!' But she restrained her emotions and attempted to find control in this conversation and agreement that had been usurped by Sesshomaru. "Then I think we have a deal. Shall we shake on it?"

He nodded once. With that agreement, she held out her right hand. In response, he extended his, mirroring her motion and allowing her to grasp his with hers. He was surprised at how strong her grip was — for a human. She was surprised at how soft, and cold, his skin was and how his claws nearly drew blood from her wrist just by brushing against it.

Agreement made and handshake completed, they broke the contact and took a step back from the awkwardly formal exchange.

All things settled, Sesshomaru asked, "And to be clear, you are not taking Coyote into your employ?"

"I might consider it if you piss me off again," she replied, wiping blood off her face with her sleeve. "But in all honesty, after he gives up the location of his stolen goods, we're ditching him in the forest. I don't need any more noses up my skirt."

"Good." The proud, self-assured gleam returned to his stature, telling of a deal gone completely in his favor. "At least you're wise enough to see reason."

"Oh, and Sesshomaru?" Stepping on top of each of his feet, Jenny took hold of his chestplate with one hand to pull her face right next to that of the stunned daiyokai. She brushed one finger along his cheek and whispered in one pointed ear, "Just how close did you mean by 'close proximity'?"

Blood raced through his head, especially where the Harkness woman touched the marks on his cheekbone. His skin burned well after her fingers had left his face. For far too long, his eyes drank in her lithe figure, the cascading yellow waves of hair down her back, the deep blue irises that had a sharpness and intelligence he couldn't explain. Humans should disgust him, but she had none of the
typical annoyances of mortals: fear, ignorance, weakness even.

But then before he knew it, she'd given him a smirk of one who had regained the upper hand and stepped away. "Come on Sesshomaru," she called after him. "We still need to get Coyote to talk."
Now at this point, it is customary to have a 'foreigner-learns-English-and-makes-a-bunch-of-silly-mistakes' montage. You know the one. But here we have two problems. One, Sesshomaru is the epitome of daiyokai intelligence, grace, wisdom and overall perfection. To think he would be anything but a stellar student is shameful and you should hang your head and scold your parents for daring to raise such a child.

Two, a recounting of all the times that Sesshomaru has not lived up to that standard in the month-long intensive English study he underwent to become fluent, will result in this narrator meeting with a rather painful, drawn out, untimely end at the poison claws of the illustrious, and not at any time foolish, Great Lord Sesshomaru.

So please, dear reader, understand that Sesshomaru possesses an enhanced capability of learning, allowing him to become fluent in a language well outside his language family in about a month's time. Because according to Liu Pauni and Rosario Lopez, Sesshomaru went absolutely mute for a month before telling them that Liu's plan to paraglide into the U.S. Treasury would get him killed. And Sesshomaru approved wholeheartedly of the idea.

Instead, we shall offer you a glimpse at the transformation of Sesshomaru from Feudal Era warrior to Twenty-First Century Man.

"Sesshomaru, I want you to know that you are possibly the most handsome and —"

"Gorgeous," Rosario added, "beautiful, stunning, magnificent, attractive —"

"— well dressed man I have ever met in my entire life," Liu said with a strained smile on his face that reached from ear to ear. "Your kimono and hakama are just so … you in an indescribable way."

"We love having a small bit of living history walking around with us like it's perfectly normal."

"However," they chorused.

"It's time we got you a new wardrobe," Liu finished.

Sesshomaru merely stared down his two co-workers while he processed their English words. Normally he would just ignore their prattling, but it seemed that now they spoke directly to him and wanted some sort of response. He considered that this might be another test from Ms. Harkness — the name she insisted he call her in public. He never did quite understand humans' insistence on having family names. Liu and Rosario seemed braced for an angry retort, but in their attempt to soften the blow of their request, they didn't make it clear what they wanted to ask.

Fortunately as he had discovered centuries ago, silence often spoke volumes. The right look could have an enemy spilling everything or running away in fear.

"Jenny's on an errand and assigned us to take over your lessons today," Rosario said.

"Her dad called just last night and asked her to figure out who's been chopping off the heads of some tennis players," Liu explained. "He wanted to spend some time with her. Solving gruesome cases is their family's thing. Anyway, we're ignoring her lesson plan and we're taking you shopping. Come on."
 Somehow without a word of consent, and despite some truly terrifying glares, they managed to get Sesshomaru to follow them downstairs and into Liu's (new) Lexus. They even taught him how to open the door without ripping it off its hinges. He'd had practice with using the door of the apartment Jenny made sure was provided for him. In any case, Sesshomaru soon found himself in the unenviable position of being trapped in the back seat of a car with two humans that squabbled nearly as bad as Rin and Jakken did during their travels together.

"We have to go to Mahdi first," Liu argued.

"But he's not on the way. We don't want to backtrack."

"We have to give him time to make at least one suit."

"It's not like we're bringing Sesshomaru to the prom. We'll find him something that fits on the way."

"No!" He pounded his fist into the steering wheel. "If we're kidnapping him, we're doing it right. Sessh, back me up my friend."

But Sesshomaru had his eyes locked on the passing scenery outside the car window. He'd been through human villages before, but nothing looked anything close to familiar. The humans came dressed in all sorts of shapes and styles, from rough and grungy to prim and polished. The men and women themselves had as much variety as their clothing. Black, rich mahogany, pale white with speckles, reddish brown … orange? Despite his many travels, he'd never seen so many different races in his life.

"They look strange, don't they." Rosario said, catching on to what he was focused on. "It's fine if you think so. We're in New York City; lots of them are weird, even to us. Sometimes humans want to feel unique — um, special."

The cars around them seemed to grind to a halt. "Fantastic," Liu grumbled. "Why do we even have to live here, anyway? We could literally set up anywhere in the world and people would come to us."

"Jenny likes people."

"No, Jenny hates people."

"She hates idiots. Which makes me wonder why she hired you in the first place."

"What? I bring valuable, indispensable skills to this team!"

"That's a weird word for 'lots and lots of money.'"

"That's rich coming from someone who forgets her own name."

"Hey, I have legitimate brain damage. That's excusable."


The woman certainly had a bias toward certain words.
They promised him they would go to a small shop. But as they approached the building that stretched several stories above his head, he doubted that they knew the definition of the word 'small.' Nonetheless, Sesshomaru followed his companions through the door.

Inside, a small man wearing a turban and a sharp gray suit looked up from a counter with a load of fabric strewn across it. The room definitely felt small, with racks of dark clothing made of quality fabric lining the walls and dummies wearing some of the clothing offered for sale. Sesshomaru idly ran his fingers along the sleeve of one of these humanoid dummies missing a head, hands and feet, wondering if he, too, would be wearing one of these dreary ensembles.

"Mahdi!" Liu said, taking the man into his wide arms in a hug. "Good to see you again! It has been far too long."

"It's been a week," Rosario said, rolling her eyes. "We can barely tear you away from this place."

The shop owner's face remained a hard, no-nonsense line. "He only does this to steal my wallet."

Liu shrugged and pulled away. "And your watch." Between two fingers, he held up a silver time piece.

Sesshomaru had to blink several times and reexamine his memory as Liu pulled not only a wallet from his sleeve, but a gold chain with a key, a ring and a dollar bill wrapped around the inside of a pen. In one innocuous greeting, Liu took everything of value the shop owner had on his person. Noticing his slightly perturbed expression, Liu explained, "I'm a pickpocket. See?" He then pulled a small novel — *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* — from his coat pocket.

Immediately, Sesshomaru scrambled through his sleeves to find the book Jenny had given him the night before, but it was nowhere to be found except in Liu's hand. Normally this would have been cause to rip off the thief's hands and leave him in the dirt bleeding, but he couldn't bring himself to feel anything more than amazement at Liu's talent and audacity. Instead, he just snatched it back and put it back in his sleeve.

"Relax, I wasn't going to keep it. I'm just showing off."

Rosario put an arm around Mahdi's shoulders. "Our boss is willing to pay for an entirely new wardrobe for our new friend. Cash as usual, no questions, keep your mouth shut…"

"Kevlar lining too, I imagine." Mahdi's wrinkles didn't multiply, and he calmly pushed his glasses up his nose as he gave Sesshomaru a once-over. "And I take it you'll need this as soon as possible."

"Let me put it this way: he's been wearing that kimono for weeks, and now we're introducing him to 21st century fashion."

"Oh, and there's a slight possibility the fur is not detachable," Liu added.

Mahdi sighed and gestured for Sesshomaru to follow him to the back to get him measured. "Just when I think she can't pull anyone else stranger than you two out of the woodwork…"

"So it turns out that the fur pelt isn't necessarily not detachable, but Fluffy and Sesshomaru are basically inseparable."

"Liu."

"Not to worry, though. Mahdi is a genius as always and can work with it."
"Liu."

"The suit lays nicely, so you can't even tell there's something attached. He looks like a model — trust me, I would know."

"Liu."

"You're really going to be impressed. I know Sesshomaru is. He's spending a lot of time with the mirror."

"Liu!" Jenny shouted over the phone. "I was only running late. I told you to stall him, not kidnap him for a shopping spree!"

From where Sesshomaru stood, Liu had no appearance of contrition about him at all. By the looks of it, the man had no idea his yokai ears could hear both sides of his phone call. "What can I say? He came willingly."

This earned him a slight growl, but Mahdi would have none of that. The shop owner, a tailor by trade, readjusted Sesshomaru's position again and moved another pin in the suit coat, accidentally sticking him. If either of them noticed, they didn't let on.

The back room smelled like dust, resin and brick and had all sorts of interesting finds for Sesshomaru to examine while standing patiently and acting like the world's most cooperative mannequin. Machines for sewing, dummies whose shape could be changed according to specific measurements, bolts of cloth, and a dummy wearing a coat covered in bells. This last item caught his attention only because Liu was using it to pass the time while he spoke with Jenny. He filled each pocket with a small item or scrap of fabric, then proceeded to walk by and take the items away. Sesshomaru could barely keep track of Liu's fingers as he slipped them into the pockets and lifted the various materials stuffed inside without ringing any of the bells.

"He used to come here to practice," Mahdi explained, "back when he was smaller. His parents immigrated from Tonga when he was about 9. They lived in the apartments upstairs. He liked to bother me, so I thought I'd teach him something useful to keep him occupied. Little did I know he could actually turn it into a career path. At least his new boss keeps him from getting into too much trouble."

"That is so not true," Liu said, returning from his phone call. "It turns out the tennis player beheader was a jealous girlfriend and Jenny is on her way back. Mahdi, this is your best. Work. Yet. Why do you never let me take your stuff on the runway?"

The tailor replied with a disgusted curse word in yet another language Sesshomaru couldn't recognize.

"Have you shown Rosario yet? Come on."

Ignoring his icy stare, Liu pushed Sesshomaru out of the back room and into the main shop area. Something outside the window had caught Rosario's attention as she didn't notice when they entered. Her arms crossed, she stood stiffly, not breaking her gaze. "You about done?"

"Take a look."

She didn't move. "Looks great."

With an exasperated sigh, Liu joined her at the window and put on his serious face. "What is it?"
"Bank across the street is about to be robbed. Lookout, getaway driver, two armed men about to walk in." She nodded toward each of the suspects. "Looks like they've done this before. Police response is approximately seven minutes. By then, they'll be in and out."

"It's just money. As long as no one gets hurt, we can let it go."

"They have guns. Do they really look like they're not going to hurt anyone?" She gave Liu a hard look and he responded with a sigh. "I'm going in," she said, pulling on a worn blue flannel jacket and a pair of aviator sunglasses.

Sesshomaru moved to follow her, but Liu held him back with a hand on his arm. "We haven't paid for that suit yet. Just watch."

Against his better judgement, he joined Liu at the window, followed by Mahdi, and kept his eyes on the Hispanic woman. Rosario crossed the road with her hands in her pockets, blending right in with the few other people walking down the road. An unsuspecting man wearing a brimmed hat and a baggy shirt and jeans, had his focus on the road, watching for a police response, so when Rosario came up behind him and hit him in the neck, he went down without a fight.

After dragging him off to the side of the sidewalk, she moved on to a weathered car missing its license plates. The antsy driver frowned as he saw her come up to his window, but he didn't think anything of it until she'd pulled a gun out of her belt and smashed his window in. The thin, 5' 6" woman proceeded to punch him in the teeth, reach in and pull the keys out of the ignition.

"This is the impressive part," Liu said, elbowing Sesshomaru. "Or it would be if we were in there."

The driver slumped over unconscious in his seat. Having taken care of the outside influences, Rosario entered the bank. From their vantage point, the three men in the tailor shop window saw only a few people run out in terror, some of them talking on their cell phones. They didn't see anything else for nearly a minute, only heard screams and a couple of gunshots. Then a man in a brown leather jacket and a black mask over his head went flying out the door. Instead of running off like he should have, he picked himself back up and ran back inside.

Liu grimaced. "Ooh, bad idea."

More shouting came from inside the building, but no more gunshots were heard. It only took Rosario a few more seconds to send the masked man back out the door for good, followed up by a similarly dressed man with a rubber clown mask on his face.

Peeling off and abandoning her jacket, Rosario stepped over the men groaning in pain, broke down a handgun and tossed the pieces at them for emphasis.

By the time the bell over the door rang, signaling Rosario's return to the shop, police sirens wailed in the distance. She had a strange smirk on her face and a distant look in her eyes as she closed and leaned against the door. "That was fun."

"And never shall we speak of it happening, lest Jenny find out." Suddenly uninterested in the scene unfolding outside, Liu clapped his hands. "Shall we finish?"

Jenny stood in the middle of the entryway with her arms crossed, narrowed eyes, and a paper bag at her feet, tapping her toes expectantly. Rosario pushed Liu in first, but the sight of both of them made her shoulders tense up in preparation for the tongue lashing she had ready.

Liu put up his hands in surrender to the blonde woman barely half the size of him. "Before you get
started, I think today was a wonderful educational opportunity."

"I agree," Jenny said, holding up her phone with an Instagram-ed picture of Rosario leaving the jewelry store. "If you're going to stop a robbery, scrub the cameras. I've taught you both better than this."

Liu's face went pale, but Rosario had to get a closer look at the phone and still looked confused by it. "I have no idea what that is," she said.

Just then, Sesshomaru entered the apartment carrying a few bags of merchandise from various stores. The fur pelt over his shoulder and his long, silver-white hair remained unchanged, but Jenny stood in shock to see the transformation. A clean, white business suit with the coat left unbuttoned, silver cuff-links, polished black shoes, a bright red tie with a floral pattern and matching pocket square, an atomic Rolex on his wrist, and his hair pulled back in a low ponytail gave him all the appearance of a typical high-powered executive, while the distinct markings on his face and wrists gave him an eccentric flair. Underneath the coat, the scabbards of Bakusaiga and Tenseiga hung from a new belt, keeping his weapons at the ready. He noted with amusement that not only could Jenny not stop staring in awe, but her heart thundered in her chest. Funny how humans' reactions could change so drastically in response to new appearances.

Rosario grinned like a high school girl at her boss's expression. "Now you can take him places without people thinking he's a cosplayer."

With a nervous laugh, Jenny soon found her voice and remembered how to blink. "Thank God for that, I guess." Clearing her throat, she turned her attention to the bag at her feet. "Once you put away your purchases, I've got a gift I'd like to give to you."

Eager to move things along, Rosario took Sesshomaru by the arm and ushered him out of the apartment, saying, "I can help."

As soon as the door was shut behind them, Liu elbowed Jenny in the arm. Which when done by someone as large and strong as him, tends to leave a bruise. "I did a good job, didn't I."

"Yes," she replied. "Still not subtle, though."

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Sitting side by side at the kitchen counter, Jenny set a square blue device with a black glass front before Sesshomaru. "This is a smart phone," she said. "Specifically, this is an HTC 510 Desire. With it, you can talk to people all over the world, send written messages, take pictures and videos, play games and music, and browse the Internet. We're only going to cover two of these functions today: telephone calls and text messages. And if anything doesn't make sense, just stop me like usual."

"Why do I need this?" he immediately asked.

"So I can talk to you when we're on assignment and I'm on one end of the city and you're on the other end. There's a button at the top of the phone. Press it."

Taking the device that felt tiny in his long fingers, Sesshomaru did as he was instructed, bringing the glass to life with color.

"That's your screen. You touch that while there's color to make it do what you want. Put your finger at the bottom and drag up." At his elbow, Jenny watched patiently as he fiddled with the screen to make it unlock. Finally, he swiped upward, but his nail left one long scratch in the screen. "Bit too hard, there. You have to be careful with touch screens. All these little pictures are called icons. Touch that one in the bottom left corner."
The screen changed from a bright blue background with icons to a black screen with a grid of numbers. The setup looked familiar. "This is a type of telephone," he concluded. Some days ago, Jenny had gone into a drawn out lesson on how humans in the 21st century communicate, and the telephone was one item she went over.

"Yes it is. Now, I'm going to have you practice calling my cell phone. Your phone can remember or save phone numbers for you, but I want you to memorize my phone number. So touch 9 … 1 … 2 …"

His finger slipped and hit 5 instead.

"It's okay, just press that button. It's the backspace key. Good. 2 … 5 …"

The glass under the 5 suddenly burst into a small white spiderweb at his touch. "I broke it," he grumbled in frustration.

But Jenny simply slipped the phone out of his grasp. "Don't worry about it. I thought this might happen." After turning off the cracked phone, she pulled a box out from her paper bag, took off the top and presented him with another cell phone the exact size and shape as the first one. "I bought spares."

Gently guiding him from her seat at his elbow, Jenny showed Sesshomaru how to make phone calls, answer phone calls, program contacts, write and send text messages, and set ring tones. (He set it to vibrate as soon as she told him how.) His fingers and impatience cracked many, many more phones. On one occasion, crushed the whole thing in his fist when he opened the wrong application and annoying music started playing — for the fifth time. But then the device leaked something acidic and she said something about the battery catching on fire and he avoided doing that again.

"I think you've finally got the hang of this," Jenny declared long after the sun had set. The bag of endless cell phones also contained a thin black cord with a metal prong on the end that fit into a slot of the phone. "Don't forget that you have to charge the battery every night. Or every other night depending on how much you use it. And this will help protect your screen from scratches." She handed him a rectangle of a stiff, clear film that fit the size of his phone.

"I think you should put it on."

"Sure." While cleaning the fingerprints off the screen, she asked, "How are you liking the 21st century?"

"Is this a part of your English lessons?" he asked, allowing deep suspicion to enter his tone.

"Not exactly. I just want to know what you're feeling about everything and if there's anything I can do to help you."

"Your concern is not necessary."

With a final squishing of air bubbles, Jenny handed Sesshomaru his new phone. "There you go." The patient, somewhat amused look had left her face, leaving behind a cold, businesslike demeanor. "Well it's getting late. I should send you home."

"I don't sleep," he told her. Again.

Standing up, she shooed him out of the apartment. "Keep playing with your phone and get to know it. I'll see you tomorrow."
The bags of new clothes ended up in a pile on the bed, which Sesshomaru never touched. He would have simply thrown the smart phone onto the kitchen counter along with his kimono, hakama and armor, but Jenny seemed rather insistent that he keep it in good condition and charged. So he found an outlet and plugged both it and the cord in before going to the one piece of furniture in this tiny set of rooms that he actually used.

Rosario had furnished the place well for the short time limit given. Overnight, she turned the bare apartment into one passably livable with a bed, chest of drawers, a sofa, two armchairs, a television, a few lamps, and food in the refrigerator. Jenny added a bookcase later, one that reached to the ceiling. In the last few weeks, she alone had given him enough books to fill most of the shelves. Fiction, non-fiction, picture books — he read them all. Whatever she gave him to get acquainted with modern knowledge and the English language, he devoured it instantly.

He took a hardcover book from the bookcase and sat in the window sill where he spent most, if not all, of his nights. The thought of sleep gave him a bitter taste in the back of his mouth. To close his eyes for a moment and wake up in a world that had gone by overnight … he couldn't do it again. Adjusting to this one gave him difficulty as it was. Furthermore, he simply had too much to learn to waste time on sleep.

Tonight's book was *Thing Explainer* by Randall Munroe. This book offered a different challenge from the others. Reading any of these books in English was like putting together a picture piece by piece without knowing what the completed image looked like. He needed to figure out the meaning of each word before he could understand sentences, then pages, then chapters. Glimpses of stories lay scattered in his memory, but understanding the larger picture didn't matter so much as getting accustomed to the language and grammar. And every night, he learned even more about what humans had discovered.

*Thing Explainer*, however, had easy-to-understand words and no stories to follow. It was the *things* that it explained that he couldn't quite comprehend. A vehicle that carried humans all the way to the moon, machines that could burn entire cities, boxes that created power … In his day, even yokai couldn't accomplish such feats. But humans had no end to their creativity when it came to solving non-problems and questions. Getting into the air seemed like one of those things they had a particular fascination with. Instead of coming to terms with walking, they made flying machines, then climbed aboard. Admirable, but at the end of the day, humans walked home on their two feet and he could glide home above their heads effortlessly.

Not that he had any need to gloat.

While this world didn't have forests quite in abundance, he'd come to see the metal, glass and cement buildings as a new type of forest after all these nighttime periods of pondering. The city housed hunters, unsuspecting prey, herbivores, carnivores, omnivores. Life thrived, struggled, screamed occasionally, and was snuffed out in an instant. The only difference was he couldn't hunt near as frequently as he would have liked. He didn't need to eat often — a quick trip out of the city to a nearby forest to prey on a deer every week or so was sufficient — but he didn't like feeling restrained. And Jenny had a fit the one time she caught him snatching a pigeon out of the air. Something about avian flu.

Speaking of the devil, the apartment may have been two doors down from the office, but he could still hear Jenny talking over the phone, typing on her laptop, meeting with late-night clients — all the mundane minutia she didn't feel the need to bore him with. The court she held each day, deciding
who most needed help from Merripit House, fascinated him. Policemen with cases that had no answers left with a flippant response and a solution from the ruler of the House. Parents with a runaway child would leave feeling relieved when she got the errant brat under control. She took on ordinary, straightforward cases because only she could see a more interesting mystery underneath the 'red herrings,' as she put it. Then at night, she quietly wrapped up details and eased her clients' fears.

Sesshomaru watched the exit of the apartment complex nightly for the detective to finally leave the office. Earlier Liu and Rosario had left in two separate cars headed the same direction. He suspected that Jenny had sent them to fulfill an assignment and then kept track of them via phone throughout the night. A door shut with some finality and keys scraped in a lock, signalling the exit of the last person to leave the office that night. He snapped his book closed and pushed open his window.

Time to begin the hunt.

First off, Jenny never left from the same exit each night. Front door, parking lot, fire escape, back door - even out the window once. The next day, she had a slight limp and she hadn't tried that one again since. This evening, Sesshomaru thought perhaps she would use the parking lot exit as it had been a while since she had. But then a whiff of rosemary and gunpowder hit his nose from the west. The fire escape tonight.

Dressed in the same leather-like clothes she'd worn in the traffickers' warehouse, Jenny climbed down the ladder and jumped off onto the sidewalk. She slung a purse over her shoulder and began walking down the street. If it weren't for the bright white-yellow — no, the word was blonde — streak of hair cutting across the street, she would have blended right into the city with her dark clothes.

Here, too, came another set of variables. Would she take a bus? Hail a cab? Catch a train in the subway? Or would she just keep on walking? At the moment, she walked.

Before she got too far out of sight, Sesshomaru opened the window wide enough to slip through and stepped out, landing silently in the garden below. The sun hadn't set far enough for him to risk exposing himself by flying, so he followed on foot. He might as well test out the effectiveness of his new clothing. The purpose of such a purchase was to help him blend in, after all. Fifty meters ahead of him, Jenny joined a crowd of commuters headed to the train station, her head low and her hands in her pockets.

Towering over most humans had its advantages as he could keep an eye on the streak of white-blond hair moving through the crowd - swifty, too. For the first time, heads didn't turn to stare at his clothes like they thought he had some strange proclivities. They now turned upward to see just where his height ended. He never could just blend in. That and the swell of youki that surrounded him made the crowd part unconsciously before him, even if they had no idea why.

Jenny turned down a street with marketplaces all along each side. And suddenly a hat shaped like a blue felt bucket with a brim appeared on her head. Only a moment ago, this hat with an equally flashy blue rose, was hanging on a hook as one of the wares offered by a shop. Once a thief, always a thief. But it did disguise one of her distinctive features and helped make her harder to spot.

As he passed this same hat shop, Sesshomaru snagged a silver-gray one that caught his fancy, and placed it on his head. Two could play this game.

Half the crowd turned toward the train station, and he expected Jenny to go down the stairs with them. Instead, she kept on going straight ahead along the road toward an even more crowded part of the city. Moving through this crowd felt like walking upstream in a rushing river as these humans, if they felt the presence of his youki, ignored all external distractions to get where they wanted to go.
With her petite size, the detective had little trouble weaving through the swarm. But as long as he kept his eye on the bobbing blue hat, he didn't worry about the pushing and jostling or losing her.

Right up until the blue hat bobbed down and disappeared entirely. Scanning the crowd wildly, Sesshomaru fought to pick out the woman’s scent from all the others. Not many here smelled of gunpowder after all. On second thought, far more people in this crowd had fired guns recently than he had counted on. But constant proximity to the woman had granted him more familiarity with her overall scent than she intended and he could quickly figure out which direction she had gone.

Right around where Jenny vanished, he found the stolen hat off to the side in the street. The crowd nearly knocked him over when he stopped to pick it up. Then he noticed Jenny racing through traffic, dodging the cars and the — he had no name for the narrow two-wheeled vehicles some humans rode at high speeds. She conveniently found ways to put vehicles as large as Ah-Un in between them, then changing directions while she had advantage of a distraction. She didn't even look for these opportunities, like her daily routine included losing a tail that would not shake.

Soon Jenny reappeared on the other side of the street, melting into the crowd as if she hadn't just taken off on a dead run moments before. If any human were following her, they would probably cross the street as soon as possible to keep up with her, which would only expose them. He decided to stay back and wait. His yokai eyes could see her well enough anyway.

As he kept up with her on the other side of the road, he made note that the shoes Liu forced upon him (because "I will not have you ruin a beautiful ensemble with the wrong pair of shoes!") had no grip, rubbed his heels and pinched just a bit. Surely Jenny would see reason in allowing him his armored boots back. If not Jenny, then certainly he could prevail upon Rosario for help. That strange woman with a temper seemed positively enamored with him.

A yellow car topped with 'Taxi' emblazoned in light, stopped at the side of the road right next to Jenny. With barely enough time to speak to one another, the detective climbed inside, passed him a handful of bills, and the car left the curb. Despite the heavy traffic, the taxi pushed its way through the others and got some good distance before Sesshomaru could decide how best to proceed.

Moving like a human proved difficult here. Keeping up with a car by foot would do more than simply turn heads, but perhaps if he kept his speed to a reasonable sprint he could remain unnoticed. Just one problem. Crowds don't suffer one man's sudden course change lightly, nor do they allow for someone to move faster than the average walking speed. Nonetheless, Sesshomaru forced himself through the wall of people, possibly pushing them aside with a wave of youki, and found a break between the crowd and the road where he could run.

Taking a sharp right, the taxi turned down a less populated street, clearly finding that the fastest route to wherever Jenny needed it to go. When it passed the building on the corner, Sesshomaru stepped out into the maze of cars and — seriously, what are these steel carts called? Darting between obstacles nearly fast enough to look like a blur, he got across the street and aimed for an alley that he could cut through. His hat flew off as he moved even faster with no humans about. He absolutely had to get ahead of the taxi, no matter if the few homeless people caught a glimpse of his feet scarcely touching the ground.

Once he made it to the other side of the block, he searched the street for Jenny's taxi. To his dismay, no fewer than five yellow taxis waited at the end of this street. Getting out onto the sidewalk thirty meters away from them, he ducked a bit to see into the windows, hoping to find a streak of blonde hair.

Not a one of them contained the detective.
This, too, was part of the game. He always lost her. But he refused to let her outwit him tonight. With his senses at the height of their capabilities, he sifted through the mountain of information before him, searching for the right concoction of scents. Rosemary. Gunpowder. A hint of spearmint. Newspaper. A voice that had the steady tone of a low flute and spoke sweetly while undermining the status of whomever she talked to. A sharp gaze that drove people away should she choose that.

Then his ears caught a car door opening, a frog’s croak, shouts of surprise at an innocuous amphibian leaping from a taxi, and Jenny's deep breath as she recovered from a sneeze. Just past the intersection, a taxi heading to his right had a passenger that released a frog. Sesshomaru allowed himself a smug grin at the reliability of human frailty before diving back into the crowd to follow the direction of this cab. Soon enough, the cab stopped and Jenny escaped. While the driver may have refused to help her escape from her hunter, she now had quite a bit more distance on him.

It didn't take long for Sesshomaru to spot Jenny weaving through the flow of people. Only now she'd pulled her hair to the side and taken off her jacket to look like someone else. She even stole another hat from an inattentive child as she turned with the crowd into the stairwell of the subway.

The subway had given him plenty of trouble before. Not only had he been too noticeable, but if she even did get on a train, he had very little time to get to the station on either direction and check if she disembarked at that stop or went even further along the line. He had soon learned to watch for if she got money out of her pocket to pay for a ticket before she descended into the station. If she didn't, he had a better chance of following her by simply waiting for her to double back.

Today, however, he could join the human throng. And the thought of a new avenue of attack thrilled Sesshomaru to no end.

From the top of the staircase, he saw her standing at a large metal box, pressing buttons and inserting money. Once she retrieved a paper from the dispenser, she repeated the process, but without taking the paper. These tickets were called tickets, or receipts. In any case, everyone who wanted to get on the train needed something resembling these papers. Could she have left the ticket as an act of charity? Or possibly because she knew?

No, she couldn't know. She never checked over her shoulder for a pursuer or acted like she knew someone was there. Her methods of getting lost in a crowd seemed more instinctual than deliberate. Which should beg the question, why does she feel the need to lose potential followers? This could be answered another day.

Pushing people aside with greater force, Sesshomaru forced his way through the throng to get to the ticket box before anyone else could get there. As soon as he reached the metal contraption, he butted in front of some man trying to use it and thrust his hand inside the basket at the bottom. His claws wrapped around a scrap of paper and pulled it free.

Jenny passed through a set of gates where she had to present the ticket in order to get through. Sesshomaru almost forgot he needed to be inconspicuous as he hurried to catch up and take the same route. A feeling of delight surged through his system at the thought of getting farther than he ever had before, of getting closer to finding out where this woman lived and where she might be hiding the Ketsugō-kiba. He nearly leaped over the gate himself, but according to the scowls of the policemen patrolling the area, watching for thieves, that would have been a frowned upon action. Instead, he just kept his eye on Jenny's form merging with the group of people headed for one particular train.

The movement ended at a hallway with columns and benches, flooded with harsh artificial light. Jenny stood at the edge of a ledge where the side of a tunnel began. The floor of this tunnel had two narrow strips of rigid metal, stretching off in either direction as far as the eye could see. Sesshomaru
paused behind one of the cement pillars plastered with colorful papers advertising various services and events. He’d never dared to get this close before, and he had no desire to ruin such a good opportunity.

A rumble passed through the area just before a massive metal cart slid into the tunnel, stopping right at the end of the hallway. It had glass all along its sides, and at certain sections, metal doors slid open. He’d seen this invention, a train, many times overhead. It reminded him of a giant metal snake. From the side, it looked entirely different. Almost immediately, travelers inside the train flooded out into the station, replaced moments later by the ones waiting in the hallway. The Harkness woman was one of those, moving with the crowd as soon as they started walking. Sesshomaru followed suit, entering the train several doors away from her.

The train had connected sections to it, but he could see from one into the next through the windows. Standing one section away from his target, he could keep watch over her motions without exposing himself. He took hold of the bar overhead, mimicking the others who hadn't found a seat, and prepared for the carriage to leave. Before the doors closed, warning lights flashed and beeped. Just as they slid shut, Jenny stepped off the train and back into the station.

He scrambled to get to the doors before they closed, but even when he hit the button to open it, they refused to let him back out. The floor lurched to the left and the train went on its way, carrying Sesshomaru away.

Jaw clenched, he turned away from the window, avoiding the sight of Jenny's successful escape. Then he found an empty seat next to a man that smelled like stale beer and cigarettes, and forced himself to not put his fist through the side of the train.

He stayed in that seat until dark. Hard to determine that when most of the train's path is underground. Under cover of night, he flew back home, entering his residence via the open window. Whether or not anyone saw him didn't matter at all to him. He had reading material to return to, after all. He picked up *Thing Explainer*, turned on one of the lamps and attempted to return to his studies.

Then something on his kitchen counter caught his eye. A white dot flashed on the cell phone. Unobtrusive, but noticeable. Tucking the book under his arm, he followed the directions Jenny had so carefully given him earlier that day and unlocked the phone. He found a little red circle with a '1' in the corner of the text messaging app and opened it.

*You saw through the taxi switch. Not bad! You're getting better. Of course, you don't get full credit for following the frog. Tomorrow, I promise won't cheat and use the train.*

A wave of disgust ran through him, caused not simply by his crushing defeat at the hands of a normal human woman. Apparently he had been playing *her* game all along.
Guard Dogs

The next day, Sesshomaru met Jenny at the top of the stairs with a blue hat in his hand. "What purpose does this serve?"

She readjusted the purse strap on her shoulder so she could start digging around for her keys. "It … looks pretty? And when I wear it, I feel pretty?"

"You knew I was following you."

"Oh that! It's good practice for you when I eventually assign you to follow someone, and me for losing someone following me. Liu and Rosario did the same thing when I hired them and they still don't know where I live."

"I see." He held out the hat awkwardly. "I don't need this."

With a spare hand, she took it and placed it on her head. "Thanks."

As they approached the offices of Merripit House, Liu came down the hall in a panic. "Boss, you have to do something. Rosario's about to kill someone."

The trio rushed to the office, Jenny throwing open the door herself, and found Rosario holding up a man in an expensive suit by his throat, using one hand. And since she was standing on a kitchen chair, the man's feet dangled several inches off the ground. His desperate death grip on her wrist kept him from suffocating in her grasp.

"Rosario!"

At the sound of her boss's voice, her fingers released him and let him fall. While he composed himself, Rosario calmly stepped off the chair and stepped aside, keeping herself within punching distance. "He broke in while I was taking a nap," she explained with a shrug.

Straightening his suit, the man cleared his throat and turned his fiery gaze on Jenny. "For the last four weeks, I have called, left messages, emailed, even sent letters, and you have ignored every last one of my attempts to contact you. I spoke to the NSA and apparently you've been blowing off every potential case from a major government organization except the NYPD. And the FAA for some reason. You have left me with no choice but to force your hand."

The man reminded her of a rat. And not just because he had an annoying habit of weaseling his way into her affairs. Beady brown eyes, long narrow nose, bushy dark hair and thin eyebrows completed the mental image of a sniveling government man with too much power and not enough ways to abuse it. Dressed in a suit decorated with a diamond studded tie pin, an ID badge with an absurdly high level of security clearance, a pressed pocket square, a gun holster and gold cuff links, he acted like he owned whatever room he stood in.

Having five agents under his command currently searching every nook and cranny of Merripit House helped too.

Liu stood awkwardly behind Jenny, not knowing if he needed to draw the gun his fingers reached subtly for. Sesshomaru stood at her side with his hand on the hilt of Bakusaiga and his face impassive. His gaze flicked between the two threats facing off, waiting for a signal to act.

"Michaelis," Jenny said with considerable patience. "Please do tell me what the United Nations is
doing to force my hand. Are we still pretending you work for the UN?"

Genuine smiles never came to this man's face unless he had reason to revel in another's misfortune, so the sweet grin that stretched across his mouth had an aftereffect like unto aspartame. "Auditing your finances."

One of the agents emerged from Jenny's office holding a basket full of labeled and coded packets of various white powders. "What do you want me to do with these?" he asked with a professional passiveness.

"Oh, and apparently we're performing a drugs bust too." This smile was real. "Take them in for evidence."

"Don't forget to dust them for prints too," Jenny added as the agent passed her and left the apartment. "What do you think you're going to find in here?"

"Something to strip you of your PI license and throw your …" He eyed Sesshomaru with a raised eyebrow. "… friends in jail. And not the regular kind, either. I'm thinking of a certain prison in Colombia."

"I'd be impressed if your men were capable of taking my people into custody in the first place."

"And the joke's on you," Liu interjected. "She doesn't even have a license because we're not private investigators."

Michaelis' eyes narrowed in confusion. "I don't see that helps your case."

"Sir!" Another agent popped a skinned boar head out of the fridge. Tastefully covered in plastic, of course. Sesshomaru and Rosario were the only ones to not flinch a bit at the sight. "Evidence?"

"Put that back," he ordered. "Why do you even have that, Harkness?"

"I … can't honestly say at the moment." Her gaze turned to Rosario, who had the decency to take the boar's head from the agent and return it to its shelf in the fridge. "I hope I'll be hearing an explanation later."

"It's for … an experiment," Rosario said.

"Never a dull moment around you," Michaelis said, shaking off the mental image. "Now, as I was saying —"

"I see you got a few ideas from Sherlock," Jenny interrupted. "But if you think I'm dumb enough to leave incriminating evidence in my office, why do you want my help?"

A sadistic laugh leaked from his lips. "Oh, I doubt you are that stupid. I suppose that means we'll be here a while."

A frown finally crossed her face. "Well bless your heart, you certainly are dedicated, even if it's to the wrong cause."

"Nonetheless, I can make it impossible for you work, with or without impunity. Unless you agree to take this case."

Another agent poked her head out from Jenny's office. "We finally got that last safe open, but all it has is a stack of old journals —"
"You put those back untouched."

The apartment fell still and silent. She didn't have to make any specific threat, but every one of Michaelis' agents froze in fear. Even Sesshomaru could feel a cold wave of anger radiating from the detective and a desire to give her some space. Rosario did put a hand on the grip of the gun at her side, ready to interfere.

Wisely, Michaelis gave a nod, directing the agent to put the journals back where she found them. As soon as the safe clicked shut, the occupants of the room let out an audible sigh of relief.

Jenny crossed her arms and glared at her antagonist. "I take it this panicked display of what little power and authority you have means that you finally have a case worthy of my attention."

"'Worthy'?" he sputtered.

"Yes, worthy. Every country around the world is dealing with an inexplicable reemergence of Legendary Creatures, but I refuse for Merripit House to be considered synonymous with the 'X-Files.' We don't put out fires, Michaelis. We find arsonists. Now, what did you find that has you so panicked that you dare to threaten me?"

The agents also happened to be fantastic techies. Within moments, they had the TV screens in the living room hooked up to a couple laptops. Jenny took a seat in one of the armchairs while Sesshomaru stood to attention just behind her. Liu made popcorn and plopped down on the couch with Rosario.

"The new guard dog is an interesting addition," Michaelis remarked, barely letting his gaze slide toward the watchful daiyokai.

"And a particularly lethal one, too," Jenny replied icily. "I'd hate to see what happens if Sesshomaru should lose his temper because some dweeb in a suit thought he could make snide remarks."

The daiyokai sent a cold glare toward the rat faced man, unsettling him like a literal flood of fear had hit him in the chest. Taking a deliberate step away, Michaelis stood before the television and pointed a remote at the laptop.

The screens filled with black-and-white security camera footage from a few cameras surrounding a well preserved Mayan pyramid. At first, the day proceeded like normal. Tourists walked around the four staircases, took pictures of the sculptures and hieroglyphs, and posed for stupid photos.

"This is footage of El Castillo taken in Chichen Itza in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico. Similar events have occurred at La Muerta in Guatemala and Calakmul in Campeche, Mexico," he explained.

Then, the images went blurry as the cameras began to shake. A few seconds later, the side of the pyramid burst open like a shaped charge had gone off, but without the telltale smoke and flames. Tourists ran away, but some got caught by the flying stone and were sent tumbling down.

From the resulting hole, a beast with the head and fangs of a snake, a crest of feathers down its back and around its face like a mane, and a roar that sent everyone stumbling to the ground, slithered out and onto the pyramid. It had a body nearly as wide as an elephant's and long enough to wind around the top platform. Flicking a tongue out to taste the air, it paused for a minute to search for prey.

A smile threatened to break across Sesshomaru's face at the sight of a creature powerful enough to be worthy of death by his blade. But his face remained impassive. Jenny could practically hear
Bakusaiga hum in anticipation.

Turning its head, the beast's eyes locked onto something in the forest. Then it suddenly slithered off through the air into the dense greenery where it vanished.

"Quetzalcoatl," Rosario whispered after the room shared a moment of shock in silence.

Michaelis abruptly became the professional again as he paused the footage. "This is the third feathered serpent that we know of that has been awakened. The other two were much smaller and easily dealt with. We haven't been able to find the third, but local police have reported several missing persons. We need to find the third one immediately."

"What exactly happened to the first two?" Jenny asked.

Another click, and a new image appeared on the screen next to the footage, that of a mugshot of a mustached Mexican man in his late 50s with a cruel glint to his eyes. "A hobbyist went hunting. And now we can only presume that their heads are stuffed and hanging on a wall of El Comedor del Hombre's secure mansion in the middle of his armed compound. Our intelligence says he has the third in his custody."

"Alive?"

"Well..." Michaelis summoned the mugshots of five mode men and a couple women. "It's probably not a coincidence that El Comedor's enemies, and ex-wife, are the ones that turned up missing. Naturally, a known cartel lord cannot be allowed to be in possession of a feathered serpent. The Mexican government would like to have it. The U.S. Army even more so."

"Why can't the U.S. just invade the compound?"

"Because like most cartels in Mexico, El Comedor del Hombre's men have not touched an American."

"I seem to recall that our — sorry, my — government has habitually invaded Middle Eastern countries for lesser human rights violations."

"You want me to convince the US to sanction another war? With a border country, no less? It's never going to happen."

Jenny propped her head up with her hand, looking bored of the whole ordeal. "So do you want me to steal or destroy the third feathered serpent? And I imagine you don't a hint of involvement from the UN or US."

"Really, Harkness, what I want is for these monsters to stop coming to life." Michaelis didn't notice the glance all three human members of Merripit House gave Sesshomaru, nor the glare that intensified in the daiyokai's eyes. Or if he did, he didn't care. "That's the only reason I brought you this case specifically. It's the only footage we have of anything waking up. Find out what's causing it and stop it."

An eager grin came across the detective's face and she leaned forward in her seat. "Now that's more like it, Michaelis. Go back and play it from the beginning," she ordered, rising to her feet. The tech agent rewound the footage to just as the feathered serpent burst out of the pyramid, but she held up a hand. "No, further."

Without question, he went back, letting hoards of people run backwards for several seconds before he got a signal to play the film. Standing only a foot away from the screen, Jenny stared at it, waiting
with hovering fingers. Michaelis joined her at her side, trying to see what she was looking for. "Did you recognize someone?"

"Shh!" Once more, the feathered serpent broke out of its stone tomb, but Jenny waved her hand, telling the tech guy to go back. The picture played again, and a moment later, she barked, "Stop."

Rosario and Liu went up to the TV and squinted at the frozen image. Sesshomaru and the other agents leaned in too.

Jenny's fingers started to shake as they brushed over the blurry figure of a woman in a black dress. "She started to run before the feathered serpent escaped," she said in a strained whisper. "She knew what was going to happen before the others did."

Michaelis snapped into action, getting someone on the line. "Do you have any other angles?" he asked the agent manning the laptop. "I want to see this woman's face."

Shaking herself out of her stupor, Jenny further instructed, "Get every agency worldwide looking for the woman in black, but do not approach her. Observe only. Don't even have her followed."

"Do you know the suspect?"

Sesshomaru recognized the raised heart rate that betrayed just how nervous the sight of this woman made her, but her ability to swallow that fear and put on a mask of control impressed him just a bit. "I don't want her spooked if at all possible. You can handle that, right?"

"Of course. Are you taking the case, then?"

"I need to talk to my crew in private before I decide that."

Liu choked on a piece of popcorn, earning him a few good slaps on the back from Rosario. She, too, had a faint look of surprise on her face. Michaelis gave Jenny a hard look before deciding he couldn't get anything more apart from the lead she'd already found for him. "Let me know, then. And soon, please." With that, he and his agents swept out of the apartment office, leaving Jenny alone with her crew.

"Alright, how bad is it?" Rosario demanded with crossed arms and sharp glare. "You never ask for our opinion on if we'll take a case."

Taking a seat on the coffee table facing them, Jenny took a moment to put her thoughts in order. "It's pretty bad. I've met this woman before, and … it's bad."

"Who is she?" Sesshomaru asked. This whole vague act had him itching to go tear something apart.

"Her name is Theda. But she's also been called The Woman in Black, the Grim Reaper, Santa Muerte, Azrael … she seems to pick up a new name wherever she's at."

"So she's a serial killer that's waking up legendary creatures?" Rosario guessed.

"Worse." Liu found himself starting to pace with a nervous energy. "We met her before either of you came along. We were on assignment in Lebanon tracking down a terrorist cell as a favor to Michaelis, actually. Found them easily enough: just had to figure out where all the foreign kids were headed. Along the way, we discovered that this ISIL cell had a plan to use these kids to detonate bombs in the middle of a shopping center in Beirut. They tell these kids — as young as 13, 14 years old — that the bomb vests are specially designed to blow outwards, away from them, so they'll be safe." He shook his head in disgust. "Naturally we go to the mall and find the kids, tell them they're
going to kill themselves. And it works, too. There were supposed to be six kids. We talked to four of
them and convince them to leave. That's when Theda shows up.

"She is devastatingly beautiful, possibly the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. She had ebony
hair, deep brown eyes, and a midnight black dress straight out of the '40s. She always wears black. I
was talking to Amaya, this 15 year old girl who joined ISIL a few weeks before and was having
doubts already, when Theda came up behind her and started whispering in her ear. I don't know
what she said, but Amaya just turned and left. Went right back into the crowd. I tried to go after her,
but Theda pushed me back and said, 'You're too pretty to blow up today.' Then the bombs went off."

"Every one of those kids had gone back in and blown themselves up," Jenny said, picking up when
Liu couldn't keep going. "We didn't make a bit of difference, only because Theda didn't want us to.
The death toll was 67 with 104 casualties. It should have been 68 and 103. Shrapnel lacerated my
liver." To illustrate how close she'd come to dying, Jenny stood and lifted up her shirt, showing
Sesshomaru and Rosario the scars across her torso. "As I was lying in a rapidly expanding pool of
blood, Theda approached me. I remember being so thirsty and delirious and wondering if she would
get me some water. But all she did was get something to slow the bleeding and tell me that I was too
interesting to kill just yet.

"I've seen her a few other times and she stops to talk to me. She told me she's the goddess of death,
and currently she's going by Theda."

"Has she ever gone by Izanami?" Sesshomaru suddenly asked.

Jenny's back stiffened. "Possibly. Have you met her too?"

Keeping his eyes on the blurry figure dressed in black, he explained, "I knew a sorceress named
Izanami who delighted in killing humans and yokai alike. She slaughtered hundreds before I cut her
down with Bakusaiga. She is dead."

"If we're talking about the same person, she probably reconstituted herself."

"That is impossible with Bakusaiga."

"Not with Theda. I've shot her in the head every time I've seen her since. She can't be killed, and I'm
pretty sure she can turn into a host of various psychopomps. So not only can we not kill her, but she's
a sociopath with legendary power who habitually arranges for hundreds of people to die at a time
and when she's really mad, can snap her fingers and make someone's heart stop. If she's the one
waking up the legendary creatures, we can assume it's because she intends to kill thousands, possibly
millions of people."

For a long moment, no one knew what to say. Rosario's shoulders tensed noticeably as she examined
Liu's pale face. Even Jenny noticed how he kept his mouth shut for once. Running her fingers
through her hair, she continued. "I, personally, am flying to Mexico as soon as possible and looking
into these feathered serpent attacks. I don't want any of you to feel like I'm dragging you with me on
a suicide mission."

"Aren't they all suicide missions?" Rosario asked hesitantly. "Because that's sort of why I signed
up."

"I'm not that bad," Jenny replied with mock offense in her voice. "But if you want to opt out of this
one, now is the time to do so."

Standing to attention, Liu locked his gaze with Jenny's. "Theda killed a kid right in front of me. How
many times have you met her and not told me?"

It took her a few moments to reply. "Four."

"When we find her again, I get to shoot her."

"As many times as you would like." She turned to Rosario. "What about you?"

She shrugged. "We've beaten impossible odds before. I want to meet this Theda and punch her in the teeth."

When Jenny turned to Sesshomaru, he could have struck her for the indignity of even asking. "You will be killed if I don't accompany you. I have slain many yokai more dangerous than a feathered serpent or this Theda."

"See? We have Sesshomaru," Rosario said, giving him a friendly punch to the arm. "What could possibly go — sorry! Not supposed to say it out loud."

With a nod of thanks and approval, Jenny clapped her hands together. "Right. Pack up; we leave for Mexico in two hours."
"How did you even get my fingerprints to plant on a dime bag of cocaine in the first place?"
Michaelis screeched from over a thousand miles away.

Jenny calmly finished her water bottle before replying, "You sent me an awful lot of mail. Maybe
don't handwrite me a letter next time you're trying to get my attention."

"You realize this could have ruined my career, right?"

"You're the one that decided to log cocaine I'd left in plain sight into evidence. Right after
threatening to ruin mine. Now, I imagine you're going to 'lose' the evidence in the next couple days."

He grumbled something unpleasant about the trouble he'd already gone through without her
interference. "What's your progress on the case?"

"Well if you'd quit interrupting…" She and Sesshomaru approached a pair of Mexican policemen
keeping watch over the Mayan pyramid that had burst open three days before. She pulled out a
wallet with a badge inside and held it up for them. "... Maybe I would actually get somewhere."

"Please don't start a cartel war while you're there."

The policemen lifted up the yellow caution tape so she and Sesshomaru, who attracted all sorts of
glances, could duck under. "I make no promises, dear. Talk later," she said, hanging up on him.

With a hand over her eyes, Jenny surveyed the scene before her. Construction crews and
archaeological teams had already started moving pieces of stone away, most likely to categorize it in
some school of higher education where the destruction of such a beautiful temple could be properly
mourned. However, the fact that possibly a hundred humans had gone through the interior already
annoyed her to no end.

"I told Michaelis to not let anyone in, but the damage may already be done. Hopefully you'll be able
to pick up a scent."

Sesshomaru scoffed at her. "If the creature was asleep for as long as I, no amount of humans could
have covered it up with their stench."

"I'm starting to think I shouldn't have taught you how to insult humans. Your accent's getting cleaner,
though."

They started the long walk up one of the more stable staircases, Jenny soon lagging behind
Sesshomaru's long strides and inhuman lung capacity. "What is the purpose of this building?" he
asked.

Jenny took a moment to catch up before replying, "It was a temple built by the Mayans a few
hundred years ago. They were built to house deities or bury kings. Each of the stairs represent a day
of the year. Four staircases, four seasons. Up there at the top, they'd sacrifice stuff to gods."

He paused to sniff the air, subtly giving Jenny time to catch up. "It smells like human blood. Did they
sacrifice humans here?"

She stopped in her tracks. "Yeah, and blood letting, too. You can smell that?"
Pleased at having surprised the woman who could never be caught off-guard, Sesshomaru made a small sound of confirmation.

Once at the base of the hole, the pair made their way into the depths of the pyramid. Despite the work done by the archeologists, slabs of carved rock and pieces of the pyramid still hampered their way. The obstacles provided little hindrance to Sesshomaru who simply bypassed them, but Jenny had a hard time climbing over the larger ones.

"There is another structure inside one," he declared over his shoulder to Jenny who was sliding down one longer stone down to his level.

"The Mayans would build new pyramids on top of old ones. I wouldn't be surprised if we found another one inside this one."

Crouching to the ground, Sesshomaru put a hand on one of the carvings of the interior pyramid. An energy flowed through this place, but it had a different feel from his own youki. Something more savage had slept here. Should he go back outside and smell the land of the rest of this country, he had no doubt that he'd feel bits of this same energy everywhere. Suddenly it made sense why the Harkness woman wouldn't refer to creatures outside his land as yokai. They were different beings altogether.

Along one of the walls, a fresh streak of blood had been left behind when a large serpent had broken out of its tomb. He took in a deep whiff and memorized the scent. Once he took hold of a scent, his mind never let it go. Nonetheless, he dug his claws into the wall and pulled out a piece of it to keep the scent with him. Down the tunnel, a few feathers had gotten caught in one of the cracks. These, too, he pulled out and placed in his suit coat pocket.

"I have enough to track this feathered serpent," he reported.

Jenny's eyes stared off into the depths of the tunnel, lost in thought. According to the creases in her brow, the thoughts concerned her. "I've been told that the Mayans built over the old pyramids because it was easier than building a bigger one. But what if they were trying to lock something in? And keep it buried?"

"You think this creature is powerful."

"I think it's not just a feathered serpent, but it might be the god Kukulkan. And if that's the case, I want you to be careful."

He passed her with a short harrumph. "I have defeated gods before. This one will be no different."

"If you say so. But wait to engage him in battle, please. All we need you to do right now is find him."

"Understood." Leaving Jenny behind, Sesshomaru flew off to find his quarry.

Liu and Rosario pulled up to the walls of a compound in a dingy, beat up Jeep. Looking somewhat green, Liu hopped out of the passenger seat as soon as Rosario put the vehicle in some sort of semblance of parking. "Are you trying to kill me before El Comedor del Hombre can do the job himself?"

"Pansy," she teased as she climbed out herself.

Sesshomaru came down from the treetops, his white suit looking no worse for wear despite the few
hours he'd spent in the jungle. "The serpent's scent ends here, but the beast itself seems to be hidden from me."

Grabbing a backpack from the back seat, Liu swung it over his shoulder. "Not to worry. We've got you covered."

Dressed more sensibly for the climate, Rosario wore a pair of camouflage print pants, heavy combat boots and a green T-shirt. She strapped on a belt with a pair of handguns, extra magazines of ammo, and a couple pockets with extra toys before pulling her hair back into a ponytail. Sesshomaru noticed as she did so that along her scalp for about a centimeter, her hair was bright blue. This struck him as odd as Rosario didn't seem to be one of the humans that insisted on sporting unnatural colors of hair. "Did you get a good look at the layout?" she asked.

From his breast pocket, he produced a map he'd drawn while waiting for the duo to arrive. They had taken their time, in his opinion. "The El Comedor del Hombre resides in a castle on the west within the walls."

"His name means The Man Eater in Spanish, so you don't have to say The The Man Eater," Rosario said as she examined the map. "And are you sure it's a castle? It's probably just a mansion."

Liu smacked her arm lightly. "Now now, let's not be critical of the man who learned fluent English in less than a month. English is hard enough without adding Spanish to it too."

"Just saying," she grumbled. Looking at the map this way and that, she finally looked up at the wall and decided on a course of action. "If one of you will give me a boost, I can go for the house and get the financials. You want the map?"

"You take it," Liu replied, getting a set of lockpicks out of his bag. "I'll take Sesshomaru."

With a nod of understanding, Rosario beckoned to Sesshomaru to follow her to the wall. She had him lace his fingers together so she could use him as a foothold. On the count of three, he lifted her foot up at the same time she jumped. Kicking off some vine-covered points, she continued leaping upwards until she grabbed the top of the wall and pulled herself up. A moment later, she slipped over the other side.

"Will she be safe on her own?" Sesshomaru asked when he returned.

"Oh yeah. Rosario's … Rosario's strong. She'll be fine. The real question is whether she'll leave everyone alive." Liu began walking along the wall, looking for a door. "I'm more worried about my safety, actually. But that's why I have you."

Annoyance at the thought nearly broke through his impassive expression. "And Harkness? Where is she?"

"She has her own part to play. It's a bit more … straightforward."

Liu's generous use of pauses started to get on Sesshomaru's nerves. The man clearly knew more than he let on, like a parent trying to protect his child from stories that might or confuse or anger him. He did not appreciate the implication. "What are you hiding?"

"Why whatever do you mean?" Liu asked as he innocently began working some lockpicks in a rusty padlocked door. The lock popped open a few moments later and he hurriedly ushered Sesshomaru through. Once inside, they ducked behind a row of armored trucks before a strolling sentry could see them.
From what Sesshomaru had seen earlier, most of the men inhabiting the walled and camouflaged compound wore clothing that appeared military-like as well as helped them blend into their environment, and each of them carried large, heavy guns. If he did not know from the briefing Jenny gave before he flew off to Mexico on his own (getting inside a metal contraption when he could very well fly on his own power seemed redundant and ill-advised), he would have thought these men part of a police force instead of guards surrounding what amounted to a castle, no matter what Rosario insisted on calling it.

Liu crept along the line of vehicles, keeping himself in the shadows as much as was possible in the middle of the day. Compared to Sesshomaru, he blended right in with his black and dark green ensemble, but not so much that he looked like a cat burglar. But while he walked with steps as quiet as a whisper, Sesshomaru followed in perfect silence like a great white shadow.

At the end of the row of vehicles, Liu paused as he scanned the open area for anyone that could be watching. "Did you see a security office, or someplace where everyone congregated?" he whispered to his partner.

Nodding once, Sesshomaru took the lead in guiding him to the only place in the compound that fit his description. He'd noted it as a sort of armory in his mind. Having gotten a good look at the place from overhead, he knew exactly where to go to avoid being spotted. And when anyone came across them, Sesshomaru simply rushed the unsuspecting man, punched him in the throat and threw him under a truck or into a patch of trees, and did so faster than a human could take a gasp of surprise. It would have been far simpler to slash their throats open with his poison whip, but Jenny had given him specific instructions to kill no one.

After Sesshomaru dispatched one of these men, Liu stopped to take the man's gun, jacket and beret. A casual observer would have considered him just another guard in the compound, although on closer inspection, they would have seen right through his disguise. Sesshomaru had no interest in following suit.

Once Sesshomaru pointed out the armory, Liu checked for any passing guards before casually strolling out into the open, whistling some lighthearted tune. He approached the door, which had an electronic lock, and plugged some sort of device into the keypad. The lights soon flashed green, and the door unlocked.

Instead of going inside, however, he retrieved a couple metal disks from his backpack, slipped them through the door and shut it again. While he waited, he greeted some of the passing guards and personnel like he'd been a part of the team for ages and was just taking a break.

Sesshomaru decided that if his cheeky nerve got him into trouble, he could deal with it on his own.

Checking his watch, Liu peeked inside the building, then waved Sesshomaru over. When he opened the door, six men laid crumpled in a heap on the floor. They weren't unconscious, but they certainly weren't moving much. "Nitrous oxide," Liu explained. "Want to help me get them into a closet?"

By 'help me,' Liu meant for Sesshomaru to do all the work, he quickly realized as he locked them all into a small closet without their weapons. In the meantime, the thief took control of the computer terminals and wide wall full of miniature television screens. Sesshomaru barricaded the door with a bookcase, lifting it easily in front of the entryway.

"Okay, Rosario," Liu said. "I've got eyes on the cameras. You're good to go." He must have noticed the confused look the daiyokai gave him, so he removed a small device from his right ear. "Radio. I hear everything she and Jenny say, and they hear what I say. Want one?"
While the idea of having even more of Liu's and Rosario's prattling in his head disgusted him, he did recognize the tactical advantage of communicating with one's team. So when Liu took a second such device out of his backpack, he accepted out and copied Liu in placing it in his right ear.

"Say hello to Sesshomaru."

"I just saw him ten minutes ago. Why would I — oh he's got an earpiece now. Welcome to the insanity. You got eyes on Jenny yet?"

Liu scrambled around the terminal that controlled the screens. From here, one could conceivably watch the entire compound at once. It was a wonder they hadn't been seen on their way to this building. Then again, Liu had stopped to throw rocks once in a while. Sesshomaru realized that he probably shouldn't have chalked that up to Liu being Liu.

"Alright, I've got her."

Sesshomaru narrowed his eyes at one of the screens. This camera was trained on the main entranceway, the one that had nearly a dozen armed guards and a few ferocious German Shepherds watching it. A single figure dressed in black leather approached the gate via bicycle, her long blonde hair trailing loosely behind her. When she reached it, she slowed down and dismounted before waving at the guards above.

"That can't be —"

"I told you her plan was straightforward," Liu replied.

Not that Jenny particularly enjoyed having guns pointed at her head, but this seemed to be occurring on an annoyingly regular basis. If only she could blame someone other than herself.

"Necesito hablar con El Comedor del Hombre," she shouted to the men up top. She deliberately used a bad American accent. "Quiero hablar con él acerca de Kukulkan."

The guards took a few moments to confer among themselves, then even longer to send a message up the chain of command. Soon enough, the gate slid open, revealing a middle-aged, Hispanic man with dark hair, immaculately trimmed beard, a steely gaze, and a well-muscled physique that nicely filled out his white button-up shirt. Three men with guns and one with a dog, flanked him as he approached her. "Who are you?" he asked with a thick accent.

"Jenny Harkness. I've been hired to find out who's been going around the world waking up creatures like the feathered serpents you recently hunted down. Normally I'd just approach you in that bar down the road that serves your favorite tamales, wear a pretty dress, twirl my hair, laugh at your attempts to hit on me, then ask you to show me your zoo of illegally acquired endangered predators, but I just don't have the time today."

He looked her up and down before deciding to settle on pleasantly amused. "Pity. I would have enjoyed the game."

"Me too. Want to skip to the part where you show off your dead animals?"

Despite the macho exterior, El Comedor del Hombre laughed at her confidence. "I would rather show you the living ones," he replied as he offered her his arm.

El Comedor del Hombre, or Guerrero as he soon asked her to call him, had a truly impressive
Jaguars, a tiger, a leopard, some terrifying species of monkey that made Jenny jump when it screeched at her, an atrium full of hawks and eagles, a terrarium for some tarantulas, and a pit for a Komodo dragon. He had a particular pride in the 30 foot boa constrictor he'd wrested out of the Amazon himself. She probably would have been more entertained by the story if she could hear it over the rolling, grumbling thunder in her ear.

Jenny started to regret having Liu give Sesshomaru an earpiece.

"So why keep these ones alive if you're a hunter?" she asked, drawing him away from the topic of the mighty boa constrictor.

"I don't have to kill everything I come across," he replied. "These are beautiful creatures, no?"

She and the monkey with the protruding nose shared a glare. "Is that why you haven't killed Kukulkan?"

With a longsuffering sigh, he turned them toward another cage farther away from the other animals. This one was simply a set of iron bars forming a hallway down into a round cement covered structure. "Perhaps," he replied. "Who told you that I have the feathered serpent in my possession?"

"You have leaks," she shrugged. "It's my job to find them and exacerbate them."

His grip on her arm got tighter as he led her toward the dark enclosure. The ground seemed to rumble a bit under their feet as he slid a card through a reader and opened up the iron gate. "For whom?" he asked as he ushered her inside.

"It would be highly unprofessional of me to reveal my sources. But let's just say that when Kukulkan made his exit, it was not a quiet one and there are several archeologists in tears over what he did to El Castillo."

El Comedor del Hombre nearly stopped in his tracks. "Then this is an academic inquiry?"

"More or less. What I really need to know for sure is who woke up the feathered serpents." Slipping her hand out of his grip, Jenny turned on him with a steely expression. "You've owned these poor animals for a few years, but these cages are only one or two months old. You built a new zoo here to cover up the creature you intended to house in this compound, and hastily so. According to my research, your influence in the cocaine market has decreased considerably in the last three months, meaning you've taken on a new priority. You knew Kukulkan would come into your possession long before he ever woke up. You even practiced on smaller feathered serpents before killing them. I want to know who told you and prepared you to take him into captivity."

The faint amusement left his eyes as he pulled himself up to his full height to glower over her. "How do you know these things?"

A smirk came over her face. "I'm observant. Apart from the crisp lines in the concrete in the cages that haven't been worn down yet, and the fact that your jaguar over there is still trying to figure out where it likes to sleep, and the remaining tracks from cement trucks outside are only a few weeks old, and this place doesn't smell enough like urine yet — I have someone going through your financials who will soon be emailing them to my contact in the U.N."

His face blanched for a moment before he started yelling in Spanish into his radio earpiece.

"I've got someone else jamming the radio and cell signals. You didn't honestly think I'd walk up to your front door without backup, did you?"
"What do you want?" Fury rose in his eyes as his breathing rate picked up.

"The person who woke up Kukulkan and the other feathered serpents. I need to talk to them."

For several moments, he fumed without speaking, trying to figure out how this woman had ripped the rug out from under his feet. Then, the fury calmed. "I don't know who woke the creature."

"You're lying," she said, rolling her eyes.

"I did not participate," he argued. "But I know who you should speak to."

"Who?"

With a right hook, El Comedor del Hombe punched Jenny's lights out.
Groaning as she decided her head had stopped hurting enough to keep her down, Jenny pushed herself up off the damp cement floor. A flash of revulsion passed through her as she realized that the stains she sat on were the result of poorly hosed off blood. Enough for at least one human, maybe two. In the darkness, she heard gears turning and metal scraping as a doorway opened. Crushed electronic and plastic pieces lay on the ground in front of her face, and she realized Guerrero had removed and destroyed her earpiece.

Calmly getting to her knees, she unzipped her pocket and took out a second one.

"— can't just tell the mark we're stealing from him while we're stealing from him!" Rosario complained. "If she wants to meet Theda way before we're ready to, she doesn't have to drag us into it too."

"Boss knows what she's doing," Liu replied, although the edge in his voice betrayed how stressed his own situation was. "No, stay put. Sesshomaru, you're not helping."

"I cannot protect the fool if she's dead —"

"Report," Jenny ordered, silencing the clamoring. She had to listen for the slithering and hissing of a giant feathered serpent, after all. Instantly the voices returned to order.

Liu reported first, the sounds of banging heard faintly in the background of his earpiece. "I gave El Comedero del Hombre's men a report of an intruder on the south end," he said. "That should keep them confused for a while, but it shouldn't be too long before he starts straightening them out now that he's been unoccupied for the last five minutes." Bit of an exaggeration, she concluded, as she hadn't been out for anywhere near that long.

"I'm still in the office," Rosario said. "I need privacy for five more minutes to get these files transferred."

"I can set off a fire alarm," he suggested.

"Do it," Jenny said. "Open up the compound and get out of there. Rosario, you have my permission to not hold back, but knock out only. Don't kill anyone." She started backing away from the cavernous darkness and into a patch of light from a grate overhead. Her breath caught in her throat as a pair of golden slitted eyes peered out, followed by the hiss of a tongue tasting the air. "Sesshomaru, I am not admitting that I am in over my head ...

The eyes soon had a face. Bright green scales shimmered as it opened a mouth large enough to swallow a man whole, to show off a pair of nearly foot-long fangs that dripped with clear venom. The snake, with a plume of peacock blue and tree frog green feathers around its head and down its back, emerged with a lazy stride to its slither, reveling in the fear it tasted in the air with its flicking tongue.

"... but I need you to come here right now."

"Hn." She could only assume that meant he was on his way. That and a crash followed by a rush of wind.

Sorting through a mental catalogue of facts about snakes — they smell with their tongue, their vision is adequate enough to see movement, they're cold blooded — she continued backing away from the
massive feathered serpent until her back hit the wall. At which point she held her breath.

Do you think I am some simple-minded, belly-crawling creature that exists only to serve its base desires?

The voice echoed through her head, ringing it soundly with contempt and arrogance. Her eyes never once broke from the massive serpent's maw. It's mouth didn't move like a talking animal character from a Disney film. But she knew it was this feathered serpent that bore down on her mind, speaking without sound. The term 'Vision Serpent,' which she'd gathered from her research into ancient South American gods, suddenly made perfect sense. Without a doubt, she could feel the power of this mighty god that fed on blood sacrifices of humans, and had thousands of worshipers in its heyday.

"Kukulkan," she said aloud. "That is your name, right?"

The serpent reared up to look down upon her, venom dripping down its fangs sizzling on the cement floor. No words entered her head, but she felt a faint amusement coming from the way his mane grew wider and its chest puffed out.

"What is a god like you doing in a cage?"

Feeding ... I hunger for human flesh ... I thirst for human blood ...

"Before you eat me, I have a question for you."

Kukulkan darted to her right as fast as a, well, serpent's strike. In an instant, his body had wrapped around her, burying her in scales up to her waist in a loose hold. He held his nose a mere foot from her face, his flicking tongue tickling her cheek. Ask quickly. You smell of dog and I want to swallow you whole.

"Why — and how — did the Goddess of Death (It was Theda, correct?) wake you from your sleep?"

The serpent's head bobbed back in an imitation of a human laugh — a halting string of hs-hs-hs! Jenny nearly had to cover her ears to keep the chill of his mirth out of her head, but it would do no good.

The Death God had need of me, and so I awoke. She comes to me with many names and faces, but I know her all the same. She tastes of belladonna and poppies. She smiles at me when I feast and brings me the hearts of kings when I do as she wishes. And when hunters chase me, she gives me poison in my teeth. She is my master, and I her willing pet.

Love, reverence, awe, she felt all these things and more as Kukulkan's heart soared at the thought of Theda. And for an instant, she saw the woman kneeling in the dark with a torch in her hand. Through the feathered serpent's eyes, she saw great beauty and horror at what she represented. The woman's lips moved, distorted by Kukulkan's memory in her mind.

"I have a great and terrible work for you to do, my love." Jenny could feel Theda's hand stroking her plume of feathers across her back. No, those feathers belonged to Kukulkan. "The world will become acquainted with blood and darkness as it once was. But first, I need you to help me find—"

The vision cut off with a fierce beastly roar filling her ears. She gasped at the sight of fangs reaching for her neck, only a clawed hand had ripped Kukulkan's head backwards by his mane of feathers. Sesshomaru, his eyes cold and focused, wrapped his arms around the serpent's neck and squeezed hard. The serpent's body twisted and flailed under the assault, throwing Jenny against the wall.
Before the serpent could try to reach for the detective, Sesshomaru slashed at Kukulkan's eyes with his poison claws. With a reptilian roar, the feathered serpent rammed his back into the ground to loosen the daiyokai's hold. No sooner had he done so than he struck out and bit the fur over his shoulder, his fangs going straight through.

"Sesshomaru!" Jenny screamed. She rushed to help, but a cold glare stopped her at once.

Blood dripped from the wound in his shoulder, but the daiyokai gave no indication of pain through his face. Only a frown of annoyance. He pried the serpent's jaw open with both hands gleaming green with poison. "Leave now," he ordered shortly before swiping his claws at Kukulkan's nose.

"He gains power from blood," she said, ignoring him. "Don't let him—"

An unearthly howl filled the room as Kukulkan began to writhe. It seemed like more venomous fangs popped into place in his maw, even when Sesshomaru snapped one off to free himself from the serpent's grasp. His head thrown back with an energetic cry, the eyes that Sesshomaru had blinded with poison reconstituted like he'd done nothing at all. Then the skin around his neck began to peel away, allowing Kukulkan to slither out of his grasp as he left his skin behind.

The new Kukulkan slid around the circular arena in a body twice as large and fearsome than before, letting off a primal call of dominance.

"Do that," Jenny finished lamely.

Sesshomaru took a few paces forward, approaching him, and drew Bakusaiga, his slight smile betraying how ready he was for a real fight. But seeing Jenny still in the arena, he said over his shoulder, "Get out."

"I need him to tell me what Theda was looking for," she argued, backing away to a safer location regardless.

"If you do not leave —" He slashed his sword at the serpent's face, forcing him away from his attempted strike at the detective. "— then you will not even have the chance to ask her in person."

"I've got armor that Kukulkan can't pierce. I'll be fine. I just have to get back into his head."

An impatient growl escaped his lips, breaking his cool mask, and he wasted a few precious seconds to snap his poison whip at her feet which made her jump in surprise. "You're in my way."

"Boss, they've cut the power," Liu reported over the radio. "I'm blind and pinned down."

Rosario's breathing picked up like she had started running. "I'm not doing so hot either."

Shooting a glare at Sesshomaru for his implied threat, she replied, "On my way," as she turned and ran for the exit. As much as she would have liked to get information from Kukulkan, she needed the rest of her team alive too. Furthermore, this would be a good time to see if the daiyokai could do his job properly. Slamming an iron gate down after passing under it, Jenny sent one last reminder before she locked him in the arena with the feathered serpent. "Sesshomaru, do not kill Kukulkan. Disable him or get him back in his cage. And don't let him taste any more of your blood." With that, she hiked back up the hallway and into the sunlit compound.

For one person using only the security equipment available to him, Liu had caused quite the mess of confusion. El Comedor del Hombre's men ran back and forth, attempting to figure out what their leaders wanted them to do, and didn't even give Jenny a second glance as she emerged from the half destroyed zoo, its animals scattered all through the compound. Somehow on his way in, Sesshomaru
had managed to not only tear up all the iron gates, but also rip open every last cage. Jenny didn’t want to think of the chaos the jaguars currently unleashed on the unsuspecting cartel members.

One of the trucks she passed had a collection of weapons just sitting in the back seat begging to be taken. Getting through the lock proved little obstacle to her lock picks and nimble fingers. A moment later, she had her pick of rifles, handguns and grenades. She slung a sniper rifle and ammo belt over her shoulder, took a bag of flashbangs, and stuffed a couple loaded guns with safeties on into her waistband.

A ricocheting bullet clipped her arm. A firefight had commenced among a guard and a pair of tigers with bloodlust in their eyes, and the large cats had no intention of going down without tasting human flesh. Jenny took a path directly away from the gore and toward the base of a watchtower.

Taking hold of the ladder with one hand and a handgun in the other, she raced up the thin iron ladder leading to the wooden base of a square crow’s nest. Scuffling of boots above her head informed her of one person manning the lookout. Three knocks on the trapdoor alerted him to her presence.

A younger man in his early 20’s with light brown skin and a black moustache lifted the door with a relieved expression that quickly turned to surprise. Before he could react, Jenny aimed her gun at his head. The man put his hands up and backed away, allowing her to climb up inside. "Tiren sus armas," she said, and he immediately dropped his weapons. Gesturing with her gun toward the door, she had him back out slowly and pull the trapdoor closed after him.

Once she locked the door behind him, she took the sniper rifle off her back and began scanning the compound. The security office Liu had barricaded himself inside had a sizeable hole in the roof — probably from Sesshomaru’s exit — and a pack of men on the other end of the building attempting to break down the door with a battering ram. More men surrounded a traditional mansion with far too many open air balconies. Nearly every one of those balconies had guns trained on them.

"Liu, Rosario, I have eyes and teeth." The battering ram team put a crack into the door, so she fired three shots just over their heads to send them running for cover. "Tell me what you need."

"An exit!" they chorused.

Jenny shot out the tires of an armored truck that had a machine gun mounted in the back. Brakes squealing, the vehicle careened into another two parked nearby. "Liu, get out through the roof, steal a car and pick up Rosario. Rosario, your best exit is through the second floor balcony, west side."

Grumbling something about his boss either underestimating how tall Sesshomaru is or overestimating how tall Liu is, the thief managed to find a way to squeeze his way out of the hole in the roof. Jenny set down the rifle to pull the pins on a couple flashbangs and launch them into a pack headed toward the south gates. As soon as the explosions went off and the battering ram group turned to look at the noise, Liu leaped out of the hole, raced across the roof and jumped down into a parked pickup truck.

Despite their ringing ears and spots dancing in their eyes, some of El Comedor del Hombre’s men attempted to aim their firearms at Liu as he rushed to hotwire the truck. With cool precision, Jenny put bullets straight through their shoulders and legs. As much as she would have liked to kill them, she couldn’t risk alerting Theda to their presence. And so she had to risk injuring them only instead of just finishing them off. Electricity sparked in the wires in Liu’s fingers, the engine roared into life and the truck started off for the mansion with Jenny clearing his path with some well placed sniper shots.

"Rosario, what’s your progress?" she asked.
From the grunts and shouts on the other end, it sounded like she had her work cut out for her. "You wouldn't happen to have a flashbang for me, would you?"

Jenny took a look around the watchtower for anything useful. Apart from a grenade launcher with no grenades and a bazooka she didn't know how to operate, the place didn't have much to it. "What about if I threw some very large rocks?"

From the zoo complex, a roar escaped. Then a crack broke open the serpent arena, shaking the ground. The gunshots and yelling silenced as everyone stopped to regain their footing. Or in Liu's case, swerve to avoid one of the fissures that burst through the road like a series of fractures spreading in a cracked mirror. As far as distractions go, this worked just fine for Rosario. A triumphant laugh on the other end told Jenny enough about the tide that had turned in her favor.

A stream of green scales and blue and green feathers flew straight up out of the cement arena, shrieking as it rose. Every human within a mile grabbed at their ears to shut out the sound, but the words still seeped through.

*Blood! Flesh! Feed my hunger!*

Kukulkan, as large as a sycamore and covered in blood and cuts across his skin, dived to the ground with the speed of an eagle. His prey: the gunmen gathering around a broken door in the compound wall. His jaw swung open wide and snapped shut around the torso of a straggler. Lifted high into the air, he screamed and flailed like a helpless mouse until Kukulkan swallowed him up in one gulp.

The feathered serpent god shuddered a moment before the cuts in his flesh started to close up. A dreamy look came to his eye while he reveled in the power he felt returning to him.

"You've got a ride on the way, but I think we found you another combatant," Jenny told Rosario.

"Where's Sesshomaru?" Liu asked.

An even deeper tremor rocked the ground and a white light rocketed out of the arena. Before it reached escape velocity, the light dove back down, swirling in a spiral of dust, debris and power. Moments later, the smoke cleared. Towering thirty stories tall, a white hound with a gaping, sharp-tongued maw that dripped green poison, a streak of fur reminiscent of Sesshomaru's pelt down his back, blood red eyes and jagged maroon markings on his face towered over the arena. His tongue fell out the side of his mouth, but the narrowed glare and deep growl aimed at Kukulkan removed any doubt that this white-furred beast might have had a playful nature.

"Right," Jenny whispered shaking herself out of her surprise. "Inu means dog."

For the first time, Kukulkan screeched in legitimate fear. He slithered through the air in a desperate attempt to flee, but Sesshomaru leaped after him, his teeth gleaming in the sunlight. Then his jaws snapped shut on the tail of the feathered serpent, sending feathers all through the air as he began to shake his head from side to side.

Seven men got tossed off the west side balcony, followed by Rosario leaping out. She'd timed her jump thus to coincide with Liu pulling the truck around a fissure chasing after him so she could land with a resounding *bang!* in the bed of the pickup. Once he had her safely crouched in the back, Liu turned 90 degree to the left toward the giant Inu daiyokai and feathered serpent.

With all of El Comedor del Hombre's men scattering, Jenny focused on keeping an eye on the fighting god and demon. Out of explosives and nearly out of ammo, she searched for some way she could help, but came up nearly empty. "Sesshomaru, if you can still understand me, *do not* kill
Kukulkan. I repeat, *do not kill Kukulkan.*

The serpent in question had no intention of going down without a fight. Reeling backwards, he attempted to strike the dog's neck with his fangs, but Sesshomaru had learned his lesson and simply threw him aside into the roof of the mansion, which collapsed almost immediately. Then he reeled back to pounce.

Aiming for Kukulkan's eyes, Jenny fired twice and blinded the god. He shrieked in pain just before Sesshomaru's claws tore into him.

"Sesshomaru, hold back!" Jenny abandoned the sniper rifle and opened the trap door. "Liu, Rosario, go see if you can stop him."

"Um … sure," Liu replied. "But I think he might have it covered."

Right when Jenny jumped off the foot of the ladder, Sesshomaru tore off Kukulkan's head and threw it into the air. A moment later, it landed solidly in the hood of Liu's truck.

Jenny clenched her jaw shut as rage boiled over in her throat.

Wind picked up and swirled around the victorious daiyokai. Dirt and leaves obscure his body as he shrunk back down to the more humanoid version of himself. Sesshomaru dispersed the whirlwind and stepped away from the gored feathered serpent god with a few punctures in his clothing from Kukulkan's fangs and blood staining his mouth and clawed hands. His eyes still had a wild red look from the rush of the battle.

Liu climbed out of the truck and whistled at the impressive sight of the dead god and Sesshomaru standing proudly next to his kill. "That's —"

"Awesome!" Rosario exclaimed as she jumped out of the pickup bed. "Dibs on the next one!"

Like a hurricane aimed at an unsuspecting island village, Jenny seethed as she approached the group gathered around the feathered serpent's body. Rosario moved to intercept her path across the courtyard toward them, but Liu grabbed her arm and deftly turned her right around. "We don't want to get in between those egos."

Storming right up to Sesshomaru, Jenny screamed, "I told you not to kill Kukulkan!" pushing him in the chest for emphasis. "The entire damn point of this mission was to get information out of him!"

"The serpent was too feral to achieve any other outcome, and your foolish concept of your invulnerability nearly killed both of us," Sesshomaru snarled back. He knew well enough that reacting physically against such a weak opponent would only sully his honor.

"It was your daiyokai blood that turned him feral, and if you had listened to me —"

"I have slain demons for thousands of years —"

"Then use some of that experience to *not* kill our only good lead!"

Temper flared in his eyes and he nearly bore his fangs at her. "My job is to protect you and I cannot do that if you refuse to run the instant I tell you to leave."

"What does it matter if I get hurt if we find a way to protect the world from Theda?"

"My, my, my."
Mouths snapped shut as Sesshomaru and Jenny turned to the source of the new arrival. Sitting cross-legged atop the plume of Kukulkan was a woman with sharp features, dark brown eyes that glinted with mirth, hair pulled back in a Victorian style, and a long black glittering dress that shamelessly exposed her cleavage through a deep V-neck and her long legs with a slit up the skirt. While most would have hung their mouths open at her beauty, the members of Merripit House stared at her in a foggy sense of fearful awe.

"I was wondering what could kill a feathered serpent god," she said with a voice as bright as a singing mockingbird. "I guess all I needed was a rabid dog."
Femme Fatale

Silence hung heavy in the air for far too long. Acting on instinct, Liu, Rosario and Jenny each drew a weapon to have it at the ready, but didn't raise them. Sesshomaru subtly moved to place his body in between the rest of the group and the woman in black. He studied her features intently, searching for any hint of the woman known as Izanami. But though she had the same smug smile, smell of graveyard soil, ashen white skin that belonged to no particular race, and long, ebony hair, she had cheekbones too high, lips too plump and nose too long to belong to the sorceress he once knew. The two women could have easily belonged to the same species of daiyokai.

Jenny was the first to speak, her voice dripping with disgust and loathing. "Theda."

"Jackie," she replied with a smile. "Wait, no, that's your sister. Who I killed. Twice. Sorry, I have harder time remembering the names of the living. Don't tell me, it starts with a J. Josephine, Genevieve, Jocelyn, Jeanette, Jennifer … Jenny! Jenny, long time no see!"

Despite her effort to remain unaffected by Theda's words, Jenny paled visibly. Liu and Rosario passed a sympathetic, yet questioning, look toward their boss, wondering why they had never heard of this 'Jackie' before. Sesshomaru could hear how her breath caught in her throat momentarily before she regained her composure. "What are you doing here?"

"You invited me!" she said, gesturing to the heap of feathered serpent carcass all around here. "I'm so excited to meet the new and improved Merripit House. I've only met Liu once. How are you doing, handsome?"

Liu glanced toward Jenny, unsure of how to respond. Her only suggestion came in the form of a slight shrug. "I'm fine," he replied stiffly. "Jenny keeps me busy."

"She keeps me pretty busy too. Not that I'm upset about all the people that you lot keep me from killing. It's just what you do. Oh, I met your grandmother Moni the other day. She made me these coconut dumplings that were just divine. Artery clogging too, at least in her case. You'll be happy to know she passed away with her family close by."

Stunned, he could only eke out, "No … I'm not happy to hear that at all."

Disregarding Liu, Theda turned her gaze onto Rosario. "You're new. It's Rosario, right? That's the name I keep hearing whenever you get a good headshot in, but it just doesn't seem right to me. Are you sure you don't have another name?"

"How dare you," she snapped with a sharp-eyed glare. Unconsciously, she had moved herself to protect Liu from danger, even if the only barbs thrown were verbal. "How dare you kill an innocent woman. If you're upset with us, take it out on us."

"It's nothing like that, honey. I'm Death. I facilitate the transfer of thousands of souls from this life into the next. It's just a job. Believe me, when I'm mad at you, you'll know. Now tell me, who does your hair? I love the blue coloring."

Rosario frowned in confusion. "No one. It's black."

"But — " Theda spotted Jenny shaking her head slightly and miming for her to zip her lips, so she dropped the subject. "Apparently we're not supposed to talk about that. Sorry. I don't think I've met or killed any of your family. Are you sure you exist?"
"Are you the one responsible for releasing Kukulkan?" Jenny asked, breaking into the conversation.

A tad miffed at the detective's insistence that she not dig around in Rosario's past, Theda re-crossed her legs. "Obviously. I wouldn't be sitting on his corpse if I wasn't," she said, rolling her eyes as she plucked a feather out of Kukulkan's back. "But you knew that, which is why you've got your mechanical sentries following my every move. I don't appreciate the spying, by the way."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jenny lied. "He's not the first legendary creature that's been woken up. Why did you do it?"

"Sesshomaru could tell you that." Theda turned her attention to him, locking her eyes with his. "If you're thinking of bringing Kukulkan back to life with Tenseiga," she said as she jumped off the serpent's corpse, "I wouldn't bother. I expedited the delivery of his soul to the Underworld myself, which means that sword has no one to kill. Can't say that I appreciate the fact that you're using it again to revive the dead."

Smoothly, Sesshomaru removed his hand from the hilt of Tenseiga, letting it rest on Bakusaiga instead. "I don't know you or your purpose for waking the demons of this land."

With an exaggerated swing to her ample hips, Theda strolled over to Sesshomaru and twirled a few strands of his long, silver-white hair in her fingers. "Don't I look familiar to you? Similar to someone you dared to run through with Bakusaiga a few centuries ago?"

His back stiffened. "You speak of Izanami. How do you know her?"

Averting her gaze to focus on the tendrils of his hair, a bitter look glazed over her face. "You must not have known her well if you have no idea."

"After she turned on me and used Daiichi to lay waste to my kingdom, I realized that all that I knew about Izanami was a lie. I do not regret my actions in the fields of Fukushima."

Tangling her fingers even further in his hair, her smug smile faltered with a deep pain. "Why would you say that?"

"Izanami and Daiichi were too powerful and power-hungry. Naturally they would make it difficult for me to rebuild my kingdom." He slowly began to loosen Bakusaiga in its sheath.

Tightening her grip, Theda pulled him down to her level. "If that's your reasoning," she said, whispering in his ear. "Then I suppose I won't regret repeating history. Every. Last. Bit of it."

With a hand dripping with poison gripping hers, Sesshomaru glared down at her as he tried to slowly release her vice-like grip. "You are Death and already have a place of power in this world. According to your own admission, you have no particular animosity toward humans. You have no reason to rule this world."

Her eyes flashed red, almost like a fire burned inside her skull. "Let's just say that I am not happy about what you did to my family."

"Theda let him go," Jenny ordered as she moved to get a clearer shot. Behind her, Rosario and Liu split up and moved to flank the woman in black while also taking cover behind a cinderblock structure and an armored truck. "You told me that you don't kill anyone directly. I imagine that rule involves yokai as well as humans."

Reluctantly releasing Sesshomaru, a grim laugh escaped her lips. Lips that lost their red sheen and turned to the color of ash. The skin on her face and arms shrunk and dried until she resembled the
desiccated corpse of a once-beautiful woman. Thin black hair with streaks of gray framed a face split by a ghastly, toothy grin. "Do you have any idea what Sesshomaru is responsible for?" She turned her lidless eyes to Jenny. "Not only did he destroy and humiliate the greatest destructive force this world has ever seen and sealed him in the Underworld, but he derailed the most beautiful holocaust I've ever seen arranged."

"I take it that Izanami is — was — your daughter? Sister?" Jenny didn't like guessing, but both Theda and Sesshomaru had some frustratingly tight lips at the moment. Watching her face, the detective kept going with the few pieces of information she'd picked up. "And now that you know Sesshomaru is alive, you're attempting to avenge her death and fulfill her dream of ..." She trailed off, hoping Theda would fill in the blanks.

Shoving her face right into Jenny's personal space, Theda put a hand on her shoulder, her long, bony thumb jabbed into her neck. "As clever as you are, detective," she sneered, "you don't have any idea what you're meddling with."

"Nor do you." A flash of green energy suddenly threw Theda backwards across the compound and into the side of a cinderblock building. Sesshomaru stood there with Bakusaiga in his grasp and a growl escaping from his throat. Jenny touched her neck and found a small line of blood on her fingers. "I have battled and conquered the most powerful beings of this world. You will find that I am not nearly as easy to kill as a human."

Jumping back to her feet in a huff, she brushed off her dress as her flesh filled back in with blood and straightened her hair as the grey left it and returned to black. "It took me a couple thousand years, but I managed to figure out how to kill your father. All it took was a dragon and a human woman. Look around you, Sesshomaru. Barely three months awake and you're the protector of a thief who's trying not to cry about his dead grandmother, a blue-haired woman that doesn't exist —"

"It's not blue!" Rosario shouted.

"It so is! — and the single most powerful human woman in this world. I remember Rin, the girl you stole twice from me. I remember Kohaku, the boy you didn't steal but he still totally should have died way earlier than he did. The Inu no Taisho never got this wrapped up with humans because he knew, like you're going to have to learn, they break so easily."

He knew well that Theda meant to rile him up, like poking a chained-up dog behind a fence with a stick. He felt like slicing open her throat with his poison whip and pulling her tongue out, but he reigned in his temper with even breathing. If she wanted a response, she would have to work harder than resorting to petty jabs.

Fortunately, Jenny's temper flared on his behalf. "Don't forget, Theda, you're not allowed to kill me."

"Why?" she laughed. "Because I like you?"

"No, although that's part of it." Stepping forward slowly, she walked up to the woman in black until her lips were in Death's ear and Sesshomaru had to strain to hear her whisper. "Because Jackie said so."

A pulse of angry energy pumped out, Theda's smoldering eyes at the epicenter of the wave. An icy chill settled on the compound and a dry wind picked up. Even though not a cloud hung in the sky, the sun seemed to darken. But Theda did not attack Jenny. Her face twisted into an ugly sneer, and she turned on her heel to walk away. If she had a long, flowing black cape, she couldn't have looked any more sinister as she stalked toward Kukulkan's carcass. "This is your one chance, detective, to remove Merripit House from my path. In the maelstrom, the protections put in place for you will not
be extended to your friends, your family, and all you hold dear."

"Well if I'm the most powerful woman in the world, I'm sure I'll find a way to protect them," Jenny replied.

"Human woman. Don't forget that."

Theda's hand stretched straight out to her side, then swept straight down. A tornado of black dust swirled around her. The winds tore at their clothes and skin and nearly threatened to knock them over, but after a few moments the air settled back to normal. Not only had Theda vanished, but the corpse of Kukulkan had disappeared with her.

As Merripit House regrouped around Jenny, Sesshomaru cornered her with a cold glare. "Who is Jackie?" he asked. "If you have concealed a personal vendetta against Theda —"

"No," she snapped. The fury in her expression that bore down on the daiyokai could have rivaled that seen in the woman in black. "We need to know who Izanami and Daiichi are. Now."

The exhausted crew sat around a table in a hole-in-the-wall restaurant with ceiling fans that barely stirred the heavy, humid air. Liu couldn't touch the glass of indistinguishable booze sitting in front of him, while Rosario had already knocked back a few shots. Neither of them knew how to handle the inexplicable shivering that coursed through them at odd intervals. Sesshomaru refused to touch any alcohol not made from rice, and Jenny sipped on a bottle of water while keeping a bag of ice on the growing bruise on her cheek. By far, they were the quietest and most out-of-place clientele of the entire city.

"So," Liu said, turning to Sesshomaru. "You pissed off Death."

"I killed a shinigami named Izanami," Sesshomaru corrected. "Theda must be part of her family. Possibly her only family."

"So Izanami was trying to take over Japan?" Rosario said, trying to figure out exactly what was going on.

"No. Her son, Daiichi, wanted to build his own kingdom through blood and death, as well as gain power for power's sake," he explained. "Izanami helped her son fulfill his vision by summoning demons from the Underworld, but Daiichi was the more deadly of the two. He proved to be a smarter and stronger opponent than I counted on."

Jenny stepped in to take the role of interrogator. "Why did you come into contact with Daiichi in the first place?"

"I had a kingdom. It wasn't large, but I ruled it. Naturally, to prove his strength, he needed to defeat the strongest daiyokai in the land."

Jenny chose not to remark on his humility or lack thereof.

"I had come to know Izanami during my travels around the country. She taught me about the power of Tenseiga and the nature of the Underworld. When Theda said she tried for over two thousand years to kill my father, she was not wrong. My father battled her thinking he could gain immortality. According to Izanami, my father took Death's heart and forged it with his fang into the sword Tenseiga. This gave it the ability to kill creatures from the Underworld and restore life. Sesshomaru noticed how Liu's head perked up at that, with hope and pleading in his eyes. "Tenseiga can't prolong life indefinitely. In many instances, Tenseiga will refuse to change the course of nature.
Death is, after all, a necessary part of life."

Heart crushed, Liu's head returned to its sunken position. Rosario rubbed his back with one hand in an attempt to comfort him without words.

"Can I assume, then, that Izanami told her son to attack your kingdom?" Jenny asked.

Nodding, Sesshomaru continued. "Izanami knew a great deal about my strengths, as well as the gaps in my armor, so to speak."

"The word is 'weaknesses.'"

"I don't have weaknesses. Only allies. Daiichi murdered those closest to me first. Then his army attacked mine, hindering it with a poison I couldn't counter until it was too late. Over the course of a week, we fought without rest. We each had good armies that slaughtered each other. The best warriors fought at my side, but even they fell to Daiichi. He alone had strength that rivaled mine. And we put it to the test. His very existence poisons the air around him, and he could break souls from their bodies with nothing but a touch." Recalling the battle brought a darkness to his eyes. Speaking in vague generalities seemed to protect him from the horror of the specifics.

"But you were stronger," Jenny said gently.

Locking his eyes on hers, he replied, "Always. In the midst of the battle, a gate opened to the Underworld. Perhaps that happens when so many die in one place at one time. I threw Daiichi inside and sealed him in a prison there. He will never terrorize the world again."

"Unless Theda releases him to command this army of legendary creatures," Rosario pointed out.

"Theda can't go to the Underworld, though," Jenny replied. "She's strictly a transitional agent. Even if she's building a better rendition of Izanami's army, she's can't use him."

"This army will kill thousands, possibly even millions with Theda at the helm," Sesshomaru said. "I know her kind."

"I wouldn't be surprised if she's aiming for a number more in the billions." He hid his surprise that the world held a number of humans that massive. "This is not an enemy you can fight, Harkness."

Rubbing her temples, she sat back in her chair. "And yet we're already in the thick of it. None of this makes sense, though. Theda is simply not a vengeful person. I have a hard time believing that she's angry at you for what you did to Izanami."

"Love makes you do crazy things, especially if it's family," Rosario said.

"Even still. Death doesn't have an emotional or moral agenda. It just is. Theda's always been like that. At least until today."

"How do you know her so well, oh Miss Most-powerful-woman-on-Earth?" Liu spat

A heaviness settled on Jenny's shoulders. She didn't argue with the title either. "Like she said, she killed my little sister twice. And she likes me. So we've had opportunities to talk."

Before she could explain further, a group of five to ten haggard men who had just run through an unforgiving jungle entered the restaurant. A hush fell on the occupants as the men scanned the room.
Then the leader, covered in cuts and bruises, noticed the group sitting around the corner table. Grabbing a nearby chair, which happened to be occupied by a local farmer boy who quickly removed himself, the leader sat himself down in between Jenny and Liu.

"Guerrero, yes, please, join us," the detective said sarcastically. "Heaven knows we still wanted to deal with you today. How can we help you?"

"How are you still alive? And what did you do with my feathered serpent?"

With a glance toward Rosario, she gestured her head toward the other men standing guard. Finishing her latest shot, Rosario scraped back her chair, cracked her knuckles, and punched the closest cartel member in the throat. He flew backwards into the wall, crashed to the ground and didn't move.

While fists and chairs, and soon bodies, went flying, Jenny calmly replied to El Comedor del Hombre. "To answer your second question first, this guy," she jabbed a thumb toward Sesshomaru, "turned into a giant dog and killed Kukulkan."

His eyes went as wide as saucers. "You ate him?" he asked incredulously.

The daiyokai decided to get up and leave instead of suffer the indignity of staying in the man's presence, punching one of the men Rosario was dealing with on his way out of the building. Despite most of the men being twice her size, the pint-sized Hispanic woman seemed to be handling them with ease and a grin on her face.

"As for your first question," Jenny continued, "I have a lot of people looking out for me. Now. You put me in Kukulkan's arena so I would meet the Grim Reaper when I got eaten. What I need to know is what Theda wanted you to do with the feathered serpents she released."

Her words pierced his hardened exterior and shook his core. "How do you know —"

The last cartel member Rosario needed to deal with crashed on top of their table. Blood ran from a gash above his eyebrow. A moment later, she dragged him off and returned to her seat next to Liu. He still hadn't looked up from his glass. "Are we almost done here?"

In spite of the mess all around him, El Comedor del Hombre gaped at Jenny and her supposed omniscience. "She will know, and she will flay me alive."

"I'll have Rosario kill you faster first." The detective's voice had gone cold and impatient. "Theda. The Grim Reaper. Santa Muerte. What did she want?"

"The head of Kukulkan," he whispered, like she could hear them speak from whatever dimension she'd vanished to. "And Quetzalcoatl. And Q'uq'matz. And Tohil. She wanted them all dead and she told me how to hunt them."

"Then why would you keep Kukulkan in a cage?"

Shifting uncomfortably in his seat, he replied, "My weapons didn't work on him. The best I could do was imprison him."

She rolled her eyes at his pathetic attempt to lie to her. "You built that arena long before he woke up. Rosario?"

The Hispanic woman rose from her seat with her fist clenched, but that was as far as she got before El Comedor del Hombre flinched. "It was Santa Muerte's direction! She wanted him stronger before I killed Kukulkan."
"Gracias!" Finally holding onto the information she needed, Jenny rose from the table. Liu and Rosario immediately fell into step behind her. "See how easy that was?"

Confused, El Comedor del Hombre spun around in his seat. "Wait, you are not going to arrest me?"

"Not a Fed!" she shot back over her shoulder. "Seriously, why does everybody think that?" On second thought, she stopped in her tracks. "Considering all the horrible things you've done, though, you should turn yourself in before someone decides to assassinate you. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go track down a runaway dog."
Why?

Why would Theda go against her nature and aim to avenge the death of Izanami and the defeat of Daiichi?

Why would Theda wake the feathered serpent gods only to arrange for a human to kill them?

Why have El Comedor del Hombre imprison and feed Kukulkan before having him killed?

Why did Theda take Kukulkan's body?

Why does Theda believe the world is due another holocaust?

As soon as Jenny found a way to align the conflicting actions, perhaps she could have a better handle on Theda's ultimate motivation and desire. She had evidence and information. Now it just needed digestion. So she sat cross-legged on a pile of cushions with her eyes closed and her hands resting on each of her knees, palms face up.

She would have preferred silence, but even on a private jet — paid for by the U.N. — that was a hard commodity to come by.

The noise started with Rosario working on getting Sesshomaru to step foot inside the massive metal container with wings. "Get in the plane, Sesshomaru," she said.

He snorted in response. "I will fly on my own."

"Get in the plane."

"No."

"Look, when we're on a case, we rarely have time to regroup and debrief. Flying time is one of those rare moments."

"I have the radio. I will listen."

"The earpieces don't work up in the air, and we can't use our cell phones either. Just get on the plane."

Liu brushed past the arguing pair with a phone glued to his ear. Although he spoke in Tongan, the unshed tears in his eyes, husky voice and tense posture as he took the first seat he could stumble into said that the person on the other end of the line was family. At first, he tried to keep his composure as he subtly asked how his grandmother fared. But as soon as this person told him she'd passed away the day before, his whole body collapsed under him.

Rosario sputtered at another one of Sesshomaru's suggestions which had been lost in the noise of Liu's conversation. "No, that's, how would that even work, dude? Look, there's plenty of room in here. You can stand up straight, walk around, lean your seat back and take a nap. Just get on the freakin' plane."

"Liftoff in two minutes," Michaelis said, sticking his head out the door. He, too, had a phone attached to his ear, and by his expression, he did not agree with what the person on the other end of the line had to say. "Mm hm. Mm hm. Yes sir, I will proceed with the berating — debriefing."
Someone will be held accountable, sir. *Harkness!*

"You have no authority to do such a thing," Sesshomaru growled at one of Rosario's threats.

"I beg to differ. If I have to punch you in the gut and carry you aboard, I will." Knuckles cracked in anticipation, Rosario geared her fists up for a fight.

He glared down at the woman who barely came up to his shoulder. "You are no match for me, human."

"Don't say I didn't warn you."

A bony fist hit a solid wall of muscle, and despite the crash of luxury airplane seats, tables and the suitcase Liu abandoned in the aisle that suffered damage from Sesshomaru flying into the window opposite the doorway, the daiyokai landed gracefully on his feet. Before he could make his escape, Rosario kicked the staircase away and pulled the door shut. While he could have easily torn open the door again with his claws, or any part of this human contraption, he chose to maintain his last shreds of dignity, get to his feet and find a better place to sit. Of course, as soon as he did so, his head slammed right into the ceiling with a resounding thud.

"I'll be there, Mom," Liu said as assuredly as he could. "I just don't know how long I can stay. My boss has us working a really difficult case right now. No, Mom, don't call Jenny. I can handle this on my own. I'll talk to her, I promise. She's just a little preoccupied at the moment."

"Preoccupied, my arse," Michaelis muttered, storming up to the meditating Jenny. "Do you realize what your incompetence just cost me? El Comedor del Hombre, the fourth most wanted man in the country, the man who built one of the biggest cocaine empires in the last decade, is lost in the wind. And now the Mexican government wants answers as to not only his location, but how their information on him was leaked to an outside agent. It will take years to corner him again. In the meantime, he's probably going to slaughter another 106 people — you did realize he's responsible for the executions of 106 people, right? Are you just going to sit there and pretend like there won't be any consequences?"

Grumbling for his own reasons, Sesshomaru found a place on the floor at the front of the plane near Jenny to sit with his back against the wall. "Silence, human. Your voice grates on my ears."

"What was that, Pretty Boy?"

The intercom crackled to life. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. We are just about ready for takeoff. Please fasten your seatbelts and put all electronic devices into Airplane Mode."

Liu said his farewells to his family and turned off his phone. "We got a flight plan?" he asked Michaelis.

"I told the pilot to head to New York City. If Jenny bothers to wake up from her trance and tell me otherwise, then we'll go somewhere else." He took a seat and buckled himself in. "Which should be soon since we're supposed to be taking off."

"Dude," Rosario scoffed as she took her own seat. "She's not getting up for something like that. Once she's in the zone, she's out."

Sesshomaru similarly stayed on the floor, continuing to glower at the peaceful looking detective. Fortunately the few flight attendants on board recognized the futility of urging them to move and let them be. The plane rumbled as the jet engines switched on and the pilots taxied down the runway.
Michaelis' position in whatever government operation he was currently a part of had the benefit of priority on the tarmac.

"Good God, this is such a mess," Michaelis groaned. "I need answers now. Can she even hear us? When's she going to wake up?"

"She's not deaf," Liu said. "So if you've ever wanted to not argue with her, now's your chance." He leaned forward so Jenny could hear him over the roar of the plane taking off into the air. "I was wondering if I could take some time off work. Mom said that Nana's funeral is going to be sometime next week. But the thing about traditional Tongan funerals is that they're pretty big affairs. The whole family is going to get together and we'll cook for about a week. I'd really like to be able to support my family through the whole process, but if I can only go for the funeral itself, I'd understand. Theda's kind of a big deal and we have to save the world and all that. I know you missed your sister's funeral, but —"

"Hold up, what?" Rosario turned in her seat to face her boss. "First off, I'm a little upset that I'm only finding out now about your sister. But you skipped her funeral? What kind of sister does that?"

"I'm sure she has her reasons."

"I know I've heard of Jackie before," Rosario continued. "Something about the whole thing sounds incredibly fishy, especially since you never talk about her. I thought you trusted us enough to tell us about your parents. But why would knowing about your sister be so awful?"

*Ribbit!*

The airplane occupants blinked, and a little green frog perched on Jenny's knees blinked back. Then it leaped toward Sesshomaru, who immediately caught it between his claws.

"Ew, no! Not in here!" Rosario cried.

"Where, then, do you suggest I put it?" When she couldn't come up with a solution in time, his mouth opened wide, showing off two rows of perfectly straight, sharp gleaming teeth, and he swallowed the frog whole.

Shuddering again, she closed her eyes. "Isn't she supposed to sneeze for that to happen?"

Normally, yes. But listening to the prattling of the humans, sitting in a confined space and knowing the flight had many hours ahead, and still smarting from the indignity of Rosario actually punching him hard enough to throw him into the airplane, Sesshomaru's youki had grown considerably with the irritation he felt under his skin. Jenny might not have known what she felt creeping like ice water around her body, but her curse certainly did and reacted accordingly. At least, this is what she concluded after careful thought, taking the attitudes of everyone around her into consideration.

Kukulkan needed to find something. Theda killed him. Did Kukulkan find the mysterious *it*?

Theda hates Sesshomaru for killing Izanami and defeating Daichi. Theda does not get vengeance. Why is Izanami's death so important? Is it actually important?

Sesshomaru growled and his youki flared again. Jenny's nose tickled. Another frog popped out of the air. Sesshomaru had another snack. Rosario complained about the sight and questioned Jenny's ability to think clearly when facing the foe that essentially killed her sister. Michaelis questioned Jenny's purported talents, period. Liu begged again for time off, promising to look for legendary creatures on Tonga.
Hm. Now there was a thought.

The handful of puzzle pieces in her hand with no reference picture might not fit together quite right, but all she needed were more pieces. Edge pieces.

Jenny finally opened her eyes. The occupants of the airplane quieted as she slowly stood up and gazed upon each of them in turn. Eventually, she settled an icy stare on Michaelis.

"El Comedor del Hombre has been killing his own business for months and taking the funds to finance hunting trips around the world ever since his mother died. That's how he met Theda in the first place. He hasn't gained a conscience; he's suffering from a mid-life crisis and depression. He'll burn himself out in a few months, but not before he's shot a few more vision serpents, jaguar gods and chupacabras. His cartel is done and gone in all but name and reputation only now that his main stronghold was destroyed in a fight between a particularly powerful inu daimyokai and a feathered serpent god by the name of Kukulkan. No cartel war required. No evidence of involvement from any other country. You're welcome."

She next turned to Rosario. "Jackie went missing in the spring of 2012. She just … didn't come home from school one day. We looked everywhere and found nothing. We called the police. You were one of the officers that helped investigate her disappearance. Y'all found nothing. Jackie came home a few weeks later with gaps in her memory and bulletproof armor. You suffered a head injury soon after that and most of those years on the force became a blur. And every time you find out I have a sister, you get pissed at me for some reason and I have to relive the worst periods of my life so that you can remember that case for two days, feel somewhat guilty about not finding her, then forget right after that. I'm tired of doing that over and over. So forgive me for not talking about Jackie."

"Liu." He lowered his head in preparation for her pronouncement. "I may or may not have deliberately missed my own sister's funeral, but that does not make me a cold hearted ice queen. For the love of all that is good and holy in this world, go to your grandmother's funeral."

Light returned to his eyes and his head lifted. "When you say funeral —"

"All of it. The whole week. And bring me back some otai and your mother's faikakai topai."

Sesshomaru came last on her list for reasons. Just for him, she switched to Japanese partly to protect his privacy, and also partly because Michaelis had burning ears. "In order to understand Theda better, we need to have a much more detailed discussion about Izanami and Daiichi. We can talk in private so you don't have these two gossiping up a storm," she said, pointing a thumb toward Liu and Rosario, "but we will talk. I also want you to understand that I know you were a powerful ruler and general, but you work for me now. When I give you an order, you follow it. Lose control again and I will 'forget' where Ketsugō-kiba is."

Sesshomaru shot to his feet, narrowly avoiding hitting his head on the ceiling again, and towered over her with an icy glare that rivaled hers. "You gave me your word —"

"You're the one breaking our agreement. I am perfectly within my rights to withhold the sword."

"You dare to use Ketsugō-kiba to enslave this Sesshomaru?"

"It's a contract. A ridiculously short contract, mind you. Six months for the only weapon I know of that could possibly give us humans a defense against the great Lord Sesshomaru should he ever decide to start slaughtering humans. And your transformation in the compound just goes to show how lethal you are and how much of a risk I am taking in teaching you how to live in this world. I think I can expect a more controlled performance from you from here on out in return for that, correct?"
The rumbling growl in his throat rivaled that of the plane engines and turbulence. The insolence at the idea that he couldn't control himself! Even when fighting Kukulkan, he had control and he alone made the decision to kill the feathered serpent. After nearly 500 years of pacifism, his daiyokai instincts craved, desired, demanded that he spill the blood of a creature whose strength proved a challenge to defeat. But while Sesshomaru had the presence of mind to understand his own base impulses and force them to wait patiently for just a little while longer, Kukulkan did not. The harder Sesshomaru fought to contain the feathered serpent, the more insatiable the creature's bloodlust became. The serpent would not, could not, be imprisoned without drinking all of the daiyokai's blood, followed immediately by every last human in the country. To contain Kukulkan, the god had to be executed. And he did so.

He half told himself that he disobeyed the detective's direct orders screaming in his ear because his pride demanded such. The only one capable of making a decision as to how to handle the feathered serpent should have been him, not Jenny. He had the experience, the skills, the strength. The Harkness woman's plan would only lead to a humiliating defeat — one he could scarcely afford. He refused to lose what little he had gained in this new life to the direction of someone too arrogant to see where she had no grasp on the situation and too blinded by a hunt.

But then he had a higher order of directives to follow. He had to keep this infuriating woman alive at all costs in order to obtain the location of Ketsugō-kiba. Even if it meant losing a valuable lead. By this reasoning, he had done his job correctly.

"I should be able to expect the same from you, woman," he replied with nary a hint of justified insubordination. But the ice in his eyes told of his opinion of her authority.

She flinched. Sesshomaru didn't actually expect her to physically react, but surprise widened her eyes and dropped open her mouth just a bit. "Excuse me?"

"I do not repeat myself;"

Examining every twitch of his features to determine his thoughts, Jenny's eyes stared deep into his very nature. "You think I can't lead this team." He opened his mouth to reply, but she shut him up first. "It surprises me how quickly you forget that you lost your army and kingdom to Daiichi under your leadership."

He blinked. Two, three times. Then he bowed his head slightly, as much of an apology as he could make.

"I'm glad we've come to an agreement," she said, her tone biting. "And put your youki away. I've done enough research to know that you're the one causing my curse flare-ups."

Michaelis, Liu and Rosario gaped at Jenny as she turned back to address the whole group. Liu unconsciously grabbed Rosario's hand, unsure if their boss's anger had been sated yet. "I don't want to die," he squeaked.

"Michaelis, see if we can make a pit stop somewhere for Liu to get off and head to Tonga," Jenny ordered. She let the rat-faced man roll his eyes and slink off to the pilot's cabin to inform them of the change in plans as well as arrange for a large money transfer to whoever could authorize such a change in flight plans.

"Thank you so much, boss."

She waved off his unnecessary gratitude. "Theda is using Izanami as a red herring, a distraction from her true goals. If she was actually angry about Izanami dying, she would have tried to kill you
months ago, Sesshomaru. She's looking for something that has world-destroying power, and I have no doubt she wants to use it. She'll keep us distracted, focused on stopping her alone while raising up more creatures that can look for this mysterious MacGuffin."

Rosario raised her hand. "Question. MacGuffin? I ask for the benefit of those of us that might not have been born in the last century."

"It's a movie trope," Liu explained. "Alfred Hitchcock coined the term for some object that everyone wants that moves the plot along."

"She cannot be allowed to find the MacGuffin before we do," Jenny continued. "But before we start fighting with Theda's army, we need to know more about her, and that means talking to those who know the earliest versions of Theda."

Once again, Rosario had a question and raised her hand. "Wouldn't anybody fitting that description be dead already? Apart from us?"

"If they're human. But I know someone who is considerably older. And kind of a perv."

A frown broke through Sesshomaru's icy composure, which Jenny did not miss. "You said you would have nothing more to do with Coyote."

"I'm pretty sure all I said was I wouldn't hire him. Rosario, your job is to arrange for Sesshomaru and me to meet with him."

Her face went white. "What? Why me?"

"Because he visits you at least once a week ever since we released him into the Adirondacks. Washing your jacket to get rid of his scent so Sesshomaru wouldn't notice was a good move, but animal hair sticks like no other and you always forget..." Lifting up the collar of her favorite denim jacket, she pulled out a two inch long brown strand of fur. "... to check the crevices."

Liu smacked her arm in irritation. "You're supposed to tell me when you get a stalker!"

"He's not a stalker. He just likes to hang around me and tell me funny stories," she said with a guilty shrug. "And he's kind of... anthropomorphized."

Rolling her eyes, Jenny headed for one of the luxury reclining seats. "In any case, I'm taking a nap. Wake me up when we get back to New York."
Rosario answered the door of her apartment before Jenny had a chance to knock, wearing a short-sleeved black blouse with a royal blue scarf and a pair of jeans that she hadn't ripped to shreds. She'd even put on some makeup and erased any evidence of blue in her hair with a rushed black hair dye job. "Coyote said he'd meet us on the roof," she said first thing. "Oh good! You didn't wear your armor."

Sesshomaru did a poor job suppressing his frown of disagreement. He'd insisted that the detective wear it when meeting with the trickster god, but she argued that the weather was too humid for the armor and that she would be fine without it. To further add to his consternation, she picked out a red knee-length sleeveless dress and a pair of knee-high brown boots. "I'd dress up nicely to go see the president. Why would I not do the same for a god?" she'd said.

"You didn't for Kukulkan," he'd replied. At least he'd switched to a light gray suit that didn't have fang punctures or blood all over it.

In a show of compromise, she slipped a knife into her boot, strapped a gun to her leg, and wore a pair of shorts underneath her dress.

Taking the lead, Rosario showed the pair the way to the roof. The four story building had one staircase leading to a door that only maintenance had a key to. But some kid had taped the lock long ago and the residents had free access to the roof to hang out, hang laundry to dry, smoke and escape from oppressive parents. So when the three of them made it outside, they didn't necessarily expect to be alone.

Waiting eagerly to greet them, a tall, skinny Native American man dressed in leather skins and brownish furs, practically pounced on Rosario as soon as she opened the door. "Magpie Girl, you're late!" he cried. "You shouldn't keep me waiting so long."

"Only by ten minutes, you turd," she replied, reaching up to rub his head. As she did so, his head changed from that of a human to a coyote's — one with a tongue that flopped over his teeth and pointed ears that needed scratches. Fur sprang up down his neck, arms and chest, and his fingers sharpened to pointed claws, completing the look of an anthropomorphized coyote. "Why you want to hang around me, I will never know."

Darting over to Jenny and Sesshomaru, Coyote took her right hand in both of his. His eyes grew serious and professional. "Corn Silk Girl, I am pleased to meet you once again, both you and your ..." He gave a sidelong glance at the daiyokai, whose usual icy stare had intensified the closer the trickster god came to him. "... protector."

"It's good to see you too, Coyote." She managed to finally slip her hand out of his grasp. "I never did properly introduce myself. My name is Jenny Harkness, and this is Lord Sesshomaru."

Lord? The daiyokai's eyebrow raised at the title. Certainly he deserved it, but the Harkness woman rarely, if ever, addressed him as such. In fact, she often found need to remind him that she didn't believe the title applied to him currently. What purpose could she have in elevating his status in the eyes of Coyote? Glancing at the god, he saw a spark of amusement before Coyote tilted his head back in a bark of laughter.

"Ah, yes! Son of the Inu no Taisho! I thought I recognized your smell. I remember the day you were born, how your father crowed to everyone and the moon who would listen. How is the old dog?"
"Dead," was his clipped reply.

But the announcement didn't faze him in the slightest. "Such a pity. My apologies. And what of your darling mother?"

His nose wrinkled slightly, but when Jenny blinked, the expression had vanished. "Probably not."

"Wait, now you have family too?" Rosario exclaimed. "What is with you people avoiding your family? Is Liu the only normal person I know?"

"Why else would I keep him around?" Jenny replied. "Coyote, I was hoping I could ask you a few questions —"

"Oh no no. I never get right to the point before dinner. You'll join me, won't you?" Dancing away from them, he bent down to all fours as the fur covered the rest of his body, his knees bent backwards and a tail popped out. "My home is just over the mountain on the horizon. I have room for two," he said, his eyebrows wiggling eagerly. He probably meant to look seductive, but Jenny swallowed back the lump that suddenly appeared in her throat, Sesshomaru wanted to rip them off with his poison claws, and Rosario simply giggled and climbed onto Coyote's back.

Jenny took a step, aiming to board the trickster god who expanded a bit to make more room, but Sesshomaru grabbed her wrist and stopped her. "I will carry Ms. Harkness."

Looking between the two canines, she whispered, "He's not going to drop me, Sesshomaru. I think."

"I am not so sure."

A yellow spark glinted in Coyote's eyes, and he bounded to the edge of the roof. "How about a race, Little General?" With a laugh that echoed off the moon and rattled the stars, the trickster god leaped off into the sky with Rosario shrieking in excitement on his back.

The ice in Sesshomaru's expression melted slightly, just enough for Jenny to see what his intentions were. And she did not like them. He was going to play along. He could smell the fear rolling off her in delicious waves and he wouldn't let go of her wrist. He wanted to play along. "Get on," he ordered, kneeling down so she could climb onto his back.

"We could just take a train—"

Sweeping her around, he pulled her arms around his neck and jumped off the roof. Her knees locked around his waist, and if he didn't need to breathe near as often as humans do he'd probably worry about her stranglehold on his throat. Although he knew he'd have a ringing in his right ear for the next day or two, he reveled in the sound of her screams.

Finally, finally, he found a single fear that could crack this insufferable woman's perfect composure.

Coyote had several seconds headstart on them, so Sesshomaru picked up the pace. Darting high above the reach of the skyscrapers, he found Coyote's scent and shot after it. The wind whipped his skin and sent his hair flying all around, but he could only focus on the race, on the pursuit, on the hunt. Zipping through a low flying cloud, he caught sight of Coyote bounding across the sky. Rosario had her hands up in the air, her scarf and a stream of laughter trailing behind her. The woman had to be slowing Coyote down some, enough to make sure she wouldn't fall off.

Finally, finally, he found a single fear that could crack this insufferable woman's perfect composure.

Jenny buried her face into Sesshomaru's mokomoko over his shoulder, her eyes squeezed closed as tightly as the rest of her body held on. "Oh God please put me down, put me down, put me down." The wind bit her skin, leaving it red and raw, but if she felt the pain, she didn't show any sign.
Seeing Sesshomaru gaining on him, Coyote redoubled his efforts and rushed through a series of rainclouds gathering above the city. Naturally Sesshomaru picked up his speed too, forcing his youki to work harder than it had in centuries. Moving with a demonic aura provided some protection for him and his passenger against the elements, but not much. For him, the only thing that mattered in the chase was winning. What that entailed, he couldn't be sure as only Coyote knew where he put the finish line.

When their race took them outside the city limits, they dipped down lower where the air was warmer. Coyote's paws touched the treetops, seeming to use the boughs as his footpath. In the shadows of the sunset, his grin and tail extended to more comical proportions, making him resemble a painted version of himself. More and more, he proved himself a creation of beauty, wonder and legend. Perhaps Rosario maintained a friendship with him for that reason, Sesshomaru thought. Humans do have difficulty seeing past tricksters' illusions of grandeur.

Diving into the trees, Coyote led Sesshomaru around branches, bushes and trunks in an effort to lose him. But the daiyokai would not be dissuaded. Despite the thorns and branches that snagged his fur and broke Jenny's skin occasionally — he could smell the sharp tang of her blood all of a sudden, which almost complimented the rosemary in her hair — he refused to let some trickster get the better of him.

Coyote abruptly stopped, nearly sending Sesshomaru flying past him in the wrong direction, and dropped down into a small clearing. Almost blending in with the forest, a small circular hut made of logs and branches with a mud roof stood innocuously under the cover of trees. He let Rosario off his back before turning back into a half-human, half-coyote. She hopped off with a spring in her step and a plea to do that again.

Sesshomaru wondered if he'd have to peel Jenny off his back, but as soon as he landed lightly on his feet, she began the slow process of removing her stiff limbs from around his body. Her breath came in shivers, partly from cold and partly from the adrenaline surging through her system. He knelt down so she wouldn't drop so far when she eventually let go. With some gentle prodding, he helped her fingers loosen their grip and allow him to breathe once again.

Standing back to observe the detective attempting to regain her composure, he couldn't help but break into a smug smile. She very distinctly had a green — and blue — pallor to her. "So you are afraid of something. You're not as foolish as I thought."

"Give me … your coat," she said through chattering teeth.

He was too amused to defy her command, and so did as he was told. As soon as he took the garment off, she snatched it away and thrust her arms through the sleeves, leaving the ends hanging about a foot over her hands. Huddling her face in the lapels, she inhaled the musky scent lodged in there as she tried to warm it up a bit. Sesshomaru ran a bit hotter than humans, but she needed even more heat.

Herding the pair like an insistent sheep dog, Coyote ushered Jenny and her ride into the hut. "Come inside! I caught a deer this morning."

A smile fire in a dirt pit warmed the hut. Some slabs of venison had been put on stakes to roast while the rest of the deer carcass had been nicely cleaned and set aside in a couple of bowls. The rest of the hut had an earthy, homey feel to it, with woven baskets, hunting and cooking tools, and a pile of purloined goods all squirreled away in their proper shelves and corners. Taking a large bear skin off the wall, Coyote draped it over Jenny, turning her into a pile of dark brown fur. "Thank you," she said, her voice muffled by the layers of warmth. "I wish I had known we'd be flying." This last remark she half meant for Rosario.
But the woman with a rosy flush to her cheeks looked completely unapologetic. "I know! Me too! I would have taken some pictures."

Coyote sat the group around the fire and began handing out dinner — the cooked venison for the humans, and the raw meat for him and Sesshomaru, who looked pleasantly surprised and pleased by the offering. Rosario and Coyote tore into their dinner with gusto, as did Sesshomaru, albeit with a great deal of decorum, but Jenny could only hold the stake of venison in her fingers and look nowhere but at her hands.

"Coyote," Jenny eventually said, "you know that story about how you made death permanent?"

"Oh yes," he replied. "It's one of my favorites. All of my favorite stories are about me."

Rosario quickly swallowed a large mouthful of meat. "I haven't heard it."

"Magpie Girl, has Corn Silk Girl not told you this story?" When she shook her head, Coyote eagerly sat back on his haunches and launched into his tale. "In the beginning of the world, man could not die. They kept on living, even when they became old enough to wither into dust. With no one dying, the Earth soon filled up with humans, leaving no space for new children or anything else. So the chiefs gathered together for a council — which I, of course, joined. One man stood up and said that humans should die, but only for a little while, and then come back to life. I jumped up next and said, 'No. Humans should die, and die forever. Otherwise there will be no more food or water or land if they lived forever.' (Naturally, a few exceptions could be granted temporarily.)" Coyote narrowed his eyes in Sesshomaru's direction, glancing at the pair of swords at his side.

"The chiefs argued with me that if man died forever, then there would be no more happiness in the world because all their loved ones would be dead. The silly council decided to ignore me and decreed that humans would die, but only for a little while.

"The tribe's medicine men then built a large grass house facing the east. They told the tribe that when someone died, they would come to the grass house and be brought back to life. The chief medicine man put a large black and white eagle feather on the roof of the house. When the feather became bloody and fell to the ground, they would know someone had died. Then all the medicine men would gather together and sing a song to draw the spirit of the dead back to the grass house where they could restore it to life again. All the people were happy to hear of this plan.

"Everyone except me.

"Soon, the feather became bloody and fell off the roof. The medicine men gathered and sang for the spirit to come to the grass house. In ten days, a whirlwind blew in from the west, circled around the grass house, and finally entered through the east. From the whirlwind, a handsome young man who had been murdered by another tribe appeared. All the tribe rejoiced to have this warrior back — especially the women. Everyone except for me because they refused to abide by my rules.

"Soon, the eagle feather became bloody and fell again. The medicine men gathered and sang for the spirit to come to the grass house. When the whirlwind came, I hurried and slammed the door closed before it could enter. The spirit, seeing no place for him to stay, continued on until he found his way into the Spirit Land.

"Thus humankind was introduced to death. Now when a whirlwind blows, they will say that someone is wandering about and remember how Coyote shut the door of the grass house." His chest puffed out as he finished his tale, and his ears perked up to catch the sounds of awe and wonder from his audience.
"Is all of that true?" Rosario asked.

He snorted — a very animal-like sound. "Of course it is, Magpie Girl. Why else would I tell it?"

Handing her dinner to the only person in the hut who would eat it, Jenny extracted herself a bit from the fur blanket. "The reason I asked about the story in the first place is because I need to know what you know about a woman in black named Theda."

His eyes hardened at the sound of that woman's name, and the fur on his back prickled. "Corn Silk Girl, why do you know the name of Death?"

The green in her skin had vanished, leaving only a reddened determination in her eyes. "We've met her," she replied simply. "And we know she woke you up."

He didn't answer for a few long moments. With a sigh, he laid down, turning into a thinner, graying full coyote carrying too many years behind his furrowed brow. "Death has sought you out personally because you are not made of corn silk. You're made of something considerably harder. Like beaten steel overlaid with flaking gold."

"She sought out everyone in my house, Coyote. Sesshomaru especially. We need to know more about her and why she intends to kill a vast number of people using yokai and other legendary creatures."

Growing dark, the god placed one paw on top of another, looking like a man in deep prayer. "I do not understand why she woke me up."

"She didn't ask you to do anything or find something?"

He shook his head. "The Death god knows better than to ask me to cooperate with her."

"Even though you helped create her?"

"I have done a great many things, but create Theda, no. I could not have done such a thing. She already existed when I decided to make humans dying a permanent thing. She was young and weak then, barely managing to survive. I made her strong, and she has been grateful to me ever since."

"Then she gains strength from killing people," Rosario deduced.

"It is, after all, why she exists," Coyote replied. "I do not know Theda so well to know why she intends to bring terrible creatures back to the world. I do know that she tires of things easily. Perhaps she misses the skin walkers and monsters. Hunting is so boring when you are the greatest creature in the forest."

"How did Theda come to be in the first place?" Jenny asked.

Coyote frowned, as much as he could with his long snout. "I was there in the creation of the world, so I can tell you for certain the Theda has not always existed. Many years after humans were made, us gods noticed a being who could take the spirits out of men. We named her Death so we could take some credit in her existence, but she immediately went and found a new name. We don't know how she came to be. It's likely that we never will. At first, the gods declared that she could only take the spirits out of lower living things. Then I let her freely take the spirits of men. But over the years, as she grew even stronger, she began to take the spirits out of more powerful beings — creatures told of in stories, myths and legends. When she found a way to kill the Inu no Taisho, the gods finally began to fear her growing strength and disdain for the authority of power. If the Inu no Taisho could die, perhaps, then, so could the gods. Amaterasu ordered Theda to be cut into a million pieces, and
worrying that she would use the greater creatures to harm them, the gods cast a great spell over everything mightier than a lowly human, and put them to sleep."

A confused frown broke over Sesshomaru's face while Jenny's lit up in understanding. "No wonder Theda was pissed at Sesshomaru. *She's* Izanami."

"But Izanami was just a shinigami," he argued. "And no one ordered me to do any such thing."

"Theda changes her name and face and body whenever she grows tired of her old persona," Coyote said, brushing off his concern with a wave of his paw. "Izanami, Hel, Mot, Ankou, she's been all of these and more. And gods rarely use direct communication with mortal beings. For instance, Magpie Girl, when did I tell you to take your friends to the roof of your home?"

Rosario opened her mouth to answer, but a blank spot in her memory stopped any words that would have come out. "Um … wow, that's weird. Like, I just knew you wanted to meet us there." She decided to switch to something her brain could comprehend. "So why would Theda make us think she wasn't Izanami?"

"She is a coward and did not want to face my wrath a second time," Sesshomaru answered. "That means Daiichi is the son of Death."

A low rumble rose in Coyote's throat. "This is not good, Little General. Death should not be capable of bearing offspring."

"Daiichi was defeated long ago. We have no reason to fear what Death's children are capable of."

Jenny raised an eyebrow when Sesshomaru chose not to sing his own praises. Certainly a daiyokai as proud as he would claim ownership of the defeat of Death's own son. "Are the gods afraid of Theda coming after them now?"

Coyote shrugged. "Who can say? They are all asleep. I am the only god awake, and I'm sure she did it by accident."

"Or practice," Jenny said with a hard edge in her voice. "Are you aware of the feathered serpent gods that she rose and then had slaughtered?" Sesshomaru noted that she specifically excluded mention of Kukulkan's cause of death.

A chill seemed to pass through the small mud and wood hut as Coyote's eyes grew hard. "This is worse than I thought." He closed his eyes and settled deep into thought. For a moment, it seemed like the world had dropped away from the small group, leaving them in darkness with a splash of stars above their head for light. "A battle is coming, and you are not prepared for it, Corn Silk Girl. Humans have forgotten how to fight with creatures with power."

"What do you mean by power?" Jenny asked. "I know Sesshomaru has youki, but that doesn't seem like it's a universal energy amongst creatures like you."

"It's not universal at all, and yet all energy comes from the same source. Different beings respond to different, shall we say frequencies? Different frequencies of energy. Of course, that doesn't explain it at all, but then when have I been known to give a comprehensive explanation of anything?" He threw his head up with a bark of laughter. "The only god capable of using every variety on Earth is Theda, as she takes it away from spirits when they separate from their bodies. All it takes is a nice healthy zap to wake someone up from an enchanted sleep."

"Then presumably Sesshomaru could wake up a yokai?"
"Only if he wanted to die. Now, Corn Silk Girl, I have grown weary of talk about Theda. Tell me a story."

Feeling a bit sweaty under the bear skin, she shrugged it off her back. "What kind of story would interest you?"

"One about me!"
"I'm back!" Liu cried. And yet as he threw open the door of Merripit House, no one came to greet him or rejoice in his successful return to the continent. "Seriously? Warm reception, guys."

Down the hall a ways came some odd sounds. Like a punching bag fighting back against a wimpy opponent, and winning. And frustrated grumbling. And some unappreciated giggling from a second party. And an unappreciated snort of derision from a third party. And a snarling, "Rosario, I swear to whatever god is listening right now, if I hear you laughing one more time, I will cut your pay in half!"

After dropping off some things, Liu decided to go down to Sesshomaru's apartment to see what the fuss was all about.

He knocked twice before opening the door. What little furniture Sesshomaru owned had been pushed away into back rooms so he could transform the main living room into a pseudo-dojo. Thick foam mats sprawled across the floor, on top of which someone had set up a portable punching bag. Wooden swords shaped like katanas stood against one wall, with a collection of throwing stars, knives, bows and arrows and other deadly throwing devices laid out neatly on the ground. Rosario's muk yan jong took up space in a nearby corner, completing the image of an unofficial training ground.

Off in the open window, Sesshomaru sat in the sill reading a book on the Middle Ages, a scowl permanently etched in his features. For someone who didn't even want the apartment in the first place, he certainly seemed annoyed that someone (Rosario) wrangled their way into taking it over.

The two of them had clearly been working at it for a while. The hours training had left Jenny's ponytail in a mess and her spandex tank top and capri leggings had distinct sweat stains, while Rosario, dressed in sweatpants and a police academy t-shirt, looked not nearly as haggard as her usual attire. Straightening her back and shoulders once more with some impatient prodding, Rosario tried to correct Jenny's form before she threw another wimpy blow at the punching bag.

"Wow boss," Liu said, setting some things down on the kitchen counter. "This may be the first time I've ever seen you try something new that wasn't food."

If she didn’t already have every muscle in her body tensed, she would have clenched her fists and teeth before responding with something snarky, but her unbending teacher lightly whacked the back of her knees with a retractable baton. "Looser. Keep them bent. Again."

"What brought this on?" Liu asked, wincing as Jenny made another pitiful strike.

"Coyote said a war was coming and humans weren't prepared for it," Rosario replied, "so I thought maybe I should teach the boss how to not be so useless on the battlefield."

"For the record," Jenny said between pants, "this is not voluntary." As soon as she threw another punch at the bag, she winced in pain when her bones hit the sack wrong.

Liu gritted his teeth in sympathy. "Did you just start today?"

"No, it's been about a week," Rosario replied as Jenny could only attempt to burn through his skull with her eyes.

"Ohhh. You're doing great, boss!" he said with a thumbs up and a fake toothy smile.
Sesshomaru snorted, then lifted his book up higher. Jenny had a tendency to throw nearby objects when he deigned to comment on her performance.

"You know, I don't know if I'd say she wouldn't hurt a fly; more like she couldn't. She could not hurt a fly." Straightening Jenny's posture again, Rosario had her switch arms. "It's like working with a piece of dried straw, or a sad flower, or a kitten with brittle bones and poor eyesight."

Once again, Liu winced as his boss attempted to follow Rosario's instructions and wondered if he could ever take her seriously ever again. "Geez, it's like watching a baby horse try to stand for the first time."

"I can hear you both, you know," Jenny snapped. "I still have complete control over payroll."

Liu suddenly remembered why he carried in so much stuff to begin with. "Oh, I brought the otai and the coconut dumplings —"

Moving swiftly out of her teacher's grasp, Jenny grabbed the Tupperware containers, pried them open until she found the bowl with the dumplings, then nabbed a spoon from one of Sesshomaru's drawers. "I think Liu meant to share …" Rosario started, but when her boss gave her a chilling glare, she let it go. "Okay, maybe that's yours."

"There's more in the office," he mouthed to Rosario.

While Jenny scarfed down one of her two favorites foods in the whole wide world, not even caring that her hair stuck to her face and back, Liu asked, "Have you heard anything from the Michaelis?"

"Nope."

"So Theda quit waking up demons?"

"Nope."

"She's setting up her game," Sesshomaru said with a bitter voice. "And then she will make us play it. I do not like waiting for my enemy to act before I do."

Pouring herself a cup full of otai, Jenny gave an apologetic shrug. "Unfortunately we're in the part of the case where we react instead of act. It's just a matter of time before Theda slips up and shows us more than what she means to. We already know she's the Izanami you killed, which she was hoping to hide."

" Doesn't make any sense," Rosario grumbled. "It's a stupid thing to lie about when it's so easy for us to talk to Coyote and figure that out."

"She didn't exactly lie, though," Liu said. He'd found the collection of throwing knives and picked up a few of them. "Theda just made vague statements and we made the wrong assumptions." Standing on the far side of the room, he threw a knife at a target hung up on the wall. From the holes in the plaster all around the paper, whoever had used the target last had some difficulties with hitting it. Liu, however, hit dead center. Then again. And again. And again. "Hey boss, want to learn?"

"No. No!" she shrieked as Rosario picked her up by the waist. "Would you quit doing that? Sesshomaru, help me out here!"

His gaze returned immediately to his book, and he wondered why she kept demanding his assistance when she knew he refused to intervene in such petty squabbles. Furthermore, he somewhat agreed that Jenny needed to learn how to defend herself. Even if in the process he ended up wanting to pick
the woman up and shake some capability into her limbs.

Setting her down next to Liu, Rosario grinned wickedly. "There's no way you can screw up knife throwing. Well, not nearly as badly as you do Aikido and Krav Maga."

"Why can't I just use a gun?" she argued. "I'm very good with a gun. Some might even say I'm one of the best sharpshooters in the state of Georgia, with a few ribbons and certificates to back up that claim."

"Then you should pick this up no problem," Liu replied, putting one of the knives into her hand. "And then you'll be just as scary as Jackie was."

"Jackie didn't throw knives," she argued, trying to give the blade back.

"Well unarmed combat isn't doing you any favors. Come on," he insisted, shoving it back. But something went wrong in the handoff and the knife slipped, slicing a deep cut in her palm.

"Rrgh!" Jenny's face contorted with pain and she clutched her hand to her chest. Sesshomaru could smell the blood before it seeped through her left hand's fingers as she put pressure on the incision. Immediately, the playfulness left the atmosphere. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry! How bad is it?" Liu removed the offending knife and tried to grab her hand, but she wouldn't let him touch her. Her teeth clenched hard from the pain, but apart from the trembling in her arms, she had no other reaction for a few moments before she stormed past him and out of the apartment.

Rosario smacked him in the arm. "Way to go, genius," she said as she moved to go after her.

But Sesshomaru got to his feet and passed her before she could take a step. "Stay here," he ordered as he shoved his book into Liu's chest. Stopping only to close his front door to keep the others from interfering, he followed Jenny's path out of his apartment.

The good layer of sweat she'd developed over the last few hours working with Rosario meant that according to his senses, her path shone like it had been paved with yellow bricks. Not that he needed her pungent sweat or the blood dripping from her hand to figure out where she had run off to. The door of Merripit House hadn't closed completely and the door of the bathroom slammed shut a second later.

Moving silently into the apartment, Sesshomaru listened for any hint of frustrated screaming or objects crashing into walls that he fully expected to come from the stressed-out detective. Instead, an overwhelming wave of grief hit his senses. He stopped in his tracks and sniffed the air to confirm. Salt.

He strained his ears, checking his other senses, just to be sure. Coming from the bathroom were quiet sobs of a woman in pain. The sounds didn't seem real, especially from her. When Rin and the other trafficked girls died, she had a steely composure at the shock. This simply felt wrong for the detective to be capable of emotion and weakness.

"Go. Away." Jenny's voice: biting and commanding, but strained from emotion. The fact that she knew he stood just feet from the bathroom door confirmed her identity alone.

Normally he wouldn't even be put in this position of questioning whether to submissively comply or disobey orders despite the consequences. He settled on a firm, "No."

"I'm not coming out until you do."
"Then you will wait a long time."

"Fine by me." Under her breath, she muttered, "I'll just go out the window."

Whether or not she understood that he could fly out there faster than she could attempt to step foot onto the fire escape mattered little. In any case, he had enough experience with females to know when to press and when to leave well enough alone. So he waited.

Inside the bathroom, Jenny tried desperately to stifle the emotion coming out of her throat to little avail. Drawers opened and slammed shut, their contents rattling about violently as she rifled through them. Water burst from the faucet in a hurried stream and Jenny hissed as it hit the cut in her hand. A few seconds later, the water stopped and the scrambling started again. Whatever she sought eluded her, and after some more fruitless searching, something made of glass slid off the sink and shattered on the tile. "Damn it."

Sesshomaru knocked twice before opening the door. Kneeling on the ground by the toilet, Jenny hurriedly picked up pieces of a broken mirror with a hand still bleeding all over the place while attempting to swallow back her emotions. Though the space felt cramped and made it a bit awkward to reach, Sesshomaru squatted down and began helping her collect the shards.

"I'm fine, I've got it," she snapped.

But he ignored her. Soon she gave up entirely and leaned back to sit against the wall, letting him finish cleaning up the last shards of glass. "Neither Rosario or Liu are teaching you correctly —"

"The training's fine. It's just me." Sighing, she looked up at the ceiling and tried to explain her jumbled thoughts. "Look, I can do many things. I can shoot a fly off a horse's ear at forty paces. I can tell you if a politician is cheating on his wife from the turn of his pants. I can build a bomb that can destroy a building using common household cleaners. I cannot fight. I can't dance, I can't march to a beat, I can't play any of those stupid hand-clapping games from elementary school. In my family, I'm the thinker and Jackie's the actor, the dancer, the fighter. … Was the fighter," she amended quietly.

Sesshomaru threw the glass into the garbage next to the sink and sat down on one knee. From her stuttered breathing and staring into nowhere, he could tell she had lost herself in memories.

"You should have seen her," she said with a hazy smile. "Just looking at her, you'd never think she was capable of hurting anyone. She loved everyone and everything so much. And she could dance. She was poetry in motion, whether she was on the stage, in the studio or training with Dad in hand-to-hand combat. All this I've been trying to cram into my head this week, she could pick it up like that." She snapped her fingers and chuckled at the thought of her sister's antics. "Never realized it was something to be jealous of until she went missing."

"Learning to protect yourself reminds you of her," he said, absentmindedly finding some gauze to clean Jenny's wound as he prodded for more secrets from her life. The knife had left a shallow cut along the heel of her thumb. Not terrible, but it required attention. Fortunately, he'd had good teachers and healers that prepared him for the day that they wouldn't be available. "Do you not wish to remember your sister?"

"It's not that," she sighed. "When she came back home, she … she was different." She chewed on the inside of her lip as she tried to find the right way to explain. "Jackie became this tiny little spitfire who could knock out twelve men robbing the National Treasury in two minutes, then catch a puppy falling from a burning building. The next minute, she would beat up a rapist and then break someone out of a burning car wreck. Given the chance, she could have kept up with you in a sparring match."
He half-smiled at the absurdity. "A human girl? That would never happen." Even if that human had the abnormal strength of Rosario. Once he'd cleaned off the blood, he undid a length of thread from a spool, strung a needle onto it and started sewing up the cut with careful precision. His sharp eyes and nimble fingers allowed him to make small, exact stitches. He noted that Jenny didn't flinch as he did so. Her breathing slowed and deepened, a sign that she had a method to manage the pain.

"She certainly was impossible," Jenny sighed. "She's the only case I've ever failed to solve, which says a lot about my talents, but ... I should have been able to find her. Not that it matters since she's dead now anyway."

"How did she die?"

"Gunshot to the back is the official cause of death, but she endured a lot more. A lot more. I shouldn't have read the autopsy report, but I did. Half her bones were broken, even more had bruising. Multiple concussions. Lacerated spleen and kidneys. Bullet punctured her diaphragm and lung. She drowned in her own blood. But she was a fighter, so she went out fighting. That was about six years ago."

"She died a warrior's death. She is to be envied, not grieved."

"I don't want a dead sister, though. I want her back." Swallowing back a lump in her throat, she forced back some tears and decided to focus on something else. "Did you have siblings?"

"I had a half-brother who also died in battle not long before I fell asleep." Fell asleep? It felt like a lifetime ago, like he'd died then and been brought back to life here in this strange meaningless afterlife.

From the crease that appeared between her brows, he determined she didn't actually think he would answer in the affirmative. "Do you miss him?"

His jaw clenched at the thought, but he would never admit to that type of weakness. "Why would I miss the presence of a thorn in my side? But when I fight to defend humans, I am reminded of him and know he would be pleased," he replied as he tied off the last stitch that closed up the wound, then cut off the end of the thread with his teeth. He could smell sweet pea in her palm. "Perhaps your sister would think the same."

Jenny shrugged and pulled her hand away to wrap it in gauze. "Jackie would ask me what the hell I'm doing trying to piss off the Goddess of Death." Wiping off the last of her tears, she tried to put on a self-effacing smile. "I mean she died to protect me. She'd think it a pity if I let myself go to waste."

Sesshomaru fixed her with a firm expression. "Simply staying alive does nothing to honor her memory. Conversely, foolishly putting yourself in danger also undermines her sacrifice."

"Is this about Kukulkan again?" she groaned. "I'm working on finding that happy medium, I really am. But yes, I will try to be more careful so you don't have to be so overprotective." She tried to meet his gaze, but her eyes couldn't seem to lift past his toned chest exposed by his unbuttoned dress shirt missing its tie.

Similarly, Sesshomaru couldn't meet her eyes either. Somehow on the days she hadn't felt the need to impress anyone — least of all him — she came across as fascinating. For someone who could captivate a strong willed human man with her bright blue eyes, flowing blonde hair and attractive body, the features she possessed that captivated his attention had nothing to do with conventional physical appearances. Intelligence, cunning, courage, loyalty; these he would have sought in a mate, and so often inu daiyokai females came lacking in the standards he sought. He never thought a
human possessed the capability of exemplifying every personality characteristic he found admirable. And yet, he wasn't blind to how her skin tight clothing emphasized her firm stomach and thighs, how her chest strained against the material as she breathed deeply, how her hair, despite the haphazard way she'd pulled it back, gave her an effortless elegance.

Temptation rose to brush away some of the hair sticking to her face, if only to touch her flushed skin out of curiosity, and his hand lifted.

Seeing Sesshomaru's attention had lingered a little too long, Jenny cleared her throat and scrambled to her feet. He quickly put his mask of icy indifference back on his face as he followed suit. "Thank you for sewing me up. I'll be back in a few minutes after I clean up."

He nodded and extricated himself from the tight space. "I will speak to Rosario and teach you some simple hand-to-hand combat methods myself when you return."

For some reason, the offer made her heart thunder in her chest, sounding like a beating drum in his ears. "Alright. Thank you." She turned the sink back on when curiosity suddenly struck her. "Sesshomaru, what was your brother's name?"

He stopped, his hand on the bathroom doorknob. Images of the desecrated grave sprang to mind, and a rush of anger nearly stirred his tongue. But with a calm breath, he decided to discover if she even remembered the name on the gravestone she dug up. "His name was InuYasha," he replied as he slid out and shut the door of the bathroom.

The last thing he heard was something else made of glass being thrown to the ground, followed by a "Damn it. Damn it all to Hell."
"How does Liu always get a first class seat?" Rosario hissed as she and Jenny shuffled down the narrow aisle of the commercial airplane.

"Don't say his name for the next eight hours," she snapped back. As Jenny slid into her cramped window seat, she briefly wished she could go the Sesshomaru route of travel. Even if she'd rather eat a box of nails.

For a number of reasons — claustrophobic accommodations, TSA would forbid him from carrying a pair of swords on board, his fake passport wouldn't hold up to scrutiny, his 'I'll kill you' stare would automatically get him picked out for a random search — Sesshomaru decided to fly on his own following the plane, and the others agreed with that decision. Furthermore, this would make him more flexible and mobile should his particular talents be needed.

After meeting Coyote, Jenny put out feelers amongst all her contacts around the world, seeing if any of them had picked up any strange readings on radar or satellite. Only three hours ago, as Jenny emerged from the bathroom completely put together like she hadn't just embarrassingly broken down in front of Sesshomaru of all people, she noticed a text from a less-utilized contact in MI-6.

Unreadable energy signatures detected. Sources and coordinates contained in attachment.

From the countryside of jolly old England, to the sands of mystic Egypt, to the heart of turmoiled Lebanon, magic seemed to have awoken in the old world. Magic seemed like a better way to describe the 'energies' Coyote described. It seemed fitting anyhow. The bursts of energy signatures aligned with a few new reports she came across in a hurried search on her phone. A monstrous man wreaking untold havoc in Beirut. Men and women with the heads of various animals causing trouble in Giza. Six children missing in the moors of Scotland, and one traumatized boy who cut off his own hand and could only speak of the white horses that turned black. Scotland Yard had its own genius they called on to solve these sorts of mysteries, but even he didn't have a mind open enough to the possibility that the children were, in fact, taken by kelpies.

That last report alone pissed her off to no end. She knew Theda would begin building her army in earnest, and soon, but she did not have to kill children to do so.

Due to the kelpies episode in Scotland, Jenny made the call that even if Theda herself goaded Merripit House into playing her game and falling for her traps, they couldn't just stand by and let her slaughter unsuspecting humans. So for now, they would play along, Sesshomaru and Rosario taking primary responsibility for putting the creatures down before they hurt anyone, and Liu and Jenny working on a way to predict Theda's moves. This necessitated a trip across the Atlantic.

MI-6 owed her a favor for the Coyote thing anyway. On the trip to JFK, she wrangled the last known sighting of Theda — a glimpse of the woman in London — out of Michaelis so they could have somewhere to aim. According to Murphy's Law, the first flight available to London was a commercial one instead of a private one.

Rosario settled into her aisle seat well into the back of the plane after sliding past an enormous mountain of a man trying to get his carry-on in the overhead compartment. Jenny resisted the temptation to stab the man in front of her with a pen when he leaned his seat waaaaayyyy far back.

"Oh gross," Liu grumbled over their earpieces. "Some lady's emotional support dog just dropped a fart bomb. It smells like some kid pooped his pants, and it won't go away."
They tried not to giggle.

Some hours later, Jenny woke up from her stuttered nap to see blue ocean peeking through the cloud cover below. Off to the side, well enough away from the wing of the plane to avoid causing problems, Jenny spotted Sesshomaru flying alongside them. Squinting, she thought she saw light surrounding him, helping him keep up with the jet engines. His hair and fur pelt flew out behind him, but he otherwise remained unaffected by the wind.

The sight filled her with a sense of wonder. In Sesshomaru's presence, she hadn't allowed herself to feel starstruck. She couldn't afford to. Any other normal human would gape at his dignified beauty, tremble when he glared, run when he growled and his eyes grew red with bloodlust, shriek in terror from the youki that spewed forth when he drew Bakusaiga. Stare when one caught him flying and recognized just how passively inhuman he is. How in the hell did this happen? With a simple order and some persuasive arguing, she could direct the all-powerful daiyokai force to her benefit. By all rights, she shouldn't have that sort of control. She shouldn't have even met him, or survived their first meeting.

The plane lurched a bit and the announcement tone came over the intercom. "Ladies and gentleman, this is your captain speaking. Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts. We will be making an unexpected landing as soon as a runway is available."

A murmur passed through the passengers as they hurried to comply with the captain's request. "Liu," Jenny said quietly, pressing a finger to her ear. "Get your air marshal badge out and see why we're having an emergency landing."

"On it," he replied.

She settled in and geared herself up to her imminent uselessness. Idly, she wondered if Sesshomaru could tell if something had gone wrong if she could get a message to him, seeing as how the earpieces didn't work outside the plane. He seemed to have a sense of when the members of Merripit House were worried. Did that have something to do with his daiyokai powers? Or did he just have a good sense of observation?

A few minutes later, Liu reported in. "Co-pilot said all international and trans-Atlantic flights are being grounded due to a mysterious bogey with a large heat signature being spotted a few minutes ago. It's moving fast and could be hostile." Jenny sat in silence as she took a moment to figure out what to do with this information. "Boss?"

"I'm just trying to think of a way to explain what a bogey is." Turning in her seat, she pressed her nose to the window and found Sesshomaru had drawn in closer.

Charades it is, then. She pointed at him when she had his attention, pointed two fingers at her eyes, then gestured in a circle at the rest of the sky. *You look around.*

Nodding once, he lifted up and away to scan the area.

Throwing a wide net of youki that spread for miles in every direction, Sesshomaru scoured the air for signs of disturbances. But keeping up with the airplane meant his senses had to strain to get anything, making his youki the only detection agent he could rely on.

As the plane reached closer to land, a powerful force made a ripple in his demonic energy, moving upward from the ocean. It didn't quite have the same presence that Kukulkan had, but it presented a great danger nonetheless. With claws at the ready and his heart eager for a fight, Sesshomaru dove.
Bursting through the cloud cover, a massive scaled beast with great leathery wings, four legs like a lizard, a tail that whipped back and forth and the head of a yokai like Ryukotsusei. From the smoke that leaked out of its snout and nose, he determined that this beast could breathe fire like Ah-Un could. So dark was its red coloring that it nearly appeared black. Its orange eyes searched for prey and locked on the noisy airplane soaring overhead. He flapped his wings harder and gave a bone rattling roar as he shot upward at it.

Just before his massive jaws locked onto a wing, Sesshomaru reeled back a fist and punched its snout, sending it hurtling downward. The blow took the beast by surprise. It took him a few moments to regain the hold he had on the air. In that time, Sesshomaru darted at him and struck its face with his poison whip. Reeling his head back with a roar, the beast showed little sign of feeling pain from the blow. Instead, he took a deep breath.

Sesshomaru darted just fast enough to escape the stream of flames that shot out of the beast's throat.

A smirk nearly crossed his face as he glanced at his singed sleeve. "So, you'd like a fight, would you?"

The beast flapped its wings, sending a massive gust of wind at Sesshomaru. It nearly had the strength to knock him down into the sea below. Instead, he found himself blown backwards enough that it could chase after its intended prey. The gale had given the plane some trouble. Tipping dangerously to the left, the plane struggled to stay afloat. Using this moment of weakness, the beast inhaled, preparing for another blast.

Moving fast as a strike of lightning, Sesshomaru took hold of the beast's tail and yanked hard. A stream of fire flew out of its maw, narrowly missing the belly of the plane. Screeching, the beast attempted to fight back, bending down to bite his mokomoko, but Sesshomaru simply turned and threw it with all his might. A roar cut across the sky, trailing after the falling beast.

While the plane carrying the humans he was unfortunately saddled with for the next four and a half months now, made its escape to land only a few miles away, Sesshomaru went after the fire breather. His daiyokai blood thrummed with the desire to hunt, to prove his strength. But this creature's natural habitat laid in the sky. His was on the earth for the most part. He needed to move this skirmish to a place of his advantage.

Undeterred from its attack, the beast came after him again, seawater spraying off its body like it had taken a dip in the sea. Sesshomaru darted just of of its reach, letting its jaws snap shut on empty air. Turning slightly, he unfurled his whip and snapped it across the creature's snout. Despite the acidic poison, the scales showed it had little effect apart from angering it. With a furious and prideful roar, the beast decided he'd suffered enough and chose the daiyokai as its new prey. Glad to play the part, Sesshomaru whipped the beast a few more times, letting it feel the smart, before speeding off toward the shores of England.

For a brief moment, he recalled a battle similar to this one, the day he discovered Ah-Un. The two-headed dragon had more than a little fight in him before he recognized the daiyokai's superior will and strength, at which point Ah-Un gladly bent to his authority. But he'd taken his sweet time getting to that point. Why he needed a steed like Ah-Un, he never could quite say as he could fly faster and farther than the two-headed dragon could. But when Jakken and then Rin eventually joined him in his journeys, Ah-Un proved himself resourceful and surprisingly convenient, carrying his vassal and ward so Sesshomaru could move freely on his own. This version of traveling in an airplane certainly moved the group further and quicker. Even though it lacked the same ease and charm as travel with a dragon, Sesshomaru felt no need to replace Ah-Un just yet.

The beast had a fiercer constitution than Ah-Un cared to demonstrate, shooting through clouds with a
sonic boom in its wake. Even though Sesshomaru could still easily escape, he made sure to stay only just ahead of its teeth. When he heard it inhale, preparing to shoot out a blast of fire, he simply darted immediately left or right. Flames tickled his heels and singed his fur pelt, but he allowed it so the beast would think it might have a chance of besting him.

As soon as Sesshomaru saw land, he dropped down toward the grassy hills. The lower altitude meant the beast couldn't move quite as much, but it desired to catch the daiyokai above anything else. He slowed slightly, and the beast opened its mouth full of jagged white teeth, ready to catch his feet.

Spinning around, Sesshomaru interlocked his fingers in one large fist and slammed down on the creature's snout hard enough to rattle its teeth. Dazed, its wings faltered and gravity took over. By the time the beast had sense enough to use its wings again, the ground came up and hit him solidly.

Haphazardly, the beast struggled to push itself back up to its feet, using its wings as supports. Sesshomaru landed gracefully several yards — oh, right, this is England — meters away on the ground. Before the creature could swipe out with its sharp claws, he waved his arm and whipped the beast on the nose. "Heel."

A rebellious cry issued out of the beast's throat. Its tail lashed out, but Sesshomaru blocked it with his whip while ordering the creature, "Heel," again.

Again, the massive creature roared and attempted to roast the daiyokai. Once more, with more anger in his voice and posture, Sesshomaru whipped it until it backed down slightly. "Heel." The command came with a force of will backing it. The beast needed to understand that if it expected to live, it had to cooperate. If it didn't, it would feel pain.

Fire shot out of the creature's nostrils, catching Sesshomaru's fur pelt. Wrapping the poison whip around its maw, he yanked down and knocked its head into the ground. A wave of angry youki flowed out of the daiyokai, oppressive and heavy, as he ordered once more, "Heel."

As the whip unwound from its mouth, the beast kept its head on the grassy field. Although tense and full of injured pride, it did not make a move to raise its body or its wings. With no one but him and the creature around for miles, Sesshomaru allowed himself a half smile at his victory.

Let the detective accuse him of only being capable of killing now.

"We weren't exactly sure how to handle something like this," a British middle-aged woman in a dress suit with a badge on a necklace around her neck, said to Jenny soon after she and her companions arrived at the scene. Agents like this woman had roped off a piece of the countryside and kept all inquisitive policemen and news reporters well away. "Michaelis said you'd know what to do."

Looking off into the distance, she spotted a silver-white haired man in a white suit keeping a massive lizard-like winged beast the size of an elephant occupied. "He would be right. We'll go take care of it. Thank you, Yvette."

As the trio ducked under the crime scene tape, the MI-6 agent stopped them. "If you don't mind me asking, how do you plan on doing that? The radar readings showed them both moving at unprecedented speeds, and their energy patterns —"

"You handle your people, and I'll take care of mine," she replied. "Thank you for your help agent."

Sesshomaru stood before the burgundy creature with his whip in hand. The beast knew better by now than to test its luck with the daiyokai. As the three humans approached, some faster,
Sesshomaru's icy scowl increased in intensity, warning it to behave.

Liu could only get to about 50 or 60 meters away. "That. Is. A."

"Dragon." Jenny stood far, far closer than Liu dared, to the beast currently sitting like an obedient dog at the feet of Sesshomaru. "You caught a dragon."

"Bested," he immediately corrected.

"You broke it," Rosario said. After talking to the British agents, she had taken on a bit of an English accent. One close to that heard in Manchester.

"This dragon, as you call it, is perfectly healthy. I didn't harm him physically."

"It's. A. He." Liu could barely get words out of his gaping mouth. "How?"

"No, broke him like you break a horse," she explained as she sidled up next to him. The dragon followed her movements with his eyes, but otherwise made no antagonistic move toward her. "Can I touch him?" Pleased that she recognized who had the power in the relationship between daiyokai and dragon, Sesshomaru had the beast lower his head. Gently, Rosario ran her hands over the scales next to his nose, then down the top of his head to his neck. When she reached his throat, she smiled like a kid on Christmas. "He's hot inside."

He had half a mind to show her the blackened spots on his sleeves and fur pelt just so she could see how 'hot' he ran.

"I used to train horses back in the day," she said wistfully. Sesshomaru noted that Jenny raised one eyebrow at this statement, but chose not to say anything. "I wonder if training a dragon would be similar." Trailing her hand along his snout, letting the dragon get used to her scent, a thought struck her. "Have you dibs-ed him yet?"

As at other times when Sesshomaru heard a word he didn't recognize, he blinked once and gave a blank stare. "What do you mean —"

"Dibs! Dibs on the dragon."

"You can't dibs a dragon," Jenny immediately argued.

"Especially when Sesshomaru is the one who did all the work fighting it," Liu said. "He gets automatic implied dibs."

Ignoring Sesshomaru's continued confusion, Rosario put her hands on her hips. "Unless he doesn't want to keep him. You're not keeping him, right?" she whispered to him.

"No! No one is dibs-ing the dragon," Jenny said with finality. "No one is keeping it. Where would we even put it?"

"I have no use for an undomesticated beast such as this," Sesshomaru answered disinterestedly. If the strange woman with more strength than any human had business possessing, wanted it, she could have him. "You may attempt to train him if you wish."

"Yes!" Her cheer nearly startled the dragon. "Hey, since you caught him, you should name him What's a good name Japanese for him?"

Thinking for a moment, he spoke the first name that came to mind. "Fudo," he replied simply. The
name of a god of fire and wisdom.

"No, don't name it," Jenny grumbled. "We're not keeping it."

But the decision had already occurred, and Sesshomaru turned and left Fudo. With her hand still on his nose and their eyes locked together, Fudo stayed put with Rosario. A moment later, she tilted her head, indicating for him to follow her off the hillside. Liu stood completely frozen until the dragon decided to stop right in front of him. His head slithered forward until his nose was level with Liu's trembling shoulders.

"Rosario…"

With a snort that almost sounded like laughter, Fudo poked the terrified man in the chest, sending him falling to the ground on his behind. The dragon hopped, ready to play with his new friend, his tail wiggling with joy. When he poked out his tongue, possibly intending to find out how Liu tasted, Rosario smacked his snout once. Without a command given, the dragon fell into place behind her and followed his new master.

"No, you're not keeping it!" Jenny protested. "We're not keeping him! … Oh bless your animal-loving heart."
Valued Employees

Loch Spey, Central Highlands, Scotland

"Is there a reason we told Sesshomaru that we were going to Cottingley to deal with some fairies?"
Liu asked as he lifted a foot out of a surprisingly deep mud hole. "Instead of, like, you know, the
truth?"

Jenny ducked under some branches, following him on their way to the water's edge. "I didn't want
him to worry."

"Worry about us hunting kelpies. Right, I can see how that's a silly thing to be concerned about." A
dragonfly zoomed out of the cattails and nearly hit him in the face.

"I needed a break from the hovering," she admitted. "There's keeping me alive, and then there's
watch my every move so I can't even breathe out of a misplaced fear that I'll go try and kill myself."

Liu stopped to squat in a patch of English ivy and inspect the dirt beneath. Leaves had gotten
squashed under a pair of hooves that left distinct impressions in the soil. "I thought that's why you
hired him."

"That's why he sticks around. My reason for bringing him on board was more to keep him occupied
with things like the mess in Greece right now."

Meanwhile in Athens, Greece…

Nine heads on nine long serpentine necks. Each with fangs and a nasty temper. And all attached to a
beast's body that stood nearly five times taller than Sesshomaru.

The daiyokai eyed the monster with a bored expression as he drew Bakusaiga. Jenny had made it
sound like this land held a wide mixture of mythological creatures that would give him a semblance
of a challenge. But if the rest of the creatures he came across resembled this one, perhaps he ought to
take a nice stroll and acquaint himself with the scope of the landscape.

One head lashed out at him with its fangs bared, but with a flick of his wrist, Sesshomaru sliced it off
with a poison whip. The serpent-like head fell to the ground and flopped around for a moment before
the light left its eyes.

The beast shuddered for a moment, it's headless neck spurting blood. Then the neck began to twist
and split into two. A moment later, a head grew onto each neck, each as fearsome as the one he'd cut
off.

So that's its trick.

Before the beast could strike him with one or more heads, Sesshomaru leaped into the air,
brandishing his katana. A disintegrating wave would handle it nicely.

"Bakusaiga!"

Meanwhile back in Scotland…

"It's just that it seems like this is the sort of thing we should have Sesshomaru taking care of. Or
Rosario at least," Liu muttered as he swatted away another spiderweb that caught his arm.
"Normal humans have dealt with kelpies for hundreds of years. We'll be fine." Even still, Jenny checked for her gun on her hip out of nervous habit. And fingered the silver chain and cross around her neck. And the knife in her belt.

Over one shoulder, Liu carried a bridle inlaid with silver crosses. Over the other, he had a shotgun which had shells filled with silver pellets. The climate ended up getting warmer than either of them planned on, so his canvas jacket and long pants felt suffocating as they stuck to his skin. But after his stay in Tonga, the heat didn't bother him so much as it could have.

Jenny didn't have a much better experience. Sweat ran down her back and into her boots thanks to the weight and impermeability of her black armor. But at least none of the biting insects or thorns bothered her.

Liu stopped to pick up a few white horse hairs caught in a branch close to the ground. Near them, more horse hoofprints trailed off in a path nearing the edge of the river. "From the tracks, it looks like it's headed toward the river."

Nodding, Jenny asked, "You think so?"

"Why would it not be?" She refused to say anything more, buttoning her lips and keeping a passive look on her face, so Liu examined the scene even closer. The hairs caught in the branch could only have gotten there if the kelpie had walked away from the water. But according to the hoofprints, its trail went the other way. A break in the branch that snagged the hair could mean that it simply had twisted the wrong way when the creature brushed past it. "It's probably headed back to the Loch," he declared. Confidently, he strode toward the river.

Watching him walk down the path, Jenny stood motionless with her arms crossed for a few moments. Waiting.

Soon, Liu came trucking back the opposite way. "Kelpie hooves are backwards, aren't they."

"Yes they are," she said with a smile, and soon joined him in trekking through the river grass. "I haven't really had a chance to ask yet, but how's your family doing?"

"They're good. Everyone's doing good. And a lot fatter than I remember. Mom's going to stay in Tonga for a little while until things get settled down and taken care of, which probably means she and my Aunt Suka are going to burn the whole island down with how well they get along. Dad could barely fit on the plane, but it's his own fault since he practically ate an entire roast pig himself. But it was good to catch up with my brothers and my sister is a nightmare, but at least her kids are cute. How about your family? Are your parents doing well?"

Stiffening her shoulders, she replied, "They're good."

"Still not talking?"

"I'm not avoiding them. I Skype with Mom at least once a week, and I'll talk to Dad when he calls. But I'm not a big fan of the 'What you're doing is too dangerous' speech. It gets old really fast, especially since Sesshomaru's giving it to me now. It'd be nice if I could just lie about what I do for work. What do you tell your family?"

"Beats me. I still have no idea what to tell them."

"Is professional problem solver not a real job?"

"I think they suspect I work for the CIA. Which all things considered isn't exactly wrong. I could just
tell them I've gone back to modeling."

Jenny suppressed a shudder. "Let's never go back to Milan."

"Oh come on. The case wasn't that bad."

"I would rather gouge out my eyes. Or get another piggyback ride from Sesshomaru."

A confused frown crossed his face. "Wait, what?"

"Hush." Holding up one hand, Jenny paused and indicated for Liu to listen.

Drifting on the air came a lilting song carried by a voice that had too much of an ethereal quality to have come from a human. Its words came softly, just loud enough to know someone had a story to sing, but too low to know what they said. They had to concentrate to decipher the lyrics, which didn't actually help because they were in Gaelic. Before he knew he'd taken a few steps toward the music, Liu felt Jenny's hand on his arm. "Is that the —"

"Yep." She retrieved a couple pairs of orange foam earplugs from her pocket and handed him a set. "Kelpie."

Crouched low to the ground, they approached the muffled singing cautiously. The cattails and grass didn't hide them perfectly, but it offered enough cover for their purposes. Jenny part ed the plants enough to get a visual on the creature before them.

To anyone unfamiliar with horses, the majestic shining white mare before them would have astounded anyone with its beauty. Hypnotic dark eyes, a flowing mane and tail, not a speck of coloring or dirt anywhere on her coat and a strong back invitingly absent of passengers. Flitting fairies braiding flowers in her mane would not have seemed out of place here.

But to Jenny's trained, raised in the South and may or may not have competed in a rodeo once, eye, she could say for certain that this creature was anything but a horse. Hiding behind locks of thick white hair, seaweed had gotten tangled in her mane. And her hooves faced the wrong direction.

"Okay, we found it," Liu said in a whisper. "Now what do we do?"

"It pulled two kids into the water and left the entrails of one of them on the riverbank." Jenny took the shotgun off his shoulder and loaded two shells into the barrel. "According to legend, that's par for the course. Let's not let that happen again."

A little ways off, children's laughter echoed over the rushing water, coming closer with running footsteps. Jenny and Liu peered through the grass together to find two little boys and one girl racing toward the kelpie. Her coat shimmered for a moment, like she put on an extra layer of enchantment.

"Great," Jenny grumbled, pulling the necklace off. "I'll distract it. You get the kids."

"Got it."

Giggling, the kids got up close to the beautiful horse and began arguing amongst themselves as to whether they should get on and ride it. Before the oldest boy could touch its coat with an outstretched hand, Jenny broke out of the reeds and rushed in between them, holding up her silver cross. The mare reeled backwards, kicking its front legs up, and screeched in fear. While the kelpie backed away from the silver, its eyes blazing with a green light, Liu slipped in, grabbed the two smaller children, and just started running.
Throwing the necklace over the oldest boy, who had fallen to the ground in surprise, Jenny pushed him to his feet. "Run. Now!"

The brilliant white coat split down the middle of the mare's back, falling to the ground as she circled around to come back at Jenny and the boy. Underneath, its skin shone with tar black scales and its teeth dripped with seaweed. It resembled a soggy form of a horse made from a bog. The image alone scared the boy bad enough to get him racing after Liu and his friends.

Now with a clear line of fire, Jenny raised her shotgun and fired at its chest. Screaming from the silver spray burning through its heart, the kelpie stumbled away, its skin and flesh falling off its bones as it tried to get back to the water. Jenny aimed at its head and squeezed the trigger. With a blast of silver and gunpowder, the screaming silenced.

With the kelpie dead and gone and dissolved into foamy water, Jenny broke open the shotgun and loaded two more shells into the barrel before tramping through the underbrush after Liu and the other kids. She found him defending himself from their tiny fists and one large stick. Apparently they'd been given the Stranger Danger talk.

"Ow! Ow! Quit it! I'm trying to help! See, this is why we should have gone to Paris," Liu whined.


Meanwhile in Paris, France...

"Stay… Stay…"

Rosario held up a hand, backing up slowly. The more steps away from Fudo she took, the antsier he got. Of course, the dead rabbit in her other hand looked incredibly tempting and he wanted it badly. But Rosario demanded obedience above all else. Only two days under her training, and she already had him coming and sitting and allowing her to ride his back whenever she pleased. This stay command, however, proved hard to follow.

And the grayish monstrosities with stone wings, thick chests, razor sharp talons on their hands and feet and the heads of demons racing toward his mistress from behind didn't help matters much. At least five of these monsters climbed over broken and shattered pews as the swarmed into the Notre Dame cathedral.

"Stay… No attacking the gargoyles just yet… You're being such a good dragon… Stay… Release!"

Fudo charged forward and shot a stream of fire at the first gargoyle nearing Rosario. She ducked and turned in time to punch another one in the stomach, sending it crashing back down into one of the few pews still intact. Rearing up on his hind legs, Fudo came down hard on two more, setting them on fire as he did so.

Within minutes, each of the gargoyles screamed in pain from their broken, twisted bones and as they burned to death. Rosario gladly tossed Fudo the rabbit, who happily swallowed it in one gulp. "Good boy, Fudo! Good boy," she crooned as she rubbed his snout.

Meanwhile back in Scotland...

With the children returned to their proper owners, Jenny and Liu continued their search of the Loch and adjoining River Spey. This time Jenny kept the shotgun at the ready while Liu prepared to throw the bridle over the head of any kelpie that dare take him by surprise. And since he still had the lead, his muscles practically shook with anticipation and fear. The river showed some signs of abnormal bubbling, but if Theda had woken up more than one kelpie, the others wisely left them alone. Not
that Jenny would have minded putting another one down.

The real quarry they sought had less to do with the creatures and more with the place they slept for nearly half a millenia.

"It's been awhile since we've done this," Liu said absentmindedly. "You and me on a case together."

She nodded in agreement. "I hope you don't feel like I've been neglectful."

"You're busy teaching Sesshomaru English and Rosario to not kill so many people. I get it. Besides, I'm not rusty at all."

"Hn," she replied noncommittally. Mentally, she added another item to her 'teach Liu how to be as smart as me' list.

Spinning around, he jabbed a finger in her face. "You just made a Sesshomaru noise."

Her face went slightly pink. "What? No I didn't."

"He does that all the time when he doesn't want to talk to me. 'Hn.' You've started doing it too."

"I — So what? We've been talking to each other eight hours a day for a month and a half. I must have picked something up." Flustered, she brushed past him and picked up the trail. "Kind of like how you used to say, 'Bless your heart,' a month after I hired you."

"Okay, how was I supposed to know that meant 'F— you' in Southern?" He hurried to catch up with her. "I think we're getting off topic, here."

"And what topic were we supposed to be on?"

"The topic of 'You're avoiding Sesshomaru because you kind of like him.'"

This time she truly sputtered, came to a halt and prayed for a kelpie to shoot. "There is no part of that sentence that is true. I'm not avoiding him — it's strategically advantageous to send him to slay the Nemean Lion or Cerberus or whatever's going on in Greece and I wanted to kill the kelpie myself. That's all there is to it." She stormed off for a moment before stomping back and getting in his face. 

"And I do not have a crush on that stuck up, arrogant, old enough to be my great-great-great-great-grandfather's grandfather, dog."

"Boss," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder, "I may be an idiot about many things. But when it comes to matters of the heart, or schoolgirl infatuations —"

"Knock it off, Liu," she snapped, brushing his hand off. "We have work to do."

Rolling his eyes, he shut his mouth and followed after her.

With a stick she found on the side of the path, Jenny began poking at the reeds on the bank of the river, looking for something. The soil along the edge had been overturned in the last week or so.

"Looks like something the size of a horse had to dig itself out," Liu remarked.

"When you're asleep for a few centuries, the river tends to move and bury whatever isn't moving," she replied in agreement before handing the shotgun back to him.

Then she pushed down some grass. The bottom halves of the blades bore a coating of dried, burgundy blood. Tearing it away, she exposed the soil below and the extent of the circumference. Even though the dirt swallowed most of the blood, it still had enough of a stain to show the extent of
"This isn't where the boy's entrails were found, right?"

Liu pulled out a paper map and unfolded it to the right location. "Nope. They found his remains back there."

"What's wrong with this blood?" she asked.

"There's a lot of it?" Liu guessed. "The victim must have been unconscious, so where's the body?"

"No signs of violence." She took a few pictures with her phone. "This is all voluntary. It's likely this person is also still alive despite the massive amount of blood loss."

Realization dawned on him. "This is Theda's blood. So this is how she's waking the demons up."

"I'd agree, but I found no blood in El Castillo." Grumbling slightly, Jenny began to dial a number in her phone. "Okay, fine. Maybe I did need Sesshomaru for this one."

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Athens, Greece

Sesshomaru couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the monstrosity snarling at him. With musculature like an ox and a chestnut coat of fur, the creature could accurately pass as a giant mongrel of unfortunate parentage. The three heads drooling as they growled at their challenger could not hope to be taken seriously by any means. He could understand two heads on a dragon. Three heads on a dog of all beasts, he could not comprehend the reasoning behind that creative decision nature had made.

He could disintegrate this travesty of a species with naught but a wave of Bakusaiga, but a vibration in his coat pocket gave him pause. Sheathing his katana for a moment, he answered his cell phone, putting it on speakerphone. (Putting the horrible device anywhere near his face annoyed him to no end, especially how it made him look so much like a prattling human.)

"Speak," he said.

"Hello Sesshomaru," Jenny said on the other end of the line, putting a little extra emphasis on the greeting as a gentle reminder of how American humans politely answered the phone. "How is Greece?"

The three headed beast lunged at him, but a casual strike from his whip put the cur in its place. "Why have you called?"

"Are you familiar with the scent of Izanami's blood?"

At the mention of her name, a flood of memories, all tainted by odors, came rushing into his mind. He'd tasted of her blood once on a battlefield. Hot, angry brass and ash had seared themselves into his brain. An Inu Daiyokai never forgets a scent. "Vaguely," he replied.

"I need you to search for any trace of it that you can find near where mythological creatures might have woken up."

He inhaled. The three headed dog's stench nearly overpowered everything, so much so that he had the temptation to just kill it. It wouldn't solve anything, but at least he wouldn't have to smell its
horrid breath anymore. But his sharp senses did catch a whiff of blood at least three days old. "What am I supposed to find?"

"I'd rather not taint your expectations."

The blood came from someplace further down the cave, and this dog's entire body filled the tunnel and blocked the only way there. With a growling, "You're in my way. Move," he unleashed Bakusaiga and rid himself of the beast.

"I take it these creatures you're finding are not very challenging for you," she remarked dryly.

"Naturally."

"Makes me kind of glad you work for me."

"Temporarily," he reminded her.

"I have your last day of employment circled in red on a calendar in my office. Believe me, I haven't forgotten." Sesshomaru sensed a bit of bitterness in her voice, perhaps at the thought of losing Ketsugō-kiba to him, he mused. "Let's try to solve this whole Theda dealio before then."

The further back into the cave he went, the more a strange feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. He felt like he needed to turn around and leave, like if he went back into the recesses of the cave, he would never come back out. Never before had he desired to avoid something so harmless as walking into a cavern. Could it be he felt ... afraid? Afraid of falling asleep again for good?

How disgustingly human.

Living with these mortals had given him some unpleasant traits he hadn't realized he'd picked up. He made a mental note to work on removing and prevent from forming those characteristics from his mind. Fear, humility, justice, mercy, intense curiosity, infatuation — these had no place in a daiyokai's heart.

The scent of blood grew stronger. Despite how deep he traveled, he still had slivers of light to guide his way. When he reached the end of the light, he stopped. At his feet, covering a swath of ground the size of a small room, a pool of dried crimson blood stained the stone.

"I found her blood," he reported. "She must have spilled nearly all that she had. It smells nearly three days old."

"Hm. Anything else of note?"

Crouching down, he examined the stain closer and came across something odd. "I found a rope. It's three yards long and completely soaked through with blood." He tried picking it up and found the dried blood made it stiff. All along the length of it, barbs made of sharp black stone stuck out.

Jenny cursed and mumbled something to Liu that Sesshomaru didn't quite catch. "We found the same thing here, minus the rope."

"What does it mean?"

"I have some idea, but I need to check something else out first. If there are more dangerous creatures nearby, go ahead and hunt them down so Theda can't use them to build her army further," she instructed. "Then come and meet us in India. I'm getting reports of something that sounds like a Pishacha. I'll send you some coordinates if you'd like to take care of it. You've done good work,
As he pocketed the cell phone, he couldn't help but feel a slight stir of satisfaction at the hint of praise she offered him. Not that one such as he needed to be praised, but, still. He didn't mind it.
"Hey boss, strange question, but do you remember how to stop a Golem?"

Jenny wracked her brain, searching through the various bits of information she'd crammed into it the last few month on every legendary creature she could research. From dragons to trickster foxes to monsters made of the body parts of eight different animals — she had at least six variations spring to mind — the information had grown into a jumbled mess that she could barely keep track of. But Golem came easily enough as she could still remember looking it up after watching an episode of Sherlock. "Its instructions should be written in Hebrew somewhere on its body. Erase the right letters, and it will go back into sleep mode. You should go find a rabbi to help you out."

"Okay, cool. And if the Golem is made out of nuclear waste?"

That question drew from the other part of her brain, the one that got a chemistry degree a few years ago. It took a minute for her mind to switch gears. "Find some lead-lined gloves? And a nuclear weapons specialist from the U.S. Army who would be willing to not ask too many questions or put you on a no-fly list."

"I think I can handle that. Maybe I'll just shoot it. On a completely unrelated note, if you were to dismantle a terrorist cell, how would you do it?"

Sighing, Jenny sagged her shoulders. Unbeknownst to the others, she hadn't had time to sleep in the three days since the flight to England, and she didn't entirely know for sure what country she and Liu had just landed in. Perfectly beknownst to Liu, she hadn't eaten much either besides a granola bar he pushed on her when her growling stomach woke him up from a nap on the plane to … oh, right, India. Was that only two hours ago that they landed? She just had too much to ponder. "Rosario, you not only know exactly how to put an end to a terrorist cell all on your own, you have a dragon. Don't make me do all the thinking for you."

Glee lit up Rosario's voice, even over a cell phone connection. "So you don't mind if I go a little crazy?"

Any answer besides, 'Yes I do mind. Take care of it quietly,' would result in Michaelis and half of the United States military yelling at her for a week and a half, but Jenny had a tension headache named Liu trying to convince her to stop at the Sikh Temple nearby for a free meal and, to be honest, she just wanted Rosario back as soon as possible so she could more easily control the slightly wild woman. "Do as you wish. Just don't kill anyone. I mean it this time."

"I take it Rosario's going to be occupied for a bit," Liu commented as his boss ended her call. Stretching high into the sky, marble pillars rife with sculptures of deities and domes with shining gold caps stood at Liu's back, a testament of the love, honor and devotion of the people to their gods and art. Tourists and native Indians walked past and around the trio, avoiding the obstacles on their way to Akshardham. The building took up nearly an entire block and gleamed in the sunlight with a pink-orange hue. In a lower courtyard, children enjoyed marble sculptures of elephants on a lazy parade. Sitting on the edge of the staircase leading up to the Hindu Temple in New Delhi, India, Liu smoothed out a world map for Jenny to also pore over.

"She'll rendezvous with us soon," she replied. "She's just a little stuck in Baghdad right now."

Glancing down the street past dark skinned, dark haired visitors coming to see the art, she spotted Sesshomaru sticking out like a perpetually grumpy daiyokai with long silver-white hair flowing over his shoulders who towered over at least everyone around him by about twelve inches, walking
through the crowds. Everyone gave him a good foot of personal space as he stalked toward the
temple. Jenny stood and waved, letting him know where to find them. He noticed, but his pace did
not change.

Pulling out his phone, Liu opened up his text messages. "Are we interested in having Sesshomaru
investigate reports of a seven-headed white horse down by the Ganges?"

"Ugh, no. We don't need to deal with another river horse thing."

"Yeah, one kelpie was enough for me."

They may not have known that even out of the range of human earshot, Sesshomaru could hear their
hushed conversation. Raising an eyebrow, he subtly tested the air for the scents lingering on Jenny
and Liu as he joined them. Algae, river mud, horse hair, silver, gunpowder and blood. And a lie. At
the very least, a mis-truth created from his own ignorance. He had no idea what a fairy was or where
Cottingley was located, but the creature she described when she sent him off to deal with the many
headed beasts in Greece had little to do with the scents still attached to the two humans. He did not
like the deception. But as they both came back unharmed and alive, he let it slide. For now.

Uncapping a red marker with her teeth, Jenny knelt down and leaned over to make a few X's on the
map. "So we've seen legendary creatures pop up in the Scottish Highlands, Paris, Athens, Baghdad,
and Delhi," she said as she made her marks in the several countries of the world.

"If that doesn't look like a treasure map," Liu said, tracing his finger in a line along the cities, "I don't
know what does. The question is where the big red X at the end is."

"Fukushima," Jenny replied confidently to the surprise of both men.

Sesshomaru frowned in response. "Why there?"

"To raise Daiichi, obviously."

A cold shudder despite the hot, humid Indian summer ran through both Jenny and Liu as
Sesshomaru's steely glare narrowed dangerously. "That is impossible. I sealed him myself in the
Underworld. No god is powerful enough to break him free and Theda can't enter there."

"Doesn't mean Theda's not going to try to get her son back, killing hundreds or thousands of people
in the process." Pulling her feet back until she sat in lotus position, Jenny explained, "It was the rope
you found that gives her plan away. Do you remember how I told you that the Mayans practiced
blood sacrifice? Well they also practiced bloodletting in order to see the vision serpents like
Kukulkan. One of the ways they would do that was cut a hole in their tongue and pull a barbed rope
through."

Liu flinched in sympathetic pain and locked his tongue behind his teeth. Sesshomaru merely shook
his head at the odd things humans will do for a religious experience. "You think she's trying to
summon more vision serpents?" he asked.

"No. I think she's trying to see Kukulkan and Quetzalcoatl and the other feathered serpents she had
killed. The spirits of demons and gods go to the Underworld, do they not? She's using them to look
for Daiichi as she travels closer and closer to Fukushima."

Kneeling down on one knee, Sesshomaru looked down at the map, nearly boring holes through it
with his intense scrutiny. "Leading us there as well."

"At the rate she's going, she'll stop a couple more times, China and Korea possibly just to make sure
we've caught her trail. She wants us to follow her, so I propose we jump ahead of schedule and go straight to Fukushima." Jenny looked up at Sesshomaru. "That means you'll have to take us back to that battlefield. Do you think you can find it?"

"Yes," he replied instantly. Humans may have changed the whole face of the Earth, but even he could still find the place where Daiichi made his first and last stand. It may not have been located anywhere near his own lands, but Sesshomaru had taken it upon himself to make sure Daiichi reached no further than the few cities he conquered in his quest to prepare to meet the famed daiyokai head on. "I will know the place. I am certain you will too."

Her jaw clenched briefly, thinking of the grave she had dug up, but the passing symptom of guilt faded quickly as she turned her attention to her phone. "Liu, I need you to help Rosario acquire a few things."

"Are we talking explode-y things?" he said with a wicked grin. "Who do you want me to take them from?"

"Just pick some stuff up along the way. North Korea probably won't mind if you borrow a few explosives. Nothing nuclear, though. Fukushima has had enough trouble as it is." Folding up the map and slipping it into her jacket, Jenny stood and brushed the dust off her pants. "I'm just going to catch a plane to Japan —"

"No. I will carry you there," Sesshomaru said, his tone allowing no argument.

"Sesshomaru, that's over 3,000 miles," she argued.

"I can endure such a journey easily," he replied, brushing off her concerns.

"I'm not worried about you, dear. I'm worried about the cold, thin air for who knows how many hours. Humans aren't exactly made to go flying unprotected for extended lengths of time."

"I will ensure that you will be warm enough. Come," he ordered, standing and turning on his heel. He very well could have picked them up and carried them off right there, but from his limited experience with humans, they tended to panic when he made large displays of power within the confines of their cities.

Rolling her eyes, she followed.

"So I'll just find my own way to North Korea, then?" Liu said with an ineffectual shrug. "Not even going to leave me with any contacts or hints? Alrighty, then."

Sesshomaru's gigantic dog form proved to not only travel faster than his humanoid form, but the ride over was far more comfortable, Jenny decided as she clung to his fur and buried any of her exposed skin in his coat. Plus this time, she had pants. He smelled a little woodsy, but otherwise he didn't resemble a common domesticated dog in any way. Not only did his entire body display the lethal strength and wit he boasted of so often, a sharp power hummed just under his skin, waiting to be released in some way. When he landed in the desolate wasteland that was the remains of the evacuation zone around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, she took her time sliding down his back.

"Thanks for the ride," she said, allowing her feet to get reacquainted with the ground. "Let's not do that again for a while."

With a brief surge of electric power and a gust of wind the size of a miniature tornado, Sesshomaru
transformed from his true dog form to his more reasonably sized form, flipping his fur pelt over his shoulder as the dust and leaves came to a stop. "This place has changed some since my time," he remarked, taking in the scope of the landscape's trees and hills. "There must have been an earthquake."

"And quite recently too," Jenny replied. "In March of 2011, a 9.0 magnitude undersea megathrust earthquake hit off the coast of Tohoku, Japan, the largest earthquake in Japan's recorded history. It triggered a tsunami that reached up to 40-and-a-half meters high and swept away everything up to ten kilometers inland. Fifteen to eighteen thousand people died. The tsunami knocked out generators required to keep the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant operating safely. There were three nuclear meltdowns when the control rods couldn't be properly cooled, and radioactive material was released into the air due to explosions. It's the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. Which is why we should avoid staying here for too long because it might give us thyroid cancer."

Sesshomaru could see six fat towers hidden behind a gray cement walled enclosure just over the hill. The forest he'd landed in showed the same state of disrepair as the building. The trees and plants might have recovered some from the wall of water that rushed over the land, but remains of buildings, ships and other debris, despite a cleanup effort that must have occurred seven years ago, still littered the area. A chill of silence rested on the land. While many humans may have returned to their homes some miles away, the place still felt strangely absent of life. Even the air had a strange taste to it, even stranger than the polluted cities he'd lived in the past few months.

A buzzing came from Jenny's pocket, and she pulled out her phone. "It's Rosario. She's probably asking about our coordinates," she said before wandering a ways off to talk to her.

As Rosario and Liu would more than likely take a while to arrive, Sesshomaru decided to do his own exploring and scout out the area. Weaving between the trees, his feet guided him as he scoped out good places to create ambushes and traps. Even with no army, he found himself still thinking like a general. How could he not with the threat of Theda hanging over them directly? But this world, with its weapons that could be launched from far further away than the archers he was accustomed to, and explosive devices that decimated vast swaths of land at a time, meant he wouldn't have the proper experience necessary to make any real battle plans. The principles might be the same, but the strategies and tactics required a far greater study than he had currently.

And then he found that his feet led him to a line of four gravestones, one of which had a bare patch of ground the size of a grave before it, and an old bouquet atop it.

Had it really been 500 years since he sank his claws into the earth to pull it back far enough to lay a two-headed dragon, a small kappa, an old human man and even a hanyou in their own graves? He remembered so distinctly how the soil resisted against his efforts. How he struggled to find stones clean, wide and flat enough to write their names with a poison claw. How he waited for what felt like hours before he felt strong enough to cover their bodies with dirt. How he couldn't bear to fill in InuYasha's empty grave at all. How the dirt made three large heaps over each fallen warrior. How he expected nature to reclaim the land all too soon.

The dried dead flowers confused him. The recently resettled dirt, a cleaned-off gravestone and fresh grass growing in the soil made complete sense. Someone filled in the hole Jenny created when she stole Ketsugō-kiba. But why did InuYasha's grave have dead plants atop the gravestone?

"I know it doesn't make up for what I did," Jenny said, "but I cleaned up my mess as best I could." She crept towards Sesshomaru with a bundle of colorful flowers in her hand. If he hadn't heard her quiet footsteps, smelled the fresh picked flowers or sensed her hesitation, she still couldn't have surprised him with her approach. "I wanted to —"
"Apologize?" he snapped. "If you could change the past, would you? Would you choose to not desecrate my half-brother's grave?" The hitch in her voice before she attempted to respond gave him all the answer he needed. "Then how can you apologize for something you would do again if given the chance?"

Stepping up to the grave, Jenny knelt down and brushed away the dead flowers before tearing away some of the grass that had grown over the stone. "If I hadn't found Ketsugō-kiba, you would never have woken up. Of course then Theda might not have sought revenge for what you did to Daiichi, but she still might have tried to destroy the world anyway. Would you prefer to still be asleep?"

In response, his glare only intensified. He certainly loved tasting the blood of many a fearsome creature, a variety and number of which he had never imagined facing in battle, and he couldn't stomach the thought of staying trapped in a false death. But she didn't need to know she had hit the mark with her piercing question. The corner of her mouth turned up for a moment before she reverently placed the bundle of flowers on InuYasha's grave. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Nothing of consequence." Turning to the grave next to her, she started cleaning the stone as she had InuYasha's. "Did you know these men?" Her fingers traced the kanji for Jakken, scraping out the dirt from the carved out ruts.

He paused a moment to collect his thoughts before kneeling at the grave marked for Ah-Un and following her lead. His claws, as he traced out the dirt from the name of his faithful steed, defined the edges further with acidic poison. "I buried them myself."

Jenny's head snapped up in surprise. "Then they were friends of yours."

"Yes." His claws sliced through the grass overgrowing Kohaku's gravestone. "Ah-Un, Kohaku and Jakken fought by my side until they met their noble ends." His normal reticence would have silenced him at this point. A human woman he would only know for another few months had no need to know more details of his life, especially if they were painful ones. But he kept on speaking. "Daiichi beheaded Ah-Un at the very start of our battle with a whip made of bone. Kohaku fought far longer than any human I've ever seen. He lasted three days before he succumbed to sounds given to him by a pack of deranged wolves under Daiichi's control. Jakken followed me loyally for centuries until Daiichi poisoned him himself. InuYasha..." A lump formed in the back of his throat, which he quickly swallowed away like it had never grown there in the first place. "InuYasha absorbed a blast of pure youki from Daiichi's own hand, preventing me from sustaining further injury and allowing me to seal him in the Underworld. I dug his grave, but I never found any trace of his body."

Before she knew what she was doing, Jenny reached over and squeezed his hand. "I'm so sorry. I know it's difficult to lose those closest to you."

He froze. Her touch felt warm against his skin, partly from the heartfelt sincerity of her words. He couldn't remember the last time, if ever, someone felt sympathy for him. Sensing his tension, Jenny released her hold and returned to cleaning InuYasha's grave. "You don't have to feel pity for me. I am old. I've seen many live and die," he said, allowing no emotion into his voice. "This battle ended centuries ago."

"But for you, it's only been a few months, right? I can tell that they meant a lot to you, even if you won't admit it." Separating the bundle of flowers into four groups, she placed one small bouquet on each grave. "Grief isn't weakness, Sesshomaru. Not from what I've seen."

They lapsed into silence as they worked on cleaning up the gravestones, scraping aged moss off and sprucing up the grass around them. A slight hum of power, reminiscent of Tenseiga, still held fast to the earth beneath, a remnant of the sword that once had laid in rest here. But as much as he would
have liked to perpetuate the stillness between them, one question still nagged at the back of his mind. "How did you know the Ketsugo-kiba was here?"

After checking over her shoulder, Jenny gave him a wry grin. "I guess there's no way Liu or Rosario can overhear. My sister buried it here in a cement case with a cedar box inside it that I can't open. Then she left me a note in a journal so I'd know where to dig."

"Then your sister was in possession of my father's sword before you."

"Yep."

"That means my father meant for her to have it, and for you to obtain it."

"Yep."

"Why?"

"I won't know until I get the cedar box open, which seems to have some sort of enchantment on it. All I know for sure is that at some point in time, she found an open hole and made use of it."

"That was over 500 years ago," he said with a frown of confusion.

"Yep."

He wanted to ask more of the whole affair, but her lips went into a tight line and her gaze locked on the task at hand, shutting down any more questions with her body language alone.

Then a scent floating down a breeze hit his nose with pinpoint accuracy. Every muscle and bone in Sesshomaru's body went as rigid as stone as he confirmed with his memory what his sense of smell already told him.

"Sesshomaru?" Jenny asked hesitantly. "What is it?"

"Blood."
How did the castle of the Western Lady drift so far upwards?

Sesshomaru came crashing down on the stairs to the courtyard, leaving cracked and shattered stone in his wake. Jenny, clinging to his back, managed to slide off without tripping or otherwise tangling herself in his feet. Without pausing, he unsheathed Bakusaiga and raced up the remaining stairs, hunting for the scent of blood.

This blood he could scarcely remember smelling in his many centuries of life, if ever at all. But he knew exactly who it belonged to.

"Hey, wait up!" Jenny called after him as she attempted to traverse the stairs as fast as him. After holding onto his back and neck as tight as possible the entire flight, much of the strength of her limbs seemed to have diminished. But still she insisted he not leave her behind, and he needed to make sure she didn't accidentally fall over a railing. Not entirely amused by her mortal frailty, he stopped long enough for Jenny to catch up before grabbing her wrist and dragging her along.

The Japanese castle had a distinct air of nobility and authority to it. From the well maintained wood floors and shoji, to the paintings used to bring life to the walls, to the coloring of the building itself, whoever lived here had wealth beyond reason. And the fact that the castle itself floated without rockets or space elevators 30,000 feet in the air meant that this aristocratic person had power like unto Sesshomaru. Possibly even more.

Hanging between pillars and on flagpoles in the courtyard, banners emblazoned with the symbols of his house, a sharp blue crescent moon prominent among them, caught Jenny's eye as they passed by. The fabric showed the effects of age, the colors having faded and the edges frayed slightly, but they still held up remarkably well despite the passage of time. "This is your family's home," she deduced.

"Hn."

"I'm sure your mother will be alright. She's related to you, so I bet she's giving Theda more trouble than she planned on."

At some point, he had learned to not ask how Jenny knew things he'd never spoken of. Humans generally knew so little with their dulled senses — they couldn't even differentiate between human and yokai blood, let alone yokai and daiyokai. And yet Jenny knew in an instant that Sesshomaru had concerns about his mother's welfare. The Western Lady would have a fit if anyone besides him knew that she could bleed like some lowly yokai or worse, human. And if she suspected her only son thought she might need rescuing like a damsel in distress, she would have to kill something powerful. And large. And delicious, probably. Just to put him in his place.

As he entered the castle, he felt like he'd just walked back in time. He hadn't realized just how accustomed to the 21st century his lessons and travels had made him. The wooden panels and columns, coupled with the shoji screens, despite their expensive origin, gave the place an air of antiquity like he might find one of the history museums Jenny had dragged him into for one of her lessons on the history of some country he didn't care about. Instead of the slightly homey atmosphere
he'd come to expect from his visits to his mother's castle, he received the distinct impression that from his clothes to the swirl of information in his head to the detective barely keeping up with his pace, he was a stranger to this world already. To be fair to his mother, the reason for that alienation didn't entirely have to do with the passage of time. Even before the battle in Fukushima with Daiichi, he couldn't say he ever felt that much 'at home' when he met with his mother.

The scent of blood grew stronger, but not overwhelmingly so. Sesshomaru's mother was hurt, but not drained. Disturbingly, he couldn't smell her anywhere. Just the blood.

Turning to stop at an unoccupied room, a closet with musty futons and blankets by the smell of it, but actually a small armory full of swords, spears, bows and arrows, he pushed Jenny inside. "Stay here. Stay hidden."

She rubbed her wrist, a spot of purple peeking through her jacket sleeve. Did he do that? Or was that from another scuffle she got involved in? "Alright," she replied.

He raised an eyebrow at her surprising display of cooperation. "Stay here. I won't be able to protect you myself," he warned again.

"I said okay. I got it. Staying put." Crossing her arms, she sat down on one of the chests that probably contained some armor. "Go find your mother."

"You're not simply saying that to make me leave, are you?"

"Go."

Shutting the door behind him as if it would do any good to keep her in or shield her against any fighting gods or daiyokai flying at it, Sesshomaru swept back down the pathway towards the smell of his mother's blood, knowing from his limited experience that Jenny listening to him and staying out of harm's way would not happen.

A speckled trail made of scarlet dots led him to the topmost building, one he knew his mother rarely used except to impress and overwhelm dignitaries and daiyokai. The family had taken to calling it the Throne Room, although it acted more as a display for the power of the entire pack. Every now and again, when the Inu no Taisho or the Western Lady defeated some great yokai or accomplished something worth boasting of, they would casually display the fangs, claws, scales, usurped crowns or claimed mystical weapons in this room. Let visitors tremble in the implied fear of the things the Western Lady could simply take if she wanted to bother.

Sesshomaru entered the throne room, noting distinct spots of fresh blood seeping into the wood floors on his way in. Sitting in the window, with her rich ebony hair pulled up with a pair of jade hair sticks, a black kimono with silver embroidery, and hands soaked with blood, Theda lit up as soon as she heard his footsteps. She turned away from from the scene outside, toying with a jeweled necklace — his mother's Meido Stone — wrapped around her bloody hand. Turning her head just right, the muscles in her face began to twist and move, morphing into a structure he recognized all the more clearly.

"Hello Sesshomaru," she said, her eyes burning with anger despite the kind voice she put on.

"Izanami," he replied with a slightly disrespectful upward tilt of his head.

"Long time, no see. That was a funny trick you pulled, falling asleep for a few centuries so I couldn't find you. Never living with the risk of mortal danger, and never actually dead. But you're awake now."
"What have you done with my mother?" he demanded, venom dripping from his lips. Figuratively, of course. He held his anger back with perfect control.

Barely concealing her own fury, Theda or Izanami or whatever name was appropriate at the moment, began to circle him. "What have you done with Daiichi? I want my son back."

"You know where he is. The vision serpents have told you his location in the Underworld."

For a moment, her mouth gaped in surprise. "How could you know about — oh yes. Jenny Harkness." A half-amused smile flashed across her face. "It's annoying how fast she can unravel a plan one has been assembling for years, centuries even. I've had a lot of time to figure this out, Sesshomaru, while you've scarcely been awake for a few months now. I knew it was you the instant you woke up. I could feel your pulse in the air. But just to make sure, I found a girl named Rin and had her killed. You did not disappoint," she said with a proud smile. "I heard Tenseiga slice through my servants from half a world away, and the men you slaughtered with your poison more than made up for the souls you stole from the Afterlife."

"How dare you," Sesshomaru growled, baring his fangs. His youki swelled, filling the throne room with an oppressive force that Theda shrugged off. "You're a god bound by laws. You're forbidden from using your powers for personal gain."

"Hardly," she corrected, a smirk spreading across her face. "Gods are bound by their own desires. We are our own laws." She ran the back of her hand over his fur pelt, causing it and him to bristle in irritation. Either she didn't notice or she didn't care. "Have you enjoyed slaying the monsters I've been raising? You arrived in Fukushima before I could hit Korea with a Bulgasari. You might have liked that one. My blood expels enough energy to wake up everything in a thirty mile radius while allowing me to see into the Underworld without going there myself. Leaves me a weak, whimpering wreck for a while until I get my strength back. Then it's on to the next creature. But a mother will do anything for her child, especially if it's her only son. Don't you agree?"

Fast as a lightning strike, Sesshomaru's clawed hand snatched Theda's neck, digging into her skin with acidic poison. "What. Did you do. To my mother?"

Not to be outdone, the Death goddess calmly wrapped her thin hand around the daiyokai's wrist and squeezed. The bones that formed her hand stretched, elongating around his arm with points that dug into his skin. His face remained hard as ice, but subtle cracks and pops in his wrist betrayed exactly how strong of a grip she had. And from her relaxed jaw and triumphant expression, she had barely begun to squeeze. With a simple push, she took Sesshomaru's hand away from her neck. Blood dripped down from five puncture wounds on her neck that sizzled and smoked, but soon enough, they closed back up.

Twisting her hold on his arm, Theda forced Sesshomaru to fall to a knee. Only now, he began to pant with the effort of resisting someone who simply couldn't be stopped. As her sadistic smile grew, darkness fell around the throne room, the surrounding walls of the castle, and even the sky outside.

"You think you can cut me into a million pieces and I'll stay down? Your Bakusaiga is nothing but an annoyance to me. Your strength is but a mouse compared to an elephant against the likes of me. Your reticence is noble, but stupid. You should have known you couldn't have hidden Daiichi from me, even in the Underworld." Her body began to distort, her shoulders becoming sharp points in her kimono and her torso thinning to a wound spindle's width. "I know there's a way to release him without you."

"This I truly doubt," he said, his voice calm as a hurricane's eye. "I sealed him myself. Daiichi will never be freed from the Underworld."
Theda's eyes burned as she released her hold on his wrist, leaving a painted red handprint behind. "Such arrogance. You've always been more head than heart, only capable of cold precision. This time, you are wrong."

Retaining his proud posture, Sesshomaru narrowed his eyes. "I did what had to be done. I do not regret my decision."

"Well. Fortunately for me, I know just the being with the power to break the sealing." With a devious grin — made all the more evil by the red seeping into her eyes and the sharp points emerging on her teeth — Theda held aloft the Meido Stone. "Only because I like you so much, I'll give you a chance to save your mother. All you have to do is enter the Underworld."

Raising Bakusaiga, Sesshomaru adopted a fighting stance. "My mother has no need to be rescued by the likes of me. I should think you know that well. However, I demand that you return her Meido Stone."

"And here I thought you loved your mother, rushing up here so fast I barely had time to hide her," she replied, sneering in disgust. "Why else would you demand to know what I've done with her?"

"So she won't embellish later."

She let out a disbelieving laugh. "I'm surprised at you, Sesshomaru."

"No, you're not."

A heavy sigh escaped her lungs. "You're right." Slashing out with one hand, Theda sent long bony fingers, sharpened to pointed ends, at his face and chest. He nimbly jumped away from the spear-like fingers, ducking under a second strike. The bones went from rigid to whip-like in an instant as she brought them down at the daiyokai once again. "I've been generous in my assessments of you."

Sesshomaru could move fast, possibly quicker than even he knew for certain. The bone whips rained down in his direction, growing spiked barbs and shooting off little missiles that lodged in the walls, shredded tapestries, shattered ancient relics and attempted to stab him. But not one strike could land on him. Slightly annoyed, he predicted his mother would chew him out for allowing Theda to ruin her room full of trophies. Moving faster than the light reflecting off him could keep up, he sidestepped a bone spear and swung Bakusaiga upwards at her weapons with a disintegrating blast of green youki.

Shock widened Theda's face right before her body attempted to avoid the wave, but it came too quick for her left arm. The disintegration took out half the room, destroying everything it touched, along with Theda's arm right below the shoulder. Still sleeved, the limb flopped to the ground. The bone spears and whips ceased to strike. Grabbing at the stub left behind, Theda screamed unintelligibly, hardly aware that the entire wall behind her had fallen away. "Bastard!"

"Do not insult my parents so," he growled, preparing for a second attack. "Return the Meido Stone."

Her steaming expression could have melted steel from the way the sky and room suddenly darkened around them. She bent down momentarily to pick up her limb and replace it in its socket. The skin, bone and muscles knit together seamlessly within seconds, leaving only one missing sleeve as evidence of Sesshomaru's attack. "Not until I have what's mine!"

Throwing her arms forward, a massive swarm of crows simultaneously filled the room through the open wall and shot at him in a congealed mass of angry feathers, talons and beaks. Sharp enough to pierce holes in his Kevlar lined suit, they tore at his face, hair, fur pelt and hands with unrelenting
ferocity in their attempt to blind and confuse him. The sheer number of feathers and bodies alone made it difficult to even breathe, not to speak of concentrating on unleashing Bakusaiga again. He found himself forced to retreat and find better ground.

"You can't run away from me, Sesshomaru!" Theda shrieked after him. But away he ran, out the door, down the hall, in through another outer building with a narrow entrance that bottlenecked the swarm of crows.

Racing through the opposite doorway, Sesshomaru darted down a pathway and toward the courtyard, slashing crows apart with his claws simply to free himself of their grasp. Already he could breath and move more easily, allowing him to slice through a slew of birds with a poison whip. But the effort resembled a sword slashing through a swarm of flies.

"I will have my son!" the Death goddess screamed over the deafening birds. Chasing after him, she seemed to float on a black cloud made of feathers, although she just as easily could have been the swarm itself.

Dashing around a tight corner, he spotted a streak of blonde hair running down the path toward him with a cloud of crows at her back. Although the birds passed by Jenny on their way to attacking Sesshomaru, they didn't go out of their way to avoid her. Even as they rushed him from the front, halting his progress, he picked out the smell of her blood from one crow clipping past her face.

The suffocating swarm of crows grew in size and weight, bearing almost entirely down on Sesshomaru specifically as Theda cackled and directed the murder with wild gestures. Jenny dropped to one knee in an attempt to keep below the birds. With a gun in her hands, she aimed it at the one woman that seemed to have control over this Daphne du Maurier nightmare.

Two shots. The first hit Theda perfectly in the center of the forehead and exited out the back, taking a satsuma-sized chunk of brain matter out with it.

The second was just for good measure.

Theda fell, tumbling forward into the wide staircase before reaching the courtyard. Much of the shrieking of crows dampened, but the infernal birds remained, even with their master down for the moment.

Sesshomaru felt the cutting stop and the swarm around him seemed to relax just enough for him to move. But the birds wouldn't leave. That alone worried him. If Theda could recover from disintegration by Bakusaiga, she certainly could recover quickly from a fatal gunshot wound.

Ahead of him, Jenny's arms flailed around her, attempting to get the crows off her. But they simply clung to her armor and pecked at her arms, back, legs and face out of revenge for Theda, probably. More of her blood hit the air, forcing Sesshomaru to act. Diving through the air, he swooped in and scooped her up with one arm before heading to higher ground. With some squawking, the last of the crows released their hold as the pair flew fast and high.

"I told you to stay hidden," he said through teeth clenched in irritation.

"I heard a loud noise." Her arms wrapped around his neck to keep a better hold of him. Although with how tightly he held her to his side, she needn't have worried about falling.

"Then why did you go towards it?" With his free right hand, he raised Bakusaiga and lashed out at the swirling storm of crows with a disintegrating blast. In a chorus of screams that soon silenced, each bird burst apart, the guts from the ones at the head of the pack splattering on the ones behind
them and continuing the decomposition of the entire flock.

"I thought you might want some help," Jenny explained. "I may also have just happened to be in the area."

"Happened," he repeated skeptically. Carefully, he descended onto the grounds of the courtyard, setting her down on the one patch of ground not covered by crow guts. "Forgive me if I don't believe you."

"Despite popular belief and all evidence pointing to the contrary, I don't actually have a death wish."

Unzipping her jacket, she slipped her gun back into the holster on her hip. "Did you find your mom?"

"No. Only Theda." He hesitated to resheath Bakusaiga, certain that the woman hadn't finished with them yet. "She took something that belongs to her."

"Then let's go get it back before she comes to." Without waiting for Sesshomaru, Jenny headed towards Theda's body lying in the courtyard.

"Wait," he ordered, going after her.

To his utter shock and surprise, she did. She stopped and turned to him, rolling her eyes at his holding her up. But she listened. "Then get a move on," she complained.

A thick black shadow shaped like a tall, cloaked figure bloomed out from the ground behind her. Emaciated arms suddenly wrapped around her in a chokehold, clapping one bony hand over her mouth. Jenny grabbed the figure's wrists and tried desperately to pull the tightening limbs away, but even though her fingers went white from the effort, they simply wouldn't be moved. She kicked and twisted in its grasp, resulting in little more than bruises on her neck and face. From under a heavy black hood, Theda's face appeared, her eyes red and her teeth's sharp points glinting menacingly.

Sesshomaru raised his sword, preparing to slash at the Death goddess, but Theda dug her fingers into Jenny's skin as she dragged her backwards up the steps, eliciting a scream of pain from the woman that chilled his blood so quickly that he immediately halted.

Theda noticed. Instead of smiling at this surprise hesitation, her face twisted even more into one of fury and disgust. "You care about this woman? More than your own mother?"

Ignoring her unspoken, 'Why?' he snarled at her. "Release her, Izanami. Your quarrel is with me."

"I think not." The hand keeping Jenny quiet disappeared into the folds of the billowing cloak and reemerged in a flurry of motion with the Meido Stone in her grasp. "Let's play a little hide-and-seek, shall we? You can be it."

Cracking like thunder in the sky, the air around them seemed to break apart and separate, forming a circular doorway through the dimensions. The opening showed little of the world past its threshold. Only darkness and barren rock. With no warning, Theda released her hold on Jenny and shoved her face-first through the portal. Letting out a short scream, the woman vanished almost instantly into the darkness.

Sesshomaru stayed put, his right hand gripping the hilt of his sword with pent up fury. He could see Theda's clever, albeit desperately executed by any means necessary, plan. She wanted him to enter the Underworld. But he knew exactly what to expect past this doorway. The Underworld had scarcely been a place that Kohaku could survive the last time he'd traveled there using his mother's Meido Stone. Like Rin, Jenny would not survive. Even so, he refused to act when Death had the
higher ground. He would not enter the Underworld.

Not while Theda held the Meido Stone.

The woman — if he could even call her that at this point — glanced between him and the portal, utterly confused. She had made several errors in her calculations. First, that Sesshomaru didn't trust his mother to escape the Underworld herself, if Theda had indeed trapped her there. Second, that he had any motivation to protect Jenny apart from keeping her alive to preserve the location of Ketsugō-kiba. Third, that he would miss a second time.

Looking just over her shoulder, not even giving her the dignity of making eye contact, Sesshomaru casually flicked a decomposing blast at Theda, catching her off guard. This time, as the green flash burst toward her, she barely had time to scream properly before her entire body tore apart due to the blast.

The Meido Stone, sturdier than any normal piece of jewelry, came flying away from the wreckage of bone and blackened fabric. He deftly caught it before turning towards the portal. Whatever Theda had prepared for him to find in the Underworld, he knew he could easily handle. But he had to hurry before the detective's soul became lost for good.

With the exit in hand, Sesshomaru dove into the darkness after Jenny.
Jenny got to her knees slowly, brushing dust off her hands after sitting up. She inhaled deeply, and immediately started coughing from the acrid stench that burned her lungs and nostrils. Without waiting for her eyes to adjust to the oppressive darkness, she looked around her surroundings. It felt open and empty, the way the breeze blew against her skin, but at the same time, the pure darkness bore down on and nearly suffocated her. She felt smooth, flat stone under her hands with no hint of variation as she swept her hands around.

Something rustled to her left. In the thick silence, it rattle noisily in her ear. It seemed to come from her shoulder. Carefully, her right hand traveled up her left arm until it came across a strip of paper hanging there. With a quick tug, she attempted to remove it, but it refused to budge. Even pulling a couple more times couldn't loosen its hold or even tear it. So she let it be.

Her pupils felt like they'd stretched as wide as saucers, but she still couldn't see much apart from the gray ground immediately around her. Despite burning her lungs, the air, along with the mostly stagnant darkness and stone under her feet, felt cool like a deep winding cave. Something she knew the feeling of from first-hand experience. Theda mentioned something of an Underworld. Could this be where she'd sent her?

Memories of chains, blindness, electricity, water flooding her lungs and a forbidden name came streaming into her head, filling her brain in the absence of stimuli. She could almost feel the shackle gripping her ankle, hear white noise ringing in her ears, smell blood and spattered brain matter. Claustrophobia couldn't even begin to describe the adrenaline that kicked her heart into a full-blown fight-or-flight response, the crushing tightness in her chest that shortened her breath, the fierce cold sweat that broke out all over her body, or how quickly her muscles contracted together to pull her into a ball. Her brain mentally checked off the list of panic attack symptoms as she shrunk even further into herself.

"Not again," she whispered. "I got over these. I'm fine. Sesshomaru will find me. I'm safe. I'm fine. Sesshomaru will get me out of here."

With no allies or enemies in sight or earshot, Jenny forced herself to deal with her panic attack on her own, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. Focusing on a single area of her body at a time, she relaxed her muscles one by one.

Slowly she became more aware of the subtle changes in her anxiety and the sounds in the darkness. Namely footsteps and creatures shuffling around her, getting closer. Were they dangerous? Did they want to eat her? Nothing like imminent danger to get her mind off of old traumatizing memories.

"Breathe," Jenny reminded herself. "Sesshomaru is coming."

With her mind and heart settled some, she made a mental inventory of the tools available to her. Namely a set of glow sticks in her jacket pocket. She snapped the two white sticks, shook them and held them up to get a look around. Like moonlight dancing on the edge of a cave, they barely illuminated a thing. But what she did see …

Her assumption of being in a cave wasn't off. Some yards away from her, a wall raised well over her head like the face of a cliff with a desolate trickle of water running between some of the protruding rocks. Between the boulders, nestled in the shadows, creatures with leathery wings and glinting teeth shuffled and emerged from the cracks. They occasionally left their perches to sail off into the air and catch a wriggling snake or worm crawling across the rock face or even on the ground before her. On
closer inspection, however, the creeping things had more demonic heads than anything she'd seen on Earth. Or rather, the land of the living.

Raising her light higher, Jenny threw the faint glow as far as the source could reach. Beyond the wall, the land stretched out for a little ways before it dropped off entirely. Curiosity took hold, silencing her fear for a moment. Creeping toward the edge of the path, Jenny dared to look down.

Moving in a shadowy mass, beasts and demons milled about in the depths of the valley. Some silently darting between dark corners, others stalking prey in the barren wasteland. Like the winged and creeping creatures, these beasts vaguely resembled grotesque versions of wildlife she knew. Monstrous wolves, fearsome tigers with oversized fangs and muscles, twisted birds of prey with dark plumage, red eyes and long talons. Further details, painfully obscured by the darkness, probably would have frightened her and shaken her considerably weakened emotional constitution at that moment.

While the demons didn't seem to notice the faint light coming from her direction, one or two of the more ogre-like ones did stop in their tracks and look up. They narrowed their eyes at her before snarling something implying violence. Before she could reveal any more of herself to them, she pulled back abruptly and hid the glowsticks in her pocket.

"Okay, now would be a fantastic time for Sesshomaru to show up."

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end moments before she heard a subtle growling. From its baritone rumbling, it couldn't have been smaller than an elephant. And if Sesshomaru's true form indicated just how large yokai could get, she wouldn't be surprised if this one had a mouth large enough to swallow her whole.

A nose pressed into her back and inhaled. Jenny could feel her whole body sucked backwards by the force of its sniff. Twice more, the massive nostrils took in air, no doubt studying her scent. Absolutely petrified, she stood with one hand inches away from the pocket with the light. She didn't dare run blind. She didn't dare run at all.

A tongue as wide as she was ran up the small of her back, leaving warm slobber on her armor. Just a little taste, possibly to see if she was fresh enough to eat.

Okay, now would be a spectacular time – you know what, screw it, she thought before taking off running.

She made it three steps before a mouth with large jagged teeth as long as her arm came down on her and swallowed her whole.

For a Jonah experience, Jenny figured things could have gone far worse. But on the whole, she'd rather not repeat the whole 'get swallowed by a hell hound' experience. Fortunately the contents of its stomach had mostly digested earlier and her armor prevented her skin from dissolving so long as she kept her hands out of the puddle of stomach acid. She got out her glow sticks once and, having seen the inside, quickly regretted the decision.

With a mighty heave and some contractions in his stomach and esophagus, the hell hound vomited her up and deposited the detective in a slightly moist heap in the doorway of a cavern before turning tail and bounding away.

Only when she knew for certain that the beast had abandoned her did Jenny retrieve the light from her pocket and get to her feet. Like she suspected, the creature had not taken her out of the
Underworld, instead dropping her in another part of it, leaving her with less hope that Sesshomaru would be able to track her down. But if his nose was as sharp as he frequently claimed, he should still be able to discover her scent. The light revealed the distinct man made qualities of this cavern. Perhaps a better word for it would be corridor. The floor had a sheen to its smooth surface, like someone had polished it. The walls, too, had the same straightness, rising up to vaulted ceilings. Every few feet, sconces for unlit torches graced the hallway. Apart from that, the whole place bore no hint of decorations or homeliness.

But a door to a corridor had to mean something. Why else would the hellhound regurgitate her here? So she stepped inside.

Only once she could take a better look around did she notice the guards. For a moment, Jenny thought that the massive demons slumped against both sides of the hallway like a line of stuffed animals on a child's bed, were only sleeping until needed. But as she drew close to one that vaguely resembled a panther in armor with weapons at his side, she noticed the deep bloodless gashes in its neck and chest. The bear yokai next to him, and the dragon and the jackal and the ogres – they all bore similar fatal wounds of one kind or another. Their slumber was of the permanent variety. But why would anyone prop all these bodies – dead for weeks as evidenced by the desiccation of their skin and flesh, but without a hint of decomposition like mummies – along this corridor?

"Do you like my soldiers?" a deep, smooth voice vibrated through the hall. In Japanese. He wasn't loud, but the sound of it sent a tremor through the place.

Abruptly backing away from the dead panther yokai, Jenny searched for the source of the voice. "They can't be very good at their job," she replied carefully. "They seem a bit stiff, I'd say."

The ground rumbled with laughter as the voice seemed to laugh. "They are sufficient for my needs."

Something like a spark traveled through the lines of dead yokai. All at once, hollow eyes opened and stiff limbs creaked and groaned as each demon pushed themselves off the floor, took up their weapons and stood to attention. Spinning around, Jenny located the nearest escape route, but the living dead simply held their ground and never glanced her way.

"How do they appear to you now?"

Jenny weighed her options. She could run out of the cavern easily enough with a quick spring. Sesshomaru would have a better chance of finding her then. Despite having quelled her panic attack, a fierce need to get out of this damned cave and back into fresh air and freedom screamed in her head.

But if she found the source of this mysterious voice, perhaps she could figure out why the hell hound had left her here, where Sesshomaru's mother might have gone, and what Theda planned for Sesshomaru to do in the Underworld. And this voice ... she had a nagging suspicion that she knew exactly who it belonged to. And satisfying curiosity always takes precedence over getting to safety.

Dropping one of her glowsticks at the entrance, Jenny strode forward with her eyes locked on the end of the corridor. "He can find me," she said to herself. "If he's trying."

Whoever had carved out this corridor, the rooms and smaller hallways that branched off it, and the spiral staircase at the end of it, had certainly done so with great care. And yet not a speck of light shone anywhere in this desolate place despite the preparations for candlelight and other such illumination. If it weren't for the guards that came to life as she walked by, she would have thought the place completely abandoned. The air that came through the halls had a fresher feel to it and didn't burn her nose and lungs so much, but it still had a stony taste.
The stairs descended for what felt like a thirty stories. Its twisting nature meant that even if she had a
tool to light, she still wouldn't have seen the end until it came up abruptly. The thought crossed her
mind that if she went down too deep, she might never come back up. But when a chuckle rumbled
through the stones, she knew she had to keep on.

A gust of hot air hit her in the face, signalling the end of the flight ten steps before she reached it. The
doorway opened up to a massive cavern with a damp floor shaped almost like an upside down
volcano with a narrow base and a wide roof. The builders had not touched this place for some
strange reason. From her limited knowledge of caves, the place had an unnatural feel to it. No
stalactites or stalagmites clung to the ceiling or floor, and the walls had deep gouges in them like a
giant bear had dragged its claws down the sides of the cavern, coming to a point in the middle. At the
center of the room, a heavy boulder the size of a whale seemed to vibrate or wriggle. In the darkness
and at this distance, she couldn't figure out what exactly was going on with it.

"Come closer, human," said the boulder.

Despite the overwhelming sense of imminent danger, Jenny stepped towards the shadowy figure.
The boulder's motion, she soon realized, was due to little imps crawling all over it. They carried
rudimentary chisels and hammers to chip away at the stone which fell off into a pile around the stone.
But soon after hitting the ground, the chips moved on their own back up to the hole at nearly the
same rate that the imps cut them away. The whole process had the air of a Tantalus trap. Always
working to free the being trapped in the stone, making a bit of progress, only for the rock to return
and undo their labor. But if the imps felt frustration at their nearly pointless task, they made no
protest. Or any expression, really. Like the guards in the hallway, their eyes had the same vacant
expression shared by all corpses.

Their work managed to uncover the head, arms, and upper torso of a dark-haired man. Buried nearly
upside down with his face up and his arms splayed wide — not a comfortable position from the
looks of it — the humanoid figure had an expression of tried patience. From the speed of the imps
and the rock that continually sealed him in this miserable tomb, he must have waited centuries to
even have this much freedom. He wore a black kimono with pewter colored armor on his shoulders,
a white cape that had no sign of deterioration, and a black ribbon that once tied back his long
obsidian colored hair, but had since loosened its hold in the years that he had lain in stone. Though
his face hid in shadows and she'd never encountered him before, Jenny knew his name instinctively.

"Daiichi," she said, half whispering in horrified reverence.

He smiled, his razor sharp teeth glistening in the ghostly light. "I see my name and reputation have
survived the ravages of time. Tell me, what legends have you heard of conquests?"

"How honest do you want me to be?" she asked hesitantly.

"There can be no stories about me that do not strike terror in the hearts of you simple-minded
humans."

Jenny edged closer to the trapped daiyokai in hopes of seeing his face. "It is true that those who
speak of you do so in solemn tones. But I have to wonder if the reason your mother never mentioned
you until the Great Lord Sesshomaru reemerged was because she couldn't pretend your
embarrassing defeat never happened anymore."

The imps suddenly quit working, each of them turning to shoot icy glares at her. Anger rolled off
Daiichi in waves, but he kept an iron control over the emotion that showed in his expression. "If it
weren't for my mother's protection sutra, I would have my servants rip your tongue out of your
impertinent mouth."
Ah. That explains the paper on her shoulder. "Remind me to thank her when I get out. Why did you bring me here?"

"You're an anomaly," he replied, his calm demeanor returning. The imps got back to work, chipping even more fervently at the stone that had traveled up his skin while he had his angry spat.

"Because humans don't exist in the Underworld?" She hadn't seen any hint of them since Theda threw her down here.

"Not often," he admitted. "The Underworld strips them of their souls. But I suppose that's why my mother placed the sutra on you. I can't imagine why she would do such a thing. Perhaps it has something to do with the scent you're drenched in."

Jenny frowned. Whatever smell had been on her before the hell hound swallowed her would have been eaten away by the stomach acid, and the beast had gone off in another direction. It couldn't have spoken to Daiichi directly. That must mean that he has some sort of mental link with the creature. For a moment, she wondered how she had gone from making cold, hard deductions about criminal matters to puzzling out what 'magical powers' daiyokai had. "You mean Sesshomaru-sama's scent?"

This time, his emotion broke through his expression. Daiichi's eyes narrowed and he scowled at the detective. "Do not speak his name again, filthy human."

Don't antagonize the big bad, Jenny reminded herself. Repeat, do not antagonize the big bad. "Who? Sesshomaru?"

The earthquake that sprang from Daiichi's snarling growl shook the ground so hard that Jenny stumbled and fell on her back. Futily, his arms twisted and stretched towards her, but the rock not only held firm, it thickened around his torso visibly. The imps scurried away before his flailing clawed hands could slash them to pieces. Unfortunately one imp fell victim to his grasp and vanished in a puff of smoke. After a few moments of useless struggling, he caught his breath, clenched his fists, and forced his anger back into its bottle. "The one comfort I have in this forsaken place is that I am not tortured by his presence. Not until you came here, carrying his scent."

Quite the temper, she noted. Just like his mother. Although the unnerving calm he exuded didn't seem to come from her.

What traits exactly did Daiichi inherit from his father?

Drawing even closer — close enough that he could possibly grab her with his claws — she noticed several characteristics and features in him that couldn't have come from Theda. Pointed ears. Skin pale as death. A stripe as dark as burgundy slashed across each cheekbone. An absolute, justified arrogance. A natural disdain for humans.

For the last few weeks, Jenny had operated under the assumption that Theda simply produced a son out of nowhere. Her stomach hardened into a knot when she realized that one question should have come to mind far sooner than now. Even if she didn't want to answer it.

Who is Daiichi's father?

With a trembling hand, she reached toward his head, aiming for the dark hair that obscured his face. Daiichi inhaled the fear emanating from the detective. Swallowing back her trepidation, Jenny brushed aside the locks covering his forehead, and immediately jumped back like she'd touched a hot stove.
"Oh my God," she gasped. The tightness returned to her chest, crushing her heart. Tears of rage burned in her eyes as she struggled to fit these strange pieces of a puzzle together. Daiichi's father could only be one person. One daiyokai.

Daiichi reveled in her horror with a smug smile. "I never could understand why my mother was so soft on that dog."

"You're — he can't be — there has to be some mistake."

"Did he not tell you?" His expression vacant for a moment as he gazed off into nothing. "He is coming."

Hope and fury flared all at once in her heart, but she had to regain an even temper. Exposing raw emotions to one as ruthless as Daiichi could turn fatal. "Here? How do you know."

He shrugged as best he could with his back buried in stone. "Spies. Scouts. And irresistible bait."

Jenny barely had time to notice the imps scampering away from the boulder en masse before Daiichi's hand whipped out and snatched her wrist. Yanking back hard, she tried to break free only for the daiyokai's grip to tighten to the point of cutting off the blood supply to her hand. "You idiot! Sesshomaru doesn't care if I die. He's only here to search for his mother!" she screeched.

But the smirk never left his face. The stone began to grow again, climbing up his torso. "You came here covered in my father's scent. He would never let a human so much as touch him if he didn't care about their welfare."

The rock covered him up to his collarbone and filled in around his head. The inexorable stone would soon encase his arms, and in turn, the detective in his grasp. Panic exploded in her chest, cutting her breath short and quickening her struggling. Death by stone encasement or suffocation was the top of her list of 'never ever let this happen to me.' "You're wrong. This is pointless."

"So scream for him and prove me wrong. If I am, then you'll die a slow, agonizing death as the rock seals you inside, and my servants will spend another few centuries excavating my body. It is no matter to me."

Daiichi's arm stiffened as the boulder grew in around it. Biting her lip, Jenny could stand this inevitable crawl towards death no longer, and she began to scream. "Sesshomaru! Sesshomaru you lying bastard! SESSHOMARU!"
Wrong Prometheus

Salt. Sweat and tears laced with adrenaline. A touch of gunpowder.

Sesshomaru crouched on the ground, placing one hand on the rock floor. Still slightly warm. Jenny had lain here. And she was scared. More than scared — terrified. Even worse than when he'd taken her flying unexpectedly. He knew the Underworld tended to bring out the worst of emotions in mortal visitors, but he never thought the detective could feel this much fear.

The traces of the scent of a hellhound could have explained her panic, although she hadn't shown a similar response when facing Kukulkan or even an irritated Coyote. Nonetheless, the detective's scent ended where the beast's began. Meaning it had picked her up and spirited her away.

Fortunately hellhounds had a noxious scent that left clear paths wherever they traveled. So following his nose, Sesshomaru took to the air. A few airborne creatures could sense his irritation and the sheer power he carried, and quickly scurried out of his way before he could slice them to pieces with his claws.

A faint sign of Jenny's presence emerged from behind the wall of a stone fortress. He caught a faint whiff of her scent along with that of the hellhound. Said beast bounded over the wall before turning tail and running off up the side of a mountain. Since he could smell no hint of the detective's blood, he decided that he had no need to slay the beast out of revenge.

The fortress seemed to have been carved straight out of a small mountain. At one particular doorway, the main one into the deep building, his sharp eyes spotted a strange light that had no smell of fire accompanying it. Like the manmade world up above, this place had little, if any, fire. For yokai, this presented no problem as youki and other sources provided enough illumination to move about freely. For a weak human like Jenny, she would require her own light. So he landed in the doorway to examine the light.

Sesshomaru picked up the odd device. Again, this strange plastic stick that glowed a soft white light and expelled no heat, had a distinct trace of Jenny's scent. She wouldn't leave it here unless she meant to give him a clue. Meaning she'd gone further into the fortress, a decision he most certainly did not approve of. On top of that, he hadn't smelled so many yokai in one place since he woke up.

As soon as he took two steps through the doorway, a mass of armed yokai of various shapes and sizes swarmed into the corridor and formed a wall of spears and swords. Each of them had a hollow or glazed look to their eyes. But that didn't stand out nearly as much as the deep gashes and fatal wounds found on every last yokai that dared to block his path. The last time he had seen such a sight was in a minor battle with Kagura, when she used her Dance of the Dead against InuYasha. From his experience, he could dispatch those types of foes easily.

Behind him, the hellhound with burning red eyes and fur as thick and dark as the night sky returned, standing just outside the doorway. Boxing him in. Sesshomaru's eyes narrowed as he drew Bakusaiga.

"You're in my way."

Leaping into the air, he unleashed a destructive blast at the wall of yokai. But to his consternation, the greater part of this wall also jumped, getting out of the way before the green wave could hit them. A few unfortunate guards disintegrated immediately, but on the whole, the soldiers regrouped and launched their own attacks. A weighted chain shot out at him, wrapping around his ankle before he
could dodge it. An instant later, the yokai behind it, a young dragon from the looks of it, yanked hard and brought him crashing into the ground.

Sesshomaru twisted to land in a favorable position to block a flurry of sword strikes that immediately came at him from all sides. Mildly amused by the attempt, he moved fast enough to not only block each blow, but swing his poison whip through an unfortunate oni, grab hold of the sword hand of a wolf yokai and throw him into a trio of badgers with crossbows setting up fire at him.

An instant later, he snarled at a set of claws that had slashed through his coat into his ribs just as he unleashed a second decomposing wave. Screams of anger rang through the corridor before their bodies fell apart entirely. A massive snake yokai launched itself at Sesshomaru, attempting latch onto his shoulder. He simply whipped his left arm back, slicing it clean in half lengthwise with his poison whip.

But one scream, barely heard amongst the sounds of yokai furiously attempting to hold him back with tooth and claw, pierced him to the core. A simple, panicked, "Sesshomaru!"

With a primal roar, the daiyokai flew forward, leading with Bakusaiga, in an attempt to follow Jenny's voice. But an oni the size of an upright bus with a massive wooden club had other ideas. Swinging it like a bat, the oni knocked Sesshomaru backwards into the fight he wanted to leave behind. Sharp teeth and swords came at him from all angles in the tangle, but he tore through them with his claws alone.

"Sesshomaru you lying bastard!"

Bakusaiga blasted apart a dead kitsune trying to claw out his neck. Summoning all the anger and youki he could manage, he released an enormous disintegrating wave that spread out in every direction, cutting these beasts asunder. Normally he would note how Kagura could never have wielded an army as effectively as whoever had these creatures under their control — almost as if they possessed a more devious and complex mind capable of utilizing multiple techniques at once in battle — but other matters pressed on his mind.

"SESSHOMARU!"

At the end of the corridor, he came upon a narrow spiral staircase. Rather than fly down, he unleashed Bakusaiga upon the stone, shattering open a chasm into a cavern below. Immediately, he jumped down, landing in a crouch with a crash amidst falling rock and trembling stone.

Before him, a lone boulder had taken hold of Jenny's hand, which she desperately pulled against to get it out to no avail. Even from this distance, he felt her racing heart and panicked breathing as loudly as he would if his ear were pressed against her chest. The signs of panic and fear settled slightly when she heard his entrance and turned to face him.

"It's Daiichi," she hurriedly explained. "He's got me trapped."

His eyes widened slightly in surprise. But all things considered, everything Izanami — Theda, he corrected in his mind — had put them through made this meeting all but inevitable. How had Jenny found Daiichi so quickly, though? And what, precisely, did she learn? As he rushed to her side, the stone encasing her hand grew abruptly, burying half her lower arm. Sheathing Bakusaiga, he dropped to his knees and dug his claws into the rock, breaking it away. He'd seen this type of magic before and knew it would only continue to get worse. "This is a sealing spell," he noted.

"Yeah, the one you put on your son." Fury burned her fear away as she glared at her savior. "Did you think I wouldn't figure it out as soon as I saw him? Apart from some distinguishing features, he
looks just like you."

He clenched his teeth and focused his narrowed gaze on the task at hand. Chunks of rock fell away under Sesshomaru's ministrations, but the stone only grew in faster, traveling up to her elbow. "Must we discuss this now?"

"Well it would have been extremely helpful to know beforehand that we've been fighting with your wife."

"Former mate," he corrected through his teeth. Only with concerted effort did he keep the rock from encroaching higher on her arm, but only now did he notice that somehow her other hand had gotten stuck as well, and she was kneeling in a puddle of rock that had started climbing up her body too. "You don't have a right to the private details of my life."

"I do when one of those 'minor' details of your life is currently breaking my wrist." Grimacing in pain, she let out a strangled groan as her arm felt more and more compressed.

The sound sent an unexplainable chill down Sesshomaru's spine. His hands inexplicably began digging faster, accidentally clawing her armor — which didn't split at all, oddly enough — in his desperate efforts to free her. "I told you what you needed to know. Nothing more," he said. Frustration seeped into his tone as the boulder had her buried up to her waist now. "I didn't lie."

"Hiding your actual relationship with Theda from me is lying," she replied with venom in her voice.

"There is no relationship. I practically killed her."

"I've done that too, but — "Jenny would have loved to argue further, but creeping rock began to crush her chest and she could only speak in strangled cries of pain. Sesshomaru began to realize that even if he dug with all his might, he could do little to stop the inevitable, and that would only prolong her suffering.

All at once, Sesshomaru decided on his only course of action and stood, drawing Bakusaiga. "I will have to cut you free."

She narrowed her eyes at him as he raised his sword, filling it with his youki. "Don't you dare. Just let me go. Earth can't afford to have Daiichi let loose." As much as she meant the words she spoke, a tremor behind them betrayed her terror at the prospect of dying. Especially here. Especially this way, suffocating under impermeable rock.

"I agreed to a contract," he replied. "I will fulfill it." He brought Bakusaiga down on the boulder, directing the blast to only disintegrate stone, before Jenny could come up with another perfectly reasonable and well-founded argument that made his blood boil. Daiichi absolutely would not take Jenny Harkness from him too.

The boulder blasted apart into pebble-sized bits of shrapnel that shot in every direction across the cavern. He threw up an arm to protect his eyes from the dust. A moment later, two bodies emerged from the rubble.

One, a long-haired humanoid figure wearing black armor over his rich, black silk kimono and matching hakama, shook off the rock with a triumphant, dog-like roar, stretching his arms up to the heavens. A burst of youki, pent up for centuries, burst out of him as he took off through the air and up through the shaft left by the destroyed staircase in a mass of silk and steel.

In the same instant, Sesshomaru dove into the pile of rubble to pull Jenny out. Pulling her into his lap, he made sure none of her limbs had accidentally gotten severed in the blast. She took in grateful
lungfuls of air, punctuated by gasps of pain as he examined her right wrist. An ugly purple bruise had only begun to bloom all around her fragile arm. Half cradled in his arms, she glared at him. "Baka."

"You have a strange way of expressing gratitude," he replied in his native tongue.

"Does it matter if you save my life if you just unleashed the Eldrich horror?" Forcing herself to her feet — pointedly without his help — Jenny hurried to the base of the wide shaft to the corridor a few stories up, keeping her arm held against her chest. "I hope there's a way to fix this."

Coming up behind her, Sesshomaru picked her up and put her on his back. "He can't escape the Underworld on his own, which means I have time to find a way to stop him before he can wreak havoc on the world of the living." He glided up after Daiichi, his sword at the ready and his fur pelt trailing behind him.

"Which means we're trapped here too."

There it was again, that abnormally high level of fear. Even when focused on following Daiichi's scent, the smell of her adrenaline and cold sweat overwhelmed his senses. Perhaps she didn't fear the creatures of the Underworld so much as she did the feeling of imprisonment in a dark tomb. Once he reached solid ground, he let her off his back and reached into his sleeve for the Meido stone. "Take this. If I am unable to keep Daiichi contained, use it to escape and leave me behind."

Jenny took the offered stone and slipped it over her neck, tucking the stone itself underneath her jacket. "So you are going to stop your own son."

"He was my responsibility half a millennium ago. He is my responsibility again. He will not rule on Earth." Catching Daiichi's scent, he strode away, taking the nearest offshoot from the main corridor.

Naturally Jenny followed after him, jogging a bit to keep up. "I'll stick with you until I have no other option. It's probably not a good idea for a noob like me to be handling powerful magical artifacts without some guidance."

"It's a pity I haven't been able to find my mother. She would be able to help. Perhaps even willing."

Retrieving another one of the plastic sticks from her pocket, she snapped it and produced more of the strange glowing light so she could see a bit. "Yeah, the more I think about it, the more I believe Theda never killed your mother or sent her here."

Oddly enough, the thought gave him hope. "Why?"

"I've seen Theda get involved with people dying, but she never killed anyone herself. I thought it was just a quirk of hers, but she could be killing creatures herself quite easily with her power. But instead she uses us. She must exist so people can die, but she herself can't kill directly. She has to work through something or somebody else."

"Hn," he replied. The information was fascinating, useful even. But at the moment, ultimately irrelevant.

They turned the corner and entered a vast hall resembling a throne room, complete with a throne mounted on a dais and an emperor examining the details of the fortress bearing a clash between Eastern and Western design. Sesshomaru stopped a few yards away from the entrance, keeping Jenny close behind him, and glared at this would-be ruler.

"Daiichi."
The dark daiyokai turned to Sesshomaru. All around the throne room, hundreds of sconces, candles in chandeliers, and torches burst into flame, filling the wide room with an orange light that only made Daiichi's armor and teeth look all the more menacing. With his waist-length hair swept up into a topknot, his cape, now trimmed with fur, and kimono in pristine condition and spotless armor wrapped around him, he suited the look of a lord of the Underworld. But with the presence of a steaming Sesshomaru with quiet arrogance, a modern white suit and Bakusaiga at the ready, that effect lessened in Jenny's eyes. Stepping off the dais, Daiichi opened his arms in a show of welcome. At the same time, nearly a hundred armed yokai appeared around the room, their presence concealed by Daiichi's youki, and stepped forward.

"Father. Forgive me, I haven't been able to see my fortress through my own eyes as of yet. What little I can see through the eyes of the hounds of hell and shinigami do not do this place justice. It took them centuries to build. Centuries you had me encased in stone."

Sesshomaru's face remained impassive and unimpressed by the false grandeur around him. "I see you've found a new trick: controlling the dead," he said, nodding towards the guards. "They will do you no good in this place."

"I agree. That's why I don't intend to stay here." The air temperature suddenly dropped significantly. It took a moment for Jenny or Sesshomaru to understand why, but the reason became clear when a translucent form of a feathered serpent glided into the throne room and settled around Daiichi's shoulders. It looked similar to Kukulkan, but the coloring, what little it had now that it had died, was different with more reds and purples, and it had a head that more resembled a dragon's. Jenny figured that this must be Quetzalcoatl or one of the other feathered serpents El Comedor del Hombre had slain. Daiichi listened to the dead god's message before waving the ghost off. "Mother is expecting me shortly. She says you've brought the Meido Stone to me. How generous of you, Father." He took a European broadsword from a man-like creature with seaweed in his hair, and approached his father and the detective. "You need to run," Sesshomaru said in a low voice.

"I would love to, but..." Her eyes flicked across the room, searching for a break between the advancing yokai and mythical creatures.

"Are you armed?" Poison began to drip from the claws on his left hand, preparing for a vicious fight.

"Yeah, but it won't do me much good against things that are already dead." Jenny bit her lip at the thought of having to shoot left-handed. So she went for another tactic. "It's too bad Daiichi's not powerful enough to threaten us on his own. I would have expected more from your own flesh and blood."

Daiichi's sharp ears pricked at her words and a glare crossed his features. All at once, the yokai around the room collapsed as their master released his control over them. Sesshomaru stifled a proud smile. Leave it to the detective to go straight for the throat — or rather, ego. With a path now cleared for her, Jenny listened to Sesshomaru's advice, surprisingly, and retreated a safe distance away, picking up an abandoned crossbow on her way out of the throne room.

Now, alone with the son he once took a week to defeat in battle, Sesshomaru slowly approached Daiichi. "Have you changed at all, Daiichi?"

A black substance seeped from the dark daiyokai's left hand, similar to his father's poison. It ate through the stone floor when it dripped off his fingers. "I have only become stronger, Father. I still intend to become the most powerful ruler this world has ever seen. And I will kill whoever it takes, starting with you."
With a raging battle cry, Daiichi leaped into the air, bringing his sword down in a two handed hold. The venom that he infused into his sword left a stream of smoke in the air. Moving gracefully, Sesshomaru darted to the side, letting the sword crash into the floor and cut a swath of marble out of its pristine surface. Undeterred, Daiichi swung at him again and again, only for Sesshomaru to duck and weave nimbly away before offhandedly unleashing a green wave of energy at him. The dark daiyokai jumped out of the way before black tendrils shot out of his fingers, nearly stabbing his father clean through. The closest he came was burning a hole in Sesshomaru's fur pelt.

"The centuries have made you rusty," he noted.

"I could say the same for you," Daiichi replied with a growl. "I thought after I slaughtered Kohaku, you would have been wise enough to avoid attachment to humans. Now you come here to rescue a human woman?"

Rather than take the obvious bait and get angry, he fought back with a whip of his poison tendrils, grabbing Daiichi's ankle and throwing him into the ceiling. Daiichi twisted in the air and swung his blade, sending out a stream of his venom raining down at his father. Jumping backwards, Sesshomaru shot up after him, poison dripping from his claws.

Daiichi bounced off the roof, a black fire blazing in his eyes. Sesshomaru raised Bakusaiga to parry a blow from Daiichi's sword, but that left his side open to attack. Moving fast enough to leave an afterimage, Daiichi stabbed a hand through his father's side before throwing him into the wall. Sesshomaru hit the granite with a sickening crack before falling through a pair of sconces on the floor below.

Landing a few feet away, Daiichi kicked Sesshomaru onto his back. "Is this all you have, old man? I thought you had more fight in you. Are you holding back?"

It took all Sesshomaru's power of will to not let any pain show on his face, but the venom not only burned into his side, but it seemed to freeze his limbs as it moved through his bloodstream. He forced his arm to take hold of Bakusaiga and release a wave of disintegration.

Daiichi easily jumped out of the way. With sick amusement and fascination, he watched the effects of his venom on his father. "It seems time has made my poison more potent than you remember."

Pushing himself to his knees, Sesshomaru concentrated his energy on forcing the venom out of his veins. His body could naturally resist poisons and toxins, but Daiichi actually had the potential to affect him. And that thought alone disturbed him greatly.

Stabbing his sword into the ground, Daiichi approached his near paralyzed father and began to search through his pockets. But as he turned them out, dropping a phone, a handkerchief and a few other bits and bobbles Sesshomaru had managed to pick up, a frown deepened on his face. "Where is it?" he growled.

Using a burst of his strength, Sesshomaru fought back the last of the paralytic effects of the venom, pulled back his fist and punched Daiichi in the teeth. As he went sprawling backwards, Sesshomaru used Bakusaiga to push himself to his feet. "You thought I would risk bringing the Medo Stone into your presence?"

While Daiichi recovered his footing, his gaze went vacant for a moment, followed by a wave of youki that passed through the whole fortress. "You would not have come here without a way out."

A short scream that sent an angry shudder through Sesshomaru's stiff spine echoed through the corridor. Two yokai — a wolf with arrows in his neck and a kitsune — dragged a kicking and
screaming Jenny in by her hair. A surge of fury at the sight did more to push the remnants of venom out of his system than any of his earlier efforts, and Sesshomaru used his freedom to launch himself at Daiichi.

Seeing him coming, Daiichi snatched his sword out of the ground just as his father's poison laced claws sank into his chest. Roaring in pain and anger, he responded by stabbing his sword clean through his father's stomach, pushing him backwards until the blade had him pinned to the wall. Venom instantly filled Sesshomaru's blood with a cold, searing pain, and froze him in place.

The yokai threw Jenny to the ground before their bleeding master. She futilely attempted to run before they each grabbed an arm and held her up. "Cheater," she spat.

"I should thank you, little human, for your help in freeing me. I will be forever grateful to you."

Grabbing her jacket's mandarin collar with both hands, he yanked hard to tear it open. Only the armor held fast. Even a second and third attempt couldn't rend the material, even with all his strength. A smug smile appeared on her face. "Having trouble there sweetheart?"

"What is this made of?"

"No idea. Something manmade."

Cursing the ingenuity of humans, Daiichi slipped two fingers into her collar, hooked them around the necklace beads, and pulled the Medo Stone off from around her neck and out of her jacket. Pure joy quickly replaced the angry fire in his eyes as he studied the stone in his hands. With barely a passing thought, he directed the yokai to drop Jenny as he had no more need for her.

"Well, Father," Daiichi said, holding the stone aloft. "I am glad I could see you again. Perhaps we will meet on the battlefield in more favorable circumstances."

Like a gaping hole that opened up onto a sunny field, the Meido Stone's passage let in a burst of sunlight that filled the throne room. Without waiting a second, Daiichi leaped through the opening into the world outside, leaving his father and Jenny behind in the darkness.
"Do I want to know how you got all this?" Rosario asked as she peeked into the covered army truck.

Liu stopped fiddling with a rocket launcher of some sort to scan over the truckload of explosives, artillery, and other questionable whatnots. "I'm pretty sure you do."

She jumped up into the truck bed, ducking under the canvas tarp, and picked up a mine. "North Korea?" she said with a hopeful gleam in her eyes.

"As much as they would deserve it, no. I didn't have time to infiltrate the army of a totalitarian regime, smuggle an army truck full of explosives and other whatnots onto a plane, blow through radar for hundreds of miles and land here twenty-eight minutes before you got here with Fudo."

Frowning, Rosario poked her head outside. "There are totally airplane tire tracks out there — Why do you always leave me out when you invade North Korea?"

"Because the last time I did, Kim Jon Un 'accidentally' launched a 'test' nuclear warhead at us." Liu took the mine from her and put it safely away in its box. "Besides, you had a dragon carry IEDs. Which seems incredibly unsafe to me. I don't know how you feel about it."

Rosario shrugged. "We're sitting in a truck full of things that go boom, and neither of us are actually trained to use them."

Dropping whatever he was doing, Liu immediately grabbed his things and jumped out of the truck, pulling Rosario out after him. Sitting a few yards away, Fudo stopped gnawing on a deer carcass and started wiggling happily when he saw him come out to play. "They should have been back by now," he said, running a hand through his hair nervously.

"It's only been a couple hours since they last texted," she said as she hid a grenade or two in her desert camouflage jacket. "I say we don't panic until at least nightfall."

Fudo pushed a basketball toward Liu with his nose. With an exasperated sigh, he picked it up and drop-kicked it into the distance, which Fudo eagerly lumbered off to chase. "By that point, the both of them could be dead."

"Don't be stupid. Sesshomaru won't get killed so long as Jenny's around."

"Don't you mean —"

A sonic boom nearly as loud as a crack of thunder echoed across the field. Rosario and Liu turned in time to see something resembling a body wrapped in black fabric shoot down from the sky until it hit the field half a mile away with a resounding thud, accompanied by a dust mushroom cloud.

They barely traded a glance before Rosario whistled for Fudo to return and Liou climbed into the driver's seat of the truck. A moment later and they went off to investigate. Because of course they're going to investigate a strange object falling from the side.

At the center of the smoking crater, they found the body of a human. Probably. A chopped up, swirled through a blender and shot out the other end of a meat grinder body of a human. But human nonetheless. Rosario grabbed a stick nearby and slid down the side of the crater to poke the wriggling mass, much to Liu's and Fudo's consternation. "Rosario!" he snapped. "You'll mess up the evidence!"
"It's Theda and you know it," she said right back. "See?" she said, holding up a crap of a black dress accented with beaded flowers on the end of her stick.

The pieces of flesh moved of their own accord, struggling to find other parts that they fit with. When one limb or hunk of flesh with bone would match up, the parts suddenly broke apart even further, making it impossible for this body to become whole on its own.

"Ewwwww." Liu turned up his nose at the sight, but still leaned over the pit to see what else it was going to do. Fudo, on the other hand, began pawing nervously at the ground, wanting to get away from the strange mass while wanting to stay close enough to help Rosario if something were to go terribly, horribly wrong.

Then the wind turned.

Whatever breeze that floated by before made a 180 degree turn toward the center of the crater. But it couldn't have been the air that pushed against their skin because the blades of grass stayed straight up, the leaves remained motionless and their hair didn't stir one bit. But Liu noticed a sensation sucking the oxygen out of his lungs before he could breathe it in, and Rosario felt a pressure bowling her over toward the pile of body parts.

Groaning, Fudo wobbled on his feet. "You okay there, buddy?" Liu said, patting his large, leathery scaled shoulder. The dragon's eyelids fluttered and his head bobbed once or twice before his legs gave out on him completely and he flopped over with a great crash.

"Fudo!" Rosario shouted as she jumped out of the crater. She pulled his head into her lap, lifting up his eyelids to see check his pupils. But with no medical training, she learned absolutely nothing. "What's wrong with him?"

Liu, who just so happened to have gotten caught between a dragon the size of an elephant, and the ground, grumbled, "Get him off me and I can find out!"

After heaving the beast off the thief, Rosario soon discovered that no amount of worrying or prodding or hand wringing or looking over Liu's shoulder as he felt around for a pulse or checked for a tranquilizer dart, could move the dragon an inch. The stick she had been using to poke Theda's body burst into dust when her hands squeezed it too hard in a nervous fit.

When Liu put his ear to Fudo's nostrils, he breathed a sigh of relief to feel hot air moving against his face. "He's still breathing. Fudo must be asleep."

The strange not-wind continued to move, pulling at their clothes without moving them, and darkening the air around them without covering the sun in any way. Unbeknownst to the pair distracted with fussing over the dragon, the decomposition had stopped breaking apart the pile of flesh. The pieces drew together at a faster rate, attaching to each other and forming more recognizable parts. A hand. A heart. A leg. A head of long black hair.

Clawing at the dirt, an arm shot out of the pile and pulled. Soon another arm joined the first in dragging the mass up the side of the crater. Theda's head reformed, followed by her abdomen. Then her lower half attached itself to the spine with a sound like snapping bone. Although reassembled, each limb had a warped, twisted look, and her skin barely clung to her bones enough to make her resemble a human. Inhaling her first breath as a mostly formed being, her lungs rattled her ribcage. Her black hair grew and grew until it covered her body like a long, hooded cloak. Sunken eyes looked around the field to the west of the Fukushima Daiichi Power Plant. Shrunken skin pulled her face back into a mirthless smile before she swung open her jaw and let out a blood curdling scream.
Liu and Rosario covered their ears and bent over double in pain. They would never be able to describe the ache and stabbing in their core in words, only that it felt like their souls were screaming in tandem with the skeletal reaper that emerged from the pit. And even that didn't quite explain it.

Taking her first steps since reforming, Theda hobbled towards the pair and their dragon, pointing one long bony finger at them. Not entirely willing to listen to whatever she had to say, Rosario yanked two grenades out of her belt, tore out the pins with her teeth, and threw both of them with surprising accuracy at the haggard figure. "Give me back my dragon!" she roared.

Two small explosions later, and Theda had done little more than lose an arm and a leg. Slowly, she bent down and picked up the missing limbs before returning them to their proper place. Only now the skin, instead of resembling crumpled white tissue paper, had a smoother, rosier hue to it. She inhaled again, bringing in more of the whatever was moving through the air without touching a thing.

Undeterred and still enraged, Rosario jumped into the back of Liu's stolen truck and started digging around for the nearest explosives. "There's no point!" Liu shouted after her. "She'll just regenerate."

"It'll make me feel better," she argued before setting a rocket launcher on her shoulder and aiming the sights at Theda.

"Woah! No! Not while you're surrounded by C-4!"

Grumbling, she got back out of the truck bed. "Better?"

Liu wisely took many steps away from her towards Fudo. "Not in the slightest."

Planting her feet, Rosario launched an explosive directly at Theda. The rocket hit her in the chest, blasting a hole straight through her hair, flesh and bone, and sending bits of hot shrapnel back at them. The ensuing fireball mushroomed up, letting out a wave of heat that brought tears to the humans' eyes. But the figure at the edge of the crater remained unmoved.

Somehow, possibly because of the strange energy that hummed just under her skin, the explosion had the opposite effect they wanted it to. When the smoke cleared, Theda had become even more human-looking and healthy. With filled out flesh, hair that had gone from greasy to luxuriously curled, and a face as fair as 40's movie star, Theda let out a breath of relief. With slight disappointment, she gave the pieces of her former kimono a wistful glance. "He always ruins my nicest things."

With no more ammunition (thanks to a poorly stocked supply of rockets for the rocket launcher), Rosario hurled the launcher at Theda, who didn't even move when it hit her right in the head.

The fingernails on Theda's left hand grew until they sharpened and came to a point. As soon as they had the edge that she wanted, she stabbed them into her right wrist, just below the palm, and dragged upwards, slicing her arm clean through until she reached the elbow. Blood spurted out in red sheets upon the ground, yet she did nothing to stop the flow. She watched the whole process with idle fascination until her face went from a healthy rosy shade to whiter than bleach.

Like a bomb had gone off, a flood of energy burst out of Theda as she collapsed to her knees. It passed through Liu's and Rosario's core, filling them with breath, a racing heart and adrenaline in their blood. Fudo felt it too. The great beast stirred for the first time in several minutes, opened his eyes and stretched out his wings with a giant yawn. After smacking his lips a couple times, he got back onto his feet with a renewed spring in his step. Rosario lost all interest in blowing Theda up, and ran to Fudo to hug him around his neck.
On the ground, Theda closed her eyes and began to whisper a strange incantation. Liu managed to catch the words "Mayo Stone" and "Sesshomaru" before he decided that maybe Rosario had the right idea in mind. Jumping into the back of the truck, he pulled out a machine gun and a belt of grenades to hand to her. "Rosario, dearest, could you help me please?"

"Don't mind if I do," she replied with a grin. The gun strap went over one shoulder while the grenades went over the other before she climbed onto Fudo's back and settled into the handmade saddle placed thereon. Kicking his side and clicking her tongue, she urged the dragon to take to the sky.

Fudo didn't seem to be the only creature that got a burst of energy from Theda's spilled blood. The forest in the distance released a cacophony of animalistic noises in unison. Each one the cry of a creature larger than life that had come to consciousness. And the noises only seemed to get louder as time marched on.

It only took Liu a few moments to throw back the canvas tarp of the truck, revealing a rotary barrel minigun mounted in the bed, and load a belt of bullets into the chamber. After putting on some ear protection, he aimed and fired at the Death goddess in repose. Bullets sprayed all around her body, hitting her squarely in the chest and head. But as soon as one bullet tore through and exited out the other side, the hole left behind closed up with barely a drop of blood escaping from her skin.

"Fudo, fire!" At Rosario's command, the dragon drew himself to his full height and inhaled deeply before roaring out a mouthful of molten hot flames directly on Theda's head. This fire, which easily consumed the grass and plants within a twelve foot radius of her, barely ate away the hair on her head. When Fudo ran out of fuel, she brushed a bit of ash off her shoulders.

A shower of grenades. A heavy dose of machine gun fire. A lobbed mine. Nothing could break the goddess of death away from her meditative pose. But at least Liu felt a bit better about losing his grandmother and Rosario could take out some of her aggressive tendencies.

"Do you think your pathetic weapons can have any lasting effect on me?" Her voice, although soft, had a sharpness to it that carried well over the short distance between them. "Even Sesshomaru's Bakusaiga could hold me back for long."

"There's something to be said for trying," Liu replied as he loaded up another belt into the minigun. "Silly creatures," she muttered. "So easy to kill if I just had the claws."

A crack of thunder missing its accompanying lightning rent the stillness of the air. Theda jumped to her feet and spun around to find a black hole opening up in the air just over the crater. A pair of clawed hands reached through, almost as if they needed to grab hold of something to pull free of the darkness. Soon ebony kimono sleeves followed, along with the boots and hakama of a tall, imposing creature. Long, straight black hair flowed ahead of the rest of his body as the armored figure completed his journey from the Underworld into the realm of the living, dropping down onto the ground below. A white cape trimmed with black fur swept around him as the pathway closed behind him.

Heaviness settled on the air, weighing Fudo's wings down, as soon as his feet touched the ground. A coldness spread through the ground, spreading frost up the tires of Liu's truck and freezing his minigun to the point that he couldn't get any of the mechanisms to move. After Fudo could smell what the humans could not: pure, rancid death and fear. Despite Rosario's protests and the pulling on his reins, he began flying away from the pair of tall, inhumanly pale, dark-haired figures before the downward pull became too great to keep flying.
The smile that broke across Theda's face could have cracked her skin with how wide it stretched. But at the same time, she had to pinch her arm to be sure that she really could see her own son standing in the middle of her crater. She immediately slid down the side of the pit to meet him. "Daiichi!"

His eyes lit up when he heard his name, and his arms automatically opened to catch her. She wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him as tightly as she could. He returned the gesture in kind, holding her close. "Mother. You were right. Everything happened exactly as you said."

"I told you I'd get you back." She pulled away to look him over, holding his face in her hands. "We need to find you something to eat. Oh, you're hurt."

Daiichi moved his cape to cover the bloody gash filled with poison in his side. Filling the wound with his youki, it soon closed on its own. "It is nothing but a scratch. I will recover."

"Of course, of course." She simply couldn't stop running her hands down his face, smoothing out his hair and cape on his shoulders. "I truly have missed you, my son. Half a millenium is far too long for a mother to be without her son."

He took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the living world, of greenery, of wildlife, of cement, of radiation and nuclear waste. "I smell humans," Daiichi remarked to his mother. "Too many humans."

The dark daiyokai's eyes immediately locked onto Liu sitting in his truck and Rosario struggling to keep Fudo in the game. A chill passed through their spines as Daiichi unconsciously licked his lips in hunger.

"Liu?" Rosario said over the radio.

"Yeah?" he replied, measuring just how fast he could get the next belt loaded again before the son of Death could slit his throat open with his claws.

"Is this the Big Bad that Sesshomaru said would never escape?"

"I'm going to go with yes. Yes he is."

Calculations raced through her head based on what she knew Sesshomaru could handle, how far away she was from him and the weapons available to her. "Okay. So. I'll distract him, you run, and when you get away, I'll catch up."

"Right, because I'm just going to leave you and run away like a little girl. ... That came out wrong."

Whispering a string of comforting words in the dragon's ear, Rosario helped Fudo get his nerve back and prepare to go into battle. "Think of it as getting the explode-y stuff away from the guy Sesshomaru is afraid to admit he's afraid of," she said, unclipping a grenade from her belt.

Without waiting for Liu to argue further, Rosario took hold of Fudo's reigns with one hand and guided him into a dive. As the dragon opened his mouth and unleashed a thick stream of orange fire directly at Daiichi and his mother, Liu climbed into the driver's seat, revved up the engine, and floored the gas pedal.

Lifting out of his dive, Fudo's stream of fire ceased long enough for Rosario to get a good look at the damage. Like before, the scorched grass bore the most damage. Daiichi, on the other hand, had singed fur and a scowl on his face. With black venom emerging between his fingers, he took to the sky, darting after the woman and her dragon.

"Go go go!" Even without Rosario's panicked cries, Fudo would have cut through the sky in a rapid
retreat from the daiyokai. At his strength and speed, Fudo should have easily kept ahead of the fastest
dragons, but this daiyokai barreled through the sky so quickly that Rosario could swear she saw two
black and white streaks.

Daiichi nearly had the dragon and its rider within his grasp. He only had to slash this creature's wings
and the annoyances would be gone and done with. Plus he would have his first meal in literally
centuries. With both hands, he swiped at the beast's hind legs. A spurt of blood and a pained roar,
and he knew he'd injured the fire-breather.

Enraged and terrified by the shrieks of pain Fudo gave, Rosario turned around in the saddle and
threw a grenade at Daiichi. Her aim and enhanced strength in her throwing arm shot the grenade
directly at his face, where it exploded with a concussive blast. The daiyokai reeled back, snarling, to
scratch the smoke and debris out of his eyes. Naturally Rosario chucked two more in quick
succession in his direction.

Too much trouble. Too much trouble for a mouthful of food.

The dragon slipped out of Daiichi's reach. The metal contraption that smelled like the fireballs the
woman had thrown at him, also had gotten a significant distance away from him and his mother. He
reminded himself that he had more important things to spend his precious energy on, so he flew back
down to the ground.

"Humans!" he spat as he returned to his mother, landing lightly on his feet. He shook more
gunpowder and explosives residue out of his fur. "Always coming up with creative ways to get
themselves killed."

Theda smirked. "Don't I know it. Don't worry. They will always have good, old fashioned stupidity."

"Soon enough I will crush them under my heel. Where is my army?"

Embarrassment spread across her face in a red blush. "I'm working on it, my dear. I expect you'll
have one within the week. Now, we need to find you a castle fit for a Daiyokai. I thought we could
take this power plant over here, and with some retrofitting —"

"I will use my own," he replied, cutting her off.

Taking the Meido Stone, Daiichi opened up a hole in the ground. It grew wider and wider,
surpassing the width of a football field. He took to the air, floating just above the portal, while Theda
was forced to back away before she fell inside.

A rumble began to rattle the ground as a mountain peak emerged from the darkness. The fortress of
the dark daiyokai would once again grace the skin of the earth.
"The son of Death and Sesshomaru. Can you say 'We're royally screwed'? Oh, and by the way he can control dead yokai. Guess what we've been doing for the last two months. Daiichi didn't need the army he built down here. Merripit House has been assembling one hand picked by Theda, and passing the information on to Michaelis so the armed forces of the world can do the same! The entire world is screwed, but don't worry. I'm just fine and dandy and you'll get your friggin' sword."

Jenny wanted so badly to kick the unconscious Sesshomaru pinned with a sword to the wall. From the shallow breathing and glaring eyes that followed her every move, she knew he couldn't be dead despite the ghastly wounds inflicted on him by Daiichi. *His son,* she repeated in her head. Even yelling it at him didn't make it any more real in her mind. *He has a son. He and Izanami were married — mated. Maybe that means something different to yokai.*

"This is not as satisfying as I had hoped," she sighed before looping her arms around each side of the crossguard, propping her foot against his chest for leverage, and pulling back hard. The first couple tugs proved fruitless, but the sword let go of the wall on the third and final one, sending her falling backwards onto her butt.

Once dislodged from the wall, Sesshomaru fell to the ground in an undignified heap, spilling black stained blood all over the marble. After tossing the sword aside, Jenny turned him over to examine his wounds. His tattered coat had blood coating nearly every surface and crevice. The massive fur pelt over his shoulder had bloodstains clumping in places closest to his ribs. Despite the kevlar lining, Daiichi's claws and sword, as well as other yokai probably, had punctured and torn it past repair. Unable to cut it away, Jenny ripped pieces of his shirt off with her left hand and her teeth before she wadded them up to stop up the bleeding in his chest and ribs.

With the sword out of his chest, Sesshomaru could neutralize the venom in his system at a faster rate and close up his wounds. He would have gotten free from the wall himself given a few more minutes, but Jenny's help didn't hurt. And the fact he was practically shirtless while her expert hands worked on checking for injuries and staunching the bloodflow from his wounds reminded him of many a battle when Izanami would chide him for taking foolish risks as she bandaged him up —

No. He shut down that train of thought immediately. He couldn't let himself see this human woman the way he once did *her.*

But at the same time, he didn't want Jenny's touch to leave his skin. Each light brush of her fingers sent a burning stream of heat across his chest, settling in his heart that began to race with wild abandon. How could she not hear how loud his heart screamed? And every time she moved her broken wrist the wrong way and flinched, a need to fix and protect raged in his mind. The fact that he remained completely unable to do so frustrated him to no end and set fire to a smoldering anger in the pit of his stomach.

A tremor shook the floor of the fortress, and Jenny looked up to the ceiling nervously. Something about the way the whole place vibrated put a deep crease of worry between her eyes. "There's no way this place is seismically sound. Can you move yet?" she asked.

Flexing his arms without any trouble, Sesshomaru pushed himself onto his side. His legs still felt a bit stiff, but he could at least get to his own feet without her help. As he got on his knees, Jenny took his elbow to give him a hand up, but he pulled his arm away — perhaps a bit too roughly. "I can manage," he said.
A bit miffed, she put his arm back over her shoulders and heaved him to his feet. "I want to leave today. Let's worry about your ego tomorrow."

Working together, Jenny providing support and Sesshomaru providing momentum, the two managed to make a fairly decent pace. The yokai they passed had either collapsed now that their master had no need to control them any longer, or they lay in pieces along the corridor due to Sesshomaru's Bakusaiga. A smile glanced across Jenny's face when, in doing the math, she realized that far more of the bodies had fallen because of an attack from Sesshomaru.

The ground trembled again, tripping the both of them, and it refused to stop. A *whoosh* of air flew out of Jenny's lungs as the massive weight of the daiyokai hit her back a little too hard. Sconces fell over and rolled, spreading fire across the hallway. Pieces of the wall broke off and littered the floor with debris. Undeterred, she planted her feet and steadied herself to push the both of them back up, but Sesshomaru had also gotten quite a bit more movement and energy in his limbs back. To her surprise, he picked her up off the ground by her waist and threw her over his shoulder. "Let's go."

Using every ounce of his strength, Sesshomaru kicked off the ground and flew straight down the corridor. This simple task, with the venom still in his veins, put more stress on his body than he was able to handle just yet. His lungs burned with the effort, but he forced himself past the pain and focused on his goal. Escape. Just get out before the whole fortress collapsed on them.

The shaking grew more violent, threatening to destroy the door and their one escape out of this place. But with a final burst of speed, Sesshomaru carried Jenny out past the threshold and down the mountain path. He could see black spots creeping in on his vision. So before the spots engulfed him completely, he turned enough to put himself between the ground and Jenny.

They hit the ground hard enough for Jenny to break out of Sesshomaru's increasingly limp grasp, and go rolling for a few feet. He skidded several yards before his back hit a rock wall and he slumped over unconscious. Jenny scrambled to her feet to grab his collar and drag him towards a covered outcropping in the canyon where they could stay out of the way of any freed rocks or boulders tumbling down from higher up the mountain.

For the first time, Jenny took a better look at Sesshomaru since his fight with Daiichi. Several ugly bruises marred his perfect face, adding to the colored markings already there. But they had a green hue to them as if they'd gone through several days of healing. She checked the pulse in his neck and found that his heartbeat had gone irregular and his skin had become clammy. The best medical treatment she could do for him at this point would be to let him be and heal on his own. Judging from the bruises, it shouldn't take that long.

Another tremor shook the ground and a giant *crack!* rent the relative quiet of the world around them. A fissure broke the earth all around the fortress, circling it completely. The whole place rocked back and forth as a fault underneath it had shifted suddenly. Then, the gash in the rocky floor widened considerably as the walls, building and attached mountainside lifted into the air like a pair of hands had reached down, picked it up and lifted.

Suddenly light flooded the entire land, illuminating the demons and creatures already hiding in the crevices of rock and avoiding the moving fortress. A hole with the radius of the fortress and accompanying walls had opened up from the land of the living. Although considerably faint, any sign of real sunlight felt like a summer day in this place. The peaks of the carved out mountain poked through the portal, and the fortress kept lifting skywards.

"It's … leaving." Jenny fell to her knees, watching the massive fortress slowly leave her sight. Sunlight from the Aboveworld that blinded her for just a minute as the building made its way up, dimmed as the fortress blocked it out and returned the world below into a place of shadows once
again. "We could have gone home," she said with a gaping mouth. "We could have had a ride back home."

Sesshomaru's labored breathing remained unchanged, drowning out any hope she had that he might be able to find some strength in reserve and fly them out. When did she come to rely so heavily on his ability to fly? Or his ability to do … well … far more than expected. He spoiled Merripit House with his presence. And now she would pay the price by dying a slow death of starvation and darkness while trapped in this literal tomb.

Jenny could feel her muscles want to tighten up again. So she forced herself to pace. Loosen her limbs. Do not, do not, do not succumb to a panic attack in Sesshomaru's presence, even if he is asleep. Logic has to prevail over base instinct and emotional rash judgments. As soon as he gets better, he would know a way to leave. If he got better.

Dirt and rocks rained down on her head as the circular fortress rose just past the boundary of the portal. With a final push, the building escaped the confines of the Underworld completely just before the doorway shut completely, leaving the world in absolute darkness again.

Shortness of breath. Jenny compensated by taking measured, deep breaths. Pain from tightness in her chest. She coped by clenching her hands into fists. Cold sweat down her back. She adjusted accordingly, unzipping her jacket to let in some much needed air.

"I will find a way out."

Although his eyes still hadn't opened, Sesshomaru had returned to consciousness. That annoying feeling — ache, he supposed — plagued his entire body. But he still had enough of his wits about him to recognize that his senses were drowning in the smell of terror and fear. Apart from knowing the physical source of the scent, he didn't know why.

Nodding, Jenny stopped pacing for a moment before switching to wringing her hands and lengthening her strides. "I don't doubt it."

"Then why are you scared?"

"It's … I'm not ..." Considering whether or not to explain to him why she wanted to tear out her hair and scream until her throat bled raised her anxiety level just enough for Sesshomaru to notice. But she couldn't hide it or deny that it was happening. Taking a deep breath she replied, "I'm having a panic attack. It's a physical response to a trauma in my past which my brain is currently re-living for me because we're in a cave. No, I don't want to talk about it. And I swear to God, if you tell Liu or Rosario, I will kill you with my bare hands and a rusty spoon."

He almost had to laugh at the mental image, but that would have rattled his mostly healed ribs. "You hide many things from the people who know you best."

"Oh you're one to talk, Mr. I-conveniently-forgot-to-mention-that-Death-and-I-knew-each-other-in-the-Biblical-sense," Jenny snapped. "How could you have been stupid enough mate with a psychopath?"

"I needed a mate to maintain my political power. I'd met Izanami while attempting to study the nature of Tenseiga, as I told you. She not only knew more about my father's sword than my mother ever did, but she had power unrivaled by any daiyokai in the land with no aspirations whatsoever to gain more. And when I first knew her, she was kind and happy." He did not add that she provided everything he missed about Rin when she decided to live with humans and wed Kohaku.
By now, the detective had stopped her pacing and chosen to sit down in front of him. Focusing on Sesshomaru's abbreviated at best confession allowed her mind to forget for a moment the prison they remained in. "Sounds too good to be true."

"She was."

"Where does Daiichi come in?"

"Izanami was with child within the year. I won't deny that we enjoyed each other's company, but as soon as there was life in her belly, she began growing cold and distant. I should have known then that a woman can have other aspirations besides political ones." His eyes opened briefly to glance Jenny's way.

She gave him a dirty look. "We're not all baby crazy," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Izanami wasn't either. As soon as Daiichi was born, she hardly knew what to do with her own child. According to my mother, Izanami relied far more on the wet nurses than she ever did."

"That makes sense because by her nature, she's mostly only seen dead babies and bad parents."

"In any case, I was happy to have a child and did what I could to help raise him. I tried to teach Daiichi everything my father taught me. He took to the sword like a fish to the water. But he had no respect for life. Even so young, he had a bloodlust that refused to be satisfied. When he was twelve years old, we argued fiercely one day during practice. I threatened to stop teaching him any sort of martial arts or war strategies, and Izanami became enraged. I refused to change my position on the matter, and within the day, she had taken Daiichi and left."

"Did you go after them?"

Sesshomaru shook his head. "I knew Izanami well enough to know that if she wanted to hide, I would never find her. The next time I saw either of them was 20 years later when Daiichi began a war and I met him in battle." The rest of that story, Jenny already knew, so he closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. As much as he hated to recount his own miscalculations and foolish decisions, he felt a bit of relief to hear Jenny's heart and breathing quiet down a bit.

Crawling further under the overhang, Jenny curled up next to Sesshomaru and made herself as small as possible next to him. By his estimate, this would minimize the chance of a creature assuming they could eat her while he had his eyes closed. "I don't mean to rush you, but how long do you think you'll need to rest?"

"This is not an area I am well experienced in," he replied.

"Meaning you don't get seriously hurt very often."

"If at all."

The Underworld had a perpetual echo of shrieks and snarls. But a particular hissing roar had a chilling effect on the air. It seemed to ring louder than the other creatures in the depths of the Underworld and even her grumbling stomach. Quite the accomplishment.

Sesshomaru hadn't stirred for over an hour, but the instant Jenny moved to investigate the noise, his eyes flew open and his hand grabbed her arm. "Wait."

Pulling back, Jenny let him take the lead and investigate. Even if she could see through this thick
darkness or had a weapon at the ready, she couldn't have done a thing with her broken wrist. But Sesshomaru had Bakusaiga which he drew as he dipped into the darkness to sniff around. They might have only stood a few feet apart from each other, but the Underworld had a way of swallowing up and isolating everyone.

The hissing came again, this time from below. But Sesshomaru couldn't smell a thing. Nothing physical, anyway. As a precaution, he drew Tenseiga as well. Should this opponent be a creature of the Underworld or a spirit, he wanted to be as prepared as possible.

A ghostly light flooded the area as a giant snake's head popped out of the ground and shrieked a bone rattling scream at Sesshomaru right before his fanged mouth snatched down at him. He nimbly leaped away and slashed at the creature's snout, releasing a burst of spirit light. With a roar, the serpent's head darted forward in an attempt to swallow the daiyokai's soul whole.

Sesshomaru retreated only to collect Jenny. "It's Kukulkan," he said, crouching down.

Without having to be ordered to climb aboard, Jenny wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight as he took off. "I take it he's not a very friendly ghost."

"Hn." Sesshomaru darted over the top of the canyon, only to have to drop to the ground as a second translucent feathered serpent rose up at him. Tenseiga pulsed with power, crying to see battle. He had no intention of depriving his blade of its desire.

With two feathered serpent god spirits attacking at every angle, Sesshomaru had to duck and weave and slice their hides with Tenseiga at any chance he could get. Despite the blows he managed to land, the massive serpents had a strategic advantage and unending reserves of energy, and he couldn't keep them off him. They forced him to stay on the defensive, backing him up into a corner step by step. Jenny jumped off to give him better mobility, but the snapping teeth and flying feathers refused to stop even when he had a bit less to worry about.

Never in a thousand years would Sesshomaru ever admit to being caught off guard and trapped in an unwinnable battle. But his experienced battle eyes knew that despite wielding Tenseiga, he had lost too much ground to effectively mount a defense. He could only hope that their anger could stay focused on the being that killed Kukulkan and Jenny could run. When a serpent tail whipped around and struck him in the side, he went flying backwards, nearly colliding with Jenny. As a last resort measure, he released a destructive wave with Bakusaiga to create a defensive measure behind which he and the detective huddled for a moment.

"For the record," Jenny said, "I'm grateful you at least tried to protect me."

"I'm not dead yet, woman."

A battle cry rose up from the canyon, quickly approaching the battle. Then a third force joined the fray with an explosion of fierce spiritual power.

A shower of sparks that lit up the sky like starlight. A burst of flame that carpeted the entire mountain and tingled instead of burned their skin. A mighty roar and sharp talons that rained down in quick strokes, rending the spirit flesh of Kukulkan and Quetzalcoatl. The ghosts screamed a noise that rattled bone and shook the ground.

For several minutes, all Jenny and Sesshomaru could see was red. Red streaks that bullied the feathered serpents into submission. A red wave that pushed the snakes far, far away from the huddled pair. A red light that surrounded and shielded them from danger.
"Is this your doing?" Jenny asked.

Sesshomaru shook his head. "This is a spirit." An exceptionally powerful one in his experience, he noted. Legend had it that a god's power grew exceedingly when dead, to the point that they could bring themselves back to life if they so choose. What sort of being, then, that could shoo these mighty feathered serpents away, could hold so much strength and power?

With a piercing screech of pain, the ghost of Quetzalcoatl writhed as the red spirit sliced its belly up the middle. Kukulkan turned tail and slithered out of the canyon, leaving the other spirit to fall to his possible demise off the cliffside.

Once free of opponents, the red spirit began to gather itself into a ball of light the size of an average human, molding and stretching until it grew limbs, a head, and a wild mane of hair. It stepped forward toward the huddled pair. Sesshomaru instinctively pulled Jenny behind him to protect her and held Tenseiga at the ready. But Jenny ducked under his arm to get a better look at the approaching spirit.

"Jackie? Is that you?"

The spirit's body took on a more humanoid appearance. Humans might have even described this being as angelic. Bright green eyes shone through the darkness. A mess of curly red hair seemed to move with the wind. The red light shrunk down into a form-fitting dress around the spirit, revealing it to be, in fact, a woman. The skirt reached to the floor where it turned up like a bed of flames. With a bit of a grimace, the woman placed her hands on her hips and tutted at the pair.

"Well, if the both of y'all are here, clearly something has gone terribly, horribly, world-destroyingly wrong. And may I point out that it is not entirely my fault this time."
God Machine

She almost seemed to be drifting in an ocean harbor. Long red hair floated out behind her in gentle waves while her dress bobbed back and forth as the air ebbed and flowed around her. Patiently, she waited for several moments in silence before her own antsiness overtook her silence.

"Well? Say something."

As if in a daze, Jenny wandered out from behind her protector to stare and gape at the ghost standing before them. Her arms drifted upwards as if to hug the apparition before her, but they ran straight through. So her hands hung there with no purpose. Her voice cracking on the edge of tears, she asked simply, "Why can't I touch you?"

"I think you know why, Jenny."

Coming back to her senses, she crossed her arms almost as if to hug herself, and cleared her throat before putting on a stern face. "Why are you wearing a dress? You don't wear dresses."

The ghost looked down, then back up again. "So I am. How interesting. Why don't I come back to you." The red haired spirit turned to the blood-stained daiyokai, and with a showy curtsy, introduced herself. "Jacqueline Harkness, Jenny's twice dead younger sister. Don't tell me; tall, scary and drop-dead gorgeous — you must be Lord Sesshomaru."

He expected that one related to the detective would show him a lack of honor that she'd always given him, but to his surprise, this spirit acted with a bit of the respect one would have given him in his own court. Perhaps she had some hope of earning his respect. "We appreciate your assistance," he replied evenly.

Jacqueline quickly proved him wrong. "Gratitude from Lord Sesshomaru? This is new." Floating upwards to stand eye to eye with the daiyokai, she poked his face and chest with ghostly fingers that went straight through his body. "Are you sick or something?"

"Don't antagonize him, Jackie," Jenny scolded.

With a short growl, he waved her away, causing her to dissipate like a puff of smoke. Chuckling, she reformed a moment later wearing black and red leather-like armor similar to Jenny's. "Oh, but he's just so much fun to tease! You don't remember me, do you my lord. It has been a few hundred years since we first met. Also, you were, like, this big."

Frowning in confusion, Sesshomaru wrestled with all the possibilities in his head that would allow a human to live for nearly a thousand years. In spirit form, this woman possessed unheard of power, which does not necessarily translate to similar aptitudes when in a mortal body. But perhaps she did not need to age. Like the strange miko that InuYasha married, what if she were capable of — what did Sōta call it?

"Time travel," he concluded. "You can travel through time."

A grin broke out on the spirit's face while Jenny simply raised her eyebrows in surprised pride and amusement. "Used to," Jacqueline responded. "I can't do that anymore. During my time traveling days, though, the Inu no Taisho would have known me as Jericho, but for some reason he insisted on calling me Hi no Kami no Shoujo."

"You knew my father?"
Jackie's bright smile brought light and warmth to that little area of the canyon. "The Inu no Taisho and I go way back. Oh my gosh, your father was so cute after you were born. He tracked me down in, I want to say South America, brought me back to Japan — as a friend. I cannot stress this enough. As a friend — and had to show me the itty-bitty Killing Perfection, and his shiny new castle, and now that I think about it, he was also probably trying to keep me away from the Western Lady because she was about as scary as you are currently covered with yokai blood and guts like this is your normal Tuesday night activity. I wrote about me and the General in the book. You read the book, didn't you Jenny?"

The detective took a moment to figure out what she was talking about. "The one in the cedar box? I haven't been able to get it open."

Jacqueline groaned in frustration. "Rrh, that freakin' sword! I mostly included Ketsugō-kiba so the box wouldn't decay, but it must have put a protective barrier on it. Bakusaiga could probably get through it, though."

"Why did my father give you his sword?" Sesshomaru asked.

"It's …" Her face scrunched up as she tried to explain. "I don't know what it was about the General, but he liked making swords that don't act like swords. Tenseiga heals and brings back the dead, Tessaiga collects superpowers and shoots out diamond pieces, and Ketsugō-kiba is basically a shield. I tried telling your father to just make a shield with the magical powers he picked out, but noooo. He wanted to practice making a sword so that when he made Tessaiga it would be perfect. Of course, once he made a sword that, one, puts a protective barrier around the rightful wielder and, two, seals up the demonic power of whoever it cuts, the General found it an annoying weapon and thought it was cheating a little bit. So he gave it to me. I don't really use weapons that much when I fight, especially now that I'm dead, so I left it for my darling sister who can't get in a cat fight without spraining a wrist. I figured that for someone who has, like, eight left feet when it comes to martial arts or anything requiring coordination, it might give you a chance of surviving the battlefield. Maybe. This is still you we're talking about."

"Thanks," Jenny replied with a dirty look developing in her eyes. "I'm starting to forget why I miss you."

"Oh, you're only grumpy because you're trying not to cry." With a goofy grin on her face, Jackie shaped her hands into a heart. "Luv you! That's why I'm here."

That sentence seemed to spark the detective's suspicions. Setting her good hand on her hip, she gave her sister a hard, inquisitive look. "Jackie. Why are you really here?"

Sputtering for a second, the ghost gesticulated wildly toward the gaping hole left behind by the football-field sized fortress. "This was noisy! I had to come investigate only to find out that this was worse than I imagined. You absolutely do not take things out of the Underworld and put them anywhere else, especially not the world of the living."

But according to Jenny's silent glare and Jackie's faltering confidence, the detective wasn't buying that story for a second.

Finally, the ghost dropped her arms and sagged her shoulders with an exaggerated sigh. "Okay, fine. You're dying."

Jenny could only manage a deadpan expression and a flat, "What?"

"Theda was trying to be sneaky because she knows that if you were about to die in the Above…
I would come racing across time to rescue you without fail. So she sent you here along with this," she said, tugging at the sutra attached to Jenny's left arm.

Jenny twisted around to look at the paper, but Sesshomaru took her arm to examine it first. Widened eyes and a sharp intake of breath were the only indicators of surprise he manifested at what he found. The paper, once painted with kanji in black ink, now had faded writing and a grayish hue. "What does this mean?" she asked.

"The sutra is failing," he diagnosed. "Once it does so, the Underworld will tear your spirit out of your body."

"Theda is incredibly powerful, but this is one thing she isn't capable of doing. She can postpone a death, but she cannot prevent it altogether. I have no doubt she knew that when she sent you here." Placing her hand over the sutra, a warm light began to grow under Jackie's touch. A moment later, her hand came away, revealing a somewhat cleaner paper underneath. "It won't last, but if we hurry, we can get the both of you out of here before —"

"Before something unpleasant occurs," Jenny finished for her. "That includes preventing Daiichi from raising an undead army of yokai and other such beasts. Sesshomaru, how do we get out of here?"

Attempting to gain his bearings, he scanned the visible area for signs of a landmark or something familiar, even taking to the air briefly to see further down the canyon. But as much as he was loathe to admit it, he had no idea where in the Underworld they were. Returning to the ground, he declared, "We need a guide."

"Ooh! I know just the guy!" In a flash of orange flames, Jackie darted down the canyon, scaring away a few wolf-like creatures of the Underworld in her way. "Come on!"

_How ... convenient_, they both thought as they watched the ghost zoom away. But neither of them intended to turn down any hint of help, no matter how suspicious the source. Sesshomaru crouched down for Jenny to climb onto his back, but she hesitated. "Are you sure? Have you healed enough?"

With a derisive snort, he took her arm and pulled her on board like a human backpack. "I told you, I have a contract to fulfill."

"Okay, so, bit of info dump for y'all since we don't have time to do a Divine Comedy storyline — sorry if you're sick of all the exposition. Think of the Afterlife as a really long path. You enter the border between this life and the previous one. It's a landing spot for spirits on the cusp of living or dying, as well as a graveyard for powerful daiyokai, gods and other such beings. That's kind of where we're headed now, but normally you would keep moving on to get to your ultimate destination. You travel through the Underworld next. It's a place for creatures that only exist in the realm of Death, the evil-est of evil spirits of any kind, and a fantastic place to seal daiyokai that simply won't die, apparently. If you keep going, you'll hit a land that, compared to the Underworld, is basically paradise. That's Limbo. It's overcrowded and no fun. Most animal and lower level mythical creatures' spirits end up there. But if you're more intelligent and spiritual and pure, you can keep moving forward to better and better places until you reach an even higher level of the Afterlife. Some people call it Heaven, others Nirvana. I've heard rumor that there's something even better past that, but I wouldn't know."

"Why?" Jenny asked.

"Currently I'm in heaven with Great-Grandma Gennie."
Sesshomaru frowned in confusion, but to be perfectly honest, he didn't care that much about the explanation, especially since the woman's prattling reminded him oh so much of a little green toad-like yokai that didn't know when to stop talking. It seemed like Jackie had a need to make up for lost bonding time with her older sister, although according to the disinterested nods and "Mm hm" sounds and occasional questions, Jenny wanted little more than to listen in silence.

"Because there's two of you now, right?"

"So several years ago, I got a little bit dead," Jackie said in a matter-of-fact-like way in order to fill Sesshomaru in. "I was walking home from school, someone shot me, they hid my body, and that was the last anyone ever heard from or saw me ever again. My spirit came here, went to heaven, and I waited patiently for my parents, Jenny and everyone else to join me in the great Hereafter. It was a blast. I was in Heaven with my family for 5,000 years. Unbeknownst to me, There was a group of time travelers that wanted to borrow me to study a new time machine. So they came back in time, followed me, and when I was dead, they picked up my body and took it back with them to the future. There they worked their magic and essentially resurrected me. And if a body is resuscitated, the spirit has to go back too. 5,000 years in a literal Heaven, and I was ripped out, my memories of this place taken away. Then there was that whole mess with Edison, Beirut, DATURA, did some Time Cop stuff…"

Trying not to grab a rock and throw it at the babbling ghost, Sesshomaru muttered in Japanese to Jenny, "Does she ever stop talking?"

"Rarely," she replied. "But it makes her happy, so just let her."

"... saved the world — I eventually drugged my CO and came home. Big party, 'Woo hoo, Jackie's back! Where were you?' 'Oh, I have amnesia,' sort of thing. That frustrated everyone. I traveled the world a bit, came back to America, fought some bad guys, and then I passed away again."

"You were tortured to death," Jenny corrected.

"Tomayto, Tomahto. Point is, I'm back. And since there are two of me … I'm a loophole!" she said with a wide grin and jazz hands.

But she couldn't fool either of them with her exuberance. "You are not allowed back in Nirvana," Sesshomaru deduced.

Jenny's mouth dropped open in a look of horror. "You've been condemned to Hell?"

"No no no," Jackie hastily explained. "I just can't be anywhere around previous me. There are a few lower parts of Nirvana I can go to, but mostly I wander around Limbo. I'm only here because you told me to look for you here."

"I did?"

The air lost some of the hyper energy electrifying it as Jackie attained a more mature and focused composure. Her eyes hardened, but never lost their hopeful sparkle. "Like I said, things have gone terribly, horribly wrong."

Jackie took them over mountains home to forests of withered trees, through winding and narrow canyons that opened up into valleys made of crystal, quartz and onyx, across streams of murky water, and along the pride lands of fearsome hellhounds and undead creatures who attempted to pluck the daiyokai and his rider out of the sky. One flash of flame from the spirit leading them through the dangerous parts of the Underworld, along with a warning slash or two, and they hastily
made way for them.

"Your sister possesses unheard of power," Sesshomaru remarked. "Yet you show no such aptitude."

"She is 5,000 years older than me, apparently. Who knows what she picked up."

"Are you two talking about me?" A vulture attempted to intercept her path, but Jackie offhandedly punched it in the face and knocked it out of the air.

"Only good things," Jenny replied with a yawn.

In the last few hours as they flew, Sesshomaru had noticed Jenny's grip around his neck getting progressively weaker. Perhaps she had grown to trust him to not drop her, or she found this comfortable. Rin often said so when wrapped in his fur pelt. But a nagging thought said the weakening sutra had something to do with her state. When she stopped holding her head up to watch the passing scenery, choosing to close her eyes and rest in the fur over his shoulder, he impulsively wrapped his arms behind him around her legs to hold her fast to him.

"I'm fine. I just haven't slept … or eaten … in a few days."

Nonetheless, Sesshomaru held on tight as her breathing petered out into a deep slumber.

"Get out of here filthy human! No one wants you here!"

The shrieking voice in the distance shook Jenny awake, but she didn't look to see the source until Sesshomaru touched down on the ground. Jackie had taken them out of the dark, barren wasteland of the Underworld to a somewhat lit barren wasteland littered with dried, bleached bones. One of these piles of bones had landed neatly around a large canine skull, forming a shelter with the mouth as the doorway and a ribcage as the walls of a tiny house. Just past the threshold, Jackie had a little imp in a headlock and was giving him a noogie as he squirmed to get free.

"Unhand me you disgusting creature!"

"Maybe if you yell louder, I'll magically learn how to speak Japanese," Jackie replied, dropping him on his head. The little green imp dressed in burlap colored robes burst into a puff of smoke as soon as he hit the ground, but soon reformed himself in time to start biting her leg. "I think we're developing some sort of rapport. This guy has been telling people he's been through the door guarded by the stone giants, which seems to be the only way for physical and mortal beings to leave this world."

"He knows this because I led him through it," Sesshomaru said, stepping up to the doorway to interrupt the wrestling pair. "Jakken."

All at once, the little green toad released his hold on Jackie, forgetting about her entirely as his wide eyes gazed in awe on the majesty of the daiyokai. "My … my lord!" Tears welled up in his eyes for a brief moment before the imp fell to his knees at Sesshomaru's feet, sobbing. "My lord, I knew you would come for me! I never doubted for a second that you would emerge victorious from our battle with that imposter! And now you have returned to free me from this wretched place —"

"What is that?" Jenny mumbled, lifting her head up off his shoulder.

"My most faithful vassal. Jakken."

"I didn't say 'who,' I said 'what.'"
"... and I see you have recently returned from a fierce battle, clearly emerging victorious." The little demon's hand flew to his heart when he belatedly realized his master had inadvertently complimented him. "My lord ... " The waterworks nearly began again before he noticed the woman. "Lord Sesshomaru, you have a human on your back!"

"I am aware of that, Jakken."

"And now the human wants down." Releasing his hold on her, Sesshomaru helped her slide down to the ground. Even with her nap aboard his back, exhaustion still had a stranglehold on her body. Her legs wobbled a bit and she steadied herself by grabbing hold of his fur pelt, making her wince in pain for putting stress on her broken wrist. Instantly, his hands were at her side. "I'm fine. I'm fine," she insisted.

"You know your armor can act as a splint," Jackie said, hovering over her to show her how to pull the sleeve up and over her thumb. Pressing a few hidden buttons, the end of Jenny's sleeve became stiff to hold her wrist in place and provide compression where needed. "I can't believe you figured out how to change the color scheme, but not the splints."

"It's not like your future tech came with instructions. In English."

"Jakken, do you know where the gate of the stone guardians is?" Sesshomaru asked.

"Of course my lord! It's just over this hill and across the Field of Forget-me-Not." With nothing but a sharp look, the little demon understood his lord's wishes. Squawking, he started down the pathway. "This way my lord!"

As Sesshomaru and Jenny started walking after their new guide, Jackie began to back away. "I guess that's my cue to leave."

Jenny stopped to stare at her sister in shock. "You're not coming with us?"

"Why would I? I'm a deus ex machina whose only purpose is to make sure you get out of here alive. And I think I've done that for now."

Her trembling lip threatened to spill over into an embarrassing display of tears and emotion. But with great effort, Jenny held steady her stony mask sculpted into a blank expression. "I see."

"Get out of here alive, Jenny. And shoot Theda in the face for me. Because she knows damn well that I don't ever want to see you in here before your time. Sesshomaru, keep my sister safe or there will be hell to pay."

With those parting words, Jackie's spirit swelled with flames and popped like a glittering firework. A few moments later and the sparks dissipated away, leaving no trace of the fire haired woman anywhere. Sesshomaru waited a respectful amount of time for Jenny to pay her respects to her deceased, departed sister.

"That little … rrgh!" she growled, clenching her fists. Suddenly she spun around. "Come on. Let's go. I hate to think what Rosario and Liu are doing without us."
"So. Where is Ms. Harkness?"

Now Michaelis was one man Liu had never once considered robbing, even in jest. It didn't just have to do with the fact that the man's rat-like nose creeped him out or how his suits always had a fresh pressed look to them even when the man had clearly sat for several hours in a cramped helicopter in order to reach the scene of the crime. No natural human could pull that off, he decided. No, Michaelis always showed up at exactly the right, opportune time. Without fail. If he knew where the trouble would be before Jenny did, then he'd catch a pickpocket faster than the boss could. And he'd probably have Liu thrown into a Venezuelan prison just for kicks and giggles.

Gathering all his confidence, Liu looked the government agent in the eye. "To be completely honest with you, sir, we have no idea where the boss lady is."

"Mr. Pauni, if you think this is the time to keep secrets from me —"

"Do you really think that the boss running off into mortal danger without leaving any hint for us as to where to find her is so out of character for her?" he snapped.

Michaelis considered this for a moment. Then shrugged and nodded his head. "Perhaps you're right. But can you see, Mr. Pauni, why I might be worried?"

He threw aside the flap of the army tent, opening the door to the Fukushima hillside. Overnight, the Japanese military had assembled a small army of trucks, tanks and other dangerous equipment, built a small city out of tents near the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, and flown in a bevy of scientists, engineers and doctors specializing in nuclear waste management. The transformation overall impressed Liu simply by their speed, efficiency and expertise. But the reason for doing so…

Stone walls and a twisted, spired building carved from black granite had emerged out of nowhere and settled itself on top of the complex, cracking and almost destroying the buildings and walls there. The whole place had a dark, evil look to it, though no one could put their finger on why those particular adjectives described it to a T. Perhaps the windows had a glare or the curve of the roof had a spiked, lace-like appearance. in any case, its height and size alone made it an imposing force. Drones overlooking the building mapped out a series of hallways, strongholds, armories and windowed towers. Without a doubt, this building's true purpose was to stay put and repel with enthusiasm any and all opposing forces. With little effort, put on the offense this fortress could hold large destructive power.

Men in white, lead lined HASMAT suits examined the readings of some high-tech equipment. While the fortress hadn't broken through any of the containment measures for the six reactors to hold in the nuclear waste and other fallout, they couldn't rely on them holding indefinitely. The plant couldn't survive a tsunami, and a foreign stone fortress weighing several thousand tons sitting on top of it couldn't help much.

"Well?" According to rumor, Michaelis' glare had melted stone before. The chill that went down Liu's spine at this moment convinced him that this particular story might be true.

Sighing and hoping that this government agent would have the patience to hear out his crazy tale, he
decided that at this point, the truth couldn't hurt. "Well … remember the woman in black boss wanted you to follow around? Her name is Theda. She's a mass-murdering psychopath, shape-shifting monster and the one and only goddess of Death."

Michaelis blinked a few times as he processed this information. "I see. What else do you know about her?"

Liu stopped and frowned. "Wait, you believe me?"

"I gave your team the data on Kukulkan," he replied condescendingly.

"Oh! That's right. Kind of forgot about him." It had been a week or two since their trip to Mexico, after all. And a lot had happened in the interim.

"Right. What is her purpose? How dangerous is she? Can she be negotiated with? Can she be killed?"

Snorting, Liu chuckled with a dark laughter. "Negotiate with Theda. Right. All I know is she has a son named Daiichi who wants to rule the world, and he just did that," he said, pointing at the fortress. Like, all of it.

"Fantastic," Michaelis sighed, massaging a headache forming in his temples. "Then I imagine that these are a part of that master plan."

His sweeping hand indicated the swarm of creatures descending from the sky, swimming through the ocean and racing out of the forest, all of them sharp-toothed with razor claws and murderous eyes converging on the fortress. At their distance, these beasts looked like a field full of ants congregating in one central location, but personal experience told Liu otherwise. Drop one human in the midst of these creatures, and a red mist would probably rise up moments later. The entire army could feel the impending death on their collective doorstep. Already drones had documented beasts resembling ferocious demons with dragon-like heads, snarling beasts with oversized teeth, limbs, wild eyes and flailing tongues. Although a distinct section of them were clearly native yokai to Japan, a greater portion of these creatures had to have come from wide corners of the planet, and they all wanted to come to the fortress.

"Theda may or may not be using Japan's yokai to build an army for her son," Liu explained in a hurried breath.

"Then we'll have to do something about that. Problem is there's still too much radioactive material in the area. We can't just drop some warheads on them and be done with it without upsetting the international community for stirring up the fallout. You thought of that before you raided North Korea's weapons cabinet, didn't you?"

Swallowing nervously, Liu hurried to figure out what lies he could get away with. That conversation when Michaelis arrived nearly 24 hours ago and found him with a truck full of 'acquired' explosives and Rosario with a bleeding dragon was certainly an awkward one. Fortunately, a massive roar and a brief jet of flames escaping from a nearby tent stole the agent's attention for the time being.

A few men with surgical gowns and bloody gloves escaped out the front of the tent before a flurry of claws tore the canvas door apart. A moment later, Rosario was heard shouting, "Knock it off! They're trying to help!"

"How is the dragon?" Michaelis asked as he ducked inside, almost oblivious to the serpentine tail whipping around the medical tent and knocking over all the equipment.
Fudo filled the tent like a winged elephant. Attempting to keep him still, Rosario had his reins in her hand and a sack full of fresh meat. A pair of surgeons worked on his rump with scalpels, needles, sutures and sponges to close up the wound Daiichi had given the beast. By Liu's estimation, it had only gotten deeper and even he could smell a faint rotting. Rosario handed Fudo a dead rabbit for keeping still while one of the surgeons dabbed the open wound with a sponge. The white material came back soaked in black fluid.

One of the surgeons left his post and removed his mask to talk to Michaelis. "It looks like whatever made this cut left some sort of venom behind. It's been keeping the wound from properly healing."

"How long until it can be back up and flying?"

"There's no way to tell how long it will take for him to recover. He could certainly fly, but he'd be in a lot of pain —"


"You're not touching my dragon," Rosario snapped.

"It's either useful to me right now or it gets put down." Michaelis summoned one of the nearby soldiers to bring his largest gun.

But before Rosario's temper could explode in a fit of violence — and, really, who could blame her? — Liu slipped between the two of them. "Putting Fudo down is a little premature, sir," he said. "Rosario's been training him to hunt creatures like these yokai. You're going to be better off waiting a few days and using him then than killing him outright and pissing your best yokai-killing resource, Rosario, off."

Just for emphasis, she glared at the government agent while cracking her knuckles, clenching them into fists. Michaelis felt no need to back down, however, motioning for the soldiers under his command to load their weapons.

"Tell you what," Liu continued, desperately trying to bring the attention back to himself. "Leave Fudo alone and you can borrow Rosario instead."

"What?" she exclaimed.

"Deal," Michaelis said. "Report to the front lines tomorrow morning."

With no further arguments to be had — partly because Liu clapped a hand over Rosario's mouth and dragged her backwards before she could make any changes to the current arrangement — the remaining members of Merripit House were left alone with a dragon snarling in pain and a bunch of Japanese soldiers and surgeons trying to figure out what to make of the unexpected power play. As soon as the tent flap door flew shut, Rosario punched Liu hard in the shoulder. "What the hell? You can't just volunteer me like that! You're not Jenny."

Rubbing his arm, Liu took her aside. "Look, there's something not quite … right about all this. Theda and Daiichi practically have an army of yokai on their doorstep and they're just sitting there. The yokai don't seem to be doing anything, but Michaelis has gone all bloodthirsty and war hungry on us."

"Michaelis is always bloodthirsty and war hungry. He drinks blood and eats war. Why'd you have to drag me into the middle of it?"

"But not to the point of being stupid and hasty." Fudo groaned in pain, distracting them for a

Rosario frowned in thought. "When we talked to Coyote, he said a god can influence someone's thoughts without them knowing. Apparently some Japanese god made Sesshomaru kill Izanami. Maybe Theda's telling Michaelis and the Japanese army to kill all the yokai. Which makes no sense because Daiichi will need a living army, right?"

Frowning, Liu stared off at the piles of equipment in the corner of the tent, thrown there by Fudo. "We don't actually know that. I mean, she is Death. Sesshomaru mentioned that Daiichi used an army from the Underworld, whatever that is. What we need is more information."

Hubbub outside the tent gave the two of them pause. Rosario grabbed her jacket and slung it over her shoulders. "No. What we need is Sesshomaru. And maybe the boss if she decides to show up again." With a sigh and a final pet on Fudo's nose, she headed outside. "I'll go head off the army."

"At least she's dressed now," Liu remarked.

A wide throne room with fire blazing in sconces and chandeliers, luxurious furnishings and pieces of armor and weapons scattered about, housed two of the deadliest powers the world had ever known. Daiichi, dressed in furs, steel armor and silks, paced the long room in boredom rather than agitation or anxiety. A tiny bird flew by the window and with an offhand flick of his wrist, the sparrow vanished in a puff of black ash and feathers. In a chaise lounge next to the throne, Theda, now reassembled and refreshed with makeup and a black kimono patterned with white and silver lilies, laid peacefully as if in meditation.

Biting his lip, Liu carefully manipulated the joystick controlling a drone hovering at the window of the fortress throne room. The picture on the screen in front of him got ever so slightly clearer and closer. A second screen to the right showed a similar area from a different angle. As he leaned in closer Fudo peered over his left shoulder until his nose touched the screen. "You're not helping," Liu sang.

He switched to a second control pad, moving the second done. After a few fancy maneuvers and switch flips, an audio feed opened up. White noise and a few muttered words came out of the speakers. "Mic planted," Liu declared. "Now … we just need a translator. This is a much easier process when the boss lady's around."

"I thought you spoke Japanese," Rosario said over the radio.

"For the eighth time, no." With a sigh, he pushed Fudo off his shoulder so his sniffing nose wouldn't knock over the monitors and left in search of a translator.

In the meantime, Rosario found herself in a tent full of weapons. And in front of a soldier assigned to distribute them to everyone headed to the battlefield. Brass knuckles, machetes, sidearms, hollow point bullets, a distinct lack of grenades and other explosives, and a wide variety of katanas to choose from. She spun around like a kid in a candy store before stopping in front of the swords. "I will take two of these, please. Ooh, and I'll need a couple knives, and let's see how many guns I can carry."

The stony expression on the soldier's face did not change as she loaded up every square inch of her body with weapons. Even when Rosario presented a note signed by Michaelis himself to put her on the front lines — armed — as soon as possible. All he did was hand her a Geiger counter. "If radiation goes above the red line, an alarm will sound. Retreat immediately."

"Will do," Rosario said with a mock salute. She snagged an extra combat knife on her way out of the
Before she could escape, however, the stony faced soldier stopped her. "And you'll need this," he said, handing her a sheathed katana.

She took it with a look of reverence and confusion. "Don't these take years of practice and training in order to wield properly?"

"Yes they do, which is why this is an inexpensive one that's on its way to the junkyard."

"There's such a thing as cheap katanas?"

"They're not magic swords. It's just a sharp piece of metal with which to cut off the heads of yokai should you run out of bullets." By the glare in his eye, he probably thought that incredibly likely. Holding open the tent flap, he invited her to leave immediately and never return. Which she did.

Liu's voice soon entered her ear as she made her way through the camp. "They trusting you with the grenades?"

"Not so much," she replied, falling in line behind a group of soldiers on their way to the battlefield. "Nobody's getting anything stronger than a rifle. I think they're nervous about kicking up any radioactive material. Otherwise I bet they'd ask the U.S. to nuke these yokai from orbit."

"Rosario. No. No they would not." She could almost feel the epic facepalm going down on Liu's end. And for some reason, she did not understand what about what she said had caused such a reaction. But as usual, she didn't bother to ask why.

As she neared the edge of camp, she spotted a truck just sitting on the sidelines. Naturally she veered sharply to the right, directly for it. To her minor dismay, she found a soldier sitting in the driver's seat when she opened the door. "Excuse me," she said as she grabbed his shirt front, yanked him out of his seat and roughly deposited him on the ground below. A moment later and she took control of the wheel and sped off for the forest.

"Did you, did you just steal a truck?" Liu asked incredulously.

"Yeah. Why?"

He quietly shut off all comms belonging to whoever was reporting a stolen vehicle loaded with dangerous equipment. "No reason."

Like a hunter on a safari stepping into the savannah, Rosario carefully climbed out of her purloined truck with a rifle in hand and a katana on her back. Her location: a mile from the battle lines at the edge of the woods. The forest would have hundreds of yokai, but at the moment, the shadows concealed every last one of them. Shadows that seemed unnaturally thick which moved against the wind. Rosario put a finger to her ear, keeping her eyes peeled for any sudden movement. "Liu, I'm here. Not seeing anything interesting yet."

"Theda is, though," Liu replied. "She just got really excited. Translator says she just ordered someone to kill, but she wasn't talking to her son."

Off in a 10 o'clock direction, Rosario heard a snapping branch and something slithering. Something rather loud and heavy. She raised the rifle to her shoulder and scanned the area through the scope. The silence had too much reign over the forest. Where are the squirrels, the birds, the bugs? A large predator lurks here, seeking its prey. And she had a funny feeling she knew exactly who that prey
"This was a bad idea."

A shrieking roar pierced the silence an instant before a set of fangs lunged at her. Snapping her aim directly at the danger, Rosario fired three shots in quick succession just as her mind registered the red and yellow eyes, the gaping jaws and the monstrous size of the attacking yokai. Darting to the left, she avoided the snake-like body that landed just where she'd been standing just as a second demon zipped out of the darkness. Two shots directly to its skull and it crashed to the ground, creating a nice ditch in the dirt as it landed.

That's when a cacophony of roars shook the forest.

"Mierda." Slinging the rifle over her shoulder, Rosario whipped the katana off her back, unsheathing it in time to slash through the grizzly face of a demon that reminded her of a Noh mask on a worm. She spun around, slicing the jaw of another demon before throwing it aside to bleed out. Three more ganged up on her, but with her strength and adrenaline rush, she soon made quick work of them. Not that she was stopping to bask in the victory.

"Hey, whatever it is you're doing, Theda's smugly happy about it," Liu said in her ear. "Translator says she said —"

"Do not care!" she shrieked, slicing down a stream of yokai as fast as they flew at her. "These are not near as much fun as the gargoyles!"

The snake-like demons were soon joined by creatures resembling moss covered beasts and fearsome mutated animals. They charged at Rosario with teeth and claws bared. In the mad dash to tear her throat open, one or two managed to grab hold of her arms with their jaws, tearing gashes in her jacket and drawing blood. With a roar, she threw these yokai back toward the forest, beheaded several in a few quick sword strikes, and even caught one with her bare hand and crushed its throat.

But even if she still stood able to fight, the demonic army had no end, and no reason to stop anytime soon. Despite having no visual or clear way of knowing the trouble his partner was in, Liu had a fairly good idea what was causing the kerfuffle off in the distance and on her end of the radio. "Get out of there!" Liu shouted.

Rosario couldn't agree more with that decision. So tearing the jaw off of one yokai that wanted to eat her head, she ran off toward the army truck parked a few yards away, slicing a pathway as she burst out of the swarm of creatures.

"I think we can safely say that she wants us to kill the yokai."

Gasping for breath, she tore open the truck door. "I think we can safely say that the yokai want to kill me!" she snarled as she hastily turned the key and slammed the gas pedal down. The spinning wheels kicked up dirt for a moment before it lurched away from the forest and out of reach of the flying yokai. "This is so much easier when Sesshomaru's around!"

Chapter End Notes

Author's Note*: My dearest readers. I sincerely apologize for my long, unexplained absence. It seems that I fell to the common affliction known to all writers known as Life.
In my case, I made a lot of significant changes. First off, I bought a car.** That took quite a bit of time to go shopping and test driving and comparing and getting that all squared away. And then I decided that at the ripe old age of 26, I needed to move out of my parents' home and into an apartment.*** Again, shopping, moving, settling, adjusting ... But I think I'm back! I can't guarantee a schedule as regular as I had before**** because I never did build up my buffer again, but I will try not to leave again for another several months. I really do want to crank this thing out before I go spend a couple weeks in New Zealand.

Thank you to all those who have stuck with me, and welcome new readers! Come, read, leave a comment, ask questions, berate me for going on hiatus without notice!

*Wait, but I don't do those or believe in them. Meh...

**Yay adulting! I just want y'all to know that I now have a beautiful new white 2008 Kia Spectra.

***Moar adulting!

****I'm thinking of at least one chapter a week, but I want to aim for two. Can't guarantee they'll be on Wednesdays and Saturdays like before.
Faithful Servant

So fluffy...

Keeping her head up grew increasingly difficult for the sleep deprived detective. Even worse, the fur pelt over Sesshomaru's shoulder made an excellent pillow, and she felt absolutely sure that his hold on her would never fail, so she didn't worry too much about holding on so tight. Besides, sleeping made dealing with the stabbing hunger and thirst so much more bearable.


"I'm still alive," she grumbled. "Just let me sleep a bit more."

A somewhat concerned expression crossed the daiyokai's face only because he knew she couldn't see it. For the last day of travel, a good 12 hours at the very least, she had slept on his back, and only after walking until her feet could hold her up no more. While most of Sesshomaru's focus laid on watching out for danger and demons, a small portion paid attention to the steady rise and fall of Jenny's chest against his back, and her breath on his ear. The shallower it became, the more his frown deepened. He would have quickened his pace as well if Jakken weren't so slow.

While Jackie could easily keep up with Sesshomaru in the air, Jakken could not float higher than a few inches off the ground, and then only at a brisk walking pace — for him. The daiyokai kept to the ground, his pace steady as he strode through the dark and dreary Underworld. But traveling slowly toward a known exit had significantly more benefit than hurtling through the sky at top speed in a random direction. And so he drew upon his great and infinite patience and tried not to rush Jakken much.

"I don't need to remind you that haste is appreciated," he said with his typical cold disdain.

"Of course, my lord!" Jakken squacked, jumping to hurry up his pace. And yet, as before, Sesshomaru had no need to speed up his steps. "If you don't mind me asking, my lord, who is this human on your back?" he hesitantly asked.

"Her name is Jenny Harkness," Sesshomaru replied, but how to explain what that means, that he couldn't answer right off. This relationship of theirs — of a daiyokai sworn to protect a human woman to gain a sword he felt less and less entitled to the more he thought about it, of an unlicensed Private Investigator and her employee, of a beauty and a beast — Jakken couldn't understand it. Not that he wouldn't try in an effort to stay on his lord's good side. Eventually, Sesshomaru decided upon, "We are working to defeat a common foe."

The little demon immediately scoffed at such a notion. "What sort of foe is this that the great Sesshomaru needs the help of a mere human woman?"

Three humans, actually. "She needs mine," he corrected. "And in return, she teaches me a new language."

"And history," Jenny suddenly added, though her head remained on Sesshomaru's shoulder. Sleep must come with difficulty for one who loves to eavesdrop. "Just wait until we get to biology. Then you'll really get confused." With that, her breathing and heart rate returned to the slow, light rhythm of one sleeping on the edge of death.

"Forgive me if I seem to pry," Jakken continued, "but it seems that the troubles of humans are well beneath the dignity of my lord."
Considering how Jenny did browbeat him into a contract to serve her with compensation, he supposed his vassal was correct. Still, he didn't need to admit that. "You need not concern yourself with how I conduct my affairs, Jakken."

Sufficiently humbled, the little demon shut his mouth.

The rocky mountain pathway lowered into a bright grassy field. The air here seemed warm, like sun was shining on a mountain meadow. But the light had no source, and the wind had a certain bite to it despite its softness. The place almost came straight out of a scenic painting, consisting of the essence or spirit of grass, wind, sky and mountain without actually existing. Yet here in the Underworld, it did. Before Jakken could step foot onto the first signs of life, he stopped. "This is as far as I can go. This field is a barrier to the dead. On the other side is the gate of the Stone Guardians." Squinting, he and his Lord could see the faint outline of the mountainside, still somewhat familiar from their time hunting Naraku.

"This wasn't here 500 years ago," Sesshomaru remarked. "Where did it come from?"

Jakken's eyes glazed over a bit as he recalled the legends he'd gathered over the years. "A few centuries ago, a mysterious Kami planted a single flower in the center of a barren field. The scent of this flower brings memories to life. Within weeks, the flower multiplied and its seeds spread to fill the entire field. It's said that the Kami wanted to keep the spirits of the dead from traveling backwards and the living from going where they shouldn't."

Sesshomaru scanned the area with all his senses. Not a thing seemed amiss. No spirits, no poison, not even a rock out of place to trip him up. Not even the living world contained such an absence of danger or imperfection. Even Jenny seemed to notice the eeriness of the peace and silence, sitting up fully alert for the first time in hours. "I don't like this," she said.

"We don't have a choice," he replied, pointing to the mountainside. It had to be only a mile or so away, but it still appeared faint like it stood many leagues further than that. "The gateway is there. It won't take us long."

"Doesn't look too bad." Inhaling deeply, she took in a long breath of fresh air heavy with the distinct scent of poppies and forget-me-nots. Almost instantly, she could feel blood surging in her veins and the grit of exhaustion leaving her eyes. "Wow." Releasing her hold, Jenny jumped off Sesshomaru's back and started walking through the field. As soon as her feet touched the grass, small white flowers burst out of the earth almost like a fairy trail. It only took a few steps before her walk became a jog, then a run.

"When will you return, my lord?" Hope. Longing. Love. Honor. These traits defined the literally undying loyalty of Jakken and explained the sad twinge in his voice. He dared not ask his lord to stay, but he could bear the loneliness no longer, especially when this next wait could last even longer than a mere 500 years.

Bending down on one knee, the great Lord Sesshomaru spoke softly to his faithful vassal, giving him a look of both pity and admiration. "Jakken. Your loyalty stretches far beyond the call of duty. I was not surprised to find you waiting for me, but the fact that you did saddens me. There is a vast eternal reward that you have denied yourself as of yet."

"Being in your service has always been the greatest honor I have ever known!" he cried with tears nearly spilling out of his eyes. He fell to his knees, groveling at his lord's feet. "I will wait thousands of years for your return before I enter the Spirit World, and only then can I do so happily!"

Sesshomaru shook his head. "Do you think I cannot travel to the Hereafter unaided?" he asked, not
coldly, but with a certain sharpness.

Jakken's eyes widened in fear and guilt. "N-no, of course not! You are talented and intelligent and powerful-"

"Then why are you here when you could be caring for Ah-Un or Rin's family?"

The little demon's face blanched. "I-I"

The daiyokai stood, turning toward the Field of Forget-Me-Not. "Move on, Jakken. Claim your reward. Join the others and wait for me there. That's an order."

For a good long few moments, he couldn't think of anything to say in argument. 500 years of waiting, and all his lord could do was leave him. Finally, he turned back toward the path to the Spirit World. "Yes, my lord."

A gust of wind blew past and without looking, Sesshomaru knew Jakken was gone, having followed his last order. Focused and determined, and unwilling to reflect on the past's sudden departure at his words, he stepped into the field.

In the few minutes of privacy with his old vassal, Sesshomaru lost sight of Jenny. Every last visual trace of her had vanished or never existed - no footprints, trail of flowers, shadows or crushed grass blades. But at least he could still find her scent on the air, and it had no trace of fear or panic in it, so he began following her trail, not entirely worried about her just yet.

A turn in the air brought a new scent that made him stop in his tracks. Frowning, he looked behind him to his left. Searching expectantly.

"Lost something?"

Spinning around, he came face to face with the red eyes of a dark haired, smug faced wind demoness with feathers in her hair and a spider scar on her back. No, he couldn't see the scar physically, but he could see it perfectly in his mind's eye. She brandished a fan in her hand, holding it coyly despite the danger and terror he knew it could unleash. "Kagura."

"You know what this place is, don't you Sesshomaru?" With a wave of her fan, she sent a thick breeze over the entire field. A new scent overlaid the area, that of magnolias, blood and ash. Even though she looked perfectly fine, he could only see a gaping, rotting, burning hole through her chest and feel the sinking weight of knowing she would die and he couldn't save her.

"This is a place where I relieve my memories," he replied.

Kagura smirked. "Not quite."

"Lord Sesshomaru!" Off in the distance, a girl long black hair, some of it tied up to the side, called out to him, waving. Her orange and goldenrod kimono had dirt stains and tears, but she was happy. Lively. Smart enough to outwit vicious yokai. Kind enough to befriend the ones who needed her crooked smile. Old enough to be married. To choose her husband.

In his shock, her name left his lips before he could fix his slipping mask of composure. "Rin."

At that moment, a young man appeared near her, simply out of nowhere. From the coloring of his demon-slaying armor, Sesshomaru knew Kohaku instantly. He called out to Rin in a voice the daiyokai couldn't quite hear. Even though Rin wanted so badly to greet her lord, the young man absorbed her attention and her path diverted. A pain entered his chest, like his heart had a crack
"This place shows you the dead who have caused you pain," Kagura explained. "Every kind."

"Pain?" He glanced back toward Rin and Kohaku. The girl looked as beautiful and fearless as ever. Just as he remembered her. Before he knew what they were doing, his feet had already carried him several steps in their direction. "You were nothing more than a passing annoyance when you chose to antagonize me," he said, arguing with the wind demoness. "And how could Rin of all humans have ever caused me pain? Why is she here and InuYasha is not?"

The scene before him changed to the edge of a forest lit with lanterns. Though the buildings that should have been here had gone missing, he knew this particular setting well. Kohaku and Rin dressed for their wedding, gazing deep into each other's eyes, profoundly joyous at the prospect of sharing their lives and raising a family.

Watching with him, Kagura scoffed as her body began to disintegrate into dust and wind. "She never saw you as anything other than a father figure, didn't she."

The crack in his heart throbbed again and a frown crossed his brow. "I wanted nothing more than her happiness."

That annoying smirk on her face simply deepened. "You do keep saying that. I wonder if you're ever going to believe it," she said as she slipped out of existence.

Ash lingered in the air, drawing the memories of that day he watched her die out of his mind like salt drawing water from flesh. That touch of grief seemed to make flowers in the field grow. They looked taller, stronger and more colorful than the ones that appeared when Jenny ran off. So the 'spirits' here must be nothing more than constructs of memory, hallucinations designed to reawaken buried pain. They're not real. This realization made it easier for Sesshomaru to leave Rin and return to his duty, though the trail of blossoms recorded his feelings of regret, heartbreak and shame.

As he travele, the memories came fast and large. The Panther King, Shishinki, Jakotsu, Mōryōmaru, shadows of the various incarnations of Naraku, his own father the day he turned down his demand that he turn Tessaiga over to him, the woman the old man left his mother for. These he ignored or eagerly slashed his claws through.

Soon, he found Jenny kneeling on a hill bursting with orange poppies as wide as dinner plates. The scent brought forth massive demons and even a monstrous version of Naraku who loomed over them in the sky. Yet Jenny continued to stare at the ground or off into the distance, her eyes tearful and her skin clammy and pale. Whatever she saw had her heart pounding hard inside her chest.

He stopped just at her side, close enough that she should have moved at his presence. "Jenny, these visions are not real. Ignore them," he said. When she didn't move and her eyes remained unwavering, he tried again, crouching down and touching her shoulder to shake her out of her stupor. "Detect—"

The entire field exploded into a cacophony of cries, wailing and shrieking the instant his hand made contact. As far as he could see or hear, people of all walks of life surrounded them, filling the meadow to the very edges of the mountains and pressing in on him and Jenny. They appeared normal apart from a ghostly pallor to their skin and blood dripping from various open wounds. They cried, they shouted in anger, they scorned and mocked the detective. And she heard and took it all. A similar cry rang out in a strange unison from these souls. "Why could you not save me?!"

Yet the most powerful of these spirits, the one who captured her attention, laid in a bruised, bloody
heap at her knees. Jackie, covered in gashes and burns, her limbs twisted from broken bones, and bleeding from her nose and mouth due to a gaping hole going straight through her back into her chest, did not move, did not speak. After seeing this woman himself, albeit in spirit form, this memory of Jenny's stood in stark contrast to the lively figure he'd only just met. Not once had he ever seen a human take such abuse. And no doubt, the sight of her dead sister was causing tremendous emotional devastation to Jenny.

"They're just memories," he said softly. This time, her gaze flickered toward him, letting him know she heard him.

After taking in a shuddering breath, she replied, "Memories still hurt."

This he could not argue with.

"I should have been able to stop this. All of this."

Sesshomaru looked over the thick crowd, examining the wounds and states of dismemberment of each person. He spotted a few women with ligature marks around their necks, young men and women wearing explosives around their torsos, slit throats, gunshot wounds, broken necks. All people from Jenny's past cases. The thought came to his mind, he had no doubt that if he asked her, she would tell him the name and details of every last one of these figures in the field. Despite her hardened exterior, here he saw evidence of something he'd begun to suspect before they'd even entered the Underworld. The detective has a soft-ish heart, carrying the weight of guilt with each victim she failed to save.

Realizing this, he noticed a group of six girls with gunshots in their heads, but they remained silent. He recognized one of them as Rin, the little girl Jenny was trying to save from the human traffickers. Why were these girls here if he already saved their lives? Perhaps because they died once?

For that matter, why could he see any one of these humans to begin with? They hurt Jenny, not him.

The sutra on her arm looked nearly as black as coal. He could hear her heartbeat beginning to waver. He had no desire to interrupt this experience in the Field of Forget-Me-Not, but they had more pressing matters. Namely Daiichi and Theda attempting to take over the world. With a gentle push, Sesshomaru turned her face to force her to look him in the eye. "How? How could you have saved them?"

"I … I don't know. I just, I should have been smarter. Faster."

"You're brilliant and clever, more than any other human I've known, but you're a human. You will always fail if your only acceptable standard of excellence is perfection."

"Why should perfection not be my goal? Should I be fine with any of their deaths?"

"Of course not. But you are not at fault. Strive for perfection in your own choices, and allow others to bear the weight of guilt for their own failures and misdeeds."

For a moment, it seemed she would argue with his direct words. Her mouth gaped open as she attempted to form a reasonable sentence. But instead, she buried her face in her hands and began to sob silently, her whole body shaking with the effort. Though her composure crumbled to nothing before him, the clamoring of the dead chorus started to die down.

It was only then that a different set of voices rose. As Jenny curled forward, he saw a host of dark, shadowy spirits glaring, gnashing their teeth and shouting horrendous obscenities from behind her. Hot, fiery anger welled up inside him as he knew exactly what sort of pain she'd felt at their hands.
Though *why* he should feel that way escaped him for the time being.

"Come," he said, helping her stand up. By his estimation, the sutra on her arm would lose its effectiveness in an hour or less. "We need to leave this place."


Red fury blazed in Sesshomaru's eyes listening to their taunts. Though Jenny valiantly attempted to ignore them, especially in his presence, her hunched shoulders showed how much it still hurt to hear and relive. And that only made him bare his sharp fangs and growl. His grip around her shoulders tightened out of some sort of base instinct to protect.

"They don't matter," Jenny said. "I shot half of them already. They can't hurt me again if they're dead." But her words could not sate his rage, nor could his own rational reasoning. When the figures started laughing and lashing out, he couldn't bear it anymore.

With a snarl, he ripped Bakusaiga out of its sheath. "**LEAVE!**" he snarled in the instant he unleashed one of the sharpest, most fearsome decomposing blasts that he had ever produced, absolutely filling the field with green energy. The figures burst into puffs of hazy memory, followed by a surge of orange and white petals, and green grass and flower stalks being torn asunder molecule by molecule. Sesshomaru's roar echoed off the mountainsides for several reverberations as the dirt and plant matter rained back down to the ground. For nearly a mile, a swath of turned up soil stretched out through the field, coming to a point at the daiyokai's feet.

The voices in the field quieted to the point of silence as Jenny straightened her back from her flinching crouch, and took her hands off her ears. She stared at the almighty power of Sesshomaru, the shock having dried up her tears in a quickened heartbeat. What does one say to the man — no, daiyokai — who would release such power in a rage in order to defend her against even her own horrid memories? "Sesshomaru," she hesitantly whispered.

Seeing his enemies — rather her enemies — vanquished, he sheathed his sword and crouched down at Jenny's side. "Come."

She understood that he had no desire to explain or justify his actions, so she silently climbed aboard. Burying her face in his fur once more, she relaxed in the safety and security of his grip as he hurried through the field toward the gateway back to the realm of the living.

*So fluffy...*
The way is shut. It was made by those who are Dead, and the Dead keep it. The way is shut.

Much like the Paths of the Dead from the Lord of the Rings movies, the gateway of the Stone Guardians had a dreary, ominous presence. It had no steps leading up to it. Halfway up a sheer rock face, the mountainside simply had a stone doorway framed by bone, cobwebs, and the claw marks from desperate creatures trying and failing to dig their way out. Though Jenny had a bit of confusion when she found no trace of these titular guards, stone or otherwise, she didn't voice those concerns to her long-suffering companion and protector. He seemed to still have the energy to fly for ages despite his haggard appearance, what with his shirt torn to shreds, essentially missing entirely and blood staining his coat and pants. In direct contrast, apart from black circles under her eyes telling of her days without sleep or food, Jenny seemed rather put together. She allowed herself a moment to appreciate this moment of looking better than she felt because it most likely wouldn't happen again. Ever.

With no handles and barely a seam between the two halves of the door, it clearly acted more as a barrier to keep the dead inside and give the living a little access to the Underworld and the realm of the dead. "So how do we get it open?" Jenny asked.

Standing in the air before the door, Sesshomaru wondered the same thing. As he recalled, the barrier-breaking Red Tessaiga had opened the gateway once before, and the guardians allowed him past only when they saw Tenseiga. But this time around, he had Bakusaiga. It could destroy a great many number of things, but he didn't know for sure if it could break through this door. Things in the Underworld tended to be made of much harder things.

"Should we try knocking?"

Now there's a thought. Squaring his shoulders, Sesshomaru called out, "Stone Guardians! I am Lord Sesshomaru, Ruler of the Western Lands. I demand an audience."

Though the rumble of his roar sent a shiver through her body, Jenny pulled herself up to speak in his ear with an air of teasing. "I'm still curious, which Western Lands exactly do you rule?"

"Quiet."

The seconds of silence stretched out painfully long as the mountainside remained still. No response. No movement. No sound.

With a shuddering groan as loud as a boulder breaking apart, the door split and began scraping open at a tortoise's pace. Light — real light — shone through the growing crack, bathing them in the orange-yellow tones of a torch or campfire. An eye the size of a beach ball peeked in at them before it locked in on the pair and examined them with a stiff gaze. Jenny's mouth dropped open a bit as she mentally measured the massive head on the other side of the doorway — probably the size of a Smart car — then extrapolating the rest of his body. As the stone continued to move, those estimates became confirmed. His whole body looked like someone had sculpted a masterpiece from a slab of granite. This artist imagined an ancient Japanese warrior complete with a helmet, chest plate, and spear, but since he had a body of impervious stone, those details seemed superfluous and redundant.

Every subtle move, from blinking to turning his head to stiffening his shoulders at the sight of them (can someone made of rock even get any more stiff?) took Jenny by surprise. He shouldn't even move, but this being lived. No doubt about it. "I may have been thinking that the guardian would be
a bit smaller," she admitted quietly.

Sesshomaru drew Tenseiga, leaving Bakusaiga in its sheath. He didn't want them to catch him off guard, after all. "We are living beings demanding entrance to the Realm of the Living."

The doors finally opened wide enough to reveal a second guardian backing up the first, dressed similarly, down to the spear held at the ready to block the pair's passage into the Aboveworld. In a voice that shook them to the core, the first growled, "We will grant passage to the son of the Inu no Taisho, the one who wields the heart of Death, but this woman on your back bears the black mark of the Reaper. She must remain in the Underworld."

The look on their faces had a stubborn determination … though they may have simply been sculpted that way. But Sesshomaru had a stronger resolve than even they. "500 years ago, you exercised wisdom when you chose not to test my blade, knowing I would defeat you. I warn you, Tenseiga's blade has not dulled in the last half-millennia. Let. Her. Pass." He brandished his sword to emphasize his point.

But the guardians would not budge. "A darkness infects the Earth. Armies of yokai have awoken only to be cut asunder fire and blade. Death's son steals power from the Netherworld to spread this infection. Our purpose is to keep the way shut to those who dare to trespass. The one who wields the heart of Death must hold to this vow."

Jenny could feel the tension growing in Sesshomaru's back. She didn't even have to look at his face to see the scowl growing between his eyes. "This woman is under my protection, and you will let her pass!"

"Gentlemen!" Liu said with a bright smile and his hands in the air. "I'm sure we can come to some sort of understanding. Preferably a bloodless one."

The poor, unsuspecting translator sitting next to him stood to attention as a whole platoon of soldiers, with Michaelis leading the charge, flooded the medical tent with weapons drawn, though not aimed at the thief and his accomplice just yet. Their sudden invasion woke Fudo from his already fitful sleep. With a deep, smoldering growl in his throat, he crept up behind Liu, placing his head between him and the approaching party on his left.

"Sir," the translator said, "I can explain."

But to Liu's great surprise, Michaelis didn't say a word. The thief could almost fill in the space that Michaelis should have filled himself. "With Pauni's help, I don't doubt it. You've had far too much time to get your story straight. You promised me Rosario. It's been eight hours, and no one's seen hide or hair of that girl. Produce her in the next instant or I'm burning your retirement fund." (This retirement fund is a collection of stolen artwork Liu has acquired over the years. Just a nice cushion in case he should suddenly lose every legitimate penny to his name.)

"She's on her way," Liu would say. "I just need you to take a look at this surveillance —"

"I never authorized any surveillance! I want you out of here, I want this poor schmuck court marshaled, and I want this poor, helpless injured dragon executed!"

Alright, maybe it wouldn't go exactly like that. Still, it had a better ring to it than the absolute uniform silence of the host of men before him. Liu glanced at Fudo, reading a tension and suspicion in the giant beast's expression. So even a dragon could tell that something seemed incredibly off in this company of soldiers.
"Um, Michaelis?" Liu said hesitantly. When the UN professional failed to respond, he pushed further. "I just wanted to let you know that when Interpol started chasing their tails trying to figure out who broke into the British Museum without leaving a trace, that was me. All me. There's a slight chance not all the Egyptian hieroglyphics are genuine. And I wouldn't test the Crown Jewels anytime soon. I swear, I'm only borrowing a couple pieces. For now."

Still, the same dead-eyed stare, all of them locked on Liu. Fudo's growl deepened and grew more menacing the longer they continued to just … stand there. As the dragon prowled toward them, they finally reacted. Their bodies collectively shifted and their guns raised to aim at the beast's heart.

Only then, Liu spotted something somewhat odd. A silvery strand glinted in the lantern light on the back of one soldier's neck. A quick survey of the rest of the company revealed a second, third, fifth, ninth soldier with the same strand trailing from their neck, nearly invisible to the eye. Squinting, he followed each one back to the point that they first appeared. The strands seemed to coalesce at the tent door and extend beyond it.

"I don't get it," the increasingly confused translator said. "Why aren't they moving?"

Keeping his eyes on the strands lest they should vanish like those weird squiggly lines you get in your eyes that jump around when you try to focus on them, Liu slowly got up from his seat behind the laptop screens and drone controls. "Hey, do you have a sword or very large knife?"

"Yes…"

"I'm going to steal it for a minute. Fudo, you keep being actively aggressive."

True to his word, Liu slipped the soldier's sword out of the sheath and quietly walked in the direction of the doorway. Fudo diligently upped his growling and creeping toward the small army filling the tent. In response, the soldiers raised their weapons until they were aiming at the dragon's head, placing their fingers on their respective triggers. Swift and silent as a cat … burglar … Liu reached the culmination of the silver threads. Now that he could spot them, it looked like a twisted cord no larger than climbing rope.

Twitching anxiously, there wasn't a whole lot more threatening Fudo could do before he had to take action, and this mass of soldiers seemed to know it. The bullets seemed to dance on the edge of a gunpowder induced flight. Liu raised the sword above his head, feeling a bit like an incompetent moron while doing so — no, he corrected himself. More like Jenny trying to throw a punch.

With a silent prayer that this move would cease the mind control, Liu blindly chopped downwards, severing the cord.

The soldiers seemed to catch their breaths in a chorus of relief and switching safeties back on. And for Michaelis, that meant barking out, "What the hell is —"

A screeching roar pierced the air just before the whole tent wall ripped away under the hands of a broad chested Japanese man with ancient green robes, long black hair tied back in a topknot, wild black eyes and sharp, jagged teeth. He shrieked a moment longer before massive hairy black legs shot out of his back. The skin of the man broke open and fell away like a shed exoskeleton as the giant body of a spider emerged with massive snapping fangs dripping with poison.

Liu scrambled backwards away from the black predator. "Holy Sh —"

"AAAAAAAAAGGGHHHH!"

Leaping over the spider's back with a bloody katana in her hands, Rosario slashed the yokai's head,
aiming for its eyes. The creature reeled back to deal with this new foe, spewing webbing in an attempt to catch more men to follow its bidding. But they'd wised up enough to avoid it and pull out their own swords. The soldiers would have tried shooting the damned thing if Rosario didn't have teeth figuratively … mostly figuratively … sunk into its neck.

"Move!" Rosario shouted as she slid to the ground and slashed at a leg or two trying to stab her. She looked like she'd gone through a hurricane that rained black demon blood, and come out the other side with a chip on her shoulder and an appreciation for a good sword. "I need fire!"

Destroying the rest of the tent on his departure, Fudo tore out of there, taking to the air and shooting a stream of fire at the spider. The monstrosity scuttled away while Rosario chased after it. He tried to strike her with his fangs, but she would have none of that. Despite its piercing roars, the battle cries and shouts escaping Rosario's throat rivaled the beast in terms of noise. The spider attempted to bite, and she simply dropped her sword and punched that sucker in the eye.

The spider flew back.

Thinking she'd landed a lucky strike, the creature attempted to attack again. But without missing a beat, she struck it again in a one-two combo, finishing her move with a roundhouse kick that drove it into the fire.

Screams filled the air as the spider scrambled away from the vicious woman. The air stank of singed hair and burnt spider carcass, but all felt relieved that it finally saw the futility in attacking these particular humans and decided to scurry back to the forest.

"— ssshhhelob!" Liu rushed to Rosario's side as she panted hard, attempting to catch her breath. Clearly she'd used up most of her energy reserves as she felt little embarrassment using him as a bit of support. Even Fudo looked worried about her as he started prodding her with his nose. "How are you holding up?"

She gave him a distinctively dirty look. The yokai had torn her clothes to shreds, she had no weapons besides her blade and her own two fists, both of which she'd beaten bloody, and some of the blood streaking her body was red — her own. Bending down, she picked up her sword. "They've only been getting worse since sunset. I fight off one batch only for another swarm to come in. And to top it all off, some of them look human before they turn into something worse."

"Like that spider yokai."

Rosario nodded. "I was thinking of someone else, but sure. Have you heard anything from either of them?"

Before Liu could reply, Michaelis broke in, for once somewhat surprising the thief. "I'm curious to know as well." He had his usual arrogance and smugness about him, but his condescending tone seemed to have left him for the time being. He almost sounded … genuinely concerned. "Rosario, I take it congratulations are in order. You seem to have left a bloody trail of corpses in your wake."

"Unfortunately, sir."

"Unfortunately?"

"As I've been trying to explain," Liu said, jumping in, "Theda's plan involves having us kill these mythical creatures. It would be nice if you and the yokai weren't playing so perfectly into her hand like a bunch of patsies."

That earned him a scowl. "Can you fault the army for defending themselves against an enemy who
But Theda's — oh never mind," Liu grumbled. He suspected that Theda drove the yokai to attack the humans the way she incited Michaelis and the Japanese army to violence in the first place. It's just a mess all around. "Rosario, you should take a break. I think boss's phone might have come online a while ago, but the signal was weak. The army can handle themselves."

Before Michaelis could argue to the contrary, Rosario got back to standing on her own and gave Fudo a scratch on his nose. "That's just not true." She wiped some of the blood off her sword on the remains of her jacket. "We need Sesshomaru back and soon. Until then, I know way more about these guys than anyone else here. If I don't fight, no one here will live."

An all-too-familiar roar rang out from the direct of the forest, but the sound came from somewhere distinctly closer. And by the depth of the voice, the creatures had to be far larger than any they'd encountered before. The soldiers, despite following their orders to spread out and secure the camp, clearing away any lingering small fry, raised their heads at the sound, not knowing what exactly they needed to do to prepare. Even Michaelis felt the fear of the unknown caused by the sound.

"Well we can't count on Sesshomaru right now," he said in a low voice. "Use the translator, brief the men. Competence is the goal we're shooting for tonight."

Shouts of soldiers calling out to warn the others, probably as an, "Incoming!" cry, rang out through the camp just before a massive deer with blackened glowing eyes and antlers the size of a small fruit tree charged at one of the gatherings with a bellowing roar. Gunfire thundered out immediately, lighting up the night with muzzle flashes, followed soon after by screams as the deer gored two or three men before throwing them twenty feet in the air.

Rosario sighed as she readied her weapon. "Fudo, your job is to keep Liu safe and out of trouble. Michaelis, either go hide or go get eaten quickly. I don't care enough about you to spend time protecting you." Ignoring the men's immediate rebuttals, she began walking towards the front line, shouting orders on her way. "You! Go get some ropes and nets! You! Get some harpoons and harpoon launcher thingies! Get tasers and pepper spray, and could somebody please get me a decent sword!"

While Fudo dutifully herded a reluctant Liu away from the approaching hoard of yokai and Michaelis attempted to stick with them, the darkness came to life with hundreds of red eyes and gleaming fangs. The soldiers' commander shouted his own orders as the creatures on for hit them like a tidal wave. Mutated snakes, serpentine dragons, oversized predators tire through flesh and body armor with barely a moment's hesitation, sending showers of blood into the air. The beast's killed a few lucky men on impact. Others had to scream in agony before the yokai finished the job and ripped out their hearts and throats.

But the army had their own tricks. A few has some talent with the combat knife, getting up close and slitting some stores and jugular veins. More preferred to keep their distance and fire explosive rounds at their targets. They hit just as hard and fast as the legendary creatures trying to shred their flesh.

No one could have seen the power that came when Rosario became desperate. Some men said her eyes glowed as brightly as the yokai, though with a violet hue to set her apart. Someone tossed her a katana which she caught without looking right as she needed it to slice a hunk out of an oni's belly. She flew through the mass of scales, claws, fur and tusks, creating havoc and bloodshed as she disrupted their flood.

With a mighty cry, she rallied the soldiers to pursue their hopeless defense. For as many of the yokai as they felled, three more humans gave their lives in the process. And the forest had no end to the
creatures it could produce. The creatures of sky and sea hadn't even bothered to attack just yet.

A horse the size a mobile home with fiery hooves and mane galloped across the expanse, aiming right for Rosario. The way the others cleared the path for him told of the legendary strength he possessed. She paused in her pursuit of enemies to brace her footing and brandish both blades in a show of confidence and defiance. Her whole body heaved from trying to catch her breath. This steed had no such exhaustion and raced at her faster than a train picking up speed.

"Come get me you bastard," she growled.

Three yards away, Rosario thrust her swords at the beast's heart, but only in vain. A massive surge of energy shot through the battlefield, tearing up the ground and filling the night with a harsh electric green light. It threw Rosario backwards several places, though she managed to land on her feet. She couldn't say the same about any of the other creatures in the field.

If the phrase 'raining cats and dogs' could be used literally, this shower of fur, scales and other such body parts that pelted the humans from above would have felt much the same. Though probably with more heart wrenching yelping and bones shattering. This just felt like someone had attempted to detonate a whale.

He stood in the air, triumphant, with his long silver-white hair and fur pelt moving gracefully the breeze and his katana still showing with the echos of the energy blast he used to disintegrate the yokai. His gaze turned to the foremost warrior of the lot with a rare proud smile.

For her part, Rosario simply collapsed to her knees, leaning on one sword to barely keep her upright. If she looked away, he might vanish while she blinked. So she stared at the daiyokai and his ragged state. "Sesshomaru. It's about damn time."
A plume of grey stone dust rose up from the ground as Sesshomaru landed amidst disintegrated bits of yokai. As a hush fell upon the soldiers and their leaders, the daiyokai examined each of them with a steely cold glare. Notably, he did not return Bakusaiga to its sheath. Nor did the surviving soldiers move their guns away from him. Rosario could feel the tension between the soldiers and the almighty being before them, but apart from holstering her gun and sheathing her swords, she had a language barrier preventing her from resolving any conflicts.

Fortunately, dragons don't need translators.

"Boss!" Liu called out as he pushed through the ranks of soldiers who split apart like butter sliced by a hot knife. Fudo following him so he could find Rosario and check on her had a bit to do with how well the men separated for him. "Boss, are you alright?"

Sitting on Sesshomaru's back, Jenny popped her head up at Liu's voice. As soon as the soldiers saw her bright blue eyes and long blonde hair emerge from the mane of fur over the daiyokai's shoulder, the majority of them lowered their aim, since they figured that if this unstoppable being had a human woman on his back, he couldn't possibly have untoward intentions for them. Probably. Plus the two strangers seemed to trust them.

Sheathing Bakusaiga, Sesshomaru crouched down so Jenny could safely slide down from his back, his fur falling off from around her shoulders as her feet hit the ground. From her black leather jacket, she had to brush off a bit of the same stone dust that coated her ride. An instant later, Liu appeared out of her peripheral vision and scooped her up in a rib-crushing hug. "You're alive!"

"Ow my spleen. Down boy."

Without giving her a chance to stand on her own two legs, Liu set her down, but kept his arm around her shoulders to hide the fact that she needed to lean against him. First things first, he handed her a bag of beef jerky. "Compliments of Michaelis. You have to stop doing this spontaneous fasting thing."

"I've got more important things to worry about," she mumbled. But she immediately crammed a piece into her mouth. "I think I need to eat more cow. Maybe an entire one."

"Harkness!" Michaelis in all his rat-faced glory stormed through a thick wall of soldiers reluctant to move for him. "Where the hell have you been?"

Almost instantly, Sesshomaru blocked his path to Jenny, towering over the government agent with a steely glare in his eye. But with a gentle touch to his elbow, Jenny melted the panicked aggression right out of him, urging him to step aside and let her handle this battle.

"Rosario," she said, "can you help Sesshomaru find some new clothes?" Translation, get him out of earshot for a bit and fill him in.

She nodded, pulling her last reserves of energy together and taking him by the arm. "Come on big guy."

Reluctantly, he followed the warrior who had taken on so much and inexplicably managed to come out alive. He and Jenny shared an extended look before the daiyokai felt confident that she could hold her own. And with Rosario taking her leave of the battlefield, Fudo felt no reason to stick around with Liu. So he began to ramble off after the pair.
With Sesshomaru gone, Jenny turned the full weight of her icy blue eyes on Michaelis. "Glad to see you're alive too. You want to know where I was? Hell, in a manner of speaking. Pardon my absence; Theda decided to physically throw me into the Underworld. Thanks to Sesshomaru's help, we were able to get out. I apologize that our journey back from the dead took so long and inconvenienced you so terribly."

"Don't take that tone with me young lady —"

SMACK!

Jenny shook some of the smart out of her hand, but the steam coming from her ears remained. Liu wisely backed away as the steel returned to her spine, something that the soldiers seemed to copy as they decided they had no need to remain on the battlefield any longer. As for Michaelis, he remained bent over with a hand to his cheek, his face in a state of shock. "Your sexism and condescension are not appreciated. I am not your child. I am not even officially your employee."

Straightening his back, Michaelis attempted to tower over her. "No, if you were my employee, you'd be fired for this catastrophe. You said you would handle this woman. Now we have corpses of yokai scattered all over Japan, a mysterious fortress that appeared out of nowhere and settled in on a nuclear disaster waiting to happen —"

"And the very son of Death about to wreak untold havoc and devastation on the world," she finished for him, brushing off his worries. "We're handling it. Point me to whoever is in charge here. Then pack up your things and go home."

That sent him reeling, but he would not step back. "You don't get to order me around. That's not how this works."

"Daiichi has set his sights on world domination. Japan is not the only battleground, only the first. And besides, you piss me off every time I'm forced to talk to you. Go home, Michaelis," she said, pointing one arm straight toward camp. And to her genuine surprise, he said nothing. With one last huff, he turned on his heel and actually stormed off. Jenny simply stood there in solitude, holding her ground. Sure she just dismissed one of the most powerful allies she'd developed in the last few years, but she simply couldn't afford Michaelis' death in this country. Before long, she took hold of Liu's arm, putting her weight on him again, and had him lead her back to his base of operations.

"Sesshomaru's rubbing off onto you, isn't he," Liu said under his breath with more than an ounce of pride to his voice.

Jenny bit a lip sheepishly. "I've been surrounded by death and violence for the last couple of days, most of which was supplied by Sesshomaru. I'm not in a good mood. Now take me to the food and catch me up on everything."

A growl rose in Sesshomaru's throat as he examined the wound on Fudo's hindquarters. The smell of Daiichi's venom permeated the air even this long after the encounter with the dark daiyokai. He ran his hand near the split skin, sensing the claws of his son tearing into this noble, loyal beast. This venom would not dissipate, not without a push, despite how well Fudo's dragon blood fought against the invasion. Sesshomaru closed his eyes and sent out a small wave of youki to disrupt and clear away the residual demonic energy found in Daiichi's venom.

"He's been quite the trooper," Rosario remarked, rubbing Fudo's nose. The beast seemed to wince in
a bit of pain, but he managed to hold still as Sesshomaru continued his work. "I can tell he's been hurting, but he doesn't like to make me worry, so he tries to hide it. Nothing the surgeons did worked on him."

He could certainly tell. Miraculously, their amateur attempts to heal a mythical creature did not end up permanently injuring the beast. Fudo seemed to relax slightly as the daiyokai's youki dug in deep to sweep away the venom. While Sesshomaru couldn't heal others, he certainly could put a stop to whatever prevented the dragon from healing himself. The dragon should have a fighting chance now. With a bit of a sigh, he lowered his clawed hand, satisfied that the venom would do no more damage.

Though most of her focus remained on her loyal steed, Rosario's attention seemed to divert every few seconds to the noises in the darkness. She had every reason to fear the creatures that could hide themselves within the night; despite Sesshomaru's impressive entrance, the other yokai would soon decide to restart the battle. "It's kind of nice you're on our side," she said to him. "Means we might actually survive the night. How far away do you think the next attack is?"

"It will not come." To him, only a few months had passed since he'd put up a warning barrier to those who would cause trouble in his kingdom. It might not have the same acreage as his former holdings, but he could make sure no more creatures interfered tonight. Closing his eyes and slowing his breathing, he focused on the massive pool of energy inside his being. He only needed a tiny percentage of it to flood the entire hillside with enough youki to keep all lesser creatures away, and make it rather difficult for stronger beings to enter the battlefield without setting off an alarm in his head.

A cool wave seemed to pass through Rosario's body, but she dismissed it as nothing more than a night breeze. Fudo could feel the power, but somehow felt quite comfortable in it. Understandable since he stood there as an ally, not an enemy. "I guess word's getting out not to mess with the great Sesshomaru," Rosario remarked.

"Quite possibly, they fear your name just as much," he replied.

To that, she shrugged. "I'm just a human."

"I am aware. But it was only a human who managed to prevent the entire annihilation of the people here against a foe she had little to no experience fighting with. Be proud of your accomplishments, for they will not be few."

A blush rose to her cheeks, and she kicked the dirt self-consciously. "I know Liu and I haven't known you for long, but we missed you, Sessh. And not just because you're scary and save our lives. You're actually one rad dude."

He might not have understood the compliment, but he felt a small twinge of pride in it. Though looking around at and smelling the carnage surrounding him, he felt a bit of doubt at his effectiveness as a protector. A short distance away, he watched a pair of soldiers cover a comrade's body with a white sheet, hiding away the gashes and gore a yokai had left behind. All over the grounds, this scene would play out another ten or twenty times. It seemed like Theda and Daiichi had taken hold of his world and shaken it violently before setting it back down upside down in his absence. Or was he to blame? After all, Theda only began to carry out her plan to free her son the instant she knew Sesshomaru still lived and had awoken.

"So, clothes are this way," Rosario said, gesturing towards camp.

Clothing suddenly felt superfluous and unimportant. Normally his youki would repair his kimono
when it got damaged in battle. All this man-made processed fabric had a resistance to his demonic energy, so he certainly would need to find replacements soon. But for the moment, Sesshomaru had other, more important, plans. Drawing Tenseiga, he replied, "I will find some later."

"Wait, so Daiichi is Theda's son?" Rosario said incredulously.

From behind a mouthful of ramen noodles, Jenny nodded her head.

"What idiot would be stupid enough to sleep with Death?" Liu asked, shaking his head. "Or was Daiichi formed like Diana? Sculpted out of clay, then given life by the gods — I could see that happening, actually. Would explain his wooden personality."

Jenny swallowed her half masticated noodles hard. "No, your first guess is right. That idiot would be Sesshomaru."

A stunned silence fell on the pair. Rosario paused while wrapping her boss's broken wrist. Liu simply dropped the stack of surveillance photographs and evidence he'd collected over the last couple of days, scattering them all over the mess hall table. Not that the mountains of food heaped on either side of her left much room for anything besides her arms, dishes and silverware. Jenny idly picked up one of the photographs to study it.

"We're so dead," Rosario moaned. "Why doesn't Theda just kill us now?"

"I've been wondering that myself." No fear infected Jenny's voice; simply bemused interest in the puzzle before her. The photographs Liu managed to collect and print off on a cheap laser printer showed little more than proof that Theda and Daiichi had holed up in the fortress to the east. "When I first met her, she told me she could freeze a heart if she so chose to. But even though we've seen plenty of death and destruction because of her meddling, she's always stayed in the sidelines. I have no evidence whatsoever that she has ever killed someone directly. At least not recently."

"Daiichi can kill, though, even if Theda can't," Liu remarked, remembering the adorable bird the dark daiyokai cut out of the sky on screen. "Maybe we can ask him. How do you say, 'Please just get it over with,' in Japanese?"

"Chōdo sore o norikoete kudasai." Sesshomaru dropped the tent flap of the mess hall as he approached his co-workers. Noting Rosario's and Liu's odd stares — probably not due to the pristine Japanese army officer's uniform he now wore — he lowered his head a bit as if to testify of the truth of Daiichi's parentage and Jenny's admission. "I would not recommend asking for death. The experience was not pleasant, and you will be sorely missed."

Touched, Rosario put a hand to her heart. "Awww…"

Jenny's eyes turned serious and hopeful as Sesshomaru stood by near their table, crossing his arms. "Anything?"

Subconsciously, he pressed a hand to Tenseiga's hilt, hoping to feel a hint of its thirst for resurrection. But like the last several hours in which he combed the battlefield, searching for a hint of the servants of the Underworld to slay, it remained silent. Regrettably, he had to shake his head. "Theda has been here. She has escorted every soul to the Afterlife in place of her servants. She will continue to do the same to more dead humans and yokai in order to build her son's army."

"So they're all dead," Liu concluded bitterly. "For good. Human and yokai alike."

Looking over these haggard humans, Sesshomaru felt a sense of disgust with what he saw. Instead of
the light and levity in Liu's countenance, he could only see pain, heartbreaking loss and tested patience. In the many hours that Rosario fought to protect Liu and the others from the attacks of the yokai, she earned so many wounds that blood already began to seep through the fresh bandages and into the new army uniform covering them. And Jenny sported dark circles under her eyes, sunken cheeks and shortened breath. All of this he could have prevented. Should have prevented. This bitter taste in his mouth could only come from one source: failure.

"Right. So," Jenny began with a sigh, attempting to reel her crew back in. "Any ideas besides dying?"

"I'm a fan of that one, actually," Rosario said, raising her hand. "I could use the rest."

The detective's face soured immediately. "Okay, I hope you're joking, but there is no way in Hell we're letting Daiichi reanimate you. And so help me, if you die, I am smacking your soul right back into you." Twirling more noodles onto her fork, she shoved a mouthful in and talked around them. "Liu, were you able to find any local Shinto priests or someone capable of performing a sealing spell?"

"Not the easiest thing to Google, but I found a few," he replied. "The best one I found was Higurashi Sōta, but he's in Tokyo. There are a few more that are closer, but …"

The diligent thief's voice drifted off as Sesshomaru's mind began to wander. He felt like a soldier watching tiny children play with a map while preparing to defeat a dragon. No matter how well they planned out a way to defeat Daiichi and Theda, they would end up eviscerated for their good intentions. For all their determination and ingenuity, the fact remained that Daiichi required an equal to defeat him, not a clever bunch of gnats. To fulfill his contract, he knew what needed doing.

Jenny's head perked up the instant Sesshomaru turned on his heel and headed for the exit. "Where are you going?" she asked suspiciously.

"I am recovered well enough," he replied. "I must go and face my son in battle. It's the only way —"

"You're not doing that," she snapped. "Daiichi and Theda are holed up in their castle waiting for a head-on attack from you. It's exactly what they expect."

"Then I must not disappoint."

Dropping everything to the table with a loud clatter, Jenny hopped off the bench and stormed after him. Liu wanted to follow, but Rosario grabbed his jacket and pulled him back down into his seat. "Egos, remember?" she said.

"The last time you were victorious against him, you had an army," Jenny pointed out.

"Only because he had his own. Now is the time to strike," he said, refusing to turn around.

Despite the fatigue riddling her body, she got ahead of him and planted her feet, forcing him to stop and look her in the eye. "You can't fight Daiichi alone, you can't fight Theda alone, the two of them working together are going to kill you."

His teeth locked shut as he attempted to quell his anger at having his strength brought into question. "I destroyed Theda —"

"Not before she got what she wanted and threw me into the Underworld."

"And therein lies the problem," he growled, narrowing his eyes. "I am distracted protecting you."
She flinched like he'd just punched her in the gut. Even Liu and Rosario leaned in to witness the smackdown, though they couldn't tell if Jenny with eyes burning with rage would deliver the most epic tongue lashing seen this side of the globe, or if Sesshomaru would coldly put her down in a position she hadn't seen in years, the losing one. "Oh," she started gingerly. "So, doing your job? And as I recall, I told you to let me die so Daiichi wouldn't be released in the first place because it was my own damn fault for getting caught in the first place!"

"A temporary lapse of judgment on my part, I assure you," he said, raising his voice only loud enough to drown hers out. With one hand, he brushed her aside and continued marching to the door. But Jenny would not relent, chasing after him at a distance. "If you leave, I am rescinding our agreement and keeping Ketsugō-kiba —"

"Then keep it," he snarled. "My father clearly intended to deliver it to a weak, defenseless human. If your sister does not require it, then you may as well wield it. I have no use for such a trinket."

She froze to the ground, stopping in her tracks. A thousand insults and arguments fought for dominance in her mind, but all these thoughts brought a weight crashing down on her shoulders, one she could barely keep up. "Is this a matter of pride for you or something?" When he refused to respond, she begged in a throaty voice with tears springing to her eyes, "Sesshomaru, please. They are going to gang up on you and kill you."

At the doorway, he stopped and turned back for a moment. "Do you have such little faith in me, woman?"

"Faith?" she said incredulously. "I am fucking terrified of Daiichi because he is your flesh and blood. The whole 'power of a god in his veins' thing I can handle."

"Then do you think me a creature of no honor?" To that question, she had no response. "My son and my former mate are my responsibility, not yours. I will see to it that they harm no one else."

Dropping the tent flap, his feet immediately lifted off the ground and he flew off toward the fortress. A moment later, Jenny fell to her knees, unable to break her gaze away from the doorway. With their greatest asset gone, Liu and Rosario came to their boss's side. "It'll be alright," Rosario said softly, barely able to believe his own words. "He's stubborn."

The detective shook her head. "It's a death trap. That's always what it is with Theda. And damn it, he knows that." Blinking twice, Jenny grabbed Liu's jacket sleeve. "Go get us a helicopter."

Despite the sudden flood of calculations and schemes running through his mind as to how to procure such a device without Michaelis' help, Liu raised an eyebrow in confusion at the request. "Are you planning on flying after him or something?"

She shook her head. "No, that will only get us killed. If Sesshomaru wants to die, that's on him." Swallowing hard, she finally broke her gaze from the empty doorway to glare at the thief. "Go do your job, Liu."
Steel Heart

A certain levity had taken hold of Theda's footsteps as she emerged from her chamber in a new kimono and with her hair pinned up expertly to show off her voluminous locks. With thick debris from a disintegrated ceiling, she couldn't exactly skip down the hallway, but that couldn't dampen her spirits or footsteps. For in the throne room, to her ever growing delight, blood and fur went flying as two monstrous-sized hounds tore at each other's skin with vicious claws and lethal fangs.

Clapping her hands together, Theda grinned like a kid at a circus. "Best. Day. Ever. Even better than the Inu no Taisho fighting Ryukotsuei, though I wish I had someone taking photos then." She quickly shrugged off the thought. It's not like she intended to take pictures on her phone herself.

Black and white fur tangled together so fiercely that an observant human might think a dalmatian the size of a fat woolly mammoth had up and decided to chase its tail until he ripped it off. Which considering the depth of the bite wounds on each opponent's limbs and tails, Theda could understand who one could make such a mistake.

The throne room, now technically an open air arena with a fancy chair at one end and a layer of limestone rubble all along the floor due to Sesshomaru's dramatic and explosive entrance, barely held together under the blows Daiichi and his father delivered to each other. Throwing the other against a wall, tearing at flesh with claws, ripping out chunks of fur and skin with savage teeth, spitting and dripping black venom and green poison from snarling mouths. No matter how vicious the two fought, stone mined from the Underworld would hold together far better than any rock found on Earth. At least, this is what Theda told herself as she ascended the dais to sit on her son's throne.

The old dog flew in with the prized experience of age and the anger of a pissed off god. Though Daiichi's full-sized dog form had the advantage of at least a full ton more of muscle mass than his father and a renewed vigor from freedom and fresh air, the white beast had managed to deal near lethal bites and strategically timed swipes of his expert claws. The blood that coated the court had the tang of poison infecting it. But Sesshomaru had not remained unscathed in this battle. Long gashes in his neck and flanks showed that Daiichi had learned a few new tricks. Fancy moves, however, would not outsmart Sesshomaru for long.

With a snarl, the white beast dodged Daiichi's fangs and lunged straight for his throat, latching on with horrific strength. Shaking his head back and forth viciously, he opened a gaping hole in the black beast's scruff and a pitiful shriek of pain. Blood sprayed across the room, painting the walls and a good bit of Theda's face in a red splatter pattern. Though Daiichi instinctively yelped and fought to free himself, Sesshomaru would not loosen his hold, dragging him further down to his level.

"Such is the price to pay for a satisfying victory," Theda remarked as she wiped a drop or two of blood sizzling with poison from her cheek. Only hours earlier, she'd counseled her son with similar words.

"Tell me how to defeat my father," he had demanded. A wise leader gains intelligence from the right sources and listens to wisdom, after all. "You know him better than anyone, including himself."

Theda, who would tear Hell open if her son demanded it, smiled at the compliment. "You must fight him in his full daiyokai form, as must you."

"But surely that will make him far stronger," Daiichi argued.

"Stronger. And dumb like a beast. As my son, you have the advantage of keeping your mental
faculties, and strength for strength, you may have a slight chance at defeating Sesshomaru-sama. If you were go up against his more intelligent form while he wields Bakusaiga, you will certainly lose."

"I have far more than a small chance of overpowering my father. I will defeat him. Soundly and entirely."

With a sweet smile, Theda placed a hand on his cheek. "Do not forget, there is always great sacrifice in victory. Always."

Taking her hand in his, Daiichi fixed her with a determined gaze. "None too great to restore your honor, Mother."

That gash in Daiichi’s throat looked rather unpleasant, Theda found herself thinking with only a slight hint of disinterest. True, she could interfere. Sesshomaru probably wouldn't see her bony spears coming at him from this angle, and he couldn't possibly hold off two attackers with their level of power. But she could never steal the privilege of feeling a complete win over the white dog from her son. He'd never speak to her again if she did that, after all. Besides, she had well placed faith.

Blood. His senses swam in it. He saw only red. He smelled iron and venom. He felt streams of the stuff pouring out of him, slipping up his foothold, spraying him in the face. With Daiichi's throat in Sesshomaru's maw, he could sense victory nearby. Just a little tighter. Just a little harder. He would make the dark one submit before he destroyed this pseudo-god. Deep within his heart, Sesshomaru's beast-like nature hungered for this victory and the power and honor and glory it would bring —

What honor is there in killing your own son? the more rational part of his mind whispered to him. There is none. There is no real victory. Do not revel in it.

The blood flowing over his teeth and tongue turned bitterly cold. The harder Sesshomaru clamped his jaws down on Daiichi’s neck, the more the blood seared his tongue as the venom ran down his throat. His mouth began to foam and froth from the toxicity, to the point that the muscles in his jaw went numb and threatened to spontaneously fail on him. Feeling his father's grip weakening, Daiichi renewed his efforts to pull away. Poison flowed out of Sesshomaru's fangs, but proved too little an effort too late.

In a flurry of strength and agility, Daiichi yanked himself free. For a moment, the two paused to reestablish their footing, examining the state of the other. The stone floor beneath them sizzled as venom and poison flooded the court. And off to the side, Sesshomaru could feel the giddiness oozing out of Theda. Like father and son had prepared this battle just for her amusement.

Seeing an opening in one of Daiichi's faltering steps, Sesshomaru lunged forward with bloodied teeth bared, intending to go for the kill. Only Daiichi's eyes glinted with a smug glee at the move. Darting nimbly to the side, the dark daiyokai went straight for the chink in his armor. Or rather, for the flesh and bone still healing in his father's chest.

A stabbing pain tore through Sesshomaru's chest as Daiichi's teeth sank into the barely patched together flesh and shattered a few massive ribs in his bite. Not a sound to hint at pain escaped his throat, but from the halting and failing state of his body, his son recognized that he'd delivered a fatal blow. Shaking his head, Daiichi heaved the white beast into the air and threw him into one of the few remaining walls.

Icy venom sank into his heart, sending it coursing through his body. Sesshomaru attempted to stand, but the effort proved too difficult in this beast form, and he collapsed under his own weight. With a wicked grin Daiichi slowly approached his father to deliver the killing strike.
Unable to keep this form, a burst of energy filled the room, briefly blinding Daiichi. A moment later, Sesshomaru stood with one hand to his chest, attempting to staunch the flow of blood, and the other wielding Bakusaiga. His limbs had already begun to freeze up like before, but a quick spark of youki allowed him to push it out of his system and hold his sword at the ready.

The black hound vanished in a puff of grey smoke, only for a dark-haired daiyokai in royal armor to come rushing forth, brandishing his own katana. Moving quickly, Sesshomaru unleashed a deadly green blast of energy, shattering the ground in his pathway. But with practiced grace, Daiichi leaped straight into the air, avoiding the worst of the blow. The disintegrating wave tore at his armor and cape, cutting his skin in the process, but ultimately the attack did nothing to slow him.

Another blast. Another wave of disintegration. Another missed shot. Poison whip struck out. Venom darts and bone spears filled the air. Lunging forward, Daiichi roared out with a battle cry and came bearing down on him with a venom tainted blade.

With barely enough time to block the attack, Sesshomaru rose Bakusaiga, letting it absorb the impact, and threw his opponent back a few steps. But Daiichi would not let anything stop him now. The blows came quick and precise, aimed directly for his weak points. And though he managed to keep blocking the strikes, even Daiichi could see the old beast slowing. Enough for finally one good opening to show through, allowing him to break Sesshomaru's hold on Bakusaiga and send him flying across the throne room floor.

Ringing echoed in his ears as he attempted to regain his footing. The whole place seemed to swim in his vision as he got to his knees. Whether the venom in his blood or the blows to his head had caused such disorientation, he couldn't say. Sesshomaru reached for Bakusaiga, only for a stiletto heeled shoe to come down on him with a venom tainted blade.

Above him, Theda had a face like a cat who caught the canary and intended to pluck out its feathers and wings one by one before eating it. With her other foot, she casually kicked his shoulder, putting him fully onto his back. "Oh my dear Sesshomaru," she purred. "I think you may, in fact, have suffered a defeat. I told myself I wouldn't do the villainous monologue, but I feel like it wouldn't be fair to leave you in the dark. Oh who am I kidding? I've been dying to tell you."

Daiichi struggled to get to his feet. The preponderance of gashes all across his body made the process rather difficult, but finally steadied himself to take a stand beside the Goddess of Death. "Get on with it, Mother."

"Oh hush. You've won. Let me savor this just a bit." Crouching down, she picked Bakusaiga up from the floor, casually turning the blade over in her hand. "The Inu no Taisho put me in a difficult spot. He stole my heart — literally. Not in the pleasant figurative way — which removed my ability to kill and change my mind. I nearly had it back in my grasp the day he died, but Tōtōsai stole it from me. Then who should I find in possession of my heart but the Great Lord Sesshomaru, powerful above all in the land save the gods alone."

With a brief malicious glance towards the defeated daiyokai, she turned to face Daiichi before kneeling and presenting him with Bakusaiga. Her head bowed properly, he grasped the hilt and lifted the sword into the air, pausing to examine the light reflecting off the blade. "This is the only inheritance I could possibly desire from a defeated Lord with no kingdom. It's almost shameful to wield, but ..." He spun on his heel, ignoring the pain coursing through his body, and released a decomposing wave at the far wall. A bright green flash of energy rushed through the court before consuming the limestone and shattering it easily. As the shaking of the weakened throne room settled down, he slid the sword into his obi. "Thank you, Mother," he said. "Now finish your task."

Nodding humbly, her hands returned to Sesshomaru's belt as she reached for the hilt of Tenseiga and
yanked it free, sheath and all. Growling, Sesshomaru attempted to slice her arm off, but with a quick stomp of his foot, Daiichi pinned his other arm to the ground before putting the blade of Bakusaiga to his throat. "Don't you touch her," he said through his teeth.

Slowly, deliberately, savoring the feeling, Theda drew Tenseiga from its sheath. Once free, she held it aloft, examining the glint of the steel in the sunlight before she sat down, straddling Sesshomaru's chest. "When you came to me, completely heartbroken and shattered by Rin choosing another human over you, I had you. I couldn't kill you; I knew that for certain. But what I could do was make you fall in love with me and give me a child. It's a nightmare to think about it, isn't it? What the offspring of Death and the Killing Perfection is capable of." Her eyes, filled with the love and pride of a mother, flicked up at Daiichi who stood despite the rivers of blood flowing down his robes. "Is he not awe inspiring? It pains me to know that you will not live to witness our son's reign on this earth."

"You have your heart back," he said impatiently. "Stand aside so I can finish this."

"Wait! I want him to see this." The tip of Tenseiga hovered above her chest, held there with a grip as steady as cool steel. One hand cradling the tsuba, the other balancing the enchanted steel on her fingers. Then tightening her grip abruptly, she rammed the blade directly into her sternum. Blood sprayed from the hole she created, but no sound emerged from her lips. Oddly, the sword did not emerge on the other side. Again and again, she drove Tenseiga down further until the a final thrust settled the hilt on her breast and the blade had disappeared entirely.

In that instant, a surge of energy, the enormity of which Sesshomaru had never before felt in his life, exploded through the room. The electrified air seemed to steal the very breath from his lungs while freezing his heart. It seemed Daiichi felt it too as he shuddered and collapsed under the weight of this wave after wave of terrible malice and despair riddled burst.

It took ages before this outpouring of energy and power began to abate, and even then both daiyokai in the fortress could barely open their eyes under its weight. Soon, Daiichi managed to get back to his hands and knees, and Sesshomaru restarted his effort to throw Theda off him. But he absolutely could not move. Her body weighed down on him like a massive block of lead. Furthermore, he could sense a distinct beat echoing through the room. Much like that of a heartbeat.

Pulling both hands away from her sternum, Theda revealed a completely intact chest and a single dog's tooth lying in her palm. Tenseiga, from its blade to its hilt, was no more. That absence alone put a pain in his chest that overpowered the injuries and venom in his blood.

"You can feel it, can't you," Theda said. Her face shone with the pure joy of a child on Christmas day. "I am complete. Your father thought he could conquer Death. And he saw you, Sesshomaru, as a leader of the creatures of this world and the next, heralding an era of peace to all. But that left me as the enemy of all life, relegated to the shadows with no place of honor."

Daiichi snatched the fang from her hand, then clenched it tightly in his fist. Squeezing with all his might, it only took a moment before he opened his hand again and let the resulting white powder, fine as ash, fall from his fingers onto the ground below. With that simple gesture, he destroyed the last remaining heirloom Daiichi could possibly have of his family, specifically from his grandfather. "Without Tenseiga, you are no more than an ordinary daiyokai trapped in this life or the other for half of eternity. Under my rule, this world will fear and worship Death. The way it should be."

Giving Sesshomaru a parting cold kiss on his cheek, Theda stood, humming with the new power inside her. Taking her place, she stood before Daiichi with a bowed head. "The Goddess of Death is at your command. Claim your inheritance, my son."
The dark daiyokai's eyes went black as his lips curled slightly and his grip tightened on Bakusaiga's hilt. "Gladly," he growled.

In the fraction of a second before Daiichi turned Bakusaiga against its progenitor, Sesshomaru, barely able to breath and light headed with blood loss, heard a voice. Jenny's voice. It must have been a memory. For the record, she said, I'm grateful you at least tried to protect me.

Almost like a distinctive, defensive maneuver, he heard his own voice reply: I'm not dead yet, woman.

A green flash of energy. A roar of decomposition. A powerful, hungry look in Theda's eyes. The calm assurance of victory in Daiichi's. And then light.

"Oh bloody — How does he do that?"

Waving away some dust hanging around in the air, Theda frowned at the enormous hole left in the side of the throne room. Though mostly the complete absence of a daiyokai body angered her more.

"Is he dead?" Daiichi demanded, scanning the area with all his senses, hoping to find some evidence of his father's passing.

"No," Theda replied. "He escaped."

"Coward," he spat. Taking in another sniff of the air, he glared at the forest below. "I cannot smell him."

"He's probably shielded by that light-bubble he flew away in. Hasn't used that trick in a while."

Daiichi remained silent, putting his concentration towards better uses of his energy. First to expel the poison his father had injected into him. Then to wake the dead. All around the fortress, bodies of yokai and humans began to stir. "You promised me an army, Mother."

"Every last mythological creature around the world just felt my heart returning to me. They will awake soon enough. Within a day, the humans will slaughter them out of fear. Your army will be here soon."

Still, her answer could not appease him. His eyes would not venture away from the forest where the light-bubble had torn through and buried itself deep in the shadows. If his father wanted to hide, he would stay hidden. Unless he had some reason to be drawn out… "I have an idea."
Adrenaline Junkie

It turns out that helicopters don't fly near as high as Jenny needed. Also, Liu can apparently steal any vehicle in existence. (Minus one stubborn hippie van that needed an extra kick from Rosario before it would get going.) That includes one little Cessna with enough room for a pilot, co-pilot and a passenger. He made sure that before he took his spot in the co-pilot's seat, that he had a parachute strapped to his back. Because Rosario, apparently, knows how to fly airplanes as well as she knows how to fly dragons.

Giving Liu some measure of relief, Fudo decided to tag along, following the little aircraft. Gazing out the window, Jenny could tell he still must feel some pain since he struggled to keep up with the slow plane, a marked setback compared to when the creature first met them. But no amount of persuading could have kept him on the ground. All things considered, though, he'd recovered a great deal since Sesshomaru banished Daiichi's poison.

Looking down through a haze of clouds, she spotted the fortress atop the defunct power plant. Even from this altitude, the effects and damage of a battle between supernatural overpowered opponents stood in stark contrast to the forests and hills surrounding it. Flashing bursts of light and energy, exploding stonework and roars that shook the air for miles threatened to tear every living thing apart if it stood too close, even the airplane actively flying away from it. Jenny bit her lip trying not to think about Sesshomaru's likely fate. Despite his ability to back up his egotistical boasts, she couldn't help wonder how she could have changed his mind.

A particularly bad flash of energy sent a ripple throughout the sky shaking the plane a bit more than other bursts. This particular one caused a painful shiver to pass through Jenny's spine, catching the notice of the co-pilot.

"You alright, boss-lady?" Liu asked with concern in his voice.

She swallowed back bile threatening to rise in her throat. "It's nothing," she lied.

"I'm not seeing anything, boss," Rosario reported. "You sure this is where we're supposed to go?"

"You need to go higher." She tore her eyes from the battle quickly shrinking from view to examine the sky and their whereabouts.

"He carried you all the way up here?" Liu said incredulously. "How did you breath?"

With a sigh, Jenny stood up to look out the front windshield. "When it comes to explaining things that happen to me when I'm around Sesshomaru, I'm finding myself shrugging at a frustratingly frequent rate."

The Cessna climbed higher, passing through a cloud bank. And suddenly, like breaking through a forest to find a hidden kingdom, before them appeared a massive Japanese castle resting in the clouds. Rosario's widening eyes expressed what surprise she could without alarming the co-pilot, who had taken it upon himself to grip his seat and brace for impact.

"Watch out for —"

"I see it!" Turning the wheel sharply, she narrowly avoided colliding with the tallest building, and swung the plane around to fly by again. "Right, OK, perfect. Where do we park this thing?"

By the time they managed to leave a few trenches in the courtyard thanks to the landing gear and
some harsh braking, and put the flying death machine down on inexplicably solid ground, Liu had only thrown up a total of twice — half as many times as he did during the drive from Osaka to Tokyo. All things considered: progress!

All her flights with Sesshomaru had left Jenny feeling rather unfazed by the entire landing, so she hurried to unlatch the door and throw it open. Before climbing out, she threw Rosario a parachute. "Might want to keep that on hand in case things go hairy."

"Aren't you putting one on?" she said as she pulled it on.

"Only two parachutes. Besides …" She zipped her jacket right up to her chin. "I don't think Theda threw me into the Underworld actually thinking I would die. Despite all this mess, I stand by what I said earlier. Theda likes me too much to let me die just yet."

Fudo landed soon after the trio exited the aircraft, crushing the one remaining intact topiary. Jenny patted his nose before leading the way up to the castle, stepping over rotting crow carcases. The little conflict between Sesshomaru and Theda had not magically cleaned itself up in the last few days.

The shock of actually landing on a solid surface 30,000 feet in the air took a while for Rosario and Liu to overcome before they could hurry and catch up with their boss. "Is this Sesshomaru's place?" Liu asked, noting the banners emblazoned with a crescent moon symbol.

"It belongs to his mother. We need to find her as soon as possible."

"And then what?"

"Wake her up before Theda does. Split up."

Jenny bit her lip, nodding at the sleeping body of a white-haired female daiyokai lying before her. "Yup. That is … that's exactly who we're looking for. And within ten minutes. Good job, Liu."

A goofy grin couldn't help but cross his face. "I just asked myself, 'If I were a super-powerful daiyokai, where would I go if I was feeling sleepy?' Sessh never uses his bedroom, so I thought, why wouldn't she be in the library?"

Even with her expertise and having free reign to explore the castle, Jenny hadn't found any trace of the Western Lady on her own when Sesshomaru brought her before. But she kept Liu on the payroll for a reason. "You could find a gold needle in a haystack, couldn't you."

"Wouldn't be the first time. Should we take care of that?" he asked, pointing to the bloody gash on the woman's left arm.

It seemed that 500 years ago when every mythical creature fell into a deep sleep, the Western Lady had a few scrolls out, set them down at a table, and knelt down to read them. Halfway through a romantic story between two doomed lovers, she put her head down on the table and closed her eyes for the last time. Not forever, though. She still had a rise and fall in her chest, barely seen under her white and purple kimono. A thin layer of dust coating her kimono and dark blue, fur lined outer wrap showed how nothing had disturbed her in the last half millennium. Nothing but someone who had come by to cut her arm open.

Jenny knelt at the Western Lady's side and took her shoulders to lay her down. Only she found that the woman would not budge. Not out of rigor mortis. Simply muscle mass. Even Liu, who stepped in to attempt to help push her over, couldn't make her move. Finally the both of them gave up and decided to go the easier route. "Rosario?" Jenny radioed.
"Yes boss?" On the other end, metal and wood rattled as she set down something carefully.

"Get out of the armory. You don't need more toys."

"Says you. Did I tell you about the spider demon I chopped in half?"

Rubbing her temple, Jenny sighed. "Just ... get over here quickly, please. This woman is very heavy."

"Wuss," she snorted. "Be there in a second."

In the meantime, Liu ripped some fabric off her kimono and began wrapping her bloodied arm. Over the last few days, she'd lost quite a bit of blood, soaking one side of her kimono completely. Despite her body working to close up and heal the deep wound, a small stream still leaked through. "Why would anyone do this to her?" he muttered.

"Theda did it," Jenny said emotionlessly. "She wanted to draw Sesshomaru here, then trick him into searching for her in the Underworld. But since she can't kill, I knew she would have left his mother here."

"So is she supposed to help us or something?"

"Depends on if we can wake her up without Theda."

Rosario soon appeared with Fudo in tow, carrying an unfamiliar katana. Jenny and Liu wisely chose not to ask about the new stash of weapons and armor resting on the dragon's back. He couldn't fit through the door, so he simply stuck his head in and sniffed around the room full of ancient scrolls.

Stretching her arms first, Rosario took the Western Lady by her shoulders and with a bit of a heave, pulled her back to lie her down on the ground. "You were not kidding," she said breathlessly as she straightened out her legs to a position more dignified.

Jenny couldn't help but brush the dust off the woman's face and her silvery-white hair out of her eyes. Every bit of this creature reminded her of Sesshomaru, though she had her own unique qualities. She seemed colder, perhaps more animal-like than her son did. Though she also looked every bit the noble and royal blood that Sesshomaru claimed to own.

A massive _thud_ that shook the entire complex, rattling the floors and knocking paintings and scrolls off the walls, interrupted Jenny's examination of the daiyokai. And instantly the troupe went on alert. She had her suspicions, but she turned her eye on Rosario and Fudo. "Daiichi or one of his puppets, probably. We'll want to move her as soon as possible. Both of you, step back please." She slipped a syringe out of her pocket, which she uncapped with her teeth.

The dragon and his rider already dropped their extraneous weight and prepped weapons and fiery breath in anticipation of an opponent before Liu even started to back out of the room. "What is that?"

"Adrenaline. If we're lucky, it will work the same as youki or whatever energy it is that Theda uses. And knowing what Sesshomaru was like when he woke up..." She shooed them a little further out into the hall.

Ideally she would inject the adrenaline into the daiyokai's heart directly. But bullets seemed to bounce off Sesshomaru, so she doubted a tiny needle could get through her sternum. Instead, she slid the needle under the bandages on her left arm and into the broken skin before pressing down the plunger.
Another thud shook the floors, setting everyone on edge. They'd call it an earthquake, except the castle wasn't on earth. It felt like someone with a temper and far more power than any one being ought to possess, stamping his foot, trying to shatter the foundation of the whole complex. And this particular tremor felt closer than the first.

The air seemed to drain from the room. Taking a closer look at Sesshomaru's mother, Jenny noticed a deeper rise and fall in her chest. But not fast enough to think she might have regained consciousness yet. At least not entirely. Rosario anxiously stepped back into the room. "Let's start moving her. I can drop her if she gets agitated."

But Jenny shook her head. "Too risky. We don't know what —"

The woman's eyes shot open. And in a flash of motion, her clawed hand latched around the detective's throat and yanked her face to hers, eyes red, fangs bared. For a second, the pain in her arm distracted her. When her focus shifted to examining what had happened to her arm, Jenny managed to pry herself free from her loosening grip. The instant her back hit the ground, she began scooting backwards and out of her immediate reach.

Drawing her sword, Rosario rushed into the library. But with a swat of her hand, the Western Lady sent out an energy whip that threw her backwards into the wall. She might not have had the requisite strength, but she got to her feet and prepared to tear the threat to shreds. Before she could turn on the dragon clearly about to spit out a fireball at her, Jenny grabbed her dress, pulling her back.

"My lady, we come as representatives of Sesshomaru-sama!"

The name gave her a bit of pause, enough for Rosario to get back to her feet. Quite deliberately, she set the sword down on the floor and backed away from the confused daiyokai. Sesshomaru's mother spun around, tearing her fur pelt out of Jenny's hands. Baring her fangs, she snarled at the detective. "I have never smelled your kind before. You are assassins sent by Izanami."

"Your highness, we are enemies of Izanami and her son, Daiichi."

Another thud landed even closer to them, and a more violent tremor rippled through the building, rocking the Western Lady off her feet. She might have fallen to her knees, but the cold atmosphere penetrating the library and the red blazing in her eyes meant she still posed more of a threat than an annoyed Sesshomaru ever did. "What did you do to me, human?"

Steeling her spine, Jenny got to her knees and crawled slowly towards the ever increasingly agitated daiyokai. With her head bowed, she offered her her hand. The Western Lady grabbed her arm, squeezing tight enough to cause pain, and brought it to her nose. Jenny bit her lip, trying not to show pain on her face. Inhaling deeply, she studied the scent embedded deeply not just in the detective's jacket, but in her skin.

The ice in the air melted a fraction of a degree. Sesshomaru's mother dragged her even closer to put her nose next to her neck and in her hair, taking in even more of her son's scent. Several long moments passed before she dropped her to the ground and declared, "You stink of dog."

"Thank you, my lady." Jenny got back to her knees. "I want to explain everything, but there is no time."

"Where is my son?" she demanded.

"We will take you to him if you will let us. But you must do so now."

Almost as if on cue, Liu stepped into the library and offered her his hand. Intrigued by his courtesy,
she took it, letting him help her to her feet and lead her to Fudo. Rather than make her feel weak or injured, he simply treated her like a royal lady as he helped her take a seat in the makeshift saddle on Fudo's back.

"This is the other reason why we keep him around, isn't it?" Rosario remarked as she collected her sword.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Jenny got to her feet. "Eso, y el dinero."

"Ah, sí."

Lumbering toward the courtyard, Fudo moved as quickly as he could by foot. That left Liu, Rosario and Jenny running to keep up with him. "So at what point do we tell her that we don't know what happened to Sesshomaru?" Liu asked between puffed breaths.

"If he's still alive, she's probably the only one who can find him," Jenny replied.

As they turned the corner, the sight of a burning wreckage of an airplane stopped them in their tracks. A piece of fuselage flying straight for them might have had something to do with them stopping, too. Skidding to a stop, Fudo darted to the left and raced towards the other side of the castle. Standing amidst the remains of their Cessna, Daiichi lifted a piece of a wing, preparing to throw it after them.

Rosario unsheathed a second katana and made to charge right at him, but Jenny caught her arm and pulled back. "He doesn't want to play with you. Come on, Fudo's our ride now."

They ran. They raced with every last bit of strength they had left. And then they pushed themselves harder. Burning lungs. Burning legs. Burning old wounds. And each of them knew that running from Daiichi would prove futile.

It seemed like he wanted to play with mice and their giant winged puppy. Without breaking a sweat, he appeared just ahead of them on the other end of the complex, forcing them to abruptly turn towards the gardens.

Fudo's steps slowed enough that Liu could scramble up his tail and climb up. Rosario got up next, as gracefully as a practiced jockey. Her hand reached out for Jenny. "I've got you!"

Despite her best efforts, Jenny simply couldn't seem to grab Rosario's hand. She might as well have tried keeping up with and jumping into a moving train. Just as she barely managed to touch her fingertips, Daiichi reappeared, forcing Fudo to skid backwards and turn around.

But he didn't pursue the dragon. He didn't even have to say a word or puff out his chest or bare his fangs. He and Jenny simply made eye contact, and she slowed her steps until she stopped in her tracks.

"Boss!" Liu shouted in a panic when she stopped following them. "What are you doing? Come on! Hurry!"

Calculations raced through her head as she bent over, catching her breath. Fudo could barely fly up this high unburdened. With four passengers, one rather heavy, he'd never manage to escape from the dark daiyokai if he gave chase. And seeing as how his gaze never broke from her, he'd found what he wanted, and nothing would keep him from taking her. "Go on without me," she replied. "I'll distract him."

"We're not leaving you —"
A soft punch in his gut quieted him immediately, allowing Rosario to keep him from escaping Fudo's back. "Good luck boss." With a heel in the dragon's ribs, she sent him over the edge of the railing and had them sailing down to the ground below.

He took his time, making one deliberate step after another, in going after his prey. By the time Daiichi eventually approached Jenny, the lot had gotten far enough away that she felt fairly certain that they would successfully escape any attack from up above.

For someone who must have won a battle with Sesshomaru, he certainly looked torn up from head to toe, blood, broken bones and gashes everywhere. But he still towered over her with a cold, arrogant air. Her face paled visibly when she saw Bakusaiga in his obi.

"That's not yours," she said.

"To the victor go the spoils." His face wrinkled as he came close enough to inhale her scent. "That includes his pets."

Slowly rising to her feet, Jenny locked her gaze on Theda's dark eyes. She couldn't quite place just what felt so wrong about her smug grin. Or the glint in her teeth. Or the extra six inches tall she'd grown overnight. She squared her shoulders, clenched her fists, and straightened her spine. "Where is Sesshomaru? What have you done with him?"

With a malicious grin, the goddess stood from her seat next to the throne. One blink later, and she materialized at the detective's side. "My son has dropped you at my feet as a token of his victory over his father. And the first words out of your mouth, you dare speak my husband's name?"

"Former mate." The correction slipped out of her lips before she could stop the thought. An icy breeze hit the back of her neck as Daiichi gave her a nasty glare on his way up the steps to his throne. Goosebumps prickled her skin, but she refused to show any sign of weakness to the dark daiyokai and his mother.

Theda smirked as she rolled her eyes. "The two of you must have grown so close in the Underworld. Certainly smells like it. And he did rush off rather hastily in order to protect you. Pity it did no good."

Jenny carefully swallowed back a lump in her throat, careful to keep her face completely neutral. Though she could not still her beating heart over the recurring thought that mother and son needed her for some purpose. "Hn," she replied. "So he's not dead."

If Daiichi's glare could melt steel beams before, it certainly could set asbestos alight now. His clawed hands dug into the armrests of his throne, cracking the stone. Sensing her son's rage, Theda's face lost all hint of amusement. "How perceptive, detective."

"I suppose you'll torture me now to draw Sesshomaru back so your son can kill him."

"No." Daiichi's voice rumbled through the whole court, rattling the debris scattered across the floor. His gaze then turned to Theda. "Mother. Practice."

Jenny never thought that shock could ever cross Theda's face. But nope. There it was. But as soon as it appeared, she smothered it with a smile. "Couldn't I practice on the Western Lady instead? I actually like having her around — "

"Mother."
He needed to speak no other words. "I guess I can't keep all my toys," she said as her hand snapped out and latched around Jenny's throat, nearly cutting off her air supply. "But come to think of it, you are rather annoying and frustrating."

Instinctively, Jenny grabbed Theda's wrist as she began dragging her backwards through the debris. "What are you doing? Theda, stop it! What are you doing? You can't do this!" she shrieked. But her struggling proved vain as Theda thrust her over a broken window ledge, dangling her over a 1,000 meter drop to a concrete pavement below. Leaning so far backwards that she could see the sea, Jenny struggled to keep her feet on solid ground. "Sesshomaru still has Tenseiga. He'll just bring me back to life."

"Oh. That old thing?" she grinned. "Not anymore."

All at once, the realization of the meaning of everything bore down on her. This new look in Theda's eyes, it meant she got what she wanted all along. Sesshomaru didn't just lose to Daiichi; he created a whole new weapon his son could wield with reckless abandon. And every notion Jenny once had about the goddess of Death … well she could throw those out the window.

Looking back up at Theda, only then did Jenny let defeat into her eyes. "Well … shit."

"Oh detective. You have no idea." And with that self-satisfied smirk, practically licking the taste of canary off her lips, the woman in black, the goddess of Death, released her hold. Leaning out the window, Theda watched as Jenny's limbs flailed, a short scream instinctively escaped her lungs, and she hit the ground with a bone-shattering thud. The puddle of red blooming from her cracked skull reported back what she already knew.

Theda can kill again.
"Found him!"

Liu's bellowing rang through Sesshomaru's ears and echoed around his skull. Not helping any were the cave walls which made his voice reverberate repeatedly. Grumbling in annoyance, he tried to turn over and cover up his ears so he could go back to sleep. 'Tried' being the operative word. Despite the orders sent from his brain to the rest of his damaged body, his limbs simply would not follow his commands. Unperturbed by this turn of events, Sesshomaru simply attempted to ignore the noise and slip back into the mindless oblivion he'd tried to avoid ever since he first awoke after sleeping for half a millenium. It seemed a long enough period of time to sleep after one battle. Following his failure to defeat Daiichi, he might as well attempt to beat that record.

But Liu had other plans. With a shrill whistle, he summoned help. Notably, Rosario.

"Mierda, he looks dead," she said as she crawled into the cave. Coming to a crouch next to him, she poked the daiyokai in the face. A couple of times. Razor sharp teeth and jaws like a steel bear trap should have snapped the offending digit off. Instead … nothing. Absolutely no response to this humiliation.

"He's not dead. Sesshomaru can't die," Liu replied. His tone sounded considerably less assured than his words. "He's just sleeping. With his eyes open."

Rosario waved her hand in front of his face. "You sure?"

"He's not. Dead." Now he just sounded desperate. And his pacing in the cave didn't help change that impression. "We have to wake him up before —"

"Where is my son?" That voice. Full of steel bladed wrath and an iron clad arrogance. It had been years since he heard it, but Sesshomaru could never forget who it belonged to.

Rolling her eyes, Rosario scoffed at the approaching daiyokai. "Why couldn't she just stay with the car?"

"Dragon."

"Whatever."

"There's a pretty substantial difference between a car and a dragon that you trained."

"Lay off it, Liu."

The air in the cave grew enormously quiet as the Western Lady approached her son. Standing before him, right in his unblinking line of sight, she sniffed at the appearance of so much blood. Blood that had yet to stop spilling from so many of his wounds. "Sesshomaru. Is this how you greet your mother?"

Whether she intended to or not, he couldn't tell, but a hurricane of youki circling her head shot out in cold bursts at random through the cave. One or two hit him directly in the chest, blasting away the venom hardening his veins. It hurt, as any youki naturally would flying offhand from a being as powerful as the Western Lady. But with that pain came the ability to move.

Sitting up, Sesshomaru pulled his grimacing face into more of a scowl. "Why are you here, mother?"
"Told you he wasn't dead," Rosario said, jabbing Liu's knee with an elbow. "Daiichi kicked your
ass, didn't he. Should have listened to the boss."

If Sesshomaru hadn't pushed her aside so as to get to his feet, his mother certainly would have.
"These humans found me in my home and awoke me," she explained. "I assume they belong to
you."

"Of a sort. They prove more irritating than useful much of the time."

A smile crossed his mother's face. "Don't they always. There was a third pet, one with fair hair. She
put something in me. I'm not sure I like it."

"That was Jenny. She's not a pet." The gashes and cuts in his legs and torso screamed in protest as he
attempted to navigate his way out of the cave. But he simply had a need to move, to leave. In
passing, he somewhat recognized the cobwebs and particular rock structures and one annoyingly
low-hanging stone beam. During his flight to escape Bakusaiga's decomposing wave, his body
seemed to have instinctively carried him to the very cave that he woke up in a few months ago.

With the grace of a dancer, she followed after her son, perfectly avoiding any cobwebs or speck of
dirt that would have desired to cling to her. Her eyes glittered with mirth and the sort of knowing a
mother has when she catches her son being less than truthful with her. "Not a pet. I understand. She
wouldn't happen to be the reason you are in this … state. Would she?"

He paused, his jaw clenching hard. It hurt a few of the loose molars to squeeze it so tight. Turning,
he gave his mother a cold look. "I am responsible for my own actions."

She returned his look with a sickeningly kind smile of her own. It dripped with disdain and disbelief.
"Of course. Do you also take responsibility for those of your son? From what your pet — excuse me
— from what Jenny told me, it seems that you still battle Daiichi. Almost reminds me of your father."

This line of questioning, he did not feel like continuing. Attempting to walk down the side of the
mountain proved a more arduous task than he would have liked. His wounds were healing
somewhat, but not anywhere near fast enough to facilitate his escape from his mother's questions.
And he certainly didn't have the energy to explain the events of the last few months. "Do you
remember when father defeated the Goddess of Death in battle?"

"Vaguely, though it was my idea to forge her heart into something useful. Like my Meido Stone. And
of course your father decided to merge it with Tenseiga soon after Tessaiga cast it off. It seemed the
perfect compliment to the Meidō Zangetsuha." Her eyes glanced towards the empty sheaths at his
side. Even in his pained state, the signs of their weight on his soul stood out in stark detail to her
eyes. But as she opened her mouth to remark on Tenseiga's and Bakusaiga's absence, she noticed a
weight missing from around her neck. The fur pelt she carried over her shoulders seemed to bristle
with anger. "Where is my Meido Stone?"

Before he could explain that his former mate had stolen it, Liu's worried shouting broke through his
concentration. "Sesshomaru, wait!" he called as he attempted to hurry down the mountainside. Even
in his injured state, he moved further and faster than he realized. "Where are you going?"

Fudo's head perked up at him seeing Sesshomaru alive, and his tail began to sway happily. And it
was then that he stopped in his tracks, realizing that he didn't know how to answer Liu's question. It
seemed perfectly natural to him a few moments ago to seek out the one person he knew who could
make sense of this whole mess. Maybe even put things right. At the very least, provide him some
solace from probing souls.
But with his mother on his heel, he couldn't quite admit that his instinctive response to the discomfort of pain and interrogation was to turn to the companionship of a human woman. When exactly did that become his first instinct? "I am simply in search of some much needed silence," he replied rather pointedly.

Sliding down one of the steeper parts of the hill, Rosario caught up to him. "Look, we have to talk to you about —"

"Where is Jenny?" His patience wore thin, and from a cursory scan of the area, he found no sign of her existence. "Did she assume she could replace me with my own mother? The woman refuses to lift a sword in defence —"

"Daiichi took her," Rosario finally snapped. "Carried her off to his castle."

The world seemed to spin.

"Why would he do that?" Liu asked him. His fists shook with an impotent fear and fury. But he remained calm as he approached Sesshomaru. "He shouldn't give a damn about her. Just you. But he came after us only so he could take the boss lady. Why?"

Thoughts and emotions boiled inside his bloodstream as he absorbed the full effect of Liu's words. If Daiichi has Jenny, he will use her to draw his father out of hiding. And the detective will suffer indescribably for it. Instincts rose in an attempt to choke off this particular train rational thought in favor of baser desires. Hunt. Kill. Retrieve. Protect. MINE.

This possessiveness flooded his brain. Over the last several weeks, this feeling had grown at a disconcerting rate. But he always told himself that the only reason he could possibly feel this animal need to protect the detective — Jenny — was because he intended to fulfill a contract. But at this moment, that damned sword didn't cross his mind for a second, and he didn't give a shit that their earlier spat made their agreement null and void. He wanted her back. Teeth bared, a growl rising in his throat, he would fly back to the fortress to tear Daiichi apart for his treachery —

If only his body had been willing to cooperate.

Practically curled in a bloody ball, shredded clothes barely covering him, a mass of matted white fur over his shoulder, the daiyokai simply could not find the physical capacity to fly. Or stand. Or move. The thief and his unnaturally strong accomplice were at his side in a blink of an eye, helping him to sit up straight and begin covering his wounds. Rosario and Liu would forgive this moment of weakness.

His mother would not.

Seeing as how she wouldn't be getting a reasonable explanation for, well, anything going on, she gave a little sigh. "I haven't eaten in ages. I'm going for a hunt."

Relief should have filled him when he watched his mother abandon him for the time being. But for the moment, too many other emotions held precedence. Not the least among them was guilt. It shone through his eyes no matter how hard he tried to hold it back. Fortunately, Rosario felt no need to tease him about it, and Liu tactfully pretended it didn't exist. And Fudo helpfully sidled up behind him, providing Sesshomaru a place to lean his bruised back against.

Given a moment to breathe and process new information, he realized that he could not wait to heal. If he were to save Jenny, he had to confront Daiichi as quickly as possible. But how to do that when he had Bakusaiga and Theda had her heart back...
"I need a sword," Sesshomaru stated as a matter of fact.

"I've got one you can borrow," Rosario replied. Without even hesitating, she began to detach the scabbard of one katana from her belt.

"While I appreciate the gesture," he said as he put a hand on hers, "I need one made with more than mere metal."

Liu's ears perked up. "A magic sword?"

"More or less. Nothing will compare to Bakusaiga, but I will need to find a way to defend against it."

"Kind of like … Ketsugō-kiba?" His old greedy grin was back, lighting his face.

Yes. Exactly like Ketsugō-kiba. But Sesshomaru shook his head. "With Jenny gone, I won't be able to find it. Not unless … Did she tell either of you where she hid it?"

"No," Rosario said, "but Liu can find anything. Found you when even your mother couldn't sniff you out. Found your mother when Jenny couldn't. Hell, he even knows where the boss lives." She gave him a 'friendly' jab in the ribs. "Won't admit it, though. She probably just plugs herself into the wall in the office to recharge."

Rubbing his bruised ribs, Liu threw her a dirty look. "I enjoy keeping my balls firmly attached to my body, thank you very much. We were with Jenny when she flew back home to New York, and she didn't have anything sword sized on the plane. So Ketsugō-kiba has to be here in Japan."

"But I searched everywhere. My senses are far stronger than yours and if she had hidden it in this land, I would have found it." Sesshomaru's patience began to slip away as frustration bled through his exterior.

"Not necessarily. Jenny hides things in places that she knows you won't look."

"She knew nothing about me. I attacked her with Bakusaiga, she fled, and by the time I found her again, threatening to feed her her own entrails, she had already hidden Ketsugō-kiba."

Blinking in surprise, Rosario shook her head. "Wait, what?"

"So why did you attack her?" Liu asked, ignoring her.

The answer came crashing down on him all at once. In that brief meeting, Jenny learned all she needed to about the Great Slumbering Lord Sesshomaru. He called her a grave robber. And from those words alone, she realized he valued that grave more than anything she held in her hands.

Pressing again, Liu asked, "Where would you never choose to look for Ketsugō-kiba?"

He pushed himself off the ground and back onto his feet. His steps were shaky, but his path was sure. "That clever little … She must have known that even if I discovered where she hid the sword, I wouldn't dare touch it."

Except now he was desperate.

Seeing as how InuYasha never inhabited his own grave, Sesshomaru figured that the insolent hanyou probably didn't mind the hands and claws digging dirt away. Jenny had already done the hard part and loosened up all the dirt a few months ago. But a damaged daiyokai, two humans and soon, thankfully, a dragon didn't exactly have an easy time getting the soil back out of the hole.
Again.

"So," Rosario said, catching her breath. Dirt clung to every square inch of her skin and sweat plastered her sleek black hair to her head. "Who is this InuYasha guy?"

Sesshomaru didn't pause despite his entire body telling him he needed to rest and focus on healing his wounds. "He was my brother. My half-brother. He died in battle, protecting me from Daiichi's attack."

"Oh, okay." Her head nodded for a moment as her exhausted brain processed this information. "Wait, so what does this have to do with Jenny's sister?"

Liu paused, squatting next to the hole. He'd long since abandoned his shirt and tied back his hair with a scrap of cloth torn off his jacket. "No one said anything about Jackie."

"Jenny disappears when she's following something involving her sister. You said so yourself before we flew to Tokyo."

"Lay off it, Rosario."

On a better day, Sesshomaru would have kindly asked the two to stop bickering. Though to be perfectly honest, his method would simply have been to glare at them until they shut up. Just as effective. But since his skin was still trying to pull itself back together, bones attempting to mend, he simply didn't have the energy to do anything more than to try to mentally filter the noises. Focus on the scrape of claws against earth, the ever growing noise of beasts and creatures gathering a few miles away around Daiichi's fortress, the gentle rush of wind cooling the sweat dripping off of the lot of them, the hum of energy coming from Ketsugō-kiba which grew the further down they dug.

A woman's shriek of panic, infused with genuine terror.

Sesshomaru's back straightened the instant his ears picked up the faint sound and his hands left the dirt. Almost immediately, Rosario and Liu snapped their mouths shut and paid attention to his battle-ready state. Standing rigid and tall, he strained to hear anything at all. Anything besides the sick crack! of a body hitting pavement that soon followed. But there were no more

"Sesshomaru?" Rosario said hesitantly. "What is it?"

He didn't have much in the way of wind to work from, but soon, the breeze carried the scent to his nostrils.

Jenny's blood.

Liu could read him. Not quite as well as the detective could, but he could still understand why the daiyokai's eyes turned crimson red. Why the blood staining his ragged clothes visibly faded into nothingness. Why he pushed Fudo out of the way like the dragon weighed nothing, only so he could fall to his knees and tear the earth away. Why the air around them felt electrified with a power that neither he or Rosario could see. So much so that Sesshomaru practically bathed in green light.

"She's dead. Isn't she." His face pale, he could scarcely believe he had the strength to utter those words himself.

"No!" More digging. Less idle chatter. She can't be, she can't be, she can't be — "Jenny. Is. Not. Dead." Why? Because there is no Tenseiga to save her. Because he didn't even have the chance. It's not fair, Daiichi should have given him at least the faintest glimmer of hope of saving her before slaughtering her before him. Like he did to Kohaku. And Jakken. And Ah-Un.
His claws hit a substance like rock, but it crumbled a bit too easily in his hands. Hurriedly brushing aside dirt, he uncovered something resembling a box with a sizeable hole in the middle. Plunging his hand inside, he reached for the sword. It was so close he could feel its presence in his bones. And then, curling his fingers around lacquered wood, he took hold of a katana's scabbard and brought it forth from the grave. Cordovan sheath with the sword's name emblazoned in kanji. Blood red tsuba. Black wrappings around the hilt. He only saw it with his own eyes but the one instance, but he knew this katana.

*Ketsugō-kiba*

Grasping the hilt, Sesshomaru drew the sword. The black blade, which probably hadn't seen proper use or the light of day in nearly 500 years, seemed to vibrate with a need to act. The same energy that once enveloped and protected Jenny from his Bakusaiga now belonged to him. It seemed to flow through and surround him to the point that he felt perfectly alive once more. So much so that he raised his newly acquired sword and released a primal roar to be heard by every man, woman and creature within a hundred miles.

Liu's hands covered his ears as he stared in wonder at the daiyokai before him. Where once a broken and battered creature once crouched in the earth, now a being of power stood before them. "Holy…" he muttered.

Rosario's head turned sideways examining him. "Where? There aren't any holes anymore."

No gashes. No broken bones. No bruises. Not a speck of blood staining his clothes or fur pelt. Not a tear anywhere on his purloined uniform. Not a single hair out of place or wrinkle of exhaustion on his face. Wielding Ketsugō-kiba, Sesshomaru stepped out of his brother's grave perfectly whole. He turned to the humans with an expression of pure confidence and determination. And, yes, a bit possessive of the woman he considered his to protect.

"Come. We must retrieve Jenny."
A rumbling roar of thunder woke her from a deep sleep.

She couldn't remember falling asleep … exactly … But it made sense that she would be. She pulled a thin blanket over her shoulder and pressed her head deeper into a flat pillow still cold and wet from her recently showered hair.

"My fault," a girl quietly sobbed. "I'm so sorry, this is all my fault."

This … This isn't quite right.

Jenny opened her eyes as another flash of lightning lit up the night sky. She recognized this room somewhat. From the squeaky springs of the mattress to the hotel branded pens with dried up ink on the particle board desk. Looking down at her clothes, she saw not the black leather-like armor covering her body from clavicle to toe, but a simple pair of jeans and a baby-blue knock off Doctor Who t-shirt.

The sobbing came from the corner of the room where a rickety chair sat. In it was Jackie, her face buried in her hands and her long red hair an absolute wreck. "I promised," she moaned. "I promised to take care of you."

"Have you not?"

Jackie's head snapped up, her face red and tear-stained. "Obviously not! You're dead!"

Unperturbed by this revelation, Jenny glanced around the place. "If this is Hell, I'm unimpressed."

"No, it's just a memory. For about a week or so, newly dead spirits live on the edge of the Underworld and relive important events in their lives before they begin to move on." Jackie wove her fingers through her hair and grabbed hard. For a moment, Jenny thought she would yank out a couple handfuls of red locks. "I was supposed to stop something like this from happening to you."

"You had no idea that Theda was going to throw me out a window?" A flash of memory crossed her vision. She pushed it aside before any fear or panic could take hold.

"None. I swear."

"I'm not blaming you, Jackie. I'm just surprised is all. Come here." Jenny gestured for her sister to come sit next to her on the bed. Hanging her head in shame, Jackie did just that, coming over to seat herself a good six inches away. But Jenny would have none of that. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders and pulled her in tight, squeezing hard to exude all the love stopped up inside her for the last five years. "You know I've missed you, right?"

Hesitantly, Jackie returned the gesture. Despite the age difference that had to exist between the two souls, Jackie felt little. She felt like a younger sister again. How her heart ached for that relationship. "I've missed you too. I just … I feel horrible every time I wish you were here with me because I don't want you to die. But now you're dead —"

"Let's focus on other things. For instance…” Jenny pulled back so she could look around the room a bit more. "Do you know why I was brought here in particular?"

Sniffing, Jackie wiped a few tears away from under her eyes. "It's the Forget-me-nots that create this
place. Why? What is this room to you? Is it happy or sad?"

"A bit terrifying, actually." She glanced towards the bedside table and spotted Ketsugō-kība lying there. "It's the day I met Sesshomaru."

At the mention of his name, the storm turned from angry to violently vengeful. The door shook on its hinges and the window nearly shattered under the force of a hurricane gale. Jackie scooted away from it, but Jenny's face remained as impassive as a spring morning. "Sounds like he's trying to kill you."

"He wanted to. But I know now he never would." Jenny climbed off the bed and slowly approached the rattling door. "I'm perfectly safe. As safe as I ever will be."

With a burst of wind that tore through the night like a sword strike flung from a tornado, the door burst open, snapping to pieces like a balsa wood plane. A shadowy mass stood in the doorway. Before Jenny could reflect on how little this blob resembled Sesshomaru, a figure of a hand shot out, connecting with her chest. It grabbed hold of her heart and pulled —


With a desperate gasp like a newborn taking its first breath, Jenny inhaled two lungfuls of sea air, arching her back and coughing out stale oxygen. A red puddle shone on the pavement around where her head had lain. Her body felt rattled inside her skin. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out her cell phone, only to find it shattered and unable to turn on. So she tossed it aside, letting it tumble across the hot cement pavement. The impact certainly did a number to her. And yet she didn't feel pain.

Sitting up, she ran a hand along the back of her head, feeling wet blood matting her hair and an intact skull under her scalp. Perfectly healed and alive, it would seem.

"It worked!"

Twisting around, Jenny found Theda kneeling on the ground behind her. The Goddess of Death was known to have pale skin, but in this light, at least in this moment, she looked sickly with a sheen of sweat coating her brow and a green pallor in her face. Her chest heaved in a vain attempt to catch her breath. Her hair had even lost some of its luster. In all, she looked weak.

"You murdered me," Jenny said simply.

"And then brought you back to life." Despite her frail state, Theda had a grin on her face. "It's been so long, I thought I forgot how."

The breeze off the ocean attempted to chill her bones. But Jenny did not relish the thought of letting the wind tangle her hair. And so, with little effort and not a speck of pain in a body that should have been shattered, she pushed herself to her feet and began to walk.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"To look around."

The power plant certainly had size and scope on its side. Then to add onto that, an imposing fortress nestled on top of the whole thing. Definitely stunk of arrogance and self-importance. Problem is that it takes for freaking ever to walk from one corner to another. But the walking felt good. A pounding heart, feet aching from unsupportive boots and a growling, hungry stomach simply meant she had air
in her lungs.

The sky was overcast. But not with clouds. With a land swarming with monsters, mythical creatures, demons and the like, similar beings should have flooded the air. But a crow, black as storm clouds and as large as a hurricane, hung over the fortress. Its red eyes swept over the land, watching it with the care of a sentry.

"The Morrigu," Jenny remarked aloud. "What is a god from Ireland doing in Japan?"

Using an abandoned overturned truck, she climbed up to the roof of a nearby shed to look over the area surrounding Daiichi's fortress.

The place looked like an anthill. So many bodies and creatures swarmed the land and climbed up the walls and stood at parapets and windows that she could barely see a stone under their feet or the grass between their bodies. Yokai of every kind stood in formation, protecting the fortress. Broken, shredded to pieces and limbs barely clinging together, yes, but perfectly silent, obedient and orderly. Should anything want to get to Daiichi, they had a thick army to get through first. And from the looks of it, the flanks were only growing, surrounding the fortress walls.

Further off in the distance, the forest still screamed with activity. Without context, it would seem that hundreds of birds had come to the decision to migrate to this very battlefront for the fall. But if one looked closer, they would notice humanoid faces, anthropomorphized animals with intelligent eyes, distorted bodies and thousands of claws deadlier than any human weapon.

"It's a beautiful sight, isn't it."

Jenny barely saw the glint of a long-bladed knife an instant before Theda clapped a hand over her mouth and slit her throat from ear to ear. The pain didn't even register. Only a sudden lack of air, blood filling her lungs, and the ground slamming into her body.

"I enjoy the view at least. See you in a bit, detective."

Sesshomaru's nose twitched as faint notes of hot coppery blood hit him. His fur pelt bristled, but otherwise he showed no hint of a reaction outwardly. As much as he hated to admit it, he had other things to worry about.

"I think that one might be Ares. Unless he's Mars?" Liu lifted his phone to compare a Wikipedia picture to one of the hundreds of larger-than-life beings gathering in the forest.

"Badb, Mixcoatl, Chi You, Anhur, Sekhmet, Durga, Bishamonten…"

"You know these guys?" Rosario asked. She seemed to stay close to Sesshomaru, a sword at the ready in her hand. Fudo stood nearby, completely on edge with the number of beings surrounding them.

He nodded once. "Father was a general. I grew up hearing stories about the war gods, or meeting them when they would deign to visit the castle. They are the fiercest, deadliest beings to ever exist in this realm." Coming from a being like Sesshomaru, this sentence held a significance that made his human companions stick all the closer to him and treat the crowd with a bit more reverence.

"So…" Liu said, "why are they all just chatting?"

For a veritable army of war gods and goddesses, the lot of them seemed to be on friendly terms. A giant armored Chinese war god had fallen into an entertaining conversation with a dark haired, olive
skinned woman with far, far too many arms and a curved sword for each hand. Another being, with a headress and pauldrons made from the feathers of a flying serpent and armor festooned with precious stones, told a raucous tale to other warriors decked out in their respective home country's armor. Greek, Hindu, Mayan, Korean, Egyptian. They looked a motley crew, but had the same taste for blood on their tongues.

"Probably trying to catch up," Rosario guessed with a shrug. "It's been a long 500 years."

"But they were all asleep."

She put her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest. "A warrior never sleeps, Liu."

"I have caught you passed out on more than one occasion from hitting the tequila a bit too hard," he muttered in reply.

It was then that the wind changed. Sesshomaru might have blamed the war gods for it if he hadn't smelled someone familiar. He looked up in time to watch four or five winged figures descending from the sky to gather in the forest clearing. Armed to the teeth, they looked ready for a fight. But as soon as they hit the ground, wide smiles crossed their faces as they found yet another friend or old acquaintance to talk to.

Following them in a blue and violet kimono was none other than his mother. She alighted gracefully on the ground before her son with a knowing smile and blood between her teeth. Despite her smug expression, he showed no sign of surprise or wonder at her arrival with more war deities. "It's fascinating, isn't it?" she asked.

He frowned in confusion. "What is?"

"The greatest army ever assembled, and it will never taste battle." The grin on her face told just how amused she felt about the whole situation. "Each god knows that as soon as he or she volunteers to lead the charge, someone else will challenge their right to the claim. So the most skilled and vicious warriors this world will ever see simply pass the time with meaningless chatter."

Sesshomaru let out a snort. Not because he didn't believe his mother's assessment, but because he did. "We shall see," he replied. Then turning to Rosario, he lowered his voice. "Take Fudo and scout ahead. Report to Liu what you find about Daiichi's fortress and army. Stay out of sight."

"Yes sir," she said, leaving his side to mount her dragon.

As for the gods before him … He drew Ketsugō-kiba and headed for some patch of higher ground. If they wanted a volunteer commander, they would have one.

The place smelled of blood and bleach. Jenny backed up towards a wall, away from the rumbling growl of a red-eyed beast hidden by the shadows. The arena door had locked shut, the feathered serpent unleashed, and the detective awaited her doom with bated breath.

"What the hell are you doing back here?"

Jackie's arrival gave the cement and stone arena a bit of warmth and light. Though Jenny could have done without the furious glare. "Theda brought me back to life. Then slit my throat."

"She killed you again?" She grabbed her sister's shoulders and held on tight. "Why?"

Jenny bit her lip as she pondered the thought. In the back of her mind, she could hear herself
screaming and crying. But she couldn't allow herself to focus on that fear. Not yet. "Daiichi told her to practice. I thought that meant she would kill as many people and creatures as she could. But I think I'm her only subject."

"She's..." Horror overcame her features as the realization dawned on her. "Fuck this is bad."

"I thought so too." It's not often that Jenny agreed with her sister. But when facing the prospect of repeatedly dying and coming back to life, she had no other choice. "How did you do it? All those years jumping off cliffs and running face first into bullets. How did you learn to be okay with dying?"

Jackie shook her head. "The time machine would always pull me out before I actually died. If Theda is repeatedly slaughtering you ... Jenny, I'm sorry, this is so much worse than what I went through. I don't have any frame of reference to help you."

Her mouth set in a grim line, she chewed on the inside of her lip, trying to come up with a plan.

The beast slithered into the light. Sharpened fangs glinted off fluorescent lights, venom dripped from his mouth, and a name vibrated through the arena like a rattlesnake shaking its tail. *Kukulkan*... Its tongue darted out, tasting her fear in the air. And he slid closer, foot by foot.

Always the sensible one, Jackie began to back away, pulling her sister with her. "Shouldn't we run from him?"

But Jenny looked right back into the flying serpent god's eyes with not a hint of hesitation. "No. Sesshomaru is coming to protect me. I don't have any reason to be afraid. Angry, yes, but not afraid." Her brows furrowed in frustration as she wished, again, that he would just appear and stop hanging around the edges of her memory. If only, if only, if only she could just slip a message through one of the many cracks in the Underworld and deliver it to him.

"Be nice if your hero would get here sooner," Jackie mumbled. "Otherwise I'll have to take care of this guy again. I wish I could just kick Theda's butt myself, but there's something about her that drives all ghosts away in a half-mile diameter."

Just as half an idea formed in Jenny's mind, the flying serpent god shifted. His hissing turned into a rushing of air, and his coat of feathers and scales morphed into a cloud of smoke with red eyes and a hand reaching out for the detective. Jenny took hold of her sister. Never would she ever take this feeling for granted again. "Is there any way for you to deliver a message to Sesshomaru? Like appear to him in a vision or something?"

"I can't," Jackie said. She wanted to avoid this smoky figure too, and so pulled her to the door of the arena. As she broke open the lock with her bare hands, she explained, "In order to appear on the mortal plane, a ghost has to be tied to significant things or people from their life, and I didn't form an attachment to anything he's carrying. And we both know what would happen if I popped up anywhere near — what's her name?"

"Rosario. Yeah, let's avoid that." A plan began to form in her mind. "What about Ketsugō-kiba? Are you tied enough to it?"

A grin filled her face. "Oh yeah! I can totally use that."

With the door swinging wide open, the two of them dashed into the hallway. The cloud chased after them, that one hand stretching out long. Jenny knew her time in the Underworld was just about out. "Hopefully Sesshomaru will be nearby, so make as much noise as you can. Bring him to you. And
Jackie, don't —"

The hand hit her in the back, grabbing hold of her heart. An instant later, it ripped her off her feet and yanked her away.

"That doesn't look like it worked."

Sesshomaru batted Liu's hand away from his rather battered and bruised face. Didn't need him poking him, after all. "How could you tell?"

"Well you're on the ground for one…"

He pushed himself back to his feet and brushed the dirt off his suit and fur pelt. "Takemikazuchi is a bit particular about his commanding officer, I'll admit."

"Maybe stop getting in pointless fights with beings whose trust you're trying to earn?" Liu, though shaken by the literally earth-shattering conflict he'd watched a few moments earlier, couldn't help but tease the daiyokai for his inability to wrangle this army to his will. "Would you like to hear my idea?"

Gla ring, he shot the thief a cold look. "I will figure something out."

And he probably would have if someone hadn't suddenly screamed his name loud enough to shatter bones and coagulate blood.

"Sesshomaru!"

Let it be known that Sesshomaru did not jump. Goosebumps might have risen on his flesh and his hand might have flown to his sword, anticipating a need to save the woman who cried out for him. Especially since it sounded like Jenny in distress. Turning, he found the source. Bright eyed, bushy tailed and a bit transparent, Jacqueline Harkness stood proud and admittedly short before the great daiyokai. With a sheepish and apologetic look on her face. "Oops. Sorry. Jenny said you hadn't found the sword."

His usual frown returning to his features, he crossed his arms and examined the ghost. But it was Liu who scrambled desperately back to his feet with a look of astonishment and hope in his face. "Jackie, where's Jenny?"

Now it's not entirely known for certain if ghosts are capable of blushing. They don't have blood in their veins, or even veins to begin with. But it seemed to Sesshomaru that as Jackie caught his eye, and then the rest of him, her cheeks turned a bit rosy. "She's … alive. Currently. But with Theda, so she needs your help."

"We're working on it," Liu replied reassuringly. Knowing his boss was alive filled him with a measure of relief. Though it would have been nice to know she was safe too.

Jackie shook her head. "You have to do more than work on it, Liu. Jenny's not in a good place."

"I will have an army of war gods presently," Sesshomaru said with more confidence than he deserved at the moment. "We will get her back."

"You better. I've got eyes on Daiichi's forces. Better than what you will get. I'll be back to deliver more information soon. Keep an eye out."
Then she flickered away into nothingness. Gone as quickly as she had appeared.

The frown wouldn't leave Sesshomaru's face. Something just felt off about this whole ghost thing. Jackie talked more last time they met. Or less. Or was more specific and useful. Or less on the nose. Whatever it was, he hoped that by the next time she showed up, he'd figure out what Jackie was hiding. In any case, they still had an army to lead.

Seeing Jackie's ghost had wiped any trace of humor out of Liu. But not enough to forget their earlier conversation. "Are you ready to hear my idea yet?" he asked.

Sesshomaru gave a noncommittal, "Hn," in response.


Jenny stood before a bulletin board with a million things going through her mind. Mostly along the lines of where and when and how? All questions, very few answers. An absence of answers. No answers.

Emerging from the shadows, Jackie looked over Jenny's shoulder at the mess of thoughts made physical. "What's all this?"

"You're missing," she explained. "I can't find you. I keep looking and asking and searching and I can't find you. No one can."

Jackie plucked off a newspaper clipping detailing the search efforts of the community. "Y'all really wanted to find me, didn't you. What's important about this day? Is it the day I came home?"

"No." Slipping her marker behind her ear, Jenny grabbed the bulletin board and ripped it off the wall, sending it crashing to the floor with papers and pins flying everywhere. The original version of this scene probably included a more emotional display on Jenny's part — tears and screaming and all that. But this time around, she performed the motion with clinical precision as if rehearsed thousands of times. "This is the day I realized I had failed. Either you were dead — which, oddly enough, is what happened — or you had been taken by human traffickers that were smart enough to leave no trail whatsoever."

"Which ironically also happened."

With her Sharpie in hand, Jenny began to draw the rough outline of a fortress. "Did you find Sesshomaru?"

"Yep," she cheerfully reported.

"It's a pity he didn't find Ketsugō-kiba on his own, but —"

"No he totally did. He was carrying it when I appeared. And he says he's going to have an army too."

Jenny's eyebrows shot up in pleasant surprise and a wide, proud smile took over her face despite her efforts to suppress it. "That is one smart dog. Well, better start memorizing. We have a war to fight."
If daiyokai had as weak teeth as humans, Sesshomaru would have ground his to a pulp hours ago. Frustration, anxiety, impatience, dread … At the end of all things, he certainly would have an excellent idea of what it feels like to life in a human's head. All these emotions at this rate couldn't possibly help his well-being or extend his life.

"Breathe…" Liu reminded him. "You're not helping anyone if you pass out."

"Do not lecture me," he snapped. "I am quite aware of the gravity of the situation." Barely half an hour had passed since he last smelled Jenny's blood and heard a muffled scream. While these weighed heavily on his mind, it was the silence that truly dragged his soul down.

Looking around at the crowd of war deities beginning to grow impatient with idle conversation, Liu gave him a knowing look. "Do you think they are?"

He shook his head. "I have tried explaining a thousand times. They do not care about my 'squabble' with my son. Nor do they believe that the Goddess of Death has amassed as much strength as I claim."

"You still don't have an army?" With a marked absence of explosions or fanfare, Jackie appeared at his side with a glare in her eyes just for him. "Do you have any idea what Theda's doing to —" She shut her mouth before she could really rip into him. "Whatever. Daichi's building his army from the dead soldiers and yokai scattered all over the world, and it is big."

"Rosario already told us that," Liu interrupted. "She's giving us an overhead visual of his forces."

The fiery red hair on her head seemed to twist and grow like a flame, alluding to the fury building under her translucent skin. "Did you know that his south flank is weak?" she snapped, her hands in fists and her teeth clenched. "Or that he's keeping a part of his army concealed in the ocean? Or that he's stolen a crap-load of grenades and other fun explodey things?"

"How do you know all this?" the daiyokai patiently asked with an even tone that suppressed his urge to shake the truth out of her.

"Jenny told me. She's got a great view from the fortress. Figures she might as well try to help you where she can. Are you going to save her or not?"

His steely glare intensified. Even when dead, Jackie's bravado began fading slightly, the barest hint of fear manifesting as her feet shivering in her boots. Sesshomaru took a step closer, towering over the raging ghost. "According to you, she's with Theda. But I know that Theda's very presence expels spirits such as yourself. That means you can't get anywhere near Jenny. How do you know all this?"

Jackie's spirit seemed to dim and shrink under the presence and power of Sesshomaru, despite the fact that his voice never raised from anything more than an intense conversational volume. Everyone around noticed. Though the gods and mythical creatures had already given them a wide berth, they took a collective step back. Liu alone stayed put, standing firmly at Sesshomaru's right hand. But even he noticed the chill and tension in the air. "Jenny," she said, swallowing, "has been making some unscheduled trips to the Underworld."

His nostrils flared. His fists clenched hard. His eyes filled with red. "With or without the Meido Stone?" he asked, carefully emphasizing each word.
Planting her feet, Jackie finally looked him in the eye, though every other sign of courage she’d born before had fled. She took a deep breath. "When Theda took back her heart, she wanted to know if she could kill with her own hands again. And more important, if she could bring people back from the dead. More than once. Unlike Tenseiga, Theda doesn’t have limits. So she’s been … practicing on Jenny," she finished in a whisper.

Like a spark that swells into an inferno, Sesshomaru's whole body burst with rage and power. The hair on his head and the fur over his shoulder raised like hackles on a dog's back as his face twisted into a snarl. A deep, furious growl tore through the earth, shaking the ground noticeably. His fists clenched, dripping with a green poison, and his eyes blazed red, and yet he hadn't moved an inch. The youki that flared and swarmed around his being sent every living thing within a mile radius scrambling for cover, and despite being dead, Jackie panicked and fled for her life out of fear that Sesshomaru might possess the capability to erase spirits through the sheer force of his anger alone. The gods surrounding him not only took notice of his state, but struggled to keep from bowing low to the ground under the weight of his fury.

Yet Liu stood firm in place. Putting a hand on Sesshomaru's shoulder, he pulled the daiyokai's attention to himself. For all the damage the daiyokai's released youki did to the vegetation around them, not one cut or blow landed on the thief. "Boss lady says to go to the south," he said calmly, though with effort. "I think we need to listen to her."

Sesshomaru tore his shoulder away from Liu's grasp. "I will not abandon her to the tortures Theda is putting her through!" he snarled. "I must protect her."

"Jenny's literally dying to give you this information. You want to make her sacrifice worthless?"

"I want her back!"

His roar threw the thief off his feet and shook the forest. But more important, it rang through the ears of every last god and deity waiting for a leader to take them to war. A blinding burst of youki flooded the forest, knocking branches off trees, sending small wildlife scattering for miles around, and alerting everyone too far to listen that war had been declared.

When the light quieted and the area settled down, Liu stared at the daiyokai in confusion. He wore a white kimono and hakama with blood red details on the sleeves, black lotus petal armor and boots, and spiked shoulder pauldron. The very warrior he had first met those few months ago stood before him.

After pausing to catch his breath, Liu rolled over and stood back up. A mischievous grin appeared on his face for some reason. "Then what are you waiting for? Let's go get her back."

It was then that Sesshomaru looked to his left, to his right, then spun around to look all around him. Standing in a semblance of formation, hundreds upon hundreds of gods and deities of war stood ready for battle. Even on the edges of the army, he spotted his mother with a bloodlust in her eyes. They heard his cry, and they listened. They looked to the one who would lead them to war, and to victory.

A familiar rush quickened the beat of his heart. His eyes and brain immediately sought for strategies. His feet begged to race off to tear out the throats of his enemies, and lead his new army to do the same. As he clutched his sword, a red energy filled and surrounded him.

"So, where would you like me?" Liu asked, feeling a bit out of place. After all, he stood only half as tall as the average god, and had no real military training.
"Rally the humans," Sesshomaru replied. "And then get creative."

"Got it. Rosario? I need a ride."

As Liu slipped through the crowd, the gods gathered around their new leader. Without a word, their march began. They smelled the tang of decaying flesh on the air not too far off. With Sesshomaru at their head, they drew talons, swords, clubs, all manner of weapons and sharpened teeth.

Breaking through the treeline before Daiichi’s forces, they sounded a war cry and tore through the first flesh their fingers could find.

It felt like breaking through water and gasping for air. Every single time. Her head ached and swam. Her lungs burned with reintroduced oxygen. Her whole body felt covered with the stabs of pins and needles.

Theda didn’t look all that bad; just like she was winded from a long sprint. Jenny found her bent over, panting for breath a few yards away. Every time she came back to life, the goddess looked horrifically exhausted, but less so each time.

"Is it really that tiring strangling me?"

"Oh no, not at all. That part’s easy. It’s the …" She paused to catch her breath. "It’s the bringing you back to life that kind of wipes me out."

Jenny raised an eyebrow. "My apologies."

Sometime between murdering and subsequently resurrecting Jenny, Theda had moved her into the fortress into something resembling a bedroom in a high tower. At least that’s what Jenny could only assume due to the wind drifting through the windows and the fact that the dusty and unfurnished room had the round shape of a tower to it. She stumbled to the window, quickly orienting herself with the position of the sun, and scanned the armies below.

Seemed that the silent prelude to battle had ended. The forest had come alive with motion. Even the trees had moved forward to attack. Massive creatures emerged from it’s depths to take on the undead yokai surrounding the fortress. And these ones had a strength and a bite to them that even Jenny could feel from her vantage point.

It seemed at first that the forces clashing against Daiichi’s army hit a wall of sand that wouldn’t break. The battle line stayed stationary, growing fiercer and bloodier. Neither side would relent an inch of ground to the other.

But then a red flash of light burst out right in the center of the battle. Then a second and a third flash. Jenny squinted hard to get more detail, but it was too far away. Despite this, a smirk crossed her face because she knew: Sesshomaru wielded Ketsugō-kiba. It shielded him in this fight from outside attacks, allowing him to make a bit of progress. Then the red flash abruptly shot out in a wave that tore through the ranks, and the attacking force surged forward.

This new army had a few aerial fighters who swooped down and dropped massive trees and rocks and snatched up an undead yokai or two to drop them into the sea. But it was the dragon that caught her eye. He unleashed infernos upon the undead creatures, but his focus was kept on the trees that provided them cover. As he swooped low, the woman riding upon his back lashed out with dual swords to slice down any that would try to stop them. Jenny smiled as Rosario cut off the head of a scorpion-type demon. "That's my girl."
And she would have continued to study the battle if Daiichi hadn't so rudely interrupted her, storming up to her at the window, grabbing hold of her hair and yanking her backwards off her feet to drag her back to his mother.

"I told you to practice," he snarled as he threw her to the ground with a bit more force than was necessary. She could barely move as it was.

Theda managed to get to her feet. Which considering her emaciated state, had to be a feat. "I have. There are only so many ways I can kill someone wearing a perfectly bulletproof suit short of drowning her."

"So stop her heart."

Jenny didn't think Theda's face could get any whiter, but it did just that. "But — But I just barely figured out this resurrection thing. I don't have the strength to —"

"Do it." With a (as Jenny later put it, frankly overly dramatic and not unlike a supervillainous) flick of his cape, he stalked off toward the door. "Sesshomaru survived and has a new sword. I'm holding you in reserve until I need you, and I don't want to be disappointed when I do."

"Wait!" Reaching out to grasp his cape, the battered detective knelt at his feet and looked up at him. "Please, just let me talk to your father. I can convince him to surrender, and you'll have your victory with minimal bloodshed."

He tore his cape out of her feeble fingers. "If the feathered serpents don't tear him to shreds, I'm sure I can find something else to finish the job. Please be sure to scream loud enough for him to hear."

The door slammed shut and Theda sighed. "I'm truly sorry about this, detective."

"If you were sorry," she replied, "you wouldn't kill me at all."

"You don't understand. He's my son. I have to do what makes him happy." She stretched out her hand in Jenny's direction and squeezed it into a fist.

A sharp pain hit her right in the chest. She gasped in shock, but no scream would come from her lungs. The harder Theda squeezed her fist, the more Jenny's heart stabbed her with pain. The blood in her body turned still, cold and starved of oxygen to the point that her head swam and limbs tingled. Dizziness and darkness overcame her vision and she fell back, collapsing to the ground. Her breath came in short gasps. Try as she might, she could not move.

"I'm sorry, detective," Theda said, panting, as consciousness agonizingly slowly began to slip away from her victim. "Next time will be faster, I promise."

Jenny woke up screaming.

Dark. Cold. Wet. Lying on stone. A chain wrapped around her ankle. A buzzing white noise with 'Alice' slipped between the cracks filled her ears. No friends, no end to the night, no escape from whatever impending fate lay before her.

But rushing through the blackness came Jackie, glowing faintly with an orange light and warmth. She raced through the cave, forming the only source of light in this Godforsaken place. Falling to the ground, she wrapped her arms around Jenny's shoulders, trying to calm her. "It's okay! It's okay! I'm here. I'm always here. I'm not going to let anything happen to you."
For some reason, despite her wanting comfort from her sister, her eyes grew cold and her fingers dug into Jackie's arms like claws before throwing her away into the wall of the cave. "You are useless," she snarled before pulling her knees up to her chest.

The words cut deep into her heart, but Jackie refused to be hurt by them. After all, she knew from personal experience that a person being tortured will say all sorts of things they don't mean. Crouching near her, she gently brushed hair out of her eyes. "I'm … I'm trying. Believe me, I'm doing everything I can."

"Theda has bludgeoned my head in, sliced my neck clean through with a garrote, and shoved my own gun down my throat. And now she doesn't even have to touch me. She can just stop my heart with nothing but a thought. There is nothing you can do to fix this."

"Sesshomaru can, though," Jackie replied softly. "He's coming. He's got an army."

"Daiichi's boxing him in." Wiping away tears, Jenny attempted to regain her composure. Logic and reasoning took over her brain, pushing out fear of dying in dark caves. "He's letting Sesshomaru punch through his forces so he can surround his army, kill the gods and use them as reinforcements. And he needs to watch out for Kukulkan and Quetzalcoatl."

Nodding as she listened, Jackie absorbed the details that needed to be passed along. "I'll tell him."

"Tell him now."

Jackie's spirit glowed with the strength that comes from 5,000 years of aging. Jenny did not. And Jackie knew quite well how Jenny felt about being left in the dark deep underground. "I'm not leaving you here alone."

Jenny tugged at the chain locking her to the rock floor. Just like the first time around, it didn't budge. "I survived this once. I can survive the memory again. Go help Sesshomaru."


When torn to shreds enough, these undead creatures could fight no more. Or perhaps Daiichi saw no need to keep controlling unrepairable soldiers. But the instant Ketsugō-kiba touched any one of these yokai, the control over them broke and they collapsed at Sesshomaru's feet. He could certainly see how his father could feel like this sword was a cheat. Especially when its shield raised yet again to stop a flurry of arrows.

Sesshomaru would have preferred not taking an untested sword into battle, but he would rather use this sword over no sword at all. The more he swung and slashed, the more he understood how it functioned. The shield would automatically protect him, but not while using the blade to seal up an opponent's demonic energy, and it could be broken if given enough opposition. But he rarely gave his antagonists a chance to break through before he cut off their source of life.

Rosario's voice came into his ear through the radio. "Daiichi's sending in reinforcements," she reported. "Looks like from the East. I think they're trying to plug up the hole you made."

He sliced through the heart of yet another giant spider yokai before pulling down a massive wolf-like creature with a poison whip. "Take a squadron with you and cut them off. Liu?"

"Still working on it." The thief's voice crackled over the radio, which wasn't surprising considering his distance from the battle. "Promise, I'll give you an update when I have an update."
Grabbing a nearby goddess, a miniature old Celtic woman weaving mischief and misfortune amongst the undead, Sesshomaru gave her an order to find a few warriors to join Rosario on her mission. She scurried off within the blink of an eye, and the daiyokai rushed a particularly grumpy rock monster, taking him down with a flurry of sword strokes. Within moments, the creature collapsed into nothing more than a pile of rubble.

"Behind you!"

Spinning around, Sesshomaru came face to beak with the snout of a giant screeching harpy with dried blood coating her torso, the evidence of someone having ripped her guts out. Her talons slashed through his kimono sleeve, but with little more than an annoyed narrowing of his eyes and a flick of Ketsugō-kiba, he threw the lifeless husk of a creature backwards into a pair of charging red-eyed, over-muscled oxen, halting them in their tracks.

Floating over the carnage, Jackie glanced over the scene before her with analytic eyes. "Not bad," she remarked. "Not your father, but not bad."

He turned to one of his lead men, a four-eyed, six-armed man with a brass head. "Chiyou, hold the line. And where is Wepwawet?"

A man-like being with a wolf's head and the clothes of an Egyptian pharaoh, rushed forward, his hand covering a gash in his side. "Here, my Lord. I was delayed by Leviathan for a moment."

Jackie turned her head in confusion. "They speak English? But —"

"Retreat, Wepwawet," Sesshomaru ordered. "Find a healer before you return."

A scowl appeared on the fearsome god's face, but it seemed his leader paid no heed to it. Grudgingly, the wolf-man obeyed, slipping through the lines of warrior gods who offered him protection.

"Gods understand every language," the daiyokai said, answering Jackie's earlier question. "How is she?"

As she came down to his level, she found that she had no desire to sugar-coat the news. "Screaming. Crying. I don't blame her. Jenny says you're going to have company soon."

"I've sent Rosario and her men ahead to cut Daiichi's reinforcements off before they can replenish the weakness in his forces."

"He's not replenishing," Jackie said, shaking her head. "He's trying to box you in."

A bone-shattering cacophony of screeches filled the air, drowning out the sounds of battle. The noise alone froze Sesshomaru's forces, turning their heads around. Swirling in the sky and headed straight for the leader of the pack, a pair of colorful serpentine beasts large enough to block out the sun for miles and dwarf even the largest of the war gods, dove towards the earth.


Almost panicking, Sesshomaru raised Ketsugō-kiba and cried, "To me!"

And then, like a meteor hitting the earth, Quetzalcoatl and Kukulcan came crashing down.
Sucker Punch

The impact seemed to shatter the very earth. The ground trembled, the trees groaned, the wind stilled. In that moment as it seemed that this island would crack in two and drift off to sea, the entire battle quieted with an eerie silence. Not one creature within a mile survived the neck-snapping concussive blast of massive feathered serpents crashing into the army of gods. But buried beneath Ketsugō-kiba's shield, Sesshomaru's army still stood.

The serpents snapped at the red shield in turn, attempting to bite through the magical barrier with its teeth. Holding Ketsugō-kiba aloft, the daiyokai strained to keep the shield from shattering. His arms shook and each blow pushed him backwards another few centimeters, but he refused to back down. His own youki flowed into and strengthened the sword, but he couldn't maintain it for long. Problem was, removing the shield would expose his army to attack.

All around him, the gods were struggling to get back on their feet. The impact of Quetzalcoatl and Kukulkan meeting a youki shield had jarred them so badly that their heads spun and weapons shook in their hands. They would not survive a frontal assault just yet. So Sesshomaru held firm.

"Why do you not attack, Father?" Quetzalcoatl mocked as he slammed his gargantuan body at the ground again, hard enough to shake the ground. "Do you fear another defeat?"

"You're going to lose your army again sooner or later," Kukulkan sneered. "Give up now. Don't drag it out."

"Why are an Aztec god and a Mayan god speaking in Japanese?" Jackie asked, confusion scrawled on her ghostly visage. "And aren't they supposed to be dead?"

"Daiichi is controlling them," Sesshomaru replied, his voice tight and strained. "And yes. They're dead."

"Oh … Do you want me to do something about that?"

Grunting, he readjusted his tight grip on the hilt of his sword. "If you could."

And off she went, flying off like some sort of Wonder Woman or winged seraphim minus the wings, towards the shield, gathering strength and energy as she flew. Her fist seemed to swell with a reddish light and just as she was about to pass through Sesshomaru's shield to knock out the lights of Kukulkan, she bounced right off it like a basketball hitting a brick wall.

Undeterred and apparently unfazed, Jackie approached the barrier again. Even her fingers couldn't get through, and she pounded her fist on it several times with no success. "General, I think we have a problem!" she called out.

But salvation came from above and with the resounding battle cry: "I ALREADY CALLED DIBS!"

Jackie's eyes widened as a wild-haired Rosario covered in blood and bruises, wielding a pair of katanas, riding atop a red scaled dragon and followed by a bevy of warrior gods like Athena and Durga, burst onto the scene with weapons held aloft. The battle cries of her little company of warriors caused Kukulkan and Quetzalcoatl to pause in their barrage and turn their massive heads.

As Rosario and her company distracted the feathered serpents, slashing at their throats and shooting arrows and fire at their eyes, Jackie darted back down to the ground to hide — well, not hide, per se
— behind Sesshomaru. By this point, the pressure on the shield had abated enough that he could stand up straight again and pull Ketsugō-kiba back a bit.

"Well it would seem that my services are, in fact, unneeded," Jackie said, her posture clearly showing just how nervous she was. Though what a ghost had need to be nervous of, Sesshomaru couldn't quite tell.

Glancing around quickly, he made a quick assessment of his army. Getting back to their feet, they seemed to be ready to dive right into the battle once again, though he spotted more than a few of his soldiers sporting cuts that would certainly give a feathered serpent strength if they managed to get a taste of their blood. "Find my mother. The wounded need to be evacuated and healed."

Jackie shuddered in disgust and possibly fear, and Sesshomaru had to wonder why his order caused such a reaction. But without any further protest, she rose to the air and darted off in search of the daiyokai.

With the bulk of his army ready to move and the feathered serpents sufficiently distracted, Sesshomaru dropped the shield with a roar and launched himself into the air.

Ketsugō-kiba glinted maliciously in the sunlight as he swung it at the thick, scaley feathered hide of one of these massive beasts, but the serpents' eyes seemed to miss it. With cold precision, he brought the blade down on one of the snake's belly. Instead of the familiar sensation of flesh splitting and bone breaking from the impact, his sword hit scales as hard as stone, jarring his arm badly enough that he nearly lost his grip on the hilt.

Clearly these beasts would not go down easily. But that wouldn't keep Sesshomaru from trying.

Kukulkan and Quetzalcoatl turned, noticing the shield was gone. Rosario's forces redoubled their efforts to distract them, to pull them back and away, to hack off chunks of their flesh behind the scales and feathers. But it seemed that the serpents had other targets in mind. Namely, all the fleshbags scurrying over the earth, each filled with potent, powerful blood.

From her vantage point, Rosario could see that her team's dispersed attacks were having little to no effect on either of the gigantic gods. Pulling Fudo back a few yards, she surveyed the scene below, searching for some opening, some weakness. And then, her eyes found it. Raising her sword, she cried, "Everyone! To me!"

With her company behind her, Rosario spurred Fudo into a dive straight at Kukulkan's head. Swords raised and claws at the ready, they hit him with the force of a cannon, right where his skull met his spine. Right where Sesshomaru had torn his head off. Screeching a panicked cry, Kukulkan tried to slither away and snap at them an instant before they broke through.

As soon as gravity took hold of the serpent's head, Sesshomaru leaped forward to slash through Kukulkan's screeching head with Ketsugō-kiba. One stroke, and the life left the serpent's eyes, never to open again. With another, the rest of the feathered serpent's body fell silent.

Seeing his companion collapse under the weight of death, Quetzalcoatl did not flee. Nor did he turn his sights on the gods who had killed his companion. Instead, he latched his jaws onto the bloody end of Kukulkan's carcass. And began to drink. As new feathers, thicker scales and sharper claws and teeth began growing, and his entire body began to balloon with thicker muscles and stronger bones, Sesshomaru's entire army, including Rosario's daring troop, began backing away, mostly to make room for him.

Swooping in to knock aside a few of Daiichi's smaller monsters — smaller in comparison to the
engorged feathered serpent still drinking his fill of blood — Sesshomaru's mother in her giant dog form began herding his bleeding soldiers away from the scene of battle. Though roughly the same size of her son, if a little bigger, Quetzalcoatl was beginning to dwarf her. And as the largest creature on the battlefield still standing, she made for the perfect target for an Aztec god trying to increase in strength and power indefinitely.

"Mother! Move!" Sesshomaru cried, abandoning his position in order to stop those hellish jaws from swallowing her whole. With poison whips slicing any obstacle in his path, he threw himself and Ketsugō-kiba at the creature. But with scales as hard as steel and sharp as obsidian, Quetzalcoatl brushed his attack aside to go after the weakened warrior gods. And when the daiyokai attempted to deliver another blow, the end of his tail whipped out and sent him crashing through the forest.

Jaws snapped shut, the Western Lady swiped at his nose with her claws, and she barely escaped from his vicious teeth. Blood spilt from one of her flanks when it caught on his tooth, but she never let her injury keep her from herding more warriors away. With just a drop of her blood on the creature's tongue, Quetzalcoatl shivered from the sheer thrill of power infecting his veins. Naturally, he opened his mouth again for another taste.

"LEAVE HER ALONE!"

Jackie, who had led the Western Lady onto the battlefield, shrieked like a red-tailed kite before she dove through the air, leading with her fist. Power gathered around her as she soared straight at Quetzalcoatl's jaw, launching a punch right at his throat that snapped his maw shut and knocked him backwards. Spinning in the air as if she were some sort of Supergirl, she sent blow after blow at the great beast until she had it backing away from the Western Lady and Sesshomaru's army. Given the opening, Sesshomaru's mother quickly darted away to herd a few more injured gods away through the forest.

Rosario's sword hung in the air, perfectly poised to slice at the serpent's back along with the rest of the gods under her command. But her eyes had caught hold of the ghostly form darting through the air, and they simply would not let go. The battle seemed to cease all about her, all noise and shouts and battle roars fading into a dull hum. She could only stare at this spirit, this woman, this …

"Jacqueline," she muttered.

Sheathing the sword in her hand, Rosario released Fudo's reins and began to climb out of the saddle on his back, much to his confusion. He flew towards the nearest patch of land, but she had already made her choice. With little more than a quick jump, she stepped off the dragon and plummeted to the ground.

Except she hit a patch of scales and grabbed a fist-full of feathers before scaling the mountainous creature, all the while shrieking, "Jacqueline! Jacqueline Harkness!" all the way up to the top of the beast's head.

The ghost stopped, hearing her name. She drifted in the air until their eyes met. An electric current seemed to close and something inside Rosario's brain fried, which Jackie recognized immediately. The woman reached for her swords, much to the ghost's chagrin. "Oh come on. I'm already dead."

Shrieking something unintelligible, Rosario charged forward and leaped off Quetzalcoatl's back, slashing both swords at Jackie. She didn't move out of the way like she would have if she wasn't a ghost, but she still instinctively raised her arms to defend herself as the swords came down on her. And to her utter shock, Jackie reeled back in pain as they sliced through her arm.

"That's a problem." Without a moment's hesitation, she zoomed away aiming for Sesshomaru.
Falling, falling, falling to the earth below, Rosario had no reaction to her imminent death. But the moment she realized she hadn't drawn blood, she sank her sword into the scaley hide of Quetzalcoatl who roared from the pain. Once her descent had slowed enough, she pulled the blade out, began scrambling up the beast's back and continued her rampaging chase after the ghost.

"Rosario!" Sesshomaru called over the radio as he picked himself back up and returned to battling an unending stream of foes. "What's going on? Report!"

"Short answer: she's gone crazy," Jackie said, popping out of the ground before him. "What swords did you give her? This," she said, showing him the open, bloodless wound on her forearm, "should not be possible. I'm a ghost!"

Wrapping a poison whip around the neck of a nearby snake demon, he yanked it towards himself and sliced it through with Ketsugō-kiba. "If she's killed 1,000 yokai, then her swords might have inherited some demonic power."

"She's killed a thousand yokai?" Jackie shouted incredulously.

"I haven't been counting. Hasn't she?"

"Jackie!" Rosario scream broke through the din of battle despite being well over a thousand meters away. "Get over here so I can kill you properly!"

"I'm already dead you psycho!" she shouted back. Sesshomaru frowned at Jackie who rolled her eyes. "I have a little bit of history with the individual currently known as Rosario."

Speaking of, the woman came charging across the battlefield, cutting down anything in her way. A fire-eyed bull, twice as large as anything found in a typical rodeo, burst into thousands of pieces as Rosario swung her sword at it, delivering a blow that practically disintegrated the beast. Attention on the battlefield turned from attacking the still-not-downed Sesshomaru to destroying this all-powerful warrior with strength too big for her size. With furious efficiency, she sliced through muscles and tendons and throats and limbs, all so she could get at Jackie.

And if she only focused on the undead creatures controlled by Daiichi, that wouldn't have been a problem. But when she disabled a jackal-headed Egyptian warrior three times her size, rendering him nothing but fodder and blood for a particular feathered serpent, Jackie realized she had to do something. "BRB."

Taking to the air, Jackie flew along the treeline until she made eye contact with Rosario once again. That current of energy that surged into her seemed to fill her eyes with a dark fire and raise the blue-black hair on her head. Snarling viciously like a lion or tiger or bear, Rosario began her racing charge once again, without one hint of slowing down.

Zooming between gods and monsters, Jackie had one, well, two goals in mind. She stayed just barely out of reach of Rosario's swords, cutting it awful close as the crazed warrior slashed at her with everything she had. The tip of one cursed katana caught her foot, nearly tripping Jackie up. It seemed that these cuts, which hurt without bleeding, drew strength and energy from her spirit. Pieces of herself that she could not afford to lose yet.

Jackie's goal came within sight. There was so much of it that it wasn't hard to find. Jackie flew towards the thick hide and scales and feathers of Quetzalcoatl threatening to crush the entire battlefield. And rather than turn away, she darted up his back, weaving between his ridge of feathers. Rosario seemed to only pick up steam with this nearly vertical climb up the beast's back. Jackie knew her pursuer could only run so far before they ran right off the scaled snout of Quetzalcoatl.
Just when Rosario’s blade nearly decapitated Jackie altogether, the ghost plunged her whole soul right into the serpent's flesh.

Rosario would not be stopped. Slamming into Quetzalcoatl's side with the force of a cannonball, she tore through his hide. Scales as sharp as bayonets, skin as tough as the armor on a tank, body as thick as a blue whale, and she burst through his side with swords, teeth, nails, fists, everything her body could throw at it — bisecting the god clean through the middle.

With a magnificent screech, the mighty feathered serpent lost control of its undead body. Or perhaps Daiichi chose to relinquish control of it. In any case, the body of this god began to fall, taking Rosario along with it.

It was at this time that Jackie, exhausted and faded, quickly made her retreat back to the Underworld. And Rosario soon realized that, for all her rage and fury, gravity was not a forgiving mistress. Scrambling for any sort of handhold or branch or thing to catch her fall, panic quickly settled into her spine as she and the upper half of Quetzalcoatl plummeted to the rocky ground.

But with a panicked roar, some flying beast burst out of the dust and smoke and snagged her arm with his teeth, plucking her right out of the air. The teeth, hot as molten steel and sharp as obsidian, sent shockwaves of pain through Rosario's system, enough that the stupor that had clouded her brain cleared enough that she could recognize Fudo strain-friving to carry her away.

"Fudo?" she muttered, trying to suss out the meaning of the confusing commotion all around her. As her eyes focused, she spotted the open fanged maw of Kukulkan headed right to them. "Fudo, look out!" she shrieked.

With a gasp, Rosario woke from blackness.

"Hey, it's okay." Liu's big, dumb face appeared above her head, his forced smile attempting to make her feel safe. "You took a bad fall, but you're going to be okay."

Despite him trying to hold her down, she forced herself into a sitting position. Aches and stabbing pain from a variety of bites and cuts plagued her entire body. She spun her head around, searching for … someone. But all she could find was a quiet and empty forest. Well, not entirely empty. Almost like they had been neatly placed in rows, injured gods and warriors were lying on sheets everywhere that she could see. Walking between each of them was a female inu daiyokai in a white kimono with purple and blue details, assessing each need and ordering little kitsune around to see to their medical needs.

Off to her left, she recognized the structure of a tent that had recently been erected. It seemed that the Japanese military had decided to act as Sesshomaru's army's MASH unit. Probably wise as Daiichi's forces would probably have torn them to shreds.

"What am I doing here?" Rosario asked, rubbing her head. It felt all fuzzy. Like the last day had happened in a dense fog. Her head didn't ache like she'd hit it, so her memory loss must have some other source. "I'm supposed to be fighting. Sesshomaru needed me."

"You got hurt. Sesshomaru's mother brought you back here," Liu explained. "It's where she's been taking all the injured soldiers. You just need to rest right now. We'll get you taken care of."

"I'm fine," she insisted. "Something happened. My head, it's all … wrong. I remember being angry, but I don't know why." Looking up, she noticed the expression on his face. It looked worried. And afraid. "I did something again, didn't I."
"You … Yeah. You did." He didn't quite look her in the eye. But he didn't move away from her either. So there was that. "Sesshomaru said you went rogue. There's a reason you're out here and not in the tent."

Sighing, Rosario grabbed a nearby rock and threw it at the nearest tree. "I thought I was getting better. I haven't had a blackout this bad in months."

"I know." Liu draped an arm over her shoulders, causing her to wince when he bumped her dislocated joint. So he reluctantly pulled his hand back and just patted her arm. "It's not your fault. You know that, right?"

His touch seemed to relax some of the tension she still had in her body. "Yeah. At least I had Fudo looking out for … Wait, where'd he go?…"

It wasn't hard to find him. He was the size of a small house, after all. Several yards away from the camp, Fudo lay in an unnatural heap with the glassy-eyed head of Kukulkan and the bloodless body of a dark-haired Greek god. Japanese soldiers were piling wood along the edges of the massive pile of dead creatures, and adding dry branches and leaves as kindling. One was even squirting a bottle of lighter fluid over the mess.

"No! Fudo!" Despite the hundreds of injuries to her body, Rosario sprang to her feet and raced for Fudo's body. It would only take one match for the flame to ignite and swallow him whole, and she could not let that happen. "No! That's my dragon! You can't take him from me!"

Pushing past the soldiers reading their lighters, she threw herself upon the pyre and wrapped her arms around Fudo's broken neck, sobbing. Liu was only a few steps behind her, and all he could do was put a hand on her back. "Rosario, I'm sorry," he said. "When we found you, he was already dead."

"Why are they burning him? He's not dangerous. He won't hurt anyone. I'll dig the hole. I can bury him."

"We can't risk Daiichi stealing him and taking control of him," he explained with a voice strained with grief. "They're burning all the corpses Sesshomaru hasn't touched with Ketusgō-kiba." Looking back, he could see that the soldiers were on edge having their work put on hold. But they weren't cruel enough to deny her this moment with her faithful steed.

"Sesshomaru can fix this," she replied, trying to wipe away her tears while more kept falling. "I've seen him do it before. He had that sword. He brought that girl back to life."

"He doesn't have that sword anymore. You can have a minute, alright? Then we've got to go. We've got something we have to do."
Night fell swiftly on the battlefield, possibly helped along by gods looking to send Sesshomaru assistance. Sesshomaru did not tell any one of those generous night gods that Daiichi had lived in pitch blackness for many a century and would find this no significant hinderance to his efforts. Still, his army took advantage of the inky sky to advance their lines and cut down Daiichi's forces while their eyesight wasn't the best.

But on the outskirts of the battle, Liu and Rosario prepared for a different attack. Dressed all in black with the various tools of her trade strapped to her body, Rosario slid a knife into her boot before throwing her mostly-black hair into a ponytail. "I thought you had a ride for us," she snapped. "Don't worry. He's almost here." Liu was dressed similarly, though he carried a bit less with him. Testing one of his wrist-mounted toys, he made sure it could show him a map of the fortress without giving off too much light, if at all. He had a pair of compact night-vision goggles set atop his curly hair and a small backpack filled with the various tools of his particular trade. "Our ride doesn't exactly have a phone."

A chilling laugh blew through the trees, and a pair of golden eyes glowed just yards ahead of them in the forest. "Magpie Girl, you seem unhappy."

Rosario's back stiffened. Gripping her sword tightly, she narrowed her eyes. "Coyote?"

Twisting and melting from the shadows between the sky and brush, the tricky beast soon appeared before the pair with an ineffable grin. "In the flesh and fur." Darting up to her, he gave her a dog's kiss all over her face, which she did not appreciate. "You taste like salt and gods' blood, Magpie Girl."

Wiping his slobber off with her sleeve, she tied a black silk cloth over her face. "Are you giving us a ride or not?"

"Testy tonight, aren't you."

Liu leaned over to murmur in his ear, "Now is not the time to be pissing her off. Trust me."

Rolling his eyes, Coyote's fur bristled and hummed as he grew large enough for both of them to climb aboard. With a final check over their weapons and tools, making sure they weren't leaving too much behind, Rosario hopped onto his back with a huff. She grabbed his fur a little harder than she needed to. "None of your usual antics, alright?"

"But Magpie Girl, that's why I'm here!" he chirped happily.

Pulling his night vision goggles into place, Liu got on behind Rosario, choosing to grasp her about the waist rather than Coyote's fur. She rolled her eyes at his choice but allowed it nonetheless. If they fell, she figured she could use him to cushion her landing.

As soon as Coyote felt confident that they were holding on tightly, he launched himself into the air toward Daiichi's fortress. Weaving behind wispy clouds and moonbeams, he flew practically invisible to every mythical creature and human eye down below. He darted left and right so hard that his riders nearly found themselves whipped off his back. But since every one of his tricky moves kept them from detection from any one of Daiichi's undead crows patrolling the skies, they didn't argue with his tactics. All they needed to do was hold on and not scream.
Which Liu would like to inform everyone was not an easy task.

Surging high, dipping low, racing across low-hanging clouds and scattering the wisps all over the night sky, Coyote seemed to stretch as long as a Chinese dragon and slip between the watchful eyes hanging above the fortress with the grace of a river and the agility of a kitsune. And not once did Liu or Rosario wonder if he was going to get them caught.

Landing as smoothly as a shadow, Coyote daintily set foot on an outlying parapet without a guard watching it. With no time to waste on catching their breaths or orienting themselves to their abrupt new location, Liu and Rosario immediately slipped off and ducked below a short wall.

"Will you be keeping watch?" she asked in barely a whisper.

Coyote's grin widened as bright and curved as the moon should have been tonight. "Probably not." And in the blink of an eye, his laughter became the night wind and his smile a constellation of starlight.

"Well that's just … that's just great," she remarked.

Liu shrugged. "He's Deus Ex Machina Airlines. Kind of have to take what you can get."

"I want a refund."

From the few cameras Liu had installed the previous days, coupled with the toys he had brought with him, he moved silently and stealthily through the tangled fortress, almost like a cat weaving through a maze. For someone of his stature, he certainly seemed to melt into the shadows and become as one with the wall. Before her very eyes — or not — Rosario could see exactly why Jenny had hired the thief in the first place.

Her own steps struggled to keep up or stay near as quiet. Rosario didn't entirely remember why she'd taken so much hardware along on this trip, or when she actually picked it all up, but now she had to make sure to keep it from making any decibel of noise at all. Couldn't afford to drop a bullet or let a sword brush against a stone wall.

Monsters lurked around every corner. Every last one. Or so Liu noted and Rosario trusted. She could smell their blood and taste their stench on her tongue. But Liu was the one who could actually see them, predict where they would patrol next, even see through the walls with his collection of high-tech devices. As badly as Rosario wanted to dismember each one of them, she kept her sword close and redoubled her efforts to remain silent. After all, if Daiichi looked through the eyes of any one of his undead servants and found the pair of humans sneaking through his fortress, he might not be pleased with such an intrusion. She knew her role was secondary to Liu's talents and hers would only be put into use as a last resort.

In one darkened — the dark daiyokai had apparently not learned about lightbulbs or electricity or candles — hallway, Liu abruptly stopped in his tracks. Holding up a hand, he signaled for Rosario to do the same. A split second later, only six inches away, or perhaps a couple of feet or more, a grizzled ogre-like creature covered in graveyard soil and spiderwebs turned the corner with a dying torch in his hands. The light of this flame was barely enough to light a match, but it was enough to pierce the darkness and fill the hallway with dancing shadows.

Liu and Rosario pressed themselves flat against the wall, disappearing into a depression in the stone, and held their breaths as the ogre patrolled the area. For a gleaming moment of hope, it seemed that he would simply go on his undead way, not having seen a thing.
But then, he paused. He sniffed the air once. Then twice. Each microscopic droplet of sweat and fear and that floated through the air seemed to scream for his attention. He breathed in deeper, more than likely catching the hints of Sesshomaru's scent that must have clung to their bodies even after changing clothes completely. Rosario mentally cursed herself for forgetting to at least attempt a shower. Her enemies had never had such sharp senses before and it was growing increasingly difficult to counter each one.

She tightened her grip on her sword with such a slight motion that it seemed like an old, dead leaf clinging to some cobwebs on the wall had moved when the ogre stirred the air by walking down the hall. But Liu twitched his head so imperceptibly slightly that it was like a stone in the wall had settled down just a bit.

The ogre turned, almost looking straight at Liu's head all wrapped in black cloth. He blinked once or twice. And then turned aside, nearly grazing the tip of his ax against the thief's stomach as he did so. Liu certainly would have been gutted had he not sucked in his stomach at the very last instant.

Just as their burning lungs were set to burst, the decaying ogre seemed to shrug internally and continue on his way down the hall. They gave him a few moments to get well down the hallway before they inhaled enough air to decrease the oxygen level in the hallway by 90 percent.

For the next several moments, Liu's steps had a fantastic sense of urgency about them as he led them down the hallway. At the same time, he seemed just a bit giddy. Hysterical, almost. Like the thrill of coming so damn close to dying that he could smell Theda's breath and then not left him with the most fantastic high one could imagine. Rosario's limbs tingled both from stiffness and a need to run and fight and get rid of all danger now. It had taken everything in her power to not rip the ogre apart moments ago, and now she could barely keep up with Liu. There was certainly a reason that she generally left the sneaky stuff to him.

The sounds of battle outside grew dimmer and fainter the further they traversed this fortress. Screams became muffled by stone. Clanging of sword and claw against shield and armor became little more than a dull beat that could have been mistaken for an errant robin's heartbeat. Roars and battle cries and horrific howls became whispers on the night wind. Heard by human ears, and soon forgotten until they were nothing more than imperfections in silence.

Darkness soon swallowed them up to the point of pure oblivion. Rosario could feel her pupils straining to stretch painfully wide, all in vain. Liu had the benefit of the night vision goggles, which meant that the only way she could follow was to grasp his shoulder and hold on tightly.

But not too tightly because Liu did enjoy not having a broken shoulder.

Just as it seemed that they'd been permanently deafened and blinded, a faint light seemed to appear at the end of a narrow passageway. And a new sound broke through the still. One that chilled their bones. For a few moments, they froze in place as they listened to something like the screeching of a dying cat. And just as they focused their senses, it soon faded away.

"Come on," Liu said, his voice scarcely making a sound Rosario could even hear.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching for a gun holstered at her hip.

He paused before he answered. "Trouble."

With footfalls as silent as cat paws, Liu pressed forward until the light came fully into focus. It was a single yellow-orange sliver that danced about like firelight, peeking through the crack in a heavy, wooden door. Producing one of the tools strapped to his person, Liu took a small camera and slipped
it through the keyhole to covertly scan the room.

The two of them huddled over a phone screen so dim, it barely had moving shapes on it. But so long as they could see a rough outline of the scene behind the door, they didn't care much for the photo quality.

A tall, gaunt figure draped with black silks stood over a heap on the ground. Given a few moments to sway and breathe, she soon fleshed out to something more conventionally feminine. Even with potato quality picture, the smile on her face shone through. It was smug, exhausted and victorious. And the object of which she gained this victory was a heap on the floor at her feet.

It had blonde hair. And form fitting black armor. Rosario thought she saw some dark red stains. This heap did not move. At all. It only took her a few moments to figure out why. "It's…"

"Boss lady," Liu said for her.

"Sesshomaru said to get her out alive." Even in the faint light, her face went visibly pale as she turned away from the screen. "She's not supposed to die."

"It's not quite that simple." He adjusted the screen so she could watch it once more.

It took a few minutes, but Theda soon took a deep breath and decided to do something other than gloat. After poking her with a toe to kick the corpse over onto her back, she got to her knees and held an outstretched hand over her body. Then she began to struggle and wince. For several minutes, it didn't look like she did much of anything besides strain against some invisible force that nearly crushed her. And then…

With a gasp they heard through the door, Jenny's back arches sharply. Air filled her lungs and blood surged through her limbs. She coughed for a moment before pathetic sobs filled the room. Theda collapsed to the floor, gaunt and frail once more. In a desperate bid to escape, Jenny dug her fingers into the ground and dragged herself any number of blessed inches away from her murderer.

"Where are you going, detective?" Theda said, sparing her thin breath for a laugh. "You already had a bathroom break."

Something cold and calculating lit up Rosario's eyes right then, and she got to her feet. Liu had seen this look many a time before, and usually only when it was useful. But right now, he needed some patience from this cold killer. "What are you doing?" he hissed.

"I'm supposed to stop this," she whispered back, loosening her katana in its sheath. "That's why you brought me in the first place."

"This isn't like running into a bank robbery. We need a plan before we go in there because if you rush in there now, Theda will kill you."

Rosario raised an eyebrow at him. "What makes you think I ever go into a fight expecting to come out alive on the other end?" Her eyes hardened and her body tensed up, ready for combat.

But Liu put his hand on hers, drawing her gaze to his. "We still need you in this battle, Rosario. Don't let Theda take you just because you're desperate right now."

She ground her teeth together, but soon released some tension and backed down. "Okay."

Sighing in relief, Liu pulled a couple smoke grenades out of his pack. "It looks like Theda is weakest right after she brings boss lady back to life. So we have to wait. Can you do that?"
Jenny's scream pierced the silence between them. The two of them flinched, but remained silent. Rosario nodded, but pulled her sword free. And they waited, listening to Theda snuff out the detective's life once more. The perfect stillness as Jenny stopped breathing sent a chill up their spines, making their hands grip tighter. They wanted to move, they needed to move. But not just yet. Not quite yet …

And then, a gasp of life.

Pulling out the pins of the grenades, Liu deftly threw them into the room. A moment later, as smoke filled the wide chamber, Rosario swept in, her sword eager for blood. Theda managed to look up in confusion an instant before her enchanted blade sliced through her chest and face.

Darting under the spray of blood, Liu dove for Jenny and grabbed her under the arms to drag her away. "What are you doing?" she groaned.

"I do believe this is our Big Damn Heroes moment, boss."

The cut across Theda's body managed to heal in just the amount of time it took for Rosario to ready herself for a second swing. She snarled something threatening, but the sword cut through her throat again before anything intelligible came out. Driven backwards, Theda stumbled and fell over a poorly placed armchair.

Jenny struggled to her feet, but she leaned heavily on Liu. Even with life back inside her, she was half dead. "Get out of here, both of you, before she kills you both," she said.

Theda's eyes burned as she regained her footing and her throat healed over. "What's a nobody like you doing with a sword as powerful as that?" she snarled.

"Getting my boss back home."

Rosario stepped forward with a slashing attack to take off the goddess's head. But Theda's hand was faster, catching the woman's wrist before the sword could connect. With her other hand, Theda dug her fingers into Rosario's chest. "Knock it off."

Squeezing just a little bit, she reached out for the woman's heart in her mind and froze it instantly. There was no scream. Just one final breath before the light faded out of Rosario's eyes. She was nothing but a rag doll now, and Theda simply discarded her like one, tossing her across the room towards Liu and Jenny.

Bony tentacles whipped through the room, clearing away the smoke. A second later, her eyes locked on to the fleeing pair who were still in abject shock and disbelief over seeing Rosario's lifeless corpse crash into the wall behind them with a sickening crunch. Jenny had recognized immediately what had happened, though Liu still didn't want to think it true. "She can't be…"

"Liu, run!" Jenny begged, pushing him away.

"Yes, Liu." Theda wrapped a bone whip around his ankle and hurled him 20 feet away into a pile of cabinets and chairs. "Run."

The whips became hardened spikes flying at his prostrate body. But with some nimble moves, rolling this way and that, he managed to avoid each one and find some cover in the form of a heavy wooden desk. No matter. Theda simply knocked aside every large piece of furniture around, one by one, taking away all his hiding spots.

"Come on, little thief. I have such a busy day ahead of me," she said with a drawl. "I have to kill
Jenny some more, then put an end to Sesshomaru's army and make my son the rightful ruler of this fallen world. So I don't have time for this." Growing to monstrous proportions, Theda ripped aside the alcove formed by a fireplace where he had to have crawled off to. But to her consternation, she found no thief.

Scanning the room, she found he'd slipped away and was scrambling toward Jenny. With a scowl on her face, she aimed her spikes at Liu. This time, she would not miss. This time, he had nowhere to hide. She reeled back and prepared to strike —

"Don't you touch him!"

Jenny's desperate plea froze Theda's entire body. Not out of some pathetic human quality like empathy or compassion. No, she simply could not move. Her feet wouldn't move one in front of the other. Her bone whips and spikes fell flat when she tried to aim them at Liu. Even her hands felt like they were hitting an ice wall when they tried to reach for him. For whatever reason, she did as she was ordered. Turning slowly to the weakened woman on the floor, she narrowed her eyes at the only cause of this sudden handicap. "Detective … What did you do to me?"

Shock crossed Jenny's features as she began crawling away from Theda's fearsome expression. Why had Theda stopped? She honestly couldn't say. But Jenny, above all else in the entire world right now, did not want Theda to kill Liu. So she would worry about the logistics and logic and reasoning behind this strange occurrence later. All questioning had to go on hold anyhow as Jenny found it rather necessary to get away from the Death goddess's encroaching wrath. "Stop," she said feebly. "You can't tell me what to do, Detective," she said, turning her full fury onto her. "You can't tell me what to do!"

Jenny huddled against the wall, putting her hands up and bracing herself for Theda to tear her apart bit by bit. The goddess, in all her fury and blackness, drew herself up to her full height, her hair brushing against the high ceiling. When suddenly a blade sliced straight through her midsection, bisecting her.

Blood sprayed across the room. Letting out a single screech, Theda collapsed into a pile of her own body. But what caught Jenny's and Liu's attention was the royal-blue haired woman standing right behind her with a blank, calm expression and Rosario's enchanted sword in hand.

Liu hastily crawled over to Jenny to help her up, but he stared at their savior in amazement. "Rosario? What happened to your hair?"

It was Rosario's body. Just with blue hair. This much Jenny could see. But she held herself differently, a bit straighter and leaner. She frowned at Liu with confusion in her eyes. "It's always been like this, Liu."

"Rosario," he insisted, "you've never had blue hair. Well, maybe blue roots."

She wrinkled her nose. "Who's Rosario? You hit your head, didn't you. I thought I was the one with memory problems. It's Eva. Eva Nova, remember? He never remembers," she whispered to Jenny as if Liu couldn't hear them. "You need some help there, Ms. Harkness?"

Her eyes perked up at this rather formal and polite title. Definitely better than 'boss.' "Oh, I think I'm going to like this one. No thank you, Eva. Liu has me. He does, and he's going to get us out of here now."

Theda began to moan and stir as her body once again grew back together. "Rrrrgh…" she growled.
"I killed you … Why aren't you dead?..."

Eva reeled back her fist and punched Theda clear across the room. Both halves. As she landed with a crunch, she turned back around to follow after Liu and Jenny who were in the process of getting the hell out of there before things got worse. "Alright, so, where are we? And why did I just attack that person?"
The ground was slick with mud made of earth and blood. But with an army that had the option of keeping their feet in the air, Sesshomaru's forces didn't exactly notice. Everyone still standing — or flying — had not one square inch of clothing or armor or exposed skin not covered in blood or grime or sweat. The rising sun shone an angry red over the battlefield, highlighting the violence that had perpetuated through the night. Sesshomaru's forces had thinned and Daiichi's strengthened, but the attacking horde had managed to punch through the defensive lines until finally their claws scraped against the outermost wall of the fortress.

Standing above the fray, Daiichi watched the battle with a satisfied smirk on his face. While he knew better than to celebrate before actually defeating his father, he could practically taste victory on his tongue. From his vantage point, he could watch the way his forces had significantly chipped away at Sesshomaru's army throughout the night. A swarm of undead yokai would find a god outside the edge of Ketsugō-kiba's shield, snuff out their life, and then Daiichi would bring them under his control, adding him or her to his grand army. Despite the efforts of the Western Lady and her cohorts, they couldn't keep every corpse away from him. And when Sesshomaru could, he broke that hold with a slash of his sword, but he couldn't spare the effort very often. Those enemies alone proved formidable enough to have the attacking force retreating every now and then.

It was almost unfair at this point. Even without using Bakusaiga, his undead yokai and gods were more than a match for Sesshomaru and his motley crew.

"Son!" Panting as if in pain or exhaustion, Theda rushed onto the balcony and fell on the railing beside Daiichi, using it to hold her up. "The detective has escaped with the help of her friends."

"And why did you not stop her, Mother?" he couldn't care less about her answer. He simply wanted to express his annoyance at her incompetence. "No matter. Sesshomaru is weakening. It's time to put an end to all these so-called gods. I'm not going to drag this out for another week like last time. Are you ready to put that heart of yours to work?"

Nodding, Theda brushed away some dried blood from her midsection. "I am ready."

"Good." He offered her his hand, which she took without hesitation. "Let's end this."

Escorting his mother, Daiichi led Theda out to a battlement that overlooked the battle from a vantage point that not only left them exposed to arrows and aerial attacks, but put them arrogantly on display for Sesshomaru in particular to see. The sight of them both stirred the gods to anger and a need to vanquish, and gave them a great sense of unease and caution.

They probably should have paid more attention to that second impression.

Drawing Bakusaiga from the sheath at his waist, Daiichi brandished the blade glowing with an electric green hue with a sinister gleam in his eye. Then stepping off into the air, he summoned every last vestige of his malevolent will and unleashed a disintegrating blast of energy from Bakusaiga directly at the attacking lines.

Before they even heard the shout of Daiichi's attack, the roaring green wave laced with black venom uprooted mighty pines and tore asunder earth and ground right before the gods' eyes. Raising their arms, they braced for the impact, assuming they could weather out the storm of some half-god's blast of power. But in an instant, the energy ripped flesh from bone, teeth from skull, eyes from sockets,
ribs from spine. Nearly two score gods practically burst into dust in one fell swoop, their remains littered across the battlefield with a hundred more screaming in pain — not from limbs and claws torn off and bones shattered, but from an acidic venom seeping into their blood turning their skin to stone and their bones to ash.

Undead yokai swarmed across the field to scavenge armor, weapons and bodies. A quick stroke of Ketugō-kiba knocked them out of commission like a pack of dominoes, but all too quickly, Daiichi summoned others to take their place. As Daiichi raised his sword again, it was all too clear that these minor yokai were the least of his advantages.

"Get against the walls!" Sesshomaru shouted as a rumble heralded the oncoming blast towards the north flank of his army.

The emerald green flash of energy split the sky again, chasing after Sesshomaru and the gods like a wave crashing in the ocean, threatening to swallow them up. Raising his sword, he summoned a shield and let the blast beat down on the protective red bubble. Bakusaiga tore at the shield like a rabies-infected lion with no other purpose in life except to shed blood, but by all accounts, the barrier held strong.

Still, Sesshomaru found his palms beginning to sweat and his muscles aching. Bakusaiga had never been this deadly before. Wielding Ketsugō-kiba in defense was like pushing against the weight of a mountain.

The blast dissipated after a moment and the last vestiges of Daiichi’s venom sank into the ground to digest anything else still living. With that breath of fresh air, the gods scrambled up battlements and stonework, their teeth bared and throats snarling for want of prey. Sesshomaru knew his own sword quite well. And he knew that more than likely, his army would not make it through a third or fourth blast.

"Bakusaika!"

Tearing through the air like knives and teeth, the disintegration chased after them again. Sesshomaru stabbed Ketugō-kiba into the stone wall, and with poison whips from both hands, he grabbed a legion of undead yokai and threw them straight into the destructive wave.

There was an enormous screech of collective pain. And then the blast ebbed away having eaten its fill.

All around, a victorious cheer rose up at this creative little victory. However war gods knew better than to gloat before their enemy’s head rested upon a platter. They simply had their own whips and a plentiful source of meat shields biting at their heels to choose from. Hand over claw, the gods continued climbing up the nearly endless fortress wall.

When finally, finally, Belus, and old Babylonian war god, and a small host of his cohorts breached the top and roared in encouragement and victory.

A black slippered foot came to greet him, lightly stepping on his meaty hand. Theda's dark eyes peered over the edge. "Why hello there."

Belus bared his teeth, his eyes flashing almost red in fury. "Surrender, Ereshkigal, or yours will be the next head to be felled by my sword!"

She stuck her bottom lip out in a pout. "That wasn't very nice. And I've never liked that name. So for that…"
Snarling, Belus swung a sword at her feet. Her expression snapped in an instant into one of cold-hearted rage. With a quick jump, she dodged the sloppy attack. Then reaching out a fist and squeezing hard, she took the mighty war god's heart and froze it inside his chest.

A roar rang out, soon stifled by the rest of Belus' organs following suit and shutting down. His grip loosened, the light left his eyes, and in a moment, the god fell a hundred feet to the ground, his body stiff with rigor mortis. It was like watching a boulder fall from a cliffside and tumble along the mountain before crashing to the ground and shattering into a million pieces.

Theda's eyes lifted towards the rest of the army. Her lips curled into a cat's grin after snuffing out the life of a canary. And raising her arms, she beheld the feast before her as she decided on which dish she might like to devour first. Sesshomaru might be raising a shield to protect his army from Daiichi's wrath and tossing yokai into Bakusaiga's path left and right, but nothing would stop Theda. Nothing could.

"Oh this is going to be fun."

Clapping her hands together, a shockwave burst forth from Theda. It shot through the army below her feet, a cold wave that pierced each heart like an ice pick driven through each sternum. Odin's mouth hung open in shock. Mixcoatl's eyes went wide and white as tea saucers. Athena dropped her spear and clutched her chest.

The battlefield went silent for five long seconds. No one breathed. No one could. And then, as a trembling began to settle into the ground, the gods started to fall. One at a time, one mighty warrior with gilded armor released his hold on the fortress wall only to tumble to the cement ground below. Then another. And another. Breath stilled, bodies stiffened, hearts ceased beating, and a wave of deities fell.

A trill of laughter shattered the silence. Jumping and clapping her hands in glee, Theda practically danced with joy at this utter victory at her fingertips. "How many years have I waited for this!" she exclaimed. "How long you have shamed me when I was the cause of every last one of your successes! No more will I suffer this indignity. No more will you relegate me to the back pages of history and hide me from your temples."

Sesshomaru could read Theda's intentions well. Even before she began eagerly taking aim at his army like a panther on the hunt, he recognized that bloodlust in her eyes. She wanted the gods dead. As for the humans hiding at the back of the battlefield providing support? They could be ignored. At the same time, this little speech of hers was a front for how winded the effort of slaughtering so many gods cost her. Speed would be of the essence here.

Sesshomaru turned to the god closest to him, a many armed woman in ancient Hindu dress. "Durga, lead them on," he ordered.

She gave him a nod then began barking orders at the others still alive. As the army began a mad dash for some semblance of cover behind the wall, Sesshomaru darted into the air, soaring above the heads of the maddening crowd below.

Back ing up, Theda gave him a maniacal grin as he landed gracefully on the fortress wall before her, Ketsugō-kiba held at the ready. "So you've found another sword, have you. This one's pretty."

"This ends today, Izanami," he muttered.

Something about Sesshomaru's appearance caught her eye. Maybe it was the way he gripped
Ketsugō-kiba a little too tightly. Or maybe his eyes simply had a redder fire and life to them. Perhaps a single one of his hairs had simply gone into a state of disarray. But Theda could see something. "Oh. You're actually angry. Couldn't possibly be the little detective —"

"Mother!" Daiichi's voice rang out over the battle cries, a sharp rebuke. An instant later, he leaped from a parapet to land on the stonework behind her. She reeled back like a viper being thrown back into her basket, but the disgust was clear on her face. Not that it mattered to her son. So long as she backed away from Sesshomaru, that's all he cared about.

The dark daiyokai, Bakusaiga gleaming in his grasp, sauntered over toward his father with a sneer on his lips. With the tip of the sword, he pushed his mother aside, glaring at her.

"You are not to touch him. If anyone is to defeat my coward of a father, it is me."

The dig certainly hit the mark intended, but Sesshomaru let no sign of emotional pain show.

Theda was tempted to stamp her foot in frustration. She thought better of it, however. Taking a few deep breaths, she soon relented, bowed to her son and backed away to give father and son a wide berth. "Of course. It is only right."

Sesshomaru and Daiichi began to circle one another, assessing the other for a sign of weakness. Surely a day and more of leading the charge of an army had tired out Sesshomaru. No sleep, a heavy burden of leadership, beginning the war at an apparent disadvantage with his sword in the wrong hands. He should be well past the breaking point. Yet Daiichi had his own struggles. Mentally leading an army incapable of thinking independently, wielding a sword not meant for him and literally no allies save his mother to speak of.

"I have no desire to kill you."

Daiichi chuckled. "You bring an army to my home and tell me you wish to negotiate? You have lost to me once already, Father. Why do you wish to repeat that failure?" He held Bakusaiga aloft, its blade already beginning to glow with the destructive energy it could unleash.

"I will not allow you to destroy this world, but I do not wish to kill you."

Scoffing at this newfound show of mercy, Daiichi casually turned to his mother. "Kill them all. I want an army of gods, not yokai."

That malicious smile of hers returned to her face. And she all the more eagerly took to the air to raise her hands once more. "As you wish, my son. These gods will remember the day of my desolation —"

"Hey, Poppet, remember me?"

A streak of blue darted across a parapet, down the wall and with swords shining with demonic energy, took a leap off the edge and straight for Theda. The goddess's eyes went wide as she recognized the she-devil that had so thoroughly bisected and eviscerated her a few hours ago. Yet even as she summoned whips and spikes of bone, that did nothing to stop Rosario — well, not quite Rosario — from grabbing her hair and dragging her down to the ground with her.

Sesshomaru's eyes darted around the fortress until his hunting instincts located his quarry. There, in a window, Liu waxed on about the stupidity of this comrade of theirs and how she would only get herself killed doing something as stupid as trying to beat the tar out of Theda. And there on his back was Jenny. Pale, her face sunken and haggard, but alive.

Jenny. Alive.
Even Daiichi could see the slight lift to the corners of Sesshomaru's mouth. And suddenly the ground didn't feel near as sure beneath his feet. The old dog didn't seem all that tired either.

Acting quickly, Daiichi unleashed a disintegrating blast at his father, only for Ketsugō-kiba's shield to raise immediately. The green light vanished just as quickly as it had come, though its effect lingered as Daiichi's venom ate away the stone fortress wall to the east, and Sesshomaru looked none too impressed to see how his sword had been treated in his ungrateful son's hands.

"You have no respect for the source of your blade."

"What respect is there for a defeated ruler?"

Another swing, but with darting, expert strokes, Sesshomaru blocked each one that came anywhere close to causing him harm. With each contact Bakusaiga made with Ketsugō-kiba, it seemed the humming destructive energy seemed to lessen. At the very least, less and less of the wall was eaten away with each blast. A rather convenient effect of Ketsugō-kiba's sealing power.

But this simple defense was child's play. Sesshomaru was almost curious to see what Daiichi still remembered from their early sparring days.

And so the dance began. A dance of blades and skills old and forgotten and new and deadly. There was a fire in this old dog’s eyes that seemed to be playing with each thrust and slash that Daiichi gave, tossing them aside like practice strikes. Taking easily to the air, they flung themselves at each other with expert attacks and even quicker defenses. But Sesshomaru had a reason to get Daiichi to move from this position. There was a courtyard a little ways away that not only would give them more room to maneuver, and it would be closer to Jenny and Liu who had already disappeared from the window in order to, presumably, reunite with Sesshomaru. Plus it kept Daiichi distracted from the army now breaking through the walls of the fortress.

"For someone who had no interest in slaying me, you're certainly doing your best to prove otherwise," Daiichi snarled.

"I am simply proving that I did not teach you enough before your mother took you away from me." Sesshomaru's eyes took notice of an opening Daiichi had left for himself, his strength beginning to flag a bit. Moving quick as a lightning strike, he slashed Ketsugō-kiba upwards across his chest.

Daiichi staggered backwards in shock. A red beam of energy shone from the cut, but not a drop of blood was spilt. Still, he patted his chest to be sure. Not a single tear through skin or armor. "A sword that does not cut? Interesting choice of weapon, this sealing sword."

Sesshomaru took a step back, Ketsugō-kiba still at the ready, just in case. But he was certain that its effect would hold.

Daiichi swung Bakusaiga, attempting to unleash a disintegrating blast at his father. But the blade merely whistled through the air with nary a hint of green energy. Another attempt produced the same result. His breath began to hasten. He slashed out with his claws, but the attempt was like a weak human attempting to slap air. No venom came forth. And Sesshomaru easily dodged his attack.

It only took a few more moments for Daiichi to understand what had happened. "You sealed my demonic powers," he said flatly.

To this, Sesshomaru had no response. He simply sheathed Ketsugō-kiba and watched. There was some sense of relief that came from disarming one's enemy. But tension still hung in the air. All around the fortress and nuclear power plant complex, undead yokai fell en masse with no power or
leader to drive them.

A bitter laugh escaped Daiichi's lips. "You think this simple trick is going to stop me?"

Come to think of it … he had been watching Sesshomaru use Ketsugō-kiba through the entire battle. Daiichi's muscles began to tense and his eyes closed as he focused on something buried deep inside him. Perhaps the entire time Ketsugō-kiba cut off the power of each undead yokai, Daiichi learned just a little bit more.

Muscles clenching, teeth gritted, eyes blood red, Daiichi strained for the power inside him. It was like a barrier had formed around it, buried within his core. But this demonic energy, strengthened by the god's blood flowing in his veins, would not be held. Every ounce of rage, boiled and purified over 500 years of imprisonment, clawed at this shield of energy forced inside him. Bit by bit, he could sense it cracking.

With a roar, the seal shattered. Sesshomaru raised Ketsugō-kiba's shield in defense, but already he knew that this sword alone could not stop Daiichi's wrath.

Bakusaiga abandoned, the dark daiyokai flew at Sesshomaru in a rage like a demon possessed. How one being could embody this much anger and hatred, he didn't know. But he knew a cornered dog when he saw one. Venomous claws sailed by his face as he dodged each blow. Sesshomaru's own poison tipped claws narrowly diverted the attacks. Now that Daiichi found himself with everything he ever wanted — the chance to defeat his father — he would never stop.

Sesshomaru unleashed a poison whip at Daiichi's feet. Though he spotted the attack and moved quickly enough to avoid it, he didn't quite notice the fist aimed straight for his solar plexus. Grunting, Daiichi stumbled backwards like an amateur before Sesshomaru's whips tangled him up again and ripped off chunks of his armor.

Once more, he roared and with venom dripping from his fangs, Daiichi snapped at his father's throat. In a smooth rebuttal, Sesshomaru jabbed him in the throat, cutting off his airway, and threw him back down to the ground.

Bloodied and with bones cracking, Daiichi rolled over in his crater only to find Sesshomaru bearing down on him with poison claws at the ready. But there was no joy of victory in this daiyokai's eyes.

"My son, I am truly sorry for this."

"NO!"

Bruised, disheveled, barely clinging to the stone wall and reaching out a hand desperately, Theda's eyes were wide as she beheld the scene of her former mate standing over her son, his poison tipped claws inches away from clawing out his throat. And before reason or sense could prevail, she grasped Sesshomaru's heart with her mind, and squeezed.

In an instant his heart stopped. An icy dagger seemed to have been driven straight through his chest and everything spun.

"Mother!" Daiichi snarled. Without wasting an instant, he scrambled backwards and pulled himself away from his father's certain death blow. "His head was mine!"

The poison faded. The light faded. Sesshomaru collapsed to his knees, his lungs exhaling their last breath.

"I'm sorry, he was going to kill you. I couldn't let that happen," she pleaded.
His brain vaguely heard sounds. Of Daiichi striking his mother. Of heated words spoken. But the synapses in his brain stopped connecting. And with one final spasm of his body ...

Black.
Family Reunion

Everything went fuzzy in her head. Tearing herself away from Liu, Jenny rushed out of the fortress, down the stairs and across the courtyard. Her eyes could only see Sesshomaru's form. Not Daiichi standing over him, fuming. Not the hundreds of undead gods and yokai beginning to stand back up and swirl around in the sky to rage with their master. Not the war gods crying out in pain as claws and swords tore through them now that no shield stood to protect them. Not the magnificent white dog mauling and slaying everything in her reach despite the fact that she soon would be overwhelmed. Not Theda on the ground in shock as Daiichi lashed out at her with his venomous words.

Just Sesshomaru. And Ketsugō-kiba lying at his side.

Grabbing the sword, she plunged it into the ground next to him. It put a shield around them, giving her a bit of peace from the battle. Jenny rolled Sesshomaru over onto his back, brushing his long silver hair away from his wide open eyes. His teeth were still bared, so quickly had Theda struck him down. But the signs of his death were quite apparent. The light in his eyes had vanished, his lips were turning blue, his body was completely limp.

"Sesshomaru, please wake up," she shrieked desperately, shaking him. "Please, tell me you're not as fragile as a human." But even as she begged, she knew he was as dead as she had been many a time the last couple of days. How she knew the signs so well.

Jenny could accept many things. The existence of mythical creatures. The death of her little sister. Even losing to Theda now and again. But in that moment as her heart ached physically over the loss of life in her arms, she realized that she could not accept Sesshomaru dying. Not for the world, not for herself.

The cords that held his breastplate together fell easily to her fingers. Within moments, she removed the armor and threw it aside. She pressed her fingers to his throat and felt no pulse. So she set the heel of her hand against his sternum and placed the other one on top of it, interlocking her fingers. "You look human enough. Whatever gods are out there who have any say in the matter, help me out. Because this had better work."

Locking her elbows, she threw her weight against his body and began chest compressions to pump his blood for him.

A massive *bang* rang out over her head, like a boulder smacking into her. But it wasn't enough to make her stop. Sparking a glance, upward, she found Daiichi pulling Bakusaiga back for another blow, anger and hate etched on his face.

"Come on, breathe," she said, pinching his nose before she put her mouth over his and gave him the air in her lungs. "Breathe. Why aren't you breathing?"

Sesshomaru knew this place, though it felt different without a body. Where the Underworld had left a feeling of cold and impending threat along his spine before, now he felt light, calm and airy. No weariness or tension of battle left inside him at all. Relief flooded his veins. Well, he didn't exactly have veins anymore.

Before him stood a castle much like his mother's, but far less ostentatious. Faint strands of music and children's laughter rose up from the building. It seemed to him like … home. Though not any home
he had ever lived in or grown up in. The place bright with sunlight, but there was no actual sun. Still, warmth and cheer infected the whole land. And bright colors and plants and trees and birds and butterflies. Rather sappy and saccharine, actually. But what did one expect when they've entered the afterlife?

Should he go inside? Something told him that he had all the time he wanted to make that choice. There was no hurry anymore. But something about the castle also invited him inside without pushing him to do anything he didn't want to. He simply was welcome to come in.

For the life of him, Sesshomaru couldn't think of anywhere he needed to be or anything he needed to do. Though he felt a vague sense that something or someone was missing from his side.

This place certainly had a lot of feelings attached to it.

Well, he figured, if he was welcome, then he would accept the invitation.

It wasn't until he had crossed a bridge that led to the main courtyard that Sesshomaru noticed that he wasn't wearing his armor. Just his kimono and hakama. He didn't even have a sword at his side. Not that he needed his armor or a weapon to feel safe, but he hardly cared about its apparent absence. It would have been inappropriate here anyway.

Entering the castle, he found a place filled with laughter, happiness, joy and other sickeningly sweet human things. It took him a while before he could perceive anything remotely physical, and when he did, he found that these details didn't matter so much as knowing why he was wanted here.

"Took you long enough." With a smile on his face, a daiyokai with long silvery-white hair, pointed ears, gold eyes and indigo-violet markings on his cheeks, approached Sesshomaru and put a heavy clawed hand on his shoulder. "Welcome home."

For a few moments, Sesshomaru stared in impassive wonder at this creature long since dead. "Father," he said evenly. "It is good to see you again."

"Still as stiff as your mother. I thought a few hundred years would have softened you a bit. Come on, let me show you around." Putting a hand on his back, the Inu no Taisho led his son out of the courtyard and into the castle. "So what brings you here?"

He thought back on it, how he had gotten here, the last thing he remembered. Blood, battle, Bakusaiga. Victory had come so close to his grasp that he could almost smell it. But then … Theda.

And he remembered failure. How he'd lost all the lands the Inu no Taisho once held in a war Sesshomaru nearly lost. How he was the reason Theda took back her heart, making his father's previous victory over the goddess completely meaningless. How ashamed he knew he would feel if he ever had to face his father with these failures if he were alive. But here was the great Inu no Taisho facing his son thanks to Sesshomaru's ultimate failure.

The air grew dark and heavy as the shame and humiliation filled his heart, and he stopped in his tracks. "I must go."

"Because you lost a battle?" The Inu no Taisho shook his head with a laugh. "You certainly are single minded."

"The battle isn't over. I have to go back. I'm not supposed to be dead yet."

The great daiyokai chuckled. "I thought the same thing too when I first arrived. I didn't defeat Ryūkotsusei simply so a measly mortal could kill me. But, well …" He gestured to the walls around
them. "Here I am, and there is no leaving."

Sesshomaru would have argued, but he recalled that Tenseiga was no more, and he knew his father was right. He had no hope of returning to the mortal realm. At least, not as a physical being.

The Inu no Taisho, ever the perceptive one, could see that his son felt uncomfortable even conversing with him. Might have had something to do with the way they parted last they saw each other while they were alive, but it seemed to him that something else was eating at him. "What is troubling you? I never thought you would ever be happy to see me, but you seem almost … afraid."

Looking down, Sesshomaru found himself studying his bare feet and the grass blades between his toes. If any word described him, 'afraid' was not it. Therefore he shouldn't fear telling the Inu no Taisho the truth. "I have failed you in every way conceivable. I have lost your lands. I allowed your sword Tenseiga to be destroyed. I could not even die by the sword and pass away with honor. I have soiled your name. Even worse, no one of this time even remembers your name. I was the last of the daiyokai and in my arrogance, I created a destructive force that is about to wipe out every living thing on the face of the earth."

From his concerned expression, it seemed that his father knew some of this already. How, he couldn't say. But the Inu no Taisho didn't scold or berate his son in any way. He simply listened and gave what Sesshomaru said a great deal of thought. Then, with his hand on his son's shoulder, he turned them around. "Come. I want to show you something."

What he had to show Sesshomaru took them through the castle, which didn't take very long, and up a few sets of staircases. In comparison to the grandeur of his mother's castle in the sky, this place in the Underworld came off as unimpressive. But he knew better than to express such an opinion. Soon, they arrived at the top of a tower in the center of the castle. Why they couldn't have just flown there, he didn't get but he let that thought go as well.

"Well," the Inu no Taisho said, gesturing to the castle, its courtyards, its garden, its stonework and water features. "What do you think?"

"It's … lovely. Quite home-y. I've lived in smaller. With annoying acquaintances that prefer to turn my space into an impromptu training ground."

"What do you not see?" He waited a moment, knowing that wasn't exactly a question Sesshomaru could answer. "Don't worry, I'll tell you. What you don't see are the many and vast lands that I conquered and ruled. Nor the yokai and humans that I ruled over, nor the trophies I earned from each of my battles and victories, nor the skulls of my enemies. These things that I valued so much in life, that I gave so much of my time and energy towards, they ultimately meant nothing. In Aboveworld, certainly, these things were important. But I did not understand this myself at the time: as eternity stretches on, we can only keep with us things that truly last through time and all of eternity. And because I did not fully understand what those things were, I unwittingly gave you a false sense of what things are of worth. I failed you. And for that, I am sorry, my son."

These were not words he had ever expected his father to speak. Certainly he remembered his father trying to instil a sense of morality in him, which only developed after having it beaten into him after his father's death. But to hear his father, the great and mighty Inu no Taisho, say that he was … wrong? That unsettled him more than this tiny, humble 'kingdom' that his father had been left to rule in the hereafter. So much of his father he had taken for immutable truth as he had matured. And now his father wanted him to see someone capable of making a mistake.

But mistakes were for humans to make.
"Are the stories of your adventures and conquests and victories not told here?" Sesshomaru demanded, crossing his arms.

"Oh yes. I hear them all the time."

"And do those who you ruled come and pay their respects to you?"

"Now and again."

"Then how can your great accomplishments have been for naught?"

"Here they are not so much accomplishments as they are great stories that have no bearing on our existence in the Underworld. But would you like to see what is of value here?"

Sesshomaru said nothing, but he allowed his father to lead him elsewhere in the castle. He tried not to wonder what it was that could be so precious in the afterlife since his father had buttoned his lips and wouldn't say a thing. Still, he couldn't help but ponder on it. Could it be the treasures that the Inu no Taisho was buried with? Other trophies that he earned while in the afterlife? No, none of these made much sense, especially since he saw no sign of them here.

They traveled down a hallway toward a large room from which laughter and the chatter of voices in conversation emanated. Soon enough, they entered this room, which turned out to be a dining room. A table in the center of the floor was laid out with a bounty of foods and surrounding it were men and women dressed in rich and colorful kimonos. A woman, noble by birth as shown by the jūni-hitoe she wore and the way she held her teacup, looked up from the head of the table. Upon seeing the Inu no Taisho with his son at his side, a wide smile crossed her face. "Tōga! Dearest!" she said cheerfully. "Who is this that you've brought to us?"

Something about this woman's eyes looked all too familiar. The woman stood and approached them to get a closer look at Sesshomaru. Another woman dressed in miko's clothing gasped and shot to her feet. "Sesshomaru!" she shouted gleefully. "I never thought I'd ever see you here."

"Sesshomaru," the Inu no Taisho said, "this is Izayoi, my wife. I suppose the two of you never met while you were alive."

Ah, yes. InuYasha's mother. Just thinking about someone related to the despised hanyou made his nose want to wrinkle, but for his father's sake, he bowed with deference to the woman. "It is an honor to meet you," he said, almost hating the words coming out of his mouth.

The miko came up beside him and punched him hard in the arm, making him grunt. "Where's InuYasha?" she demanded.

"Pushy as always, little sister."

"Where is he?"

Looking around the table again, Sesshomaru realized he knew each of these people. The dog ears on a few of them were a good hint. This was InuYasha's family, his wife, Kagome, and his children. He even recognized Miroku the monk, Sango the demon slayer, Rin and Kohaku. Each of them had a smile on their face at seeing this newcomer. From the kitchen haphazardly carrying a tray with bowls of food came the little imp Jakken who squealed with delight at seeing Sesshomaru and nearly threw the tray to the ground in a rush to cling to his leg.

"Come," the Inu no Taisho said, squeezing his shoulder. "We made you dinner to welcome you home."
The Underworld had no need for a sunset, what with there being no sun and all. But an orange light bathed the courtyard and gave it that sunset/sunrise hue. Resting his arms on the railing of a bridge, Sesshomaru watched koi swim by and birds pick at the grass for bugs.

"You really don't know what happened to him?" Kagome stood beside him, picking the petals off a flower as she rested her back against the railing.

"I remember Daiichi striking out with his demonic power. I was the target, but InuYasha jumped in to take the blow. In an instant, he was … gone. I found no trace of his body. From what I saw, I could only assume that he had perished in the blast. But if he's not here …"

Kagome nodded, understanding. "I know I shouldn't keep thinking he's alive. Even if he's not here with me, it gives me some hope to think he's still fighting. Or asleep like you."

"I wish I could tell you more, miko. I'm sorry."

"It's alright." She pulled off the last of the petals, ripped off the stamen and dropped the last bits of the flower in the creek below. "I suppose you don't know how my family's doing."

"They miss you," he said simply. "Your brother married a kind woman and they had children."

"You met them?" Incredulousness washed over her. "I didn't think you would bother."

Sesshomaru suddenly found one particular koi far more fascinating to watch than gauging Kagome's emotional state. It was a bit embarrassing to admit that her family was the only familiar thing he could find right after he had woken up. And now he found himself wishing for someone else familiar to share his thoughts with. Jenny would have found it fascinating to meet his father and his brother's mother…

"It's lonely, you know." Kagome pulled a leaf off another plant and began tearing that to pieces too. "Your father is so happy to have all his family around him, and I'm glad to have my friends and children with me. But … it's been five hundred years since I've seen him. Time flows differently here and it feels even longer than that. I miss him. I miss InuYasha. It feels just like those three years we were apart, but every second feels like those three years and the seconds just keep coming. This is a place where you just can't be alone or it kills you inside."

Sesshomaru grunted some sort of acknowledgement that he heard her. But he'd been alone often enough. Except he had Ah-Un. And Jakken. And Rin. And Kohaku. And Jenny. And perhaps Liu and Rosario counted at this point. Sighing, he grabbed one of the leaves from Kagome's plant and let his poison claws dissolve it between his fingers. "I'm sure someone will find him eventually. He can be rather persistent."

Everyone in the castle had told Kagome so at one point or another over the last half a millenia. So she gave him a tight smile. "Did you leave anyone behind?"

Yes. The answer came so clearly to him. How could it be that in the span of a few months, that damned detective had wormed her way so firmly into his being that her face kept appearing in his mind every few minutes? Even worse, he remembered the scent of her fear, the sound of her scream as Theda killed her again and again. And here he could do nothing but hope that Rosario and Liu had succeeded in rescuing her when he could not.

"Her name is Jenny Harkness." The admission surprised him as much as it did Kagome. He shouldn't be telling that filthy hanyou's wife anything. But he said it and he couldn't take it back.

"She's a foreigner, an American, but she speaks our language well enough. For a human, she's
rather beautiful. And she looks like a jellyfish flopping about whenever she tries any sort of hand-to-hand combat."

Kagome's eyebrows furrowed together. "That … doesn't sound like your type."

"She's also brilliant, arrogant, lethal with the correct weapon, and she forced me to learn English. She's horrible."

"Alright, that does sound more like your type."

Sesshomaru couldn't help but chuckle. "Jenny is … different. I will sorely miss her. And if the fates are kind, I won't see her ever again."

He could be lonely, he decided. So long as that meant the Harkness woman could live a little longer. Live out her life, find love, have all the things that he never had. Then perhaps his death would have some semblance of meaning.

As the two of them lapsed into a quiet stillness, the Inu no Taisho approached them, his nose sniffing at the air. It was a scent he couldn't quite put his finger on, but he knew he'd smelled it before. By now he should have figured it out.

"What is it?" Sesshomaru asked.

"A newcomer," his father replied. "Not dangerous, I don't think. But Kagome, why don't you go back inside."

While Sesshomaru had never known Kagome to just run and hide, apparently she was someone who followed the Inu no Taisho's orders. Picking up the hem of her skirt, she hurried back into the castle with the rest of her children.

A strange noise, like a cat getting caught in a net and screaming out, caught Sesshomaru's attention. When he turned to the source, which was just outside the castle, he heard hurried footsteps, some panting and a body tripping through bushes before finally hitting stonework. And there was some colorful cursing in a language that only Sesshomaru recognized. "I thought she wasn't supposed to enter Nirvana," he muttered.

"You know this person?"

He said nothing and simply waited for this someone to appear. Then running through the courtyard came a fire-haired woman with black and red clothing and flushed red cheeks. "Jackie," Sesshomaru said evenly as she raced up to him on the bridge and stopped to catch her breath. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking … for you." She was bent over, one arm clutching a stitch in her side. "Forgot how much work it is to chase down the recently deceased. Hello General," Jackie said, giving the Inu no Taisho a short wave.

Once the apparent initial shock had passed, the daiyokai returned the greeting by letting out a earth-shaking jovial laugh and grabbing her in a rib crushing hug. "Fire hair girl! Why have I not seen you here yet?" He said as he spun her around happily. "It is good to finally see you again! Have you finally settled down with your time traveling ways?"

After smacking his head a bit and expressing her displeasure with being manhandled in a way even he could understand, Jackie managed to awkwardly extricate herself from his hug. "Yeah, I still don't speak Japanese. But I'm glad you still like me, dude," she said, patting his shoulder. Then she turned
"Yes. They're all here. Even Kagome. But not InuYasha. Why isn't he here?"

Jackie's face went bright red and she bit her lip. "Oh. Yeah. That. I will explain that later. Probably. OK?"

"What is she saying?" the Inu no Taisho demanded, interrupting their conversation. "Why is she refusing to speak our language?"

"She's doesn't speak Japanese," Sesshomaru quickly explained, trying to push his father away and keep him quiet.

"She did when I knew her." Snorting, he folded his arms and backed out of this conversation.

"Jackie, why are you here?"

"You're not responding to CPR. Daiichi is trying to kill Jenny and he's getting close. Theda's gone nuts and is killing every single god that was in your army. I had to do something."

He frowned in confusion. "How can I respond? I'm dead. Theda stopped my heart."

Rolling her eyes, she grabbed him by his kimono, "For heaven's sake, why are you not breathing?"

His eyebrows furrowed together. "I … I don't understand."

Perfect Pair

Breath filled Sesshomaru's lungs, but not of his own accord. Releasing his nose, Jenny laced her fingers back together and began chest compressions on the daiyokai once more. After 30, she tilted her head to his chest, pressing her ear to his heart, and listened for a beat.

Was that … did he just? …

Unable to hear anything definitive, Jenny plugged his nose, put her lips over Sesshomaru's and gave him two rescue breaths. One … two … Chest rising and falling with each one. Good. His airway was still clear.

She interlocked her fingers again, put the heel of her hand against his sternum and began pushing again. One, two, three … on to 30. In sync almost perfectly with Daiichi's fists beating on the shield above her, trying to tear it down. He gives up on his own demonic rage and power. He picks Bakusaiga back up and tries again with that.

Lean down, press ear to Sesshomaru's chest, listen. Listen harder.

Is that …? Can it be? Please, please, let it be...

Still not moving. Begin rescue breathing.

For an instant, she paused. Did his eyelids flicker just then? Did his chest raise on its own? Turning her ear to his mouth, Jenny listened for the sound of breathing. Yet no air tickled her ear. So she put her lips to his once more.

But this time, a hand caught hers before she could pinch his nose shut. And another grasped her head and pulled her closer.

Before she fully comprehended what had happened, Sesshomaru's lips crushed hers in a desperate, grateful, passionate kiss. Instinctively, and perhaps a tad impatiently, Jenny melted into the embrace, her tongue curious for the taste of his mouth. The hint of poison on his fangs gave him a slightly bitter tang and the sharpness of his teeth gave her a sense of danger and vulnerability as he nibbled on her lip. But she was just as fierce a hunter as he.

All too quickly, Jenny's human sensibilities returned, most especially her need for oxygen. Pulling back, her lips still tingling, she grinned down at the smug bastard lying on the ground beneath her. "You're alive," was all she could say.

"Could say the same about you," he replied, his fingers still gently combing through her hair. He had to be careful as she still had blood matted on her scalp, something he noted with a displeased frown. "You look awful."

"And you … don't. Seriously, how are you always so pretty no matter what? You're like Snow White or something."

A clanging above their heads and the sound of something like glass beginning to crack reminded the both of them that this was neither the time nor the place for a playful conversation or public displays of affection. In the center of the red shield protecting them, Bakusaiga's blade had managed to cut through, leaving a few millimeters deep wound. Raising the sword again, Daiichi prepared to bring it down and shatter the barrier, likely to decapitate both Jenny and Sesshomaru in the process.
Grabbing Jenny, Sesshomaru rolled over, putting himself between her and Bakusaiga. "Trust me," he said with a growl.

She raised an eyebrow. "K."

In a burst of pink light, Ketsugō-kiba's shield shattered into a million splinters. Bakusaiga flew in a flash at Sesshomaru's neck. But a millimeter from splitting skin, the blade stopped cold.

Daiichi’s whole body strained with the effort to slice his father's head off. While he gritted his teeth, tightened his grip and redoubled his efforts, Sesshomaru simply pushed himself off Jenny, gave her a hand to lift her to her feet and helped dust the two of them off. All the while, Bakusaiga moved itself out of the way despite Daiichi’s most furtive efforts to slay his father. Seemed Bakusaiga knew from whence it had formed and had no desire to kill its creator. With one final, desperate push, the dark daiyokai was thrown backwards several paces by the sword's insistence.

Once pleased that Jenny was altogether in one piece, Sesshomaru let her run off to Liu, then pulled Ketsugō-kiba from the ground. "I understand, now, the purpose of this sword, even if my father didn't intend it."

Scrambling backwards, Daiichi snarled and attempted to unleash a disintegrating wave, but with simply an upraised hand, his father froze the sword in the air.

"Ketsugō-kiba is a sword that never wanted to be used alone."

He reached out for Bakusaiga. And despite his iron grip, Daiichi's hands could hold onto the sword no longer. It was an easy task for Sesshomaru to pluck his own sword from his son's hands.

Now, wielding Ketsugō-kiba in his left hand and Bakusaiga in his right, he faced his opponent. It almost seemed that Daiichi had shrunk a few inches and now his father stood taller than he did.

But even without a weapon, he still had his teeth and claws and venom. That had worked well enough for him in the past. He didn't need Bakusaiga to pin his father to the wall of the Underworld with his paralytic venom and a convenient sword. So summoning every bit of demonic energy and acidic venom from within his soul, he let out a roar and lunged at his father with his deadly claws, quick as a falcon on the hunt.

Darting forwards, Sesshomaru raised a shield to block the venom. In the next stroke, he swept the ground away beneath Daiichi's feet with a disintegrating blast. As soon as he managed to find his ground and launch another attack, Sesshomaru would simply dodge, destroy more ground and herd Daiichi towards the heart of the fortress.

In a last-ditch effort to gain some ground, Daiichi took to the air and leaped up to the still gaping open wall that used to enclose his throne room. The room, still littered with massive rocks and furniture, provided him with at least a few makeshift weapons. He grabbed whatever he could and began hurling it down at his father's path. But Bakusaiga turned the projectiles into dust as quickly as they appeared. There would be no stopping Sesshomaru from bursting into the Throne Room a second time and cornering his son.

Snarling like a rat in a cage, Daiichi scrambled around to find anything else he could use as a weapon or shield. And within in an instant, he found some discarded sword, filled it with his venom and youki, and attacked in a rage. Sesshomaru parried the blows for a bit, fascinated to find that Daiichi still remembered a few of the tricks he had taught him when he was barely a boy learning how to wield a sword.
But Daiichi's efforts were all for naught. In a lightning quick maneuver, Sesshomaru disarmed him, tossing his sword out a nearby window, then slashed his chest with both swords, one right after the other in an X formation.

Bakusaiga, guided by Ketsugō-kiba, slipped into his soul to disintegrate the youki and godlike powers that gave him strength and immortality.

Then Ketsugō-kiba sealed up his soul, keeping those powers from ever returning.

Shrieking as his demonic energy burned up like acid in his veins, Daiichi collapsed to the ground, curled up in a ball of agony.

"What have you done to me, Father?" he snarled. Not quite as impressive when there was no 'dog' left inside him at all.

Sesshomaru slipped both swords into his belt and stood above his son, witnessing the anguish he suffered. "You know what's happened. You are practically nothing more than mortal now, my son. And now you will pay for your crimes."

All around the fortress, tension in the air broke. Liu and Jenny, still outside and searching for a way out of the crumbling maze of walls, watched as undead gods and yokai abruptly froze mid-flight, mid-snarl, mid-leap. And then fell. Limp and lifeless toy soldiers simply dropped and moved no more.

Then a roar rose up. One of victory. What few remaining gods who Theda hadn't killed yet, shouted their righteous joy at Sesshomaru succeeding in this battle for the life and freedom of the entire earth. Jenny and Liu naturally joined them, Liu picking Jenny up in a tight hug and spinning them around as the ecstasy of hard-earned triumph overcame them.

But another cry rose above that din. This was a shriek and a wail of emotional turmoil. Flying like a black hornet, Theda dashed out of the forest to search for her son. And who did she find along the way?

Liu let out a deadpan, "Well, shit," as Theda's eyes locked straight onto him and Jenny. Easily throwing her over his shoulder, he sped up his pace to get them under cover on the off chance that the goddess would change her mind about eviscerating them or using them as hostages of some sort.

She did not.

Shaped like a formless cloud of black miasma, Theda crashed down on Liu and Jenny. The mist swallowed up all light around them, tangled them in solidifying tentacles and picked them up off the ground with no effort whatsoever. They could scream and tear at the pitch suffocating them, twisting their bodies into torturous positions, but the mass was unyielding in its hold.

Theda burst into the throne room like an explosion destroying what remained of the walls, and tossed Liu and Jenny to the ground. While they gasped in as much air as they could, spears made of bone rained down around them. With perfect precision, they pinned Liu's clothes to the ground and formed a barrier between Jenny and Sesshomaru. Grabbing the detective by her hair, Theda picked her up, shaped her nails into razor-sharp claws, and put them to her throat. And for a final touch, she had more spears appear above Liu's body, ready to slice through the air and finish him off.

"Where is my son?" she demanded. "What have you done with him?"

Sesshomaru moved to draw Bakusaiga, but Theda's claws pressing a little deeper into Jenny's neck
put a quick stop to that. So he took one step aside and gestured downward. Toward the dark-haired man in oversized black and white armor. He looked ... tiny. "He is alive. Daiichi, please speak with your mother."

A sheepish blush came across his face. The armor gave him some difficulty as he pushed himself up, but with a bit of effort, he managed to get to his knees. "Hello, Mother."

Theda gasped in horror. She hadn't believed her nose when she smelled her son's youki vanishing, but her eyes told a plain story. The man before her was thin, his skin hadn't seen the sun practically all his life, and he looked too young to have frightened anyone. Most importantly, "You're ... you're human."

He nodded.

The spears above Liu lowered enough to press against his back and neck painfully, but not enough to injure him yet. And Theda's nails dug into Jenny's hair to pull her head backwards even further. "Change him back. Change him back or I kill your pets. I know you like this one," she snapped, drawing blood from Jenny's neck. "Give him back his youki!"

"This is a cheap tactic, Izanami," Sesshomaru said, his teeth bared. "Do the honorable thing and accept defeat."

"If I have to lose my son, then you must feel that pain as much as I do!" she snapped back.

Hearing this, Daiichi scowled. "Do I not exist to you in this form, Mother?"

For a moment, Theda's mouth hung open. She was stunned enough by this question that her grip loosened slightly on Jenny's hair. "N-no. I mean, I just, without your youki ... Sesshomaru has taken a large part of you away and you deserve to have it back."

As mother and son bickered back and forth for a bit, Jenny's hands began to wander. Specifically, toward Theda's robes, searching for something that did not belong to either of them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sesshomaru saw an electric mop of blue hair appearing above the crumbled stonework just behind Theda. Then a hand. Then a sword. He noted that this being looked like Rosario, but that hair certainly wasn't hers. Jenny and Liu would certainly have some explaining to do.

"You only wanted to use me to rule the world," Daiichi spat bitterly.

"Let's not get caught up in meaningless motivations and arguments. I wanted to give you the world. Everything I've ever done, I've done for you. Look, I'll even kill your father's favorite pet for you."

This newcomer moved quicker than Sesshomaru had ever seen a human move, even Rosario. One moment, Eva was pulling herself up into the throne room. The next fraction of a second, she was right behind Theda. Before the goddess could blink or turn her head or slice Jenny's trachea open, Eva's hand dove straight between the goddess's ribs, grabbed hold of her heart, and yanked it right out.

An abrupt release of energy surged through the room with Theda as its epicenter, throwing her hostage violently forward to the ground and the bone spears away from Liu. And in the next moment, she screamed as her entire body began to collapse in on itself. "My heart!" she shrieked. "Give me my heart!"

But like unto the Wicked Witch of the West, Theda only grew smaller and smaller, melting into the
floor until she simply resembled a much smaller human. Eva, with a blank look on her face, impassively watched this once mighty goddess crumple into a vague shadow of her former self. The boney spikes pinning Liu to the ground simply disintegrated into dust. Sesshomaru grabbed his arm to drag him a good distance from Theda.

Once the arrogant and mighty Death goddess's voice faded into barely a gasp of air and her body eventually stopped twitching, Eva finally looked up to the other three. She cocked her head sideways and examined them with narrowed eyes like she was trying to remember where she last saw them. Jenny and Liu, she seemed to recognize. Not so much the daiyokai who had just saved all their hides. So she waved at Sesshomaru. "Hi there, hello, I'm Eva. Don't think I've met you before."

Jenny could only shrug at Sesshomaru's questioning glance and raised eyebrow. Honestly, he knew just as much as she did about this whole Rosario/Eva thing. "Eva, Lord Sesshomaru. Sesshomaru, Eva Nova," she said, her voice croaking.

"Cool. Nice to meet you. So who's in charge here? Who do I give this to?" she asked, jiggling Theda's black and bloody heart in her hand.

This person just so happened to be Michaelis. Apparently round trip flights from Japan to the UK and back were not out of his price range. That or he had never actually left.

Japanese officials of one sort or another, all with high degrees of clearance, soon flooded the half-demolished fortress to carry out the corpses of the dead and arrest those who had caused the trouble. Daiichi, now with the strength of a mere human, was easily handcuffed and carted off the battlefield to be locked inside an armored military police transport vehicle. Seeing this, Jenny went off to speak to whoever would be handling his case, making sure to drop her name and contact information in a rather heavy-handed way. However Daiichi would be handled, Jenny Harkness would be an integral part of his sentencing and imprisonment every last step of the way.

As for Theda, a different set of forces locked her in thick, titanium handcuffs and chains before loading her into a helicopter designed for stealth. Liu didn't quite know who these folks were loyal to, but he knew they weren't sent by the Japanese government. Or American. Or British. "So what will you be doing with her?" Liu asked Michaelis.

The rat-faced man gave a chuckle. "Her crimes aren't exactly of the mortal variety. So a tribunal of interested parties entirely divorced from any world government will decide her fate."

"And Boss Lady will be involved?"

"Ms. Harkness will not be involved."

"I'm sorry," Liu said, grinning sheepishly. "Didn't mean to give that statement a questioning inflection. Boss Lady will be in touch. And if you think you're going to argue that point, then I would like to point out that this guy," he said, jabbing a thumb towards Sesshomaru, "doesn't have as much to say, but people tend to listen. Have I also pointed out that he has two awesome magic swords? And I know you're old and all that, but it's high time that you stop relying on old fashioned breaking and entering and learn how to text. If Sesshomaru can figure it out, you can too."

Michaelis took the business card from Liu's fingers with a sneer on his lips. "Understood."

Trucks packed with explosives and other demolition tools began roaring their way through the forest, accompanied by soldiers tasked with transporting bodies of gods and yokai away to be identified and buried. All too easily, the perimeter walls of Daiichi's fortress would fall to something as simple as
human ingenuity.

One of Michaelis' men presented him with a metal briefcase. Opening it slightly, he checked for the contents — one heart of a Death Goddess wrapped in plastic and sealed in a jar — before locking it up and attaching it to his wrist with a pair of handcuffs. "Any other unfinished business apart from the mess of mythological creatures you lot have woken up around the world?"

"What are you going to do with Theda's heart?" Sesshomaru asked.

Michaelis patted the daiyokai's arm condescendingly. "Keeping it safe. It's what we do. Don't worry, this will never fall into the wrong hands. Now, unless I'm much mistaken, I think it's high time that everyone went home now, don't you think?"

Glancing towards Jenny, Sesshomaru found that she had finished talking with the Japanese military police. Seemed his mother had decided to reappear in her human form and speak to this human coated with Sesshomaru's scent. Poised, regal and hauntingly beautiful, the Western Lady scarcely resembled a fierce warrior who had fought viciously for the last day or so. And she certainly stood in stark contrast to the bruised, bloodied, exhausted mess that Jenny was.

"I believe this belongs to you," Jenny said. She reached into her pocket and produced the Meido stone to hand back to her. "Thank you for all that you've done."

"I do believe I owe you some gratitude for waking me from my slumber," she replied as she slipped the necklace over her head. Then with a slight frown on her face, she took Jenny's face in her claws and turned her head so as to examine the blood in her hair. "You look terrible."

"So I've been told."

"Mother." Sesshomaru had slipped through the crowd and, taking Jenny a bit by surprise, took a position at her side as if to stand there as her shield between her and his mother. "She needs rest."

Her sharp eyes did not miss the way he oriented himself around Jenny, like putting a claim of protection on her. How swiftly he came to her rescue and doted on her, even if that enemy was his own mother. The corner of her mouth lifted knowingly, but not exactly happily. "Just like your father. Take care that you do not suffer his fate."

And with that, the Western Lady turned her face to the sky and leapt off the ground to speed off to her castle in the clouds. Not even bothering to bid her son farewell.

When Jenny finally caught hold of her senses again, she gave Sesshomaru a blank stare. "I can't tell if that went well or not."

"Nor can I."
How she knew her friends and family were hosting her funeral, she didn't know. She couldn't possibly have known. In her mind's eye, she could see all of them dressed in black — her parents, Sesshomaru, Liu, some blue-haired stranger with a blurred out face, Michaelis even deigned to come to the graveside. The graveside service was far better attended than she had ever imagined it would be. There must have been half a thousand people on that hillside alone. A minister of some sort sang her praises, proclaiming all the myriad of ways she and Merripit House had saved the world in one way or another. And now the memory of her life would simply have to inspire others to fulfill her mission.

Anyway, there was no way Jenny could have known any of this. Because all she could smell was formaldehyde, linen, wood and dirt. Fabric scratched her bare arms and tickled her nose, and her hands laid trapped under a bouquet of flowers resting on her stomach. More suffocating than that, though, was the omnipresent darkness. No matter how wide she opened her eyes and let her pupils dilate, she could only behold black.

Pushing the flowers aside, Jenny scratched at the fabric above her head, tearing it away in a panicked frenzy. It didn't take long before her nails scratched treated and stained wood. Mahogany. Oh, her parents must have gone all out.

"Can anyone hear me?" she shouted. The sound returned back to her, muffled by the casket lining and pounds and pounds of soil resting atop her. The weight seemed to settle in on her chest, making her heart race and ache. "Please, I'm not dead! I'm not dead!"

Was she really now? Maybe Theda had finally gotten her way. Maybe Jenny had actually died, but something had gone awry with her body. After so many resurrections, maybe she had lost the capability of staying dead. In which case…

"No, no, no, no, no…” Feverishly, Jenny tore harder at the wood encasing her. So hard that her fingers began to bleed. But with such little air, she could feel her head going dizzy and unable to comprehend pain. Soon, the wood began to give way.

To dirt. Bursting through like a hole had sprung up in a dam, the soil sprayed down in her face, filling her mouth. It tasted of spiders and bone dust. The more she dug, the more dirt rained down on her, rushing down her shoulders, past her waist over her legs and toes. Yet no matter how much dirt she moved aside, her hole never seemed to turn into a tunnel. She just kept digging and digging and digging…

Tears and sweat made the soil turn into mud, encasing her like clay. Suffocating. Crushing. Sculpting.

"Sesshomaru!" she gasped. He must have stuck around after the funeral. She knew he would. And she knew he could hear. "Sesshomaru! Please help me! Sesshomaru!"

That smell was growing all too familiar to him. And he hated that. Adrenaline, the tang of her sweat, the salt of her tears — fear. Unadulterated, uncontrolled, unrestrained. Her racing heart quickened his own. Her labored breathing burned the air in his lungs.
Sesshomaru practically flew to Jenny's side. Writhing and screaming in her sheets, she cried out with a name that chilled his blood. "Sesshomaru! Get me out!"

"Jenny." His hands held her face, his fingers brushing hair away from her forehead. "You are safe."

Gasping like a swimmer breaking the surface of a pool of water, she sat up and opened her eyes. For a moment, she flailed wildly as her head turned this way and that, searching for safety while her hands grabbed at something. Anything. The instant she locked onto Sesshomaru, comprehending his presence, his proximity, his touch, her heart began to calm. "Sesshomaru?" she asked, panting.

Sitting down next to her on the bed, he pulled her closer. Or perhaps she's the one who pulled him in towards herself. Clinging to his kimono, she seemed to have the strength of a tiger. "I am here. You are safe," he said.

Deflating in relief, she collapsed against his chest. And the waterworks began.

Stroking her back and softly combing his fingers through her hair, he simply held her and let his fur pelt soak up her tears. Certainly this wasn't the scene he expected to find when he broke in. Yet he found it oddly … expected. After Michaelis swept in with his men to clean up the mess and finally cornered the detective, Jenny insisted that he had nothing to worry about in regards to her well-being. Theda resurrected her to perfect health each and every time she had killed her, after all. No reason to coddle the detective, to worry over her, to cluck about like a mother hen. She just needed sleep. Some goddamned sleep. Why the hell was everyone looking at her like some kind of cripple, like some kind of damaged puppy? A couple of Aspirin and a full night of rest and she would be right as rain the next day.

To be fair, Sesshomaru had tried the same thing. Michaelis put all of Merripit House up in a nearby hotel, likely to keep track of them and debrief them than out of any sort of care for them. Liu immediately smuggled them out under cover of confusion and found a nicer place for them to stay. Except for Eva who insisted on taking a nap on the roof. He might not have forgiven Michaelis yet for his many wrongs against the thief.

In any case, Sesshomaru took this opportunity to rest, taking the second bed in Jenny's room. The battle had raged for days, and how long had he kept himself awake for? Weeks? Months? So concerned about not waking up that he hadn't dared go to sleep. But with so much blood lost and strength expended, he could fight his urges no more. Exhaustion swept over him like a heavy fur rug. And with Jenny, cleaned up and in a change of clothes, lightly snoring across the room, he knew the siren song of sleep would call him soon.

Except… Perhaps it was possible to feel so tired that he couldn't sleep. No matter which way he tossed and turned and forced his muscles to relax, his mind simply kept going. It kept turning to thoughts of Jenny. The relief he felt when he first heard her voice after waking up, her weight pressing down on him to make him certain of her reality. The way she looked down on him when he inhaled her delicious air, so joyous that her entire being lit up. The softness of her lips and the sweetness of her mouth and the desire and hunger and compassion behind her kiss.

Hiccuping in a desperate bid to regain her composure, Jenny's sobs seemed to abate a bit. Sesshomaru's arms held her just a little tighter. A primal need to protect, to defend, to fix, filled his heart. But in this moment, he knew what powerlessness felt like. He could not keep the fear and pain from her mind. And she could not pretend any longer.

"I'm sorry," she gasped between sobs. "I shouldn't be … so …"

"Scared?" She nodded against his chest. "I cannot see how you possibly couldn't be."
"It's so dark." Her voice came in a frightened whisper. "Every time I close my eyes, I just know she's right there waiting to freeze my heart again."

"And you wonder if this is the last time you're ever going to experience conscious thought." A slight growl rumbled in his throat and his eyes narrowed in anger. But he had no place to direct it at. Theda was powerless and broken. Daichi was in the custody of Japanese officials. Merripit House had defeated their enemies who would pay for their crimes, but it seemed that the damage they caused would live on.

"How the hell am I supposed to just be fine with just falling unconscious for eight hours a day?" Looking up at him, she wiped away a few tears from her face, only for them to immediately be replaced. "I know you haven't slept since I woke you up a few months ago. I figured that you had gotten so much sleep that you were all stocked up for the next century or so. But it's something more than that, isn't it? I wish that I could stay awake like you so I could just avoid this entirely. But I'm a human. I'll literally die if I don't sleep for an extended period of time. Ironic, right? That I could kill myself because I'm afraid of dying."

Well now that simply wouldn't do.

With the sleeve of his kimono, Sesshomaru wiped her face clean of tears. This simple action seemed to quiet her crying somewhat. "Jenny. I failed in my duty to protect you. I failed in my duty as your servant. For that I am not worthy to beg you for your forgiveness. But I will beg nonetheless. If you will allow it, until the day you pass from this earth, I will stay by your side and not let any harm befall you. And should I fail once again, nothing will stop me from traveling to the deepest, darkest depths to bring you back into light."

"I can't ask you to do that, Sesshomaru. You are the most powerful being on this planet. You're a lord and a leader and destined for far greater things than to be my bodyguard. You were never meant to be subject to my will or to anyone's will. It's not fair for some lowly human to tie down someone as incredible as you with something as mundane as guard duty, even for as short a lifespan as mine."

His fingers brushed against her face, gently and tenderly. "You are …" His mind searched for the right word. Something simple and absolute. Human speech had many beautiful and complex words to describe concepts equally as beautiful and complex. But nothing seemed quite right to capture her essence, her soul. Except for, "You are daiyokai."

She frowned in confusion. "I'm not sure I understand."

"There is yokai: common and base, varying in power and strength. And then there is daiyokai. We are above such creatures, the epitome of perfection in every realm that they strive to obtain mastery and proficiency in. Likewise, there is human. And then there is you."

"Oh, honey," she said, letting a southern Georgia drawl bleed into her voice quite distinctly. "I am so very, very human. I'm not the Übermensch."

"I don't know what that is." Shaking her head, Jenny relinquished her hold on Sesshomaru's kimono, her joints creaking as her fingers stretched out. She propped up a pillow and scooted back a smidge to sit against it, pulling her knees up to her chest and wrapping her arms around them. "I'm afraid that as your guide to the 21st century, I may have deliberately or inadvertently given you the impression that I'm more important than I actually am. I might be smart and clever, but I'm no more or less than any other human on this planet. As you can well see," she said, gesturing to her puffy, red eyes and the wet mess she'd made of his fur pelt and kimono, "I am weak. I'm afraid. I screw up. I cannot possibly measure up to you.
You were never my servant; I manipulated you into working for me. You've always been better than me."

He couldn't help but let out a laugh, and a smile actually crossed his face for a moment. "No ordinary human could have taken a defeated, dishonored and disoriented daiyokai and improved him. And I will never let anything take such a rarity from me ever again."

A red hue bloomed across her cheeks and her eyes widened in shock. And she wished that she had her phone recording this moment of humility from the one and only Sesshomaru. Suddenly self conscious, she tucked some hair behind her ear. "Has Liu been teaching you about alliteration again?"

"Not as much as you would think."

Despite her desire to argue with Sesshomaru's assertions, Jenny found herself smiling at this simple thought. That despite the fact that he now had Ketsugō-kiba in his possession, which meant that he had no more contract, no reason to work for her anymore, he still wanted to protect her because he found her worth protecting.

"While we're on the subject of baring our souls and vulnerabilities to each other and you've seen me ugly cry, can I ask … Did your kiss mean what I think it meant?"

Before answering, Sesshomaru took a deep breath and resettled himself beside her on the bed. He had known for a while that she would ask such a question. It was one of the thoughts that had kept him awake. "If you think that it meant that after facing the very real prospect of being separated from someone I was surprised to find that I care deeply about, that I was happy beyond words to see you alive before my very eyes … then yes."

Jenny's heart leaped in her chest and her breath hitched in her throat. "You don't just want to protect me, do you."

His gaze lowered even further than before. "I do not. But after my failure, I don't deserve to ask for anything more."

"Do you know how much that hurt?" Jenny abruptly cried, lurching towards him, like she was going to grab his collar and shake some sense into him. "To watch you fall down dead right in front of my eyes. I thought I'd been through hell and back with what Theda did to me, but nothing hurt as much as seeing you die. If you didn't …" She swallowed back the words that felt too horrid to speak aloud, afraid that if she did, they would come true. "Goddamn it, Sesshomaru, I think I love you."

The words hung in the air between them, echoing in the silence it seemed. Jenny wasn't entirely sure she was ready to deal with the effect they would have, but there they dangled, just out of her reach and impossible to snatch back. Sesshomaru took them and studied them and found that he would probably treasure them for decades and centuries to come.

"Is that such a bad thing?" he asked in pure sincerity.

Flushing pink with embarrassment, Jenny averted her gaze from his. "Well there's the matter of the fact that I'm a good thousand years or so younger than you. That's some serious cradle robbing. And the way Theda made it sound, humans are supposed to pair off with humans, daiyokai with daiyokai, gods with gods. Though she's not really one to talk …"

"Did I not just say you are daiyokai?"

"Yes …"
"And do you doubt the judgment of the most powerful being on the planet?"

"Sesshomaru …" she sighed, rolling her eyes.

"Then simply ignore the words they've slipped into your ears and trust mine." With a gentleness that belied the fearsome strength she knew he possessed, he gathered her into his arms to hold her close. "You are the most incredible woman I have ever been privileged to meet."

"And how many human women have you met, Mr. Despises-all-Humans?" she shot back.

"I am very old," he argued back. "I've met several. Most of them impressive in one way or another. And others who have fallen in love with me at first sight. They were less impressive," he hastily added as Jenny's eyebrow began to raise.

Sighing, she rested her head on his shoulder. His kimono was far softer than any grossly expensive suit he'd worn to humor her. And the pelt of fur over his shoulder felt airy and warm, like a gentle cloud enveloping her. Billions of questions buzzed through her head right then, all of them relating to the specifics of 'us,' of the state of their relationship, whatever that would entail. As much as she wanted to hold on to some semblance of control of her life, she knew that her grasp had barely any strength to it. And now that the adrenaline of her nightmare had run its course through her body, exhaustion was quickly catching up to her.

"I think I need to go back to bed," she said with a yawn. "I'm sorry I woke you up."

The way he scoffed at her pointless apology without making a sound told her that he was likely to stay up the rest of the night making sure she didn't have another nightmare. "I think you're right. You humans are quite frail after all."

Though he held her in his arms with a great gentleness, she couldn't seem to escape his grasp when she tried. As romantic as it would be to fall asleep in his arms, Jenny knew the position would be hell on her joints in the morning. "You need to sleep too, Sesshomaru."

"Not as much as you do."

Clearly she would not be getting rid of him tonight or sending him back to his bed. So with an exasperated sigh and another long yawn, she suggested a compromise. "Well, it's a big bed. Probably has enough room for the two of us."

This, Sesshomaru seemed to accept, as evidenced by his hold on her relaxing. Jenny slipped out, straightened the tangled bedsheet a bit and laid down in her preferred spot. Then he followed after, lying on his side with an arm wrapped protectively, or perhaps possessively, around her. To his bones, the bed was much squishier than he was accustomed to. But he wasn't about to complain.

Closing her eyes, Jenny's breathing began to relax at his touch. Somehow that little gesture kept the monsters in her head at bay. For now. His eyes, too, began to close.

There were a million and one things they had yet to handle: Specific arrangements for Daiichi's and Theda's imprisonment, cleaning up the battlefield, figuring out what to do with all these mythical creatures and gods who had woken up, therapy or at the very least counseling for Jenny after that hell she endured, explaining how Rosario was dead and her body was not, finding out where InuYasha was if he wasn't dead, and figuring out who to send an invoice to.

But at this moment as they drifted off to sleep, the pair of them decided that these would have to be part of a larger story for another day.
Chapter End Notes

Sesshomaru and the crew of Merripit House will return in "Merripit House: The Hunted Ones."

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